SŪRAH 40

Ghāfir

(The Forgiver)

Prologue

This *sūrah* deals with the major issues of truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, the message and those who reject it, as well as unjustifiable tyranny and how God smites tyrants who seek to impose their will on others. It also refers to the position of believers who follow Divine guidance and obey God's commandments. It mentions how the angels pray that they may be forgiven their sins, and how God answers their prayers. It also speaks about the reward awaiting them in the life to come.

Such being its subject matter, the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* is one of a battle, the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and tyranny. This is interspersed with an air of grace and mercy whenever the believers are mentioned. The general atmosphere is generated through a description of how earlier communities were destroyed as a result of their opposition to Divine faith, as well as several images of the Day of Judgement. All in all, these awesome images suit the sombre air of the *sūrah*.

Fittingly, the opening of the *sūrah* uses short phrases that carry a distinctive beat: '*who forgives sins; accepts repentance; is severe in retribution; limitless in bounty; there is no deity other than Him; to Him is the ultimate return.*' (Verse 3) These phrases sound like hammers

striking in unison, with harmony between meaning and rhythm. Note also that words like 'might' and 'power' are frequently used in the *sūrah*.

As a whole, the *sūrah* has a powerful effect on us, portraying as it does scenes of the Day of Judgement and images of the fate of earlier communities. At times, it softens its rhythm so as to gently touch our hearts, showing us images of the angels who carry God's throne, as well as those around it, praying to God to bestow His grace on His devoted servants. The same may be said regarding the verses that refer to universal scenes or to the finer elements of the human soul, as both provide evidence in support of the truth of faith. Here, then, are some examples of the verses that generate these feelings:

1. In reference to earlier communities and their fate: "*Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) "*Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is powerful, stern in retribution.*" (Verses 21–22)
2. In reference to the Day of Resurrection: "*Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded.*" (Verse 18) "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verses 69–72)

3. A softer touch is provided in the scene of those who carry God's throne, devoted as they are in humble prayer: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.*'" (Verses 7–9)
4. Inspirational touches are achieved in the portrayals of miraculous phenomena in the universe and within the human soul: "*It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.*" (Verses 67–68) "*It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?*" (Verses 61–62) "*It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 64)

In all these images there is evident harmony and consistency, the whole ambience perfectly fitting the *sūrah*'s subject matter.

The *sūrah* may be divided into four parts. The first begins with two separate letters: "Ḥā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verses 1–2) This is followed by the short

phrases with their distinctive beat, to which we referred earlier. The *sūrah* then states that the whole universe submits to God and obeys Him. Only the unbelievers dispute God's revelations, thus they separate themselves from the rest of the universe. Therefore, the Prophet should pay no attention to them, no matter how affluent and well pleased they appear to be. They will inevitably face the same fate suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers. God smote them with a stern punishment. Nevertheless, more suffering awaits them in the life to come. By contrast, the angels carrying God's throne, as well as those surrounding it, declare their belief in their Lord, address their worship to Him alone, and pray for the forgiveness of the believers among the dwellers of the earth, as well as for their success and prosperity.

At the same time, the *sūrah* gives an image of the unbelievers when the entire universe, which believes in God, calls out to them on the Day of Resurrection, saying: *"Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it."* (Verse 10) In their position of humiliation, which contrasts with their arrogance in this present life, they admit their faults and acknowledge their Lord, but such realization is now of no use to them. They are only reminded of what they used to do when they associated partners with God and arrogantly turned from His guidance.

This image of the hereafter is followed by one presenting people's situation in this present life: "*He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you.*" (Verse 13) They are so reminded in order that they may turn to their Lord and declare their belief in Him as the only God: "*Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then adds a strong warning of that fearful day, and follows this with an image of how they stand on that day: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) Those who are arrogant, tyrannical or disputant will all disappear into insignificance: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16) The *sūrah* goes on to give further images of that day when judgement over all belongs to God alone. All those worshipped instead or alongside Him are nowhere to be seen.

The second part begins with a reference to the fate suffered by some past communities. This serves as a prelude to the narration about certain events from Moses' life history and specifically his encounter with Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah or Qārūn. These events, representing tyrants' attitude to the message of truth, are only told in this *sūrah*. There is no reference to them anywhere else in the Qur'ān. They tell us of a believer from Pharaoh's own household, who concealed the fact that he believed in Moses' message. He tries first to protect Moses against Pharaoh's attempt to kill him. He states the word of truth, putting it cautiously at first, then ultimately declaring it openly and clearly. In his argument with Pharaoh, this believer presents strong and clear evidence for the truth, warns Pharaoh and his people of the Day of Judgement, describes some images of the day in an inspirational way and reminds them of their attitude and that of generations before them to Joseph and his message. The story is developed in such a way as to link it, eventually, to the life to come, and we see them all there, disputing among themselves as they suffer in hell. The dialogue occurs between the weak elements of society and their arrogant leaders, on the one side, and another takes place between them all and the angels in charge of hell, trying to find a way out when there is none. In the light of this last scene, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet Muḥammad to remain patient in adversity, to have full trust that God's promise will come true, and to glorify and praise Him.

The third part starts with a statement that those who dispute God's revelations without providing any sound argument in support of what they say are only motivated by a quest for greatness. Yet they are too insignificant to attain this. The *sūrah* then directs people's hearts to reflect on the great universe God has created, which is far greater than all mankind. This reminder may perhaps make those who are arrogant better appreciate the greatness of God's creation, rather than remaining blind to it: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) It reminds them of the approach of the Last Hour and directs them to pray to God, for He responds to those who pray to Him.

Those who choose to remain arrogant will inevitably enter hell in complete humiliation. Here the *sūrah* portrays some of the universal signs that they ignore. We see the night portrayed as a time for rest and

the day is given eyes, while the earth is shown as a resting place and the sky a canopy. In relation to themselves, the *sūrah* also reminds them to reflect on the pleasing shape and form God has given them. It directs them to submit to God with sincerity. It instructs the Prophet to distance himself from what they worship, declare God's order to him to reject their deities and to submit to the Lord of all the worlds. It seeks to make their hearts more responsive by mentioning that God, the Creator of the universe, is the One who originated them from dust first, then from a gamete. It is He who gives life and deals death. Again the *sūrah* makes the Prophet wonder at those who argue about God, warning them against punishment in the hereafter, and portrays a very powerful image of such punishment: "*They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verses 70–72) Indeed, those whom they worshipped will disown their worship, while they themselves deny having ever worshipped anyone. Ultimately, they end up in hell, as they are told: "*Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.*" (Verse 76) Again, in the light of this scene the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity, and to trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether he remains alive to see some of what this promise involves or he is made to die before its fulfilment. The promise will come true at the time appointed for it.

The *sūrah*'s fourth and final part is closely linked with its third. As the Prophet is directed to wait patiently, he is told that God sent many messengers before him: "*No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave.*" (Verse 78) Still, there are many signs in the universe, and there are also plenty of signs that people ignore. Who, for example made cattle subservient to man? Furthermore, the ships that carry them on the sea are a sign they see with their eyes. The fate of past communities should also serve as an admonition to them. The *sūrah* then concludes with a powerful image coupled with strong rhythm, showing a community of unbelievers faced with God's might. They declared their belief, but it was too late: "*But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85) This is a fitting ending, one that depicts the fate of those who are arrogant.

I

A Prayer by Angels

Ghāfir (The Forgiver)



In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, (2)

تَنزِيلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْعَلِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return. (3)

غَافِرِ ٱلذَّنۢبِ وَقَابِلِ ٱلتَّوْبِ شَدِيدِ ٱلْعِقَابِ ذِى ٱلطَّوْلِ ۖ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ إِلَيْهِ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿٣﴾

None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. (4)

مَا يُجَٰدِلُ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فَلَا يَغْرُرْكَ تَقَلُّبُهُمْ فِى ٱلْبِلَٰدِ ﴿٤﴾

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ
وَالْأَحْزَابُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ ۖ وَهَمَّتْ
كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ بِرَسُولِهِمْ لِيَأْخُذُوهُ ۖ
وَجَادَلُوا بِالْبَاطِلِ لِيُدْحِضُوا
بِهِ الْحَقَّ فَأَخَذْتُهُمْ ۖ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ
عِقَابِ ﴿٥﴾

Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! (5)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ حَقَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ
كَفَرُوا أَنَّهُمْ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ ﴿٦﴾

Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell. (6)

الَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ الْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُ
يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ
وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا
وَسِعْتَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ رَحْمَةً وَعِلْمًا
فَاغْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا سَبِيلَكَ
وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٧﴾

Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. (7)

رَبَّنَا وَأَدْخِلْهُمْ جَنَّٰتِ عَدْنٍ ٱلَّتِى
وَعَدتَّهُمْ وَمَن صَلَحَ مِنْ
ءَابَآئِهِمْ وَأَزْوَٰجِهِمْ وَذُرِّيَّٰتِهِمْ ۚ
إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

'And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. (8)

وَقِهِمُ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ ۚ وَمَن تَقِ
ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ يَوْمَئِذٍ فَقَدْ رَحِمْتَهُۥ ۚ
وَذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

'Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (9)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ يُنَادَوْنَ
لَمَقْتُ ٱللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ مِن مَّقْتِكُمْ
أَنفُسَكُمْ إِذْ تُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى
ٱلْإِيمَٰنِ فَتَكْفُرُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' (10)

قَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ أَمَتَّنَا ٱثْنَتَيْنِ وَأَحْيَيْتَنَا ٱثْنَتَيْنِ
فَٱعْتَرَفْنَا بِذُنُوبِنَا فَهَلْ إِلَىٰ خُرُوجٍ
مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿١١﴾

They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' (11)

ذَٰلِكُم بِأَنَّهُۥٓ إِذَا دُعِىَ ٱللَّهُ وَحْدَهُۥ
كَفَرْتُمْ ۖ وَإِن يُشْرَكْ بِهِۦ تُؤْمِنُوا۟ ۚ
فَٱلْحُكْمُ لِلَّهِ ٱلْعَلِىِّ ٱلْكَبِيرِ ﴿١٢﴾

[They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.' (12)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُرِيكُمْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَيُنَزِّلُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ رِزْقًا ۚ وَمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ إِلَّا مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. (13)

فَٱدْعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (14)

رَفِيعُ ٱلدَّرَجَٰتِ ذُو ٱلْعَرْشِ يُلْقِى ٱلرُّوحَ مِنْ أَمْرِهِۦ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ لِيُنذِرَ يَوْمَ ٱلتَّلَاقِ ﴿١٥﴾

High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; (15)

يَوْمَ هُم بَٰرِزُونَ ۖ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ مِنْهُمْ شَىْءٌ ۗ لِّمَنِ ٱلْمُلْكُ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۖ لِلَّهِ ٱلْوَٰحِدِ ٱلْقَهَّارِ ﴿١٦﴾

the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. (16)

ٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ ۚ لَا ظُلْمَ ٱلْيَوْمَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ سَرِيعُ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿١٧﴾

This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning. (17)

Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. (18)

وَأَنذِرْهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْآزِفَةِ إِذِ ٱلْقُلُوبُ لَدَى ٱلْحَنَاجِرِ كَٰظِمِينَ ۚ مَا لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ مِنْ حَمِيمٍ وَلَا شَفِيعٍ يُطَاعُ ﴿١٨﴾

God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. (19)

يَعْلَمُ خَآئِنَةَ ٱلْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِى ٱلصُّدُورُ ﴿١٩﴾

God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all. (20)

وَٱللَّهُ يَقْضِى بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِۦ لَا يَقْضُونَ بِشَىْءٍ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿٢٠﴾

Clear Outline

Ḥā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.* (Verses 1–3)

This is the first of seven *sūrahs* that all begin with the two separate letters, *Ḥā Mīm*. In one of these seven *sūrahs* three other separate letters, *'Ayn Sīn Qāf*, are added after the initial two. We have already discussed why some *sūrahs* start with these separate letters, thereby indicating that the Qur'ān, which defies imitation, is composed of such letters which the Arabs used every day, orally and in writing, in their language.

This is followed by a statement of a fact that is frequently used in Makkan *sūrahs* given these seek to establish faith: the fact of revelation: "*The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 2) A number of God's attributes are then stated. These are directly relevant to the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the issues it discusses:

"*the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.*" (Verses 2–3) In fact all the issues the *sūrah* raises relate to these attributes of God, powerfully stated at the outset to give an impression that they are well and firmly established.

Limitless in His glory, God outlines to His servants these of His attributes that have a profound effect on their lives. Thus, He raises their hopes and fears, making them feel that they are within His grasp and can never elude what He wills. The attributes highlighted here are:

The Almighty: He is overpowering. No one can get the better of Him, while He has power over all things. When He decides something, nothing can stop this from occurring.

The All-Knowing: He conducts all affairs on the basis of perfect knowledge. Nothing is hidden from Him.

He forgives sins: He grants His forgiveness on the basis of His knowledge about those servants who deserve to be forgiven.

He accepts repentance: When sinners repent, He accepts their repentance and bestows His grace on them, opening the door for them to address Him directly.

He is severe in retribution: He punishes the arrogant who are hardened in sin, unwilling to show regret or seek forgiveness.

Limitless in bounty: He bestows His limitless grace, multiplies the reward for good deeds and gives without reckoning.

There is no deity other than Him: He alone is the Godhead who has no partners or equals.

To Him is the ultimate return: None can evade meeting Him or escape accountability.

These attributes provide a clear outline of the interrelation between Him and His servants. They should be clear in their feelings, thoughts and understanding of how to deal with Him. Then, they will have no ambiguity about what pleases Him or incurs His anger.

In the past, those who held beliefs based on legends were at a loss in knowing how to deal with their deities, because they had no clear idea of what pleased or angered them. They pictured them as impulsive, having no clear aim or purpose, demonstrating violent reactions and causing people much worry and confusion. They resorted to charms and sacrifices in their attempts to please such deities, but could only guess about whether they were satisfied or not. By contrast, Islam provides a very clear concept, establishing a relationship between people and their true Lord, outlining His attributes, defining His will, and instructing them on how to draw closer to Him, fear His punishment and pray for His mercy, always following a straight and clear path.

The Same Old Battle

> *None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell.* (Verses 4–6)

Having established the truth of God's oneness and His Divine attributes, the *sūrah* makes clear that this truth is accepted by all creatures. It is, in fact, firmly rooted in their nature and directly related to the nature of the universe. All creation is entirely convinced by the signs testifying to God's oneness. Only the unbelievers dispute these signs and argue about God's revelations. Thus they are a class apart, choosing to be at odds with the universe and all other creatures within it.

"*None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations.*" (Verse 4) Throughout the entire expanse of the universe, only the unbelievers stand apart, deviating from the true path. In relation to the whole universe, they are weaker and less significant than an ant in relation to planet earth. When they stand on their own disputing God's revelations and denying His signs, the rest of the universe declares its acceptance of Him and recognizes His oneness, deriving its strength from Him. With their odd attitude, the unbelievers' fate is sealed, no matter how powerful, affluent and mighty they may appear to be: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) They may be able to move about, gather wealth, enjoy their power and revel in easy living. However, they are ultimately doomed. The battle, if there could ever be a battle between them and the Creator of the universe, will lead to its inevitable end.

There were in former times communities that followed the same path. Their fate should make clear to the unbelievers what happens in the end to anyone who tries to stand against the power of the Almighty: "*Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) It is the same old story, beginning with the Prophet Noah. In other words, the battle remains the same throughout all generations. This verse provides an overall picture: a message from God received with rejection and tyranny, which leads to the inevitable end. Every messenger is met by those in power in his community who do not try to justify their stance with sound argument. On the contrary, they resort to tyranny and try to do away with God's messenger. They also resort to trickery in order to deceive the masses and claim victory for themselves. Therefore, God's power intervenes and smashes them in the most amazing way: "*How awesome was My punishment!*" (Verse 5) The punishments meted out were indeed severe, leaving in their wake ruins that testify to the same. Furthermore, all this is recorded in human history.

The battle, however, is not over yet. There is a further episode in the life to come: "*Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the*

unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell." (Verse 6) When God's word applies to someone, it always comes true. There can be no argument about this.

Thus does the Qur'ān describe the true nature of the battle between faith and unfaith, truth and falsehood, those who advocate God's oneness and those who, against all right, behave arrogantly on earth. We then realize that this is an old and on-going battle that started at the dawn of human life. The battlefield is wider than the whole earth because the universe and all that exists in it believe in God and submit to Him. The only exceptions are those who dispute God's revelations. The two sides are far from equal: on the side of truth stand an endless line, while on the side of falsehood only a small band stands, weak and powerless even though it may appear to be able to do as it likes on earth and to possess power and authority.

The Qur'ān describes the nature of the battle so that advocates of the truth, in all generations, are reassured. They should never be deceived by the apparent might enjoyed by the forces of falsehood at any particular time, or by the outcome of a single round in the battle. Such instances after all do not reflect the complete truth. The truth is that which is described in God's book, in His own words. He is the most truthful of all speakers, and He is the Almighty, the All-Knowing.

A Universal Bond

A relevant point is that even the angels carrying God's throne and those surrounding it, who rank among the forces of faith in the universe, remember the believers among human beings, mention them in God's presence and pray for their forgiveness. They also pray to Him for the fulfilment of His promise to those believers with whom the angels share their bond of faith:

> *Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the*

suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (Verses 7–9)

We do not know what this throne is: we have no image of it. Nor do we know how those assigned to carry it do so or how the others are present around it. It is futile to try to determine something which is beyond the reach of human understanding or perception. No purpose can be served by arguing about something over which God has not provided information. All that can be said concerning this fact is that there are some creatures who are close to God, and these '*extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him.*' Although the fact that they are believers can be taken for granted, this is specifically mentioned in the Qur'ān to emphasize the bond between them and human believers. Having extolled God's limitless glory, these servants of God pray for the believers among humanity, requesting the best that one believer can ask for another.

They begin their supplication in a very polite way, in the process teaching us how to couch our own prayers. They say: "*Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge.*" (Verse 7) As they address God, they make clear their request that God bestows His grace on people, that they are relying on the fact that His grace embraces all, and that His knowledge encompasses everything. Thus, they do not make any assumptions; they simply refer to God's grace and knowledge. "*Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) This reference to God's forgiveness and people's repentance corresponds to the opening of the *sūrah* where God is described as the One who forgives sins and accepts repentance. Likewise, the reference to the '*suffering in the blazing fire*' corresponds to the earlier description of His retribution as being severe.

These servants of God continue with their supplications, praying now for the admission of believers among human beings into heaven,

in fulfilment of His promise to His good servants: "*Our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 8) Admission into heaven is a great triumph and means a life of bliss. When there is added to this the company of righteous ancestors, spouses and offspring, another dimension of bliss is thus granted. Moreover, this is an aspect of the unity of all believers. It is in the bond of faith that fathers, spouses and offspring are united. Without it, all their ties are severed. This part of their supplication highlights God's attributes of power and wisdom. It is this combination that determines how people are judged.

The supplication continues: "*Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 9) Having prayed for their admission to heaven, this prayer refers to the most important point in the whole difficult process. It is evil deeds that ruin people and lead them to their doom. When God shields a believer from evil, He actually shields that believer from the consequences of such evil. This is the great mercy on the Day of Judgement, and it is only the first step to bliss and happiness. This shielding from evil is indeed the great triumph.

Hating Oneself

As the carriers of the throne and those surrounding it address their prayer to God appealing for His grace to be bestowed on believers, their brethren in faith, the unbelievers find themselves in a totally different capacity. Everyone is looking for support, but none is to be found. In fact all bonds with all beings and things in the universe are severed. They are called out so that they can listen to the rebuke coming from all directions. The arrogance they demonstrated in this life is turned now into humiliation. They want to place their hopes in someone, but none is available to encourage their hopes:

> *The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice*

have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' [They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.' (Verses 10–12)

The Arabic text uses the strongest word for hate. We see them addressed from all corners and told that God's loathing of them when they were called upon to believe and still rejected the faith is far stronger than their feelings of hate towards themselves as they realize to what end they have brought themselves. They realize how different their fate could have been, had they responded to the call to faith before it was too late. This reminder is exceptionally painful for them in their newly difficult situation.

Now that all delusion is gone, they realize that the only One to turn to is God Himself; and so they do: "*They will say: Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?*" (Verse 11) Their words betray their misery and despair. They call out: '*Our Lord!* Yet they had once denied Him and rejected His message. You gave us life the first time when You breathed of Your spirit into what was dead and thus You gave it life and we became alive. Again You have given us life after we died. We are now turning to You because You are the only One who can save us from the misery we are in. We acknowledge our faults and admit our sins. Is there, then, a way out of this misery?

Their appeal betrays the direness of their situation. They are in bitter despair. They are made to see the reason for their plight: "*This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12) This is what has brought you to your present position of humiliation. You denied God's oneness and attributed partners to Him. All judgement, then, rests with Him, the Exalted, the Supreme. Both attributes fit well with the position of judgement. He is Exalted above all things and Superior to all beings.

No Injustice

The *sūrah* now dwells on one of God's attributes that fits with His exalted position. The believers are instructed to address their prayers to Him, associating no partners with Him and to be sincere in their devotion to Him alone. The *sūrah* also refers to the fact of revelation so as to give a warning about the day when all mankind will be brought together for judgement, reward and punishment. On that day, all dominion and sovereignty belong to God alone:

> *He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.* (Verses 13–17)

"*He it is who shows you His signs.*" (Verse 13) God's signs are seen in everything in the universe: in the great bodies such as the sun and the planets, and also in the great phenomena such as the day and night, rain, thunder and lightning. Likewise, they are seen in minute things such as the atom, cell, leaf or flower. In each of these there is a miraculous sign which appears clearly when man tries to imitate it, let alone initiate it. Never can man fully imitate even the simplest little thing God has created.

And He it is who "*sends down sustenance from the sky for you.*" (Verse 13) Of all the sustenance God sends down people know best the rain, which is the origin of life on earth and the source of food and drink. Yet there is so much more than rain that God sends down and people learn about this gradually. Part of it consists of the rays that are necessary for life on earth. Such sustenance may also include the Divine messages

that have provided guidance for mankind ever since the early stages of human life on earth. They showed man the right way and provided sound codes for living.

"*Yet only those who turn to God will take heed.*" (Verse 13) It is the one who turns to God that remembers His grace as well as His signs and revelations which the unbelievers, with hardened hearts, prefer to ignore. In connection with turning to God, the believers are instructed to pray to God alone and to be sincere in their faith, paying little heed to what the unbelievers feel or say: "*Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 14) The unbelievers will never accept that the believers should hold on sincerely to their faith in God alone and their worship of none but Him. There is no way they will accept this, no matter how much the believers try to appease them. Therefore, the believers should stay their course, praying to God alone, completely sincere and devoted. They should pay no heed to whether the unbelievers are happy with them or not, because they will never be satisfied.

The *sūrah* adds at this point the following attributes of God: "*High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants.*" (Verse 15) It is God alone who is exalted in His position, high above all orders of being, the Lord of the Throne who controls everything. It is He who gives His orders, which give life to hearts and souls, to those whom He chooses from among His servants. This expression refers to the revelation of the Divine message, and it highlights here the fact that God's revelations bring life to humanity. It further states that revelation is bestowed from on high to those chosen elite among God's servants. All these facts are in harmony with God's attributes mentioned earlier in the *sūrah*, stating that He is "*the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12)

The main task undertaken by a servant of God chosen to receive such a message is to deliver a warning: "*so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him.*" (Verse 15) That is the day when people will meet together, and they will also stand face to face with the deeds they did during their lives on earth, and they will meet other creatures such as the *jinn*, the angels and other types of God's creation. All of them will

meet their Lord at the time of reckoning. Hence the day is described as 'the day of the meeting'. Furthermore, it is the day when they all stand without any cover to screen their reality. Hence, no one can put up a false image: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) In fact, nothing about them is concealed from God at any time. However, at all times other than that day, they may imagine that they are covered or screened by something or other, or that what they do or say may remain secret. On that day, however, they will be truly exposed, unable to enjoy even an imaginary cover.

Therefore, on that day the arrogant and the mighty are made to face their humble reality. The whole universe stands in awe, and all creatures demonstrate their submission. Sovereignty belongs completely to God, the One who overpowers all. In fact this is true at all times. However, on that day, this fact becomes clear to all and sundry. Every tyrant of old and every conceited person will come to know and feel it. Then every sound dies down and every movement stops. A majestic voice asks a question and replies to it, as there is no one else to ask or reply: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today?*"... "*With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16)

"*This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.*" (Verse 17) An air of awe, heightened by silence spreads. All creatures listen and realize; everything is settled, the reckoning is over. This is in harmony with what the *sūrah* said at the outset about those who dispute God's revelations: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) This is the end of unjustified arrogance, tyranny and injustice, as well as of wealth and affluence.

The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to warn his people about this day. The instruction is given against a backdrop of an image of the Day of Resurrection when God sits alone for judgement. Up till now the *sūrah* has not addressed people directly; instead it used a reporting style:

> *Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. God is*

> *well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all.* (Verses 18–20)

The *sūrah* describes the Day of Judgement as ever drawing near, and we perceive it to be hastening towards us. Souls are in distress, pressing against people's throats. They try to suppress their worries and fears, and the effort is difficult. Nevertheless, they can find no one to support or protect them. No one can put up a word of intercession that finds response from anyone.

They stand in full view; nothing can conceal their reality. Even a stealthy glance and a heart's secret is brought into the open: "*God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal.*" (Verse 19) An eye looking stealthily will try hard to conceal its stealthy gaze, but God is well aware of it. A secret may be hidden safely in one's soul, but it is not hidden from God who knows it all.

On that day, it is God only who passes judgement in fairness. Their alleged deities have nothing to do with such judgement: "*God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all.*" (Verse 20) His judgement is based on perfect knowledge and full awareness. He will not entertain any injustice for anyone, and He forgets nothing: "*God alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 20)



2

A Believer in Pharaoh's House

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟
كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوا۟ هُمْ أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً
وَءَاثَارًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ
بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ مِن
وَاقٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. (21)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانَت تَّأْتِيهِمْ رُسُلُهُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَكَفَرُوا۟ فَأَخَذَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
قَوِىٌّ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٢٢﴾

That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution. (22)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا
وَسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority (23)

إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَٰمَٰنَ وَقَٰرُونَ
فَقَالُوا۟ سَٰحِرٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: 'A sorcerer, a teller of lies.' (24)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِٱلْحَقِّ مِنْ عِندِنَا قَالُوا۟
ٱقْتُلُوٓا۟ أَبْنَآءَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ مَعَهُۥ
وَٱسْتَحْيُوا۟ نِسَآءَهُمْ ۚ وَمَا كَيْدُ
ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.' Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong. (25)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ ذَرُونِىٓ أَقْتُلْ
مُوسَىٰ وَلْيَدْعُ رَبَّهُۥٓ ۖ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ أَن
يُبَدِّلَ دِينَكُمْ أَوْ أَن يُظْهِرَ
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ٱلْفَسَادَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Pharaoh said: 'Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.' (26)

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰٓ إِنِّى عُذْتُ بِرَبِّى
وَرَبِّكُم مِّن كُلِّ مُتَكَبِّرٍ
لَّا يُؤْمِنُ بِيَوْمِ ٱلْحِسَابِ ﴿٢٧﴾

Moses said: 'I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.' (27)

وَقَالَ رَجُلٌ مُّؤْمِنٌ مِّنْ ءَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ
يَكْتُمُ إِيمَٰنَهُۥٓ أَتَقْتُلُونَ رَجُلًا أَن
يَقُولَ رَبِّىَ ٱللَّهُ وَقَدْ جَآءَكُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَكُ
كَٰذِبًا فَعَلَيْهِ كَذِبُهُۥ ۖ وَإِن يَكُ
صَادِقًا يُصِبْكُم بَعْضُ ٱلَّذِى
يَعِدُكُمْ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِى مَنْ هُوَ
مُسْرِفٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: 'Would you kill a man because he says, "God is my Lord," when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. (28)

يَٰقَوْمِ لَكُمُ ٱلْمُلْكُ ٱلْيَوْمَ ظَٰهِرِينَ
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَمَن يَنصُرُنَا مِنۢ بَأْسِ
ٱللَّهِ إِن جَآءَنَا ۚ قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ مَآ أُرِيكُمْ
إِلَّا مَآ أَرَىٰ وَمَآ أَهْدِيكُمْ إِلَّا سَبِيلَ
ٱلرَّشَادِ ﴿٢٩﴾

'My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?' Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.' (29)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَامَنَ يَٰقَوْمِ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ
عَلَيْكُم مِّثْلَ يَوْمِ ٱلْأَحْزَابِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Then said the man who believed: 'My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; (30)

مِثْلَ دَأْبِ قَوْمِ نُوحٍ وَعَادٍ وَثَمُودَ
وَٱلَّذِينَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ ۚ وَمَا ٱللَّهُ يُرِيدُ
ظُلْمًا لِّلْعِبَادِ ﴿٣١﴾

the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. (31)

وَيَٰقَوْمِ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ يَوْمَ
ٱلتَّنَادِ ﴿٣٢﴾

'And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; (32)

يَوْمَ تُوَلُّونَ مُدْبِرِينَ مَا لَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ
مِنْ عَاصِمٍ ۗ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ
مِنْ هَادٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. (33)

وَلَقَدْ جَآءَكُمْ يُوسُفُ مِن قَبْلُ
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ فَمَا زِلْتُمْ فِى شَكٍّ مِّمَّا جَآءَكُم
بِهِۦ ۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا هَلَكَ قُلْتُمْ لَن يَبْعَثَ
ٱللَّهُ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ رَسُولًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ
ٱللَّهُ مَنْ هُوَ مُسْرِفٌ مُّرْتَابٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

'Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: "God will never send any messenger after him." In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. (34)

ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ
سُلْطَٰنٍ أَتَىٰهُمْ ۖ كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ
وَعِندَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يَطْبَعُ ٱللَّهُ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ قَلْبِ مُتَكَبِّرٍ جَبَّارٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

'Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.' (35)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَٰهَٰمَٰنُ ٱبْنِ لِى صَرْحًا
لَّعَلِّىٓ أَبْلُغُ ٱلْأَسْبَٰبَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; (36)

أَسْبَٰبَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ فَأَطَّلِعَ إِلَىٰٓ إِلَٰهِ
مُوسَىٰ وَإِنِّى لَأَظُنُّهُۥ كَٰذِبًا ۚ وَكَذَٰلِكَ
زُيِّنَ لِفِرْعَوْنَ سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِۦ وَصُدَّ عَنِ
ٱلسَّبِيلِ ۚ وَمَا كَيْدُ فِرْعَوْنَ
إِلَّا فِى تَبَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin. (37)

The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. (38)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِىٓ ءَامَنَ يَٰقَوْمِ ٱتَّبِعُونِ
أَهْدِكُمْ سَبِيلَ ٱلرَّشَادِ ﴿٣٨﴾

'My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. (39)

يَٰقَوْمِ إِنَّمَا هَٰذِهِ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا مَتَٰعٌ
وَإِنَّ ٱلْءَاخِرَةَ هِىَ دَارُ ٱلْقَرَارِ ﴿٣٩﴾

'Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. (40)

مَنْ عَمِلَ سَيِّئَةً فَلَا يُجْزَىٰٓ
إِلَّا مِثْلَهَا ۖ وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا
مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ
فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ ٱلْجَنَّةَ يُرْزَقُونَ
فِيهَا بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

'My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? (41)

وَيَٰقَوْمِ مَا لِىٓ أَدْعُوكُمْ إِلَى ٱلنَّجَوٰةِ
وَتَدْعُونَنِىٓ إِلَى ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤١﴾

'You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. (42)

تَدْعُونَنِى لِأَكْفُرَ بِٱللَّهِ وَأُشْرِكَ
بِهِۦ مَا لَيْسَ لِى بِهِۦ عِلْمٌ وَأَنَا۠ أَدْعُوكُمْ
إِلَى ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْغَفَّٰرِ ﴿٤٢﴾

'There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. (43)

لَا جَرَمَ أَنَّمَا تَدْعُونَنِىٓ إِلَيْهِ لَيْسَ لَهُۥ
دَعْوَةٌ فِى ٱلدُّنْيَا وَلَا فِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ
وَأَنَّ مَرَدَّنَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَأَنَّ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ
هُمْ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤٣﴾

فَسَتَذْكُرُونَ مَآ أَقُولُ لَكُمْ ۚ وَأُفَوِّضُ أَمْرِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بَصِيرٌۢ بِٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٤﴾

'You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.' (44)

فَوَقَىٰهُ ٱللَّهُ سَيِّـَٔاتِ مَا مَكَرُوا۟ وَحَاقَ بِـَٔالِ فِرْعَوْنَ سُوٓءُ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٥﴾

God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: (45)

ٱلنَّارُ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا غُدُوًّا وَعَشِيًّا ۚ وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ ٱلسَّاعَةُ أَدْخِلُوٓا۟ ءَالَ فِرْعَوْنَ أَشَدَّ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٦﴾

before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' (46)

وَإِذْ يَتَحَآجُّونَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ فَيَقُولُ ٱلضُّعَفَٰٓؤُا۟ لِلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَنتُم مُّغْنُونَ عَنَّا نَصِيبًا مِّنَ ٱلنَّارِ ﴿٤٧﴾

They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' (47)

قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُلٌّ فِيهَآ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَدْ حَكَمَ بَيْنَ ٱلْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٨﴾

The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' (48)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ لِخَزَنَةِ جَهَنَّمَ ٱدْعُوا۟ رَبَّكُمْ يُخَفِّفْ عَنَّا يَوْمًا مِّنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٩﴾

Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' (49)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَوَلَمْ تَكُ تَأْتِيكُمْ رُسُلُكُم
بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ بَلَىٰ ۚ قَالُوا۟ فَٱدْعُوا۟ ۗ
وَمَا دُعَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ إِلَّا فِى
ضَلَٰلٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain. (50)

إِنَّا لَنَنصُرُ رُسُلَنَا وَٱلَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا۟ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ
يَقُومُ ٱلْأَشْهَٰدُ ﴿٥١﴾

We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. (51)

يَوْمَ لَا يَنفَعُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ مَعْذِرَتُهُمْ ۖ وَلَهُمُ
ٱللَّعْنَةُ وَلَهُمْ سُوٓءُ ٱلدَّارِ ﴿٥٢﴾

On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. (52)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَى ٱلْهُدَىٰ وَأَوْرَثْنَا
بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ ﴿٥٣﴾

And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel (53)

هُدًى وَذِكْرَىٰ لِأُو۟لِى ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ﴿٥٤﴾

as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. (54)

فَٱصْبِرْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ
لِذَنۢبِكَ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ بِٱلْعَشِىِّ
وَٱلْإِبْكَٰرِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning. (55)

Overview

We outlined in the Prologue the theme discussed in this part of the *sūrah*. Before we discuss it in detail, we should observe that this episode from Moses' life story is closely intertwined with the main theme of the *sūrah*, and uses the same style even to the extent of employing the same phrases and expressions. The man from Pharaoh's household who concealed the fact that he was a believer following the true faith presents a number of ideas that have already been mentioned in the *sūrah*. He reminds Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah that they were enjoying a life of comfort and authority, warning them against a fate similar to that which befell earlier communities and couples this with a warning against what may happen to them on the Day of Resurrection. He also refers to those who dispute God's revelations and how God loathes them, as do the believers; a fact also already mentioned in the *sūrah*'s first part. The *sūrah* then portrays their condition in hell, where they are humiliated, praying hard but without any response. A similar image was also given earlier. All this suggests that the logic of faith is the same across all generations, and all believers in all communities use the same arguments. This is only to be expected because the logic and the arguments are derived from the same truth. The *sūrah*, thus, carries the same ambience throughout, giving it its consistent and unique personality. Such uniqueness applies to each and every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān.

Citing an Historical Example

> *Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.* (Verses 21–22)

These two verses provide a bridge between what has already been discussed in the *sūrah* and the story of Moses. It serves as a reminder to

the Arabs, highlighting the lessons of history and directing them to go about in the land and reflect on the fate of those communities which in former times adopted the same attitude the Arabs showed towards the Prophet Muḥammad and his message. It states that those communities commanded superior strength and left their mark on the land. Yet their weakness was all too clear when they faced God's might. Their sins isolated them from the source of true strength and rallied against them the forces of faith, supported by God's power: "*God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God.*" (Verse 21) There is, in fact, no protection for anyone other than what is provided by faith and good action. To deny the Divine message and reject God's messengers and the clear evidence of the truth they provide will inevitably lead to ruin: "*That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.*" (Verse 22)

This general reference to earlier communities of unbelievers is followed by an example of such people whom God smote as a result of their sins. The example is provided by Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, together with other arrogant and tyrannical forces.

This episode from Moses' life story may be divided into sections variously outlining attitudes and depicting scenes. It begins by presenting the message to Pharaoh and his notables, but finishes in the hereafter, when they argue as they suffer the punishment of hell. It is a very long journey, but the *sūrah* highlights certain scenes from it to drive home the idea.

"*We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies.*" (Verses 23–24) This is the attitude adopted in the first encounter: Moses, equipped with the signs given to him by God, is held in awe by all around him due to the fact that he spoke the word of truth. On the other side, however, stood Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah with their falsehood and apparent might, guarding their positions which they felt to be threatened by this power of truth. Therefore, they resort to false argument, seeking thus to defeat the truth: "*They said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies.*" (Verse 24)

The Argument of Brute Force

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened after this first encounter, omitting the match with the sorcerers when Moses' staff swallowed their trickery and forced them to declare their acceptance of triumphant truth. Instead, it goes on to the situation that prevailed after these initial events: "*When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.'*" (Verse 25) A comment on this attitude is given straight away, before the verse is even finished: "*Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong.*" (Verse 25)

Whenever tyranny is faced with a clear argument it cannot refute, it resorts to such tactics. It dreads that truth should prevail with its clear and strong arguments that appeal directly to sound human nature. Pharaoh witnessed how his sorcerers, whom he marshalled in the hope that they would defeat Moses, were the first to respond to the truth, immediately declaring themselves as believers. By contrast, Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah said: "*Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.*" (Verse 25)

At the time Moses was born, Pharaoh had issued a similar decree. What we now need to consider is whether the Pharaoh who issued that decree had died and been succeeded by his son or crown prince. Furthermore, whether under this new Pharaoh, the original decree had been stopped, until Moses came back and confronted him with his message. Moses was after all known to this Pharaoh when he was a crown prince, and was aware that Moses had been brought up in the palace. He was also aware of the original decree to slay the male children of the Israelites and to spare their females. Now, his courtiers refer to this decree, advising Pharaoh to apply it in particular to those who believed with Moses, be they the sorcerers or the minority of Israelites who accepted Moses' message despite fearing Pharaoh and his forces. It is also possible that the original Pharaoh who adopted Moses was still in power, but the implementation of his decree had slackened with time or had even been suspended altogether. Now his courtiers advise him to revive it, applying it only to those who followed Moses, so that it would scare people away from Moses, the prophet.

Pharaoh himself seems to take a different point of view, or to have an additional measure which he mentioned during consultations on what tactics he would employ against Moses and his message. Essentially, he wanted to do away with Moses and rid himself of the whole problem:

> *Pharaoh said: Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.* (Verse 26)

His words, '*leave it to me to kill Moses,*' suggest that his view was not immediately accepted. Reservations might have been expressed, such as someone suggesting that killing Moses would not end the problem. On the contrary, it might inspire the masses to consider him a hero or a martyr, which could in turn generate enthusiasm towards him and his new faith, particularly after the sorcerers, who were supposed to expose his myth, declared their acceptance of his faith. One or other of Pharaoh's advisers might also have feared that Moses' God might avenge his killing and inflict punishment on his killers. This was a distinct possibility since idolaters believed in multiple deities and could imagine that Moses had a God who would punish his killers. This possibility explains Pharaoh's statement, '*let him invoke his Lord!*' Pharaoh might have meant this as a rejoinder to the objection. On the other hand, his wild remark might have merely been to show that he did not care about the consequences. His carelessness was suitably punished in the end, as we shall presently learn.

It is useful to reflect a little on Pharaoh's argument in support of his declared intention to kill Moses: "*I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.*" (Verse 26) Could there be anything more laughable than Pharaoh, the idolater, saying this of Moses, God's messenger? Yet, is it not the same statement every tyrant repeats about everyone who advocates the truth and seeks to reform people's beliefs? Is it not the word of ugly falsehood about splendid truth? What trickery seeking to shake people's faith! It is indeed the same logic repeated whenever falsehood is confronted by the truth, tyranny by justice and unfaith by faith, anywhere in the world.

For his part, Moses resorted to the secure shelter that is always extended to advocates of the truth: "*Moses said: I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.*" (Verse 27) As he said this, Moses felt reassured. He submitted himself to the One who overpowers every arrogant despot and is able to protect those who seek His shelter against arrogant enemies. He referred to God's oneness, stating it clearly, fearing nothing of the threats he received. He also referred to the rejection of the true promise that a day will inevitably come when people will have to account for their deeds. No one can resort to arrogance if they believe in the Day of Reckoning. How can they if they realize that they will stand in front of their Lord, humble, deprived of all power, without friend or intercessor?

In Defence of Moses

At this point, a man from Pharaoh's own household who had accepted the truth but kept his faith secret begins his argument in defence of Moses. In his address to Pharaoh and his courtiers, the man tries to touch their hearts with his advice and makes very convincing arguments that combine facts with the prospect of dreadful consequences.

> *A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord,' when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us? Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.'*
>
> *Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who*

came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant. (Verses 28–35)

This is a long, powerful argument advanced by a believer against the conspirators in Pharaoh's court. His argument relies on the sound logic of uncorrupted human nature. It is a skilful argument that combines caution with power. He begins first by describing the enormity of what they propose to do: "*Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord'*?" (Verse 28) Do such innocent words that imply personal conviction deserve killing the person who says them? Can such words be answered by murder? Shown in this way, your action appears to be gruesome, horrid and repugnant.

He then takes a step forward, saying that this person, Moses, supports his own statement with solid and clear evidence: "*he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord.*" (Verse 28) Here, he is referring to the signs Moses had shown them. They certainly saw these signs, and when they were together, away from the masses, they could not argue about such signs nor their import.

The believer then puts to them the worst possible situation, taking an objective attitude to allow them to reflect on such a scenario: "*If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him.*" (Verse 28) If he is lying, he will bear the consequences of his lie and suffer his punishment. However, this does not justify killing him. There is, however, the other possibility that what he says is true. It is, then, prudent to be careful and not to expose oneself to its consequences: "*but if he is speaking the truth,*

something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you." (Verse 28) Again this is the least that can be expected in this case. The man did not ask them to consider anything beyond this. His purpose was to make an objective stand, one that provided the most convincing argument.

He then delivers an implicit warning: one that applies to them and to Moses alike: "*God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor.*" (Verse 28) If this applies to Moses, God will not allow him to escape unscathed. Leave him to God, then, to receive his due punishment. However, you must be careful lest you be the ones who are lying transgressors, because this will mean your inescapable doom.

The believer then gives them a strong warning against incurring God's punishment, reminding them that should it befall them, no power can avert it. Their kingdom and power will then be of little use. They should remember this and be grateful to God for having given them what they enjoyed: "*My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?*" (Verse 29)

At heart, the man feels what a true believer should feel: God's punishment is closest to those who are in power. Therefore, they are the ones who should be most careful and should try their best to avoid it. It could come upon them at any moment of the night or day, so they must dread such a possibility. The man reminds them of the power and authority they enjoyed, and includes himself among them as he reminds them of God's punishment: "*Who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?*" (Verse 29) He, thus, shows them that what happens to them is a matter of great concern to him; he is one of them, awaiting the same destiny. Hence, his kind and caring advice. He hopes that they will take this to heart, realizing that it is meant most sincerely, and that they stand no chance against God's punishment should it befall them.

At this point Pharaoh demonstrates the feeling that possesses any tyrant receiving honest advice. He turns in arrogance, perceiving detraction from his authority and encroachment on his dominion: "*Pharaoh said: I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am*

guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude." (Verse 29) I am only telling you what I know to be true and useful. It is indeed the proper path to follow. Has anyone ever heard of a tyrant who did not feel that what he said was right and full of wisdom? Would any tyrant allow for someone to imagine that he be wrong? Do tyrants allow anyone to uphold a view other than theirs? How else do they become tyrants?

The believer, however, feels that it is his duty to warn and give sound advice, and to express his view lucidly. It is also his duty to stand by the truth, regardless of what tyrants say. He then tries another argument, in the hope that their hearts will soften to it and that they will begin to see the light of the truth. He refers to the fates of earlier communities of unbelievers. They testify to how powerfully God smites arrogant tyrants: "*Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures.*" (Verses 30–31) Each community had its day, but the believer combines them together, making it the day when God's retribution strikes. The nature of these days is the same; hence, they are made to appear as just one day. God wills no injustice on anyone. He only punishes them for their sins, so that those who are close to them and those who come after them may take heed and follow the right course.

The man touches their hearts again, reminding them of another day, the Day of Resurrection, when everyone is calling out: "*And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide.*" (Verses 32–33)

On that day, the angels responsible for gathering people will be calling out to them; the people standing on the heights will call out, speaking to the people destined for heaven and to the people of hell; the people of heaven and hell will call out addressing each other. Thus, calling out takes place in different ways. Describing it as the 'day of calling out' imparts a feeling of loud clamouring emanating from everywhere, as also a day of overcrowding and dispute. The general air fits well with the believer's words: "*the Day when you shall turn back*

and flee, with no one to defend you against God." They may try to flee when they see hell, but there is no escape. Yet the image of fright and attempting to flee is the first to be shown here of those who considered themselves mighty and who behaved arrogantly, revelling in their earthly power.

"*He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide.*" (Verse 33) Do we see here an implicit reply to Pharaoh's earlier statement when he said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This also implies that true guidance comes only from God. Whoever God lets go astray will have no one to guide him. God knows people's conditions and who of them deserves to be guided and who deserves to be left astray.

Finally, the believer reminds them of their attitude to the Prophet Joseph, Moses' ancestor. They also doubted him and his message despite the clear evidence he showed them. They must not adopt the same attitude towards Moses who is confirming what Joseph had brought them earlier. In fact, Moses' message disproves their assertions that God would not send a messenger after Joseph. For, Moses has been sent to prove them wrong: "*Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.*" (Verses 34–35)

This is the only reference in the Qur'ān to Joseph's message addressed to the people of Egypt. In the *sūrah* carrying his name we learn that he was placed in charge of Egypt's storehouses. He also carried the title of 'Azīz, which probably meant the chief minister. There is an indication in the *sūrah* that he sat on Egypt's throne, but this is not confirmed. This may be understood from the verse that says: "*And he raised his parents to the throne, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true.*" (12: 100)

The 'throne' to which Joseph raised his parents might have been something other than Egypt's throne. Be that as it may, Joseph attained a position of power and authority. In light of all this, we can imagine the situation to which the believer in Pharaoh's household was referring: they doubted Joseph's message, but dared not deny it outright when he was the man in power. Then they said: *'God will never send any messenger after him.'* They were practically relieved when he died. Expressing their relief in this way suggests that they did not accept his message based on God's complete oneness. They asserted that God would not send another messenger after him, yet this expressed nothing but their own desire. It is often the case that people desire something and then believe it to be true.

At this juncture, the believer takes a strong stance against such hardened denials of the truth: *"In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt."* (Verse 34) He warns them that God will abandon those who continue to doubt His message after seeing clear evidence of its truth, letting them go astray. He then tells them plainly that those who continue to dispute God's revelation, without justification or evidence, will be loathed by God and the believers. Pharaoh and his people did this in a very deplorable way. He also condemns arrogance and warns against God's punishment to those who continue to behave arrogantly and resort to high-handedness. *"Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant."* (Verse 35) These words, from a believer among Pharaoh's household, are almost identical to those at the outset of the *sūrah* speaking of how God dislikes those who dispute His revelations without any proof in support of what they say. The result is that God lets them go astray until there is no room in their hearts for the light of guidance.

Pharaoh's Manoeuvre

Despite such solid arguments from the believer, Pharaoh persisted in his erring ways, adamant in his rejection of the truth. However, he

sought to pretend that he wanted to find out whether what Moses said was true. It appears then that the believer's argument was so convincing and hard-hitting that Pharaoh and his courtiers could not totally ignore it. Therefore, Pharaoh tried to find a way out:

> *Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin.* (Verses 36–37)

Thus, Pharaoh instructed Hāmān, his minister, to build him a very high tower so that he might climb and look into the heavens searching for Moses' God. He also added: '*I am convinced he is lying.*' Pharaoh resorted to this manoeuvring so that he did not have to face the truth which would compel him to acknowledge God's oneness. Such acknowledgement would lose him his throne and dispel the legends upon which his kingdom was based. It is improbable that such was Pharaoh's understanding, or that he seriously wanted to look for Moses' God in this stupid, physical way. In fact, Pharaoh would have attained a high standard of education and knowledge. Therefore, his words really betray his ridicule on the one hand and trickery on the other. He wanted to deceive people into thinking that he was fair-minded, willing to test Moses' claims. Or perhaps this manoeuvre was meant as a retreat in the face of the strong logic advanced by the believer. Whatever is the truth behind his actions, all these possibilities indicate that he persisted in his erring ways, arrogantly denying the truth. "*Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path.*" (Verse 37) He deserved to be so barred, having chosen to persist with falsehood and deviancy. The *sūrah*'s comment makes clear that such scheming can only lead to failure and utter loss. "*Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin.*" (Verse 37)

Faced with such thoughtless and devious manoeuvring, the believer makes his final say clear, free of ambiguity. He calls on his people to

follow him in pursuing the right course leading to God. He emphasizes to them that this present life is worthless, while the life to come provides pure bliss. He warns them against the punishment of the hereafter, exposing the hollow and false nature of idolatrous beliefs:

> *The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.* (Verses 38–44)

These are the same facts established at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The believer restates them here as he confronts Pharaoh and his noblemen. He calls on them: "*My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 38) Only a few moments earlier, it was Pharaoh who said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This means that the believer was making a clear challenge, stating the word of truth, fearing nothing that the tyrant Pharaoh, or his two ministers, Hāmān and Korah, could do to him. He tells them of the nature of this present life: "*My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment.*" (Verse 39) It cannot continue. It will soon disappear; "*whereas the life to come is the lasting home.*" (Verse 39) It is the one to be preferred.

He states for them the rule that governs reward and punishment in the life to come: "*Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does*

righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning." (Verse 40) It is out of God's grace that good deeds will be rewarded in multiples, while bad ones are requited with no more than what they actually are. God is fully aware of people's weaknesses, the temptations to which they are exposed and the impediments they have to face when they try to adhere to His guidance. Therefore, He multiplies their good deeds and makes them a means to erase their bad ones. If, after the reckoning, they attain admittance into heaven, God grants them there blessings beyond all ken.

The believer expresses his amazement that he should call them to what saves them from punishment, while they call him to what will lead him to the fire: "*My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire?*" (Verse 41) Needless to say, they did not call on him to throw himself into a fire, but they called on him to associate partners with God. The two are synonymous. Therefore, he states the other call in the next verse: "*You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving.*" (Verse 42)

The difference between his and their calls cannot be wider. His call is clear, straight, requiring them to believe in God, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. He calls them to believe in the One God, whose work in the universe testifies to His oneness, limitless ability and infinite power. They should believe in Him so that He will forgive them, as He is the One who forgives all. How does this contrast with what they call him to do? They call him to disbelieve in God, to associate with Him beings of whom he has no knowledge: idols, myths, legends and paradoxes.

The believer then states in all clarity that those alleged partners have no say on any matter in this present world or in the life to come. All shall return to God Almighty when those who transgress the bounds will be the dwellers of fire: "*There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire.*" (Verse 43)

Thus the basic facts of the true faith are laid down, clear, free of all ambiguity. This believer unhesitatingly states them in front of Pharaoh

and his noblemen, although until then he had kept secret the fact that he believed in God. Now he declares his faith openly. What is left for him, then? Nothing other than to surrender himself to God. He has stated the truth as he knew it in the depths of his heart. He warns them that they are certain to remember his words when remembrance will avail them nothing. All matters are referred to God: "*You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.*" (Verse 44)

The argument is now over, for the believer from among Pharaoh's household has declared the word of truth, which remains clear and valid for the rest of time.

Who Bears the Blame?

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened between Moses, Pharaoh and the Children of Israel after this, up to the point of Pharaoh's drowning while Moses and his people were saved. Instead, it affords some glimpses of what happened thereafter, indeed, after life itself:

> *God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain.* (Verses 45–50)

This present world is over, and we see the first event that succeeds it. We see the believer who stated the truth being saved from Pharaoh

and his aides' scheming. They could not cause him any harm in this world, nor after it. By contrast, Pharaoh's folk were engulfed by suffering: "*Before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.*" (Verse 46)

The way this verse is phrased suggests that they are brought before the fire during the time between their death and the Day of Judgement. This may be a reference to the torment suffered in the grave. The statement that follows reads: '*and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.*' This means that this suffering precedes the Day of Judgement. It is a terrible punishment involving exposure to the fire morning and evening, either to make them expect its burning and pain, which is a terrible suffering, or to experience it, which is even worse. Then, on the Day of Judgement, they will be cast into the worst suffering.

The verse that follows tells us of something that happens after resurrection. The unbelievers are shown arguing in hell: "*The weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?'*" (Verse 47) This means that the weak are together with the arrogant in the fire of hell. The weak have not been spared on account of their weakness, or their being driven like cattle, having no say or choice. God granted them a position of honour, which equipped them to exercise free choice and to be responsible for what they choose. They relinquished all this and followed their arrogant leaders instead. They did not object to anything the leaders said. In fact, it did not occur to them that they could object. They did not think about what their arrogant leaders said to them, or the errors they landed them in: "*We have been your followers.*" The fact of their relinquishing responsibility and what God granted them could never serve as extenuating circumstances in God's sight. Therefore, they will be in hell, driven there by their leaders, just as they used to drive them like sheep in the life of this world. We see them asking their leaders: "*Can you relieve us of some share of the fire?*" (Verse 47) This question is a reminder of what such leaders used to assert, pledging to protect their followers against evil and harm.

Such arrogant leaders, however, are soon fed up with their weak followers requests. Their answer betrays their boredom, but nonetheless they acknowledge what has happened: "*We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.*" (Verse 48)

"*We are all in it together.*" We are all weak, lacking all support and help. We are all alike. So why do you put such a question to us when you realize that the noble and the weaker elements are all the same? "*God has judged between His creatures.*" There can be no review or change to His judgement. The matter is settled. No creature can reduce or amend God's judgement.

When all realize that no refuge can be sought from God's punishment except with Him, they all humbly appeal to the guards of hell, in a way that makes them all equal: "*Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.*" (Verse 49) They want the guards of hell to intercede on their behalf, hoping that their terrible ordeal can be lifted a little. They ask them to pray to God to reduce their punishment for one day, just to breathe and have a bit of rest. Even a day's reduction is worth such appeals.

The guards of hell, however, do not respond to this humble and passionate appeal. They know their limits, and they are aware of God's law and that the time is long passed. Therefore, they increase the suffering of the dwellers of hell by rebuking them and reminding them of the reasons for their suffering: "*They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.'* (Verse 50) The question and its answer suffice. There is no need for any more argument. The guards of hell leave them to their fate, allowing them to sink into despair. "*[The keepers of hell] will say: Pray, then!*" (Verse 50) If any praying will change your situation even a bit, why do you not offer such prayers yourselves? The verse concludes with a comment on such prayers: "*But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain.*" (Verse 50) Such prayer is ignored, remains unanswered. Those who say it are forgotten, be they the leaders or their followers.

