

255808 - Ruling on saying “Were it not for my hard work, I would not have succeeded”

the question

1. What is the ruling on someone saying, “Were it not for my hard work, I would not have succeeded in the exam”?
2. The second question has to do with means and measures (asbaab, sing. sabab). If the means were sound from an Islamic point of view, or based on experience, do I have the choice between saying “Were it not for So-and-so,” without mentioning Allah, or saying “Were it not for Allah, then So-and-so,” mentioning both Allah and the person concerned? Or is it that each of them has its own place?

Detailed answer

Firstly:

Mentioning something and connecting it to its cause (sabab) may be permissible, or it may be haraam, according to what the speaker means when he makes this connection, and what he believes in his heart about the matter.

If he connects the thing to its cause, believing that the cause brought about the result in and of itself, without the will and decree of Allah, may He be exalted,

or he forgets that Allah, may He be exalted, is the true source of blessings, and were it not for His grace, kindness and mercy, no blessings could have reached him and no harm could have been warded off from him,

or he does that out of arrogance, praising himself for having been the one who did it, and were it not for him, such and such would not have happened,

then in these three scenarios, attributing the thing to its cause or means is haraam, and may constitute shirk, either minor or major, according to what the speaker believes.

It is not permissible to believe that means and causes may yield results in and of themselves. This is contrary to what one is required to believe in of the Lordship (ruboobiyyah) of Allah, may He be exalted, and that He is the Creator of all things, and it is contrary to what one is required to believe in of the divine will and decree.

Similarly, it is not permissible to overlook the fact that all blessings come only from Allah, may He be exalted, because overlooking this fact is denying His perfect kindness and generosity, and His perfect control.

Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And whatever you have of favor – it is from Allah. Then when adversity touches you, to Him you cry for help”

[an-Nahl 16:53].

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah said in ar-Radd ‘ala al-Mantiqiyyeen (p. 537):

According to the monotheists, there is no one other than Allah who is able to do anything by himself independently of Him. Rather all that he may be is a cause or means, and the outcome cannot be achieved except by the help of Allah; the thing may happen through other means or causes, and by the warding off of any impediments. It is Allah, may He be exalted, Who creates, by means of causes and by warding off anything that could be an impediment, in addition to the fact that it is He Who creates this cause or means.

But the point is that there is nothing in existence that could lead to some outcome independently, and there is nothing that could lead to all effects or outcomes, except the will of Allah alone. Whatever He wills happens, and whatever He does not will does not happen. End quote.

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The words of some, “Were it not for So-and-so, such and such would not have happened” may be understood as not attributing the blessing to the One Who, were it not for Him, it

could not have happened, and it is attributing (this blessing) to one who has no power to cause harm or benefit for himself or anyone else. All that he may be is part of the cause or means through which Allah, may He be exalted, brought about His blessing, and the cause or means could not lead to results independently. Making that person a cause is one of the blessings of Allah, and Allah is the one Who bestowed that blessing; He is the bestower of blessings when He creates causes and means that could lead to blessings. Therefore the cause and the effect are among the blessings and favours of Allah, and He, may He be glorified, may bestow His blessings by means of that particular cause; or He may bestow blessings without that cause, so that the cause will not have any impact; or He may take away the effectiveness of the cause; or He may create something to counteract the cause and render it ineffective; or He may make the cause lead to the opposite of its expected outcome. In reality, He alone is the bestower of blessings.

End quote from Shifa' al-'Aleel, p. 37.

Attributing blessings to their causes, and denying the fact that Allah alone is the true bestower of blessings and favours, is the way of the mushrikeen (polytheists; those who associate others with Allah), and it is not permissible for the Muslim to imitate them in that. Shaykh al-Islam Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhaab said in Kitaab at-Tawheed:

Chapter on the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): "They recognize the favor of Allah; then they deny it. And most of them are disbelievers" [an-Nahl 16:83].

Mujaahid said: This refers to when a man says: "This is my wealth; I inherited it from my forefathers."

'Awn ibn 'Abdillah said: They say: "Were it not for So-and-so, such and such would not have happened."

Ibn Qutaybah said: They say: "This is by the intercession of our gods."

