

The Hidden Arrogance of the Perfect Plan

Hassan al-Ma'bari

There is a kind of perfectionism that looks innocent at first. It tells you, “I just want things to be beautiful. I just want the day to go right. I just want everything to happen the way I imagined it.” And in a limited sense, there is nothing wrong with that. A person should prepare well. A person should care. A person should have taste, standards, seriousness, and excellence.

The Prophet ﷺ did not teach us to abandon the means and call that trust. He taught us to take the means, to act, to strive, to be awake, to be strong, and then to rely upon Allah. This is why al-Nawawī, commenting on the hadith of the strong believer, explains that strength is the resolve of the soul in what benefits a person, and he brings the Prophet’s ﷺ instruction:

احرص على ما ينفعك، واستعن بالله، ولا تعجز.

Be eager for what benefits you, seek Allah’s help, and do not become incapable.

So the problem is not effort. The problem is not beauty. The problem is not preparation. The problem is not that you wanted the wedding to be beautiful, or the day to be meaningful, or the moment to unfold with grace.

The problem begins when perfectionism does not stop at effort.

It goes deeper.

It enters the heart.

It begins to imagine an ideal version of the future and then quietly demands that life obey it. It says, “This is how my wedding should feel. This is how that day should look. This is how people should act. This is how the moment should unfold.” Then, before anything has even happened, the person has already prepared a disappointment for themselves. They have already written the emotional script: “If this goes wrong, I will be upset. If this detail fails, the day is ruined. If reality does not match the image in my head, then something beautiful has been taken from me.”

But this is where the problem begins.

The thing was not ruined by reality first. It was ruined by the idolized version of reality that the person created in their own mind.

A person can say with their tongue, “Allah is in control,” but still live as if their own imagination deserves the final say. They can say, “Allah has a plan,” but become angry when His plan touches the small things, the simple things, the beautiful things.

We accept *qadar* when the matter is huge: a job rejection, a closed door, a delayed dream, a painful loss. Then we say, “Maybe Allah protected me. Maybe Allah has something better.” But many people do not apply that same faith to the small details of happiness. They do not think Allah is also present in the wedding timing, the weather, the slight delay, the seating issue, the missing decoration, the awkward moment, the small imperfection in a beautiful day.

But Allah does not only govern tragedies.

He governs joys too.

He does not only decree the doors that close. He decrees the flowers that arrive late, the person who forgets their line, the small interruption in the middle of laughter, the detail that did not match the plan. The Qur’an says:

وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ

You do not will unless Allah wills.

That is not only true for the massive turns of life. It is true for the tiny turns too.

And maybe those tiny turns reveal us more honestly than the major tests do.

Because when something major goes wrong, we already know we are supposed to be patient. But when something small goes wrong in the middle of something happy, our real spiritual state appears. Are we grateful for the whole blessing, or are we enslaved to the one detail that changed? Can we smile when the day is still beautiful, or does our ego need reality to apologize for not matching our private fantasy?

This is why perfectionism can become a hidden form of ego. Not because wanting beauty is wrong. Not because planning is wrong. Not because trying your best is wrong. The ego enters when you begin to believe that the version in your mind was the most perfect version possible. You imagined something, and without realizing it, you treated your imagination as if it had divine knowledge. You assumed that if reality differs from your plan, then reality has become worse.

But how do you know?

Allah says:

وَعَسَى أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ وَعَسَى أَنْ تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

Perhaps you dislike something while it is good for you, and perhaps you love something while it is bad for you. Allah knows, and you do not know.

This verse breaks the arrogance of the imagined future. It reminds the heart that our preferences are not always wisdom. Our plans are not always mercy. Our disappointment is not always proof that something bad happened.

Al-Qurṭubī, commenting on this meaning, transmits from al-Ḥasan:

لا تَكْرَهُوا الْمَلَبَّاتِ الْوَاقِعَةَ، فَلَرَبِّ أَمْرٍ تَكْرَهُهُ فِيهِ نَجَاتُكَ، وَلَرَبِّ أَمْرٍ تُحِبُّهُ فِيهِ عَذَابُكَ.

Do not hate the events that descend upon you; for many a thing you dislike contains your salvation, and many a thing you love contains your destruction.

Sometimes the thing you thought would “ruin” the moment is the very thing that saves it from becoming artificial, stiff, vain, or spiritually empty. Sometimes the imperfection becomes the mercy. Sometimes the interruption becomes the test. Sometimes the detail you did not want becomes the doorway through which your heart is shown to itself.

There is a difference between perfect action and perfect control.