God's Unfailing Support

The *sūrah* then adds a comment on the whole episode and what preceded it of reference to the different communities which suffered God's punishment after taking a negative attitude towards His message.

> *We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.* (Verses 51–55)

This definitive comment suits the decisive situation. We have been given an example of the end of truth and falsehood, both in this world and in the life to come. We have seen what fate befell Pharaoh and his noblemen in this life, and we have seen them disputing in hell, utterly humiliated. Such is the end of these communities, as stated in the Qur'ān: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

As for the life to come, perhaps no believer in life after death will argue about this. They do not find any reason to argue. As for victory in this present world, this may need some explanation.

God's promise is clear and definitive: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and...*" (Verse 51) Yet we see that some messengers were killed, and some had to abandon their homes after being rejected and driven out. Some believers have also been exposed to grievous suffering; some were thrown into the fire pit; some fell martyrs; some live in exceedingly difficult

circumstances. What happens, then, to God's promise of support being given to them in this present life? Satan tries hard to exploit this situation, working hard to shake people's faith.

People, however, use superficial measures when evaluating things, and they overlook many values and facts. They look at a brief period of time and a small area or space. These are limited human measures. A comprehensive look shows the situation to occur in a broad span of time and place. It does not erect limits between one era or place and another. If we look at the question of faith from such a broad perspective, we will see it triumphant, no doubt. Its triumph is the victory of its upholders. They have no existence separate from its existence. The first thing faith requires of them is to dedicate themselves to it completely, so that it is almost as if they disappear while it stays in full vision.

Moreover, people often limit the meaning of victory to a specific outcome they know and can easily recognize. But victory can take different forms, some of which might superficially at least appear akin to defeat. When the Prophet Abraham was thrown in the fire and remained resolute in his determination to stick to his faith and advocate it, was he in a position of victory or defeat? From a faith perspective, he was undoubtedly at the highest point of victory as he was being cast into the fire. He again triumphed when he was saved from the fire. These are two different images that appear to be poles apart, but they are in fact very close to each other. Al-Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson, met his martyrdom in a way that is tragic from one angle and splendid from another: so was he victorious or vanquished? On the surface, and judging by immediate considerations, it was a defeat. In reality and from a wider perspective, though, it was a true victory. No other martyr excites sympathy and feelings of support, among both Sunnīs and Shī'ah, like al-Ḥusayn. Indeed, such feelings also apply to many non-Muslims.

Many are the martyrs who achieved for their faith through martyrdom what they could never have achieved in life had they lived a thousand years. They could not impress great meanings on people's minds or motivate them to action like they did with their final sermon,

written with their own blood. Their martyrdom provided motivation for their children and grandchildren, and at times they provided the motivation to change history over several generations.[1]

What constitutes victory? What is meant by defeat? We need to review our concepts and our sense of values before we ask about whether God's promise to His messengers and to believers comes true in this present life?

Yet there are many situations where victory takes its familiar form, particularly when such form is linked to a permanent one. The Prophet Muḥammad achieved victory in his lifetime because his victory was necessary for the establishment of the faith in its full reality in human life. This faith of ours can only be brought to its fullness when it governs the life of its community. It can, thus, conduct all affairs, from those of a single heart and soul to those of state and government. It was God's will that the messenger preaching this faith should triumph during his own lifetime, so that he could establish the full form of the Islamic faith, leaving a real example for future generations. Thus, the familiar form of victory was linked in his case to a much wider one, and the two were united by God's will and according to His planning.

Another point to consider is that God's promise is given to His messengers and to believers. Thus, a prerequisite for victory is the presence of true faith in people's hearts so as to make the promise applicable to them. Yet people often overlook the significance of the truth of faith which comes into existence only when people remove all forms of idolatry. There are some very subtle forms of idolatry which can only be purged when a person is totally devoted to God, relies on Him alone and submits totally to His will in all affairs. He then feels that God guides His footsteps and that He chooses nothing other than what God has chosen for him. Thus, he accepts God's will with contentment. When a person attains this state, he does not suggest to God any particular form of victory. He

1. These words apply to the author himself and his martyrdom. He rejected all tempting offers that sought to make him change his course. His standing in the history of Islamic advocacy was greatly enhanced after his death. Indeed, his books have achieved far wider circulation after his death and have been translated into many languages. – Editor's note.

leaves the matter to God to determine. He accepts whatever befalls him as good. This is one of the meanings of victory. It is victory over one's pleasures and desires. It is an internal victory, one that is prerequisite for achieving the external victory: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

We have seen in the previous image drawn how the excuses advanced by the wrongdoers were of little use to them, and how they were rejected and made to dwell in the worst of homes. Moses' story shows yet another form of victory: "*And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding.*" (Verses 53–54) Providing guidance and passing the book down to them was a form of victory that clearly reflects the breadth of its scope.

The final note in this part of the *sūrah* is given in the form of a directive to the Prophet and the believers facing much hardship in Makkah, and to all future generations of believers who face such hardship: "*Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.*" (Verse 55) Remain patient in adversity, whether this adversity takes the form of rejection of the message, denying its truth, or the infliction of physical harm. Remain patient when you are unable to check falsehood that appears to enjoy wealth and power for a period of time. Bear with patience what you have to face of people's rough attitudes and behaviour. Check your own desire to achieve a quick victory. Remain patient as you may have to face many difficulties caused by friends, if not by enemies.

"*Remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true.*" (Verse 55) It may appear slow coming; matters may become complicated; prospects may become gloomy; yet it is the promise of the One who can fulfil it, and whose will it has been to make the promise. As you go along your way, take the necessary equipment: "*Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning.*" (Verse 55) This is what is of most benefit

along the hard way of patience; seeking forgiveness of one's sins and extolling God's praise and glory. While this serves to refine our hearts and feelings, it also ensures a positive response. Indeed, it is through such seeking of forgiveness and extolling of God's praise and glory that victory is achieved within our selves, to be followed by victory in life.

The evening and morning are specified either as a reference to all time, since these are the two ends of the day, or because these are times when hearts are calm and reflective. They can, thus, appreciate God's greatness better.

Such is the way, then, that God has chosen to provide the necessary equipment for achieving victory.



3

Always Responding to Prayers

As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. (56)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ سُلْطَٰنٍ أَتَىٰهُمْ إِن فِى
صُدُورِهِمْ إِلَّا كِبْرٌ مَّا هُم
بِبَٰلِغِيهِ ۚ فَٱسْتَعِذْ بِٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْبَصِيرُ ﴿٥٦﴾

The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. (57)

لَخَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ خَلْقِ ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. (58)

وَمَا يَسْتَوِى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ وَٱلْبَصِيرُ
وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
وَلَا ٱلْمُسِىٓءُ ۚ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. (59)

إِنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ لَءَاتِيَةٌ لَّا رَيْبَ فِيهَا وَلَٰكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمُ ٱدْعُونِىٓ أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِى
سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.' (60)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلَّيْلَ
لِتَسْكُنُوا۟ فِيهِ وَٱلنَّهَارَ
مُبْصِرًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ
عَلَى ٱلنَّاسِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. (61)

ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ خَٰلِقُ كُلِّ
شَىْءٍ لَّآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ تُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? (62)

كَذَٰلِكَ يُؤْفَكُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. (63)

ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى جَعَلَ لَكُمُ ٱلْأَرْضَ
قَرَارًا وَٱلسَّمَآءَ بِنَآءً وَصَوَّرَكُمْ
فَأَحْسَنَ صُوَرَكُمْ وَرَزَقَكُم مِّنَ
ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ ۖ
فَتَبَارَكَ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (64)

هُوَ ٱلْحَىُّ لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَٱدْعُوهُ
مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ ۗ ٱلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ
ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾

He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (65)

قُلْ إِنِّى نُهِيتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ ٱلَّذِينَ
تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ لَمَّا جَآءَنِىَ
ٱلْبَيِّنَٰتُ مِن رَّبِّى وَأُمِرْتُ أَنْ
أُسْلِمَ لِرَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

Say: 'Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.' (66)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِن
نُّطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ يُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا
ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوٓا۟ أَشُدَّكُمْ ثُمَّ لِتَكُونُوا۟
شُيُوخًا ۚ وَمِنكُم مَّن يُتَوَفَّىٰ مِن قَبْلُ
وَلِتَبْلُغُوٓا۟ أَجَلًا مُّسَمًّى وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. (67)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ فَإِذَا قَضَىٰٓ أَمْرًا
فَإِنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُۥ كُن فَيَكُونُ ﴿٦٨﴾

It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. (68)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِ
ٱللَّهِ أَنَّىٰ يُصْرَفُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? (69)

Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know (70)

ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِٱلْكِتَٰبِ وَبِمَآ أَرْسَلْنَا بِهِۦ رُسُلَنَا ۖ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged (71)

إِذِ ٱلْأَغْلَٰلُ فِىٓ أَعْنَاقِهِمْ وَٱلسَّلَٰسِلُ يُسْحَبُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. (72)

فِى ٱلْحَمِيمِ ثُمَّ فِى ٱلنَّارِ يُسْجَرُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity (73)

ثُمَّ قِيلَ لَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. (74)

مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ ۖ قَالُوا۟ ضَلُّوا۟ عَنَّا بَل لَّمْ نَكُن نَّدْعُوا۟ مِن قَبْلُ شَيْـًٔا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُضِلُّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. (75)

ذَٰلِكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَفْرَحُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنتُمْ تَمْرَحُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

'Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (76)

ٱدْخُلُوٓا۟ أَبْوَٰبَ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۖ فَبِئْسَ مَثْوَى ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return. (77)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ إِنَّ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقٌّۖ فَإِمَّا نُرِيَنَّكَ بَعۡضَ ٱلَّذِي نَعِدُهُمۡ أَوۡ نَتَوَفَّيَنَّكَ فَإِلَيۡنَا يُرۡجَعُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* is closely linked to the previous one. It is, in fact, a continuation of the last point in that passage. It further directs the Prophet to remain patient as he faced adversity in the shape of rejection and physical harm. It also directs him to remain patient when the unbelievers used every means to prevent others from accepting the truth and even boasted about falsehood. Having made this directive, the *sūrah* explains the real reason for disputing God's revelations without any sound basis. In short, it is nothing but arrogance and conceit that prevent people from acknowledging the truth. Yet they cannot even attain the status to which, in their arrogance, they aspire.

The *sūrah*, therefore, emphasizes the greatness of the universe created by God, and the smallness of all mankind, compared to the heavens and the earth. In this part, the *sūrah* highlights some of the universal signs and how God, by His grace, has made them subservient to man even though man is much smaller and weaker than them. The *sūrah* also refers to aspects of God's grace within man himself. In all, these aspects confirm the oneness of the Creator.

The Prophet is then directed to proclaim God's oneness and to turn his back on what the unbelievers worshipped beside God. This part then adds a powerful scene of the Day of Resurrection, when the idolaters are rebuked for associating partners with God. The conclusion in this part is the same as in the previous one: a directive to the Prophet to remain patient in adversity, whether God keeps him alive until he has witnessed the realization of some of what He has promised or gathers him to Himself before that. This is something that God determines. All will ultimately return to Him.

Small Fry but Arrogant

> *As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.'* (Verses 56–60)

Man often forgets the fact that he is a small, weak creature and that whatever strength he may have does not emanate from within himself, but from his bond with God, the source of all strength and power. He may sever this bond and begin to swell and take on airs. Arrogance, thus, begins to establish itself within him. Satan, who doomed himself as a result of his arrogance, works on man to increase his arrogance knowing that through it he can bring man to ruin.

The unbeliever disputes God's revelations even when they are clear, addressing human nature with the sort of argument that appeals to it. He also claims to himself and others that he is only raising questions because he is not as yet convinced. However, God who knows the inner feelings and secret thoughts of all His creatures makes clear that all this is the result of man's arrogance. It is such arrogance which prompts man to argue and dispute God's revelations over which there can be no dispute. Such arrogance also drives man to aspire to what is beyond his status and what his nature cannot attain. Yet he has no solid basis for such argument for it is rooted deeply in nothing but his own arrogance: "*As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain.*" (Verse 56)

If only man would understand the truth about himself and the universe, recognizing his role and not trying to exceed it, appreciating

that he is one of countless creatures each doing their role by God's will and according to His design which He alone knows, he would certainly feel relaxed, humble, living in peace with himself and with the world around him. If he did this, he would easily and readily submit himself to God. He would also do this without any hesitation.

"*Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 56) Seeking refuge with God against arrogance is indicative of how gruesome it is. We seek God's refuge in order to escape what is ghastly, horrible and evil. Arrogance combines all these. Moreover, it is hard for the arrogant person and for those around him. It causes harm to the heart in which it stirs and to other people's hearts. It is an evil we should seek refuge with God from. God hears all and sees all. Arrogance is normally manifested in visible action and audible words. Therefore, it is left to God to decide upon it as He pleases.

Man is then told of his true position in this great universe: how small he is in comparison to some of God's creatures, the great magnitude of which is readily visible and better appreciated on careful examination: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) The heavens and the earth are there for man to see and to measure himself in relation to them. When he knows the reality of the proportions of distance, dimension, size and power, he reduces his pride, feels his smallness and almost disappears. He can only hold his own when he remembers the superior element God has granted him, and for which He has honoured him. It is this element alone that allows man to stand on his feet in front of the greatness that is the universe.

A quick glance at the universe is sufficient to appreciate all this. The earth on which we live is merely a small satellite of the sun: its mass compared to the mass of the sun is no more than three to a million, while its size is one-millionth of the size of the sun. Yet the sun is only one of around one hundred million suns our galaxy includes. Man now knows that there are around one hundred million such galaxies dispersed in the great expanse of the universe. Still, what we have discovered of the universe is merely a small part; it is so great that we become dazed when we even try to imagine it. The distance between

us and the sun is about 93 million miles. The sun is the head of the family of our planet earth, and most probably the sun is the mother of the earth. Therefore the earth remains close to its mother, standing merely 93 million miles away from it!

The diameter of our galaxy is measured at one hundred billion light years, with one light year measuring 5.8 billion miles, because light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. The closest galaxy to our own is around 750,000 light years away.

We may say again that these distances and dimensions are the best man's little knowledge has determined. Scientists acknowledge that all their discoveries cover only a small part of this great universe.

God says to us: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) When we speak of God's power and ability, the concepts of greater or smaller, harder or easier do not apply. He creates everything by a single word, 'Be!' The reference here is to how things appear in themselves and how people see and measure them. How does man compare to this great expanse of the universe? How high can his arrogance take him in God's great creation?

"*The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal.*" (Verse 58) The one who is able to see learns and understands, recognizing his station. He does not give himself airs, nor does he allow conceit to distort his judgement. By contrast, a blind person cannot recognize his position in relation to his surroundings. Therefore, he misjudges his position and what is around him. The same applies to those believers who do good works and those who do evil. The first group see things for what they are and form accurate ideas, while the other group misjudges all due to their blind ignorance. They harm themselves and others, and above all they assign to themselves an erroneous position in relation to their environment. They are blind, for true blindness is that of the mind: "*How seldom you reflect.*" (Verse 58) Had we reflected, we would have known. The whole thing is clear, needing only some reflection before it becomes totally apparent.

If only we would remember the hereafter, be certain of its coming, reflect on our position then and recall how we will then stand ... "*The*

Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe." (Verse 59) Because they do not believe, they argue and give themselves airs; they do not submit to the truth and do not limit themselves to their rightful position.

Addressing our worship to God, praying and appealing to Him, are all means to cure hearts of arrogance, which is the evil that leads people to dispute His revelations and signs without any clear evidence. God opens the door for us to address and pray to Him. He tells us that He has committed Himself to respond to those who pray to Him, warning those who are too proud that they will be made to suffer total humiliation: "*Your Lord says: Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.*" (Verse 60)

Supplication and prayer must observe certain manners. Hearts must be totally dedicated to God, reassured that He will answer our prayer. We must not suggest a particular form or time or circumstance for answering it. To make such a suggestion is improper when appealing to God. We should be clear in our minds that it is a blessing that we address our prayers to God, and that His response is another blessing. 'Umar used to say: "I am not worried about my prayer being answered. I am worried about addressing my prayer. Once I am inspired to pray to God, prayer will be answered." These are the words of someone who has insight, knowing that when God wills to respond to someone's prayer, He also wills that person to pray to Him. The two are concurrent.

Those who are too proud to pray to God and appeal to Him deserve their just reward, which leads them to enter hell in total humiliation. Such is the fitting end of the arrogance that fills some hearts in this small planet and short life, forgetting the greatness of God's creation, let alone His own greatness. It is suitable requital for forgetting the Last Hour, which will inevitably come.

Blessings of All Sorts

The *sūrah* now speaks about certain aspects of God's blessings which testify to His greatness, yet the unbelievers do not offer thanks to

Him for such blessings. On the contrary, they are too proud to address their worship to Him:

> *It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 61–65)

The night and day are two universal phenomena, while the earth and the heavens are creatures in the universe. They are all mentioned alongside God's creation of man, who has been given a comely shape, been provided with wholesome sustenance. All these are mentioned within the context of God's oneness and being sincere in our faith in Him. This indicates that all these phenomena, creatures and concepts are interlinked. They should be looked at within their broad environment, noting their mutual interrelations.

The fact that the universe is built on the solid basis God has given it, and its following the course God has assigned to it, allowed life to emerge, evolve and progress on earth. It also allowed human life to take the shape and form familiar to us. It fits with man's needs dictated by his nature and make-up. It has made the night a time for his rest and recuperation, while the day, with its light, a time for movement and action. It has made the earth stable as a field of activity, while the skies are raised like a canopy that does not fall apart. All the necessary proportions are maintained; otherwise, man's existence on earth would have been endangered or impossible. It has allowed wholesome provisions to grow on earth or come down from the sky for man's enjoyment. Moreover, it is God's will that gave man his comely shape and a wealth

of abilities that are in harmony with what is in the universe. All these matters are interlinked, which is the reason for referring to them together in the Qur'ān. Indeed, the Qur'ān makes this interrelation between them evidence of the Creator's oneness. It directs our hearts to call on God, sincere in our devotion, declaring that all praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. It states that the One who creates all these and establishes such harmony between them is the only one to deserve to be a deity. He is indeed God Almighty, the Lord and Creator of all. How can people be turned away from this truth?

It is perhaps useful here to mention some aspects of the harmony and interrelation evident within the universe and their bearing on man's life.

> If the earth did not rotate facing the sun, there would be no succession of night and day. Had the rotation of the earth been at a higher speed than it actually is, houses would have shattered, and indeed the earth itself would have fallen apart and scattered in space. Had its rotation been slower, mankind would have perished from hot or cold weather. Indeed the current speed of its rotation is the one most suitable for the continuity of plant, animal and human life in its broadest sense. If the earth stopped rotating, all seas and oceans would be without water.[2]

What would happen if the earth's axis became straight and the earth orbited the sun in a circle where the sun would be at the centre? The seasons would be lost and people would not know summer from winter, spring from autumn.[3]

Had the crust of the earth been ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, without which animal life is impossible; and had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and vegetable life on the surface of the land could not exist...

2. Zakī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. The author gives no other details about this quotation. I managed to locate a copy of this book, only to discover that this quotation is taken from different pages, with practically every sentence from a different page. The copy I have seen is published by Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, but it is not dated. Perhaps the author referred to an earlier edition. – Editor's note.

3. Ibid., pp. 88–89.

If the atmosphere had been much thinner, some of the meteors which are now burned in the outer atmosphere by the millions every day would strike all parts of the earth. They travel from six to forty miles a second and would set fire to every burnable object. If they travelled as slowly as a bullet, they would all hit the earth and the consequences would be dire. As for man, the impact of a tiny meteor travelling ninety times as fast as a bullet would tear him in pieces by the heat of its passage.[4]

If, for instance, instead of 21 per cent oxygen [there] were 50 per cent or more of the atmosphere, all combustible substances in the world would become inflammable to such an extent that the first stroke of lightning to hit a tree would ignite the forest, which would almost explode. If it were reduced to 10 per cent or less, life might through the ages have adjusted itself to it, but few of the elements of civilization now so familiar to man, such as fire, would be available.[5]

There are thousands of fine balances in the design of the universe that are necessary for human life. If any of them is disturbed only slightly, human life as we know it would not be possible.

As for man, one of the elements of his perfect shape is his unique form among all living things. His constitution enables his systems to fulfil their functions easily and meticulously. Moreover, the harmony between him and his surroundings is perfect, allowing him to live and act within his environment. All this may be added to his most fundamental and unique quality that enables him to be in charge of planet earth. He is equipped with the tools necessary for the fulfilment of his task, having been given a mind and spiritual contact with what is beyond the physical.

If we were to study the great accuracy of the human constitution and the harmony between the different parts and systems of man's body, relating it to the Qur'ānic statement: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape*", (Verse 64) we would need to reflect at length on every small organ, and indeed on every single cell in this marvellous creature. Take for example man's jaw and how teeth are placed in it:

4. Morrison, A. Cressy, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey, 1962, pp. 27–28.
5. Ibid., p. 30.

the jaw is so finely shaped that if the gum or the tongue were to protrude by one tenth of a millimetre this would be enough to make the gum or the tongue unfit within the mouth. A protrusion of similar thickness in a tooth or a molar will bring it into friction with the opposite tooth or molar. Take, for example, something as thin as a cigarette paper which when pressed between the upper and lower jaws is left with marks on it. As the two jaws close they press against any object between them even if its thickness is no more than that of the finest paper.

Man's constitution is equipped to live on this planet. His eyes are made to receive the light frequency which he needs to see. His ears pick up the sound frequencies he needs to hear. Every single organ in his constitution is designed for the environment in which he lives, with a limited ability to adapt to changing conditions. Man is created to live in this particular environment and to have a mutual impact on it. There is a close relationship between him and his environment, i.e. with the earth and the skies. Therefore, the Qur'ān mentions man's shape in the same verse in which it mentions the earth and sky. How fitting!

Let us now briefly discuss the text itself: "*It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see.*" (Verse 61) Rest at night is necessary for every living thing. A period of darkness is needed so that living cells can rest before resuming their activity during the day. Sleeping is not enough to afford the needed rest; darkness is also necessary. A living cell that is exposed to light continuously reaches a degree of fatigue that ruins its structure.

"*And the day to make you see.*" (Verse 61) A literal translation would render this phrase as, 'and the day able to see.' The expression brings the day alive as if it is a living entity that can look at and see things. In fact, it is people that can see during the day, but this quality is given to the day itself because it is almost universal.

The succession of the day and the night in this way is a blessing that involves further blessings. Had one or the other of them stretched permanently, or if it were merely several times as long, life would come to an end. It is fitting, then, that the succession of day and night is often mentioned within the context of God's blessings for which most

people do not give thanks: "*God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks.*" (Verse 61)

These two phenomena are brought into existence by the One who alone deserves to be named God: "*Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?*" (Verse 62) People do recognize God's hand in everything, and they know for certain that He is the Creator of all. Such knowledge, in fact, forces itself on our minds by the very existence of things. No one can claim to have created these, and it is impossible that they could have come into existence of their own accord. It is most amazing then that people should turn away from believing in God: "*How deluded can you be?*" Yet, this does happen: people turn away from the clear truth, in the same way as some of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān turned away. This takes place throughout all generations, without reason or evidence: "*Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations.*" (Verse 63)

The *sūrah* then mentions the universal design that gives the earth and the sky their respective functions: "*It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy.*" (Verse 64) The earth is a place suited for man's life, considering the many balances operating in it, some of which we have briefly discussed. The sky is a structure with careful proportions, dimensions and cycles to ensure stability and the continuity of human life. Indeed human life is taken into consideration in the design of the universe itself.

Furthermore, the *sūrah* specifies a link between the structure of the heavens and earth on the one hand and man's constitution and the wholesome provisions made for him on the other: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things.*" (Verse 64) These blessings and provisions are followed by a comment similar to the earlier one: "*Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 64) He is the One who creates, measures and designs, giving you a specified place in His kingdom. He is your Lord, so glorify Him. His bounty encompasses all worlds.

"*He is the Ever-Living.*" (Verse 65) His life is from Himself, neither gained nor created, without a beginning or an end. It does not alter,

change or finish. Nothing else has such qualities to its life. All glory to Him; unique is His life.

Again He alone is the Godhead. The One who has a unique life is God: "*There is no deity other than Him.*" Therefore, "*call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him.*" And when you pray to Him, give Him due praise: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 65)

Definitive Declaration

The Prophet is given clear instructions to declare to his people that he has been forbidden to worship what they invoke other than God. He has also been commanded to submit himself to the Lord of all the worlds:

> *Say: Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verse 66)

He is to declare to those who turn away from God's revelations and deny His blessings that he has been ordered not to worship the ones they invoke instead of God. He is to tell them that he has acted on this prohibition '*since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord.*' He has the evidence, and he believes in it. It is right that he should then declare the word of truth. The prohibition to worship anyone other than God denotes a negative action, while submission to God Almighty is a positive one. It is from these two opposite parts that faith is brought to its fullness.

Having highlighted certain signs of God in the wide universe, the *sūrah* now highlights a sign from within man himself. It is the miracle of human life and its marvellous stages. This is given here by way of a prelude to stating the true nature of life granted by God:

> *It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your*

appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. (Verses 67–68)

This beginning of human life includes facts that man's knowledge could not know because they took place before his existence, and others which man sees and monitors. Yet such monitoring started only recently, centuries after the revelation of the Qur'ān.

That man was created out of dust refers to a fact taking place before his existence. Dust is the origin of all life on earth, including human life. Only God knows how this miracle was accomplished, and how this great event took shape. As for subsequent procreation, this takes place when a male's sperm fertilizes a female's egg. Conception takes place and a cell mass clings to the uterus. At the end, a baby is born after having gone through a number of major development stages. When carefully considered in comparison to what happens after birth, these stages appear to be longer and greater than the stages we go through from birth till death. The *sūrah* mentions some of these latter stages: childhood, full adulthood at around 30, and old age. These stages represent maximum vigour in between two ends characterized by weakness. "*Some of you die earlier,*" before attaining to some of these stages. God ordains all this "*so that you may reach your appointed term*", when you die at the specified time, unable to delay it or indeed hasten it. "*And you may use your reason.*" To follow the journey travelled by the foetus and then by a baby and to reflect on what they indicate of elaborate planning requires good use of our reason.

The embryonic journey is truly fascinating. We have come to know much about it with the many recent advancements in medicine and embryology. The Qur'ānic reference to it, so accurate and precise, fourteen centuries earlier, is exceptionally interesting. Any reasonable person is bound to reflect on this fact.

These two journeys, of the embryo and the baby, directly affect our hearts, regardless of our social environment or standard of education. Every generation feels this effect in its own way and according to the information available to it. The Qur'ān addresses these facts to all

generations, and they receive the message contained in them, and then determine their response or lack of it.

This is followed by mentioning the facts of giving life and taking it away, creation and origination: "*It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is.*" (Verse 68) The Qur'ān repeatedly refers to life and death as they are signs that have a strong effect on man's heart. Indeed both phenomena affect everything in man's world. Both have wider scope than initially thought. There are different forms and aspects of both life and death. We need only to think of a dead, barren land, and then we see it quicken, becoming full of life. We see a tree with dry leaves and stripped branches in one season, and we see it later with life bursting through every part of it. It soon blossoms with leaves, flowers and fruit. We can look at an egg, a chic, a seed, a plant, etc. These are all aspects of the journey from death to life. There is also the opposite journey, from life to death. Both can strongly affect us as we contemplate them.

Added to these two phenomena there is the origination. It is sufficient that God's will is directed to the creation of anything through the word, 'Be,' and the subject matter of this comes into existence. Blessed be God, the best of all creators.

A Singular Argument

Against the backdrop of the emergence of human life, the cycle of life and death, the truth of initiation and origination, disputing the truth of God's revelations or the import of His signs sounds singular. Equally odd is any denial of God's messengers. Hence, a fearful warning is given in the form of a scene from the Day of Resurrection:

> *Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have*

forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. 'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (Verses 69–76)

These verses first wonder at those disputing God's revelations when they see the great signs He has placed in the universe. This serves as a prelude to outlining the fate that awaits them in the life to come. "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers.*" (Verses 69–70) They have rejected one book and one messenger, but, in fact, they reject everything all God's messengers said. Theirs is the same faith, put in its most perfect form in the final message. This means that they actually denied every single message and rejected every single messenger. Everyone who opposed the Divine faith, at any time in history including the present, did this when he or she opposed the truth advocated by the messenger addressing him personally.

"*They will certainly come to know.*" (Verse 70) This statement adds humiliation to painful punishment. "*When, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged.*" (Verse 71) They are dragged like animals and beasts to add further humiliation to their predicament. Why should they be given honourable treatment when they have discarded every single cause of honour? Their humiliation and dragging eventually leads them "*into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verse 72) There they are tied up after the place is filled with a burning fire and scalding water.

Such is the end they face. It is then that they are further rebuked and painfully embarrassed: "*Then they will be asked: Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?*" (Verses 73–74) Their reply is that of someone who is in total sorrow after he realizes that he has been badly deceived: "*They will answer: They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.*" (Verse 74) We have lost them and we have no way of finding them. Nor can they find us. In fact we did not ascribe divinity to anyone. These were all myths and

false presumptions. After this sorrowful answer, the *sūrah* adds a general comment: "*Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray.*" (Verse 74)

A further and final reproach is then added: "*This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.*" (Verses 75–76) God save us! What, then, was all that dragging, the chains, the scalding waters and fire? It appears that these were a prelude before entering hell where they would abide. It was because of their arrogance that they were so humiliated.

Again, the *sūrah* urges the Prophet to remain patient in the face of the many levelled adversity he was encountering, represented in the arrogance shown by the unbelievers and their persistent disputing of God's revelations. He is told to have complete trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether God keeps him alive to see with his own eyes some aspects of what He warned the unbelievers against or He gathers him to Himself first. The whole question is determined by God. God's messenger's task is to deliver his message. Ultimately, all will return to God:

> *Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return.* (Verse 77)

There is something that deserves careful attention here. The Prophet Muḥammad, God's messenger, who faced a determined onslaught of rejection, persecution and arrogant hostility is being told in short: 'Fulfil your duty and do not be concerned with anything else. The outcome is none of your concern.' He was not even to entertain wishes that God might act in fulfilment of some aspects of the punishment promised to the arrogant unbelievers. He is simply required to fulfil his responsibility. The whole dispute is not his; it is God's and He determines how He will settle it.

This is a very high standard of discipline which God requires from the advocates of His message, starting with His noble messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). What is required of them is very

hard indeed. It requires them to keep their strong feelings and wishes in check. Is it for this reason that the command to remain patient is given at this point in the *sūrah*? In this sense, it is not a repeat of the earlier order to be patient. Rather, it points to a different type of patience, which can be harder than handling arrogance and physical harm with patience.

Here we see that ordinary human beings, advocating God's message, are required to purge themselves of the desire to see how God punishes His and their enemies who continue to fight against them. This is extremely difficult. Yet it is part of the cultivation of the ideals of those who serve God's cause. They are to shed everything that they desire for themselves, even though this may be no more than to see the enemies of their faith defeated and punished.

When the advocates of God's faith attain this level, they equip themselves with what saves them from drowning in the ocean of desire. Desires may seem pure and justified to start with, but Satan tries hard to manipulate them for his own ends.



4

When it is Too Late to Believe

We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood. (78)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ
مِنْهُم مَّن قَصَصْنَا عَلَيْكَ
وَمِنْهُم مَّن لَّمْ نَقْصُصْ عَلَيْكَ
وَمَا كَانَ لِرَسُولٍ أَن يَأْتِيَ بِآيَةٍ
إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ
قُضِيَ بِالْحَقِّ وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ
الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. (79)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَنْعَامَ لِتَرْكَبُوا
مِنْهَا وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. (80)

وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ وَلِتَبْلُغُوا عَلَيْهَا
حَاجَةً فِي صُدُورِكُمْ وَعَلَيْهَا وَعَلَى
الْفُلْكِ تُحْمَلُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny? (81)

وَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ فَأَيَّ آيَاتِ
اللَّهِ تُنكِرُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟
كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوٓا۟ أَكْثَرَ مِنْهُمْ وَأَشَدَّ
قُوَّةً وَءَاثَارًا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَمَآ أَغْنَىٰ
عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا۟ يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. (82)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُم بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ
فَرِحُوا۟ بِمَا عِندَهُم مِّنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ
وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. (83)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْا۟ بَأْسَنَا قَالُوٓا۟ ءَامَنَّا بِٱللَّهِ
وَحْدَهُۥ وَكَفَرْنَا بِمَا كُنَّا بِهِۦ
مُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him.' (84)

فَلَمْ يَكُ يَنفَعُهُمْ إِيمَٰنُهُمْ لَمَّا رَأَوْا۟ بَأْسَنَا ۖ
سُنَّتَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِى قَدْ خَلَتْ فِى عِبَادِهِۦ ۖ
وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (85)

Overview

This final part of the *sūrah* elaborates on the comments given at the end of the previous part. It again directs the Prophet and the believers to remain patient in adversity, until God wills to bring about what He has promised the believers and what He has warned the unbelievers against. This may take place during the Prophet's lifetime or may be

delayed until a later time. The question here is that of faith, the believers and the rejecters who dispute its truth. The arbiter in all this is God. It is He who determines the course of His message as He pleases.

In this part the *sūrah* outlines some additional aspects of this point. The Divine message has a long history. It did not start with the Prophet Muḥammad and the Islamic message embodied in the Qur'ān. Before him there were many messengers, some of whom God mentioned to the Prophet and some He did not. They all faced rejection and arrogance. They were all required to demonstrate miracles. Everyone of them dearly wished that God would give him a miracle which would force the rejecters to submit to the truth. However, showing such a sign or a miracle is a matter that God determines at His own time. The message is His and He conducts its affairs.

Nevertheless, there are numerous signs in the universe, which can be seen by all at all times. Of these, the *sūrah* mentions here cattle and ships, and refers in general to other signs which no one can deny.

The *sūrah* concludes with a strong reminder of the destruction of earlier communities all of whom displayed similar arrogance. Their power and civilization were of little use to them when God's law was applied: "*But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85) On this powerful note the *sūrah* concludes. It is a *sūrah* that focuses its attention on the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice.

Past Messengers

> *We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood.* (Verse 78)

This whole question of the message has had many precedents, some of which are told by God to His messenger in this book, the Qur'ān. Others, He chose not to tell him about. The accounts that have been

given clearly show the long, clearly marked way that advocacy of the Divine message should take. They also outline the rules that cannot be altered, since God has set them into operation. Furthermore, these accounts of past messengers make clear the nature of the message, the role of the messengers and the limits they have to observe.

The present verse strongly emphasizes a fact that needs to be fully understood: "*No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave.*" (Verse 78) Every believer, even though he may be a messenger of God, would love to see the Divine message victorious. They dearly wish that those who stubbornly reject it will soon succumb to its truth. Therefore, they would love to see a miracle that would break the stubbornness of hardened unbelievers. However, God wants His chosen servants to remain absolutely patient in the face of all adversity. He, therefore, makes it clear to them that they have no say in the matter; their task is completed when they have delivered their message. Miracles occur at the time of His choice. Thus, they should be reassured, satisfied with whatever is accomplished through them, leaving the final outcome to God, who determines it as He pleases.

God also wants people to understand the nature of Godhead and the nature of prophethood. He wants them to realize that God's messengers are mortals like them: He has chosen them and assigned them their missions. Not only can they not exceed that mission, they would not try to do so. Moreover, people should know that miracles are delayed out of God's mercy. It is God's will that should people continue to reject His faith after they have been given a miracle, He will destroy them soon after that. Thus, they are given time and a period of grace: "*When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood.*" (Verse 78) There will be no time left for any further action, nor for repentance or mending of ways.

Signs Everywhere

Those who demand miracles are directed to reflect on God's signs that are present everywhere in the world around them. Because of the long familiarity of these, they are often forgotten. Reflection on them, however, is sufficient to give them all the evidence they want. They

testify to the fact that God is the Creator of everything in the universe. No one can claim that these have been created by anyone other than God; nor can there be any claim that they existed without being created by God who has planned everything:

> *It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?* (Verses 79–81)

The creation of livestock is a miracle in the first place, just like the creation of man. To shape and fashion them and to give them life are all miracles which human beings do not even claim. Another miracle is making such livestock subservient to man, when some of them are larger and stronger than man. Yet, "*It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food.*" (Verse 79) To say that such livestock merely exist and we need not concern ourselves with how or why they do is unacceptable. To claim that they are not a clear miracle in relation to man and his ability, or that they do not point to the Creator who originated them and gave them their characteristics, as He did with man, is to make arbitrary claims that run against logic and reason.

The *sūrah* reminds them of the favours God has granted them through these creatures: "*some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried.*" (Verses 79–80) The things that they used to desire and accomplish through travelling on such mounts were great at the time; this before the invention of modern means of travel and transport. There are still certain things that continue to be done by using such livestock. Even today, certain mountainous areas can only be reached by using animals, despite the fact that cars, trains, planes and other vehicles are available to us. Access to them is through narrow passages that can only be traversed by animals.

"*On them, as on ships, you are carried.*" (Verse 80) This is also a sign from God; indeed, a great blessing from Him. The fact that ships sail on the sea is based on a number of natural laws and balances that are of the essence of the universe's design. They involve the earth, sky, dry

land, sea and river, as well as the nature of the elements and components of the universe. These are essential whether a boat uses sail, steam, combustion engine, nuclear power, or some other power God has placed on our planet and the use of which He has facilitated for man. Hence, ships are mentioned here as an aspect of God's signs on the one hand and the blessings He bestows on man on the other.

God's signs throughout the universe are countless. They cannot be denied by any serious minded person: *"And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?"* (Verse 81) Yes, indeed! Some people do deny and dispute God's revelations and signs, using false arguments to try to undermine the truth. Such people, however, are motivated only by ulterior motives, arrogance, twisted concepts or some purpose other than establishing the truth. A tyrant like Pharaoh, who feared for his throne because he knew that the truth of God's oneness would disprove the legends on which his kingship was based, disputed God's signs and His message. Some people believe in certain creeds that are incompatible with the principle of God's oneness such as communism. Communists wanted people to confine themselves to the earth, concentrating all their cares on their bellies and sexual desires. They wanted people to worship nothing other than the creed or the leader. Others suffered under the yoke of the clergy, as happened during the Middle Ages in Europe when the Church held excessive powers, and people wanted to get rid of such tyranny. Therefore, they rejected God in whose name the Church exercized its tyranny.

There are other motives that make people dispute the truth of faith. However, human nature finds such disputes repugnant and acknowledges the truth testified by everything in the universe.

Lessons of History

The *sūrah* concludes on a very powerful note:

> *Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled*

in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (Verses 82–85)

Many communities were destroyed during human history. What happened to some of these communities can be seen in their ruins; others are recorded in history, written or transmitted by word of mouth. The Qur'ān often directs our attention to these histories because they are indicative of human life and its course of history. They also have a powerful effect on our minds and hearts. The Qur'ān addresses human nature by what God, who revealed the Qur'ān, knows of human nature: what influences it and what opens its receptors. Some of these receptors need only a light tap, while others require strong hammering because of the thick veils that have covered them over time.

At this point the *sūrah* questions them, encouraging them to travel across the land with open eyes, alert feelings and an objective approach. They should look at what took place on earth before their time, and consider whether they too might be exposed to the same: "*Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them?*" (Verse 82) Before specifying what end they met, the *sūrah* describes the conditions of those past communities so that the addressees can consider how it could affect them and also enable them to draw the right lessons: "*They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth.*" (Verse 82) Thus, they enjoyed power and civilization. Some of these belonged to generations that preceded the Arabs, the history of some is given to the Prophet, while others were known to the Arabs who passed by their ruins: "*Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them.*" (Verse 82)

Neither material power nor numerical strength was of any avail to them. Indeed their advancement was the cause of their tragedy: "*When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had.*" (Verse 83) Without faith, knowledge becomes a test that may cause blindness and excess. Such superficial

knowledge can lead to conceit and arrogance. Given such knowledge, a person may think that he can control immense powers and immeasurable resources and this leads him to transgress beyond his limits. He tends to forget the great many things he does not know. These are present in the universe, but he has no power over them. Indeed, he is not fully aware of them. He only knows their ends that are close to him. Yet he boasts falsely, emphasizing his knowledge and overlooking his ignorance. If he would only compare what he knows to what he does not, and what he is able to do to with what he cannot even begin to understand, he would certainly moderate his excitement about his knowledge.

Those people, however, revelled in what little knowledge they had and ridiculed whoever reminded them of what is beyond their knowledge: "*And so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked.*" (Verse 83) Therefore, when they see God's might, they begin to realize the truth of their arrogance and acknowledge what they used to deny. They declare their belief in God's oneness and disown those deities which they alleged to be God's partners. All this, however, comes when it is too late: "*And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all.*" (Verses 84–85) It is a rule God has established that repentance after demonstrating God's might is not acceptable, because it is motivated by fear, not by faith. "*This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures.*" (Verse 85) God's way remains operative at all times. It never changes, deviates or fails: "*There and then the unbelievers will be lost.*" (Verse 85)

This is a very powerful conclusion to the *sūrah*, with God's might overwhelming the rejecters when they are raising their voices with appeals motivated by fear. Thus, the end fits well with overall ambience and main subject matter of the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* tackles those issues of faith that feature prominently in Makkan revelations, such as God's oneness, resurrection and revelation. These, however, are not the main themes of the *sūrah*. Its main theme is the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice. Indeed, the development of this battle gives the *sūrah* its distinctive features.

SŪRAH 41

Fuṣṣilat

(Clearly Expounded)

Prologue

The question of faith and its essential principles is the major theme of this *sūrah*: God's oneness, the life to come, the revealed message as well as advocacy of the message and the manners an advocate of the Divine message should adopt. All that the *sūrah* includes serves to explain these fundamental principles and provide evidence supporting them. The *sūrah* presents some of God's signs that are available in man and in the expanse of the universe, warns against denying such signs, and reminds people of the fates suffered by earlier generations that denied the truth and shows what happens to such unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection. It explains that only such unbelievers among men and *jinn* refuse to acknowledge these truths or to submit themselves to God. By contrast, the heavens, the earth, the sun, the moon and the angels submit themselves and humbly prostrate themselves before God.

Concerning the truth of God's oneness, we read at the beginning of the *sūrah* verses such as: "*Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 6) "*Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two Days? And do you*

claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds." (Verse 9) Speaking of the people of 'Ād and Thamūd, the *sūrah* tells us that the messengers sent to them explained the same truth to them: "*Worship none but God.*" (Verse 14) In the middle of the *sūrah* we have the commandment: "*Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God.*" (Verse 37) Speaking about the same basic truth, the *sūrah* says towards its end: "*on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'*" (Verse 47)

On the question of the life to come the *sūrah* issues a stern warning to those who do not believe in it: "*Woe to those who associate partners with Him, and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come.*" (Verses 6–7) It concludes with this verse: "*They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verse 54) The truth of the Day of Judgement is also mentioned in the images the *sūrah* portrays of what happens on that day, which confirms, with even greater certainty, the fact of its undoubted coming.

As for the question of revelation, there is much about it in this *sūrah*, almost to the point of revelation being its main theme. In fact, the *sūrah* opens with a detailed discussion of this issue: "Ḥā. Mīm. *A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear. They say: 'Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.' Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that...*" (Verses 1–6) The middle part of the *sūrah* mentions how the idolaters received the Qur'ān: "*The unbelievers say: Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Then we are given a more detailed account of how the Qur'ān was received and a response to what the unbelievers used to assert about it: "*Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a*

sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. Nothing is being said to you that was not said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away." (Verses 41–44)

In its discussion of the method of advocating the Divine message and the manners adopted by such advocates, the *sūrah* says: "*Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.*" (Verses 33–36)

These issues are presented against a backdrop of images that have a profound effect on the listener. The *sūrah* draws these images from a universe replete with signs and from the human soul with its remarkable constitution. It also shows images of the fates suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers and intense scenes from the Day of Resurrection.

One of these scenes of the universe is a very detailed image of the original creation of the heavens and the earth: "*Say: 'Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two Days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said:*

'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing." (Verses 9–12)

We also have images of the creation of the night and day, the sun and moon, the worship offered by the angels and the earth as it humbly worships God and how it springs into life: "*Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verses 37–39)

The human soul is laid bare before our eyes such that we see it as it really is: "*Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer.*" (Verses 49–51)

Regarding the fates of earlier communities, the *sūrah* presents what happened to the 'Âd and Thamūd: "*As for the 'Âd, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance.*

Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing." (Verses 15–18)

Several scenes are presented from the Day of Resurrection. One intensely effective and detailed image shows the unbelievers speaking to their own senses: "*On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return.*" (Verses 19–21) Another image shows, in full clarity, the anger felt by those who were deceived in this life against those who deluded them: "*The unbelievers say: 'Our Lord! Show us those* jinn *and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.*" (Verse 29)

This great variety of imagery, forming the background against which the main issues of faith are presented, constitutes the overall ambience of the *sūrah*. Right from the very outset until the end we find ourselves before the most striking and powerful of influences.

The *sūrah* may be divided into two parts, each consisting of closely interlinked sections. The first part begins with verses speaking about the Qur'ān, its nature and revelation, as well as the unbelievers' attitude to it. This is followed by an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth and the stories of the ʿĀd and Thamūd. Then, comes a scene of the unbelievers on the Day of Judgement and how they face the testimony of their own senses. It then speaks about those unbelievers in this present life and how they have gone so astray. It states that they had cronies who made evil things seem fair to them. As a result they used to urge one another not to listen to the Qur'ān, but instead to try to silence it so that they might win. This is followed by an image depicting how angry they feel on the Day of Judgement with those cronies who deluded them. A contrasting image shows us those who believed in God's oneness and followed the straight path. These receive angels who reassure them and give them news of their great prospects.

The angels tell them that they will be their friends and guardians in both this present life and in the life to come. This part concludes with a reference to the message and those who advocate it.

The second part begins by speaking about the signs God placed in the universe: the night, day, sun, moon, angels in devotion, the desolate earth and how it quickens and becomes full of life. This is followed by a reference to those who dispute God's signs and His revelations, leading to a reference to God's book and its main qualities before a brief reference is made to Moses' book and the disputes that arose among his people concerning it. The *sūrah* leaves judgement concerning all these disputes to God, at the time appointed by Him. At this point the *sūrah* adds a reference to the Last Hour and that knowledge of it belongs to God alone. He also knows the fruit that will eventually develop from flowers and what offspring will be born to pregnant females. It also shows an image of the unbelievers and how they ask about those deities whom they alleged to be God's partners. Following this the *sūrah* presents the human soul as it is, shedding all its coverings. Although man is keen to protect himself he takes no precautions to spare himself the results of denying God and His messages.

The *sūrah* concludes with a promise by God that He will make His signs within man and in the universe available to people so that they have a chance to review their attitude and be assured of their faith: "*We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verses 53–54)



I

Testimony of One's Own Senses

Fuṣṣilat (Clearly Expounded)

سورة فصلت

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: (2)

تَنزِيلٌ مِّنَ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. (3)

كِتَابٌ فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣﴾

It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear. (4)

بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا فَأَعْرَضَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٤﴾

They say: 'Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.' (5)

وَقَالُوا قُلُوبُنَا فِي أَكِنَّةٍ مِّمَّا تَدْعُونَا إِلَيْهِ وَفِي آذَانِنَا وَقْرٌ وَمِن بَيْنِنَا وَبَيْنِكَ حِجَابٌ فَاعْمَلْ إِنَّنَا عَامِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

قُلْ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَآ
إِلَٰهُكُمْ إِلَٰهٌ وَٰحِدٌ فَٱسْتَقِيمُوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِ
وَٱسْتَغْفِرُوهُ ۗ وَوَيْلٌ لِّلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness.' Woe to those who associate partners with Him, (6)

ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْتُونَ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَهُم
بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ هُمْ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٧﴾

and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come. (7)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ
لَهُمْ أَجْرٌ غَيْرُ مَمْنُونٍ ﴿٨﴾

Those who believe and do good deeds shall have an unfailing reward. (8)

قُلْ أَئِنَّكُمْ لَتَكْفُرُونَ بِٱلَّذِى خَلَقَ
ٱلْأَرْضَ فِى يَوْمَيْنِ وَتَجْعَلُونَ لَهُۥٓ
أَندَادًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ رَبُّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٩﴾

Say: 'Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. (9)

وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ مِن فَوْقِهَا وَبَٰرَكَ فِيهَا
وَقَدَّرَ فِيهَآ أَقْوَٰتَهَا فِىٓ أَرْبَعَةِ أَيَّامٍ سَوَآءً
لِّلسَّآئِلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. (10)

ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰٓ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَهِىَ دُخَانٌ فَقَالَ لَهَا
وَلِلْأَرْضِ ٱئْتِيَا طَوْعًا أَوْ كَرْهًا قَالَتَآ أَتَيْنَا
طَآئِعِينَ ﴿١١﴾

Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' (11)

فَقَضَىٰهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَٰوَاتٍ فِى يَوْمَيْنِ
وَأَوْحَىٰ فِى كُلِّ سَمَآءٍ أَمْرَهَا ۚ وَزَيَّنَّا
ٱلسَّمَآءَ ٱلدُّنْيَا بِمَصَٰبِيحَ وَحِفْظًا ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ ٱلْعَزِيزِ ٱلْعَلِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾

So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (12)

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا۟ فَقُلْ أَنذَرْتُكُمْ صَٰعِقَةً مِّثْلَ
صَٰعِقَةِ عَادٍ وَثَمُودَ ﴿١٣﴾

If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.' (13)

إِذْ جَآءَتْهُمُ ٱلرُّسُلُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ
وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ ۖ
قَالُوا۟ لَوْ شَآءَ رَبُّنَا لَأَنزَلَ مَلَٰٓئِكَةً فَإِنَّا
بِمَآ أُرْسِلْتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: 'Worship none but God.' They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.' (14)

فَأَمَّا عَادٌ فَٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَقَالُوا۟ مَنْ أَشَدُّ مِنَّا قُوَّةً ۖ
أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَهُمْ هُوَ
أَشَدُّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً ۖ وَكَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا
يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. (15)

فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِي أَيَّامٍ نَّحِسَاتٍ لِّنُذِيقَهُمْ عَذَابَ الْخِزْيِ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَلَعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةِ أَخْزَىٰ ۖ وَهُمْ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. (16)

وَأَمَّا ثَمُودُ فَهَدَيْنَاهُمْ فَاسْتَحَبُّوا الْعَمَىٰ عَلَى الْهُدَىٰ فَأَخَذَتْهُمْ صَاعِقَةُ الْعَذَابِ الْهُونِ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance. Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. (17)

وَنَجَّيْنَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَكَانُوا يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing. (18)

وَيَوْمَ يُحْشَرُ أَعْدَاءُ اللَّهِ إِلَى النَّارِ فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards (19)

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا مَا جَاءُوهَا شَهِدَ عَلَيْهِمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَأَبْصَارُهُمْ وَجُلُودُهُم بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. (20)

They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return. (21)

وَقَالُوا لِجُلُودِهِمْ لِمَ شَهِدتُّمْ عَلَيْنَا ۖ قَالُوا أَنطَقَنَا اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنطَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ خَلَقَكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

'You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you. Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing. (22)

وَمَا كُنتُمْ تَسْتَتِرُونَ أَن يَشْهَدَ عَلَيْكُمْ سَمْعُكُمْ وَلَا أَبْصَارُكُمْ وَلَا جُلُودُكُمْ وَلَٰكِن ظَنَنتُمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَعْلَمُ كَثِيرًا مِّمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

'And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.' (23)

وَذَٰلِكُمْ ظَنُّكُمُ الَّذِي ظَنَنتُم بِرَبِّكُمْ أَرْدَاكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُم مِّنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home; and if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so. (24)

فَإِن يَصْبِرُوا فَالنَّارُ مَثْوًى لَّهُمْ ۖ وَإِن يَسْتَعْتِبُوا فَمَا هُم مِّنَ الْمُعْتَبِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

We have assigned to the unbelievers companions who made their past and present seem goodly to them, but the sentence has fallen due upon them together with bygone generations of *jinn* and humans. They will indeed be lost. (25)

وَقَيَّضْنَا لَهُمْ قُرَنَاءَ فَزَيَّنُوا لَهُم مَّا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَحَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ فِي أُمَمٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا خَاسِرِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لَا تَسْمَعُوا۟ لِهَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانِ
وَٱلْغَوْا۟ فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَغْلِبُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

The unbelievers say: 'Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.' (26)

فَلَنُذِيقَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَذَابًا
شَدِيدًا وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَسْوَأَ ٱلَّذِى
كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a taste of severe suffering; and We shall most certainly requite them according to the worst of their deeds. (27)

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَآءُ أَعْدَآءِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلنَّارُ ۖ لَهُمْ فِيهَا دَارُ
ٱلْخُلْدِ ۖ جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Such is the requital of the enemies of God: the fire will be their lasting home: a fit requital for their having knowingly rejected Our revelations. (28)

وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ أَرِنَا
ٱلَّذَيْنِ أَضَلَّانَا مِنَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ
نَجْعَلْهُمَا تَحْتَ أَقْدَامِنَا لِيَكُونَا
مِنَ ٱلْأَسْفَلِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

The unbelievers say: 'Our Lord! Show us those *jinn* and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.' (29)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ
ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ تَتَنَزَّلُ عَلَيْهِمُ
ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا۟
وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا۟ وَأَبْشِرُوا۟ بِٱلْجَنَّةِ
ٱلَّتِى كُنتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

As for those who say: 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way, the angels will descend on them, saying: 'Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. (30)

'We are your guardians in the life of this world and in the life to come. There you shall have all that your souls desire, and all that you ask for, (31)

نَحْنُ أَوْلِيَآؤُكُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَفِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ ۖ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَا تَشْتَهِىٓ أَنفُسُكُمْ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَا تَدَّعُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

as a ready welcome from Him who is much-forgiving, ever-merciful.' (32)

نُزُلًا مِّنْ غَفُورٍ رَّحِيمٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? (33)

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ قَوْلًا مِّمَّن دَعَآ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا وَقَالَ إِنَّنِى مِنَ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. (34)

وَلَا تَسْتَوِى ٱلْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا ٱلسَّيِّئَةُ ۚ ٱدْفَعْ بِٱلَّتِى هِىَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا ٱلَّذِى بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُۥ عَدَٰوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُۥ وَلِىٌّ حَمِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. (35)

وَمَا يُلَقَّىٰهَآ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا۟ وَمَا يُلَقَّىٰهَآ إِلَّا ذُو حَظٍّ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (36)

وَإِمَّا يَنزَغَنَّكَ مِنَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ نَزْغٌ فَٱسْتَعِذْ بِٱللَّهِ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٦﴾

The Source of Divine Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with the two separate letters, *Ḥā. Mīm*. We have explained elsewhere the reason why many *sūrahs* start with separate letters of the Arabic alphabet. That this is often stated fits in with the Qur'ānic method of repeating references to the facts it wants our hearts to internalize. By nature, the human heart needs such repetition because it tends to forget with the passage of time. In order to instil a fact in one's conscience one needs to have it repeated in a variety of ways. The Qur'ān addresses the human heart with all the qualities instilled in its nature in accordance with its Creator's knowledge.