Abu'l-'Abbaas [that is, Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him)] said – after quoting the hadith of Zayd ibn Khaalid, in which the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Do you know what your Lord has said?” They said: Allah and His Messenger know best. “He said: ‘This morning one of My slaves became a believer in Me and one a disbeliever. As for him who said: “We have been given rain by the grace of Allah and His mercy,” that one is a believer in Me and a disbeliever in the stars. As for him who said: “We have been given rain by such and such a star,” that one is a disbeliever in Me, and a believer in the stars’” –: There are many such references in the Qur’an and Sunnah. Allah, may He be glorified, criticizes the one who attributes His blessings to something else and associates something else with Him.

Some of the early generations said: This is like when they say: “The wind was good, the sailor was skillful”, and the like, which are things that people often say. End quote.

Another example of that is the report narrated by Ibn Abi Haatim in his Tafseer (1/62) with his isnaad from Ibn ‘Abbaas, regarding the verse “So do not attribute to Allah equals” [al-Baqarah 2:22]. He said: The word “equals” refers to shirk (ascribing partners to Allah). This is more subtle than the footsteps of ants on a black rock in the darkness of night. It refers to saying: “By Allah and by your life, O So-and-so, and by my life”; or saying, “Were it not for this person’s dog, the thieves would have raided us,” and “Were it not for the geese in the house, the thieves would have raided us”; or a man saying to his companion, “Whatever Allah wills and you will”; or a man saying: “Were it not for Allah and So-and-so...” You should not include So-and-so in the phrase, because all of that is associating others with Allah.

The hadith was classed as hasan by ad-Dawsari in an-Nahaj as-Sadeed, no. 462.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The words “Were it not for this dog of his, the thieves would have raided us” constitute shirk if the speaker only thinks of the cause, without thinking of the One Who created the cause, namely Allah, may He be glorified and exalted.

As for relying on a cause that is regarded as such in Islam, or on a known, tangible cause, we have noted above that there is nothing wrong with that. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Were it not for me, he would have been in the lowest level of Hell.” But it may occur to a person in his mind, if he says, “Where it not for this, such and such would have happened, or would not have happened”, some element of shirk may creep into his heart, by relying on the cause without thinking of the One Who created the cause, namely Allah, may He be glorified and exalted.

End quote from al-Qawl al-Mufeed (2/147).

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

With regard to minor shirk, such as a little showing off,

and when a man says to another man: “Whatever Allah wills and you will”; “this is from Allah and from you”; “I am trusting in Allah’s help and your help”; “I have no one but Allah and you”; “I am relying on Allah and on you”; “Were it not for you, such and such would not have taken place” –

such words may constitute major shirk, according to what was meant by the one who said it.

End quote from Madaarij as-Saalikeen (2/924).

As for attributing blessings to the correct cause, whilst believing that that would not have happened except by the will and decree of Allah, and that were it not for that, it would not have happened – there is nothing wrong with this.

Al-Bukhaari (3883) and Muslim (209) narrated from al-‘Abbaas ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib that he said: O Messenger of Allah, have you benefitted Abu Taalib in some way, for he used to defend you and get angry for your sake? He said: “He is in the shallowest part of the Fire. Were it not for me he would be in the deepest part of the Fire.”

In another version of the hadith, which was narrated by al-Bukhaari (3885) and Muslim (209), it also says that this was by the intercession of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and Allah's acceptance of his intercession.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn 'Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked about this phrase, "Were it not for Allah and So-and-so".

He replied: To connect something other than Allah with Allah regarding matters that have to do with the divine will and decree, in such a way that gives the impression of partnership and that there is no differentiation between them, is something that is not permissible. For example, it is not permissible to say, "Whatever Allah wills and you will," because this is connecting the will of Allah to the will of the created entity with a conjunction ("and") that gives the impression that they are equal, and this is a kind of shirk. Rather you must say "then", such as saying "Whatever Allah wills then you will."

Similarly, attributing something that takes place to a cause and to Allah with the conjunction ("and") that gives the impression that they are equal is not allowed. So do not say "Were it not for Allah and So-and-so, who rescued me, I would have drowned." This is haraam and is not permissible, because you are regarding the created means as being equal to the Creator of the means, and this is a type of shirk.