Perfect action means you do your best. You prepare, you organize, you show up with excellence. That is noble. That is part of *ihsān*.

But perfect control means you expect the world to submit to the picture inside your head. That is not *ihsān*. That is exhaustion. That is trying to carry something no human being was created to carry.

You are not Allah. You are a servant. And part of being a servant is knowing the boundary between what is asked of you and what belongs to Him.

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Sakandarī expressed this with a piercing line in *al-Ḥikam*:

أَرْحُ نَفْسَكَ مِنَ التَّدْيِيرِ، فَمَا قَامَ بِهِ غَيْرُكَ عَنْكَ، لَا تَقُمْ بِهِ أَنْتَ لِنَفْسِكَ.

Relieve your soul from anxious self-management. What Another has already undertaken on your behalf, do not undertake for yourself.

The point is not to abandon effort. It is to stop trying to inwardly control what Allah has already taken into His wisdom.

Ibn ‘Ajibah explains that this blameworthy *tadbīr* is not simply planning. It is planning with inward insistence. It is arranging the future according to fear and hope by way of judgment, not by way of surrender. It is the heart saying, “This must happen, and if it does not, something has gone wrong.”

He writes:

التدبير هو تقدير شؤون يكون عليها في المستقبل بما يخاف أو يرجى بالحكم لا بالتفويض.

Self-management is to estimate and arrange future affairs according to what one fears or hopes for, by way of judgment and assertion, not by way of consigning the matter to Allah.

This is exactly where perfectionism becomes spiritually dangerous. You are no longer simply preparing. You are judging the unseen. You are no longer simply hoping. You are insisting. You are no longer simply loving beauty. You are demanding that Allah’s decree arrive in the exact shape of your imagined beauty.

That is the balance: work beautifully, but do not worship the outcome.

Ibn ‘Ajibah continues:

وغالب ما تدبره لنفسك لا تساعد رباح الأقدار، وتعقبه الهموم والأكدار.

Most of what you arrange for yourself is not aided by the winds of divine decrees, and it is followed by worries and disturbances.

This is why the imagined perfect plan becomes so heavy. You build a future in your head, decorate it, rehearse it, emotionally attach yourself to it, and then reality arrives with one changed detail. Suddenly the heart collapses, not because the blessing disappeared, but because the private idol of the perfect plan was touched.

A wedding is a perfect example. It is supposed to be a day of happiness, mercy, family, laughter, love, and gratitude. But someone can enter that day with such a fragile ideal in their mind that one small change becomes a catastrophe. A delay, a decoration, a person’s comment, a small awkward moment, a plan that shifts slightly, and suddenly the heart says, “The day is ruined.”

But ruined according to whom?

According to Allah, the day may still be full of *barakah*. According to everyone else, the moment may still be beautiful. According to the future, that imperfection may become the thing you laugh about, the thing that made the day human, the thing that gave the memory warmth. But because you already imagined yourself being upset, you obeyed that imagined sadness when the moment came.

Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh gives an even sharper line:

مَا تَرَكَ مِنَ الْجَهْلِ شَيْئًا مَنْ أَرَادَ أَنْ يَظْهَرَ فِي الْوَقْتِ غَيْرُ مَا أَظْهَرَهُ اللَّهُ فِيهِ.

He has left nothing of ignorance behind: the one who wants something to appear in the present moment other than what Allah has made appear within it.

This is not a call to passivity. It is not saying, “Do not fix what can be fixed.” It is not saying, “Do not improve what can be improved.” Rather, it is speaking about the inward protest of the heart after Allah has already manifested the moment.

If something can be corrected, correct it with *adab*. If something can be improved, improve it with calmness. If something can be saved, save it with wisdom. But do not let the heart become resentful toward the moment itself. Do not secretly say, “Allah should not have allowed this detail to appear here.”

This is why al-Ghazālī is careful when speaking about *riḍā*. Contentment is not the abandonment of judgment, nor is it approval of sin, harm, negligence, or ugliness. It does not mean that a person watches something wrong and calls it wisdom. Rather, it means that after the servant has fulfilled what Allah demanded from him, corrected what he could correct, and taken the means placed in his hand, he does not let his heart become resentful toward what Allah allowed to unfold. The hand still acts. The tongue still advises. The mind still plans. But the heart does not accuse Allah.

That is the hidden arrogance of the perfect plan.

It is not always loud. It is not always obvious. It can be unconscious. A person may say, “Of course Allah is in control,” but the heart still behaves as if its imagined version was wiser, cleaner, more beautiful, and more fitting than what Allah actually decreed.