It is as if the two letters with which the *sūrah* starts, *Ḥā, Mīm*, are a name given to the *sūrah* or to the Qur'ān. The two letters constitute the subject of the first sentence while the predicate forms the next verse: "Ḥā, Mīm. *A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verses 1–2) Choosing to identify the Divine attributes of grace and mercy in connection with the revelation of the Qur'ān highlights the quality that is most characteristic of this revelation, namely Divine mercy. There is no doubt that the revelation of the Qur'ān is an act of mercy for all mankind. It is a mercy for those who believe in it and implement it as also for other creatures, not merely humans. The Qur'ān defines a code of living that brings good results for all. It has had a profound impact on the life of humanity, its concepts, values and course of action. Its impact is universal and consistent, ever since it was revealed. Those who study human history with true objectivity, following its course in its wider perspective, which includes all facets of human activity, are able to recognize this truth. Many of them have also recorded this in clear terms.

"*A book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge.*" (Verse 3) Spelling out the verses, clearly and distinctly, according to purpose, people's nature and mentality, generations, communities, psychologies and needs is a major characteristic of the Qur'ān. Its verses are indeed clearly expounded for people who are ready to learn and receive knowledge. In this way the Qur'ān gives good news to believers who put their faith in practice, and delivers warnings to those who reject its message and entertain

evil. It also explains why such good news and warnings have been given in a fine Arabic style to Arabic-speaking people. Most of them, however, refused its message, receiving it cooly: "*Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear.*" (Verse 4)

This is indeed what they did, turning away so as not to hear or be exposed to the powerful logic of the Qur'ān. As the *sūrah* later informs us, they tried hard to persuade others not to listen to the Qur'ān. Of those that did listen their attitude was the same as those who did not: they all resisted the influence of the Qur'ān on their hearts. Thus they were like the deaf, deprived of their hearing faculty.

"*They say: Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.*" (Verse 5) Such was their stubbornness. They hoped that the Prophet would despair of them ever responding to him and that he would, therefore, stop calling on them to believe. They did so because of the powerful effect of what he said when they deliberately wanted not to believe. Thus, they said to the Prophet: our hearts are covered over so as not to allow your words any penetration, and the deafness in our ears prevents us from hearing you, and the barrier between you and us allows you no interaction with us. Therefore, leave us alone and do what you will. We will go our own separate way. Equally, they might carelessly have said: we will neither listen to what you say nor heed your warnings. You may do what you please. We will continue to follow our own ways, caring nothing for what you do or say.

This is just one example of what the first advocate of the message of Islam had to face. Yet, still he continued to call on people to accept his message, allowing no element of despair to creep into or disrupt his work. He never hastened the fulfilment of God's promise to him or the infliction of punishment on those who denied him. He acted instead upon instruction, declaring to people that putting the warnings into action was not up to him. He was no more than a human being receiving revelations and delivering a message. His task was to call on people to believe in God's oneness and to adhere to His message. He was also mandated to warn the idolaters. Once he had done this, matters

were left to God while he himself had no say in what was bound to happen: "*Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 6)

What perseverance! What endurance and what dedication! Only a person who has experienced at first hand something of this condition can appreciate the power and resilience required to persevere against such odds. Yet this perseverance is coupled with the realization that one has no say in what turn developments take. Yet the Prophet faced such unrelenting opposition, arrogance and carelessness, without ever requesting a miracle to silence his opponents.

In order to be able to face such situations, God's prophets and messengers were often directed to remain patient in adversity. Advocacy of the Divine message can only take the road of long patience and perseverance. The first thing that requires such patience is the advocate's keen desire to see the Divine message triumph, but then realize that such triumph is slow coming. Indeed, no sign of it may appear for a long time, yet those who undertake such advocacy must accept this willingly and without hesitation.

The maximum the Prophet could do in the face of such arrogant rejection and ridicule of his message was to say: "*Woe to those who associate partners with Him, and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come.*" (Verses 6–7) The fact that *zakāt*, or the obligatory charity, is specified here must have been in response to a certain situation, which we cannot now determine. This verse was revealed in Makkah, while *zakāt* was only imposed as a duty in the second year after the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. The overall requirement of *zakāt* was known about during the Makkan period, but only as a general requirement whereby people paid as they wished. Later, in Madīnah, this was modified to make it a specific duty with defined rates on different types of property. To disbelieve in the life to come is the essence of rejection of the Divine message, and it should be met with stern warnings. Some scholars argue that in this particular instance, *zakāt* means purity of faith. The general tone of the *sūrah* and the circumstances prevailing at the time admit this possibility.

Creation of the Earth

Continuing to advocate the Divine message, the Prophet puts before them the enormity of the offence they commit by associating partners with God and rejecting His message. He points first to the universe, in relation to which they are tiny and flimsy creatures. He shows them God's power as reflected in the nature of this universe of which they constitute only a small part. He wants to draw them out of the narrow angle through which they look at the Divine message. From that angle, they see themselves as large, occupying important positions. Preoccupied with their own selves, positions and interests, and the fact that Muḥammad was chosen by God in preference to them, they overlook the great truth expounded in the Qur'ān and set before them by Muḥammad. This great truth relates to the universe, to all generations of humanity, and carries absolutism that transcends time, place and people:

> *Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.* (Verses 9–12)

When you declare disbelief, you are being nothing other than careless, gross and vulgar. You are denying the One who created the earth and placed firm structures over it, blessing it and assigning its varied provisions. He has indeed operated the systems of the universe, adorned the nearest sky with secure lights. Everything in the heavens and the earth willingly submit themselves to Him, while you, a mere single inhabitant on earth, arrogantly refuses to accept the truth. The

presentation of these facts in the *sūrah* typically shakes every heart: "*Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions].*" (Verses 9–10)

The *sūrah* begins here by mentioning the fact of creating the earth in two days and comments on this first stage of creation before telling us the rest of the story. The comment says: "*It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds,*" and yet you claim others to be His equals when it is He who created the earth you live on. How absurd and ghastly!

Then, what are these days: the two in which God created the earth and the two in which He placed the mountains above it, measured its provisions and showered His blessings? These are days of God, the length of which is known to Him alone. They are not the earthly days we know, because earth days are a time-measuring unit that came into existence after the creation of the earth. Just like the earth has its day, which is the length of time it takes to complete one full rotation of the sun, other planets have their days, some of which are longer and some shorter than an earth day. This means that those four days of the earth's creation and its provisions are measured by some other unit unknown to us. The closest we can surmise given our limited knowledge, is that they refer to the different stages the earth went through, divided into several eras, until its crust solidified and it settled into its present shape able to support the type of life we know. According to scientific theory, such stages took around two billion earth years.

These are only scientific estimates based on geological studies and soil and rock analyses. When we study the Qur'ān, we do not take such estimates as proven facts, for they are not. They are simply postulations open to amendment and change. Therefore, we do not interpret the Qur'ān on their basis. We conclude that they may be true if they are in agreement with the Qur'ānic text and serve to explain it without coercion. We say that a theory or a set of assumptions is closer to the truth because it is closer to the meaning of the Qur'ānic text.

Scientists now say that most probably the earth was originally a gas-like mass of flame just like the sun, and most probably it was once part of the sun before splitting away from it for some reason. It took long periods until its crust cooled down and solidified. Its centre remains in melting form because of the intense heat that melts even the hardest of rocks. In the early period when the crust solidified, it was composed of many layers of rock strata. Then at some other early stage, the oceans came into existence with water forming by the combination of two molecules of hydrogen with one molecule of oxygen.

> The air and the water on this planet of ours worked together to break the rocky surface, carry it and deposit it in different places so as to make a soil that allows plants to grow. The two of them thus managed to carve out portions of hills and mountains, and to fill valleys. Wherever you turn your eyes on earth, you will see the effects of a continuous process of construction and destruction.[1]
>
> The earth's crust is in a process of constant change. The sea shakes its waves to bring its effect on the land. Sea water evaporates by the heat of the sun and it goes up into the sky where it forms clouds which produce rain of fresh water, falling down in torrents to form rivers. As the rivers run, they affect the surface of the earth, carrying some of its rocks, changing them and depositing them elsewhere. Over centuries counted in hundreds and thousands, the surface of the earth changes completely. Snow that has solidified into ice brings another effect on the surface of the earth. Likewise, its surface is affected by the wind as also by the sun, with the heat and the light it sends to the earth. The creatures living on earth cause further changes, as do the volcanoes that bring lava to the surface.
>
> Should you ask a geologist about the rocks forming the earth's crust, he will give you a long list, but he will highlight three major

1. Zakī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, (n.d.) I could not locate this quotation in the book. – Editor's note.

types. He will tell you first about the igneous rocks which came out from the lower reaches of the earth to its surface in melted form, and then cooled down and solidified. He may cite as examples granite and basalt. He may show you a sample, indicating its crystalline composition, with white, red and black crystals, saying that each one of these contains a different chemical compound. Thus, he points out that these rocks are in fact a solid mix. The geologist may further draw your attention to the fact that it was out of such igneous rocks that the surface of the earth was originally made in the early stages of its formation. Then different factors came into play: water falling from the sky or running in rivers or lying in the form of ice, air, wind and sun. They all worked hard changing the nature and the chemistry of the earth's surface, bringing into existence totally different rocks that have no similarity to the original ones.

The geologist will then speak to you about depository rocks, which make the second and largest type of rock. These are the ones which have been carved by natural factors or by man out of rocks that are firmer and more solid. They are called depository because they are no longer in their original places. They have been lifted and carried by water or wind and then settled somewhere else on earth. The geologist will cite limestone as an example of such depository rocks. Limestone forms mountains, such as al-Muqaṭṭam which provides the building material for all buildings in Cairo. He will tell you that limestone is made of a chemical compound known as calcium carbonates, produced by biological or chemical factors. Sand, clay and argillaceous earth are other examples of depository rocks and they are all formed from different origins.

When you enquire about these origins you are told that all depository rocks come from igneous ones. When the crust of the earth formed in the distant past, there was nothing on its solidified surface except igneous rocks. Then rain and sea water interacted with it. The air then came into play in the form of chemical gases, winds and gales, heat and light from the sun and all these elements began to interact according to their different natures. They thus

changed the useless, hard igneous rock into rocks that can be used to build houses and rocks from which minerals can be extracted. More importantly, it changed the hard solid rock to make depository soil that can support life.

Granite does not make the sort of earth surface fit for plants or irrigation. Such surface is provided by soil which ultimately came out of granite and similar rocks. When such soil was in place, plants grew allowing animals to exist. Then the earth became a fit abode for the head of all these creatures on earth, man.[2]

This journey long as it may be thought of by modern scientists, can help us to understand the meaning of the days in which the earth was created, firm mountains placed on it, then its blessing and the measuring of its different provisions in four days. We do not know the length of these four days, but we know that they are undoubtedly different from earth days.

A Blessed Planet

We need to dwell for a moment on every phrase of this Qur'ānic text before we turn our attention to the mention of the heavens in the next verse.

"*He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it.*" (Verse 10) Mountains are often described in the Qur'ān as 'firm', and in some instances the purpose of their positioning is that they 'prevent' the earth from shaking or swaying. This means that the mountains are firm in themselves and stabilize the earth, ensuring that it remains well balanced. In times gone by, people used to think that the earth was based on firm foundations. They are told today that the earth is nothing more than a small ball that floats in a great expanse, without support. They may be scared when they listen to such words for the first time, and some of them may begin to look warily askance, worried that the earth might shake or fall in deep space. Let such people be reassured. God's hand holds the heavens and the earth, preventing their

2. Ibid., pp. 96–98.

disappearance. Should they vanish, no one else would hold them in place. Such people should banish worrying thoughts, because the laws that govern the universe are set in operation by the Almighty who holds sway over all things.

The same scientist says:

> Every event that takes place on earth, whether on its surface or below it, causing one substance to be transferred from one place to another, has a bearing on the speed of the earth as it moves in its orbit. This is not affected only by the cycle of the tide. Even when rivers carry water from one place of the earth to another, this affects the speed of its movement. The blowing wind and whatever falls into the sea or protrudes on the surface has an effect on the earth's speed as it moves in orbit. Another thing that affects such speed is any expansion or retraction of its size, even though it increases or decreases by no more than a few feet.[3]

With the earth being so sensitive, it is no wonder that firm mountains are positioned over it to ensure its stability and that it does not 'sway with you', as expressed in verse 15 of *Sūrah* 16.

And He "*bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions.*" (Verse 10) When our predecessors read this statement, they used to think of the vegetation that grows on earth and the useful minerals God has placed in it, such as gold, silver, iron and the like. Now that we have learnt more of the great blessings God has bestowed on this planet and of the provisions He has placed in it over long periods of time, this statement gives us a much broader meaning.

We have mentioned how some elements in the air combine to produce water, while the combination of others produce the soil that supports vegetation, and another process gives us rain, the source of all fresh water in rivers, wells and springs. All this reflects the blessing God bestowed on the earth and its measured provisions.

Then, there is also the air we breathe:

3. Ibid., p. 82.

> The earth is a circle covered with a rocky crust, and the greater part of this crust is covered by a layer of water, while above both the crust and water there is air, a thick gas layer similar to the sea, with different depths. All living creatures, man, animal and plant, live in this layer enjoying what it gives us.
>
> As we breathe we obtain the oxygen necessary for us, while plants grow their structure using carbon, or rather carbon dioxide. We eat plants, and also eat animals which in turn eat plants, and in doing so ensure our physical growth. The nitrogen in the air is needed to reduce its content of oxygen. If we were to inhale oxygen on its own, we would be burnt by breathing. There remains in the air the evaporated water which gives it its freshness, and the hydrogen, as well as small quantities of other gases, such as helium and neon. Most probably these were part of the original composition of the earth and remained in the air.[4]

The provisions we need for survival are wider in scope than the food we eat. Yet all our food is composed of the basic elements that are present in the earth or in the air. Sugar, for example, is a compound of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, while water is made of oxygen and hydrogen. The same applies to everything we eat, drink, wear or use as a tool. They are all made of the earth's elements.

All this refers in some way to the blessing bestowed on the earth and the measured provisions placed in it, over a period of four of God's days, the length of which is known only to Him.

A Design for the Sky

> *Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each*

4. Ibid., p. 100.

> *heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.* (Verses 11–12)

What is meant here by the application of God's design is that it was His will to do so. The word, 'then', may not signify a chronological order; rather, it may mean turning to something higher. In our sense, the sky is higher. "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke.*" (Verse 11) Scientists believe that before the existence of stars there was what they call the nebula, a cloud of gas, or rather, smoke.

> The nebulas, bright or dark, contain gas and dust, which is nothing other than what is left after the creation of the stars. The theory says that the galaxy was first formed of gas and dust, from which all stars were formed by a process of deposition and sedimentation. Yet some of the gas and dust remained, and from the remainder, the nebulas formed. Yet in this great galaxy remains a large quantity, equal to that which went into the formation of the stars. The stars continue to pull some of it by gravity, which means that the stars are dusting the sky to remove what is left, yet these dusters are too few in relation to the amount that needs to be dusted away and the space that needs to be cleaned.[5]

This may be true because it is close to the meaning of the Qur'ānic statement: "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke.*" (Verse 11) It is also closer to the fact that the creation of the skies was completed over a very long period of time, taking two of God's days.

A Willing Submission

The verse then adds a statement expressing an awesome truth: "*and said to it and to the earth: Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly. They both said: We do come willingly.*" (Verse 11) This is a remarkable

5. Ibid., pp. 191–192.

reference to the fact of the universe being under God's control. It submits to its Creator and willingly does His bidding. This leaves only man who, in most cases, submits to God's law unwillingly. The law inevitably applies to him and he cannot take himself out of its domain. Man is no more than a little gear in the great machinery of the universe. All universal laws apply to him, whether he likes them or not. Yet he is the only creature who does not make the same submission as the earth and the sky. He always tries to deviate from an easy and smooth path, and, thus, he collides with the laws of nature, which will inevitably overpower him. He will then submit, albeit unwillingly. Exceptions to this are God's servants who, in their hearts, concepts, desires and actions, are not in conflict with the overall Divine law. These people submit willingly and find their way easy and smooth. They move in line with the movement of the universe, turning to God and living in harmony with all that exists. They are able to achieve wonders and produce miracles. They have no conflict with any force in the universe; on the contrary, they derive from its powers.

We, humans, submit to God's law unwillingly. How much better it would be for us to submit willingly, as do the earth and the skies. We would then enjoy the happiness that results from being consistent with the rest of the universe. At times, we also come up with what is absurd! The wheel of God's will turns in the way, direction and speed set for it, turning the universe with it according to well defined laws of nature. Yet we, out of all creation in the universe, try to force the wheel to run faster or slower, responding to what may motivate us of worry, selfishness, greed, fear or desire. We may move to this side or that, while the rest of creation moves along a well defined way. This inevitably means that we run into a collision here or there, endure pain or suffer a fatal crash. Thus, all our efforts and power go to waste. We should know, however, that when we truly believe, submit to God and relate to the rest of the universe, we will clearly understand our role, coordinate our movements with those of the universe, and move at the right time and speed, within the right space. Thus our movements will benefit by the power God has placed in the universe to produce truly great results. We will experience no arrogance or conceit because we know

the source of the power that enabled us to accomplish our great deeds. We will be certain that we do not achieve such results by our own efforts working in isolation. Instead, we achieve them when only we derive all that we do from the greatest power.

When we do this on our short journey spent on planet earth that submits willingly to God, we feel happy, comfortable and reassured. Indeed, the whole planet joins us on its own journey to its Lord. Moreover, we will enjoy the great peace that pours into our spirits as we live in a friendly universe submitting to its Lord. We will join the universe in willing submission to Him and, as a result, we will have no conflict with the universe, because we are part of it and we move with it in the same direction.

"*They both said: We do come willingly. So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task.*" (Verses 11–12) These two days may be the same as those in which the stars were formed from the nebulas, or during which the creation was completed as God only knows how. The assignment of tasks to each heaven refers to the operation of the natural laws in them, in accordance with God's directives. What, then, does the term 'heaven' mean? We have no definite answer. The word may refer to a measure of distance. On the other hand, each galaxy may be called a heaven, or several galaxies with varying distances may be called heavens. The word also admits several other possibilities.

"*We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure.*" (Verse 12) Again the sky nearest to the earth can have several meanings. It could be the nearest galaxy to us, known as the Milky Way, which has a diameter of about 150,000 light years. It could mean something else that comprises stars and planets that shine for us like lights. These skies are 'made secure' from devilment, as can be understood from other references in the Qur'ān. Quite what this entails is beyond our grasp and hence our knowledge is limited to what the Qur'ān tells us.

"*Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*" (Verse 12) Can anyone other than Him design all this? Can anyone other than the Almighty who knows all control the whole universe and conduct its affairs?

What Punishment for Turning Away?

Given this is the state of the entire universe, what position should be assigned to those who reject God's oneness and attribute partners to Him? How should their reckless arrogance be requited?

> *If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.' There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: 'Worship none but God.' They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.' As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance. Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing.* (Verses 13–18)

A warning against the type of thunderbolts that struck the peoples of 'Ād and Thamūd strikes fear in their hearts. It suits the terrible offence they commit. It answers the idolaters' arrogance referred to at the beginning of the *sūrah* showing them to be the only ones in the universe who reject the truth.

What sort of effect did this warning have on the unbelievers in Makkah? Ibn Isḥāq, an early biographer of the Prophet, gives us the following story:

> One day, as 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one of the Quraysh chiefs, was sitting with a group of Quraysh notables, he noticed the Prophet sitting alone close to the Ka'bah. 'Utbah suggested to his friends: "Shall we go to Muḥammad and make him some offers? He may

have been spared the trouble. If he wins, whatever glory he achieves will be yours." They retorted: "He has certainly bewitched you." He said: "I have stated my opinion, and you can do as you wish."

Another report by Jābir suggests that when the Prophet recited these verses, 'Utbah listened. When the Prophet read verse 13 which says: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd,*" 'Utbah put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and appealed to him by the ties of kinship to his people to do nothing of the sort. Then 'Utbah left him, went home and stayed in doors. His people talked to him later about this and he explained his position: "When Muḥammad spoke this warning, I appealed to him not to do so. You know that when Muḥammad says something, he does not lie. I feared that such punishment be inflicted on you."

The Warning and Its Effect

This is, then, one image of the effect of the warning as stated by God's messenger to a person who did not believe in his message. Before we move on, we need to reflect a little on the image of the Prophet as he listened to 'Utbah making his petty proposals, his refined manners and his focus on the great issue in question. Although the proposals 'Utbah made sounded worthless, the Prophet listened attentively, without interrupting his interlocutor. He remained calm and friendly. When 'Utbah stopped speaking, the Prophet then graciously asked him: "Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you have to say?" Then when 'Utbah confirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: "Then listen to me." He waited until 'Utbah said, "I will do," before he read to him God's own words. Throughout he was friendly, calm, confident and reassured. This is typical of how the Prophet always captured his audience's attention, even though they might at the beginning jeer him and take a hostile stand. His was always a most admirable attitude. It is certainly as God says: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

What does this warning signify: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*"

(Verse 13) Essentially, it begins a fresh round showing us images of the fates met by earlier communities who rejected God's message. The reckless arrogance of the present unbelievers is thus made all the more apparent through this reminder of what happened to similarly reckless and arrogant peoples: "*There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: Worship none but God.*" (Verse 14) This is the single issue as presented by all God's messengers; it states the central point in every Divine religion.

"*They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.*" (Verse 14) Similarly, this represents the same point of doubt faced by every messenger. Yet a messenger addressing human beings could not be other than human. This so that he would know the people he addressed and they would know him. In essence, a messenger should provide a practical example and share his people's problems. Yet the 'Ād and Thamūd declared themselves unbelievers simply because the messengers sent to them were human like themselves. They were not angels as they wanted them to be.

Up to this point, the *sūrah* speaks of the fates of both peoples as if they are one: both were struck by thunderbolts. Now, the *sūrah* gives us some specific details about both peoples: "*As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: Who is mightier than us?*" (Verse 15) The right attitude is that all creatures should submit to God and that people should not behave arrogantly. Who, then, are the 'Ād in comparison to God's great creation? All arrogant behaviour, by whatever creature, is against all right. Yet these people thought themselves powerful. They asked: "*Who is mightier than us?*" This is the false sense exhibited by all tyrants when they feel that they have silenced all opposition and that none can stand against their power. They forget the truth: "*Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them?*" This is a basic truth: the One who originated them is more powerful than they. He was the One who enabled them to exercise their power in the first place, albeit in the limited measure He allowed them. Yet tyrants always overlook facts: "*They continued to reject Our revelations.*" (Verse 15)

We see them here boasting of their power, thinking themselves mighty. The image portrayed in the next verse shows us the fate their despicable arrogance deserved: "*Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering.*" (Verse 16) It was a freezing gale lasting several days that brought them great misfortune. What was more was their humiliation in this life: a fitting response to their arrogance towards God's servants. Yet all this was a first instalment, a punishment in the life of this world. They will not escape further punishment in the life to come: "*Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them.*" (Verse 16)

"*As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance.*" (Verse 17) This appears to be a reference to their initial acceptance of God's message after they had seen the miracle of the she-camel which drank as much as all their other camels and cattle. However, they reverted to disbelief shortly after this, preferring to remain blind, straying from the path of truth. This is the worst type of blindness. "*Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought.*" (Verse 17) Humiliation is the most fitting outcome for such an attitude. It is not merely a punishment of destruction; it adds the suffering of humiliation.

"*And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing.*" (Verse 18) The round is thus concluded. They should realize by now that nothing can withstand God's power. No one can give or seek protection against Him.

Unusual Witnesses

They have been told of God's power over the universe and mankind. Now the *sūrah* tells them of His power over their own selves. They have no authority over themselves, and no part of them is beyond the reach of His power. Even their ears, eyes and skins obey Him. They too disobey them so as to be witnesses against them on the Day of Judgement.

On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return. You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you. Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing. And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.' If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home; and if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so. (Verses 19–24)

There is a great surprise in this very difficult situation in which they see their own senses and faculties obeying God and doing as they are bid. In this situation they are branded as 'enemies of God'! What fate will God's enemies suffer? They are herded together, from all generations, like a flock of sheep, and driven to the fire. When they stand close to it and the reckoning begins, they find themselves facing witnesses whom they did not reckon with. Their tongues, long used to lie, fabricate falsehood and engage in ridicule are now tied, while their ears, eyes and skins rebel against them obeying their Lord. They report on what they used to consider secret. They used to hide themselves, thinking that God would not see them conceal their intentions and crimes. But they did not try to hide themselves from their own ears, eyes or skins. How could they, when these faculties are part of them? Now, these publicize what the unbelievers thought to be concealed from all creatures and from God Almighty as well.

As God so commands their own organs, they are overwhelmed and respond in complete obedience: "*They will ask their skins: Why did you bear witness against us?*" (Verse 21) They will put the facts clearly before them, attempting to hide nothing: "*To which they will reply: God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak.*" (Verse 21) It is He who made tongues the organs of speech. He can easily give speech to

other organs. He gave speech to all things, making them speak and explain things as they are. "*It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return.*" (Verse 21) From Him all originate, and to Him all shall return. There is no escape from His authority, neither at the beginning, nor at the end. Their minds used to deny this; now their skins state it to them in an undeniable way.

The remainder of the comments may be a continuation of what their own organs say to them, or equally it may be a comment on this amazing situation: "*You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you.*" (Verse 22) It never occurred to you that these, your organs, could rebel against you. In fact, you could not have hidden yourselves from your organs even if you had tried. "*Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing.*" (Verse 22) Your foolish and ignorant thoughts deceived you, leading you to hell: "*And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.*" (Verse 23)

We then have the final comment: "*If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home.*" (Verse 24) What an absurd situation. Patience now entails enduring the fire. It is no longer the patience that withstands adversity in order to achieve a cherished goal and earn reward from God. It is a sort of patience that incurs the penalty of hell where they abide: "*And if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so.*" (Verse 24)

There is no way back, no remonstration or acknowledgement of error will suffice. It is customary for admissions of error to be coupled with a request for forgiveness, after removing the causes of strained relations. Now, no admission of error is allowed, let alone forgiveness and improved relations.

Control Over Human Souls

The *sūrah* also shows them how God's power extends over their hearts and minds, even when they are still on earth refusing to believe in Him. Since He is fully aware that their hearts have become corrupt, He lets some evil entities, from among both humans and *jinn*, befriend

them and make what is evil seem fair and goodly. Thus, they lead them astray until they join those who ruin themselves and become liable to punishment:

> *We have assigned to the unbelievers companions who made their past and present seem goodly to them, but the sentence has fallen due upon them together with bygone generations of* jinn *and humans. They will indeed be lost.* (Verse 25)

They are too proud to worship God when they are subject to His power. Their own hearts lead them to ruin and ultimately to God's punishment. God allocates them wicked companions who whisper in their ears, assuring them that all the evil they see around them is good, and who present their own bad deeds to them in a fair appearance so that they do not see how foul these are. Perhaps the worst thing that can happen to man is that he loses his balanced judgement and can no longer see how foul or deviant his actions are. In this way, he perceives everything he does as good and fair. Inevitably, though, this leads him to ruin. When the unbelievers reach this stage, they find themselves among the lost herd of past communities that suffered God's punishment: "*They will indeed be lost.*" (Verse 25)

One aspect of what such wicked companions persuaded them to do was to fight the Qur'ān when they realized how powerful was its argument: "*The unbelievers say: Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) The elders of the Quraysh in Makkah used to counsel each other to do just this, and they also persuaded the masses to do the same. They realized that they were no match for the Qur'ān, its beauty, power and eloquence: "*Do not listen to this Qur'ān.*" (Verse 26) They claimed that it cast a magical spell over their minds and ruined their lives, causing division between a man and his children or a man and his wife. It is true that the Qur'ān causes such division, but only through God's criterion that separates faith from unfaith, and guidance from going astray. The Qur'ān wins people's hearts so that they no longer value any other bond as they do their bond of faith. Thus, it was known as *al-Furqān*, meaning 'The Criterion'.

"*Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Such frivolity is totally unbecoming, yet it was the result of their knowing that they could not combat the Qur'ān with logic or consistent argument. Those who persist in such disbelief can basically do nothing other than drown out the voice of the Qur'ān with their own frivolities. They used to do this in a variety of ways: Mālik ibn al-Naḍr, for example, used to sit and relate accounts of Rustum and other Persian kings in order to impress people so that they would not listen to the Qur'ān, while others used to shout and make noises or recited poetry and rhymes. All this, however, came to nothing while the Qur'ān retained its power because it is the word of the truth, and the truth is overpowering.

In response to their singular remark they are given a stern warning: "*We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a taste of severe suffering; and We shall most certainly requite them according to the worst of their deeds. Such is the requital of the enemies of God: the fire will be their lasting home: a fit requital for their having knowingly rejected Our revelations.*" (Verses 27–28) We soon see them suffering in hell and see how the deluded are so angry with the ones who led them astray. They realize now that it was they who led them to their fate when they persuaded them that their foul deeds were fair and goodly. "*The unbelievers say: Our Lord! Show us those* jinn *and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.*" (Verse 29) They are not merely angry with them; they want to exact revenge: "*We shall trample them under our feet.*" What a contrast with their close friendly ties in this present world.

A different type of bond is that which the believers have. These are the ones who take the right path of endeavour to do only what is good. God assigns to them angels to give them reassurance, bring them the good news of their prospects in heaven and to be their guardians, both in the life of this world and the world to come:

> *As for those who say: 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way, the angels will descend on them, saying: Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your guardians in the life of*

this world and in the life to come. There you shall have all that your souls desire, and all that you ask for, as a ready welcome from Him who is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful. (Verses 30–32)

To remain steadfast in pursuing what is entailed by the declaration, '*Our Lord is God*,' means to keep it alive in one's conscience, to give proof to it in one's life and to discharge the responsibilities it imposes. This is serious, important and hard work. Therefore, it deserves the abundant grace God grants them: a friendly relation with angels who, as God tells us, reassure the believers with sweet words: "*Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your guardians in the life of this world and in the life to come.*" (Verses 30–31) They also describe heaven to them, knowing that they will have there all that they desire and is pleasing to them. They make it even more inviting and pleasing by saying that it is "*a ready welcome from Him who is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 32) It is a gift from God and a place assigned to them through His forgiveness and endless mercy.

What Image for the Advocate of Islam

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by painting an image of the advocate of the Divine faith, describing his personality, discourse and fine manners. God's messenger, and indeed every advocate of God's way, are called on to adopt such ways. The *sūrah* began by describing the hostile attitude of those called upon to accept the faith and how they met this call with arrogance. Now, the advocates of Divine faith are being told what course to follow, regardless of how their advocacy is met and how their efforts are received:

Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. If

a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (Verses 33–36)

An advocate of the Divine faith must put his addressees face to face with reality. He has to confront people's deviation, ignorance, inflated appreciation of their own deeds, as also their instinctive abhorrence of being told that they are wrong. He is opposed by people's determination to serve their own interests and maintain positions that might be threatened by the principle of equality of all people, which is basic to Divine faith. To face all this as part of the task of advocating Divine faith is indeed very hard. Yet it is something truly great: "*Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'?*" (Verse 33)

Taking all this into account, a word of advocacy, calling on people to believe in God's oneness, is the best word that may be said on earth. It is at the forefront of good words that are raised to God in heaven, provided it is endorsed by good action and confirmed with self surrender to Him. Thus, such advocacy becomes pure and sincere, free of self interest. The advocate's aim is merely to discharge his duty by presenting the Divine message. Once he has discharged his duty, he should not care whether his words are rejected or whether people are rude or boastful in their denials. He is merely presenting what is good, which puts him in the higher position. Anyone who opposes him entertains evil, and, as such, is far below an advocate of God: "*Good and evil cannot be equal.*" (Verse 34) Advocates of the Divine message cannot return evil with its like. A good deed cannot be equal in its impact or value to a bad one. Patient perseverance, forbearance and rising above the desire to return evil with its like eventually brings people back to their senses. Their earlier hardness softens and they become friendly: "*Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend.*" (Verse 34)

This rule proves true in the overwhelming majority of cases: a stormy attitude will be replaced by calmness, fury by cordiality and arrogance by humility. All this may result from a good word, a soft tone and a smile to meet the fury of one whose anger gets the better of him. Had

such a person been met with a similarly furious approach, he would only be more quarrelsome and completely lose his self control.

Such a forbearing attitude requires a great heart, one that can forgive when it might otherwise return evil with its like. Such ability is necessary for forbearance to be effective. Otherwise, forbearance may be thought a mark of weakness. If the party resorting to evil feels that a kindly attitude results from weakness, he will not respect it. Indeed, kindness will not have any effect on the matter. Moreover, such kindness and forbearance are limited to personal insults and injuries. When the attack is levelled at believers' faith, trying to turn them away from it, then every form of resistance should be employed, or else, we remain patient in adversity until God makes His judgement in the matter.

Such forbearance, which requires us to repel an evil deed with a good one, rising above feelings of anger, is a sublime grade which cannot be attained by everyone. It does not merely require patience in the face of adversity; it is also a blessing which God bestows on His servants who try hard to achieve it: "*Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune.*" (Verse 35) We say that it is a sublime grade; in fact it is so sublime that Muḥammad, God's messenger, who never showed anger for anything personal, yet nothing could stand to his anger when it was for God's sake, is told, as indeed every advocate of the Divine message is told: "*If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.*" (Verse 36) Anger may open the way to Satan's prompting who will then try to persuade us to be impatient and unforgiving when others resort to evil. In such a situation, we will do well to seek refuge with God against Satan. This is the best shelter against Satan's efforts to exploit our anger.

God, man's Creator, knows the keys to each and every heart, as well as its abilities and qualities. He knows where and how Satan can penetrate his machinations. Therefore, He protects the advocates of His message from stirred up anger as we face what excites the fury of even the most forbearing of us. Yet this too is a difficult road to follow, requiring that we submit here, as in every situation, to Divine directives, to the exclusion of all else.

2

No Concealment from God

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِ ٱلَّيْلُ وَٱلنَّهَارُ وَٱلشَّمْسُ
وَٱلْقَمَرُ ۚ لَا تَسْجُدُوا۟ لِلشَّمْسِ وَلَا لِلْقَمَرِ
وَٱسْجُدُوا۟ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَهُنَّ إِن
كُنتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. (37)

فَإِنِ ٱسْتَكْبَرُوا۟ فَٱلَّذِينَ عِندَ
رَبِّكَ يُسَبِّحُونَ لَهُۥ بِٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ
وَهُمْ لَا يَسْـَٔمُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. (38)

وَمِنْ ءَايَـٰتِهِۦٓ أَنَّكَ تَرَى ٱلْأَرْضَ خَـٰشِعَةً
فَإِذَآ أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا ٱلْمَآءَ ٱهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَحْيَاهَا لَمُحْىِ ٱلْمَوْتَىٰٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things. (39)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا لَا يَخْفَوْنَ
عَلَيْنَا ۗ أَفَمَن يُلْقَىٰ فِى ٱلنَّارِ خَيْرٌ أَم مَّن يَأْتِىٓ
ءَامِنًا يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۚ ٱعْمَلُوا۟ مَا شِئْتُمْ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ
بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He sees all that you do. (40)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ بِٱلذِّكْرِ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ ۖ
وَإِنَّهُۥ لَكِتَٰبٌ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٤١﴾

Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a sublime book; (41)

لَّا يَأْتِيهِ ٱلْبَٰطِلُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَلَا مِنْ
خَلْفِهِۦ ۖ تَنزِيلٌ مِّنْ حَكِيمٍ حَمِيدٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. (42)

مَّا يُقَالُ لَكَ إِلَّا مَا قَدْ قِيلَ لِلرُّسُلِ
مِن قَبْلِكَ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو مَغْفِرَةٍ وَذُو
عِقَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. (43)

وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَٰهُ قُرْءَانًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَّقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَا
فُصِّلَتْ ءَايَٰتُهُۥٓ ۖ ءَا۬عْجَمِىٌّ وَعَرَبِىٌّ ۗ قُلْ
هُوَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ هُدًى وَشِفَآءٌ ۖ
وَٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ فِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِمْ

Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in

وَقْرٌ وَهُوَ عَلَيْهِمْ عَمًى ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ يُنَادَوْنَ مِن مَّكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away. (44)

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ فَاخْتُلِفَ فِيهِ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن رَّبِّكَ لَقُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَفِي شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

We gave the Book to Moses but disputes arose about it. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, all would have been decided between them. As it is, they are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (45)

مَّنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۗ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٤٦﴾

Whoever does what is right does so for his own good; and whoever does evil will himself bear its consequences. Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures. (46)

إِلَيْهِ يُرَدُّ عِلْمُ السَّاعَةِ ۚ وَمَا تَخْرُجُ مِن ثَمَرَاتٍ مِّنْ أَكْمَامِهَا وَمَا تَحْمِلُ مِنْ أُنثَىٰ وَلَا تَضَعُ إِلَّا بِعِلْمِهِ ۚ وَيَوْمَ يُنَادِيهِمْ أَيْنَ شُرَكَائِي قَالُوا آذَنَّاكَ مَا مِنَّا مِن شَهِيدٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

Knowledge of the Last Hour belongs to Him alone. No fruit comes out of its calyx and no female ever conceives or gives birth, without His knowledge. And so, on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.' (47)

وَضَلَّ عَنْهُم مَّا كَانُوا يَدْعُونَ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَظَنُّوا مَا لَهُم مِّن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٤٨﴾

Whatever they used to invoke before will have forsaken them; and they will know that there is no escape for them. (48)

لَّا يَسْـَٔمُ ٱلْإِنسَـٰنُ مِن دُعَآءِ ٱلْخَيْرِ وَإِن
مَّسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ فَيَـُٔوسٌ قَنُوطٌ ﴿٤٩﴾

Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. (49)

وَلَئِنْ أَذَقْنَـٰهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ
ضَرَّآءَ مَسَّتْهُ لَيَقُولَنَّ هَـٰذَا لِى
وَمَآ أَظُنُّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ قَآئِمَةً وَلَئِن
رُّجِعْتُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّىٓ إِنَّ لِى عِندَهُۥ
لَلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ فَلَنُنَبِّئَنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟
بِمَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَلَنُذِيقَنَّهُم مِّنْ
عَذَابٍ غَلِيظٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. (50)

وَإِذَآ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَى ٱلْإِنسَـٰنِ أَعْرَضَ
وَنَـَٔا بِجَانِبِهِۦ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ
فَذُو دُعَآءٍ عَرِيضٍ ﴿٥١﴾

When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer. (51)

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُمْ إِن كَانَ مِنْ عِندِ ٱللَّهِ
ثُمَّ كَفَرْتُم بِهِۦ مَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنْ هُوَ
فِى شِقَاقٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

Say: 'Have you ever thought if this be truly a revelation from God and yet you deny it? Who could be more astray than one who places himself so far in the wrong?' (52)

We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? (53)

سَنُرِيهِمْ ءَايَٰتِنَا فِى ٱلْءَافَاقِ وَفِىٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ ٱلْحَقُّ ۗ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ أَنَّهُۥ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything. (54)

أَلَآ إِنَّهُمْ فِى مِرْيَةٍ مِّن لِّقَآءِ رَبِّهِمْ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّهُۥ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ مُّحِيطٌۢ ﴿٥٤﴾

Overview

This new part of the *sūrah* addresses human hearts. It starts with a round highlighting some of God's signs in the universe, such as the night and day, sun and moon. Some of the idolaters used to prostrate themselves before the sun and the moon alongside God, when they too are no more than His creatures. They are told that if they are too proud to worship God, there are others who worship Him and are closer to Him than they. Indeed the whole earth stands in a position of worship as it receives its life from God, just as they do but who nevertheless do not use this opportunity to move closer to God. On the contrary, they deny God's universal signs as they dispute His Qur'ānic revelations, when the Qur'ān is expressed in clear Arabic, free of any non-Arabic influence. This round then presents before them a scene from the Day of Resurrection and shows them their own reality with all its weakness, changing moods and forgetfulness, eagerness to grab good things, and panicking when it is touched by harm. Nevertheless, they do not try to protect themselves from the harm that God may inflict on them. The *sūrah* ends with a promise from God that He will reveal to them His signs in the universe and within themselves

until they realize that He is the truth, removing all that remains of doubt in their hearts.

Clear Universal Signs

> *Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship.* (Verse 37)

These signs are there for all to see, and they have a direct effect on the human heart, even though we may not have any scientific information about them. Their relation with man is more profound than scientific knowledge because it is based on the fact that we share with them a common origin, nature and make-up. They belong to us and we belong to them: our constituting elements, nature, law and our Maker who created us all. Therefore, we warm to them and understand the message they impart to us. Therefore, the Qur'ān often directs our attention to them, without delving any deeper. It only wants us not to overlook them as a result of either long familiarity with them or other barriers. The Qur'ān removes these so as to make us alert to and interact with the messages given by this friendly universe.

The verse also points to a particular aspect of deviation. Some people exaggerated the importance of the sun and the moon, and thus deviated from the truth. They worshipped them in the hope of drawing nearer to God through worshipping the most beautiful of His creatures. The Qur'ān puts them back on track, removing their confusion and saying to them that if they want to worship God they must not prostrate themselves before the sun and the moon. Instead, they must prostrate themselves before God who created them. It is the Creator alone whom they, and all creatures, should worship.

If they persist in their arrogance, it will make no difference. Others offer worship to God in all humility: "*If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that.*" (Verse 38) The first creatures we think of as being referred to by the expression, '*those who are with your Lord,*' are the angels.

However, there may be other creatures close to God and about whom we know only very little.

Those creatures who are with your Lord are more noble and honourable than humans for they do not show any arrogance like those earth dwellers who have gone astray. Nor do they allow the fact that they are close to God to go to their heads. They do not stop glorifying Him day and night. They never grow weary of this. What is the significance, then, when some people living on earth take a different stand from the rest of all creatures, and refuse to submit themselves to God?

The earth, their mother from which they originate and to which they return, stands humble before God as it receives life from His hand. On the surface of the earth they are no more like ants; and from the earth they derive all their food and drink. This earth, however, presents a different attitude from theirs: "*Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 39)

We need to reflect a little on the precision of the expression used here. In the Arabic original, the word *khāshi'ah*, translated here as 'lying desolate', is used. The term connotes a humble and attentive attitude, but it means here that it is motionless before rain falls on it. When rain is sent upon it, it stirs and swells. It is as if this is a movement expressing gratitude for giving it the means to support life. The context in which this verse occurs is one of attentive worship and humble glorification of God. The earth is mentioned here as one of the figures in the scene, expressing a suitable feeling and making a suitable movement.

We should refer here to one aspect of the Qur'ānic style, comparing word usage:

> The image of how the earth looks before rainfall and the appearance of shoots is used twice in the Qur'ān. In the first instance, the earth is described as *hāmidah* which means 'dry and barren', while in this instance it is described as *khāshi'ah* which means 'lying desolate'. Some people may think that this is mere

variation which writers normally use. It is far more than this. Let us look at the context in which each description is used.

The first description, *hāmidah*, occurs in the following verse: "*Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom.*" (22: 5)

Khāshi'ah, has a totally different context: "*Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life].*" (Verses 37–39)

A quick reflection is enough to show how each of these two adjectives fits perfectly in its context. In the first instance, the long verse speaks about creation and resurrection. It is most fitting that the earth should be shown as dry and barren before it stirs and swells, putting forth each blooming and radiant plant. In the second instance, the whole ambiance is one of worship and prostration before God. Hence the description of the earth as desolate, and then when water falls it stirs and swells. We also note that the image of sprouting different plants is not added in the second case because it does not fit in the context of worship. The stirring and swelling in the second case has a different purpose from that in the first case. Here, they merely give an image of the earth's movement after it has lain desolate. Everything in the scene described here is making the movement involved in worship.

> Hence, it does not fit that the earth should remain motionless. It stirs and swells, sharing in the movement of other worshippers. Thus, not a single detail in the scene remains fixed while all others are in motion. This sort of harmony is superior to anything we know of literary expression.[6]

The comment at the end of the verse refers to bringing the dead back to life, citing the earth as an example: "*He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 39) This image is frequently used in the Qur'ān as an example of how the dead are resurrected on the Day of Judgement. Indeed, the reviving of the earth points to the facts of resurrection and God's limitless power. The image of the earth stirring with life is close to our hearts, touching them before it addresses our minds. Moreover, when life springs in what is dead it gives a subtle feeling of the power behind it. The Qur'ān addresses human nature in its own language, using the shortest way.

How to Describe Unfaith

Against this backdrop of universal signs, the *sūrah* condemns and warns those who deny God's signs and dispute His revelations:

> *Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He sees all that you do.* (Verse 40)

The warning begins in an implicit but fearful way, stating that such people "*are not hidden from Us.*" God is fully aware of them. They will have to account for what they perpetrate, no matter how they try to distort meanings or resort to deception. They may think that they can escape God's punishment in the same way as their deception spared them accountability before human authority. However, the warning is then

6. Quṭb, Sayyid, *Al-Taṣwīr al-Fannī fi al-Qur'ān*, fourth edition, Cairo, (n.d.), pp. 89–100.

stated clearly: "*Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day?*" (Verse 40) This puts before them the prospect that lies ahead. It is they who will be cast in the fire, in contrast with the believers who will be safe on the Day of Resurrection. The verse concludes with another implicit warning: "*Do what you will; He sees all that you do.*" (Verse 40) Terrible indeed is the fate of the one who is given the freedom to do what he wills and who distorts the meaning of God's revelations when God sees all that he does.

The *sūrah* then speaks about those who specifically deny the Qur'ānic revelations, describing the Qur'ān as a sublime book, admitting no falsehood:

> *Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away.* (Verses 41–44)

The *sūrah* refers to those who reject the Qur'ān when it comes to them, but does not mention their status or what will happen to them. The sentence is left without a predicate: "*Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ...*" It is a case of saying that such people do something so horrible that it cannot be properly described. The *sūrah* simply mentions them and moves on to describe the reminder which they reject; thus showing their action in its true and ghastly colours: "*It is indeed a sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise.*" (Verses 41–42)

How could falsehood touch or creep into this book when it comes from God who is the truth absolute? It is a book which clearly presents the word of truth, one that is permanently linked to the truth that ensures the proper conduct of the affairs of the universe. How could falsehood come into it when it is a sublime book, given protection by God who undertakes to keep it intact: "*It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact.*" (15: 9)

Anyone who looks carefully at the Qur'ān will find in it the truth it has come to establish. We find this truth in its spirit and its text: it is simple, natural, reassuring, and addresses human nature in its totality with profound effect. Moreover, "*it is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise.*" (Verse 42) Wisdom is clearly apparent in its structure, directives, the way it was revealed, and in its direct address to the human heart. God who revealed the Qur'ān is worthy of praise. There is in the Qur'ān much that makes our hearts eager to express its praise of God.

The *sūrah* then establishes a bond between the Qur'ān and earlier revelations, and between the Prophet Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), and all messengers sent before his time. Thus, all prophets belong to one family which receives the same discourse from God. Their hearts and souls look up to Him as they pursue their course advocating His message. Thus, the last in this family, the Prophet of Islam, feels that he is a branch of a great tree with deep roots, a member of a great family that goes back to the beginnings of history.

"*Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment.*" (Verse 43) It is all one message and one faith. Likewise, it is received in the same way: the same rejection and the same objections. Yet it establishes one bond, making one family which endures the same experience and feels the same pain. Ultimately, it follows the same way, leading to the same goal.

How comforting this fact is to advocates of the Divine message. It strengthens their resolve to continue along the same way that was traversed before them by God's noble messengers, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and the others, (peace be upon them all). How honoured and confident the advocates of God's message feel

knowing that they follow in the footsteps of such a select group. Such a feeling motivates them to go along, caring little for the difficulties and hardships they meet on the way.

It is certainly true: "*Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time.*" (Verse 43) The impact this fact can have when it becomes firmly established in the minds of believers is truly profound.

Included in what was said to God's messengers, and to Muḥammad (peace be upon him), the last among them, was: "*Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment.*" (Verse 43) Thus balance is emphasized. A believer then hopes for God's grace and forgiveness, never despairing that these will be bestowed on him by God's will, but always fearing to incur God's punishment. Striking the right balance is an essential characteristic of Islam.

The *sūrah* then reminds the Arabs of God's blessing by making Arabic the language of the Qur'ān. At the same time, it refers to their contentious disputes and rejection. "*Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?'*" (Verse 44) They do not listen to it in its Arabic form. In fact, they feared it because it addressed their Arab nature in their own language. Hence, they urged each other to adopt this strategy: "*Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) Had God expressed His message in a different tongue, they would still have objected to it, calling for it to be put clearly in Arabic. They would object even if part of it were in Arabic and the other part in a different language. Their notion, therefore, was to argue in all cases and all situations.

The truth that emerges from this argument about the form given to the message is that this book provides guidance and healing to believers. Believers' hearts appreciate its nature and truth, receive its guidance and benefit from its healing. Those who do not believe remain in confusion, and their hearts do not feel the cheerfulness of its message. Hence, it becomes like deafness to their ears and blindness in their eyes. They recognize nothing, because they are far removed from the

nature of this book and its address: "*Say: This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it. They are, as it were, being called to from too far away.*" (Verse 44)

We feel the truth of this statement in every community and generation. Some people are profoundly affected by the Qur'ān. It transforms them, giving them a different type of life, and enables them to achieve miracles within themselves and in their environment. Others feel this Qur'ān too heavy for their hearts and ears. When they listen to it, they only grow more deaf and blind. The Qur'ān never changes; it is hearts that are different.

A reference follows to Moses and his book, and how his people differed in their attitude to the Qur'ān. God has deferred His judgement on their disputes. He has decreed that judgement on all this will be given on the Day of Judgement: "*We gave the Book to Moses but disputes arose about it. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, all would have been decided between them. As it is, they are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 45) Likewise, He has decreed that judgement on the question of His final message will be similarly deferred. He thus lets people do as they like, and they will ultimately receive what their action merits: "*Whoever does what is right does so for his own good; and whoever does evil will himself bear its consequences. Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures.*" (Verse 46)

This message proclaims that mankind have attained maturity. This makes man responsible for his choices. Such responsibility is based on individual accountability. Therefore, each one is free to choose, knowing that "*your Lord is never unjust to His creatures.*"

Man's Vacillating Attitude

As judgement is deferred to the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* makes clear that knowledge of its timing belongs to God alone. God's knowledge is described by highlighting some of its aspects in an inspiring way. This serves as a prelude to a scene from the Day of Judgement when unbelievers are questioned, and their answers are reported:

Knowledge of the Last Hour belongs to Him alone. No fruit comes out of its calyx and no female ever conceives or gives birth, without His knowledge. And so, on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.' (Verse 47)

The timing of the Last Hour signalling the Day of Judgement is beyond anyone's ken; the fruit in its calyx is something that cannot be seen; and what a pregnant female is bearing is similarly concealed. Yet they are all within God's knowledge. Our mind looks far and wide, trying to think of the fruits when they are still in calyxes and embryos in their wombs. Who can think of their count, let alone what they actually are. An image is thus drawn of the extent of God's knowledge, to the extent our mental capacity allows. Yet His knowledge extends far beyond this, as it is without limit.

Our mind then imagines those who have gone astray, as they stand before God, realizing that His knowledge encompasses everything, no matter how well concealed it is. They face the questioning: "*On the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?'*" On that day, no argument is of any use. No one can utter anything but the truth. What will they say then: "*They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'*" (Verse 47) They will declare that none of them will then claim any partners to God.

"*Whatever they used to invoke before will have forsaken them; and they will know that there is no escape for them.*" (Verse 48) They will know nothing of their previous claims. They will realize that there is no escape from their fate. They will forget their past and think only of their present situation.

Such is the day about which they take no precautions despite the fact that man is eager to achieve every good thing and fears what brings him harm. At this point, the *sūrah* shows them their naked reality, without cover or disguise:

Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has

befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer. (Verses 49–51)

Man is so insistent in his requests, urging and repeating, appealing for what he feels to be good for him. Indeed, he never tires of this. Yet should misfortune befall him, even in the slightest way, he loses hope and sinks into despair. He feels his burden too heavy, thinks that God's grace has abandoned him. All this comes about because his relationship with God is not strong enough in his heart.

Yet should God grant him something of His grace after he has suffered some harm, he will be so elated that he will forget how this grace was given to him, and he will not give due thanks. On the contrary, he will consider that he has deserved this grace and that he should have it forever. He will even dismiss the Day of Judgement thinking that it will never come: "*I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come.*" (Verse 50) He will boast of his own position, thinking that he deserves favouritism with God. He will even go further than this, denying the Day of Judgement and, thus, disbelieving in God. Nevertheless, he thinks that should he be returned to God, he will have a secure position with Him: "*Even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.*" (Verse 50) This betrays no small degree of arrogance. Here the *sūrah* issues a suitable warning to those who are so arrogant: "*We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering.*" (Verse 50)

Man is always moving to extremes. If God bestows His grace on him, he blows his own trumpet and behaves with arrogance. When harm or misfortune befalls him, he sinks low and collapses. He will pray insistently, prolonging his prayer. How accurate this description of man's inner thoughts is! No wonder; it is a description by God who

created man and knows the subtle workings of his mind. He knows that man will continue to follow round and circular ways, unless he is guided to the right path.

Now that they face their own naked reality, the question is put to them about what they would do if it is proven that the message they deny is actually God's own message? Are they really prepared to expose themselves to the consequences of such rejection: "*Say: 'Have you ever thought if this be truly a revelation from God and yet you deny it? Who could be more astray than one who places himself so far in the wrong?'*" (Verse 52) It is a possibility to be reckoned with. Have they taken any steps to deal with this should it come true?

Signs Galore

They are left to think and consider. The *sūrah* now turns to the open universe, revealing some of the signs placed in it, as well as some of what is within their own selves:

> *We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.* (Verses 53–54)

This is the final note in the *sūrah*, and it is a profound one. It is a promise by God to mankind to put before them some of the secrets in the universe and some of the secrets working within themselves. These are His signs. They will thus be able to realize that this faith, this book and its discourse are the truth. Indeed it is, for it is all from God, and whose word is truer than God's? And God's promise has certainly come true. Over the fourteen centuries that followed this promise He has made many of His signs in the universe and within man known to us, and He continues to show us more of these every day.

When we look around us we see that man has discovered much since then. Wide horizons have opened before us, as well as much of

what was unknown about man. If people would only reflect on how they came to know these and show gratitude for this, they would have ensured great benefit. They now know that the earth, which people used to imagine as the centre of the universe, is no more than a small satellite of the sun, and that the sun is merely a small circle of which the universe contains millions and millions. They also know the nature of their earth and sun, as well as the nature of the universe, if their modern information is true.

People now know much about the matter of which the universe is made, if it is true that it is made of matter. They know that the atom is the basic unit of which the universe is made, and that the atom can be transformed into radiation. They thus know that the whole universe is made of radiation that takes many different forms, making a great variety of shapes and sizes. We have also come to know much about our planet, learning that it is round in shape, like a circle or close to a circle, and that it rotates on its axis and moves in orbit around the sun. We have learnt about all its continents, oceans and rivers, and discovered what was previously unknown to us of what is below its surface. Moreover, we now know much of the provisions placed inside it and in its atmosphere.