But it is permissible to attribute a thing to its cause, without mentioning Allah alongside it. So you may say: "Were it not for So-and-so, I would have drowned," provided that the cause is correct and is something real. Hence the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said concerning Abu Taalib, when he stated that he was wearing two sandals [of fire] because of which his brain boiled: "Were it not for me he would be in the deepest part of the Fire." And he did not say: "Were it not for Allah then me," even though he would not be in a state of punishment except by the will of Allah.

Attributing a thing to its cause that is known from the religious texts or from experience, is permissible, even if no mention is made of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, alongside it.

Attributing it to Allah and to its cause that is known either from the religious texts or from experience, is permissible on condition that it is expressed in such a way that does not imply that they are equal, such as saying “then”.

Attributing it to Allah and to its cause that is known either from the religious texts or from experience, in a manner that implies that they are equal, such as saying “and”, is haraam and is a type of shirk.

Attributing a thing to an imaginary cause that is not known is haraam and is not permissible, and it is a type of shirk, such as spells, amulets and the like. Attributing a thing to such causes is pure error, and is a type of shirk, because to believe that something is a cause when Allah has not made it a cause is a type of associating something else with Him. It is as if you have made this thing a cause, when Allah did not make it a cause. Therefore it is a type of shirk in that sense.

End quote from Fataawa Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (3/130).

Secondly:

With regard to comparing the words “Were it not for So-and-so” and “Were it not for Allah, then So-and-so”:

The former is permissible, on condition that the one who says it does not have any corrupt beliefs – as discussed above – but the latter is better and more appropriate, because it is more clearly indicative of sound belief.

Ahmad (23265) narrated from Hudhayfah that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Do not say: ‘What Allah wills and So-and-so wills’; rather say: ‘What Allah wills then what So-and-so wills.’”

Better than either of these two phrases, and preferable to both of them, is to say: “Were it not for Allah alone,” and not to add “So-and-so.” This is more perfect in terms of Tawheed and is further removed from anything that could undermine a perfect level thereof.

Similar to that is saying “What Allah wills then So-and-so wills.” This is permissible, but saying “What Allah alone wills” is more perfect and is preferable.

Ahmad (1964) narrated that Ibn ‘Abbaas said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) heard a man saying: “Whatever Allah wills and you will.” He said: “Rather ‘Whatever Allah alone wills.’” Shaykh Ahmad Shaakir said: Its isnaad is saheeh.

Shaykh Saalih al-Fawzaan said in I’aanat al-Mustafeed:

This hadith directs us to that which is most perfect, which is to say: “Whatever Allah alone wills.” If someone says “Whatever Allah wills then you will,” this is simply explaining what is permissible. So there is no contradiction between the two hadiths. End quote.

In Ibn Qaasim’s commentary on Kitaab at-Tawheed it says:

He instructed them to say “Whatever Allah alone wills.” Undoubtedly this is more perfect in terms of sincerity and is further removed from shirk, and it is better and more perfect than saying “Whatever Allah wills then Muhammad wills,” because saying “Whatever Allah alone wills” is clearly affirming Tawheed and is contrary to associating partners with Allah in any way. The one with insight chooses for himself the highest levels of perfection in terms of Tawheed and sincerity. End quote.

In Tayseer al-‘Azeez al-Hameed fi Sharh Kitaab at-Tawheed (p. 542) it says:

When he said: Do not say “Whatever Allah wills and Muhammad wills”; rather say, “What Allah alone wills”, this is by way of recommendation. Otherwise it is permissible to say: “Whatever Allah wills then So-and-so wills.” End quote.

Conclusion:

If someone says: “Were it not for my hard work, I would not have succeeded”, it may be permissible if he means that his hard work was no more than a means, and it is Allah who blessed him with success. But better than that is to say “Were it not that Allah helped

me..." or "Were it not for the help of Allah..." or "were it not that Allah made it easy for me..." and the like.

But if what he meant when he said "Were it not for my hard work, I would not have succeeded" is to boast and show off, and attribute the blessing to his own efforts and not to Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, then that is haraam.

And Allah knows best.