Ibn ‘Ajībah says that among the manners of the true knower is that he lets things remain in their proper places and moves with them according to their movement. Whatever divine power brings forth into manifestation is, from the side of divine wisdom, at the utmost degree of precision.

That is a difficult truth for the ego. Because the ego wants to be the author of the scene. It wants to control not only what happens, but how it feels, how others act, how the memory forms, and how every detail confirms the image it had already created.

But the servant does not author the world.

The servant receives, responds, and returns to Allah.

Al-Qushayrī’s chapter on *riḍā* gives the inner medicine for this. Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī said:

ثلاثة من أعلام الرضا: ترك الاختيار قبل القضاء، وفقدان المارة بعد القضاء، وهيجان الحب في حشو البلاء.

Three things are among the signs of contentment: leaving personal choice before the decree, the disappearance of bitterness after the decree, and the stirring of love in the midst of tribulation.

This is the whole path in one line.

Before the decree, do not be enslaved to your own choosing.

After the decree, do not let bitterness remain.

And even inside the difficulty, let love move.

That is why mindset matters. Not in a shallow “just be positive” way, but in a deeply spiritual way. A strong mindset is not pretending nothing matters. It is knowing what deserves to matter. It is knowing when to care and when to release. It is knowing how to say, “I tried. I prepared. I wanted beauty. But Allah chose this detail differently, and I will not turn a blessing into a complaint.”

Al-Qushayrī also transmits the saying of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī, may Allah be pleased with them both:

مَنْ اتَّكَلَّ عَلَى حُسْنِ اخْتِيَارِ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى لَهُ، لَمْ يَتَمَنَّ غَيْرَ مَا اخْتَارَهُ اللَّهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ لَهُ.

Whoever relies upon the beauty of Allah Most High’s choosing for him does not wish for anything other than what Allah Mighty and Majestic has chosen for him.

This is not carelessness. This is not laziness. This is not emotional numbness. This is a heart that has learned to trust the beauty of Allah’s choosing even when the chosen thing arrives in a form the *nafs* did not expect.

Al-Muḥāsibī defines contentment as:

سُكُونُ الْقَلْبِ تَحْتَ مَجَارِي الْأَحْكَامِ.

The stillness of the heart beneath the courses of divine rulings.

That stillness is not weakness. It is strength. It is the heart no longer thrashing beneath the flow of Allah’s decree. It is a person who can stand inside a changed plan and not become ugly. It is a person who can remain gentle when the *nafs* wanted drama. It is a person who can smile when the ego wanted to punish the room for not obeying its fantasy.

Al-Junayd said:

الرِّضَا رَفْعُ الْإِخْتِيَارِ.

Contentment is the lifting of personal choice.

And Ibn ‘Aṭā’ said:

الرِّضَا نَظَرُ الْقَلْبِ إِلَى قَدِيمِ اخْتِيَارِ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى لِلْعَبْدِ، وَهُوَ تَرْكُ التَّسَخُّطِ.

Contentment is the heart's gaze toward Allah Most High's ancient choosing for the servant; and it is the abandonment of resentment.

This is one of the most subtle forms of gratitude.

Gratitude is not only saying “*alḥamdulillāh*” when everything looks exactly how you wanted. Gratitude is being able to remain soft, cheerful, and present when Allah edits your plan. Allah says:

لَئِنْ شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ

If you are grateful, I will surely increase you.

And sometimes the gratitude that brings increase is not gratitude after a huge miracle, but gratitude in a small disrupted moment when the *nafs* wanted to complain.

The Prophet ﷺ said that the affair of the believer is wondrous: if something pleasing happens, he is grateful and that is good for him; if hardship comes, he is patient and that is good for him. That means the believer does not lose. Pleasure becomes good through gratitude. Pain becomes good through patience. Even imperfection becomes good when it returns the heart to Allah.

Al-Ghazālī explains that *riḍā* is not shallow positivity. It is not pretending that the *nafs* never feels discomfort. It is one of the fruits of love:

اعلم أن الرضا ثمرة من ثمرات المحبة، وهو من أعلى مقامات المقربين، وحقيقته غامضة على الأكثرين.

Know that contentment is one of the fruits of love. It is among the highest stations of those brought near to Allah. Its reality is obscure to most people.

Its reality is obscure because many people think contentment only matters when something obviously painful happens. But the subtle test is when contentment is demanded inside a blessing. When the day is still beautiful, but not exactly as you imagined. When the favor is still present, but one detail changed. When Allah gave you ninety-nine doors of joy, but your ego stares at the one door that did not open the way it wanted.