Man has also learnt much about the laws that link his planet with the great universe and which operate within the universe as a whole conducting its affairs. Some people have gone further, moving from knowledge of these laws to knowledge of the One who created them. Others have remained stationary, looking at what has become known without moving forward. Although scientific advancement led mankind first to go astray, it has begun now to return, through scientific advancement, realizing that God is the truth absolute.

New knowledge about man is in no way less spectacular than that about the universe. We have learnt much about the human body: its characteristics, make-up, physiology, the food it needs and what it makes of it, the illnesses affecting it, how the body works and the functions of its different organs. These discoveries put before us real miracles that can only be the work of God. We have also learnt something about the human soul. Our new knowledge does not compare with what we learnt about the human body, because our study

and research have concentrated far more on the physical rather than the mental and spiritual in man's life. Yet what we have learnt so far heralds great discoveries in this field as well.[7]

Yet man has not reached the end of the road. God's promise remains true and valid: "*We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth.*" (Verse 53) Early signs of the fulfilment of the last part of this promise have come to be noticed since the early years of the twentieth century. People are flocking from different parts of the world to join the camp of faith. Many are coming forward through material science. Numerous others are coming from far away, despite the great tide of atheism that almost drowned the earth in the past. This tide of atheism is now on the retreat, although to all appearances it seems still to be rising. By the close of this twentieth century it may almost have disappeared, by God's will.[8] For, God's promise will certainly come true: "*Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything?*" (Verse 53) It is He who has made this promise, and it is He who knows the truth and is witness to it.

"*They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord.*" (Verse 54) It is because of their doubt that they will meet their Lord that people continue to perpetrate what they do. Yet the promise is true, no doubt. "*Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verse 54) How can they escape meeting Him when He encompasses all?



7. The author wrote this nearly 50 years ago, and his prediction has come true. Research in mental health has made great advancements, but scientists in this field assure us that we are still at the beginning and there are bound to be more spectacular discoveries. – Editor's note.

8. The author here was over optimistic, but it is such optimism and trust in the fulfilment of God's promise that continues to motivate advocates of the Divine faith despite the great obstacles in their way. – Editor's note.

SŪRAH 42

Al-Shūrā

(Consultation)

Prologue

Like all the *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* deals with the issue of faith, but it especially focuses on the question of revelation and the Divine message. It can truly be said that this question provides the central theme of the *sūrah* and that all points discussed in it serve this purpose.

Yet the *sūrah* also expands on the truth of God's oneness, presenting it from different angles. It also speaks of the truth of resurrection and the need to believe in it. The life to come is mentioned in several places with different images of it presented. The *sūrah* also outlines some of the believers' qualities and the good manners characterizing their behaviour. It also mentions man's provisions and how they are given in plenty or in scant measure. Furthermore, it speaks about man and his two states when he enjoys happiness or suffers hardship.

Nevertheless, the question of revelation and the Divine message provides the basic truth the *sūrah* expounds upon, giving it its general ambiance. It is as if all the points and ideas discussed in the *sūrah* are meant to emphasize this truth and drive it home.

The line the *sūrah* takes in presenting this truth and its associated topics requires further discussion. It is presented in different ways, each separated from the other with a few verses that speak about God's

oneness through showing that the Creator, or the Provider, or who controls hearts, or determines all creatures' fates is the One God. As the *sūrah* tackles its main theme of revelation and message, it emphasizes that the source of all revelation is one, as also are the message, the faith, the code of living and the line to be followed. Similarly, the leadership of humanity under the banner of faith is one. Thus the theme of oneness, with all its meanings and connotations, is brought into sharp relief throughout the *sūrah*, whatever topic it may be discussing. We will now briefly refer to some such examples:

The *sūrah* begins with five separate letters: "*Ḥā. Mīm. 'Ayn. Sīn. Qāf.*" These are immediately followed by the statement: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It, thus, begins by stating that all revelations, throughout all generations, come from the same source. Further attributes of God are added in the next verse: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) These attributes highlight the fact that the heavens and the earth belong to one owner, and that He is the Supreme One.

The *sūrah* then takes another line, describing how the universe stands with regard to the question of belief in the One Owner, and to the deviation leading some people to associate partners with Him: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verses 5–6) We thus see the whole universe preoccupied with the question of faith and unbelief to the extent that the heavens are about to be rent asunder because of the deviation by some earth dwellers. For their part, the angels pray for the forgiveness of all those on earth specifically because of the grave offence perpetrated by some of them.

The *sūrah* then returns to its main theme: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall*

be in paradise and some in the blazing fire." (Verse 7) It moves on with the two groups and their different abodes to state that God could have made them all one community. However, His will has decreed on the basis of His knowledge and wisdom that some are admitted to His grace, "*whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) It further states that God is the Protector of all, and that "*He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Again the *sūrah* returns to the central theme of the truth of revelation and message, stating that judgement on all matters that are subject to dispute between people belongs to God who has revealed the Qur'ān to which people must refer in all situations: "*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn.*" (Verse 10) It then proceeds from God's Lordship to His being the One Creator who alone administers everything in the universe, determines provisions and knows all: "*He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 11–12)

Having made these points, the *sūrah* immediately returns to its central theme: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been*

commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high..." (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* follows this pattern in presenting the truth of revelation and message, maintaining this ambiance while turning to address other issues of faith which, in turn, endorse that truth. This pattern is abundantly clear in the first part of the *sūrah*, up to and including verse 24, in which the theme of revelation and message is encountered time after time.

The second part, taking up the rest of the *sūrah*, begins with a discussion of God's signs that are seen in the way He gives some people abundant provision while others receive small measure, how He sends rainfall, the creation of the heavens and the earth with all creatures therein, and ships that traverse the sea. It then moves on to outline the basic quality that distinguishes believers and their community. This is followed by an image of the Day of Judgement showing the wrongdoers as they face their punishment: "*you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance.*" (Verses 44–45) By contrast, the believers will be in a dignified position, stating the fate that the wrongdoers face: "*The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering.*" (Verse 45) Against this backdrop, the *sūrah* calls on people to spare themselves such an end before it is too late: "*Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins.*" (Verse 47) Then the *sūrah* reverts to its central theme, the truth of revelation and message, highlighting one of its many aspects: "*If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you].*" (Verse 48)

The *sūrah* continues to refer to its central theme, directly and indirectly, up to its end and moves after each reference to address other ideas relating to it. Its conclusion provides the following statement regarding revelation and message: "*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our*

servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return." (Verses 52–53)

One of the clear objectives of the *sūrah* emerges from the way it tackles its central theme and how it proceeds, time after time, to refer to related issues. This objective is nothing less than to appoint a new leadership for the advocates of Divine faith. This new leadership is in fact this final message, the messenger delivering it and the Muslim community that follows the straight course defined by God. The first reference to this objective is made at the outset: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It thus makes it clear that it is God who reveals all messages to all messengers. This final message is a clear progression of something that has long been established.

The second reference follows shortly after that to establish the centre of the new leadership to which reference will be later made: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The third reference states the unity of the message whereas the first reference identified the unity of its source: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) In this third reference, the *sūrah* clearly states that division occurred because people disobeyed God's injunction. This did not come about as a result of any ignorance on the part of the followers of those noble messengers; they had the knowledge to spare them such division. It simply occurred as a result of injustice and envy: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then moves on to describe the conditions of those who came after the generations that differed: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

At this point it becomes abundantly clear that humanity had sunk into a state of confusion and doubt. It no longer had a wise leadership following a well-defined code. The Divine message that assumes the

leadership of humanity suffered from the division that took place between its followers, while succeeding generations viewed it with profound suspicion, thereby precluding the emergence of wise leadership. The *sūrah* therefore declares that this final message and the messenger delivering it are to assume the role of leadership: "*Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15) Thus the detailed description of the Muslim community, which occurs in the second part of the *sūrah*, comes as a natural progression, because it is this community that will assume the leadership of humanity.



I

A Message Revealed by God

Al-Shūrā (Consultation)



In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حمٓ ﴿١﴾

ʿAyn. Sīn. Qāf. (2)

عٓسٓقٓ ﴿٢﴾

Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you. (3)

كَذَٰلِكَ يُوحِيٓ إِلَيْكَ وَإِلَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣﴾

His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One. (4)

لَّهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَلِىُّ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٤﴾

The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory

تَكَادُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتُ يَتَفَطَّرْنَ مِن فَوْقِهِنَّ ۚ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يُسَبِّحُونَ

and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (5)

بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِمَن
فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ
الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them. (6)

وَالَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِن دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ
اللَّهُ حَفِيظٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَمَا أَنتَ عَلَيْهِم
بِوَكِيلٍ ﴿٦﴾

So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. (7)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا
لِّتُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا
وَتُنذِرَ يَوْمَ الْجَمْعِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ ۚ فَرِيقٌ
فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ فِي السَّعِيرِ ﴿٧﴾

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (8)

وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَهُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَٰكِن
يُدْخِلُ مَن يَشَاءُ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ ۚ وَالظَّالِمُونَ
مَا لَهُم مِّن وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٨﴾

Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things. (9)

أَمِ اتَّخَذُوا مِن دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ ۖ فَاللَّهُ هُوَ
الْوَلِيُّ وَهُوَ يُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ
شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٩﴾

وَمَا اخْتَلَفْتُمْ فِيهِ مِن شَيْءٍ فَحُكْمُهُ
إِلَى اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبِّي عَلَيْهِ
تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ ﴿١٠﴾

Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. (10)

فَاطِرُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ جَعَلَ لَكُم
مِّنْ أَنفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَمِنَ الْأَنْعَامِ
أَزْوَاجًا ۖ يَذْرَؤُكُمْ فِيهِ ۚ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ
شَيْءٌ ۖ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿١١﴾

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. (11)

لَهُ مَقَالِيدُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ
يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ ۚ
إِنَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything. (12)

شَرَعَ لَكُم مِّنَ الدِّينِ مَا وَصَّىٰ بِهِ نُوحًا
وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِ
إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ ۖ أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ
وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ ۚ كَبُرَ عَلَى الْمُشْرِكِينَ
مَا تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَيْهِ ۚ اللَّهُ يَجْتَبِي إِلَيْهِ مَن
يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي إِلَيْهِ مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. (13)

وَمَا تَفَرَّقُوٓا۟ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْعِلْمُ بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِن رَّبِّكَ إِلَىٰٓ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى لَّقُضِىَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ أُورِثُوا۟ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِنۢ بَعْدِهِمْ لَفِى شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿١٤﴾

They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (14)

فَلِذَٰلِكَ فَٱدْعُ ۖ وَٱسْتَقِمْ كَمَآ أُمِرْتَ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَهُمْ ۖ وَقُلْ ءَامَنتُ بِمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِن كِتَٰبٍ ۖ وَأُمِرْتُ لِأَعْدِلَ بَيْنَكُمُ ۖ ٱللَّهُ رَبُّنَا وَرَبُّكُمْ ۖ لَنَآ أَعْمَٰلُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلُكُمْ ۖ لَا حُجَّةَ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ ۖ ٱللَّهُ يَجْمَعُ بَيْنَنَا ۖ وَإِلَيْهِ ٱلْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٥﴾

Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.' (15)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُحَآجُّونَ فِى ٱللَّهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا ٱسْتُجِيبَ لَهُۥ حُجَّتُهُمْ دَاحِضَةٌ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ وَعَلَيْهِمْ غَضَبٌ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿١٦﴾

As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them. (16)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنزَلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ وَالْمِيزَانَ ۗ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّ السَّاعَةَ قَرِيبٌ ﴿١٧﴾

It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. (17)

يَسْتَعْجِلُ بِهَا الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهَا ۖ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مُشْفِقُونَ مِنْهَا وَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهَا الْحَقُّ ۗ أَلَا إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُمَارُونَ فِي السَّاعَةِ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. (18)

اللَّهُ لَطِيفٌ بِعِبَادِهِ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَاءُ ۖ وَهُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ ﴿١٩﴾

God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. (19)

مَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ الْآخِرَةِ نَزِدْ لَهُ فِي حَرْثِهِ ۖ وَمَن كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ الدُّنْيَا نُؤْتِهِ مِنْهَا وَمَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِن نَّصِيبٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come. (20)

أَمْ لَهُمْ شُرَكَاءُ شَرَعُوا لَهُم مِّنَ الدِّينِ مَا لَمْ يَأْذَن بِهِ اللَّهُ ۚ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةُ الْفَصْلِ لَقُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ الظَّالِمِينَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢١﴾

Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. (21)

تَرَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ
مِمَّا كَسَبُوا۟ وَهُوَ وَاقِعٌۢ
بِهِمْ ۗ وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ فِى رَوْضَاتِ
ٱلْجَنَّٰتِ ۖ لَهُم مَّا يَشَآءُونَ
عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَضْلُ
ٱلْكَبِيرُ ﴿٢٢﴾

You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. (22)

ذَٰلِكَ ٱلَّذِى يُبَشِّرُ ٱللَّهُ عِبَادَهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ ۗ قُل لَّآ أَسْـَٔلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ
أَجْرًا إِلَّا ٱلْمَوَدَّةَ فِى ٱلْقُرْبَىٰ ۗ وَمَن يَقْتَرِفْ
حَسَنَةً نَّزِدْ لَهُۥ فِيهَا حُسْنًا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ
شَكُورٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative. (23)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا ۖ فَإِن يَشَإِ
ٱللَّهُ يَخْتِمْ عَلَىٰ قَلْبِكَ ۗ وَيَمْحُ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْبَٰطِلَ
وَيُحِقُّ ٱلْحَقَّ بِكَلِمَٰتِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ عَلِيمٌۢ بِذَاتِ
ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿٢٤﴾

Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (24)

Angels Praying for Mankind

We talked previously about the separate letters that begin several *sūrahs*. Here we have five of these, followed by the verse saying: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Thus, in this way and following this pattern, God sent down His revelations to you and to messengers before you. It is made of words and phrases composed of those letters known to man. People know these words and phrases and grasp their meanings, but they cannot compose anything like it out of the letters they know so well.

At the same time, the unity of revelation is established. This comes from the same source as it is revealed by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Those who receive it are the messengers He sent across different generations. The message revealed is essentially the same, despite the fact that it was given to different recipients at different times. Thus we see the Divine message as a story beginning far back in ancient times, having numerous intertwined episodes, and following the same principles, like a mature tree graced with a large number of branches and firm, deep roots.

When this fact is well established in believers' hearts, they feel that their faith is well-founded, stable and authoritative. They are, thus, strongly attracted to the source of this revelation, who is 'God, the Almighty, the Wise.' They also value the bond between them and the believers who followed such revelations throughout all generations, since the family of believers goes far back in history, and they all turn ultimately to God. How can they abandon the straight path of the Divine message to take other, divergent ways that have unclear beginnings and lead nowhere?

The *sūrah* then adds other attributes belonging to God: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) People are often deluded, thinking that they own something of what they have in their hands; it appears to be at their disposal and they use it for their own benefit. Theirs, however, is not true ownership. The true owner is God who creates, brings to life and deals death. He alone can give people whatever He wishes, withhold,

take away or replace what He chooses. He is the One who determines the nature of everything and conducts this in accordance with the law He has chosen. Everything, then, complies with this law and behaves according to it. Every single thing in the universe, thus, belongs to God, who is the sole owner, without partners. He is the '*Most High, the Supreme One.*' His ownership is marked by His supremacy, making everything else appear lowly and inferior.

When this truth is well established in our minds, we know to whom we should turn to request what we wish for good things, provisions and earnings. Since He is the owner of the heavens and the earth, it is He who can decide what to give. Moreover, being '*the Most High, the Supreme*', He does not degrade or demean those who stretch out their hands requesting what they want from Him, as they would feel if they made their requests to other creatures. The *sūrah* then gives us an aspect of the significance of God's sole ownership of the universe and His supremacy. We see this in the heavens that are almost rent asunder, overawed as they are by God's greatness, when they realize that some earth dwellers deviate from the right way. We also see this in the angels' action as they glorify their Lord and pray to Him to forgive those who live on earth: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 5)

The 'heavens' are those creatures which we see above us wherever we are on earth and of which we know very little. We now know that these heavens include at least one hundred million galaxies, every one of which includes one hundred million stars like our sun which is larger than our earth by at least a million times. These galaxies, which humans have managed to establish with their telescopes, are scattered in space, with large distances between them, amounting to hundreds of thousands of light years. Yet these very heavens are almost rent asunder from above, fearing God, the Supreme, because some people on earth overlook His supremacy which the rest of the universe feels with a clear sense of awe.

"*The angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth.*" (Verse 5) The angels are creatures

whose obedience to God is absolute. Hence, they should be the most reassured of all creatures. Yet they never cease to extol God's praise because they feel His total supremacy and fear that they may fall short in extolling His glory. By contrast, humans, the earth dwellers, reject and deviate. Hence, the angels fear that God's anger may, thus, be incurred and they begin to pray to Him to forgive the people of earth for the sins they perpetrate. The verse may also refer to the angels praying for the forgiveness of believers, as stated in *Sūrah* 40, the Forgiving One: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers.*" (40: 7) We see here how the angels dread that any act of disobedience is committed on earth, even by believers. They pray to God for forgiveness, knowing that He is surely '*Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*' (Verse 5)

This opening of the *sūrah* ends with a reference to those who take for themselves protectors other than God, when it has become clear that no one else in the universe can give any protection. In this way, He makes it clear to His messenger that he is not responsible for them. It is God who watches over them and He will deal with them as He likes: "*As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verse 6)

Those miserable people who seek protection with beings other than God, are like those who clutch nothing but thin air. They hold nothing in their hands. Little as they and their alleged protectors are, they appear to us weak and insignificant as they are subject to God's power. The Prophet, and the believers with him, need not think or worry about them. God will make His own decision about them.

This truth must be well established in the hearts of all believers so that they are reassured, and this whether the unbelievers appear to wield power on earth or not. No matter how arrogant and tyrannical the ones wielding power are, they remain insignificant as long as they do not derive their power from God, and as long as God watches over them and encompasses them with His might. The whole universe around them believes in God and they alone are the ones who deviate, just like an odd beat in a beautiful symphony. From another point of view, the believers are reassured as they learn that they are not held in

any way responsible for anyone who turns away and deviates. Their only task is to give sincere and sound counsel. It is God who ultimately holds people's hearts in His hand. With such reassurance, the believers can continue along their way, caring nothing for the unbelievers and their deviation.

The Mother City

> *So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things.* (Verses 7–9)

Here we are back with the truth stated at the beginning, with this new aspect of the truth of revelation now closely intertwined. There is a clear link between the separate letters the *sūrah* begins with and the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed in Arabic. These letters constitute part of the Arabic alphabet, and the Qur'ān delivers its message in Arabic, for a particular purpose: "*in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The Mother City is Makkah, which is honoured by the presence of God's Sacred House, the first ever built for worship. God has chosen that this Mother City and its surroundings should be the place where His final message is revealed, expressing the Qur'ān in its Arabic tongue, for His particular purpose: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

When we look today, with hindsight, reviewing events and circumstances, studying the line the message has followed to produce its results, we can partly understand God's wisdom behind the choice of this particular spot on earth, at that particular time, to be the base

of the final message addressed to all mankind. Its universal nature was made clear from its early days.

At the advent of this final Divine message, the earth was more or less divided between four empires: the Byzantine Empire, which stretched from Europe over some parts of Asia and Africa; the Persian Empire, which ruled large parts of Asia and some African areas; and also the Indian and Chinese Empires. The latter two were confined to their areas, each having its own faith and limited political relations outside of their territories. This isolation made the first two the real superpowers, which enjoyed far reaching influence over human life and its development. The two Divine religions, Judaism and Christianity, were in one way or another under the influence of these two empires, and were effectively controlled by the then political authorities controlling them. Hence, both religions suffered distortion.

Judaism in particular suffered persecution under the Byzantines at one stage and under the Persians at another. It had practically no power on earth. Several factors contributed to its becoming confined to the Children of Israel, with neither ambition nor desire to attract other communities.

Christianity, on the other hand, was born within the Byzantine Empire which ruled Palestine, Syria and Egypt where Christianity spread secretly. The Byzantine authorities launched a wicked persecution campaign against the Christian faith leading to massacres that claimed the lives of tens of thousands. When this decimation ended with the conversion of a Byzantine emperor to Christianity, he brought with him pagan Byzantine legends and Greek philosophy, which was also pagan in nature. These imparted an alien colour to Christianity, turning it into something totally different from its original Divine revelation. Moreover, political power in Byzantium continued to wield the real authority, allowing religion only a minor influence. In addition, the different Christian schools were at loggerheads with one another, thereby weakening the Church and threatening to engulf the whole empire in acrimony. In turn, this also led to further persecution of those who dissented from the official doctrine. Yet both parties, those who toed the official line and those who dissented from it, deviated from true Christianity.

The Arabian Environment

At this juncture, Islam was revealed. It was a message that aimed to save humanity from the corruption, persecution, immorality and blind ignorance that had spread into all populated areas. It aimed to lead humanity on a way to God, providing light and guidance. Hence, it was necessary that Islam should have power and authority in order to accomplish the great transformation in human life that was required. It was imperative, therefore, that Islam start its operation in a free land, over which none of those empires had any control, so as not to let any power that was alien to its nature influence it. On the contrary, it was necessary that Islam have the power to shape its own domain and to influence its own surroundings. The Arabian Peninsula, especially the Mother City and its neighbouring areas, provided the best place on earth for the emergence of Islam and from where it would start its global march.

There was no established government with laws, legislation, an army, a police force or complete authority in Arabia, ensuring proper control over its population as was the case in the empires we have described. Moreover, Arabia did not have a clear and well-defined religion. Indeed, the opposite was true: in Arabia there was a medley of pagan beliefs. People worshipped a great variety of deities, including angels, *jinn*, stars and idols. Although the Ka'bah and the Quraysh enjoyed some overall religious hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula, this did not constitute a real authority that could mount firm opposition to the new faith. Had it not been for their economic interests and special position, the Quraysh chiefs would not have opposed Islam as solidly as they actually did. They realized how hollow and confused their beliefs were. In this way, then, the loose and weak political and religious systems in Arabia provided the best environment for the emergence of the new Islamic faith, one where it could not be influenced by any real authority alien to its nature.

Moreover, Arabia's unique social make-up provided a measure of protection for this new message. The Arabian system was tribal, where each clan had its weight and position. When Muḥammad (peace be upon him) started preaching Islam, his Hāshimite clan provided him with protection, and the general tribal balance provided him with a

good opportunity to go about his task. Other clans did not wish to fight against the Hāshimite clan realizing that the majority of its people did not follow Muḥammad's faith. Indeed, the clans were very reluctant to assault any individual Muslim who had real clan affiliation. They left the task of punishing such individuals to their own families. Indeed, those weaker elements and slaves who embraced the faith were tortured by their own masters. Therefore, Abū Bakr used to buy such slaves and free them, thus making them immune to such persecution. Needless to say, this situation provided the new faith with a particularly suitable environment to establish itself. Furthermore, the qualities of the Arabs, including their bravery, warm-heartedness, pride and sense of honour stood them in good stead and qualified them to be the bearers of this new message.

At the time, the Arabian Peninsula benefited from a suitably fertile soil to support a general renaissance. It had people with various abilities and potentials ready to serve such a development as and when it started. Experience had been accumulated as a result of trips to the nearest areas within the Byzantine and Persian Empires. The most notable of these trips were the winter one to the south and the summer one to the north. These are mentioned in the Qur'ān: "*For the tradition of the Quraysh, their tradition of travelling in winter and summer. Let them worship the Lord of this House, who provided them with food against hunger, and with security against fear.*" (106: 4) Many other circumstances helped to build a great wealth of experience which was coupled with a natural readiness to receive the great task assigned to Arabia, making it the birthplace of God's final message to mankind. When Islam began to be revealed, it made use of this wealth of experience and utilized all latent potential. It was thus able to tap the readily available Arabian resources to serve its message. Perhaps this explains the presence of a large number of great men among the Prophet's Companions such as Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Alī, Ḥamzah, al-'Abbās, Abū 'Ubaydah, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Khālid ibn al-Walīd, Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh, Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī and many others who warmed to Islam and embraced it. No doubt all these people were able to rise to a far higher standard under Islam, but they had the potential to so rise in the first place.

The Division of Mankind

Thus the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic to warn the Mother City and its surrounding area. When the Arabian Peninsula moved out of ignorance into Islam and became totally Muslim, it carried the banner of Islam, moving with it to the East and to the West. These Muslims presented Islam and the human system based on it to the world, since, by nature, this message is addressed to all humanity. They were the best and most suitable people to advocate it, stemming as it did from the most suitable place for its birth and growth.

It was by God's design that the Prophet lived until Arabia, with all its population, embraced Islam. The land chosen to be the cradle of Islam now permanently adopted the full colours of the new faith. Likewise, the language to express it and deliver it to the world was clearly chosen. Arabic had by that time achieved full maturity so as to be most suitable for delivering God's message to all corners of the world. Had Arabic been a deficient or immature language, it would not have been able to embody the message in the first place, or to deliver it to people outside Arabia. In short, the language, the people and the environment were all the best suited for this great universal event. Thus, wherever we look in our attempt to understand God's purpose, wisdom and choice, we find a long list of positive factors converging together to provide the new message with the conditions most suited for its welcome. This confirms God's statement: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

> *So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.* (Verse 7)

The hardest, most fundamental and often repeated warning in the Qur'ān is that concerning the Day of Gathering, when God will gather together all creatures from all generations and places, prior to dividing them into two groups according to what they did during their life on earth, the place where people choose what to do: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7)

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (Verse 8)

God could, if He wished, create people in a different form so as to make their behaviour and actions uniform. Had He done so, their end would have been the same and they would all go either to heaven or to hell. However, in His limitless glory, God created man for a purpose, assigning to him the task of building human life on earth. In order for this task to be accomplished He made it necessary for man to have special qualities distinguishing him from both angels and devils, as also from all types of creation with a nature of singular direction. In this respect, then, He gave man qualities and abilities which make some people lean towards guidance, light and good action, while others lean towards error, darkness and evil action. Each group follows one of these two susceptibilities inherent in human nature, leading them to the end determined for the type of action they choose: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) Thus God will "*admit to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) His decisions are based on His knowledge of the conditions of both parties and whether they follow guidance and thus deserve His grace or go astray and thus deserve His punishment.

It has already been mentioned that some people take protectors for themselves other than God. Now, the *sūrah* makes it clear that "*the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) The fact is that their alleged protectors do not exist.

Again, the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Have they chosen protectors other than Him?*" (Verse 9) It follows this rhetorical question with a statement making it clear that God is the only protector who is able to do everything. His power is clearly seen in the fact that He brings the dead back to life. This is indeed the action which shows His unique power at its most splendid: "*God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead.*" (Verse 9) His power is then stated to be total and to extend over all beings, with no limits whatsoever: "*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Who Judges in Disputes?

The *sūrah* returns to the central issue, identifying the ultimate point of reference in judging any dispute. It is this new revelation from God, containing His judgement. This ensures that changeable personal preferences and fleeting desires cannot influence life under the Divine code that admits no prejudice:

> *Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything.* (Verses 10–12)

These verses express a number of facts, but the way these are stated and their sequence and juxtaposition in this short passage is truly remarkable, requiring proper reflection. Upon such reflection, the interlinking between their inner and outer aspects is both subtle and precise. Everything over which dispute arises between people should be judged by God: "*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God.*" (Verse 10) God has made His judgement clear in this Qur'ān, stating His final word concerning this life and the life to come. He also established the code of living which people should follow in their personal and community lives, in their dealings among themselves, their system of government and their moral values and manners. He has made all this abundantly clear, making the Qur'ān a comprehensive constitution for human life, with a scope that is broader than their own constitutions. Therefore, should dispute arise between them, the right judgement is ready for them, outlined in His revelation delivered to them by His messenger.

When this truth has been established, the verse quotes the Prophet's statement whereby he clearly submits himself and all his affairs to God,

turning to Him in all situations: "*Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn.*" (Verse 10) Thus, the Prophet's statement that he turns to God, places all his trust in Him and relies on Him in all situations, occurs at the most suitable point, serving as it does as a comment on the preceding rule. When God's messenger who receives guidance from God declares his attitude in these terms, how can other people refer their disputes to anyone else or place their trust in other beings? Knowing that God is his Lord who provides everything for him and guides him to what is best, the Prophet makes his choice, turning to Him alone. How can others make a different choice?

When this is established in a believer's heart, he sees his way ahead, clearly defined and well enlightened. He does not look for any other way. He is confident, reassured, knowing where to go. He entertains no doubt because he knows that God takes care of him and protects him. Moreover, he attaches a high value to his system which he derives from God's revelations, clear in his mind that no system can be superior to God's word.

A further comment is then made to consolidate this truth: "*He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 11) The One who revealed the Qur'ān to provide final judgement on all people's disputes is "*the Originator of the heavens and the earth,*" who controls them. The law that governs the heavens and the earth is His final judgement on all that concerns them. Human life is only a part of what takes place in the heavens and the earth. Therefore, His judgement on human matters ensures harmony between human life and the life of the great universe.

God, to whose judgement they should refer all their disputes, is the One who created them and moulded their souls: "*He made mates for you from among yourselves.*" (Verse 11) Thus He designed your life giving it its very foundation. He knows what is best for you and what suits your life, putting it in harmony with the rest of His creation: "*just as He made mates for animals.*" (Verse 11) This unity in biological

form confirms the unity of will and design. Hence, people and animals multiply and procreate in the same natural process. By contrast, He is alone in the way He is, with no comparability to anything or anyone: "*Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him.*" (Verse 11) Human nature accepts this without hesitation. The Creator of all cannot be compared to anything He creates. Therefore, His creatures refer to Him when they differ. They cannot refer to anyone else alongside Him because nothing is comparable to Him.

Although God, in His limitless glory, is beyond comparability with anyone or anything, contact between Him and His creation is not severed. On the contrary, "*He alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 11) His judgement is that of the One who knows, hears and sees.

Given that He makes His judgement final in all people's disputes, this can only mean that this rule is based on the fact that having originated the heavens and the earth and set their laws in operation, He continues to hold their keys: "*His are the keys of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 12) Since mankind are only part of what lives in the heavens and earth, the same fact applies to them, which means that the keys and treasures of the universe belong to God. Moreover, it is He who provides them with sustenance, determining its measure in the same way as He conducts all affairs: "*He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills.*" (Verse 12) It is He who gives them the food they eat and the water they drink, providing everything they need in their lives. Can they, then, refer to anyone else for judgement in their affairs? It is the most natural procedure for people to turn to the One who controls all this according to His perfect knowledge: "*He has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 12) Needless to say, the One who knows everything is the One who can make a final judgement in all fairness.

This is just one example of how the meanings of the component parts of the *sūrah*'s verses converge in complete harmony and perfect subtlety to work on the human heart. It is akin to the harmonious tones that combine to make a superb melody.

The Same Faith of Old

Once more the *sūrah* addresses its central theme:

> *In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.* (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* began with a general reference to the unity of the source of all Divine faiths: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Now it gives more details of this fact, pointing out that the legislation God has enacted for Muslims is, in essence, the same as He legislated for Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, requiring them all to establish the Divine faith and not to split into factions over it. This requires that they, in turn, steadfastly pursue the Divine code of living, paying no heed to the desires of those who fall into dispute. This Divine faith is thus meant to govern human life, while those who argue about God have no leg to stand on. They are the ones who are warned of the painful punishment they might incur.

This passage enjoys the same level of perfect harmony as the preceding one: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had*

enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.'" (Verse 13) Thus the *sūrah* confirms the truth we explained at its very outset: God is the source of all Divine religions, starting far back in history. A little touch is added here which has a pleasant, subtle effect on every believer. He or she looks out to see who were their predecessors on this long line only to find that they were those noble elite: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be on them all). Every believer then realizes that he has joined their procession, travelling the same way they travelled. He will then enjoy his journey along that way, no matter how much trouble, persecution or deprivation he suffers. Who would not put up with trouble, knowing that it is only transient, when he is assured of the company of such an elite nobility?

Moreover, there is a profound sense of peace between believers in the one Divine faith who implement His law. No conflict or dispute arises between them. They feel their strong bond urging them to collaborate and understand each other so that they can maintain the link between present and past.

Since the religion God ordained for the Muslims who believe in Muḥammad is the same as He enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, why do the followers of Moses and Jesus fight against each other? Indeed, what causes fighting between the followers of different Christian sects? Why do the followers of Moses and Jesus go to war against the followers of Muḥammad? And why do those idolaters who claim to follow Abraham's faith wage a war against Muslims? Should not all these group together under the one banner hoisted by God's last messenger? The same order was issued to them all: "*Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) Only when they unite under this banner do they uphold the faith, fulfil its duties, maintain its path and work under the same banner hoisted high in succession by Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus until it was eventually carried by Muḥammad, who received the final testament.

The idolater Arabs in the Mother City and its surrounding area, who claimed to follow Abraham's faith, adopted a different stance towards the new faith: "*Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on*

them to accept." (Verse 13) They found it hard that revelation should be vouchsafed to Muḥammad, when they wanted it to be given to a person of high position and authority among them. Muḥammad's personal qualities of unblemished honesty and perfect reliability, which they readily acknowledged, and his lineage descending from the noblest family among them, did not match, in their view, the status of a tribal chief who exercised power in his tribe. In short, it was far too difficult for them to accept that their own religious authority, founded on paganism and its legends, had come to an end. They realized that its ending threatened the economic and personal interests that such authority had given them. Hence they held on to their pagan beliefs, refusing to accept the message of God's oneness advocated by His noble messenger. Similarly difficult for them was that they were told that their idolatrous ancestors were in error. Therefore, they maintained their folly choosing to cast themselves in hell rather than acknowledge the truth.

The *sūrah* comments on their attitude stating that God chooses whom He wills and guides everyone who wishes to follow His guidance: "*God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him.*" (Verse 13) He drew Muḥammad to Himself and chose him to deliver His message. He always leaves the way wide open for anyone who turns to Him and seeks His guidance.

Division in Religion

Again the *sūrah* speaks of the followers of earlier messengers who divided into sects and groups although the messengers preached the same faith: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14) Their divisions did not come about as a result of ignorance, or because they did not know the single source that grouped their messengers and faiths together. They divided after knowledge was given to them. This division was caused by selfish rivalry and mutual envy. Thus, they were not only unjust to the truth but also to themselves. There was no

single reason based on the true faith for their division. Had they been true to their faith, they would have remained united.

They deserved to be immediately taken to task in requital for their division and deviation, but God, in His wisdom, had already ordained to allow them time, up to a specified point only He knows: "*Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 14) Thus, the truth is established and falsehood is seen in its true guise. Matters are settled in this present life, but judgement is deferred until the Day of Resurrection. The generations that came after the division that split the followers of every one of God's messengers received the faith and the Divine book uncertain of its truth. Division, then, had allowed doubt and confusion to creep in, making people unable to determine which of the numerous doctrines and groups was right: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

Faith cannot be taken in this way. Faith is the solid rock on which a believer stands ensuring that he remains steadfast in his beliefs, even when the whole world around him is shaking hard. Faith is his guiding star that assures him of his way when different forces try to pull him in opposite directions. When faith itself becomes subject to such strong doubts, nothing remains certain in man's mind. He cannot be sure which way to take and which course to follow. Reassurance is no longer available to him. God revealed the Divine faith so that those who follow it would know the way that leads them to Him and ensures His pleasure. In turn, they too would be able to lead other people along the right way, unaffected by doubt or uncertainty. When they themselves become immersed in doubt, however, they cannot lead anyone anywhere.

Such was the state the followers of earlier prophets were in at the time Islam was revealed. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, an eminent Indian scholar, writes:

> Great religions became playthings in the hands of debased clergymen who corrupted and twisted them beyond recognition, so much so that, if it were possible for their founders to return to the physical life, they would not have recognized them.

As a result of the moral debasement of the great centres of civilization and general disorder and unrest, people everywhere became entangled in their internal problems. They had no message to offer to the world. The world had become hollow from within; its life-springs had dried up. It possessed neither the light of religious guidance for personal conduct, nor any abiding and rational principle for running a state.[1]

Additionally, J.H. Denison, a European author, writes:

In the fifth and sixth centuries the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place...

It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. *The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate.* The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core...

It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south... Mohammed...[2]

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1. Nadwī, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, p. 2.

2. Denison, J.H., *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, New York and London, 1928, pp. 265–269.

– This quotation runs in the Arabic text as one continuous paragraph. Apparently the author used an Arabic translation which was an abridged one, with some difference of emphasis in places. The italicized sentence is omitted in the Arabic text, but it was felt necessary to include it here in order not to affect the author's flow. – Editor's note.

It is because of such divisions among the followers of earlier messengers and the doubts engulfing their subsequent generations, and because the leadership of mankind was in desperate need of someone who was certain of the way to God, that the last messenger, Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), was sent to all mankind. God commanded him to deliver His message, holding firm to it, paying no heed to the conflicting creeds around him. He was to announce the rebirth of the Divine faith embodied in the one message that God gave to all prophets:

> *Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.* (Verse 15)

This is a new leadership for all mankind; a strong leadership, sure of its way and firm in its beliefs. It advocates its message equipped with true insight, and follows God's orders without deviation, steering away from all conflicting forces. This new leadership of mankind declares that the Divine message is one and the way to which it guides people is the same. Thus, all Divine faith comes from one source and mankind must turn to that source only: "*Say: I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high.*" (Verse 15) Its constitution and policy is based on truth and justice: "*I am commanded to ensure justice between you.*" (Verse 15) This new leadership has definite authority enabling it to declare justice among all mankind even at the time when it was confined to the narrow valleys of Makkah, where its followers suffered unrelenting persecution. Yet its authority was clear to all. It clearly announces that: (1) the Lord of the universe is the One Lord: "*God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15); (2) everyone is responsible for their own actions: "*To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds.*" (Verse 15); (3) all argument is ended as God's final word is given: "*Let there be no argument between us and you.*" (Verse 15); and

(4) all affairs are left to God for His final judgement: "*God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.*" (Verse 15)

This single verse with short, clear and decisive statements describes the nature of this last message in all its clarity. It is a message that means to follow its own way, unaffected by people's desires. It aims to extend its authority so as to ensure justice between all people. Its objective is to show the one way leading to God since it is the only way defined by all messages.

As the issues have thus been clarified and the community of believers have assuredly responded to God's message, the argument of those still disputing about God appears to be both singular and trivial, lacking basis and weight. A final word is stated about them making clear that they will have to face the punishment they have been warned against: "*As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 16) Whoever posits an argument that is null and void in God's sight has nothing to offer. Not only are his arguments proven false in this life, but in the life to come he will incur God's anger and face severe punishment for persisting with such falsehood.

Hastening the Last Hour

Yet another round is started to drive the central theme of the *sūrah* home to us:

> *It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.* (Verses 17–20)

It is God who revealed His book to set forth the truth, and it is He who ordained justice, making His book the criterion to judge in all disputes among the followers of earlier religions, as also in all disputes that arise between people. He based all His laws on true and accurate justice, which is comparable to a balance that weighs values, rights and actions. The same verse also mentions the Last Hour, which is a frequent Qur'ānic reference to the Day of Judgement. Its mention is appropriate because it is the time set for the final judgement based on absolute justice. The Last Hour belongs to the realm that is beyond the reach of human perception. Hence, no one can be sure of when it is due: "*For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near.*" (Verse 17) People prefer to ignore it when it is close to them. It will inevitably bring them to the fair reckoning which takes every little detail into account, overlooking nothing.

The *sūrah* describes the different attitudes of people concerning the Last Hour: "*Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth.*" (Verse 18) The ones who do not believe in it neither feel its seriousness nor understand what awaits them when it comes. Hence, it is no wonder that they take a frivolous attitude asking for it to be hastened. In contrast, the believers are certain of it and, as a result, they shudder as they think about it, dreading its outcome. They know what it is like when it finally comes. They also know it to be the truth, for they have always had their bond with the truth. Whereas, "*those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray.*" (Verse 18) Having gone far astray, it is difficult for them to turn back.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the sustenance God, out of His grace, provides for all people. "*God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty.*" (Verse 19) The link between this verse and the previous one speaking about the Last Hour and the different attitudes people take towards it seems unclear. However, it becomes very apparent when we read the next verse: "*To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.*" (Verse 20)

God provides for all His servants, the good and the bad, the believer and the unbeliever. People are too weak to be able to provide for themselves. God has brought them into life and given them what meets their basic needs. Had He chosen not to provide for the unbelievers and the wrongdoers, they would not have had anything and would have died of thirst and hunger. Had this been the scenario, God's purpose of giving them life and allowing them a chance to do what may be counted for or against them would not have been fulfilled. Therefore, He attached the question of provisions to different factors related to life situations and personal abilities. He made it part of the test people undergo in this life and the result of which is known only in the life to come. Thus, it has nothing to do with belief or unbelief, goodness of character or personality.

Furthermore, God has made both this life and the life to come as a harvest for people, and they choose the type of harvest they want. A person who wants to have the harvest of the life to come will work to achieve this. God will help such people because of what they intend and bless their work. They will not only have their harvest in the life to come, but will also have whatever God has apportioned to them of provisions in this life. They will lose nothing of it. On the contrary, their provisions in this world may be, in as far as they are concerned, the means to achieve their harvest in the life to come. Such people use what God provides for them, investing, enjoying and spending it only in ways that are acceptable to, and please Him. By contrast, those who desire only a harvest in this life will have the provisions God has allocated for them, denying them nothing of this, but they will have nothing in the life to come. They do not work for such a harvest, and as a result, they receive nothing.

A glance at each group is sufficient to expose the folly of the one who desires only their harvest in this life. God grants both groups the provisions they will have in this life as He has determined. No one will miss out on any of it. What is achieved in the life to come is that which people actually desire and work for.

Among those who work only for the harvest of this life we find some who are rich and some who are poor, according to their means of earning a livelihood. Such means are interlinked with general

situations, local circumstances and personal abilities. The same applies in equal measure to those who desire a harvest in the life to come. There is absolutely no difference between the two groups in this present life concerning their livelihood. The difference, however, will be obvious in the life to come. So what folly makes anyone abandon the harvest of the life to come, when this will not change his lot in this life even by a small measure?

Ultimately, the matter is determined by the truth and the balance established by the book God has revealed. Truth and justice are evidently seen in providing sustenance for all people, and all living things, as also in increasing the harvest of the life to come or denying the same to those who desire only this present life.

Fearing One's Deeds

The basic truth providing the central theme of the *sūrah* again comes in for further discussion:

> *Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.* (Verses 21–23)

The *sūrah* earlier stated that what God has legislated for the Muslim community is the same as He had enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. In other words, all this is embodied in what God revealed to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). At this point, the *sūrah* employs a rhetorical question addressing the unbelievers' beliefs and practices:

essentially, these are contrary to what God has ordained in His messages, so who ordained the same for the unbelievers, without God's sanction?

"*Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned?*" (Verse 21) None of God's creatures may legislate anything that is at variance with what He legislates. It is God alone who legislates for all His creation. It is He who has created the universe and conducts its affairs through natural laws He has set in operation. Human life is merely a small gear in the great cog of the universe. Therefore, its law should be consistent with the laws governing the universe and its operation. This can only be achieved when the law of human life is enacted by the One who has full knowledge of universal law. No one other than God has such knowledge. Hence, no one can be entrusted with the task of legislating for human life.

Although the logic of this fact is abundantly clear, still there are many who dispute it or who are not convinced of its truth. They dare to enact laws and legislation that are at variance with God's law, claiming that they are only choosing what is good for their peoples, ensuring that their laws fit their specific circumstances. In doing so they suggest that they know better than God and are wiser than Him. The only other justification they put forward is that they believe in some beings whom they allege to be God's partners, and that it is these who enact laws for them that are not sanctioned by God. There can be no greater folly than such impudence.

God has enacted for mankind laws that He knows to be in harmony with their nature on the one hand and with the nature of the universe they live in on the other. Thus, His law ensures the maximum cooperation and harmony among mankind as also with universal powers. In all this, He has put in place basic principles. He has left it for people to enact legislation concerning the details that suit their needs according to their level of development, provided that such legislation remains within the framework of the principles He has laid down. Should people differ over something in this regard, they should refer the matter to God and the balance He has established through these principles. People must make sure that every detailed law they enact fits with this balance. In this way, the source of legislation remains one and the ultimate word remains God's. He is indeed the best of all judges. Anything that differs with this constitutes deviation from God's

law and the religion He ordained for Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all).

"*Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 21) God has made His decree to defer judgement to the final day. Had he not decreed such deferment, He would have made His judgement now, punishing those who deviate from His law. However, He postpones this to the Day of Judgement when "*painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 21) Such suffering is in requital for their wrongdoing. Can there be anything more erroneous than choosing man-made laws in preference to God's law?

Those wrongdoers are shown as they will be on the Day of Judgement, afraid of what will happen to them. During their lives on earth, however, they entertained no such fear. On the contrary, they ridiculed the reckoning and asked for it to be hastened: "*You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them.*" (Verse 22) In the Arabic original they are described as 'full of fear for what they have done', as if their deeds are some fearful beast. Yet they performed these deeds with their own hands, enjoying their actions. Still, when they face these same deeds they are full of fear, realizing that they are '*bound to fall back on them,*' as though the deeds themselves are transformed into a punishment they cannot avoid.

Conversely, we see the believers who used to be in awe of what would happen on that day now feeling safe, reassured, enjoying what God grants them: "*And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds.*" (Verses 22–23) The whole image is one of bliss and happiness. Those believers are '*in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise*', where they will have '*whatever they wish from their Lord.*' There is no limit to His bounty, which is indeed supreme. This is, then, the good news that God gives to His righteous servants. It is good news that is shown to be ready, immediate, confirming the earlier promise of good things to come.

With such a pleasant image imparting an air of relaxed enjoyment, the Prophet is instructed to say to them that he seeks no reward from

them for the guidance he gives them, leading them to such lasting bliss and sparing them the painful suffering. He only gives them such guidance because he loves them; they are his kinsfolk. This is enough reward for him: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin. Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

The Prophet enjoyed relations with every single clan of the Quraysh tribe. Hence, he was keen that they should take up the guidance he was giving because it would bring them endless benefit. His motivation in all this was the affection he had for them as his kindred. He considered this as sufficient reward for his efforts.

This, then, is the meaning that sparked in my mind whenever I read this Qur'ānic expression about the Prophet's reward being merely an act of affection he does to his kinsfolk. There is, however, a different interpretation of it which I will state here because it is included in the authentic *Ḥadīth* anthology of Imām al-Bukhārī. Ṭāwūs, a scholar from the *Tābi'īn* generation, asking 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās about this phrase. Another scholar, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, answered first saying: 'It refers to the relatives of the Prophet.' Ibn 'Abbās said: 'You have been too quick! The Prophet had relations among every clan of the Quraysh. Hence he said to them that all he asked for was that they should be kind to his own kinsfolk.'" According to this interpretation, the verse should be translated as: "*Say: No reward do I ask of you for this other than the affection due to kin.*" This means that they should stop causing him harm, which is something due one's relatives, and that they should listen to the guidance he gave them. This would be his reward from them. This interpretation by Ibn 'Abbās is closer to the verse's meaning than that of Sa'īd ibn Jubayr. However, I still feel that the interpretation I suggested is closer to the point. God knows best the meanings of His words.

Thus, within the context of the gardens of paradise and the good news he gives them, the Prophet reminds them that he asks no reward for anything he gives them. People normally demand hefty fees for advice that is well below what the Prophet gave his people. This is all part of God's grace. He does not deal with people according to principles of commerce, nor according to justice; instead He deals with them in accordance with the principles of grace and bounty: "*Whoever*

does good, We shall increase it for him." (Verse 23) It is not merely that the Prophet seeks no reward whatsoever from people; they are further promised increase in their reward for good deeds. In addition, they shall have forgiveness and their deeds will be appreciated: "*God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

God's Word of Truth

Once more the *sūrah* refers to the basic fact behind its central theme:

> *Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.* (Verse 24)

This verse tackles the last excuse the unbelievers offer to justify their attitude to revelation: "*Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?'*" (Verse 24) Is this why they do not believe the Prophet, claiming that God has not revealed anything to him? Such a claim is invalid. God would not allow anyone to fabricate lies about Him, claiming to receive revelations from Him when he does not, without taking that person to task. He is easily able to seal such a person's heart rendering him incapable of saying anything like the Qur'ān. He is also able to expose the falsehood such a person says and establish the truth: "*If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words.*" (Verse 24) All Muḥammad's thoughts are known to God, even before Muḥammad (peace be upon him) expresses them: "*He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 24)

This last excuse is, thus, seen to be hollow and unfounded. Moreover, it is contrary to what is well established of God's knowledge of everyone's inner thoughts, His ability to accomplish what He wills and His law that remains in operation, establishing the truth and blotting out all falsehood. Thus, the revelation of the Qur'ān is truly from God, and what Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says is the truth. Claiming anything different from this is no more than a false allegation, one that is immersed in error.

2

God's Signs in the Created World

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يَقْبَلُ ٱلتَّوْبَةَ عَنْ عِبَادِهِۦ وَيَعْفُوا۟
عَنِ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and who pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. (25)

وَيَسْتَجِيبُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ وَيَزِيدُهُم مِّن فَضْلِهِۦ ۚ
وَٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. (26)

وَلَوْ بَسَطَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلرِّزْقَ لِعِبَادِهِۦ لَبَغَوْا۟ فِى
ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِن يُنَزِّلُ بِقَدَرٍ مَّا يَشَآءُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
بِعِبَادِهِۦ خَبِيرٌۢ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all. (27)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى يُنَزِّلُ ٱلْغَيْثَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ
مَا قَنَطُوا۟ وَيَنشُرُ رَحْمَتَهُۥ ۚ وَهُوَ
ٱلْوَلِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٨﴾

It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise. (28)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ خَلْقُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ
وَمَا بَثَّ فِيهِمَا مِن دَآبَّةٍ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ جَمْعِهِمْ
إِذَا يَشَآءُ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. (29)

وَمَآ أَصَٰبَكُم مِّن مُّصِيبَةٍ
فَبِمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَيَعْفُوا۟
عَن كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. (30)

وَمَآ أَنتُم بِمُعْجِزِينَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَمَا لَكُم
مِّن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مِن وَلِىٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٣١﴾

Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support. (31)

وَمِنْ ءَايَٰتِهِ ٱلْجَوَارِ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ كَٱلْأَعْلَٰمِ ﴿٣٢﴾

And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. (32)

إِن يَشَأْ يُسْكِنِ ٱلرِّيحَ فَيَظْلَلْنَ رَوَاكِدَ
عَلَىٰ ظَهْرِهِۦٓ ۚ إِنَّ فِى ذَٰلِكَ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّكُلِّ
صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; (33)

أَوْ يُوبِقْهُنَّ بِمَا كَسَبُوا۟ وَيَعْفُ
عَن كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. (34)

Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them. (35)

وَيَعْلَمَ ٱلَّذِينَ يُجَٰدِلُونَ فِىٓ ءَايَٰتِنَا
مَا لَهُم مِّن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; (36)

فَمَآ أُوتِيتُم مِّن شَىْءٍ فَمَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ
وَمَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; (37)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبَٰٓئِرَ ٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْفَوَٰحِشَ
وَإِذَا مَا غَضِبُوا۟ هُمْ يَغْفِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; (38)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ٱسْتَجَابُوا۟ لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا۟
ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا
رَزَقْنَٰهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. (39)

وَٱلَّذِينَ إِذَآ أَصَابَهُمُ ٱلْبَغْىُ هُمْ يَنتَصِرُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. (40)

وَجَزَٰٓؤُا۟ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِّثْلُهَا ۖ فَمَنْ
عَفَا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرُهُۥ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ
لَا يُحِبُّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

وَلَمَنِ انتَصَرَ بَعْدَ ظُلْمِهِۦ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ مَا عَلَيْهِم مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤١﴾

However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. (41)

إِنَّمَا ٱلسَّبِيلُ عَلَى ٱلَّذِينَ يَظْلِمُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ وَيَبْغُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. (42)

وَلَمَن صَبَرَ وَغَفَرَ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمِنْ عَزْمِ ٱلْأُمُورِ ﴿٤٣﴾

As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve. (43)

وَمَن يُضْلِلِ ٱللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُۥ مِن وَلِىٍّ مِّنۢ بَعْدِهِۦ ۗ وَتَرَى ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ لَمَّا رَأَوُا۟ ٱلْعَذَابَ يَقُولُونَ هَلْ إِلَىٰ مَرَدٍّ مِّن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' (44)

وَتَرَىٰهُمْ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا خَٰشِعِينَ مِنَ ٱلذُّلِّ يَنظُرُونَ مِن طَرْفٍ خَفِىٍّ ۗ وَقَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِنَّ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ ٱلَّذِينَ خَسِرُوٓا۟ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيهِمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ ۗ أَلَآ إِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ فِى عَذَابٍ مُّقِيمٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. (45)

No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward. (46)

وَمَا كَانَ لَهُم مِّنْ أَوْلِيَاءَ يَنصُرُونَهُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ ۗ وَمَن يُضْلِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِن سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٦﴾

Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. (47)

اسْتَجِيبُوا لِرَبِّكُم مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِيَ يَوْمٌ لَّا مَرَدَّ لَهُ مِنَ اللَّهِ ۚ مَا لَكُم مِّن مَّلْجَإٍ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن نَّكِيرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude. (48)

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا فَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا ۖ إِنْ عَلَيْكَ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ ۗ وَإِنَّا إِذَا أَذَقْنَا الْإِنسَانَ مِنَّا رَحْمَةً فَرِحَ بِهَا ۖ وَإِن تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَإِنَّ الْإِنسَانَ كَفُورٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; (49)

لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ يَخْلُقُ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ يَهَبُ لِمَن يَشَاءُ إِنَاثًا وَيَهَبُ لِمَن يَشَاءُ الذُّكُورَ ﴿٤٩﴾

أَوْ يُزَوِّجُهُمْ ذُكْرَانًا وَإِنَاثًا ۖ وَيَجْعَلُ مَن
يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is all-knowing, infinite in His power. (50)

وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَن يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا
أَوْ مِن وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا
فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ إِنَّهُ عَلِيٌّ
حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾

It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is Exalted, Wise. (51)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ رُوحًا مِّنْ أَمْرِنَا ۚ
مَا كُنتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَابُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ
وَلَٰكِن جَعَلْنَاهُ نُورًا نَّهْدِي بِهِ مَن نَّشَاءُ
مِنْ عِبَادِنَا ۚ وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ
مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, (52)

صِرَاطِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ
وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ أَلَا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَصِيرُ
الْأُمُورُ ﴿٥٣﴾

the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (53)

Overview

In this second part of the *sūrah*, the discussion continues to point to signs confirming the truth of faith within people's own selves and in the wide horizons. Further discussion is added about God's power and its evidence in people's surroundings and what affects their livelihood. The distinctive qualities of believers also come in for discussion. Towards the end of the *sūrah* we have further discussions on what the first part focused on, namely, revelation, its nature and how it is delivered. The two parts are closely linked, as both address the human heart and put the way to faith before us.

Affluence and People's Behaviour

> *It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all.* (Verses 25–27)

These verses follow immediately after the verses that show the wrongdoers dreading having to face what they have done given it will inevitably fall back on them. Those verses also painted an image of the believers as they revel in their rewards, secure in the flowering meadows of paradise. Moreover, those earlier verses confirmed what the Prophet delivered to them of God's message and stated that God is fully aware of what their hearts may harbour.