This is why people can live lighter lives than you. Not because they care less. Not because they have lower standards. But because they are not constantly forcing reality to answer to an imagined court in their head. They are not making every small disruption into a verdict against the whole blessing.

So the real question is not: “How do I make sure nothing goes wrong?”

The real question is: “Who will I become when something does not go according to my plan?”

Will I become bitter, dramatic, ungrateful, and controlling? Or will I become light, trusting, smiling, and free?

Because a carefree heart is not a careless heart.

A carefree heart is a heart that has learned *adab* with Allah. It still plans. It still loves beauty. It still tries. But when Allah changes the arrangement, it does not accuse the decree. It does not ruin the whole blessing over one detail. It says:

قَدَرَ اللَّهُ وَمَا شَاءَ فَعَلَ

Allah decreed, and whatever He willed, He did.

Al-Nawawī explains that the danger of saying “if only” after something has already passed is that it can become spiritually poisonous. It is not every use of “if only” that is blameworthy, especially when there is benefit or regret over a missed obedience. But the dangerous “if only” is the one that opens the door to inward opposition to *qadar*.

He writes:

فَإِنْ لَوْ تَفْتَحَ عَمَلُ الشَّيْطَانِ، أَي: يَلْقَى فِي الْقَلْبِ مَعَارِضَةَ الْقَدْرِ، وَيُوسَّسُ بِهِ الشَّيْطَانُ.

“For ‘if only’ opens the work of Satan,” meaning: it casts into the heart opposition to divine decree, and Satan whispers through it.

This is exactly what happens when the perfect plan breaks. The tongue may not say it, but the heart says, “If only this detail had happened. If only that person had acted differently. If only the timing was better. If only the moment looked like what I imagined.”

And sometimes that “if only” is not reflection.

It is resentment.

It is not wisdom.

It is opposition.

It is not care.

It is the ego grieving the death of its own imagined control.

Ibn ‘Ajībah gives the sign of a healthier kind of planning:

وَعَلَامَةُ كَوْنِهِ بِاللَّهِ أَنَّهُ إِذَا بَرَزَ مِنَ الْقُدْرَةِ عَكْسَ مَا دَبَّرَ لَمْ يَنْقَبِضْ وَلَمْ يَضْطَرْبْ.

The sign that one's planning is by Allah is that when there emerges from divine power the opposite of what one had planned, he does not become constricted and he does not become disturbed.

That is the standard.

Not that you never plan. Not that you never care. Not that you never want things to be beautiful. But when the opposite of what you planned emerges from divine power, does your chest collapse? Does your face change? Does your gratitude disappear? Does your inner *adab* vanish? Does the whole day become "ruined" because Allah wrote one detail differently?

If so, then the problem was never the detail.

The problem was the hidden throne your own plan had taken inside your heart.

The thing you think you need to be perfect may actually disrupt the flow Allah intended for you. The version in your head may be beautiful, but Allah's version may be wiser. Your imagined plan may preserve the aesthetic of the moment, but Allah's plan may purify the heart inside the moment.

So prepare beautifully. Try sincerely. Take the means. But once the matter leaves your hands, let it leave your heart too.

As Ibrāhīm al-Khawwāṣ said, all knowledge is gathered in two sentences:

لا تتكلف ما كُفيت، ولا تضيع ما استكفيت.

Do not burden yourself with what has already been guaranteed for you, and do not neglect what has been demanded from you.

That is the whole balance. Do not neglect the effort. Do not worship the outcome.

Smile.

Shrug off the small imperfection.

Let the day remain a blessing.

Do not give a tiny disruption the power to steal a mercy Allah placed in front of you.

Most people only recognize tests when they arrive dressed as pain. But sometimes the test comes hidden inside happiness. Sometimes Allah gives you something beautiful, changes one small part of it, and watches whether you will still be grateful. Sometimes He lets one detail go against your plan, not to ruin the blessing, but to expose whether you wanted the blessing itself or whether you wanted your ego's authorship over it.

And if you can recognize that test while others miss it, then you have already been given something

precious: the ability to enjoy Allah's gifts without demanding that they arrive in the exact shape of your ego.

That is a better life.

That is a lighter heart.

That is trust.

Work beautifully, but do not worship the outcome.

Plan with excellence, but do not bow to the plan.

Let your actions be polished, but let your heart be free.

Because the servant's honor is not in forcing the world to match his imagined perfection.

It is in standing before Allah's decree with effort in his limbs, gratitude on his tongue, stillness in his chest, and no resentment in his heart.