As this second part opens, it calls on people to turn to God and abandon their erroneous ways before a final judgement is passed on them. The door to repentance is left wide open. God Almighty accepts repentance and pardons bad deeds. Hence, there is no need to despair, go further into disobedience, or panic because of the sins they have committed. God knows what they do, and He certainly knows sincere

repentance and accepts it, just as He knows their past sins and pardons them for these.

Again the *sūrah* refers to what believers and unbelievers will receive in reward or punishment. Those who believe and do good deeds are the ones who respond to their Lord's call. He, therefore, gives them an increase of His bounty. By contrast, "*As for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 26) Yet the door to repentance, which will spare the repentant all suffering, is open to all at all times. Any unbeliever who repents will qualify for God's bounty which is, in the life to come, plentiful, unlimited. In this life, however, it is given according to a set criterion. God knows that in their lives on earth, human beings cannot cope with God's bounty should it be given to them without measure: "*If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all.*" (Verse 27)

Compared to the limitless bounty granted in the hereafter, the provisions people have in this life, no matter how abundant they may seem, are very small indeed. God knows that His human creatures can only cope with a small measure of richness. If He were to grant them abundance, of the sort He grants them in the life to come, they would behave with much insolence. They are too small to maintain their balance; too weak to cope with their burdens when these exceed a certain limit. God is fully aware of their limitations. Therefore, He keeps His bounty to them in this present life within the limits they can cope with. He keeps His unlimited bounty till later, and gives it only to those who pass the test of this life, reaching the life to come in safety. They will then receive His limitless bounty.

> *It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.* (Verse 28)

Again, we are reminded of some aspects of God's grace as He bestows it on people living on earth. We see them here when they have gone without rain for some time. They feel their powerlessness as water, life's

necessity, is denied them. They are in total despair. At this point, the skies open and God's grace is spread far and wide. The land is alive again, green shoots spring up, the seeds that have been planted promise a good yield, the weather moderates, smiles are back on people's faces and hope is regained. What separates the old despair from the new hope is no more than a few minutes during which the gates of God's grace are open and rain pours down: "*He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 28) His help is available at all times. He is not only worthy of praise in Himself but also for all His attributes.

The Arabic text uses the term *ghayth* to refer to rain. The term connotes providing emergency help for those who are in desperate need. The effects are given as God '*spreads His grace*', which enhances feelings of hope and happiness that we actually experience as we look at the emerging vegetation. Nothing has a greater comforting and calming effect on people than rain pouring down after a period of drought. Nothing helps to remove tension and worry better than seeing the land blooming after it has been barren and desolate.

What Causes Misfortune

> *Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.* (Verses 29–31)

These verses refer to a universal sign that is there for all to see, endorsing the truth the revelation testifies to, even though they continue to doubt it. The sign they see in the heavens and the earth is very clear, admitting no doubt. It addresses human nature in the language it understands. No one seriously argues about it. It states the fact that neither man nor any other of God's creation was the originator of the heavens and the earth. Admitting that they have a Creator, therefore, is inescapable. The heavens and the earth are huge, yet they demonstrate a meticulous harmony and function endlessly according to consistent

laws. This cannot be logically explained except by acknowledging that they have been created by God who conducts their affairs. Human nature directly receives this logic imparted by the universe, understands and accepts it before it hears any word that may be said about it by any external source.

This universal sign incorporates another, for God did not only create the heavens and the earth. He also created "*all the living creatures which He placed in them.*" (Verse 29) Life on our planet alone is another sign, so how should we conceive of other types of life unknown to us existing elsewhere in the universe. Life on this planet is a secret no one has yet managed to fathom, let alone aspire to initiate. It is a secret engulfed with mystery. We do not know how or from where it comes; nor do we know how it entwines with other creatures. All attempts to identify its source or nature have failed to open these closed doors. All research is necessarily confined to the development of living creatures, after they have life, and their variety and functions. Even in this limited scope, there are conflicting views and theories. Behind the curtain, however, there remains the great secret that no mental understanding can explore. It belongs to God alone.

All living creatures, everywhere, on earth and within it, in the deep sea and at high altitude, not to think of the rest of creatures beyond our world, are largely unknown to us. Indeed man only knows about a small number of them. All these creatures that God has placed in the heavens and the earth can be gathered by God whenever He wills. Not a single one of them will go astray or absent itself.

People cannot gather together a flock of domestic birds should they flee their cages, or bees that escape their hive. Everywhere on earth there are collections of different types of birds, bees, ants, insects, bacteria, cattle, beasts, fish, sea mammals, as well as human communities. There are also in the heavens other creatures that may be greater in number and that live in habitats about which we know nothing. Yet God can gather all these together if He so pleases. The time it takes between their placement in their different habitats and their gathering together is no more than the uttering of one word. The verse, here, therefore, contrasts the placement of all these creatures everywhere in the universe with their gathering: it is all done in just a

moment. In true Qur'ānic style, these two great scenes are juxtaposed in one short verse that takes only a few seconds to read.

The *sūrah* then tells them of what happens to the unbelievers in this life, as a result of what they perpetrate. Yet God does not take them to task for all this; He overlooks a great many of their actions. It describes their powerlessness as they occupy only a small corner of the living world: "*Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.*" (Verses 30–31)

In the first of these two verses we see in action both God's justice and His grace as He bestows it on man. Every misfortune or calamity that befalls man is a direct result of what man does, but God does not hold him to account for all his deeds. He knows man's weakness and the desires inherent in his nature which often tempt and overpower him. Therefore, God pardons much of what man does. In the second verse we see man as he truly is: weak, powerless and without support. From whom, then, can he seek protection other than from the One who protects all?

Control of Natural Laws

> *And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them.* (Verses 32–35)

Ships that traverse the sea are yet another of God's signs, just like mountains. It is a sign seen by all. They represent a phenomenon that is based on several factors each of which is a great sign put in place by God Almighty. Who created the sea? Can any human or any other creature claim that they made the sea? Who gave the sea its different characteristics: the density of its water, its depth and vast area allowing

it to carry such large craft? Then what about the wind that moves the ships that were known to those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān; and what about other forces that man was subsequently able to use such as steam and nuclear power, and other forces God may place at man's disposal in future? Who has given these forces their qualities that make them able to move such huge ships in the sea, so that they look like mountains on its surface?

"*If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea.*" (Verse 33) The wind may die down at times and ships will lie motionless, as though life has departed from them. "*In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God.*" (Verse 33) The signs are both in making the ships sail across the sea and in leaving them motionless. Such signs are appreciated by everyone who is patient in adversity, thankful for blessings. Patience and gratitude are often mentioned together in the Qur'ān, as they are interrelated qualities of believers in conditions of hardship and happiness.

"*Or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought.*" (Verse 34) He may cause the ships to be destroyed or drowned as a result of people's sins or deviation from the faith that all creatures acknowledge, with the exception of the unbelievers. "*And yet He forgives much.*" (Verse 34) He certainly does not punish people for every sinful action they do. Instead, He pardons and forgives much.

"*Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them.*" (Verse 35) Should God want to smite them, destroy their ships or visit them with some other punishment, they simply have no means of escape. Thus they are made to know that whatever they possess of this life's riches, comforts and pleasures can always be taken away from them. The only thing that is stable in this present life is to maintain a close relation with God.

A Community Moulded by Faith

The *sūrah* takes another step forward, alerting them to the fact that whatever they have in life on earth is transient. The only lasting value is what God grants in the life to come to those who have believed and

placed their trust in Him. Some of the distinctive qualities that make of true believers a separate community are then given:

> *Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.* (Verses 36–43)

Earlier in the *sūrah*, we had a description of the conditions pertaining to mankind. We learnt that those given revelations divided into groups: and such divisions were caused by petty rivalries rather than any lack of knowledge of the Divine book and the faith God established for mankind from the times of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them all). It also pointed out that the generations that followed those who were in dispute entertained serious doubts about Divine revelations. Needless to say, the conditions of those who did not receive revelations and had no messenger to guide them along the right path were even worse. Therefore, mankind needed wise leadership to save it from the depth of ignorance into which it had sunk and to guide its footsteps along the way that leads man to God, his Lord and the Lord of all the worlds. Therefore, God revealed this Qur'ān, in the Arabic tongue, to His servant Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), incorporating in it what He had enjoined upon Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Thus all phases of the Divine message, from early history, are linked together. The path it follows and the goals it aims to achieve

are the same. With this final message, the Muslim community comes into existence, assuming the leadership of mankind and setting a model of how the Divine faith functions in human life.

The present verses describe the distinctive qualities of this community that make it a community apart. Although these verses were revealed in Makkah, long before the establishment of the Muslim state in Madīnah, we note that one of these qualities is that its affairs are conducted on the basis of mutual consultation. This suggests that consultation is more deeply ingrained in the life of the Muslim community than its being the basis of its political system. It is, thus, an essential quality of the Muslim community. It then had to be carried further to the state, which is a natural progression from that of Muslim community. Another quality to be noted is that Muslims defend themselves when they come under oppression. Yet the order given to the Muslims in Makkah was that they should endure with patience and not retaliate. It was only after they migrated to Madīnah that a different order was given to them and permission to fight was granted: "*Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory.*" (22: 39) That this quality is mentioned in Makkan verses suggests that self defence against oppression is a permanent right of the Muslim community, while the instruction to remain patient and not to retaliate pertained to an exceptional and particular situation during the early period. The quality is mentioned here because an outline of the essential qualities of the Muslim community is given. Hence, this quality could not be overlooked, even though retaliation in self defence was not as then permitted.

The fact that these qualities are mentioned in this Makkan *sūrah*, long before the Muslim community had assumed practical leadership should be reflected upon. These qualities must be fulfilled by the Muslim community before it is fit to assume practical leadership. What are these qualities, and what value do they have in human life as a whole?

These qualities are: faith, placing our trust in God alone, refraining completely from grave sin and indecency, forgiving when angry, responding to God, attending regularly to prayer, conducting our affairs

through proper consultation, giving generously in charity, resisting oppression, forgiving other people, putting things right and remaining patient in adversity. We need to reflect a little on each of these qualities in the order they occur in the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* sets before us the Divine standard of values, showing us which of these are transitory and which are enduring and inalterable. Muslims will, thus, have a clear vision, one free of confusion. This standard is outlined first as a prelude to the qualities of the Muslim community: "*Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36)

There are plenty of attractive and pleasant things in the life of this world: offspring, wealth, desires and their fulfilment, high social standing, power, as well as other things to enjoy. These are granted by God as part of His bounty that is unattached to people's behaviour in this life, but He adds blessing to those who are obedient to Him, even though their share is little, and denies such blessing to sinners even though their share is great indeed. Yet none of this is permanent or enduring. It is all short-lived; it neither raises nor lowers anyone's standing. Nothing of it reflects anyone's position with God, or provides an indication of His pleasure or displeasure with anyone. It is all a fleeting enjoyment. "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36) It is better in essence and longer lasting. Compared to what is with God, all life enjoyments are trifling and short-lived. Its maximum duration is the life of the individual or the life of humanity. Both are no more than a fleeting moment in God's measure.

Having established this true fact, the *sūrah* outlines the qualities of the believers who are destined to enjoy the enduring blessings God has in store for them. The first of these qualities is faith: "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) To believe is to recognize the first and basic truth without which man cannot know for certain anything in the universe. It is through believing in God that we begin to understand that the universe is created by Him. This is essential so that we know how to deal with the universe and learn about the laws that operate in it. We can then bring our lives into

harmony with the universe, so as not to deviate from its laws. Such harmony will impart ease and comfort in our lives. We will then move, together with the universe, in a way that submits to God and seeks His acceptance. This quality is necessary for every human being, but it is most essential for the Muslim community that seeks to lead humanity.

Faith also imparts reassurance and confidence, and dispels doubt, worry, fear and despair. These are necessary throughout our life journey, but they are all the more essential for the leader who charts the way ahead.

What faith gives to man is to free him from the pressures of personal desire, interest and gain. With faith, man's heart looks up to a goal that lies beyond his own soul. He realizes that he has no say in the course the Divine message takes; it is, after all, a message from God, while he is simply a worker employed by God. This realization is extremely important to the person who is in a position of leadership so that he does not allow despair to creep in should people turn away from him or should he suffer persecution. This realization also acts as a safeguard so that he does not become arrogant should he gain power. In every situation, he remains no more than a worker.

The first crop of Muslims accepted the faith in a way that remarkably influenced their mentality, morality and behaviour. Prior to Islam, the meaning of faith had been greatly weakened so that it no longer influenced people's morality and behaviour. Islam brought about a new model of faith, one that was alive and influential, enabling that community of believers to assume the task of leadership entrusted to it. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī writes about the effects of this character-moulding faith:

> Once the Gordian knot of disbelief had been cut, it was easy to unfasten the other knots that bound them. And once the Prophet had opened their hearts to Islam, he did not have to struggle at each step to make them reject Wrong and accept Right. They entered into the new faith with heart and soul and submitted themselves without demur to what the Prophet decreed...

> Thus, when they had attained to the highest pinnacle of moral development and become proof against the inducements of Satan and of their own baser self, when they had learned to prefer the future good to the immediate good and had been transformed into lovers of the Hereafter even while living in this world, when neither poverty could be a barrier in their path nor could riches make them vain, when they had become meek, yet unbending before power, and when they had come to be the dispensers of justice among men even though it might go against themselves, their own kith and kin, God made the whole world subservient to them and appointed them the Defenders of the Faith.[3]

He also elaborates on the effect of faith on people's morality:

> During the pre-Islamic era people generally worshipped inanimate objects which could neither help nor grant their petitions and had, in fact, been created merely to serve their needs. Hence, there was no real moral enthusiasm, no genuine spirituality in their religions. The God of their conception was an artisan who had retired into a corner after finishing His job. They believed that He had bequeathed His kingdom to those whom He had adorned with the mantle of Divinity and now it was they who controlled the affairs of the universe. They lacked any spiritual understanding of God. They did not know of Him as the Creator of the universe, and any awareness was akin to the knowledge of an historian who, when he is asked who constructed a certain building, replies that it was built by such and such a king, but the mention of the king's name neither inspires awe in his heart, nor makes any solemn impression on his mind. They had no intimate consciousness of the Divine attributes and, consequently, their hearts did not bear the imprint of God's glory and love...

3. Nadwī, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, pp. 41–42.
– Originally written in Arabic, this book has been heavily edited in its English version. I chose to include all quotations from it as they appear in its English version rather than provide a new translation that is more faithful to the original text. – Editor's note.

The Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular rejected this vague and sickly religiousness and attained a Faith which was at once intense and profound and which permeated through every fibre of their existence. They pledged their Faith in God Who has Excellent Attributes, Who is the Most Exalted, the Most Magnificent and the Master of the Day of Judgement. Says the Holy Qur'ān: "*God is He besides Whom there is no other god; The Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace [and Perfection], the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme; Glory to God [High is He] above the partners they attribute to Him. He is the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms and Colours. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names; Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory: and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.*" (59: 23–24)

He is the God Who is the Creator and the Preserver of the universe, Who rewards with paradise and chastises with hell, Who swells or shrinks the subsistence of whomsoever He likes, Who is the Knower of all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and Who knows the stealth of the eyes and the secrets of the hearts, and is the embodiment of beauty and sublimity, strength and splendour, perfection and beneficence.

This solemn conviction produced a miraculous transformation among the early followers of Islam. Whoever affirmed his faith in the One Transcendent God and testified to '*Lā ilāha illallāh*'[4] experienced a sudden change in himself. The innermost recesses of his soul were lit up with the sublime radiance of God-consciousness, the spirit and the flesh in him ceased to be the enemies of one another; he achieved equilibrium within himself and extraordinary feats of courage, endurance and faith were performed by the believer.

This faith was a wonderful source of moral training. It generated among its followers an amazing strength of will, self-criticism

4. This phrase means, 'there is no deity other than God'. It is the first half of the declaration anyone who wishes to be a Muslim must make. The other half is, 'Muḥammad is God's messenger.' – Editor's note.

and justice, as nothing can help overcome the inducements of the self so successfully as living faith in the Omnipresence of God.

If anyone succumbed to evil or negative urges and fell into error, even unobserved, he would immediately confess to the Prophet and undergo the severest punishment willingly to save himself from Divine displeasure.[5]

Virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness developed in the early Muslims as the natural fruits of a sense of living belief in the Omnipresence of the Absolute God. Even when alone and unnoticed, or in any other situation wherein they could easily transgress the bounds of religious conduct, fear of God kept the Muslims under rigid control.[6]

The unruly Arabs, who were so lawless in their ways, surrendered themselves so absolutely to the guidance of the Faith that it was impossible for them to infringe the Divine law. They accepted the Sovereignty of God in its fullest sense. In peace and in war, in joy and in sorrow, in every relationship of life, at each turn of affairs and in the minutest details of their concerns they looked to His guidance and help and carried out His commands without the slightest demur.[7]

Qualities of the Faithful

Such is the effect of true belief in God to which the *sūrah* refers. To place one's complete trust in God is something such a belief entails, but the Qur'ān gives prominence to this quality: "*[It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) In the Arabic text, the inversion mode is used so as to make the sentence read, 'in their Lord they place their trust.' This implies that they do not place their trust in anyone other than God. This is indeed the first practical manifestation of believing in God's oneness. A believer knows God's attributes, believes in them all and is certain that no one does

5. Nadwī, ibid., pp. 42–44.
6. Ibid., p. 46.
7. Ibid., pp. 49–50.

anything unless He wills and nothing occurs without His sanction. Hence, his trust in God is complete. Everything he does or refrains from doing is aimed at winning His pleasure. Such a feeling is necessary for everyone. It enables man to stand with his head raised high, feeling inner certainty, reassured, fearing no one, able to withstand adversity, full of contentment in times of ease. Yet this feeling is far more necessary to a leader who is eager to fulfil his responsibilities.

"*Who shun grave sins and gross indecencies.*" (Verse 37) Purity of heart which ensures that behaviour is free of grave sin and indecency is a product of sound faith. It is also a necessary requirement for wise leadership. No one can maintain purity of heart and then indulge in grave sins and gross indecencies. A heart that lacks purity is totally unsuitable for leadership: its guiding light is obliterated by sin. Faith heightened the sensitivity of the first generation of Muslims enabling them to attain the standards described by Nadwi. It qualified them to provide a leadership of unprecedented and unequalled qualities. They remain the model to be emulated by later generations.

God is fully aware of man's weaknesses. Therefore, He has set the mark that qualifies people for the position of leadership at shunning grave sins and gross indecencies, not ordinary ones. His grace ensures that minor sins will be overlooked. This is an act of grace that He bestows on us which should arouse our feeling of humility before Him.

"*And who, when angered, will forgive.*" (Verse 37) This quality, mentioned immediately after the implicit reference to God's forgiveness of man's errors and sins, encourages an attitude of mutual forbearance and forgiveness between people. It highlights a characteristic of believers which makes them forgive when something angers them. Again we see the Islamic approach to human weakness. It does not require man to do anything beyond what he is capable of. God knows that anger is a natural human reaction and that it is not always bad. Feeling angry at something committed against God, faith, truth or justice is commendable and can bring about good results. Therefore, Islam does not forbid anger or consider it a sin. It recognizes it as a natural feeling, thus preventing conflict between man's religion and nature. However, it takes man by the hand to help him overcome his anger, encouraging him to pardon and forbear. It further makes such forgiveness one of

the important qualities of believers. It is well established that the Prophet was never angry at anything related to his own person. His anger, when it occurred, was only for God's sake and was overpowering. Yet such a high standard was set by Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who attained a high standard of greatness. Hence, God does not make this a standard that believers should attain to, but rather sets it as an ideal to strive for. What they are required to do is to forbear and forgive when angry, rising above the desire to retaliate, as long as this remains within the personal sphere.

"*Who respond to their Lord.*" (Verse 38) They remove all impediments that prevent such response. These impediments are within the human soul, created by one's desires, aspirations and ambitions. When all these impediments are removed, man finds the way to God smooth and wide open. His response is then free of any restraint or impediment.

The type of response is then shown in detail. The first aspect is that believers "*attend regularly to their prayer.*" (Verse 38) Prayer is given great importance in Islam. It comes second only to the first rule of faith, which is the declaration of one's belief in God's oneness and in Muḥammad as God's messenger. Prayer provides the bond between man and his Lord, and gives a practical example of human equality, with worshippers standing shoulder to shoulder in rows, with no distinction whatsoever between them.

Perhaps this is the reason why prayer is immediately followed, in this instance, by the quality of consultation within the Muslim community, giving it precedence over the payment of *zakāt* which is normally mentioned together with prayer. Thus, believers "*conduct their affairs by mutual consultation.*" (Verse 38) As it is phrased, the statement makes consultation a characteristic that pervades every aspect of their lives. As we have already said, this is a Makkan statement made long before the establishment of the Islamic state. This means that this quality is characteristic of the Muslim community in all situations, even though no state or government had as then been established. In fact, the state is only a natural by-product of the Muslim community and its intrinsic qualities. The Muslim community incorporates the state and together they ensure the implementation of the Islamic code of life both at individual and society levels.

For this reason, consultation was an early quality of the Muslim community and applied to a far greater area than the political arena. It is an essential aspect of Islamic life and a distinctive quality of the community entrusted with the role of leading mankind. Needless to say, it is a fundamental quality of sound leadership.

The way to conduct consultation is left for every generation and environment to decide. It is not cast in a rigid form that must always be followed. No Islamic system is outlined in a text that must be literally followed or set in a particular model that cannot be modified. They are first and foremost a product of a process that begins with the truth of faith taking root in man's heart so as to mould his thought and behaviour. Discussion about the details of an Islamic system while giving little attention to the truth of faith that gives rise to them is a futile exercise. What we are saying here may appear to anyone who is unaware of the truth of Islamic faith a theoretical discourse without firm basis. To suppose so is certainly wrong. A careful examination of its pure concepts of belief will show that Islam contains psychological and intellectual facts that have a profound effect on man, preparing the way to the rise of certain systems and situations in human society. The Qur'ānic and *Ḥadīth* texts then indicate the form that such systems and situations should take. Thus, the texts do not initiate the systems, but merely organize them. For any Islamic system to be established and functioning, it is necessary that a Muslim community should be in existence in which faith is actively working. Otherwise, no form is good enough to produce a system that can be described as Islamic. When a Muslim community is truly in existence, where people feel the truth of faith deep in their hearts, the Islamic system will naturally develop, taking a shape and form that suits that particular community, its environment and circumstances, working within the framework of the basic Islamic principles and effectively implementing them.

"*And give generously out of what We have provided for them.*" (Verse 38) This is again a requirement that preceded the determination of the different rates of *zakāt*, according to the type of property held. These rates were set in the second year after the Prophet migrated to Madīnah where he established the first Islamic state. However, the idea of allocating a portion of what God has given us to be spent in what

serves the Islamic cause came in the early stages of the life of the Muslim community. It goes back to the early days of its inception.

For Islam to be properly advocated it is necessary that Muslims should be ready to allocate money for its cause. This purges their hearts of greed and helps them rise above the instinctive desire to own. It demonstrates their reliance on God and what He has for them. All these are necessary for faith to be complete and firmly rooted. Moreover, it is necessary for the Muslim society. To advocate Islam is to be committed to strive for its cause. It is imperative that the community should demonstrate complete solidarity in such striving, whatever the outcome. At times, such solidarity needs to be complete, leaving no one any property that is considered his own. An example of this took place in the early days of Islam, when the Makkan Muslims migrated to Madīnah where they were given warm hospitality. When their situation became less acute, a permanent *zakāt* system was put in place. Be that as it may, the very concept of spending for the cause is an essential quality of the Muslim community.

"*And who, when oppressed, defend themselves.*" (Verse 39) As we stated earlier, that this quality is mentioned in a Makkan *sūrah* is significant. It means that rising against oppression and injustice is in the very nature of a community that is moulded to be the best among human communities. It enjoins what is right and fair, forbids what is wrong, and ensures that right and justice are implemented in human life. It is an honourable community that derives its honour from God: "*All honour belongs to God, and to His messenger and those who believe [in God].*" (63: 8)

In the early history of Islam, there was a period, when the Muslim community was still in Makkah, during which the Muslims were ordered not to fight, but to concentrate on attending to prayer and paying *zakāt*. This, however, was due to certain local reasons and to achieve a particular disciplinary objective that was especially relevant to the first Muslim Arab community. It should be emphasized that this was a temporary measure that does not contradict the essential qualities of the Muslim community.

There were, indeed, particular reasons behind this choice of a peaceful and patient approach during the Makkan period. One was that the

persecution the Muslims suffered at the time was not because of any recognisable authority holding sway in Arabian society. Instead, the tribal structure then pertaining made it rather loose politically and socially. Hence, a Muslim who belonged to a family of distinction could come to harm only at the hands of other members of his own family. No one else dared take any measure against him. A collective assault on a Muslim individual or on Muslims generally was a rare event. In addition, masters could torture or otherwise pain their slaves and weaker tribal elements if they chose to adopt Islam. Over time many of these were bought and set free by Muslims, and thus largely became immune to persecution. Furthermore, the Prophet did not wish to see a battle flaring up in every home between a Muslim and his family who had not as yet accepted Islam. It was, thus, a question of trying to soften hearts rather than harden them.

Another reason behind this peaceful approach was that the social environment encouraged support to anyone who was unjustly wronged or physically harmed. By being patient in adversity and holding to their faith despite persecution, Muslims could benefit by such support. This is what actually happened when the Hashimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, were subjected to a social and economic boycott. The natural Arabian sense of justice rebelled against this wrongful boycott, enforcing its abrogation, despite the fact that it was originally solemnized by a written agreement which was then hung inside the Ka'bah.

Yet another reason was that resort to force and the use of arms was a characteristic of the Arabian social environment. People were always on edge, with little to enforce discipline. To ensure proper balance in the Muslim personality, this tendency needed to be restrained. People needed to rein in their feelings by setting themselves definite goals. It was also necessary that they should get used to being patient, despite adversity, and that they could control themselves and their actions. It was also necessary to make them feel that their every whim, desire and gain were secondary to their faith. Therefore, the requirement that they should remain patient in such adversity was consistent with the system that sought to educate them and bring about proper balance in their Islamic character.

It was for these and similar reasons that a policy of peaceful coexistence and perseverance was followed during the Makkan period, while the permanent nature of the Muslim community based on self defence when oppressed was also clearly stated: "*And who, when oppressed, defend themselves.*" (Verse 39) This rule is further confirmed as a permanent aspect of human life: "*An evil deed is requited by an evil like it.*" (Verse 40) Thus, justice requires that an evil act should be answered with an act of similar nature. Otherwise, evil would be left to triumph and expand; there would be no force to check it.

Forgiveness is encouraged so that believers seek reward from God and at the same time purge themselves of the desire to retaliate; this also ensures that society does not harbour grudges: "*But the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God.*" (Verse 40) This is indeed an exception from the rule. It should be borne in mind that forgiveness can only be exercised by one who is able to requite evil with its like. It is only in such a case that forgiveness brings its desired results in both the perpetrator and the person who is wronged. When the perpetrator realizes that he has been pardoned out of the goodness of the other person, and not because of any weakness or inability to retaliate, he feels ashamed and appreciates that his opponent has scored a moral victory. Similarly, a strong person who forgives feels that he has the higher moral ground. Thus, forgiveness is better for both parties. This, however, does not apply in the case of weakness and inability to retaliate. Indeed, forgiveness does not exist in such a situation; it only encourages the aggressor and brings further humiliation to those wronged.

"*He does not love wrongdoers.*" (Verse 40) This statement reconfirms the rule that an evil act is requited by a similar one. It also implies that one should not exceed the wrong done when repelling evil.

We then have another confirmation, which is more detailed: "*However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store.*" (Verses 41–42) A wronged person who retaliates against injustice, repays an evil act with its like, and who makes sure not to transgress his limits, is simply exercising his legitimate right. Hence, no blame attaches to him. No one should prevent him from exacting

justice. The ones to be stopped are those who oppress and encroach on others. Human life cannot be set on a right basis while injustice continues unchecked and its perpetrators go about freely, fearing no consequence. God warns all perpetrators of injustice that they will be severely punished, but people must also rise against those responsible and prevent them from committing further injustice.

The *sūrah* again refers to the need for self restraint, patience in adversity and forgiveness in personal cases, when such forgiveness is exercised as an act of magnanimity taken from a position of strength and ability to retaliate: "*As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.*" (Verse 43)

When we take these verses and similar texts together, we clearly see how they ensure balance between the two directions. They want a Muslim to be free of grudge, anger, weakness, servility, as also of injustice and oppression. A Muslim should always seek God's pleasure, aware that patience is his mainstay as he continues his life journey.

Together, these qualities which believers should have impart a distinctive character to the Muslim community, the community that is assigned the task of leading mankind.

What Price for a Second Chance?

Having outlined the qualities of believers who have ample and more lasting reward from God, the *sūrah* paints the opposite picture of those who go astray and inflict injustice. They will inevitably suffer humiliation:

> *He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward.* (Verses 44–46)

What God wills is certain to take place. No one can change a course God has determined. Hence, "*He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him.*" (Verse 44) When God knows, on the basis of a person's true attitude and actions that he deserves to be left astray, His word that this person be left to follow his own devices will be done. He will then have no one to save him from error or its ultimate results, or to assist in its retraction: "*When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance.*" (Verses 44–45)

In this present world, the wrongdoers are normally arrogant, despotic and transgressors. Hence, their highlighted aspect on the Day of Judgement is that of humiliation. They see the suffering awaiting them and their pride crumbles. Subdued, they will meekly ask: "*Is there any way of return?*" It is a question that combines eagerness and despair of any chance to save themselves. They are made to see the fire and they look at it in disgrace and utter humiliation. They cannot lift their eyes; therefore, they cast only a furtive glance.

It will be clear then that the believers are the ones who state the truth: "*The believers will then say: The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.*" (Verse 45) They are the ones who have lost everything, standing there humbly asking for a second chance that will not be given. The final comment on this image explains the outcome for those brought before the fire: "*Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward.*" (Verses 45–46) No support will be forthcoming as the final word has been said and all ways are sealed.

When Response is Slow Coming

Now the *sūrah* addresses those who stubbornly opposed the Prophet's message with an order to respond to their Lord before such a fate comes upon them, all of a sudden, when they will be without support. A directive to the Prophet is added instructing him to turn away from

them if they persist in their rejection. His task though is only to deliver his message; he is not responsible for anyone:

> *Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.* (Verses 47–48)

Having made the warning and the directive abundantly clear, these verses portray the nature of the one who opposes the Divine message and stubbornly refuses to submit to its truth. He is fickle, wildly rejoicing when he is granted something of God's grace and panicking in the face of adversity. In such a situation, man often transgresses all bounds and shows no gratitude for what he is given: "*When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.*" (Verse 48)

By way of comment on this, the *sūrah* makes absolutely clear that whatever happiness or misfortune, affluence or scarcity befalls man is determined by God. It is very strange therefore for someone, who reacts in this way to blessings and misfortune, to turn away from God when He holds all the strings affecting his life:

> *To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.* (Verses 49–50)

Offspring is an aspect of what man is given or denied. It is something very dear to man. Since human nature is very sensitive to procreation, looking at it from this angle is more effective. The *sūrah* spoke earlier of man's provisions and how they are given in plentiful or scant measure.

Offspring is a different aspect of what God provides man with. It is no different from money, however, in the way it is granted.

These verses begin by stating that everything in the heavens and earth belongs to God alone. This introduction fits with every detail that follows this statement of general ownership. The same is true of the succeeding sentence: "*He creates what He will.*" (Verse 49) This emphasizes the effect the verse aims to generate, directing man, who loves every good thing, to turn to God who creates everything that man loves and dislikes.

Further details are given of what God may grant or withhold. He may grant female offspring to anyone. The Arabs addressed for the first time by the Qur'ān used to dislike females. He also grants male children to anyone He chooses. Alternatively, He may give offspring of both kinds to anyone. The fourth situation is that He may deny offspring altogether, making people barren. What is important to remember is that all these situations are determined by God's will. None interferes in His decision which is based on His perfect knowledge and executed by His power: "*He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.*" (Verse 50)

Methods of Revelation

As it draws to its conclusion, the *sūrah* picks up its main theme again, which is the truth of revelation and message. It now speaks of the nature of this contact between God and His chosen servants and how it is done. It asserts that such contact has actually taken place with the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). This last contact has a definite objective God wishes to accomplish, namely, providing guidance along a straight path to whoever chooses to be guided:

> *It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is exalted, wise. Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a*

light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (Verses 51–53)

The first of these verses makes it abundantly clear that no man is ever spoken to by God face to face. 'Ā'ishah is quoted as saying: "Whoever claims that Muḥammad has seen his Lord is delivering a very grave falsehood." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] God speaks to people in one of three ways. First, by 'revelation', which is given directly and the recipient knows that it comes from God. Secondly, 'from behind a veil', as God spoke to Moses whose request to see God was denied. In fact, he was unable to stand firm when God's glory was revealed to the mountain. The relevant Qur'ānic report states: "*When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: 'My Lord, show Yourself to me, so that I may look at You.' Said [God]: 'You shall not see Me. But look upon the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then, only then, you shall see Me.' When his Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down. Moses fell down senseless. When he came to himself, he said: 'Limitless You are in Your glory. To You I turn in repentance. I am the first to truly believe in You.'*" (7: 143)

The third form of address is that God sends a messenger, who is an angel, '*to reveal by His command what He will.*' This takes different forms, which the Prophet explained as follows:

1. The angel would impart to him something he recognized within himself, without seeing the angel. The Prophet said: 'The Holy Spirit has imparted to me that no soul will ever die until it has had whatever provisions assigned to it. Therefore, remain God-fearing and moderate your requests.'
2. The angel would come to the Prophet in the form of a man who spoke to him and made sure that he understood what was being said to him.
3. The angel would give him the revelation in a way that sounded like a bell ringing in his ear. This was the hardest form for the

Prophet. He would be perspiring even on a very cold day. If he was riding a camel, his camel would fall to the ground. Once he received revelation in this way when he was seated, with his thigh next to that of Zayd ibn Thābit who felt then that his bone was almost broken.

4. The Prophet would see the angel in the angel's own form, giving him whatever God bid him give. This happened to him twice as mentioned in verses 7 and 13 of *Sūrah* 53, The Star.[8]

Such were the different forms of contact and revelation. "*He is Exalted, Wise.*" (Verse 51) He bestows His revelation from on high, to whomever He chooses, according to His wisdom.

The Nature of Revelation

At this point I have to say that whenever I read a Qur'ānic verse or a statement by the Prophet that mentions revelation, I feel a shudder as I try to think how it happened. How does such contact take place between the One who is eternal, having no defined space in time or place, who encompasses everything and has nothing that bears any resemblance to Him, and an ordinary mortal? And how is such contact then represented in words, sentences and meanings? How can a mortal receive God's eternal word which is totally unlike what we know? How this, and how that? I then say to myself: why should I ask when I cannot imagine things beyond my limited space within the world of mortals? The truth is that this took place and was given a form which I can now recognize within my immediate world.

Yet the shudder remains. Prophethood is something great indeed. Similarly, the moment when an ordinary man receives revelation from on high is indeed very great. My reader, can you feel it with me? Are you, like me, trying to imagine it; imagine this revelation coming from 'there'? Am I saying, there? No! there is no such thing as 'there'. Revelation comes from no place, time, space, direction or situation. It

8. Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, Beirut, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 78–80.

comes from the Absolute, the Infinite, the Eternal, from God Almighty. It is addressed to a mortal: it is true that the recipient is a Prophet and a messenger, but he remains confined to the limited world of mortals. It is such a wonderful and miraculous contact which can only be made a reality by God who alone knows how it becomes reality. My reader, do you appreciate the feelings I am trying to portray in such disjointed sentences? Indeed, I do not know what I am saying about what I experience in the depths of my heart as I try to contemplate this great event, which is miraculous in both nature and form. It took place on numerous occasions during the lifetime of God's messenger. Several people saw some aspects of it with their own eyes.

'Ā'ishah witnessed some of these remarkable moments in the history of mankind. She says about one of them: "The Prophet said to me, ''Ā'ishah! Here is Gabriel presenting his greeting to you.' I said, 'Peace be to him, together with God's mercy.' The Prophet was seeing what we could not see." [Related by al-Bukhārī.] Zayd ibn Thābit also witnessed such a great moment as stated earlier. Other companions of the Prophet saw it on many occasions, recognizing the fact as they looked at the Prophet. They left him alone to receive whatever he received. When it was over, he was with them just as he was before.

Then, what sort of special nature distinguishes the human soul that makes this contact with the sublime? What is the element within the human soul that enables it to be the recipient of revelation from on high? This is yet another issue. In what way did the Prophet's soul, which is a human soul, feel this contact and how did it open its receptive faculties to revelation? How did it feel the universe in those moments when God opened His glory to it, with His words resounding in its every corner?

What care, what grace, what honour are bestowed on man, such a small creature, when God in His glory confers on him what enlightens his way ahead and keeps him on the right track? Such honour appears great indeed when we remember that, compared to God's kingdom, man looks more insignificant than a mosquito compared to man.

Revelation is indeed a reality, but a sublime one. It appears to rise to a high and distant horizon which our faculties can hardly perceive.

The Guiding Light

> *Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.* (Verses 52–53)

It was by means of such contact that revelation was given to the Prophet: "*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command.*" (Verse 52) The process was the same as revelation granted to earlier messengers, bringing to the Prophet a '*spirit*' that gives life to souls, motivating them to act and implement the Divine message. "*You knew neither revelation nor faith.*" (Verse 52) The Qur'ān describes the Prophet's soul prior to revelation in this way. The Prophet had heard of revelation and faith before, because the Arabs were aware of other communities that had scriptures and believed in a well-defined faith. It is not the mere knowledge of such matters that this statement refers to. The reference here is to how revelation affected the Prophet's heart and conscience and how he interacted with it. He certainly experienced nothing of this before this spirit was revealed to him by God's command.

"*But We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants.*" (Verse 52) This is the total nature of the message given through this revelation. It is a light that imparts happiness to those hearts that are guided by it. "*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God.*" (Verses 52–53) Special emphasis is placed here on relating guidance to God's will, making it clear that He alone grants it only to whom He will on the basis of His own knowledge, shared with no one else. The Prophet is only the means chosen to fulfil God's will. He does not initiate guidance in people's hearts. He only delivers God's message which opens the way to the fulfilment of God's will.

"*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verses 52–53) Guidance shows us the path of God, at which point all ways converge, because it leads to the Sovereign who alone has dominion over the

heavens and the earth. Whoever is guided to His path is certain to know the laws that God has set in operation in the universe, bringing their forces into play and providing sustenance to all. Hence, the whole universe turns to its Supreme Owner to whom all shall return: "*Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.*" (Verse 53) He will then judge them all. Such is the light God has given so that people will go along the way He has chosen for them; they will return to Him having obeyed His command and benefited by His guidance.

Thus the *sūrah* is brought to its conclusion. It began with a discussion of revelation, which provided its main theme. It stated that revelation started with the early prophets, making it clear that Divine religion is one, outlining the same code and showing the same way. It gives humanity its new leadership represented by the person of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), and in the community that believes in his message. This community is entrusted with the task of guiding people to the straight path leading to God. The *sūrah* also outlines the characteristics of this community which qualify it to provide sound leadership. It is this community that shoulders the trust bestowed from on high by the sublime process of revelation.



SŪRAH 43

Al-Zukhruf

(Gold)

Prologue

This *sūrah* presents a detailed picture of what the Islamic message faced of problems, arguments and objections. It also shows how the Qur'ān dealt with these and their effects on people, establishing at the same time its own truth in place of old, false, ignorant superstitions and values that had taken hold of people's minds at the time. In fact, some people, everywhere, continue to hold elements of these as valid.

Followers of pagan beliefs used to claim that the cattle God has created for the benefit of mankind are divided between God and their own alleged deities: "*Out of the produce and the cattle He has created, they assign a portion to God, saying: 'This is for God' – or so they pretend – 'and this is for the partners we associate [with Him]'. Whatever they assign to their partners never reaches God, but that which is assigned to God does reach their partners.*" (6: 136) In fact, they believed in many legends and superstitions concerning cattle, and these were all the result of deviant practices. In this way, they claimed that they were forbidden to ride some animals, while others were considered unlawful to eat: "*They say: 'Such cattle and crops are forbidden. None may eat of them save those whom we permit' – so they falsely claim. Other cattle they declare to be forbidden to burden their backs; and there are cattle over which they do not pronounce God's name, inventing [in all this] a lie against Him.*" (6: 138)

This *sūrah* discusses such deviant beliefs putting forward the original truth and demonstrating that cattle are God's creatures, representing an aspect of life that is closely related to the creation of the heavens and the earth. God has made cattle subservient to man so that people can express their gratitude and give thanks to Him for such a blessing. They must neither attribute false partners to Him nor enact for themselves legislation that is at variance with what pleases God, when they recognize Him as the Creator. How absurd that they discard the natural result of this truth, which they acknowledge, allowing superstition to get the better of them: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verses 9–14)

Ignorant paganism used to claim that angels were God's daughters. Although they hated daughters being born to themselves, they nonetheless attributed daughters to God and worshipped these instead of Him. They alleged that they worshipped them by God's will. Had He willed otherwise, they would not have worshipped them. Again, this was nothing but a legend arising from deviant beliefs.

The *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic as well as the logic of sound human nature to refute this baseless legend: "*Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the*

Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (Verses 15–22)

When they were told that they were only worshipping statues, idols and trees, and that everyone who worships anything other than God will be thrown into hell together with the object of their worship, they twisted this clear statement making it a subject of dispute. They referred to Jesus, pointing out that his followers worshipped him. So would he be thrown into hell? They also argued that the idols represented angels who were God's daughters. Therefore, they postulated, "we are better worshipping them than the Christians who worship Jesus, a mere human being." The *sūrah* exposes such twisted logic, absolving Jesus of what the Christians perpetrated after his time, since he did not sanction anything of the sort: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verses 57–59)

They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith and, as such, were best guided, yet all the while they were immersed in pagan ignorance. The *sūrah* outlines the true nature of Abraham's faith, based on God's absolute oneness. This principle continued and will continue among Abraham's descendants. Muḥammad, God's messenger, came to them with the same principle, but they received him with other than what Abraham's offspring should give: "*Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*" (Verses 26–30)

They could not understand God's wisdom in choosing His messenger. Their earthly values, the basis of the status they assigned to people, contributed to their unwillingness to accept him. The *sūrah*

reports what they said in this respect, presenting the true values that should be upheld in comparison to their trivial ones: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verses 31–35)

The *sūrah* then recounts an episode from Moses' life history, one that reflects Pharaoh's similarly false values. This account demonstrates how both these values and Pharaoh himself were unworthy. It tells us of the fate that awaits him and all those with similar attitudes: "*We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 46–56)

I

Ignorance Based on Superstition

Al-Zukhruf (Gold)



In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

By the Book that makes things clear! (2)

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand. (3)

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٣﴾

It originates in the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom. (4)

وَإِنَّهُ فِي أُمِّ الْكِتَابِ لَدَيْنَا لَعَلِيٌّ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds? (5)

أَفَنَضْرِبُ عَنكُمُ الذِّكْرَ صَفْحًا أَن كُنتُمْ قَوْمًا مُّسْرِفِينَ ﴿٥﴾

وَكَمْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن نَّبِيٍّ فِي الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; (6)

وَمَا يَأْتِيهِم مِّن نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ ﴿٧﴾

but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. (7)

فَأَهْلَكْنَا أَشَدَّ مِنْهُم بَطْشًا وَمَضَىٰ مَثَلُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history. (8)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ خَلَقَهُنَّ الْعَزِيزُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' (9)

الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ مَهْدًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ فِيهَا سُبُلًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. (10)

وَالَّذِي نَزَّلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً بِقَدَرٍ فَأَنشَرْنَا بِهِ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ تُخْرَجُونَ ﴿١١﴾

And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. (11)

وَالَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا وَجَعَلَ لَكُم مِّنَ الْفُلْكِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ مَا تَرْكَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, (12)

لِتَسْتَوُۥا۟ عَلَىٰ ظُهُورِهِۦ ثُمَّ تَذْكُرُوا۟ نِعْمَةَ
رَبِّكُمْ إِذَا ٱسْتَوَيْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَتَقُولُوا۟
سُبْحَٰنَ ٱلَّذِى سَخَّرَ لَنَا هَٰذَا وَمَا
كُنَّا لَهُۥ مُقْرِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. (13)

وَإِنَّآ إِلَىٰ رَبِّنَا لَمُنقَلِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

To our Lord we shall most certainly return.' (14)

وَجَعَلُوا۟ لَهُۥ مِنْ عِبَادِهِۦ جُزْءًا ۚ إِنَّ
ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ لَكَفُورٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. (15)

أَمِ ٱتَّخَذَ مِمَّا يَخْلُقُ بَنَٰتٍ
وَأَصْفَىٰكُم بِٱلْبَنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? (16)

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُم بِمَا ضَرَبَ
لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ مَثَلًا ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُۥ مُسْوَدًّا
وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. (17)

أَوَمَن يُنَشَّؤُا۟ فِى ٱلْحِلْيَةِ وَهُوَ فِى
ٱلْخِصَامِ غَيْرُ مُبِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾

[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? (18)

وَجَعَلُوا۟ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ
عِبَٰدُ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ إِنَٰثًا ۚ أَشَهِدُوا۟
خَلْقَهُمْ ۚ سَتُكْتَبُ شَهَٰدَتُهُمْ
وَيُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. (19)

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْ شَآءَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ مَا عَبَدْنَٰهُم ۗ
مَّا لَهُم بِذَٰلِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ ۖ إِنْ هُمْ
إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. (20)

أَمْ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُمْ كِتَٰبًا مِّن قَبْلِهِۦ فَهُم
بِهِۦ مُسْتَمْسِكُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? (21)

بَلْ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا عَلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٍ
وَإِنَّا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' (22)

وَكَذَٰلِكَ مَآ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ فِى
قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ مُتْرَفُوهَآ
إِنَّا وَجَدْنَآ ءَابَآءَنَا عَلَىٰٓ أُمَّةٍ وَإِنَّا
عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم مُّقْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' (23)

قَٰلَ أَوَلَوْ جِئْتُكُمْ بِأَهْدَىٰ مِمَّا وَجَدتُّمْ عَلَيْهِ ءَابَآءَكُمْ ۖ قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا بِمَآ أُرْسِلْتُم بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' (24)

فَٱنتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ ۖ فَٱنظُرْ كَيْفَ كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (25)

An Address to the Mind

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters *Ḥā* and *Mīm* which are then followed by an oath by the book that makes things clear. Both the letters and the book are of the same nature: in its spoken form, the book is of the same type as the letters. Just like all letters in human language, the two letters, or sounds, are of God's signs: it is He who created people and gave them the sounds of their languages. When such letters are mentioned, they carry more than a single meaning with reference to the Qur'ān.

God states this oath by the two letters and the clear book so as to confirm the purpose of making this Qur'ān in the form it was made when revealed to the Arabs: "*We have made the Qur'ān a discourse in Arabic so that you may understand.*" (Verse 3) The purpose, then, is that they should understand it as it is composed in their own tongue. The Qur'ān is God's revelation which He has made, in its spoken form, Arabic as He chose the Arabs to be the bearers of His message. We explained this purpose partly in commenting on the previous *sūrah*. Moreover, God made His choice on the basis of His knowledge that the Arabs were suitable message-bearers and that their language could best express it. God knows whom to entrust with His message.

He then defines what position He has assigned for the Qur'ān with Him and its value in His overall plan for the universe: "*It originates in*

the source of revelation kept with Us; it is indeed sublime, full of wisdom." (Verse 4) We will only in passing refer to the literal meaning of the phrase *Umm al-Kitāb*, translated here as 'the source of revelation'. Does it refer to the 'imperishable tablet'[1] mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'ān, or to God's eternal knowledge? Both are the same in the sense that they do not have a specific meaning within our sphere of knowledge. Yet the verse transmits a definite impression that the Qur'ān has an especially high value in God's overall knowledge and planning. This is enough for us. The Qur'ān is '*sublime*', and '*full of wisdom*'. These two qualities give it a specific rationality, and indeed it is so! It is as if the Qur'ān has a soul of its own, with special features and qualities, that respond to the souls of those who interact with it. With its sublime position and wisdom, it provides guidance to humanity, leading it according to its own nature and qualities, imparting to its rational understanding and to its life values, concepts and facts that are also sublime and bear wisdom.

When this fact has been established it makes the people who speak the language in which the Qur'ān has been revealed appreciate the great gift and blessing God has given them. It shows them the extent of their transgression when they turn away from it in disdain. It is they who deserve to be treated with contempt. Therefore, they are told that they may well be ignored because of their transgression: "*Should We ignore you and take away this reminder from you because you are people who transgress beyond bounds?*" (Verse 5)

It is indeed most remarkable that God, in His glory and sublimity, should care for such people, revealing to them a book in their own tongue, telling them about what they feel, explaining the inner aspects of their lives, showing them the path delineated by His guidance, relating to them accounts of earlier communities and reminding them of God's law that was in effect during ancient times. Yet they continue to ignore His guidance, turning away from it. For God to say that they will be deprived of His care and be ignored for their transgression sounds dreadful.

1. Verse 22 of *Sūrah* 85.

In addition to this threat, they are reminded of God's law that applied to earlier communities that denied the prophets sent to them: "*Many a prophet did We send to people of olden times; but they mocked at each prophet who came to them. We destroyed them even though they were mightier than these. Thus their example has gone down in history.*" (Verses 6–8) What can they expect when God has already destroyed people that were much mightier than they because of their derision of the messengers sent to them?

The Almighty Creator

Amazingly, although the Arabs recognized that God was the Creator of the heavens and the earth, they did not follow this through to its logical conclusion, declaring His oneness and address all worship to Him. On the contrary, they attributed partners to Him, assigning to these some of the cattle He has created. They also alleged that the angels were God's daughters whom they worshipped in the form of idols. The Qur'ān reports their acknowledgement of God's creation, puts before them the logic of human nature which they discard, and outlines the behaviour they should adopt in response to His blessings, particularly ships and cattle. It then describes what they claim about the angels:

> *Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.' It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way. And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead. And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.* (Verses 9–14)

The Arabs had a faith, which we can imagine as consisting of remnants of the original pure faith of Abraham, that had lost its original shining colours, intermingled with legends. What remained was something that human nature could not deny, namely that the universe has a Creator who is God: the universe could not have existed without a Creator and the Creator could only be God. Yet, the Arabs did not take this natural truth to its logical conclusion; they simply stopped at the bare fact: "*Yet if you ask them, 'Who created the heavens and the earth?' they are sure to answer, 'The Almighty, the All-Knowing created them.'*" (Verse 9)

It is obvious that they did not verbalize God's two attributes: the Almighty and the All-Knowing. They acknowledged that it was God who created the universe, but they did not know God according to His attributes detailed in the Islamic faith. These are positive attributes that produce a clear effect on people's lives and the life of the universe. They admitted that God created them and the universe, but they also alleged that He had partners because they did not know God's attributes that would have made the very concept of partnership with Him appear absurd. The Qur'ān tells them now that the Creator they acknowledge is the One who is Almighty and who knows all.

The *sūrah* takes them another step forward in outlining God's attributes and the favours He has given them: "*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you so that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Smoothing out the earth is a fact understood, in one way or another, by everyone. The people who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān would have seen the earth smooth under their feet when they walked, ready for plants to grow. It is smoothed out generally for life to grow. However, we realize this today in a more profound way, taking into account what we have learnt about the nature of the earth and its history. Future generations will understand this fact in an even greater way; human knowledge will continue to expand and discover new facts that have so far remained unknown.

Today, we understand that smoothing out the earth so as to enable the human race to survive on it and find ways and paths to ensure life progresses is a complex multi-faceted process. In fact, this planet has gone through a number of different stages that have allowed its surface

to change from a hard rocky one to plant-supporting soil. Water has been formed from oxygen and hydrogen. Its rotation speed has slowed down to ensure that it has moderate temperatures throughout its day and so as to allow objects to remain stable on its surface. Moreover, a proper measure of gravity has been placed on it to ensure that its atmosphere remains sufficiently stable to support life. Without such an atmosphere life cannot be sustained, as is the case on other planets with a gravity too weak to ensure stability. Moreover, the earth's gravity has been made equal to movement and this equilibrium has protected objects and living things from being blown away, while at the same time allowing man and other living things to move on the surface of the earth. Had gravity increased above this sustainable level, all objects and living creatures would have been stuck to the earth and their movements would have become very hard or even impossible. Furthermore, air pressure would have increased so as to bind them firmly to the earth or crush them against it, just as we sometimes crush flies and mosquitoes with a strike that does not bring our hands into contact with them but rather increases the air pressure around them. By contrast, should air pressure decrease, our veins and breasts may burst.

The smoothing of the earth to make it life supporting also refers to the fact that the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator has brought about numerous balances which together facilitate human life on earth. Had any of these been disturbed, life would have become very difficult, even impossible. We have already mentioned some of these. We may, however, refer to the fact that the great amount of water that covers much of the earth's surface purges its atmosphere of much of the poisonous gases that result from the infinite number of interactions that take place all the time. Thus, its atmosphere remains life supporting. Plants also ensure that a proper balance is maintained between the oxygen living creatures breathe in and the oxygen breathed out during the process of assimilation plants perform. Unless this balance is maintained, all living things would have suffocated in a very short period of time.

Indeed the significance of the Qur'ānic statement, '*It is He who has smoothed out the earth for you and has traced on it paths for you,*' grows

wider every day. Every new addition to its significance testifies to both God's might and knowledge. We see God's able hand wherever we look and however far our imagination roams. It tells man that his life is not the result of blind coincidence nor has he been abandoned. Indeed, God's hand defines man's every step before, during and after his life on earth.

"*So that you can find your way.*" (Verse 10) Reflection on what the universe contains and its natural laws inevitably leads the human mind to recognition of its Creator who established such accurate and perfectly harmonious systems.

Blessings of Every Type

The *sūrah* then looks a step further at the process of life and the emergence of living creatures: "*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure. With it We raise dead land to life; and thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) Water comes down from the skies, as every person sees and knows, but most people are not moved by this remarkable phenomenon because of over familiarity. Muḥammad, God's messenger, (peace be upon him), however, held a different attitude. He looked at the drops of rain with love and welcoming delight, knowing that they came from God; in other words, his heart recognized God's handiwork in these drops. Every heart that is aware of its bond with God and the laws of nature He has set in operation should adopt this attitude. Every raindrop is the result of these laws of nature which operate under God's eye and control. That rain originates from the vapour that rises from the earth and cools down in the atmosphere in no way diminishes the implication of these facts. Who has brought the earth into being, placed water on it, subjected it to heat, made water naturally evaporate and vapour rise and condense? Who has given the universe its other characteristics which give the condensing vapour an electrical charge so that when clouds gather, their electric charges cause rain to fall? Besides, what is electricity? What are these other characteristics that produce the combined effect of rain falling down? As we learn more about nature, however, our knowledge casts a heavy weight over our understanding. We no longer

appreciate the messages given by universal phenomena; we no longer allow these messages to refine our feelings and responses.

"*And He it is who sends down water from the sky in due measure.*" (Verse 11) It is given in the right quantity, neither too much so as to flood large areas of land, nor too little to leave the land barren. Man has come to recognize the importance of maintaining this fine balance for the continuity of life. "*With it We raise dead land to life.*" Life on earth flourishes where water is plentiful. It is from water that every living thing originates. "*And thus you will be raised from the dead.*" (Verse 11) The One who originated life in the first place will bring it back again. It is He who started life in a land that was dead, and He will raise all back to life on the Day of Resurrection. Nothing is difficult for Him.

We learn from this *sūrah* that the Arab unbelievers used to assign a portion of their cattle to God and another portion to other beings. God, however, created cattle as one of the favours He bestows on man: people ride cattle as they ride on ships and they should appreciate His blessings and give thanks: "*And He it is who created all living things in pairs, and provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride, so that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves. To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verses 12–14)

Making things in pairs is a rule of life, as indicated in this verse. All living things are created in pairs; even the first living cell carries masculine and feminine characteristics. In fact, this rule perhaps applies to the universe in its entirety, if we consider its basic unit to be the atom which consists of a negative electron and a positive proton, as all research in physics has so far indicated. Be that as it may, this duality is apparent throughout life. It is God who has created all pairs, human and non-human.

Moreover, it is He who has "*provided for you the ships and animals on which you ride.*" (Verse 12) This is to remind man that God has placed him in charge of the earth, putting at his disposal its considerable and varied power and potential. It also invites man to show gratitude for God's choice and blessings, reminds him of the One who grants

blessings every time such a blessing is enjoyed. Such expressions of gratitude for God's blessings is sure to keep our hearts alive to their bond with God at every turn in life: "*So that when you are seated on their backs you remember your Lord's blessings and say: 'Limitless in His glory is He who has made all this subservient to our use. We could not have done it by ourselves.*" (Verse 13) We certainly cannot match His blessings. All that we can do is to be truly grateful and give due thanks for all that He has favoured us with. We should realize that we will eventually return to God after our term in charge of the earth comes to its end. He will then requite us for what we have done in life when we enjoyed His favours and what He placed at our service: "*To our Lord we shall most certainly return.*" (Verse 14) Such are the refined manners people should adopt towards God who has granted us countless favours and blessings. Yet we tend to forget Him even when we are enjoying His favours. Hence, this gentle reminder.

These Islamic manners closely relate to the cultivation of the human conscience and people's education. This is not a mere ritual or empty phrase we say when mounting cattle or riding on ships and other means of transport. It is a deliberate action that aims to alert our feelings so that we are fully aware of the bond between God and His creatures. Furthermore, His blessings are granted to us freely; we cannot repay God in any way for any of His countless blessings. Hence, we should always remain in awe of Him, thinking of the day when we will meet Him and submit our account of what we did in life. Thus we should always remain conscious of God, aware that He is watching over us.

An Absurd Superstition

The *sūrah* then refers to the absurd legend that makes deities of angels, alleging that they are God's daughters when they are no more than a different type of creature:

> *Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude. Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons? If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily*

attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom. [Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument? They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it. They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying. Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast? No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.' And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end. (Verses 15–25)

The *sūrah* addresses every aspect of this superstition, leaving no loophole unclosed. Throughout, the *sūrah* uses the unbelievers' own logic and draws on their own life situations. It places before them the fate of earlier communities that adopted a similar stand to theirs, making almost identical allegations. It begins by highlighting the absurdity of this superstition and what it means of blatant rejection of the truth: "*Yet they assign to Him some of His own servants as offspring. Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude.*" (Verse 15) The angels are God's servants. To allege that they are God's offspring means that they are not His servants, but instead have a special relationship with Him. Since they are God's servants, to give them any special relation to their Creator is meaningless. All God's creatures are His servants. Such a claim, thus, brands man as a clear unbeliever: "*Surely man is clearly bereft of all gratitude.*" (Verse 15)

Using their own logic and standards, the *sūrah* ridicules their allegation that the angels are female and then their claim that they are

God's offspring: "*Would He, out of all His creation, choose for Himself daughters and favour you with sons?*" (Verse 16) If God were to take offspring for Himself, why would He choose females and give the males to them? This is nothing less than absurd and especially when they are so distressed when a daughter is born to them. "*If any of them is given the good news of the birth of what he so readily attributes to the Lord of Grace, his face darkens and he is filled with gloom.*" (Verse 17)

What sort of manners are these that make them attribute to God what would fill them with gloom? Indeed, they would be so distressed about parenting a daughter that they could not even face speaking about it. In their environment, it was only brave men who could fight hard in battle that were looked upon with esteem. How come, then, that they assign to God offspring of the type which only cares about jewellery and fine things, unable to refute an argument or fight a case? "*[Would they ascribe to God] someone who is brought up among trinkets and cannot put together a clear argument?*" (Verse 18) Here we see how the *sūrah* uses their own logic, making them ashamed of attributing to God what they themselves hate to father. Should they not, if at all, have attributed to Him what scores highly in their own estimation?

The *sūrah* then refutes another of their absurd superstitions. They alleged that the angels were female. On what basis do they make such a claim? "*They claim that the angels, who are themselves but servants of the Lord of Grace, are females! Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19) Were they present when the angels were created so as to know that they were female? Had they seen their creation, they would have had reliable evidence. They certainly cannot claim to have been present at the time, yet still they make this ridiculous assertion. Therefore, they will be made responsible for claiming what they have no evidence to prove: "*Their testimony will be put on record and they will be questioned about it.*" (Verse 19)

The unbelievers provide further argument to justify their absurdities, but once again the *sūrah* exposes how flawed their statements are: "*They say: 'Had it been the will of the Lord of Grace, we should never have worshipped them.' Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly*

lying." (Verse 20) When they are faced with irrefutable argument based on solid evidence, they justify their action by claiming that it is God's will. They allege that God accepts their worship of angels. Had He not been pleased with this, He would have prevented them from such worship! How devious! It is true that everything in the universe occurs by God's will. Yet it is also God's will that man has been given the ability to choose for himself which way to follow: true guidance or error. God has also required man to choose His guidance and follow it, telling man that this is the choice He will be pleased with. He is not pleased when man chooses error and disbelief, even though He has enabled him to do so.

When they attribute their own choice to God's will, this is nothing less than wild conjecture. They cannot be certain that God wants them to worship the angels. How can they achieve such certainty? "*Of that they have no knowledge: they are blatantly lying.*" (Verse 20) They simply indulge in guesswork and delusion. "*Or have We given them a book before this one to which they are still holding fast?*" (Verse 21) Do they have such a book as a basis for their claims, giving them clear evidence in support of their worship?

Thus we see how the *sūrah* closes in on them, refuting every argument they make, and clearly indicating that faith cannot be based on guesswork or unsupported claims. Faith can only be based on a revealed book to which people should adhere.

At this point, the *sūrah* exposes the reality on which they rely when holding to their absurd superstition that makes them offer false worship: "*No indeed! They say, 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we find our guidance by following in their footsteps.'*" (Verse 22) This is a ludicrous and baseless argument. It shows them to be content to follow their ancestors without thinking about or looking into the basis of their actions. Thus, they are no more than a herd of cattle driven to where it does not know. They are totally unaware of their destination or whether they are following the road leading to it.

Being a message that seeks to free the human mind of all shackles, Islam rejects such abject following in the footsteps of ancestors. Every action should be determined on the basis of deliberate thinking and conscious choice.

At the end of this passage, the unbelievers are shown the fates of earlier communities that argued in the same vein and blindly followed their forefathers' footsteps, rejecting the truth clearly presented to them by God's messengers: "*And thus it is: whenever, before your time, We sent a messenger to any community, the wealthy among them said: 'We found our forefathers following this tradition and we are only following in their footsteps.' He said: 'Even though I bring you a guidance better than what you saw your forefathers following?' They replied: 'We reject the message you have been sent with.' Therefore, We inflicted Our retribution on them. Reflect on how those who rejected the truth met their end.*" (Verses 23–25)

Thus we see that those who turn away from Divine guidance are of a similar nature and use the same arguments. They are blind to everything other than following in their forefathers' footsteps. They close their minds to any new evidence, rejecting any new way even though it may be better, rely on solid argument and bring better results. Such a persistently deviant nature, which will not open its eyes or mind to the truth, deserves nothing but destruction. Such is the fate put before the unbelievers so that, perchance, they will take heed.



2

Blindness Out of Choice

Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, (26)

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَٰهِيمُ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِۦٓ إِنَّنِى بَرَآءٌ مِّمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' (27)

إِلَّا ٱلَّذِى فَطَرَنِى فَإِنَّهُۥ سَيَهْدِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God]. (28)

وَجَعَلَهَا كَلِمَةًۢ بَاقِيَةً فِى عَقِبِهِۦ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. (29)

بَلْ مَتَّعْتُ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ وَءَابَآءَهُمْ حَتَّىٰ جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ وَرَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' (30)

وَلَمَّا جَآءَهُمُ ٱلْحَقُّ قَالُوا۟ هَٰذَا سِحْرٌ وَإِنَّا بِهِۦ كَٰفِرُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَقَالُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانُ عَلَىٰ رَجُلٍ مِّنَ ٱلْقَرْيَتَيْنِ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?' (31)

أَهُمْ يَقْسِمُونَ رَحْمَتَ رَبِّكَ ۚ نَحْنُ قَسَمْنَا بَيْنَهُم مَّعِيشَتَهُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَرَفَعْنَا بَعْضَهُمْ فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ دَرَجَٰتٍ لِّيَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُهُم بَعْضًا سُخْرِيًّا ۗ وَرَحْمَتُ رَبِّكَ خَيْرٌ مِّمَّا يَجْمَعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. (32)

وَلَوْلَآ أَن يَكُونَ ٱلنَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَٰحِدَةً لَّجَعَلْنَا لِمَن يَكْفُرُ بِٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ لِبُيُوتِهِمْ سُقُفًا مِّن فِضَّةٍ وَمَعَارِجَ عَلَيْهَا يَظْهَرُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, (33)

وَلِبُيُوتِهِمْ أَبْوَٰبًا وَسُرُرًا عَلَيْهَا يَتَّكِـُٔونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

gates, couches on which to recline, (34)

وَزُخْرُفًا ۚ وَإِن كُلُّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمَّا مَتَٰعُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ وَٱلْـَٔاخِرَةُ عِندَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (35)

We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. (36)

وَمَن يَعْشُ عَن ذِكْرِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ نُقَيِّضْ لَهُ شَيْطَانًا فَهُوَ لَهُ قَرِينٌ ﴿٣٦﴾

These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. (37)

وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَصُدُّونَهُمْ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُم مُّهْتَدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! (38)

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَنَا قَالَ يَا لَيْتَ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكَ بُعْدَ الْمَشْرِقَيْنِ فَبِئْسَ الْقَرِينُ ﴿٣٨﴾

Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering. (39)

وَلَن يَنفَعَكُمُ الْيَوْمَ إِذ ظَّلَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ فِي الْعَذَابِ مُشْتَرِكُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? (40)

أَفَأَنتَ تُسْمِعُ الصُّمَّ أَوْ تَهْدِي الْعُمْيَ وَمَن كَانَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; (41)

فَإِمَّا نَذْهَبَنَّ بِكَ فَإِنَّا مِنْهُم مُّنتَقِمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. (42)

أَوْ نُرِيَنَّكَ الَّذِي وَعَدْنَاهُمْ فَإِنَّا عَلَيْهِم مُّقْتَدِرُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

فَٱسْتَمْسِكْ بِٱلَّذِىٓ أُوحِىَ إِلَيْكَ ۖ إِنَّكَ
عَلَىٰ صِرَٰطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path; (43)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَذِكْرٌ لَّكَ وَلِقَوْمِكَ ۖ
وَسَوْفَ تُسْـَٔلُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. (44)

وَسْـَٔلْ مَنْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ مِن
رُّسُلِنَآ أَجَعَلْنَا مِن دُونِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ
ءَالِهَةً يُعْبَدُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (45)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِلَىٰ
فِرْعَوْنَ وَمَلَإِيْهِۦ فَقَالَ إِنِّى
رَسُولُ رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' (46)

فَلَمَّا جَآءَهُم بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ إِذَا هُم مِّنْهَا
يَضْحَكُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them, (47)

وَمَا نُرِيهِم مِّنْ ءَايَةٍ إِلَّا هِىَ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ أُخْتِهَا ۖ وَأَخَذْنَٰهُم بِٱلْعَذَابِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. (48)

وَقَالُوا۟ يَٰٓأَيُّهَ ٱلسَّاحِرُ ٱدْعُ لَنَا رَبَّكَ بِمَا
عَهِدَ عِندَكَ إِنَّنَا لَمُهْتَدُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' (49)

فَلَمَّا كَشَفْنَا عَنْهُمُ الْعَذَابَ إِذَا هُمْ
يَنْكُثُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word. (50)

وَنَادَىٰ فِرْعَوْنُ فِي قَوْمِهِ قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ
أَلَيْسَ لِي مُلْكُ مِصْرَ وَهَٰذِهِ الْأَنْهَارُ
تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِي ۖ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? (51)

أَمْ أَنَا خَيْرٌ مِّنْ هَٰذَا الَّذِي هُوَ مَهِينٌ
وَلَا يَكَادُ يُبِينُ ﴿٥٢﴾

Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? (52)

فَلَوْلَا أُلْقِيَ عَلَيْهِ أَسْوِرَةٌ مِّن ذَهَبٍ أَوْ جَاءَ
مَعَهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ مُقْتَرِنِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?' (53)

فَاسْتَخَفَّ قَوْمَهُ فَأَطَاعُوهُ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ
كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil. (54)

فَلَمَّا آسَفُونَا انتَقَمْنَا مِنْهُمْ
فَأَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; (55)

فَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ سَلَفًا وَمَثَلًا
لِّلْآخِرِينَ ﴿٥٦﴾

and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations. (56)

Overview

The Quraysh, the major Arabian tribe living in Makkah at the time of the revelation of the Qur'ān, used to say that they were Abraham's descendants, which was true. They also claimed that they followed Abraham's faith, which was untrue. Abraham espoused monotheism, clear and undistorted. It was for his belief in the One God that he abandoned his father and his people, after he was subjected to execution by burning. His religion is based on this basic belief. He urged his children and descendants to remain true to it. Thus, no trace of polytheism is ever found in his faith.

In this section of the *sūrah* the Arabs are made to see this historical fact so that they might check their claims against it. The *sūrah* also reports their objections to the Prophet Muḥammad's message: "*They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?'*" (Verse 31) It shows the basic flaw in this argument: not only does it disregard the true values on which God wants human life to be based but it also espouses false values which turn them away from true guidance. Once the truth is outlined, the *sūrah* tells them of the fate of those who prefer to remain blind to God's remembrance. It also explains why such a choice was made which boils down to nothing less than following what Satan whispers. At the end of this section, the *sūrah* consoles God's messenger, who is grieved by their choice. He is told that he cannot make the blind see nor the deaf hear. They will have their due requital, whether he lives to see how God punishes them or God chooses to delay such punishment. He is directed, therefore, to hold fast to what is revealed to him as it represents the truth preached by all former messengers: "*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?*" (Verse 45)

In this section we are also given an episode from Moses' story, which reflects the Arabs' attitude to God's messenger. It seems that the same objections are repeated again: Pharaoh and his people adhered to the same false values upheld by the pagan Arabs.

The Principle Abraham Urged

> *Abraham said to his father and his people: 'I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.' He made this an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].* (Verses 26–28)

The precept of monotheism rejected by the Quraysh was nothing but the belief advocated by Abraham, from whom they descended. It was this great principle that Abraham declared to his own father and people, thus rejecting their false creed, disowning their traditional worship. He did not adopt falsehood simply because his father and people practised it. In fact, he did not pay them any courtesy when he declared his rejection of it in a clear and emphatic statement quoted in the Qur'ān: "*I renounce what you worship, I worship none other than Him who brought me into being. It is He who will guide me.*" (Verses 26–27)

It appears from Abraham's statement that although his people did not deny God's existence, they nonetheless assigned partners to Him and worshipped others beside Him. Therefore, Abraham disowned all those they worshipped other than God. He described God by His attribute that makes Him the One to be worshipped, which is the fact that He initiates and originates. It is He who deserves to be worshipped because He is the One who creates. He also stated his firm belief that God would give him guidance. He created him and He knew how to grant him guidance.

Abraham clearly stated this precept of God's oneness to which the whole universe testifies. He said it and made it "*an abiding precept among his descendants so that they might always return [to God].*" (Verse 28) It fell to Abraham to have the largest share in establishing this precept in life, delivering it to future generations through his seed. A number of his descendants were prophets and messengers, among whom three belong to the very select group of messengers endowed with the strongest resolve. These three are Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all). Today, scores of centuries after Abraham, more

than a billion people who follow the three Divine religions are indebted to Abraham for their belief in the fundamental principle of God's oneness. It was he who made it an abiding precept among his descendants. Many of them may abandon it, but it remains firm, clear and undistorted. Thus, people will always have a chance to return to God, their Creator, and worship Him. This represents a return to the truth, understanding it and holding firm to it.

Mankind knew the principle of God's oneness before Abraham, through many prophets such as Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and perhaps Idrīs, as also through other messengers who did not have a continuous line of descendants who could revive and advocate the principle. It was, therefore, with Abraham that this principle took firm root on earth. It continued to be advocated by his descendants, with a continuous line of prophethood, up to the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him), who descended from Abraham through his son, Ishmael, and who bore the greatest similarity to him.[2] Muḥammad stated the principle of God's oneness in its final and most comprehensive form, a form that influences every human activity and life concept.

How did those Arabs, descending from Abraham, receive this principle? They had after all been far removed from it for generations. Indeed, they had forgotten Abraham's faith to the extent that the principle of God's oneness was alien to them, viewed as exceedingly singular. They gave the Prophet preaching it a very bad reception, judging the Divine message by earthly standards. Hence, their criteria were flawed:

> *I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear. Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.' They also say, 'Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities.' Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to*

2. Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "I have been shown earlier prophets. I found Moses (peace be upon him) to be a tall, slim type of man, as though he belonged to the men of Shanū'ah [One of the tribes of Yemen]. I saw Jesus (peace be upon him) and the person I know who has the closest similarity to him is 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd. I saw Abraham (peace be upon him) and the one who bears closest similarity to him is your man, [meaning himself]." – al-Bukhārī

them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass. Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing. (Verses 29–35)

The *sūrah* turns to speak of those people present at the time of revelation: "*I have allowed these people and their forefathers to enjoy their lives freely until the truth has come to them through a messenger who makes things clear.*" (Verse 29) It is as though the *sūrah* is saying: 'Let us not talk about Abraham, for these people have no relation to him. We will discuss their situation specifically, which has no relevance to Abraham and what he advocated. God says that He allowed these people and their ancestors to enjoy life, providing them with much, and allowing them a long life, until the truth came to them in the shape of the Qur'ān, and there came to them a messenger who stated things clearly. Nevertheless, "*Now that the truth has come to them, they say, 'This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.'*" (Verse 30)

The truth, which is always clearly manifest, cannot be confused with sorcery. What they said was conjecture and they were the first to know that it was false. The elders of the Quraysh could not have been blind to the truth of the message of the Qur'ān, yet they aimed to deceive the masses: first by alleging that it was sorcery and secondly by reaffirming their rejection of it: "*This is all sorcery, and we reject it outright.*" (Verse 30) In this way, they sought to impress the masses by showing themselves to be confident of what they said. Like all who are deluded, the masses would then follow them. What the Quraysh elders feared most was that they might lose their influence over people. Should the people see the truth of the principle of God's oneness, no leader would have any influence except within the framework of worshipping God alone.

Whom to Entrust with God's Message

The Qur'ān describes their confused values and standards as they objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as the one to bring them light and the message of the truth: "*They also say: Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) The two cities they referred to were Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Prophet belonged to the most distinguished family in the clan of Hāshim of the Quraysh tribe, which were the elite among Arabs. He was also known to be a man of high principles and fine manners, even before he was chosen as God's messenger. However, he was not a tribal chief, while his environment placed much store on such considerations. Hence their objection: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31)

God certainly knows best whom to entrust with His message. He chose the man whom He knew to be best suited to the task. Limitless is God in His glory! He chose a man whose paramount qualities were his morality and dedication, both of which are part of the nature and essence of the Islamic message. For the delivery of His message, He chose neither a tribal chief nor a man of wealth or social influence. This because He did not wish any earthly value to cast a shadow over the message bestowed from on high. It should neither be adorned with an earthly jewel nor be influenced by any alien effect. Thus, no one would embrace it to achieve ambition, and no one would seek it for unfair gain.

With their narrow view of worldly pleasures and lack of awareness of the nature of the Divine message, the Arabs objected to the choice of Muḥammad (peace be upon him) as God's messenger, suggesting that a recognized leader of either of the two cities would have been preferable. The *sūrah* denounces their objections and reminds them of how God bestows His grace on whomever He chooses of His servants. It shows the flaw inherent in their concepts which confuse worldly values with Divine ones. It also makes clear to them how their values score in God's accurate measure: "*Is it they who apportion your Lord's grace? It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may*

take others into their service. Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass." (Verse 32)

How singular! What business do they have in apportioning God's grace when they cannot even determine their own provisions? Whatever comes their way of earthly provisions is determined by God, according to His wisdom and how He wants life on earth to progress: "*It is We who deal out to them their livelihood in the life of this world, and raise some in rank above others, so that some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32)

People's livelihood and provisions in this present life are influenced by their individual talents, life circumstances and social relations. The way they are shared out among individuals and communities is subject to all these factors. Its sharing, however, differs from one generation and society to another, according to the systems, relations and general circumstances of each. The one essential feature which has never been absent, even under the most government-controlled system, is that people's shares are different. It has never happened that people receive equal shares, not even under artificial social orders claiming to enshrine absolute equality.

The result is that some people are raised in rank above others; a situation that occurs in all societies and generations. The purpose for such difference is that "*some of them may take others into their service.*" (Verse 32) When the wheel of life turns, some people will inevitably be made to serve others. What is meant here is not that one class or one person should behave arrogantly towards another. This is a naïve understanding that is unsuited to the Divine pronouncement. The significance of the statement is longer lasting than any change or development in human society. All mankind serve one another as the wheel of life turns with them all. The one whose provisions are stinted serves the one who is affluent, but the reverse is true as well. Those who have plenty accumulate wealth, using it for their living and employ others who will then receive their provisions by virtue of their work. Each one thus serves another, and it is the difference in their livelihoods and their provisions that enable them to use one another in the course of life. Thus, a worker is in the service of the engineer and the employer,

while the engineer is in the service of the employer and the worker, and the employer, in turn, serves both engineer and worker in like manner. All contribute to man's assignment on earth through their differences in abilities, talents, livelihoods and incomes.

I know that many advocates of government-controlled systems cite this verse in their criticism of Islam and its social and economic systems. I also think that some Muslims feel uneasy about this statement. They feel that they need to defend Islam against the charge of establishing distinction between people in their provisions so that some of them can take others into service. It is time, however, that the advocates of Islam should stand firm, feeling absolutely proud of their faith. They need not defend it against a trivial accusation that will always remain unsubstantiated. Islam states permanent facts that remain part of the nature of the universe for as long as life continues.

It is part of the nature of human life that it relies on differences between individual human beings with respect to their abilities and talents, as well as to the type of work each one can do and the degree of excellence a man or a woman can achieve. These differences are necessary to ensure the fulfilment of a wide range of roles needed to discharge man's mission on earth. Had all human beings been copies of the same model, life on earth could not have survived. Numerous types of work would not have had corresponding abilities. They would have remained undone because there would not have been people who could do them. The One who created life and willed that it should steadily progress also created people with different talents and abilities to correspond to the different tasks that needed fulfilling. It is through such differences in roles that differences of livelihood and provisions occur. Such is the rule.

Greater than Life's Riches

So much for people's livelihood in this present life. Beyond it, however, is something far greater: "*Your Lord's grace is better than all that they can amass.*" (Verse 32) God bestows His grace on those whom He selects, knowing that they deserve it. There is, however, no

connection whatsoever between God's grace and what people have in this present life. Nor is there any connection between it and the values of this world. Such lots are worthless according to God's measure. Hence, they are given to good and bad people, while God's grace is preserved for those whom He chooses.

Earthly values are so petty and insignificant that had God so willed, He would have given them in plenty to those who disbelieve in Him. The only reason behind not doing so is that such plenty would then become a source of delusion, preventing many people from accepting the Divine faith:

> *Were it not that all people would become one community [of unbelievers], We would have provided those who now disbelieve in the Lord of Grace with roofs of silver for houses, stairways on which to ascend, gates, couches on which to recline, and gold ornaments. Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world. It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.* (Verses 33–35)

It is God who knows man's weaknesses best and what effect wealth and affluence have on him. Had it not been for the fact that people would be lured by such luxuries, God would have given to those who disbelieve in the Lord of Grace abundance in this world. He would have given them homes with roofs of silver and staircases made of gold. He would also have given them houses with many doors, indeed palaces with many couches to recline upon and gold ornaments as decor. Giving such luxuries in plenty to disbelievers clearly shows how worthless these items are on God's scales. "*Yet all this would have been nothing but the fleeting enjoyment of life in this world.*" (Verse 35) It is all no more than a fleeting enjoyment that lasts no more than this present life. Moreover, it is all no more than a trifling suited to this lower life.

"*It is the life to come that your Lord reserves for the God-fearing.*" (Verse 35) These are the ones who are honoured by God because they are God-fearing. He stores for them what is better, greater in value and more lasting. He grants them what is special. They are

thus distinguished over those who deny God, the Lord of Grace, for these are only given the trifling enjoyments of this worldly life, which animals also share.

Worldly luxuries, examples of which are given in these verses, dazzle large numbers of people, particularly when they see unbelievers enjoying such commodities while believers are deprived of them. They may see good believers suffering hardship while unbelievers enjoy power, wealth and high position. God knows the effects of such situations on the majority of people. Therefore, He explains to them how worthless these luxuries are in His unerring scales and how truly worthy what He has in store for believers is. A believing heart is reassured that God chooses only what is right and suitable for each group. The Makkan unbelievers who objected to God's choice of a man who had not been given much wealth rated people according to what they have of money and position. These verses make clear how trifling these are in God's sight, so much so that He gives them to the worst of His creatures, the people whom He dislikes most. Hence, affluence and its like does not indicate a person's position with God.

Thus the Qur'ān puts matters in their right perspective, showing the basis on which provisions are given in both this life and the life to come and stating those values that are true and consistent. In doing so, it lays down the basic principles that are unaffected by life's circumstances, developments, different creeds, social systems or environments. Life has its consistent, unchanging rules that govern its development. People who look only at changing appearances and do not reflect on the permanent rules tend to overlook this God-made law. They think that change applies to the essence of things as well as their form and appearance. Hence, they allege that the ever continuing march of life precludes the existence of permanent rules and values. The only law that they believe to be unchanging is that whereby everything undergoes continuous change. We, who believe in Islam, see in what is around us the truth of what God has stated: consistency and change are present, side by side, in every corner and aspect of the universe. The most obvious example before us is the difference in livelihood and provisions between people, and their varied causes and rates.

Which Type of Comrade

The *sūrah* moves on to explain the fate of those who are given plenty of the luxuries of this world but who remain unmindful of their duty of obedience to God and glorifying Him so as to deserve the great prize He grants on the Day of Judgement to those who fear Him:

> *We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade. These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided. When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.' Evil indeed are you for a comrade! Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.* (Verses 36–39)

The Arabic text uses the term *'ashā* as the choice of unbelievers. This term signifies a tiredness of the eyes that prevents them from seeing things. It mostly occurs when facing a glaring light which the human eye cannot look into, or in the evening as darkness begins to descend when a weak eye cannot see things clearly. It may also be the result of illness. Its usage here, signifies blindness and a wilful turning away from God, the Lord of Grace.

"*We shall assign to whoever chooses to remain blind to the remembrance of the Lord of Grace an evil one as a comrade.*" (Verse 36) It has been God's will that when man chooses to neglect His remembrance, Satan finds his way to him and becomes his comrade, whispering to him and making evil things seem goodly and attractive. In the Arabic text, this verse is stated in the conditional form to express a consistent rule that makes the result inevitable when the cause occurs. Thus the evil comrade will certainly turn his comrade away from the right path, even though such a person may continue to think that he is on the right track: "*These [evil ones] turn them away from the right path, making them think that they are rightly guided.*" (Verse 37) This is the worst thing that one comrade can do for another: turning him away from the right path and not allowing him to wake up or reflect on what he is doing. Instead, he keeps him deluded, thinking that he is

doing well, until he comes face to face with his inevitable end. Note, too, that the verse uses the present tense, implying that this is going on now before the eyes of onlookers, though those who are blind do not see it.

The end comes all of a sudden while they are still deluded: "*When such a person comes to Us, he will say [to his comrade]: 'Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West.*" (Verse 38) In an instant we move from this present world to the next. Those who chose to be blind unexpectedly arrive at their destination and wake up like a drunken person regains his consciousness. They open their weak eyes and each one of them looks at his evil comrade who led him to ruin while assuring him of safety. He is so enraged with him that he says to him: "*Would that I was as far away from you as the East is from the West. Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38) I wish I had never met you and that a great gulf had existed between us. The *sūrah* then makes this comment on the exchange between the two comrades: "*Evil indeed are you for a comrade!*" (Verse 38)

As the curtain drops on them both, we hear a word that crushes all hope for them: "*Because of your wrongdoing, it will not be of any benefit to you that you are now to share your suffering.*" (Verse 39) The suffering of each is given in full measure. It is not something to share out among them so as to reduce its effect.

Making the Deaf Hear

The *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet with a word of consolation so that he does not grieve about those who turned away from him, disbelieving in his message. It encourages him to hold on to the truth revealed to him from on high, as it is the same word of truth given to every messenger of God:

> *Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error? If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them. Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a*

straight path; and it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account. Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?' (Verses 40–45)

This point is repeated several times in the Qur'ān to comfort the Prophet and to explain the nature of guidance and error, attributing them both to God's will. They are part of the task assigned to God's messengers, (peace be upon them all). Here the *sūrah* puts clear lines between man's limited power, even at its strongest level given to prophets, and God's free and unrestricted power. It emphasizes God's oneness in one of the most inspiring images in the Qur'ān.

"*Can you [Prophet] make the deaf hear? Or guide the blind or those who are in manifest error?*" (Verse 40) They are neither deaf nor blind, but akin to both in so far as they have chosen to turn away from Divine guidance and follow error. The task assigned to the Prophet is to put the facts before the ones who hear and to guide those who see. When people shut down their receptive faculties and refuse to listen to the discourse addressing their hearts and souls, the Prophet can do nothing for them. There is no way, then, that he can guide them to the truth. He should not grieve over their error, after having fulfilled his task to the best of his ability.

When the Prophet has done his duty, God will now determine matters: "*If We take you away, We shall inflict retribution on them; and if We show you the fulfilment of what We have promised them... We have full power over them.*" (Verses 41–42) The case is resolved either way. Should the Prophet die first, God will determine the punishment of those who rejected his message. If, on the other hand, he remains alive until the fulfilment of what they were warned against, God is certainly able to mete out what His warnings contain. They cannot escape. What He determines will take place. In either case, the matter is subject to His will. The message is His, while the Prophet is only His messenger.

"*Therefore, hold fast to what has been revealed to you: you certainly are on a straight path.*" (Verse 43) Hold on to what you have been given and go along your way, reassured, caring little for them and what

they do. For, "*you certainly are on a straight path.*" It will neither bend nor deviate. This faith is closely related to the essential truth of the universe. It is consistent with the basic law that governs the universe. It leads its follower to the Lord Creator, safe from all error and deviation. God reassures His messenger, re-emphasizing this truth. The advocates of Islam in subsequent generations should find in it reassurance and comfort, even though they may suffer a great deal at the hands of those who have gone astray.

"*And it is an honour for you and your people. In time, you will all be called to account.*" (Verse 44) This verse may be understood in two ways: this Qur'ān is a reminder to you and your people, and you will be questioned about it on the Day of Judgement. Now that you have been given this reminder, you are left with no argument if you fail to follow it. Alternatively, it means that the Qur'ān is an honour that raises the standing of the Prophet and his people. This is what has taken place in reality. As for the Prophet, hundreds of millions of people pray to God at all times of the day and night to bless him and grant him peace; this for more than fourteen centuries. Hundreds of millions of hearts will continue to love him and bless him until the end of time. As for his people, they were very much on the margin of life until the Qur'ān was revealed, giving them the leading role in human history. When they carried its message to the world, they had its leadership, but only for as long as they held on to the Qur'ān. When they abandoned it, they were reduced to the lowest level among humanity. They were left at the tail end after once having been distinguished leaders. Those people whom God has chosen to carry His message and to assume mankind's leadership will face a great responsibility should they abandon their trust: "*you will all be called to account.*" (Verse 44) Of the two interpretations, I prefer this second meaning as it is broader in scope.

"*Ask any of the messengers We sent before you: 'Did We ever appoint deities to be worshipped other than the Lord of Grace?'*" (Verse 45) God's oneness is the central point of Divine religion ever since the first of His messengers. On what basis, then, do those who worship other beings rely? The Qur'ān states this truth here in a unique image that shows the Prophet asking the messengers before him whether God has

appointed deities to be worshipped other than Himself. The very question implies its definitive and categorical answer, given by each and every one of God's messengers. It is a very pleasing image, one that employs a strong, inspiring and effective style.

Needless to say, there are gulfs of time and place between the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and the messengers who went before him. There is also the gulf between life and death, which is far greater than the gulfs of time and place. Yet all these gulfs totally disappear before the essential truth of the unity of the Divine message based on God's oneness. It is this truth that remains solidly present while considerations of time, place, life and death, as also of all changing phenomena, disappear. The dead and the living all testify to it at all times. Such are the connotations of this remarkable Qur'ānic statement.

However, in relation to the Prophet and his brothers, the messengers of God sent before him, and their bond with their Lord, nothing is considered far or near. At any Divine moment, all barriers are removed, and the essential, fundamental truth appears in full colour. It is the truth of all existence that transcends all barriers of time, place, shape and image. At this moment, the Prophet asks and receives the answer, as happened to him on his night journey when he led all earlier prophets in prayer.

When we look at such a statement, it is better for us not to think of limitations in our life. What is familiar to us in life is by no means the total law governing the entire universe. We should remember that we only know some of the phenomena operating in the universe and see some of their effects when we recognize an aspect of its laws. There are barriers in our constitutional make-up and in our senses that limit our perception to what is familiar to us. Beyond that, there is a realm that we cannot fathom.

The Same Old Argument

The *sūrah* continues to console the Prophet in the face of the objections raised about God's choice of him as the messenger by the chiefs of his people, people who upheld the false values of the present world. In this context, the *sūrah* relates an episode from Moses' history

depicting how Pharaoh and his people also upheld the same values. The Quraysh elders said: "*Why was not this Qur'ān revealed to some great man of the two cities?*" (Verse 31) In former times, Pharaoh took pride in his power and kingdom, arrogantly asking: "*Is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see?*" (Verse 51) Proud and arrogant, he pointed to Moses, God's prophet and messenger, who had no great worldly wealth or position, and said: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) Pharaoh also made a suggestion similar to the unbelieving Quraysh: "*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?*" (Verse 53) It sounds like a musical recording, played over and over again.

The *sūrah* shows how the deluded masses responded, despite the miracles shown by Moses and the tests to which they were subjected. Every time a hardship befell them, they would cry out to Moses to pray to his Lord to lift their affliction. The *sūrah* also explains the fate they suffered after they failed to heed the warning: "*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 55–56) Yet these later unbelievers still do not take heed.

Throughout this episode, the unity of the Divine message is clearly apparent. Similarly, the nature of the tyrannical elders and their reception of the message of the truth is the same. They all cling to the trivial values of this world. We also see the nature of the masses who are easily led astray by their leaders.

> *We sent Moses with Our message to Pharaoh and his nobles; and he said: 'I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds,' but when he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.* (Verses 46–47)

The episode starts with a very brief reference to the first meeting between Moses and Pharaoh, as a prelude to the main point intended here, which is to portray the similarity of the objections made by Pharaoh and the pagan Arabs, as also their similar values. It sums up the nature of Moses' message in these words: "*I am a messenger of the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 46) It is the same truth stated by every

messenger: that he is 'a messenger' sent by 'the Lord of all the worlds'. The *sūrah* then provides a very quick reference to the signs given to Moses, adding how the people received these: "*When he presented Our signs to them, they laughed at them.*" (Verse 47) The arrogant and the ignorant always behave this way.

This is followed by a reference to the testing hardships God inflicted on Pharaoh and his people, which are detailed in other *sūrahs*:

> *Yet each sign We showed them was greater than the preceding one. We put them through suffering so that they might return [to the right path]. They said: 'Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.' Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.* (Verses 48–50)

The signs shown by Moses did not provide enough motivation for people to believe, yet each was greater than the one before it. This confirms what God says in several places that such signs do not provide guidance to a heart if it is not ready to listen, and that God's messengers cannot make the deaf hear or the blind see. What is most singular in what God describes of Pharaoh's and his people's attitude is that when they spoke to Moses, they said: "*Sorcerer, pray to your Lord for us on the strength of the covenant He has made with you. We shall now follow the right way.*" (Verse 49) They appeal to him to do his best to lift their hardship, yet they address him as '*sorcerer*'. They also say, '*Pray to your Lord*' while he tells them that he is '*a messenger from the Lord of all the worlds,*' not his own special Lord to whom only he and a few followers submit. Neither miracles nor God's messenger's words touched their hearts, despite their promise: "*We shall now follow the right way.*" Such promises are often forgotten: "*Yet when We removed their suffering they still broke their word.*" (Verse 50)

The masses may be influenced by miracles, and the truth may find its way to their hearts that have long been deceived. To forestall this, Pharaoh appeared before them in his full regalia, adorned in splendour. He tried to deceive them with a superficial argument, one that unfortunately appeals to those who have long endured tyranny:

> *Pharaoh proclaimed to his people, saying: 'My people, is the kingdom of Egypt not mine, with all these rivers flowing at my feet? Do you not see? Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear? Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him? Why have no angels come to accompany him?'* (Verses 51–53)

The kingdom of Egypt and the rivers flowing at Pharaoh's feet are there, before their very eyes. The masses are deluded by such apparent power and splendour. By contrast, the kingdom of the heavens and earth, and all that is between them, compared to which Egypt is no more than a little particle, requires believing hearts to perceive. Only such believers can draw the right comparison. Under the yoke of tyranny that has long subjugated them, the masses are dazzled by the glitter they see before them. They do not stretch their minds to reflect on the kingdom of the universe and to whom it belongs.

Pharaoh knew how to manipulate his people's hearts and delude them with his riches: "*Am I not better than this contemptible wretch who can hardly make his meaning clear?*" (Verse 52) What he meant by referring to '*this contemptible wretch*' was that Moses was not a king, a prince, or a man of power or wealth. Or perhaps he meant that Moses belonged to the Israelites, a wretched and enslaved community in Egypt. His other description of Moses as one '*who can hardly make his meaning clear*' refers to his speech impediment. By the time of this encounter with Pharaoh, however, Moses was cured of this by God in answer to his prayer: "*My Lord, open up my heart [to Your light], and make my mission easy for me, and free my tongue from its impediment, so that people may understand what I say.*" (20: 25–28) Nothing now prevented him from making his meaning clear. In the eyes of the masses, Pharaoh, with his terrestrial kingdom, was better than Moses, even though he had the word of truth, was a prophet, and advocated the faith that ensured safety from hell.

"*Why have no bracelets of gold been given to him?*" (Verse 53) Is such a petty thing as a gold bracelet needed to confirm a Divine message? Is a mere trifling to be valued as greater than the miracles God gave to His messenger? Or, perhaps, Pharaoh meant that Moses should have

been crowned as king to give him power as well as the message. "*Why have no angels come to accompany him?*" (Verse 53) This is yet another deceptive objection, one that is often levelled at God's messengers.

"*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 54) That tyrants make fools of their people is a familiar story. First of all, they isolate their people from all sources of knowledge, withholding the facts until they are forgotten and no longer sought after. They use all types of influences until their minds are fully convinced of them. Thereafter, it is easy to make fools of them and lead them wherever they want them to go. Yet no tyrant can do this to his people unless they are transgressors, turning away from God's straight path after having abandoned the standards of His faith. Conversely, it is extremely difficult to try to delude believers or make fools of them. Hence, the Qur'ān gives the reason for the response Pharaoh received from his people: "*Thus did he make fools of his people, and they obeyed him. They were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 54)

The time of tests, warnings and education was over. God was fully aware that these people would not believe. The masses willingly obeyed Pharaoh, an arrogant tyrant, turning a blind eye to God's light and His clear signs. Therefore, the warning had to be fulfilled and God's word was issued: "*When they incurred Our anger, We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all; and so We made them a thing of the past and an example for later generations.*" (Verses 55–56)

Here, God is speaking about Himself in the context of retribution inflicted on people whom He destroyed. This is meant to highlight His limitless power. What the *sūrah* describes is a situation where these people were guilty of a great crime incurring God's anger. Therefore, "*We inflicted Our retribution on them and drowned them all*", meaning Pharaoh, the notables among his people and his army. In this way did they meet their end when they tried to pursue Moses and his people. God made of them the ancestors of every erring generation. He also set them as "*an example for later generations*". (Verse 56) Hence, later communities should learn their story and benefit from the lessons it delivers.

Thus, this episode of Moses' story reflects similar attitudes to those of the pagan Arabs as they confronted God's last messenger. It is mentioned here so as to comfort and support the Prophet and those who believed with him. It warns the unbelievers against a fate similar to that of earlier people. This is one example of how the Qur'ān uses a historical account as an edifying narrative. The *sūrah* then gives us an episode from Jesus' story against the backdrop of the Arabs' argument in defence of their worship of angels and the comparison they cite, as some Christians worship Jesus. This is given in the last passage of the *sūrah*.



3

When Friends Turn Enemies

Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, (57)

وَلَمَّا ضُرِبَ ٱبْنُ مَرْيَمَ مَثَلًا إِذَا قَوْمُكَ مِنْهُ يَصِدُّونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. (58)

وَقَالُوٓاْ ءَأَٰلِهَتُنَا خَيْرٌ أَمْ هُوَ ۚ مَا ضَرَبُوهُ لَكَ إِلَّا جَدَلًۢا ۚ بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ خَصِمُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. (59)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا عَبْدٌ أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَجَعَلْنَٰهُ مَثَلًا لِّبَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. (60)

وَلَوْ نَشَآءُ لَجَعَلْنَا مِنكُم مَّلَٰٓئِكَةً فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ يَخْلُفُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. (61)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَعِلْمٌ لِّلسَّاعَةِ فَلَا تَمْتَرُنَّ بِهَا وَٱتَّبِعُونِ ۚ هَٰذَا صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦١﴾

Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. (62)

وَلَا يَصُدَّنَّكُمُ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

وَلَمَّا جَآءَ عِيسَىٰ بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ قَالَ قَدْ
جِئْتُكُم بِٱلْحِكْمَةِ وَلِأُبَيِّنَ لَكُم
بَعْضَ ٱلَّذِى تَخْتَلِفُونَ فِيهِ ۖ فَٱتَّقُوا
ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿٦٣﴾

When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. (63)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ رَبِّى وَرَبُّكُمْ فَٱعْبُدُوهُ ۚ هَٰذَا
صِرَٰطٌ مُّسْتَقِيمٌ ﴿٦٤﴾

God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path.' (64)

فَٱخْتَلَفَ ٱلْأَحْزَابُ مِنۢ بَيْنِهِمْ ۖ فَوَيْلٌ
لِّلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمٍ
أَلِيمٍ ﴿٦٥﴾

Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (65)

هَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا ٱلسَّاعَةَ أَن تَأْتِيَهُم
بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? (66)

ٱلْأَخِلَّآءُ يَوْمَئِذٍۭ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ
عَدُوٌّ إِلَّا ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٦٧﴾

On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing. (67)

يَٰعِبَادِ لَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ وَلَآ أَنتُمْ
تَحْزَنُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

You, servants of Mine, no fear need you have today, nor shall you grieve. (68)

ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَكَانُوا۟
مُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

You, who have believed in Our revelations and surrendered yourselves to Us, (69)

enter paradise, you and your spouses, in pure happiness. (70)

ٱدْخُلُوا۟ ٱلْجَنَّةَ أَنتُمْ وَأَزْوَٰجُكُمْ تُحْبَرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in. There you shall abide. (71)

يُطَافُ عَلَيْهِم بِصِحَافٍ مِّن ذَهَبٍ وَأَكْوَابٍ ۖ وَفِيهَا مَا تَشْتَهِيهِ ٱلْأَنفُسُ وَتَلَذُّ ٱلْأَعْيُنُ ۖ وَأَنتُمْ فِيهَا خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. (72)

وَتِلْكَ ٱلْجَنَّةُ ٱلَّتِىٓ أُورِثْتُمُوهَا بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat. (73)

لَكُمْ فِيهَا فَٰكِهَةٌ كَثِيرَةٌ مِّنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell. (74)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ فِى عَذَابِ جَهَنَّمَ خَٰلِدُونَ ﴿٧٤﴾

It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair. (75)

لَا يُفَتَّرُ عَنْهُمْ وَهُمْ فِيهِ مُبْلِسُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves. (76)

وَمَا ظَلَمْنَٰهُمْ وَلَٰكِن كَانُوا۟ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!' He will answer: 'You are here to stay.' (77)

وَنَادَوْا۟ يَٰمَٰلِكُ لِيَقْضِ عَلَيْنَا رَبُّكَ ۖ قَالَ إِنَّكُم مَّٰكِثُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

لَقَدْ جِئْنَٰكُم بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَكُمْ
لِلْحَقِّ كَٰرِهُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. (78)

أَمْ أَبْرَمُوٓا۟ أَمْرًا فَإِنَّا مُبْرِمُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. (79)

أَمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّا لَا نَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ وَنَجْوَىٰهُم ۚ
بَلَىٰ وَرُسُلُنَا لَدَيْهِمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (80)

قُلْ إِن كَانَ لِلرَّحْمَٰنِ وَلَدٌ فَأَنَا۠ أَوَّلُ
ٱلْعَٰبِدِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' (81)

سُبْحَٰنَ رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ رَبِّ
ٱلْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. (82)

فَذَرْهُمْ يَخُوضُوا۟ وَيَلْعَبُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يُلَٰقُوا۟
يَوْمَهُمُ ٱلَّذِى يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (83)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى فِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ إِلَٰهٌ وَفِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
إِلَٰهٌ ۚ وَهُوَ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٨٤﴾

It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. (84)

وَتَبَارَكَ ٱلَّذِى لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا وَعِندَهُۥ عِلْمُ ٱلسَّاعَةِ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. (85)

وَلَا يَمْلِكُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِهِ ٱلشَّفَٰعَةَ إِلَّا مَن شَهِدَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it. (86)

وَلَئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّنْ خَلَقَهُمْ لَيَقُولُنَّ ٱللَّهُ ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God.' How is it, then, that they are so misled? (87)

وَقِيلِهِۦ يَٰرَبِّ إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمٌ لَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٨٨﴾

And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.' (88)

فَٱصْفَحْ عَنْهُمْ وَقُلْ سَلَٰمٌ ۚ فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨٩﴾

Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know. (89)

Overview

In this final passage, the *sūrah* picks up the legends the pagan Arabs weaved around their worship of angels. It refers to one of the arguments they used to defend their absurd beliefs. It was a futile argument that reflected no attempt to arrive at the truth; it was more an exercise in polemics. They had been told that both they and what they worshipped were bound for hell. The reference here being to their idols that were

first intended as representations of angels, but which were later worshipped as deities. They were told that whoever worshipped anything other than God will be in hell together with the thing worshipped. In response, some of them cited the example of Jesus, who was worshipped by some of those who deviated from true Christianity. They asked whether Jesus would also be in hell? This was nothing but idle argument. They also claimed that they were better guided than the Christians who worshipped Jesus, a human being, while they worshipped the angels, God's daughters. All this was no more than compounded falsehood. In connection with this, the *sūrah* gives an account of Jesus, explaining the truth about him and his message, and the differences that gripped his people both before and after him.

Addressing all those who deviate from the true faith, the *sūrah* warns them against the sudden coming of the Last Hour. It moves on to portray a long scene of the Day of Judgement, giving an image of lasting happiness for the God-fearing and one of painful suffering for the guilty. Furthermore, the *sūrah* negates their legends concerning the angels, makes it clear that God is free of all that they allege concerning Him and outlines some of His attributes, including His complete ownership of both this life and the life to come. The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to be forbearing and to turn away from the unbelievers. They will come to know what is there to be known. This is an implicit warning to those who continue to argue after things have been made very clear.

Arguing About Jesus

> *Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry, saying: 'Who is better: our deities or he?' They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people. He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel. Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth. He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy. When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom,*

and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (Verses 57–65)

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq gives the following report:

> The Prophet sat with al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah in the Sacred Mosque, and they were joined by al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith. There were a few other men from the Quraysh. The Prophet spoke to them, but al-Naḍr interrupted him. The Prophet argued with him until he silenced him. He then read to them a passage of the Qur'ān that included the verse that says: "*You and all that you were wont to worship instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is what you are destined for.*" (21: 98) The Prophet then left.
>
> Then came 'Abdullāh ibn al-Ziba'rī of the Tamīm tribe who sat with them. Al-Walīd said to him: 'Al-Naḍr was no match for Muḥammad. Indeed Muḥammad said that both we and the deities we worship will be the fuel of hell.' Ibn al-Ziba'rī said: 'Had I been the one who argued with him I would have won. Ask Muḥammad whether everyone worshipped other than God will be in hell together with those worshipping him. Well, we worship the angels, and the Jews worship Ezra, while the Christians worship Jesus, son of Mary.' Al-Walīd and those who were in the Mosque admired what Ibn al-Ziba'rī had said and felt that he put forward a winning argument. When this was mentioned to the Prophet, he said: 'Anyone who likes to be worshipped in place of God will be joined to those who worship him. These people only worship Satan and whoever Satan orders them to worship.' God then revealed the verse that says: "*But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell.*" (21: 101) This means that Jesus, Ezra and other rabbis and priests who were sincere in their faith, but were then worshipped as deities by later people will be safe from hell.

> Furthermore, concerning the argument about Jesus being worshipped and the admiration of the argument by al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and others, God revealed the verse that says: "*Whenever the son of Mary is cited as an example, your people raise an outcry.*" (Verse 57)

In *al-Kashshāf*, a commentary on the Qur'ān, al-Zamakhsharī gives a broadly similar report, without mentioning its source. Both reports show clearly how argumentative the pagan Arabs were. They were exactly as the Qur'ān describes them: "*They are contentious people*". (Verse 58) They were certainly skilful in dispute. They realized what the Qur'ān and the Prophet meant, but they tried hard to twist its meaning, indulged in polemics, exploiting the fact that the Qur'ānic statement was general in its implication. This is characteristic of everyone who is devoid of sincerity, seeking to manipulate words and phrases in order to twist what was a clear meaning. Therefore, the Prophet strictly prohibited contentious arguments. Abū Umāmah, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: "The Prophet came out once only to find some people involved in argument concerning the Qur'ān. He was so angry that he looked as though vinegar had been poured over his face. He then said to them: 'Do not argue about God's book citing parts of it against other parts. No community strays into error unless they are given to contentious argument.' He then quoted the Qur'ānic verse that says: '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people.*' (Verse 58)

Another possible interpretation of the statement, "*Who is better: our deities or he?*" is supported by the general drift of the verses referring to their legend about the angels. What they meant is that their worship of the angels is better than the Christians' worship of Jesus, because the angels are closer to God in their nature and descent. Exalted is God above all that they allege. Thus, the statement, '*They cite him only to challenge you. They are contentious people*', serves as a reply to Ibn al-Ziba'rī as suggested earlier. Moreover, it means that their citing of what the Christians worship is invalid, because it deviates from the truth of God's oneness. It is not right to compare one deviation from the truth with another; they are all false. This interpretation is reasonable.

Hence, the *sūrah* makes the following comment: "*He was but a servant of Ours whom We had favoured and made an example to the Children of Israel.*" (Verse 59) He was no deity to be worshipped, even though some Christians deviated from the true path and did worship him. He was only a favoured servant of God, and no blame attaches to him for the fact that people worshipped him. God granted him favours so that he would be an example for the Children of Israel to follow. However, they forgot the lesson and went astray.

The *sūrah* discusses the Arabs' legend about the angels, making it clear that they are part of God's creation. Had God willed, He would have made the angels succeed them on earth, or He would have transformed some people into angels to succeed them: "*Had it been Our will, We could have made you angels, succeeding one another on earth.*" (Verse 60) All questions of creation are determined by God; whatever He wills to create will surely come into existence. None of His creation has any relation to Him other than that of a created being with its Creator, a servant with its Master.

Another statement about Jesus reminds them of the Last Hour which they denied: "*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path. Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*" (Verses 61–62) A number of the Prophet's statements speak of Jesus' second coming, a short time before the Last Hour. This is perhaps what is indicated in the statement: '*He is a portent of the Last Hour.*' It means that he informs of its approach. Abū Hurayrah quotes the Prophet as saying: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, the son of Mary is about to come back among you, serving as a just arbiter. He will break the cross, kill the pig and abolish tribute money. Wealth will be so abundant that no one will accept money. Indeed one prostration before God will be better than this whole world and all that it contains." [Related by Mālik, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and Abū Dāwūd.] Jābir quotes the Prophet as saying: "A group of my community will ever continue to fight, holding on to the truth, until the Day of Judgement. Jesus, son of Mary, will then come down and their commander will say to him: 'Come and lead us in prayer.' He will reply: 'No. Some of you lead others.' This is just an aspect of honour God has granted to this community." [Related by Muslim.]

All this belongs to the realm beyond our perception. We are informed of it by the Prophet who tells the truth and references to it are given in the Qur'ān. No human being has any say in this other than what has been stated in these two sources.

"*He is a portent of the Last Hour. Have no doubt about it, but follow Me: this is a straight path.*" (Verse 61) They had strong doubts about the coming of the Last Hour, but the Qur'ān calls on them to be certain of it. Likewise, they steered away from guidance and the Qur'ān urges them, through God's messenger, to follow him along the straight path which ensures that its travellers will not go astray. It makes it clear to them that their deviation is only the result of their following Satan when they would be better advised to follow God's messenger: "*Let not Satan debar you; for he is your sworn enemy.*" (Verse 62) The Qur'ān always reminds people of the on-going battle between them and Satan that has been raging since the time of Adam, their first father, and the first encounter in heaven. No one can be more heedless than one who knows that a watchful, sworn enemy is deliberately waiting for a chance to attack him and yet does not take care to protect himself. On the contrary, he moves closer to the determined enemy and even follows his lead.

Islam places man in the midst of this ever-raging battle with Satan. It assigns to him gains that are beyond anyone's imagination, should he be victorious. Likewise, his loss, should he be defeated, is beyond anyone's reckoning. Thus, Islam steers man's fighting ability to this on-going battle which asserts the humanity of man, giving him his special position among the rest of creatures. Thus, the highest aim for man on earth is to achieve victory against his enemy, Satan. Once he does, he overcomes evil and wickedness and establishes firm roots of goodness and purity.

The *sūrah* now speaks about Jesus, stating the truth about him and what he preached, and how his people differed about him, both before and after his time:

> *When Jesus came with clear signs, he said: 'I have come to you with wisdom, and to make clear to you some of that on which you differ. Therefore, fear God and follow me. God is my Lord and your Lord:*

so worship Him alone. This is a straight path. Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day. (Verses 63–65)

Thus, Jesus came to his people with clear signs, whether miracles God granted him or teachings that lead along the right way. He said to his people: '*I have come to you with wisdom*'. Whoever is granted wisdom is indeed granted much of what is good, and he is safe and assured of his way. Jesus' mission also clarified for them some of the questions over which they differed. Indeed, they differed on many aspects of the law of Moses, allowing their variances to split them into hostile factions. Jesus also invited them to maintain their fear of God and to obey him in the Divine message he delivered to them. He declared the principle of God's oneness in full clarity, admitting no compromise in it: "*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone.*" (Verse 64) He never said that he was God, nor that he was God's son. He never made any reference to any relationship between him and God other than that of his being God's servant. Furthermore, he stated that his message demarcated a straight path without bend or error. Yet those who came after him disputed much, splitting into factions like those who preceded him. In this they were wrongdoers, relying on no sure information. Hence, the warning: "*Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.*" (Verse 65)

Jesus' message was addressed to the Children of Israel. They were awaiting his coming to save them from their humiliating bondage to the Romans. Yet when he came, they denied and opposed him. Indeed, they even plotted to get him crucified. Jesus found them divided into numerous sects, the most important of which were as follows:

1. The Sadducees, named after Zadok, whose family retained custody of the Temple since the time of David and Solomon. According to their law, he must have been a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother. For, custody of the Temple belonged to Aaron's descendants. Holding such an office, they were very strict on detailed worship rituals, denouncing any deviation. Nevertheless,

in personal matters, they were lax, enjoying life's pleasures. They denied the Day of Resurrection.

2. The Pharisees. They were in dispute with the Sadducees, objecting to their strict observation of worship rituals while denying the Day of Resurrection. Their most common characteristic was their disregard of worldly pleasures, even though some of them took pride in their knowledge. Jesus denounced such an attitude.
3. The Samaritans. They were a mixture of Jews and Assyrians. They believed only in the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. They denied the later books accepted by other Jews as part of their scripture.
4. The Essenes, or Essenians. These were influenced by some philosophical doctrines, living in isolation of other Jewish sects. Theirs was an ascetic, strictly organized sect.

In addition, there were numerous other sects that gave rise to much confusion in Jewish beliefs and traditions. The Jews at the time tolerated humiliation under the Romans, and awaited their deliverance at the hands of the Messiah. When the Messiah, Jesus Christ, came to them declaring that '*God is my Lord and your Lord: so worship Him alone*', and preaching a law of tolerance and spiritualism, he was opposed by the professional clerics who gave paramount importance to rituals. He is reported to have said about them: "They make loads that are hard to carry and lay them on the shoulders of the people. However, they are not willing to lift a finger to move them. They do everything to attract people's attention. They make their headbands large and the tassels on their shawls long. They love the place of honour at dinners and the front seats in synagogues. They love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have people call them Rabbi." (Matthew 23: 4–7) He is also quoted as addressing them thus: "You, blind guides! You strain gnats out of your wine, but you swallow camels. How horrible it will be for you, scribes and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You clean the outsides of cups and dishes. But inside they are full of greed and uncontrolled desires. You blind Pharisees! First clean the inside of the cups and dishes so that the outside may also be clean. How horrible it will be for you, scribes

and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You are like whitewashed graves that look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of dead people's bones and every kind of impurity."[3] (Matthew 23: 24–27)

When we read today these words of Jesus (peace be upon him) and similar texts, we realize how applicable they are to professional clerics of all religions. They are all of the same type.

Jesus' term on earth came to its end and he went to his Lord. Later, his followers split into groups and factions: some made him a deity; some made him the son of God; others make God a trinity of three one of whom is Jesus. The pure concept of God's oneness preached by Jesus has, thus, been lost, as also his call on people to worship God alone, pure in their submission to Him.[4]

"*Yet are the sects at variance among themselves. Woe, then, to the wrongdoers for the painful suffering that will befall them on a grievous day.*" (Verse 65) Then the pagan Arabs disputed with the Prophet concerning Jesus, basing their argument on what these different factions fabricated and weaved of legends about him.

Waiting for the Last Hour

When the *sūrah* refers to wrongdoers, it includes those factions that disputed about Jesus together with the pagan Arabs who argued with the Prophet on the basis of what those factions perpetrated. It draws a long, spectacular scene showing what happens to them on the Day of Judgement and adds an image of what happens to the God-fearing who receive His favours in heaven:

> *What are they waiting for other than the Last Hour, which will come upon them all of a sudden and take them unawares? On that Day, friends will become enemies to one another, except for the God-fearing.*

3. The information given here about Jewish sects and the subsequent quotations are based on Al-Aqqād, 'Abbās Maḥmūd, *'Abqariyyat al-Masīḥ*, Cairo, (n.d.).

4. A more detailed discussion of this is given in *In the Shade of the Qur'ān*, Vol. XIII, pp. 178–180.

desire. However, what comes over and above desire satisfaction is that it is all pleasant to the eye, adding beauty to gratification: "*They will be waited upon with trays and goblets of gold; and there will be found all that the souls may desire and the eyes may delight in.*" (Verse 71) Yet there is more to this blessed enjoyment: there is something greater and far more honourable. They are honoured by an address from on high: "*There you shall abide. This is the garden that shall be your own on account of what you used to do. You shall have there fruits in abundance, from which to eat.*" (Verses 71–73)

What fate awaits the evildoers whom we left a little while ago in dispute, blaming one another? "*The evildoers shall abide in the suffering of hell.*" (Verse 74) It is a permanent, hard and severe suffering that allows no reduction or respite. No ray of hope will ever appear nor any chance of deliverance. They endure it, lost in despair: "*It will not be lightened for them; they will remain in utter despair.*" (Verse 75) This is all their own doing. No one has wronged them: "*We never wronged them; it was they who have wronged themselves.*" (Verse 76)

An outcry is heard from afar. It is an outcry of utter distress, born in despair: "*They will cry, 'Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!'*" (Verse 77) It comes from down below, from behind the closed doors of hell. The evildoers are not appealing for help or salvation; they have already despaired of that. All they are asking for is that they should be allowed to perish, their misery end. That is all that they can hope for. When all that one can hope for is to perish, one must be in extreme distress. This cry certainly comes from long-suffering souls and bodies whose endurance has gone beyond all limits. Hence they cry out: "*Mālik, if only your Lord would put an end to us!*" The answer they are given adds to their despair, caring little for what they feel: "*He will answer: 'You are here to stay.'*" (Verse 77) No deliverance, no hope, no death, no end; they are there to stay.

This distressing image is followed by an address to those who hate the truth and turn away from guidance. It portrays to all how singular their attitude is:

> *We have brought the truth to you, but most of you abhor the truth. If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our*

own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all. (Verses 78–80)

It is their abhorrence of the truth that prevented them from following it. It is not that they did not realize that it is the truth. Nor did they doubt the honesty and sincerity of the Prophet; they had long known him, acknowledging that he never told a lie. How could he, then, lie to God saying about Him what was false? In most cases, those who oppose the truth are not unaware that it is the truth; they simply hate it because it conflicts with their desires. They are too weak to resist their desires, but they can always attempt to suppress the truth and persecute its advocates. It is from this, their weakness, that they derive the audacity to stand against the truth.

Therefore, the Almighty who knows all their secrets and scheming warns them: "*If they have resolved on some scheme, We have a scheme of Our own. Or do they think that We do not hear their secret talk and their private counsel? Indeed We do, and Our messengers are with them, recording all.*" (Verses 79–80) Their persistent support of falsehood against the truth is countered by God's clear will to establish and strengthen the truth; and their wicked scheming under the cover of darkness is countered by God's knowledge of all secret whispering. When weak creatures stand against the Almighty, All-Knowing Creator, the outcome is a forgone conclusion.

In Heaven and on Earth

Now the Qur'ān directs the Prophet to say something to them and to leave them to face the destiny which has already been described to them:

Say: 'If the Lord of Grace had a son, I would be the first to worship him.' Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions. Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised. (Verses 81–83)

They alleged that the angels whom they worshipped were God's daughters. Had God had any offspring, the first one to know this and act on the basis of this knowledge was God's Prophet and messenger. He was close to Him and was quick to comply with His orders. He would have been the first to offer his respects to His offspring, had He had any as they alleged. He, however, worships none but God. This in itself is evidence confirming that their allegation has no basis. All glory belongs to God who is totally unlike what they allege. "*Limitless in His glory is the Lord of the heavens and earth, the Lord of the Throne: He is far above their false descriptions.*" (Verse 82)

When we contemplate the heavens and the earth, looking at their systems and harmony, we feel the greatness and sublimity of the One who controls all this, referred to as, '*the Lord of the Throne*,' and we realize the absurdity of any such claim. By our nature we know that the Maker of the universe can have no similarity to creatures who procreate. Therefore, attributing sons and daughters to Him appears to be no more than idle talk and play, which deserve no answer. It only merits a stern warning of what happens on the Day of Resurrection, an image of which has already been given: "*Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the Day they have been promised.*" (Verse 83)

The *sūrah* continues its glorification of God, the Creator, attributing to Him what is worthy of His Lordship of the heavens and the earth as well as the mighty throne:

> *It is He alone who is God in heaven and God on earth; He alone is the Wise, the All-Knowing. Blessed is He to whom sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and all that is between them belongs, and with whom the knowledge of the Last Hour rests, and to whom you shall be brought back. Those whom they invoke beside Him have no power of intercession, unlike those who know the truth and bear witness to it.* (Verses 84–86)

This statement confirms the unity of Godhead throughout the universe, making it clear that no one shares this with God Almighty who does everything according to His infinite wisdom and perfect

knowledge. The Arabic word *tabārak*, translated here as 'blessed', carries connotations of greatness and exaltedness above all their perceptions. It is He who is '*the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all in between*'. He alone knows the timing of the Last Hour and to Him all creation returns. On that day, when all return to Him, none of those whom they allege as His offspring or partners will have the power of intercession for anyone. None can intercede with Him other than one who knows the truth and bears witness to it. A person who testifies to the truth will not intercede on behalf of any who ever stood in opposition to it.

The *sūrah* then confronts them with something that is ingrained in their nature and concerning which they have no doubt. That is, their Creator is God. How, then, can they associate partners with Him in their worship, and how can they expect that anyone will intercede on behalf of anyone who associated partners with Him: "*Yet if you ask them who created them they are sure to answer, 'God'. How is it, then, that they are so misled?*" (Verse 87) How can they ignore the truth testified to by their own nature? How can they allow their behaviour to be in conflict with its inevitable result?

As the *sūrah* comes to its close, it highlights the fact that the Prophet turns to his Lord complaining of their rejection of the truth and their disbelief: "*And [the Prophet] says: 'My Lord, these are people who will not believe.'*" (Verse 88) This is given in a special form that implies how keenly the Prophet felt this and how well God received it. The answer from on high is a directive to the Prophet to bear with them and not to care for their rejection. On the contrary, he should forbear and feel his heart content. To this is added an implicit warning to those determined opponents of the truth: "*Still, bear with them and say, 'Peace,' for in time they will come to know.*" (Verse 89) The time will come when everything is exposed and they will then know the dreadful fate that awaits them.

SŪRAH 44

Al-Dukhān

(Smoke)

Prologue

Characterized by its short and rhyming verses, violent images and inspirational shades of meaning, this *sūrah* strikes like a hammer, its beat directed at making every human heart tremble. The entire *sūrah* appears to be a single whole, with one central theme to which all its elements are tied: the story the scene from the Day of Judgement, the fate of earlier communities, its depiction of the universe and the direct discussion of God's oneness, people's resurrection and God's message.

The *sūrah* begins with a reference to the Qur'ān and its revelation on a blessed night when every matter of wisdom is made clear. Its revelation is an act of mercy for mankind, as well as a warning to them. Moreover, it tells people about their Lord, the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all between them, confirming His oneness. He is the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of everyone who lived and everyone who will come to life.

The *sūrah* abandons this thread in order to speak about the people addressed by the Qur'ān: "*Yet they remain in doubt, playing about.*" (Verse 9) It issues a swift but stern warning against such doubt and play: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous*

is this suffering!" (Verses 10–11) On the day when this suffering befalls them, they will pray for it to be lifted, but once it comes it will not be removed. They are reminded that such suffering has not as yet been inflicted. They should, therefore, seize the opportunity now before they are returned to their Lord when this fearful suffering falls due: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* tells them about Pharaoh and the end he and his people met when a noble messenger from God came and appealed to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God.*" (Verses 18–19) However, they refused to take heed until God's messenger despaired of their ever responding. They were destroyed after having behaved with insolence: "*How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verses 25–29)

Against this backdrop the *sūrah* reverts to their denial of the life to come. They said: "*We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.*" (Verses 35–36) They are reminded of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba' and are told that they are no better than they were. Therefore, they will not be spared a similar fate.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that there is a link between resurrection and God's wisdom manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand.*" (Verses 38–39) It then tells them about the Day of Decision, which is the time appointed for all of them. It adds here a violent scene depicting the suffering of the guilty who are made to eat of the Zaqqūm tree. It shows them how a sinful person is dragged into the midst of the blazing fire, where scalding water is poured over his head in recompense for his sins: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verses 49–50)

Side by side with this scene is an image of the blessings enjoyed in heaven by the God-fearing. This is a profound image, one that contrasts with the great suffering endured by the other group, and fits with the strong beat of the *sūrah*. This then ends with another reference to the Qur'ān, coupled with a strong and implicit warning: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

From start to finish the *sūrah* uses a continuous and fast beat, and puts before the human mind a succession of images and impressions that are characteristically powerful. It takes us on a long journey that includes the heavens and the earth, the present world and the next, heaven and hell, the past and the present, life and death, the laws of creation and those of the universe, of worlds that are perceptible as well as those that are imperceptible. Relatively short as it is, the *sūrah* provides a grand tour of the world around us and of that which lies beyond our perceptive faculties.



I

Smoke That Ushers Clarity

Al-Dukhān (Smoke)

سُورَةُ الدُّخَانِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

By the Book that makes things clear! (2)

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٢﴾

We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. (3)

إِنَّا أَنزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةٍ مُّبَارَكَةٍ ۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا مُنذِرِينَ ﴿٣﴾

On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear (4)

فِيهَا يُفْرَقُ كُلُّ أَمْرٍ حَكِيمٍ ﴿٤﴾

by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] (5)

أَمْرًا مِّنْ عِندِنَا ۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا مُرْسِلِينَ ﴿٥﴾

as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; (6)

رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلسَّمِيعُ ٱلْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦﴾

the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. (7)

رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ ۖ إِن كُنتُم مُّوقِنِينَ ﴿٧﴾

There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors. (8)

لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْىِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ رَبُّكُمْ وَرَبُّ ءَابَآئِكُمُ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٨﴾

Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. (9)

بَلْ هُمْ فِى شَكٍّ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. (10)

فَٱرْتَقِبْ يَوْمَ تَأْتِى ٱلسَّمَآءُ بِدُخَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٠﴾

It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! (11)

يَغْشَى ٱلنَّاسَ ۖ هَٰذَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' (12)

رَبَّنَا ٱكْشِفْ عَنَّا ٱلْعَذَابَ إِنَّا مُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; (13)

أَنَّىٰ لَهُمُ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ وَقَدْ جَآءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٣﴾

but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' (14)

ثُمَّ تَوَلَّوْا عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا مُعَلَّمٌ مَّجْنُونٌ ﴿١٤﴾

We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. (15)

إِنَّا كَاشِفُوا الْعَذَابِ قَلِيلًا إِنَّكُمْ عَائِدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution. (16)

يَوْمَ نَبْطِشُ الْبَطْشَةَ الْكُبْرَىٰ إِنَّا مُنتَقِمُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, (17)

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَجَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! (18)

أَنْ أَدُّوا إِلَيَّ عِبَادَ اللَّهِ ۖ إِنِّي لَكُمْ رَسُولٌ أَمِينٌ ﴿١٨﴾

Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. (19)

وَأَن لَّا تَعْلُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ ۖ إِنِّي آتِيكُم بِسُلْطَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿١٩﴾

I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. (20)

وَإِنِّي عُذْتُ بِرَبِّي وَرَبِّكُمْ أَن تَرْجُمُونِ ﴿٢٠﴾

If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' (21)

وَإِن لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوا لِي فَاعْتَزِلُونِ ﴿٢١﴾

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُۥٓ أَنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ قَوْمٌ مُّجْرِمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' (22)

فَأَسْرِ بِعِبَادِى لَيْلًا إِنَّكُم مُّتَّبَعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; (23)

وَٱتْرُكِ ٱلْبَحْرَ رَهْوًا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ جُندٌ مُّغْرَقُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' (24)

كَمْ تَرَكُوا۟ مِن جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, (25)

وَزُرُوعٍ وَمَقَامٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, (26)

وَنَعْمَةٍ كَانُوا۟ فِيهَا فَٰكِهِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

and good things in which they used to delight! (27)

كَذَٰلِكَ ۖ وَأَوْرَثْنَٰهَا قَوْمًا ءَاخَرِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. (28)

فَمَا بَكَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلسَّمَآءُ وَٱلْأَرْضُ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ مُنظَرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (29)

وَلَقَدْ نَجَّيْنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ مِنَ ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلْمُهِينِ ﴿٣٠﴾

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, (30)

مِن فِرْعَوْنَ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ عَالِيًا مِّنَ ٱلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. (31)

We chose them knowingly above all other people. (32)

وَلَقَدِ اخْتَرْنَٰهُمْ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عَلَى الْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (33)

وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُم مِّنَ الْءَايَٰتِ مَا فِيهِ بَلَٰٓؤٌا۟ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

Now these people assert: (34)

إِنَّ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ لَيَقُولُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. (35)

إِنْ هِىَ إِلَّا مَوْتَتُنَا الْأُولَىٰ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُنشَرِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (36)

فَأْتُوا۟ بِـَٔابَآئِنَآ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? (37)

أَهُمْ خَيْرٌ أَمْ قَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ وَالَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ أَهْلَكْنَٰهُمْ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. (38)

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا لَٰعِبِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. (39)

مَا خَلَقْنَٰهُمَآ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. (40)

إِنَّ يَوْمَ الْفَصْلِ مِيقَٰتُهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي مَوْلًى عَن مَّوْلًى شَيْـًٔا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support (41)

إِلَّا مَن رَّحِمَ اللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٤٢﴾

except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (42)

إِنَّ شَجَرَتَ ٱلزَّقُّومِ ﴿٤٣﴾

The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree (43)

طَعَامُ ٱلْأَثِيمِ ﴿٤٤﴾

will be the food of the sinful; (44)

كَٱلْمُهْلِ يَغْلِى فِى ٱلْبُطُونِ ﴿٤٥﴾

like molten lead will it boil in the belly, (45)

كَغَلْىِ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

like the boiling of scalding water. (46)

خُذُوهُ فَٱعْتِلُوهُ إِلَىٰ سَوَآءِ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٤٧﴾

'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; (47)

ثُمَّ صُبُّوا۟ فَوْقَ رَأْسِهِۦ مِنْ عَذَابِ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٤٨﴾

then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! (48)

ذُقْ إِنَّكَ أَنتَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْكَرِيمُ ﴿٤٩﴾

Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! (49)

إِنَّ هَٰذَا مَا كُنتُم بِهِۦ تَمْتَرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

This is the very thing you surely doubted.' (50)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ فِى مَقَامٍ أَمِينٍ ﴿٥١﴾

The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, (51)

فِى جَنَّٰتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

amid gardens and fountains, (52)

يَلْبَسُونَ مِن سُندُسٍ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ
مُّتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. (53)

كَذَٰلِكَ وَزَوَّجْنَٰهُم بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. (54)

يَدْعُونَ فِيهَا بِكُلِّ فَٰكِهَةٍ ءَامِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. (55)

لَا يَذُوقُونَ فِيهَا ٱلْمَوْتَ
إِلَّا ٱلْمَوْتَةَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ ۖ وَوَقَىٰهُمْ
عَذَابَ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥٦﴾

They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, (56)

فَضْلًا مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ
ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿٥٧﴾

an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (57)

فَإِنَّمَا يَسَّرْنَٰهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ
يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. (58)

فَٱرْتَقِبْ إِنَّهُم مُّرْتَقِبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Wait, then; they too are waiting. (59)

The Blessed Night

> Ḥā. Mīm. *By the book that makes things clear! We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all; the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers. There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.* (Verses 1–8)

The *sūrah* begins with the two separate letters, *Ḥā Mīm*, making an oath by them and by the book composed of letters like them, making things clear. We have spoken elsewhere about these separate letters occurring at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs* in the Qur'ān. The point to add here is that making them the subject of an oath is just like taking an oath on the book. Every single letter, representing a sound, is a true miracle, or one of God's signs manifested in man's make-up, giving him the ability to speak. They also identify the order in which alphabetical sounds occur along the vocal tract, the symbol representing the letter and its sound, as also man's ability to gather information through them. All these are significant facts that grow in our minds when we seriously reflect on them.

What the oath asserts is the revelation of the book on a blessed night: "*We have bestowed it from on high on a blessed night; for, indeed, We have always sent warnings. On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear by Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance] as a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verses 3–6) The reference to the night on which the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high most probably means – although God knows best – the night when its revelation first started. It was a night during the month of Ramaḍān, which is described in the following words: "*It was in the month of Ramaḍān that the Qur'ān was revealed.*" (2: 185) The Qur'ān was not revealed in full on that night, nor was all the Qur'ān revealed during Ramaḍān. It had only

started to make contact with the earth, and that night was the first time such contact was made.

Blessed indeed is the night which brought such great goodness to mankind, allowing the Divine system to be implemented in human life, and providing people with a chance to be in touch with the major laws that govern the universe. These are given in easy translation in the Qur'ān, enabling human nature to respond to them and implement them with ease and comfort. It then enables a human community to be established, one based on the rules and responses of the nature God placed in man, living in harmony with the universe around it. It establishes a system that is naturally clean and honourable, free of unnecessary restrictions, under which man lives on earth but by which he maintains his contact with heaven.

Those who were the first to receive the Qur'ān lived during a remarkable period of history when they were in direct contact with God. He told them what they felt in different situations, making them feel, time after time, that He was looking after them. For their part, they took all this into account, in every move and action they performed, and every thought they entertained. They appealed to Him at every turn, trusting that He would always respond to them.

When that generation passed away, the Qur'ān remained an open book that directly addresses human hearts. When people open themselves to it, its effect surpasses magic. It transforms their feelings in a way that is heard of only in great legends. The Qur'ān has remained ever since a complete and clear system that can establish a model human community in any environment and at any time. What it creates is a type of human life that lives within its local environment and time and adopts the unique Islamic system with all its special qualities. This is the distinctive mark of the Divine system, and it applies to everything that God makes. Human beings make what suits them at a particular period of time and in a particular situation. God's work, on the other hand, is perfect, fulfilling all needs, suited to all times and situations, combining permanent truths with variable forms, all in perfect harmony.

God bestowed the Qur'ān from on high on that remarkable night to warn people in the first place: "*We have always sent warnings.*" (Verse 3)

The very fact that the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high on that blessed night makes this a deciding point: "*On that night every matter of wisdom is made clear.*" (Verse 4) The Qur'ān certainly set things apart, distinguishing the permanent truth from powerless falsehood. Limits were established and the road along which man should travel through life was charted. This is the road man should follow for the rest of life. Thus, none of the fundamental issues of human life are left ambiguous. Everything is made clear in the Divine message. All this has been accomplished by God's command and by His will to send messengers to clarify matters for all mankind: "*By Our command; for, indeed, We have always sent messages [of guidance].*" (Verse 5)

All this has been done as an act of mercy bestowed on mankind for all future generations up to the Day of Judgement: "*As a mercy from your Lord. He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 6) Nothing manifests God's mercy like the revelation of the Qur'ān. With consummate ease, it appeals directly to people's hearts as easily as the blood flowing through their veins. In this way, it transforms man into a noble creature. With Qur'ānic guidance, human society becomes more like a dream world, yet it is there for eyes to see. The faith the Qur'ān outlines profoundly engages hearts and minds so as to be loved passionately. The question here is not one of meticulous perfection, goodness and suitability. It is much more than that. It is a scenario in which every one of these qualities is further enhanced until their perfection attains a beauty that permeates all details and combines and harmonizes them while at the same time maintaining their close links to the main body.

"*As a mercy from your Lord.*" this is how the Qur'ān was revealed on that blessed night. "*He alone is the One who hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 6) He hears and He knows. He reveals what He reveals to people on the basis of His knowledge of what they say and do, as well as what is suitable and beneficial for them of laws, regulations and directives. He is the One who is in control of the universe, taking care of all who live on it. He is "*the Lord of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, if only you were firm believers.*" (Verse 7) The revelations He bestows from on high to mould people's lives is part of His Lordship of the universe and of His laws that operate in the universe.

The reference in this verse to firm belief implies an allusion to the unbelievers' confused beliefs. They recognized God as the Creator of the heavens and the earth but they, nevertheless, associated partners with Him. This means that the central principle of God's oneness was blurred in their minds, and this precluded them from having firm and reassured beliefs.

God is also the One who gives life and deals death, the Lord of all generations of creation: "*There is no deity other than Him; He gives life and deals death. He is your Lord and the Lord of your earliest ancestors.*" (Verse 8) Both the initiation of life and its deathly end are witnessed by all and are recognized as being beyond the power of any creature. This is clear at first sight and with simple consideration. The scene of death, like the scene of new life, touches the human heart and leaves a very strong influence on it, making it ready to respond. Hence, they are often mentioned in the Qur'ān to attract people's attention to them.

Clarifying Smoke

At this point, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' own situation, which was the opposite of the seriousness with which they should have dealt with God's revelations:

> *Yet they remain in doubt, playing about. Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering! [They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.' How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!' We shall remove this suffering for a while; but you are bound to revert [to your old ways]. On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.* (Verses 9–16)

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet that they are playing about when the situation requires seriousness, and that they continue to be in doubt about God's confirmed revelations. He is, therefore, instructed to

leave them until they face a day of great hardship: "*Wait, then, for the Day when the skies shall bring forth a kind of smoke which will make things clear. It will envelope the people. Grievous is this suffering.*" (Verses 10–11)

Scholars during the early period of Islam differed in their views about what the smoke mentioned in this verse means. Some of them maintained that it will occur on the Day of Judgement, which makes the warning implied here similar to other warnings in the Qur'ān about that day. They said that this will surely take place and that the Prophet awaited it. Others said that it actually did take place just as the Qur'ān states. It was then lifted after the Prophet prayed God to so remove it.[1]

We, though, are more in agreement with the view expressed by Ibn 'Abbās and explained by Ibn Kathīr making it clear that the smoke will appear on the Day of Judgement. Similar warnings also occur elsewhere in the Qur'ān. What it means here is that these people doubt and play. Leave them, then, in anticipation of that terrible day when the skies shall bring smoke that makes things clear. As it envelops people, their suffering will be particularly painful. Their appeals for help is described thus: "*[They will cry]: 'Our Lord! Relieve us from this suffering; for, indeed, we are believers.*" (Verse 12) They are told that a positive response to their appeal is impossible. It is now too late: "*How will this remembrance benefit them? A messenger who clearly explained things had previously come to them; but they turned their backs on him and said: 'He is taught by others, a madman!'*" (Verses 13–14) They claimed that a non-Arab person or people taught the Prophet the Qur'ān, and they further alleged that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was a madman.

Having given them this image of a time when they appeal in vain, they are told that they still have a chance, which they should not lose. While they are still in this life, their punishment is delayed. If they believe now, as they will later promise they would if returned, they

1. The author adds here lengthy quotations from *Ḥadīth* anthologies and from commentaries on the Qur'ān in support of both views. To include these in full would perhaps be tedious for an English reader. They are no more than endorsements of each of the two views, showing the evidence on which each relies. Therefore, these quotations have been omitted in this edition. – Editor's note.

will have acted whilst they have the time to prove their sincerity. Nothing is lost yet, so they better act now before they are returned to God. When they are returned to Him: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught,*" when the smoke envelops people. "*We will indeed exact retribution,*" for the play you indulge in and the falsehood you level at the Prophet describing him as *'taught by others, a madman',* when he is God's trusted messenger.

Drowning Pharaoh

A very brief account of the history of Moses and Pharaoh is then added. It concludes with a mighty strike in this present life, corresponding to the mighty onslaught that will strike them on the day when the skies will bring forth their smoke:

> *We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people: there came to them a noble messenger, who said to them: 'Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.' He then called out to his Lord, saying: 'These people are lost in sin.' And [God said]: 'Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.' How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.* (Verses 17–33)

This round starts with a strong note alerting people to the fact that when God sends a messenger to a certain community, this may represent

a special test for them. Likewise, allowing those who oppose the messenger and reject his message a period of time during which they may persist in their arrogance, persecuting the messenger and those who believe in him, may also be a special sort of test. When a community exhausts the patience of God's messenger, leaving him despairing of their ever being positive towards the Divine message, their action may incur a stern punishment: "*We did, before their time, try Pharaoh's people.*" (Verse 17) We tested them with prosperity and power in the land, as well as all means of affluence and power. "*There came to them a noble messenger.*" (Verse 17) This was a part of their test, showing how they responded to God's messenger who asked nothing for himself in return. He only called on them to believe in God and demonstrate their readiness to give everything to God, leaving nothing for themselves when it comes to sacrifice for His sake. Thus, the messenger said to them: "*Give in to me, you servants of God! For, I am indeed a messenger sent to you, worthy of trust! Do not exalt yourselves against God; for, indeed, I come to you with manifest authority. I seek refuge with my Lord and your Lord lest you hurl stones at me. If you do not believe me, stand away from me.*" (Verses 18–21)

These are clear words, in short sentences, outlining what Moses asks of his people. He is advising them to make a complete response and submit totally to God. It does not behove God's servants to exalt themselves against Him. As Moses gives them God's message, together with clear and irrefutable proof that he is God's messenger, he seeks God's help and protection should they attack him. If they persist in their erring ways, unwilling to believe in God, he asks them to leave him alone, move away from him. This is extremely fair behaviour. Tyranny, however, is rarely willing to deal in fairness. It fears should the truth remain free, approaching people peacefully. It, therefore, resorts to strong, hard tactics in its efforts to impose its absolute authority. It cannot afford for the truth to make any in-roads and thus win minds and hearts over to its side. Hence, tyranny and falsehood strike hard. They stone any advocate of the truth, seeking to persecute them in every possible way.

The *sūrah* leaves out several episodes of this story to pick up its thread as it approaches its end. Moses realizes that people will not

respond to him positively. Nor will they adopt either of the two options he offered them: accepting his status or moving away from him. He is certain that they are genuinely guilty, with no hope of their ever changing their ways. Therefore, he makes his ultimate appeal to his Lord: "*He then called out to his Lord, saying: These people are lost in sin.*" (Verse 22) What means a messenger of God has other than to submit the outcome of his efforts to his Lord? Moses presents his account and leaves matters to God to deal with as He pleases.

Moses received an endorsement from God with regard to his evaluation of his peoples' status: they were truly guilty: "*Set forth with My servants by night, for you will surely be pursued; and leave the sea calm behind you; for their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verses 23–24) That their flight was to occur at night comes in for stronger emphasis in the Arabic text: the verb *asri*, translated as 'set forth', implies that the march must be under cover of darkness, then the verse adds the word *laylan*, meaning 'by night'. Thus they set forth stealthily, at night, unseen by Pharaoh and his watchmen. Furthermore, they were instructed not to make any disturbance in the parted sea as they crossed through it. Thus, Pharaoh and his host would be tempted to pursue them and God's will would then be as He had determined: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) Thus, God's will is done through apparent causes, but these causes are part and parcel of His will and how it is accomplished.

The *sūrah* sums up the scene of this mass drowning in words that express God's will, which inevitably comes to pass: "*Their host are destined to be drowned.*" (Verse 24) This is followed with a comment highlighting Pharaoh's humiliation as also of those who supported his arrogant tyranny. They are utterly humiliated in a world where they behaved with all arrogance. How fitting! Those very people bowed their heads before Pharaoh, bewitched by his power, yet he is of no significance in this world. When his power is withdrawn, there is nothing he can do to regain it. No one mourns his loss.

> *How many gardens did they leave behind, and how many fountains, and fields of grain, and noble dwellings, and good things in which they used to delight! Thus it was. And We made other people inherit*

it all. Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite. (Verses 25–29)

The scene begins with an image of the splendid comfort in which they dwelled: gardens, fountains, plants, high position, honour and blessings in which they revelled. Yet all this is taken away from them, or they are removed from it, so as to give it to others. In another *sūrah*, the Qur'ān says: "*We bequeathed it all to the Children of Israel.*" (26: 59) Whilst the Children of Israel did not inherit Pharaoh's kingdom *per se*, they were nonetheless given a similar kingdom in another land. What is meant, then, is that the same kind of kingdom and blessings that were taken away from Pharaoh and his people were given to the Children of Israel.

What happened next? Those same tyrants, who had gloried in their power and who were held in awe by people, were removed altogether. None grieved for them. Neither earth nor heaven felt their loss. Nor were they given any reprieve: "*Neither heaven nor earth shed tears over them, nor were they allowed a respite.*" (Verse 29) The statement carries connotations of humiliation and total disregard. No one on earth or in heaven was sorry about how these tyrants met their end. They were crushed like ants under foot. The whole universe hated them because they had split themselves away from it. This is a universe that believes in its Lord while they denied Him. Theirs were evil souls, untouchable by the universe in which they lived. Had these tyrants felt what these words imply, they would have foreseen their own humiliation and known that the universe looks upon them as creatures apart.

This is then contrasted with an image of those who are saved and blessed with honour:

We saved the Children of Israel from humiliating suffering, from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor. We chose them knowingly above all other people. And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test. (Verses 30–33)

It was from '*humiliating suffering*' that the Children of Israel were saved. This contrasts with the humiliation that the Egyptian tyrants

and transgressors found themselves in. They were saved "*from Pharaoh, who was arrogant and a transgressor.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then mentions the fact that God chose the Children of Israel, knowing all about them, with both their positive and negative qualities. Yet He chose them in preference to all other people in their own time. God knew that they were, at the time, the best people to be given the trust. This despite all that He has mentioned in the Qur'ān about their deviation and slow response. Perhaps God made His choice on the basis that whilst they did not then attain the high standard of faith He required, they would nonetheless be the best under a faithful leadership that led them along the straight path of faith and insight.

"*And We gave them signs in which there was a clear test.*" (Verse 33) Thus, in turn, the Children of Israel were tested by means of these signs. When the test was over and their time in charge came to its end, God punished them for their deviation and evil. It was as a result of this test that God abandoned them; indeed, they were smashed by those who left them in their Diaspora. They were to suffer humiliation and were warned that God will re-punish them whenever they transgress and behave with arrogance. This warning remains true as long as human life continues.

Doubting Resurrection

Once more the *sūrah* takes up the unbelievers' doubts and denial of resurrection and accountability. Here, too, resurrection is linked to the fact that the structure of the universe is raised on a foundation of truth and seriousness that requires accountability and requital after resurrection:

> *Now these people assert: 'We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again. Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because they were lost in sin? We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day*

when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful. (Verses 34–42)

The Arab idolaters used to say that people die once only and that is the end; no resurrection and no further life. They called this the first death, meaning that it precedes what they were promised of a second life after resurrection. To them, the proof of this assertion was contained in the fact that none of their forefathers who died had ever returned; none had been resurrected. They demanded that their forefathers should be brought back to life before their eyes if resurrection were indeed true. They thus betrayed their ignorance of the purpose of resurrection. They did not understand that it is a further stage of human life, with a definite purpose and a clear goal, which is the administration of requital for what was done in the first stage. Thus, God's obedient servants reach their noble destination, which they have earned through acting well in their first lives, while hardened sinners arrive at the miserable and filthy end they deserve. This means that resurrection will come about after the entire first stage of life has ended, i.e. man's time on earth has concluded. It precludes that resurrection should be the result of a human wish expressed by an individual or a community, so that they can believe in it. Indeed, faith is not complete unless one believes in resurrection, which God's messengers have confirmed, and which is apparent to anyone who reflects on the nature of life and God's wisdom in creating it in this way. Such reflection is sufficient on its own to believe in the Day of Judgement.

Before the *sūrah* invites them to reflect on the design of the universe, it shakes their hearts strongly, reminding them of the fate suffered by the people of Tubba',[2] in South Arabia. This story must have been well known to the Arabs, as the *sūrah* makes only a brief reference to it, warning them against a similarly terrible fate: "*Are they better than the people of Tubba' and those before them, whom We destroyed because*

2. Tubba' was the title given to the kings of Ḥimyar, a major tribe that lived in southern Arabia. – Editor's note.

they were lost in sin?" (Verse 37) As this reminder makes them shudder, they are called upon to reflect on the perfect design of the heavens and earth, and how the universe is finely balanced and well planned, indicating that it is deliberately made in this way for a particular purpose: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. We created them all for nothing other than a true purpose, but most of them do not understand. The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 38–42) There is a fine and delicate relation between the creation of the heavens, the earth and all that is in between them on the one hand and the question of resurrection and accountability on the other. Human nature can easily understand this when attention is drawn to it in the way described here.

Such reflection should take into account the creation of the universe, what it points to of elaborate planning, wise purpose, perfect balance and harmony, the creation of everything in accurate measure and quantity placing it thus in harmony with everything around it. Such reflection undoubtedly leads to the conclusion that everything is created on purpose. No coincidence or carelessness is allowed in any aspect, major or trivial, of the design of the huge celestial bodies or the small, fine creatures living on them. Thus, we realize that the universe is created for a purpose, which means that nothing of it is the result of idle play; and that it is based on the truth, which means that no falsehood is allowed to infiltrate it. We further realize that it must have an end, which does not occur at the point of death after a short journey on earth. Logically speaking, a second life, when reward and punishment are administered, is inevitable, so that good and evil come to their natural ends. Man has been so created as to be susceptible to both tendencies of good and evil. It is through his will and effort that he chooses one or the other, making himself liable to ultimately receive its reward or punishment, as the case may be.

That man is so created, with both tendencies, and that God's action cannot be mere idle play, means that man will have a specific fate

which he meets after his journey on earth is over. This is the essence of the hereafter. Hence, it is mentioned after attentions have been drawn to the wise purpose that lies beyond the creation of the universe: "*The Day of Decision is the time appointed for all of them. It is a day when no friend shall be of the least avail to his friend, and when none shall receive support except those upon whom God will have bestowed His grace and mercy. He alone is the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful.*" (Verses 40–42)

This statement comes naturally at this point, closely related as it is to what went before it. It is absolute wisdom that requires that creatures should have a day when judgement is made between those who follow true guidance and those who go astray; when goodness is rewarded and evil humiliated; when people have no support, bond or relation. They will return to their Creator as individuals, just like He created them, to be requited for what they did in life. No one will support them or offer a gesture of mercy, except for those on whom God bestows His grace. It is from God's hand that they came out to work in life, and to His hand they will return to receive what their actions deserve. In between, they have a chance to act, just as they are being tested.

Two Different Fates

The final scene in the *sūrah* depicts the two different ends of the believers and the unbelievers. Again, the scene and its images are violent, in keeping with the *sūrah*'s general ambiance:

> *The fruit of the Zaqqūm tree will be the food of the sinful; like molten lead will it boil in the belly, like the boiling of scalding water. 'Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water! Taste this, you powerful and honourable man! This is the very thing you surely doubted.'*
>
> *The God-fearing will certainly be in a safe position, amid gardens and fountains, wearing garments of silk and brocade, facing one another. Thus shall it be. And We shall pair them with pure companions with most beautiful eyes. There they can call for every*

kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security. They shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire, an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph. (Verses 43–57)

The scene begins with an image of the Zaqqūm tree, which is stated to provide the food of sinners. It is a powerful image that strikes fear and panic in the audience's hearts. The closest thing we know to this food is the lees, the sediment that remains when oil has been long boiled. This lees continues to boil in their bellies like molten lead. The sinful person who behaved towards his Lord and His trusted messenger with arrogance will be standing there. An order is issued to the guards of hell to take him away in a brutal manner that suits his 'honourable' position: "*Take him, and drag him into the midst of the blazing fire; then pour over his head the suffering of scalding water.*" (Verses 47–48) Drag him away so as to make him feel his humiliation, for there is no honour for such sinners! When he gets there, pour scalding water over his head so as to burn his skin. Then, added to all this punishment is a strong rebuke: "*Taste this, you powerful and honourable man!*" (Verse 49) This is indeed the fate best suited to the one who boasted of his power and honour. Now he has none of this, because his boasting was an affront to God and His messengers. "*This is the very thing you surely doubted.*" (Verse 50) When you were warned against this fate, you received the warning with mockery, doubting that it would ever happen.

Our eyes stretch to the other side to see the God-fearing who took the warning seriously and feared what may happen on this day of decision. We see them '*in a safe position*', where there is nothing to fear and no harsh treatment. They revel in their splendour '*amid gardens and fountains*'. Their garments are made of silk and brocade. They take their positions facing one another talking about whatever is of concern to them. In addition, they are given pure companions with beautiful eyes to make their bliss perfect. There, in heaven, they are the 'owners' of the place. They can ask for whatever they want and it will be given: "*There they can call for every kind of fruit, enjoying peace and security.*" (Verse 55) They expect no end to this happiness, as death

does not occur here. They have already died once and they will not be made to taste death again. This contrasts with what the unbelievers used to say in this present world: "*We shall die but one death, and we shall not be raised to life again.*" (Verse 35) In the unbelievers' case, the one death is followed by suffering in hell. The believers, who are in heaven, "*shall not taste death there, having had their one death. He will have preserved them from suffering through the blazing fire.*" (Verse 56) This is yet another aspect of God's favour which He bestows on believers. No one is saved from suffering on the Day of Judgement unless the Lord grants this favour. It is all through "*an act of your Lord's favour. That is the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 57)

The *sūrah* concludes with a reminder of the great blessing God has bestowed on us by sending His message to warn us against the consequences of disbelief: "*We have made this Qur'ān easy to understand, in your own language, so that they may take heed. Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verses 58–59)

It is a fitting conclusion that sums up the message of the *sūrah*, reflects its ambiance, and fits with its beginning and line of discussion. It started with a reference to the book God revealed as a reminder for people so that they may take heed. It warned against what may happen on the Day of Judgement, with God saying: "*On that Day We shall deliver a mighty onslaught; We will indeed exact retribution.*" (Verse 16) The two short verses at the end remind them of the favour God granted them by giving them the Qur'ān in the Arabic tongue, which they understand. They are finally given an implicit but nonetheless fearful warning: "*Wait, then; they too are waiting.*" (Verse 59)



SŪRAH 45

Al-Jāthiyah

(Kneeling Down)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, describes some aspects of the reception Islam received from the idolaters. It reports their facile answers to its arguments and signs, states their stubborn rejection of the truth and shows how they unashamedly pursued desire. The Qur'ān also portrays their minds as sealed to Divine guidance, straying in whatever direction their fancies led them. Yet the Qur'ān continued to confront them with God's signs, reminded them of God's punishment and described His reward and His laws that operate in the universe.

As the *sūrah* describes those who opposed the message in Makkah, we see a group of people who insisted on going astray, who stubbornly rejected the truth and who were rude in their description of God and His revelations. Such people are described in the *sūrah* in the terms they deserve. They are also warned against God's grievous and humiliating punishment: "*Woe betide every lying, sinful person who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever*

to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them." (Verses 7–10)

We also see a group of people, perhaps belonging to those who received earlier revelations but who were given to ill thoughts and misjudgement. They paid little attention to the truth of faith and saw little difference between those who did evil and those who did good works. The *sūrah* makes it abundantly clear to them that there is a huge difference between these two types on God's scales. It describes them as ill-judging and makes it clear that God judges all on the basis of absolute justice, which has been ingrained within the core of the universe since the beginning of creation: "*Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.*" (Verses 21–22)

We also see the person who has no criterion other than his own desire for judging anything. For this type, desire is the deity he worships and obeys. The *sūrah* wonders at such people and publicizes the fact that they are blind to the truth: "*Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed?*" (Verse 23) Such people deny the life to come altogether, express grave doubts about the issue of resurrection and accountability and they stubbornly reject the truth asking for proofs that cannot be given in this life. The Qur'ān directs such people to consider the signs and proofs already in place. They, however, remain oblivious to these: "*They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.'*" (Verses 24–26)

It is possible to read all these descriptions as pointing to a single type of people. It is equally possible that they are different groups, all of which were opposed to the Islamic message during its period in Makkah. They would, thus, include some people to whom revelations were given in former times, but these would have been very small in number in Makkah at that time. Yet this reference to people of earlier revelations need not point to a particular group in Makkah; it may just be a pointer to a type of people that others should be made aware of.

Be that as it may, the Qur'ān confronts these people, highlighting as it does their qualities and behavioural patterns. It describes for them God's signs all over the universe and within themselves, warning them that they will have to face the reckoning on the Day of Judgement. It also cites what happened to communities before them when they abandoned Divine faith.

In the first instance, God's signs are put before them in a profound, effective and simple way: "*Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verses 3–6)

The *sūrah* then refers to other signs, showing them as blessings and favours granted by God, but the rejecters are oblivious to the message these impart: "*It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think.*" (Verses 12–13)

The *sūrah* also shows the unbelievers what they will be like on the Day of Resurrection, which is something they deny altogether: "*When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be*

summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph. And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: 'When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? For when it was said, "God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour," you would answer, "We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced."' The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.' Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends." (Verses 27–35)

The *sūrah* leaves absolutely no doubt about the fairness of the requital or each person's individual responsibility. This fundamental principle is shown to be central in the way the universe came into existence and in the way it is maintained: "*Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.*" (Verse 15) This is further clarified as the *sūrah* responds to those who do evil yet consider that they will be on an equal footing with those who believe in God and do good deeds: "*God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.*" (Verse 22)

In the way it addresses its subject matter, the *sūrah* is one single whole, but we have divided it into two parts for easier study. It begins with the two separate letters, *Ḥā, Mīm*, adding a reference to the Qur'ān: "*This Book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) It concludes by addressing all praise to God, the absolute Lord of all the universe. This glorification of Him contrasts with the attitude of those who remain oblivious to His signs and

who ridicule His revelations: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verses 36–37)

The *sūrah* is characterized by its easy flow and a soft beat that contrasts with the strong rhythm of the preceding *sūrah*, Smoke. God, the Creator of people's hearts and the One who has bestowed this Qur'ān from on high, sometimes addresses people in a strong and hard way, at other times with gentle touches, and then again sometimes with a soft and quiet beat. He takes into account their different conditions, circumstances, attitudes and responses. His knowledge is absolute and His wisdom infinite.



I

A Clear Way of Religion

Al-Jāthiyah (Kneeling Down)



In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

This Book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. (2)

تَنزِيلُ الْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. (3)

إِنَّ فِي السَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَءَايَٰتٍ لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. (4)

وَفِي خَلْقِكُمْ وَمَا يَبُثُّ مِن دَآبَّةٍ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾

وَٱخْتِلَٰفِ ٱلَّيْلِ وَٱلنَّهَارِ وَمَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مِن رِّزْقٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَتَصْرِيفِ ٱلرِّيَٰحِ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason. (5)

تِلْكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱللَّهِ نَتْلُوهَا عَلَيْكَ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ فَبِأَىِّ حَدِيثٍۭ بَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ وَءَايَٰتِهِۦ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٦﴾

Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations? (6)

وَيْلٌ لِّكُلِّ أَفَّاكٍ أَثِيمٍ ﴿٧﴾

Woe betide every lying, sinful person (7)

يَسْمَعُ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ثُمَّ يُصِرُّ مُسْتَكْبِرًا كَأَن لَّمْ يَسْمَعْهَا ۖ فَبَشِّرْهُ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٨﴾

who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. (8)

وَإِذَا عَلِمَ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِنَا شَيْـًٔا ٱتَّخَذَهَا هُزُوًا ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿٩﴾

When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. (9)

مِّن وَرَآئِهِمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَلَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُم
مَّا كَسَبُوا شَيْـًٔا وَلَا مَا اتَّخَذُوا مِن
دُونِ اللَّهِ أَوْلِيَآءَ ۖ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ
عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them. (10)

هَٰذَا هُدًى ۖ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ رَبِّهِمْ
لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مِّن رِّجْزٍ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

This is true guidance; those who reject their Lord's revelations shall suffer abominable punishment. (11)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي سَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الْبَحْرَ لِتَجْرِيَ الْفُلْكُ
فِيهِ بِأَمْرِهِ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِن فَضْلِهِ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. (12)

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُم مَّا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ
جَمِيعًا مِّنْهُ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think. (13)

قُل لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا يَغْفِرُوا لِلَّذِينَ
لَا يَرْجُونَ أَيَّامَ اللَّهِ لِيَجْزِيَ قَوْمًا
بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Tell the believers that they should forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned. (14)

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ
أَسَآءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۖ ثُمَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return. (15)

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ
وَٱلْحُكْمَ وَٱلنُّبُوَّةَ وَرَزَقْنَٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَٰتِ
وَفَضَّلْنَٰهُمْ عَلَى ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood; and We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations. (16)

وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُم بَيِّنَٰتٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ ۖ فَمَا
ٱخْتَلَفُوٓا۟ إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا جَآءَهُمُ
ٱلْعِلْمُ بَغْيًۢا بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ
يَقْضِى بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ فِيمَا
كَانُوا۟ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

We granted them clear indications in matters of faith. It was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves. Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed. (17)

ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَٰكَ عَلَىٰ شَرِيعَةٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ
فَٱتَّبِعْهَا وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَآءَ ٱلَّذِينَ
لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. (18)

إِنَّهُمْ لَن يُغْنُوا۟ عَنكَ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۚ
وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَآءُ بَعْضٍ ۖ
وَٱللَّهُ وَلِىُّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿١٩﴾

They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing. (19)

هَٰذَا بَصَٰٓئِرُ لِلنَّاسِ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith. (20)

أَمْ حَسِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱجْتَرَحُوا۟ ٱلسَّيِّـَٔاتِ أَن نَّجْعَلَهُمْ كَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ سَوَآءً مَّحْيَاهُمْ وَمَمَاتُهُمْ ۚ سَآءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. (21)

وَخَلَقَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ بِٱلْحَقِّ وَلِتُجْزَىٰ كُلُّ نَفْسٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged. (22)

أَفَرَءَيْتَ مَنِ ٱتَّخَذَ إِلَٰهَهُۥ هَوَىٰهُ وَأَضَلَّهُ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ وَخَتَمَ عَلَىٰ سَمْعِهِۦ وَقَلْبِهِۦ وَجَعَلَ عَلَىٰ بَصَرِهِۦ غِشَٰوَةً فَمَن يَهْدِيهِ مِنۢ بَعْدِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed? (23)

Signs Everywhere

> Ḥā. Mīm. *This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe. And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith. And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason.* (Verses 1–5)

The *sūrah* mentions the revelation of this book, the Qur'ān, by God, the Almighty, the Wise after having introduced the two separate Arabic letters *Ḥā, Mīm*, to point to this book's source. In speaking about the separate letters introduced at the beginning of a number of *sūrahs*, we have mentioned elsewhere that they highlight the fact that the Qur'ān is composed of the letters forming the Arab's own language, yet they cannot produce even a very small portion like it. This, then, constitutes permanent evidence that the Qur'ān is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty who can do whatever He wishes, the Wise who creates everything according to a certain measure and to serve a particular purpose. This is an apt comment that fits the ambience of the *sūrah* and its discussion of different types of people.

Before speaking about the unbelievers and their attitude towards the Qur'ān, the *sūrah* refers to signs pointing to the Creator that are available everywhere in the world around them. Alone, these signs should have been enough to direct them to believe in God. Now, the *sūrah* turns their minds to such signs so that they may open their hearts to them and realize that it is God who has bestowed this book from on high and that it is He who has created this great universe: "*Surely, in the heavens and the earth there are signs for those who believe.*" (Verse 3) The signs scattered everywhere in the heavens and the earth are not limited to any area or situation. Wherever we look around us we find signs. Is there anything in this wonderful universe that is not a sign pointing to its great Maker?

Look at the skies and the great celestial bodies that are scattered like small particles in space; it is such an awesome expanse, yet so pleasant to the eye. Consider these celestial bodies as they move in their respective orbits with unfailing accuracy and harmony. We are never tired of contemplating this perfect harmony which is conspicuous everywhere around us. Then look at the earth: how big it is in comparison to the humans who dwell on it, yet it is no more than a tiny particle compared to the huge stars or to the expanse in which it floats. It would have been lost in that expanse, had it not been for the hand of God placing it in its appointed position within the overall universal system. Nothing is lost sight of. Consider also how God gave this earth the necessary conditions that allow the emergence of life on it. This has required that many fine elements have been brought together in absolute accuracy of measure and quality. Should any of these qualities be in the wrong measure or be inaccurate in their function, life on earth would not have been possible nor would it have lasted.[1]

Everything on earth and every living thing, indeed every part of every living thing, large or small, is a sign. This applies to fine, little things in the same way as it applies to the large and huge: a small leaf in a great high tree or a frail plant is a sign when we contemplate its shape, size, colour and feel. A hair on the body of man or animal and a bird's feather are equally signs whether in terms of quality, length, material or function. Wherever man stretches his eyes to look at the skies or the earth, he will find a great multitude of signs that stand clear before him. Yet, who looks at these signs and understands their message? To whom are they addressed? In short, these are "*signs for those who believe.*" (Verse 3)

It is faith that opens people's hearts to receive the messages that emanate from the numerous great signs disseminated throughout the heavens and the earth. When faith touches hearts, they soften and become far more receptive. The message everything around us gives is to indicate the distinctive nature of whatever God's hand has made of objects, whether these be animate or inanimate. Indeed, everything

1. For further discussion of this point, please refer to the commentary on Verse 2 of *Sūrah* 25, in Vol. XII, pp. 379–383.

God has created is miraculous in nature. No one else can create anything similar to it.

The *sūrah* then points out that God's signs can also be seen within people themselves. They feel these close at hand: "*And in your own creation, and in the animals God scatters on earth there are signs for people of sure faith.*" (Verse 4) Man's wonderful constitution, unique qualities, varied and fine functions are all miraculous indeed, but we tend to forget this because of long familiarity. Indeed the physical make-up of any human organ fills us with wonder. In its most simple and primitive form, in the amoeba and even smaller forms, life is a miracle. If this is apparent in man's highly complex constitution how much more complex then is his psychological and emotional constitution?

Around man, countless creatures walk on earth: different kinds with a great variety of shape, size and form. Only God knows them all. The smallest is the same as the largest: they are all miraculous in their creation and in the way they fit with the overall pattern of life. No species increases beyond certain limits to the extinction of other species. Only the mighty hand of God controls them all, increasing or decreasing them according to a perfect measure, giving them the qualities and functions that ensure proper balance.

Eagles are birds of prey that enjoy longevity, but who lay only a small number of eggs and so procreate on a small scale, as compared with swallows and other small birds. What would the world of birds be like had eagles procreated at the same rate as swallows and swifts? Needless to say, all other types of birds would have vanished. The same applies to lions who are ferocious hunters. What would animal life be like, had they procreated at the same rates as sheep and deer? No other animal species would have survived in any jungle or forest. Again, the hand of God controls the number of lions to ensure continuity, and increases the numbers of sheep and deer for an easily recognized purpose. A fly lays hundreds of thousands of eggs during its life cycle, yet flies live for only around two weeks. What would happen if flies were left to live for months or years?

Thus we see that in the very act of creation and its management, the qualities of different creatures of all kinds and types, there are endless

signs that deliver the same message, but only to those who make the effort to see and contemplate these signs. These are "*signs for people of sure faith.*" Certainty of faith is the condition that makes hearts receptive and interacting. It gives them reassurance so that they can look at the facts the universe presents with ease, confidence and calm. This enables our minds to draw great conclusions from simple facts.

The *sūrah* then highlights a number of natural phenomena and their effects on human life and on the lives of other creatures: "*And in the alternation of night and day, and in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the shifting of the winds there are signs for those who use their reason.*" (Verse 5) The alternation of day and night is a phenomenon that has lost its significance in the minds of most people because of its regular frequency. Yet, what wonder would fill the heart of anyone who sees the approach of night or the creeping of the day for the first time? An alert mind and an open heart will always see this great wonder and marvel at it as they see in it God's hand that controls the universe.

As human knowledge of some natural phenomena increased, man came to know that the night and day result from the earth revolving in its position opposite the sun once every 24 hours. Yet the wonder is in no way diminished. Indeed, similarly wonderful is the fact that the earth revolves with such regular speed while floating in space, with nothing to hold it in place other than God's hand that has set the laws of nature in place, thus allowing life to emerge on this planet. Human knowledge broadens and people begin to recognize the great importance of the alternation of night and day for life on our planet. They understand that dividing time into night and day is essential for the emergence of life and its continuity. Without such alternation, everything on earth would be different, particularly human life. Thus the more we know, the better we feel the remarkable wonder that is this great phenomenon.

"*And in the means of subsistence God sends down from the skies, reviving with it the earth after it had been lifeless.*" (Verse 5) The '*means of subsistence*' may refer to rain pouring down, as people understood in the past. Yet the term may refer to other things that

come from the skies and have similarly important roles to play in sustaining life on earth. The rays that come from the skies provide an example. These rays are actually essential for rain, because it is the heat of the sun that causes sea water to evaporate. It then gathers in clouds that produce the rain in a process of condensation. Rain water then forms reservoirs that allows rivers to flow and springs to gush forth. Thus, after being lifeless, the earth is revived through water, heat and light.

"*And in the shifting of the winds.*" The winds blow east or west, north or south, straight or at an angle, hot and cold, but always in accordance with the accurate, synchronized system that operates in the universe, where everything is meticulously calculated leaving nothing to coincidence. The blowing of the wind has a definite relation to the movement of the earth, the alternation of day and night as also to the means of subsistence sent down from the skies. They all cooperate to fulfil God's will and how it operates in the universe. All these are signs we see in the universe, but who understands their message? It is understood only by "*those who use their reason.*" (Verse 5) Man's mind, thus, has a role, one that it should fulfil.

Those Deaf to the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān, revealed by God, highlights these universal signs in a way that inspires believers who have certainty of faith and who use their reason. In this way, it touches hearts and minds and addresses people's natures. The profound link between human nature and the universe means that it only requires some inspiring words, such as the verses of the Qur'ān, for senses to be alerted and made responsive. Anyone who does not believe as a result of contemplating these signs is totally unlikely to believe in some other way; and the one who is not fully alerted by the inspiring verses of the Qur'ān will not be alerted by loud outcries from any other source: "*Such are God's signs that We recount to you, setting forth the truth. In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verse 6)

No words will be as effective as the Qur'ān, God's word. Nor will any creation be equal to God's creation in the universe. Likewise, no

truth will be as clear and confirmed as the truth of God: "*In what discourse will they then believe, if they deny God and His revelations?*" (Verse 6)

The only requital fit to be given to an unbeliever is severe punishment:

> *Woe betide every lying, sinful person who hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them. So, give him the news of painful suffering. When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it. For such people there is humiliating suffering in store. Hell lurks behind them; and all that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God. Grievous suffering awaits them.* (Verses 7–10)

These verses describe, in part, the unbelievers' reception of the Islamic message in Makkah, their stubborn refusal to listen to the clear word of truth and their insistence on falsehood. They take a hostile attitude to the truth, as if it has never even been presented to them. These verses also mention the unbelievers' rudeness and impudence as they speak of God and His word. The Qur'ān severely rebukes them for this, putting before them the grievous and humiliating suffering they are certain to endure.

"*Woe betide every lying, sinful person.*" (Verse 7) This verse threatens every habitual liar who frequently indulges in sin. The threat is issued by God Almighty who is able to bring about the total destruction of any community, and whose promises and warnings always come true. This makes the warning all the more serious and frightening.

The mark of such a lying, sinful person is that he persistently holds on to what is false, looks with disdain on the truth, feels too proud to respond to God's revelations and behaves with insolence towards God. He thus: "*hears God's revelations being recited to him, and yet persists in his haughty disdain, as though he had not heard them.*" (Verse 8) Although this hateful type of person could be found among the idolaters in Makkah, the same type is seen in every *jāhiliyyah* society, immersed in ignorance, whether in the past, present or future. Many

are those all over the world, including some who are described as Muslims, who behave with disdain when they hear God's revelations being recited and who persist in their erring ways as though they have never heard such revelations. They do so because what God has revealed is contrary to their desire and will not approve the evil and false practices in which they indulge.

"*So, give him the news of painful suffering.*" (Verse 8) This statement describes the punishment such a person will receive, but the Arabic text uses the word *bashshir* for 'giving news', even though the word is only used for giving good news. As used in this verse to bring news of painful suffering, it thus carries connotations of ridicule. If this person does not listen to the warning, let him receive the news of his suffering in a voice that signals good news. What mockery!

"*When he learns something of Our revelations, he ridicules it,*" after learning their source. This is a far more serious and grave response. Yet it describes an oft found situation in every community that lives in a state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*. How many are those, including some described as Muslims, who ridicule God's revelations, mocking them and those who believe in them. "*For such people there is humiliating suffering in store.*" (Verse 9) Humiliation is the fitting requital for everyone who ridicules God's revelations.

This suffering is ready and close at hand. It may not be time for it yet, but it is nevertheless present: "*Hell lurks behind them*". (Verse 10) The phrase, '*behind them*,' has connotations that are specifically intended. Since the suffering is 'behind' them, they do not see it and remain oblivious to it. Therefore, they do not try to avoid it. Yet it will surely engulf them. "*All that they may have gained shall be of no avail whatsoever to them, nor shall any of those which they took for their protectors beside God.*" (Verse 10) Nothing that they might have done or gained is of any use to them. Even if some of their deeds are good, they cannot benefit from them because they have been scattered by the wind like dust. Their deeds were not founded on a solid basis of faith. Likewise, their possessions will be of no use to them. Nor can their deities, friends, supporters or soldiers offer them help or protection. Nor can they intercede on their behalf. "*Grievous suffering awaits them.*" (Verse 10) Their punishment is not only humiliating, as

fits their offence for mocking God's revelations, it is also grievous to suit the magnitude of that offence.

This section concludes with a word that describes, in general terms, the true nature of God's revelations and the punishment to be meted out to those who disbelieve them: "*This is true guidance; those who reject their Lord's revelations shall suffer abominable punishment.*" (Verse 11) It is a fact that this Qur'ān is true and pure guidance that admits no error whatsoever. Therefore, anyone who denies its truth deserves such grievous suffering. The nature of the pain is described here as abominable, which serves to emphasize its description in the previous verses.

Will They Reflect?

Once again the *sūrah* reminds them of the great favours and blessings God has given them in this world, so that their hearts may soften and reflect:

> *It is God who has subjected the sea for you, so that ships sail through it by His command, and that you may seek of His bounty, and that you give thanks. And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth. In this there are signs for people who think.* (Verses 12–13)

Man, an insignificant creature in this great universe, receives a large share of God's care, which allows him to make use of greater creatures in the universe, benefiting by them in a variety of ways when he understands a part of the secret, Divine law that controls all. Had man remained ignorant of this part of God's law, he could not, weak as he is, have benefited by such great forces. He would not even be able to live with them, considering his small stature and strength compared with theirs.

The sea is one such huge force which God has subjected to man by revealing to him a portion of its secret make-up and qualities. Thus, man has been able to make ships sail through the huge oceans without fear of its strong waves: "*so that ships sail through it by His command.*" (Verse 12) It is God who has given the sea and the material from which ships are made their qualities and made atmospheric pressure, the speed

of winds, earth's gravity and other universal features in the way they are. Thus, they combine to allow ships to sail through the sea. God further guided man to understand all this and make use of it for his own benefit, whether it be by fishing, trade, gaining knowledge, or sports and pleasure: "*And that you may seek of His bounty.*" It behoves man, then, to turn to God in gratitude for all these favours: "*and that you give thanks.*" (Verse 12) The Qur'ān directs man to attend to this duty and to understand the close relationship between him and the universe. Everything has been originated by God and everything will ultimately return to Him.

Having specified the sea, the *sūrah* makes a general reference to God's favours. He has made all the forces, potentials and blessings in the universe that have a bearing on man's task on earth subservient to him: "*And He has subjected to you, as a gift from Himself, all that is in the heavens and on earth.*" (Verse 13) Everything in the universe is created by God. He controls it and determines its operation. Man, a small creature in the universe, is given the ability to understand a part of the laws of nature that operate, by God's will, in this universe. This enables him to make use of powers and forces that are immeasurably greater than his own. Without God's grace, he would not have been able to do so. In all this, there are signs to reflect upon: "*In this there are signs for people who think.*" (Verse 13)

Forgiveness of Offenders

Now the *sūrah* calls on believers to show magnanimity and forbearance to those who are weak because their hearts do not open to the great source of power. They are urged to show kindness to those who are blind to the great truths, and as a result, do not look forward to God's great days when some aspects of His majesty are clearly shown:

> *Tell the believers that they should forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God. It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned. Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.* (Verses 14–15)

This directive is issued to the believers, requiring them to be forbearing towards those who do not look forward to God's days. Theirs should be an attitude of forgiveness that combines generosity with power and dignity. The truth is that such people deserve pity and sympathy because they are deprived of the benefit of believing in God, which is a rich treasure of grace, strength, wealth, reassurance and kindness. It provides true protection in moments of stress and weakness. They are also deprived of true knowledge that understands the nature of universal laws and what they can bring of power and riches for man's benefit. Those who enjoy the wealth of grace and benefits that come with faith are the ones who should be forbearing. They should forgive the slips and errors of the ones who are deprived of them.

On the other hand, the believers should leave the matter to God and He will requite all as they deserve. He will then credit them with their forbearing attitude and reward them for it as a deed of goodness. Such forgiveness naturally applies to what does not spread corruption on earth and does not constitute a transgression of the bounds set by God: "*It is for Him alone to requite people for whatever they may have earned.*" (Verse 14) This is followed by an assertion about every person's individual responsibility and about fair judgement for all. It further confirms that all will return to God: "*Whoever does what is right benefits himself; and whoever does evil causes himself harm. In the end to your Lord you will all return.*" (Verse 15) When this is made clear, a believer is able to be forbearing and to overlook personal offences, but this forbearance is not out of weakness. Instead, he is the one who is strong and magnanimous. He holds the torch of guidance to enable the ones deprived of light to see. He comes forward with the cure for those who are ill. He will be rewarded according to his deeds, unharmed by those who do evil. All matters are ultimately judged by God, to whom all shall return.

The Leaders of Humanity

The *sūrah* then speaks of the leadership of humanity and how it has ultimately been assigned to believers in the Islamic message. It refers to the divisions that split the Children of Israel after God had given

them scriptures, wisdom and prophethood. The mantle of leadership has now been given to the messenger advocating God's final message. This was clearly stated when the Prophet was still in Makkah, suffering with his followers from persecution by the unbelievers. Yet this tells us something about the nature of the Islamic message, right from its very beginning, and the mission it is expected to fulfil:

> *To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood; and We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations. We granted them clear indications in matters of faith. It was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves. Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed. And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing. This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith.* (Verses 16–20)

Before the advent of Islam, the leadership of mankind was assigned to the Children of Israel. They were the community entrusted with the Divine faith God laid down for a certain period of time. Mankind needs a leadership enlightened with Divine guidance. When human leadership is based on earthly considerations alone, with no reference to Divine guidance, it is pulled in different directions whether by desire, ignorance or commonplace failings. God alone, the Creator of mankind, is the One who gives people a law that is free from the pressures of desire, ignorance or failing. He is the One who knows best what suits His creation.

"*To the Children of Israel We gave revelations, wisdom and prophethood.*" (Verse 16) They were given the Torah, containing God's law, and they had a state where they were required to implement this law. They were also given prophethood after Moses so as to ensure the

continued and right implementation of this Divine law. Prophets were sent to them in succession over a relatively long period of history. "*We provided them with wholesome things and favoured them above all other nations.*" (Verse 16) Their kingdom was in the holy land, which yielded rich harvests of all types, stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates.

"*We granted them clear indications in matters of faith.*" (Verse 17) What they were given of the Divine law was clear and decisive, free of ambiguity, confusion and contradiction. There was absolutely no reason for them to differ over this clear law. There was no obscurity over any question of their faith or its laws, and they were certainly aware of the right judgement on all matters of importance. Nevertheless, "*it was only after knowledge had been granted them that they began to differ maliciously among themselves.*" (Verse 17) Such disputes were motivated by mutual envy, malice and injustice, despite their knowing the truth. Therefore, their leadership of mankind was terminated, and their case is left to God, who will judge them on the Day of Resurrection: "*Your Lord will certainly judge between them on Resurrection Day regarding all that on which they differed.*" (Verse 17)

God then assigned a new leadership, imparted a new message to a different messenger, put His Divine law back on its right course and gave back to Divine faith its absolute clarity. This new leadership is thus guided by God's law, not by any human desire: "*And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth].*" (Verse 18) Thus matters are defined in absolute clarity: it is either God's law or people's changing desires that are devoid of knowledge. There can be no third alternative and no middle way. No one abandons Divine law unless they choose to pursue human desires. Everything that differs with God's law is the expression of desire that pleases those who lack knowledge. God warns His messenger against following the desires of those who have no knowledge of the truth, as they will be of no avail to him. They only try to protect one another. Thus, they cannot harm him in any way as God will support and protect him: "*They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing.*" (Verse 19)

This verse and the one before it charts the way for the advocates of the Divine message, leaving no need for any comment or further detail: "*And now We have set you on a clear way of religion; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know [the truth]. They will be of no help to you against God. The wrongdoers have only one another to protect them, whereas God is the Protector of all who are God-fearing.*" (Verses 18–19) There is only one law that fits this description; everything else is the result of desire and ignorance. Every advocate of the Divine faith must follow only that. Those who espouse desire cannot help a believer: they only help one another and will not abandon their course. Yet they are too weak to be able to cause a believer any harm, since God is the One who protects the God-fearing. How can humans who, in their ignorance and weakness, have only one another for support be compared to one who advocates God's law and is protected by Him?

Commenting on this decisive clarification, the *sūrah* mentions the certainty of faith and what the Qur'ān provides of insight, guidance and Divine grace: "*This [revelation] is a means of insight for mankind, and a source of guidance and grace for people of sure faith.*" (Verse 20) Describing the Qur'ān as a means of insight emphasizes its role of providing enlightenment. The Qur'ān provides insight, and insight makes matters clear. Moreover, the Qur'ān itself is guidance and mercy, but all this is dependent on certainty of faith which admits no doubt or worry. With such certainty, we know the way as it appears before us clear, straight, leading to a well defined goal. We go along this way sure of step and without hesitation. The Qur'ān is our source of light and guidance. It is indeed the embodiment of God's grace.

Totally Unequal

The *sūrah* clearly distinguishes between those who commit evil and those who do good as a result of being believers. There is no way that they can be judged in the same way. They are different in God's sight. Furthermore, God has established His universal law on the basis of truth and justice:

> *Do those who indulge in sinful deeds think that We shall place them, both in their life and their death, on an equal footing with those who believe and do righteous deeds? Flawed is their judgement. God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, so that every soul shall be recompensed according to its deeds. None shall be wronged.* (Verses 21–22)

The first of these verses may be understood to refer to those among the people of earlier revelations who deviated from their scriptures and indulged in sin, but who nonetheless continued to think of themselves as believers. They might have thought themselves to be on the same level as Muslims who do good deeds. They might also have considered that the two groups are equal in God's sight, both in this life and in the life after death when people are given their reward or punishment. These verses may also be taken as a general discourse defining how people are judged on God's scales. It shows that believers who do good deeds are definitely in a higher position. It says that putting the evildoers and the righteous on the same level, either in this life or in the next, conflicts with the basic and permanent rule upon which the universe is founded, namely, the truth. Thus the truth is fundamental to both the universe and the Divine law. Consequently, both the universe and human life are set to progress by means of this truth. This manifests itself in the distinction between evildoers and those who do good in all respects, and in the individual judging of people on the basis of what each has earned through life. Justice is, thus, administered to all: "*None shall be wronged.*" (Verse 22) This is the constant truth, the foundational stone of the entire universe.

The *sūrah* then refers to desire, which is by nature changing and fleeting. Yet some people make of desire a deity and thus they are unable to recognize true guidance:

> *Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity, and whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth], sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes: who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]? Will you not, then, take heed?* (Verse 23)

The inimitable Qur'ānic style draws here an extraordinary image of the human soul when it abandons the basic and permanent rule of truth in order to follow fleeting desires, making of them a deity from which concepts, rules, feelings and actions are derived. In this way does man submit to desire and obey its dictates. This extraordinary situation is painted in a tone that invites strong censure.

"*Consider the one who takes his own desires as his deity!*" Such an example should be carefully considered. A person of this ilk deserves to be abandoned by God so that he goes even further astray: no light of guidance will be given to him by Divine mercy. After all, he has left no room in his heart for such guidance when he worships his own desires: "*And whom God has [therefore] let go astray despite his knowledge [of the truth].*" The Arabic phrase, *'alā 'ilm*, may be translated as, 'in full knowledge', in which case it refers to God's knowledge that such a person deserves to be left astray. Alternatively, it can be translated as we have rendered here as '*despite his knowledge*'. In other words, his knowledge of the truth does not deter him from pursuing his desires. Such a person deserves to be left straying in blindness: "*sealing his ears and heart and placing a cover on his eyes.*" His receptive faculties are sealed, allowing no light or guidance to seep through. His judgement is, thus, fundamentally impaired.

"*Who can guide such a person after God [has abandoned him]?*" (Verse 23) All guidance comes from God. No one can provide anyone with guidance or error, not even His chosen messengers. It is all determined by God alone. "*Will you not, then, take heed?*" (Verse 23) When a person takes heed, he will break the chains of desire and return to the straight path of truth. No one who treads this path will ever go astray.



2

To Whom Supremacy Belongs

They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. (24)

وَقَالُوا۟ مَا هِىَ إِلَّا حَيَاتُنَا ٱلدُّنْيَا نَمُوتُ وَنَحْيَا
وَمَا يُهْلِكُنَآ إِلَّا ٱلدَّهْرُ ۚ وَمَا لَهُم بِذَٰلِكَ مِنْ
عِلْمٍ ۖ إِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' (25)

وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتُنَا بَيِّنَٰتٍ مَّا كَانَ
حُجَّتَهُمْ إِلَّآ أَن قَالُوا۟ ٱئْتُوا۟ بِـَٔابَآئِنَآ
إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.' (26)

قُلِ ٱللَّهُ يُحْيِيكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يَجْمَعُكُمْ
إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
ٱلنَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. (27)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ
ٱلسَّاعَةُ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَخْسَرُ ٱلْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. (28)

وَتَرَىٰ كُلَّ أُمَّةٍ جَاثِيَةً ۚ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَىٰ إِلَىٰ كِتَابِهَا ۖ الْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.' (29)

هَٰذَا كِتَابُنَا يَنطِقُ عَلَيْكُم بِالْحَقِّ ۚ إِنَّا كُنَّا نَسْتَنسِخُ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph. (30)

فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ فَيُدْخِلُهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿٣٠﴾

And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: 'When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? (31)

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَفَلَمْ تَكُنْ آيَاتِي تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ فَاسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ وَكُنتُمْ قَوْمًا مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

For when it was said, "God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour," you would answer, "We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced."' (32)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَالسَّاعَةُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهَا قُلْتُم مَّا نَدْرِي مَا السَّاعَةُ إِن نَّظُنُّ إِلَّا ظَنًّا وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُسْتَيْقِنِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَبَدَا لَهُمْ سَيِّئَاتُ مَا عَمِلُوا وَحَاقَ بِهِم
مَّا كَانُوا بِهِۦ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride. (33)

وَقِيلَ ٱلْيَوْمَ نَنسَىٰكُمْ كَمَا نَسِيتُمْ لِقَآءَ
يَوْمِكُمْ هَٰذَا وَمَأْوَىٰكُمُ ٱلنَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم
مِّن نَّٰصِرِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. (34)

ذَٰلِكُم بِأَنَّكُمُ ٱتَّخَذْتُمْ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ هُزُوًا
وَغَرَّتْكُمُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۚ فَٱلْيَوْمَ لَا يُخْرَجُونَ
مِنْهَا وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.' Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends. (35)

فَلِلَّهِ ٱلْحَمْدُ رَبِّ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَرَبِّ ٱلْأَرْضِ
رَبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. (36)

وَلَهُ ٱلْكِبْرِيَآءُ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ
وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣٧﴾

His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (37)

Overview

This last passage of the *sūrah* presents what the idolaters used to say about the hereafter, resurrection and accountability on the Day of Judgement. It refutes their arguments, citing irrefutable evidence drawn from their own particular situation. It then portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement which they see as closing in upon them, even though it is not as yet due. This is because the Qur'ānic style presents it as if it is there before their very eyes.

The *sūrah* then concludes with praises of God, the only Lord of the heavens and the earth and all those who live within them. His glory is extolled and no one can aspire to His position of absolute power.

A Narrow View of Life

> *They say: 'There is nothing beyond our life in this world. We die, we live, nothing but time destroys us.' Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess. Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.' Say: 'It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt, though most people do not understand.'* (Verses 24–26)

So short-sighted were they that they considered life to be nothing beyond what they saw before their very eyes: one generation dies and another replaces it in life. Apparently, no hand deals death; it is all a question of days that pass and time that elapses bringing death to all. It is time, then, that ends their lives, making them die. This is a superficial outlook that does not go beyond appearances to discover subtle reasons and causes. They do not ask what brings them life; or, when it is there, what takes it away? They see that death does not occur according to a defined system or after a certain number of days and years. Instead, they think that only the passage of time deprives them of life. Death comes to all: children and the elderly, the healthy and the ill, the strong and the weak. Therefore, when we carefully

consider the reason behind all this, time is an inadequate explanation. Therefore, God says of them: "*Of this they have no knowledge whatsoever. They merely guess.*" (Verse 24) Their guesses are wild, lack proper reflection, sound knowledge and an understanding of cause and effect. They do not look carefully at the two phenomena of life and death to realize that they are the result of a will other than that of man and a reason other than the passage of time.

"*Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, their only argument is to say: 'Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.'*" (Verse 25) This is a similarly superficial outlook devoid of any understanding of the laws of creation, God's wisdom or the secret that lies beyond life and death. People live on this planet so that they have a chance to work towards their ultimate destiny. Thus, God tests them by means of what He places at their disposal in this life. They then die and await the time of reckoning determined by Him. They will account for what they did in this life. Therefore, when they die, they do not return to this world. No purpose is served by such a return before the appointed time. They will not return merely because a group of human beings suggest they should. The major laws God has set in operation in the universe are not changed as a result of human suggestion. There is no question whatsoever of their naïvety in answer to God's revelations being taken up: "*Bring back our forefathers, if what you claim be true.*" (Verse 25)

Why should God bring back their forefathers before the time He, in His infinite wisdom, has determined? To convince them that God is able to bring the dead back to life? How amazing! Do they not see that God initiates life at every moment before their very eyes, in accordance with the law He has set for life? "*Say: It is God who gives you life, then causes you to die; and then He will gather you all on Resurrection Day of which there is no doubt.*" (Verse 26) The very miracle they want to see done to their fathers occurs before their very eyes. It is God who grants life and causes death. There is nothing surprising, then, that He will bring the dead back to life, gathering them all on Resurrection Day. Why should they entertain any doubt about this, when they see it occurring before them: "*Though most people do not understand.*" (Verse 26)

The Qur'ān's comment on this visible fact cites the origin of all: "*To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 27) He is the One who makes and controls everything in the universe, and He is the One able to originate and reinstate everything and everyone.

The Record of All Deeds

They are now presented with a scene from the day that they doubt will ever come:

> *When the Last Hour strikes, those who follow falsehood will on that Day lose all. You will see every community on its knees. Every community will be summoned to its record: 'Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.'* (Verses 27–29)

In the first of these verses they are told of the fate of those who follow falsehood. They are the ones who end up in utter loss. Then we are given a panoramic view, with all the generations that have dwelled on the surface of this planet throughout the ages gathered together. They all sit on their knees, each community distinguished from the next, but all awaiting their dreaded accountability. The atmosphere is one of awe and fear. How can it be otherwise, when the assembly brings together everyone from all generations, and they are all on their knees? Greater fear is inspired by what lies ahead of people having to account for their deeds. What generates most fear, however, is that they have to face God Almighty, the Most Gracious, whose blessings were not met with gratitude, on earth, by most of those gathered before Him.

All those waiting on their knees look anxiously, breathless and with dry mouths. They are told: "*Today you shall be requited for all that you did. This Our record speaks of you in all truth; for We have been recording everything you do.*" (Verses 28–29) All of them, belonging to different communities, races and generations, are split into two groups – believers and unbelievers – for there is no other banner to raise on that occasion. One is God's party and the other is Satan's.

"*Those who believed and did righteous deeds will be admitted by their Lord into His grace. That will be the manifest triumph.*" (Verse 30) They are the ones who are given comfort to dispel all worry and anxiety. The outcome of their situation is given straightaway, easily and without delay, so as to spread over them a pleasant air. But what do we find as we stretch our eyes through the words of the text to look at the other party? We hear a long and shameful rebuke one that reminds them of their worst sayings and deeds:

> *And as for the unbelievers, [they will be asked]: When My revelations were recited to you, did you not glory in your arrogance and persist in your wicked ways? For when it was said, 'God's promise will certainly come true, and there can be no doubt about the Last Hour,' you would answer, 'We know nothing of the Last Hour. We think it is all conjecture, and we are by no means convinced.'"* (Verses 31–32)

How do you view your situation now? Are you convinced? Then the *sūrah* turns away for a moment to give us a glimpse of what happens to them: "*The evil of their deeds will become clear to them, and they will be overwhelmed by the very thing they used to deride.*" (Verse 33) Further reproach is heaped upon their heads, and they are told that their lot will be nothing other than total disregard, humiliation as well as painful doom:

> *It will be said to them: 'Today We shall be oblivious of you as you were oblivious of the coming of this your Day! The fire will be your abode, and you will have no one to help you. Thus it is, because you received God's revelations with ridicule and allowed the life of this world to beguile you.'* (Verses 34–35)

As their ultimate fate is announced, the curtains are drawn leaving them in hell from which they cannot hope to leave and where they are not asked for excuses or justification: "*Therefore, they will not be brought out of the Fire on that Day, nor will they be given a chance to make amends.*" (Verse 35) As we listen, we almost hear the doors of

hell as they are finally closed. The scene is completed; nothing of it will change.

The *sūrah* concludes with voices praising and glorifying God:

> *All praise is due to God, the Lord of the heavens, the Lord of the earth and the Lord of all the worlds. His alone is all supremacy in the heavens and the earth. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 36–37)

The praising voice declares God's Lordship over the universe: earth and heaven, mankind and *jinn*, birds and beasts, as well as everyone and everything. They are all under the care of one Lord who is totally in control. Praised is He for the care He takes of them all. The glorifying voice declares that all supremacy in the universe belongs to God alone. To Him bows every exalted tyrant, and to His power submits every rebellious nature. Furthermore, to Him belongs the supreme power and absolute wisdom. Praise and glory to God, the Lord of all the worlds.



SŪRAH 46

Al-Aḥqāf

(Sand Dunes)

Prologue

The present *sūrah*, revealed in Makkah, addresses the question of faith: belief in God's oneness and His absolute Lordship of the universe. As in other Makkan *sūrahs*, faith here also includes belief in the revelation of the Divine message to Muḥammad, God's messenger, who was preceded by other messengers, and to whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high, confirming earlier scriptures. It also includes belief in the resurrection and accountability for all that is done in this present life, whether good or evil.

These are the fundamental principles upon which Islam builds its whole structure. Hence, the Qur'ān elaborates on these principles in all the Makkan *sūrahs*. It also touches upon these aspects in the *sūrahs* revealed later in Madīnah, and specifically whenever it lays down legislation or addresses a directive to the Muslim community. Part of the nature of the Islamic faith is that it considers belief in God's oneness, Muḥammad's message and accountability in the life to come the pivot upon which all its principles, systems, laws and morality turn. All are closely related to this belief. Therefore, they remain proactive.

The *sūrah* treats this question of faith in every possible way, presenting it against different backdrops and adding universal, psychological and historical effects. It makes faith a question for all

existence, not merely the human race. It gives us a glimpse of how some of the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, and refers to the attitude of some of the Children of Israel to it, presenting one testimony from uncorrupted human nature and another from some Israelites. It takes us on a journey so that we can look at the expanse of the heavens and the earth, and it also presents images from the Day of Judgement. It further shows us the fate of the people of Hūd, and touches on the fates of some of the townships around Makkah. According to the *sūrah*, both the universe itself and the Qur'ān are books stating the same truth.

The *sūrah* consists of four inter-related parts that can be seen as a single whole. The first part begins with the two separate letters *Ḥā Mīm*, that also began the six *sūrahs* preceding this one. These two letters are immediately followed by a reference to the book of the Qur'ān and its being a revelation from God: "*This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 2) The *sūrah* follows this with a reference to the book of the universe, which is established on the basis of His truth and created according to elaborate planning. "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, the recited book of the Qur'ān and the book of the universe we behold confirm the truth as well as the elaborate planning: "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3)

After this powerful and comprehensive opening, the *sūrah* begins to present the question of faith, starting with a denunciation of polytheism, upheld by the pagan Arabs, demonstrating that it lacks all basis in the universe, and that it further lacks true pronouncement and inherited knowledge: "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4) It shows the error of the one who worships instead of God someone or thing who cannot hear or respond to its worshipper and who disputes with him on the Day of Judgement dissociating itself from all such worship.

It then speaks of the appalling reception they gave to the truth as presented by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), describing it as plain sorcery. (Verse 7) They even had the temerity to go further than this and alleged that the Prophet had fabricated it all. The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to give them a reply that suits his position as a messenger of God, one that reflects his fear of God and accepts His judgement both in this world and the next: "*Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verses 8–9) It also cites the attitude of some of the Children of Israel who accepted the Qur'ān as true guidance when they found in it what confirmed the scriptures given to Moses (peace be upon him). Such a person "*has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance.*" (Verse 10) They are, thus, denounced for their wrongdoing, for their disbelief, despite the testimony of those endowed with greater knowledge: "*God does not guide wrongdoers.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* also mentions the unbelievers' flimsy justification of their attitude as they said in reference to the believers: "*If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.*" (Verse 11) This explains their true stance: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.*" (Verse 11) The *sūrah* also refers to the book of Moses and the fact that the Qur'ān confirms it, highlighting its role: "*to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12) This part concludes with details of the good news given to those who believe in God and follow the right course: "*Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.*" (Verses 13–14)

The second part of the *sūrah* portrays two patterns of human nature, one upright and the other deviant, highlighting their different attitudes to the question of faith. It depicts both natures as they commence their lives, reared by their parents. It describes their respective attitudes

when they come of age and are able to make their own choices. The first recognizes God's blessings, is dutiful towards his parents, eager to give thanks, and seeking forgiveness for slips and mistakes: "*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*" (Verse 16) The other is disobedient of both his parents and God, denies the Day of Resurrection, and creates tremendous distress for his parents: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) This part of the *sūrah* concludes with a swift scene of the Day of Judgement portraying the fate of this second type of person: "*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.*" (Verse 20)

In the third part, the *sūrah* speaks of the destruction of the 'Ād after they had rejected all warnings. It highlights the great wind which they had expected to give them rain and growth. Instead, it brought them ruin and the punishment they had hastened. "*When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do we requite guilty people.*" (Verses 24–25) In this way, the *sūrah* aims to heighten the unbelievers' feelings by showing them the fate of the 'Ād, who they are reminded were stronger and wealthier than they. "*We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.*" (Verse 26) As this part comes to an end, the *sūrah* also reminds them of the fate suffered by the townships around them and how their alleged

deities could not provide any support. Thus, their fabrications were clear for everyone to see.

The fourth and final part gives us the story of a group of *jinn* who were directed by God to listen to a recitation of the Qur'ān. They were highly moved by it, immediately declaring that it speaks the truth and confirms "*what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) They went straight back to their people warning them and calling on them to believe: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.*" (Verses 31–32) The *jinn* also refer to the open book of the universe which testifies to God's power of initiation and resurrection: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33) At this point the *sūrah* adds a touching scene, showing the unbelievers as they are brought before the fire. They will then admit what they used to deny, but it is all too late.

The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet to remain patient and not to hasten the unbelievers' punishment. They are only given respite for a short while, and God's punishment will inevitably catch up with them: "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*" (Verse 35)



I

One Universe, One Creator

Al-Aḥqāf (Sand Dunes)

سُورَةُ الأَحْقَافِ

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Ḥā. Mīm. (1)

حٰمٓ ﴿١﴾

This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. (2)

تَنزِيلُ الْكِتَٰبِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given. (3)

مَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَآ إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا عَمَّآ أُنذِرُوا مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Say: 'Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring

قُلْ أَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ ۖ أَرُونِى مَاذَا خَلَقُوا۟ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ أَمْ لَهُمْ شِرْكٌ فِى السَّمَٰوَٰتِ ۖ ائْتُونِى بِكِتَٰبٍ

مِن قَبْلِ هَٰذَآ أَوْ أَثَٰرَةٍ مِّنْ عِلْمٍ
إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٤﴾

me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.' (4)

وَمَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّن يَدْعُوا مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ مَن
لَّا يَسْتَجِيبُ لَهُۥٓ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ ٱلْقِيَٰمَةِ وَهُمْ عَن
دُعَآئِهِمْ غَٰفِلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? (5)

وَإِذَا حُشِرَ ٱلنَّاسُ كَانُوا۟ لَهُمْ أَعْدَآءً وَكَانُوا۟
بِعِبَادَتِهِمْ كَٰفِرِينَ ﴿٦﴾

When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship. (6)

وَإِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَٰتُنَا بَيِّنَٰتٍ قَالَ
ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ لِلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ هَٰذَا
سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٧﴾

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' (7)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ ٱفْتَرَىٰهُ ۖ قُلْ إِنِ ٱفْتَرَيْتُهُۥ
فَلَا تَمْلِكُونَ لِى مِنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا ۖ
هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تُفِيضُونَ فِيهِ ۖ كَفَىٰ
بِهِۦ شَهِيدًۢا بَيْنِى وَبَيْنَكُمْ ۖ وَهُوَ
ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.' (8)

قُلْ مَا كُنتُ بِدْعًا مِّنَ الرُّسُلِ وَمَا أَدْرِي
مَا يُفْعَلُ بِي وَلَا بِكُمْ ۖ إِنْ أَتَّبِعُ إِلَّا مَا يُوحَىٰ
إِلَيَّ وَمَا أَنَا إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٩﴾

Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.' (9)

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِن كَانَ مِنْ عِندِ اللَّهِ
وَكَفَرْتُم بِهِ وَشَهِدَ شَاهِدٌ مِّنْ
بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ عَلَىٰ مِثْلِهِ فَآمَنَ
وَاسْتَكْبَرْتُمْ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي
الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' (10)

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا
لَوْ كَانَ خَيْرًا مَّا سَبَقُونَا إِلَيْهِ ۚ وَإِذْ لَمْ
يَهْتَدُوا بِهِ فَسَيَقُولُونَ هَٰذَا
إِفْكٌ قَدِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' (11)

وَمِن قَبْلِهِ كِتَابُ مُوسَىٰ إِمَامًا
وَرَحْمَةً ۚ وَهَٰذَا كِتَابٌ مُّصَدِّقٌ
لِّسَانًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّيُنذِرَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا
وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (12)

Those who say, 'Our Lord is God', and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. (13)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do. (14)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا جَزَآءًۢ بِمَا كَانُوا۟ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

In Line with the Truth

> Ḥā. Mīm. *This book is bestowed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth, and for an appointed term. Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.* (Verses 1–3)

As the *sūrah* opens it touches on the link between the letters of the Arabic language they speak and the Qur'ān, a book composed of the same letters but unlike anything people say or write. This, in itself, is sufficient evidence to testify to the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed from on high by God, the Almighty, the Wise. It also touches on the relationship between God's recited book and the book of the universe we behold and which He made. Both books are made with the truth and according to careful planning. The fact that the Qur'ān is bestowed from on high by the Almighty testifies to His power and absolute wisdom. Likewise, the creation of the universe is an act of truth: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them otherwise than in accordance with the truth.*" (Verse 3) It is subject to elaborate planning: "*and for an appointed term.*" (Verse 3) Thus, God's purpose behind creation is fulfilled and all that He has willed through the process of creation is accomplished.

Both books are open, available to ears and eyes to contemplate. Each testifies to God's power and wisdom, indicating His planning. Indeed the book of the universe affirms the truth of the revealed book and its

promises and warnings. "*Yet the unbelievers ignore the warnings they have been given.*" (Verse 3) This is indeed most singular.

The revealed book states that the Godhead is One and that He is the Lord of everything, since He is the Creator who controls and determines all. The book of the universe also affirms this same truth: its system, balance and harmony confirm that the Maker is the One who makes everything on the basis of comprehensive and unerring knowledge. Indeed, everything bears the same mark of the One Maker. How can anyone then claim that there are deities other than Him? What have such alleged deities created? What share do they have in the universe? "*Say: Have you thought of those whom you invoke besides God? Show me what part of the earth they have created, or which share of the heavens they own. Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true.*" (Verse 4)

Thus, God instructs His messenger to put before people the testimony of the book of the universe, as it admits no dispute and addresses human nature according to its own logic. "*Show me what part of the earth they have created.*" No one will ever say that such worshipped deities, be they statues made of stone, trees, *jinn*, angels or any other, ever created any part of the earth or anything that lives on earth. Human nature flies in the face of anyone making such a suggestion. "*Or which share of the heavens they own?*" (Verse 4) Nor will any human being claim that any worshipped deity has ever had any share in the creation of the heavens, or that they own any share in them. A glance at the sky is sufficient to fill our hearts with a clear sense of the Creator's greatness and oneness, and to discard all deviant beliefs and absurdities. God, who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, knows the effect of contemplating the universe on people's minds and hearts. Therefore, He directs us to look at the book of the universe and listen to its message.

Some people, however, make assertions that rely on neither proof nor evidence. The Qur'ān does not allow them much leeway in this respect. Instead it requires that they provide evidence and proof in support of their claims and teaches them the method of proof putting before them a complete system of consideration, reflection and conclusion drawing: "*Bring me a book revealed before this, or some other*

vestige of knowledge, if what you claim is true." (Verse 4) Thus, they have to rely either on a true book revealed by God, or a proved piece of evidence that has survived over time. All books revealed before the Qur'ān emphatically assert the oneness of God, the Creator. None of them assigns even a shred of validity to the legends that speak of multiple deities, or suggests that they have any share in the creation of the earth or the ownership of the heavens. Nor is there any vestige of knowledge to support such absurd claims.

Thus the Qur'ān puts before them the testimony of the universe, which is clear and decisive, discounts any claim that has no supporting evidence and teaches them the method of proof; all this in one verse using a small number of words, but with strong rhythm and sound argument.

The Qur'ān also invites them to take an objective look at those beings alleged to be deities. It points to the obvious error behind such claims when these entities can neither respond to them nor show any awareness of them in this present life. Furthermore, they will stand against the unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection, denying all their claims:

> *Who is in greater error than one who invokes, instead of God, such as will not respond to him till the Day of Resurrection, and are not even conscious of being invoked? When all mankind are gathered [for judgement], these will be enemies to them and will disown their worship.* (Verses 5–6)

Some of the unbelievers considered their idols to be deities, either in themselves or as statues representing the angels. Others worshipped trees while still others worshipped the angels directly or even Satan. Yet none of these so-called deities respond to those invoking them, or at least make a useful response. Statues and trees give no response whatsoever, angels do not respond to anyone who associates partners with God, while the devils' response is only one of whispering and leading people astray. Then, on the Day of Resurrection, when all are gathered before their Lord, all alleged deities disown their errant worshippers. Even Satan disowns them, as clearly stated in another *sūrah*: *"And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say:*

'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store." (14: 22)

Thus, after having explained to them the universal truth that rejects their claims, the Qur'ān puts their own claims before their eyes, showing them what effect these claims have in this world and in the life to come. In both, the truth of God's oneness is clearly seen as the book of the universe proves it. The idolaters should espouse this if they care about what happens to them in this life and in the life to come.

This strong denunciation of idolatry referred, at the time of Qur'ānic revelation, to the deities worshipped by different communities during different periods of history. However, the Qur'ānic statements in this case have a broader significance and farther application than the historical situation then pertaining. What error is greater than one creature invoking another instead of God, at any time and place? Every creature thus invoked, regardless of its identity and status, will not and cannot make any response to those who invoke it. It is God alone who does what He wants. Polytheism is not limited to the naïve form practised by the idolaters of old. Many are those who associate with God partners from among people who have power, influence, wealth or position; they appeal to them for help. Yet these are also too weak to make any significant response to their appealers. None has any power to cause benefit or harm even to themselves. Appealing to them, placing hope in them and fearing them are all forms of subtle idolatry, which is unfortunately practised by many even though they do not recognize it as such.

A Wild Claim

The *sūrah* now discusses their attitude towards the Prophet and his true message, establishing the truth of revelation as it has already established the truth of God's oneness:

Whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, the unbelievers describe the truth when it is delivered to them: 'This is plain sorcery.' Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'? Say: 'If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful. Say: 'I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner. Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.' The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.' Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good. (Verses 7–12)

The *sūrah* first rebukes them for the reception they gave to God's revelations when it is given 'in all clarity', free of ambiguity, leaving no room for doubt. Besides, it presents the indisputable truth. Yet they describe this revelation as '*plain sorcery*'. As we all know, truth is vastly different from sorcery; the two cannot be confused or viewed in the same way. Thus the *sūrah* begins its discussion by refuting their ridiculous claims.

It then picks up on their other claim alleging that the Prophet had '*invented*' it. It states this in the form of a question, not a report, giving the impression that such a thing cannot be made or at least is unlikely to be made: "*Do they say: 'He has invented it himself'?*" (Verse 8) What a shameless claim! The Prophet is instructed to reply to them in all the politeness that fits his position as a prophet of God, reflecting his understanding of his Lord and his mission, as well as his knowledge of the true power and values in the universe: "*Say: If I have invented it, you cannot be of the least help to me against God. He is fully aware of*

what you say amongst yourselves about it. Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you. He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful." (Verse 8)

Essentially, the Prophet is instructed to ask them: how, for whose interest and for what objective would I invent it? Would I invent it so that you can believe in and follow me? If this is the case, you cannot help me in the least against God. He will surely hold me to account. What use would it be to me if you follow me, when you cannot give me the slightest support or protection when God punishes me for such invention?

This is a fit response from a Prophet who is instructed by God, and who recognizes no power in the universe other than His. Besides, it is a logical response which, when objectively considered, appears to the addressees to be truly valid. The Prophet makes this response and leaves them to God for judgement: "*He is fully aware of what you say amongst yourselves about it.*" (Verse 8) He is a witness to all that they say and do, and this is enough to ensure a fair judgement: "*Sufficient is He as a witness between me and you.*" Yet, "*He is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 8) He may treat you with compassion, bestow His grace on you and guide you, forgiving you your earlier error. It is a response, then, that combines warning with persuasion. It gently touches hearts and makes people realize that the matter is far too serious to be left to their absurdities.

Yet another argument is provided, this time drawing on realities. Why do they reject the idea of a Divine message being given through revelation? Why are they so quick to denounce it as sorcery or as an invention, when there is nothing strange or unusual about it? "*Say: I am not the first of God's messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me. I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

The Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was not a totally new phenomenon: he was one in a line of God's messengers. His situation was the same as all messengers who preceded him. He was an ordinary human being whom God knew to be suited to deliver His message. Therefore, He gave him His revelations and the Prophet carried out God's orders. This is what a Divine message is like. When a messenger of God feels this bond, he does not ask God for proof, nor does he

request anything special for himself; he simply moves on to deliver God's message as it is revealed to him. "*I do not know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow what is being revealed to me.*" He gets on with the task of delivering his message, not because of any knowledge he has of the realm that lies beyond human perception, nor because of any information given to him about what will happen to him, his people or his message. He simply follows instructions, trusting his Lord, submitting himself to Him. The future is unknown to him; its secrets are with his Lord and he does not seek to know them. He has all the reassurance he needs, and he realizes that the proper attitude for him is not to look beyond the limits of the mission he has been assigned: "*I am only a plain warner.*" (Verse 9)

Those advocates of Islam endowed with profound insight into its message follow in the footsteps of the Prophet and find the same reassurance. They carry on with their advocacy of the Divine message seeking neither personal gain nor self interest. They do not know what the future holds for it or for them. They do not ask their Lord for evidence; they have all the evidence they need in their hearts. Nor do they pray for any special favour; it is sufficient favour for them that they follow this line. They discharge their duty, and this is enough for them. They do not overstep the fine line God has demarcated for them.

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers a witness who is close at hand and whose testimony is particularly relevant because he belongs to an earlier Divine religion whose followers are aware of the nature of revelation:

> *Say: 'Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it? What if a witness from among the Children of Israel testifies to its similarity [to earlier scriptures], and has believed in it while you glory in your arrogance? God does not guide wrongdoers.'* (Verse 10)

This verse may refer to one or more of the Jews who, knowing the nature of the Torah, recognized that the Qur'ān had the same nature as earlier revealed books and, therefore, declared themselves believers in Islam. There are reports that it refers specifically to 'Abdullāh ibn

Sallām. However, this *sūrah* was revealed in Makkah, and 'Abdullāh ibn Sallām only adopted Islam when the Prophet later migrated to Madīnah. Other reports suggest that this verse was revealed in Madīnah, thus confirming that it refers to this particular individual. Still other reports suggest that the verse was revealed in Makkah and hence would not refer to him. It may also be that the verse refers to a different situation that took place when the Prophet was still advocating his message in Makkah, when a small number of followers of earlier Divine religions adopted Islam. This would have been particularly significant for the idolater Arabs. Hence, the Qur'ān refers to it more than once, delivering a strong counter argument to those idolaters who rejected the Divine message without any basis.

The *sūrah* uses a special style in presenting its argument to them: "*Have you thought: what if this Qur'ān is really from God and you reject it?...*" (Verse 10) It aims to shake their stubborn rejection and raise a fear within them concerning the eventual result. Since there is a possibility that the Qur'ān may really be from God, as Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says, should they not take precautions lest their rejection of it brings them to a terrible end? Could all the warnings it provides come true? Would they not be better advised to reflect on the whole matter lest they leave themselves open to all that it warns them against? Taking such precautions is all the wiser, considering that one or more of the people of Divine faiths confirmed that the Qur'ān is of the same nature as earlier revealed scriptures, and followed this by declaring their belief in it. By contrast, they, whose language the Qur'ān speaks, persist with their rejection. This is indeed blatant wrongdoing as it suppresses the truth. It deserves God's punishment: "*God does not guide wrongdoers.*" (Verse 10)

The *sūrah* continues to report what the pagan Arabs said about the Qur'ān and Islam. It specifically mentions their arrogance as they try to show themselves as superior to the believers:

> *The unbelievers say of those who believe: 'If this [message] were any good, these people would not have preceded us in accepting it.' Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'* (Verse 11)

Among the earliest Muslims were those who were poor and weak in Makkan society. To the arrogant elders of the Quraysh, this was a point of weakness. They boasted: 'had Islam been good, we would have been the first to recognize its goodness. Those others could not have preceded us in following it. Given our positions, knowledge and understanding, we are better equipped to determine what is good.'

Yet this was not so. What stopped them from accepting Islam was not any doubt that they had about it or that they did not recognize how good and sound it was, but rather the fact that they were too proud to follow Muḥammad's lead. They especially feared any loss of their social position or their economic privileges. Moreover they were proud of their ancestors and what they believed in. By contrast, those who were quick to respond to the call of Islam paid little attention to such considerations. Pride always prevents the arrogant from listening to the voice of sound nature; it precludes them from accepting the truth. Pride and arrogance always make people stubborn, urging them to seek hollow excuses and make false claims about the truth and its advocates. They will never acknowledge that they are wrong. Indeed, they put themselves at the centre of life, as if they were the pivot around which life itself turns: "*Since they refuse to be guided by it, they will always say, 'This is an ancient falsehood.'*" (Verse 11) Since they have not acknowledged the truth, then there must be something wrong with it. They could not make a mistake. They try to impress on the masses what they feel of their own infallibility!

The case for revelation concludes with a reference to Moses' scriptures:

> *Yet before this the book of Moses was revealed as a guide and a [sign of God's] grace. This book confirms it in the Arabic tongue, to warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.* (Verse 12)

The Qur'ān repeatedly refers to its bond with earlier Divine books, particularly the one given to Moses, considering that the one given to Jesus was a complement to the Torah, which contains the basic faith and legislation. Hence, Moses' book is defined as '*a guide*', or *imām* in Arabic, and described as '*grace*'. Indeed, all Divine messages are signs of His grace bestowed on earth and its inhabitants, in every sense of

the word. It is grace and mercy extended throughout this life and in the life to come. This present book, the Qur'ān, "*confirms it in the Arabic tongue.*" It confirms the original source that forms the basis of all Divine religions and also the Divine code of life advocated by all religions. It confirms the true direction shown to humanity to ensure that it remains in contact with its Lord. The reference to its being in Arabic serves to remind the Arabs of God's favour in choosing them to be the bearers of His message to humanity and choosing their language for the Qur'ān. The verse also speaks of the nature and function of the message: "*To warn the wrongdoers and to give good news to those who do good.*" (Verse 12)

What Reward for Believers?

At the end of this first part, the *sūrah* describes the reward of those who do good, explaining the good news the Qur'ān gives them, making clear its necessary condition, which is acknowledgement of God's Lordship and its implementation in human life:

> *Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and follow the straight path shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve. They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.* (Verses 13–14)

What is required of them is that they say: '*Our Lord is God.*' These are not idle words; indeed, they represent more than belief. They embody a complete system that applies to every step, action and feeling in life. They set up a criterion to judge every thought, event, action, relation, bond and person. Our Lord is God: to Him do we address our worship, it is Him that we seek and it is on Him alone that we rely. Our Lord is God: no one else matters; all our hopes look up to Him, and we fear none but He. Our Lord is God: in every thought, judgement and action we seek His pleasure. Our Lord is God: His is the law we implement, and from Him alone we receive guidance. Our Lord is God: all our bonds with anyone or thing in the whole world are subject to our relation with Him.

"*And follow the straight path.*" (Verse 13) This is the next step that defines a straight line that we should follow with reassurance and steady feelings, entertaining neither doubts nor fears. Thus, actions and behaviour will always be in line with God's code, avoiding pitfalls and resisting all temptations.

So, the statement, '*Our Lord is God,*' outlines a system, and following this system after having consciously chosen it is a higher grade still. Those whom God guides to have both are indeed the best people. Hence, they "*shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they grieve.*" (Verse 13) Why would they fear anything or grieve over anything when they have a system that leads to God and following it is the best assurance to be with Him?

"*They are the ones destined for paradise where they shall abide as a reward for what they do.*" (Verse 14) The phrase '*for what they do*' explains the meaning of the statement, '*our Lord is God*' and diligent following of the system it outlines. It tells us that there is a type of action that earns the reward of abiding in heaven. It is the type of action that results from this particular system and its conscientious implementation. Thus we realize that the words and phrases of faith in Islam are not mere statements to be made verbally. The basic statement, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God', denotes a complete system. If it remains no more than a statement, it cannot be the cornerstone of Islam, as it always should be.

Millions of people repeat this declaration today, but it remains no more than words they utter. It produces no effect on their lives. They continue to lead a life based on a system that is akin to paganism while they repeat a declaration that for them remains hollow. To say, 'I bear witness that there is no deity other than God', or 'our Lord is God', is to denote a system of life. This must be clear in our minds so that we can identify this system and follow it.



2

Two Types of Offspring

وَوَصَّيْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ بِوَٰلِدَيْهِ إِحْسَٰنًا ۖ
حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُۥ كُرْهًا وَوَضَعَتْهُ كُرْهًا ۖ
وَحَمْلُهُۥ وَفِصَٰلُهُۥ ثَلَٰثُونَ شَهْرًا ۚ
حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُۥ وَبَلَغَ أَرْبَعِينَ
سَنَةً قَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِىٓ أَنْ أَشْكُرَ
نِعْمَتَكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَىَّ وَعَلَىٰ
وَٰلِدَىَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَٰلِحًا تَرْضَىٰهُ
وَأَصْلِحْ لِى فِى ذُرِّيَّتِىٓ ۖ إِنِّى تُبْتُ
إِلَيْكَ وَإِنِّى مِنَ ٱلْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents: in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months. And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.' (15)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ نَتَقَبَّلُ عَنْهُمْ أَحْسَنَ
مَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَنَتَجَاوَزُ عَن سَيِّـَٔاتِهِمْ فِىٓ
أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۖ وَعْدَ ٱلصِّدْقِ ٱلَّذِى
كَانُوا۟ يُوعَدُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them. (16)

وَٱلَّذِى قَالَ لِوَٰلِدَيْهِ أُفٍّ لَّكُمَآ
أَتَعِدَانِنِىٓ أَنْ أُخْرَجَ وَقَدْ خَلَتِ
ٱلْقُرُونُ مِن قَبْلِى وَهُمَا يَسْتَغِيثَانِ
ٱللَّهَ وَيْلَكَ ءَامِنْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ ٱللَّهِ
حَقٌّ فَيَقُولُ مَا هَٰذَآ إِلَّآ أَسَٰطِيرُ
ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' (17)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ حَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْقَوْلُ فِىٓ
أُمَمٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ
إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ خَٰسِرِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of *jinn* and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost. (18)

وَلِكُلٍّ دَرَجَٰتٌ مِّمَّا عَمِلُوا۟ ۖ وَلِيُوَفِّيَهُمْ
أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ وَهُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged. (19)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ عَلَى ٱلنَّارِ أَذْهَبْتُمْ
طَيِّبَٰتِكُمْ فِى حَيَاتِكُمُ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَٱسْتَمْتَعْتُم
بِهَا ۖ فَٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ عَذَابَ ٱلْهُونِ بِمَا كُنتُمْ
تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ ٱلْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنتُمْ
تَفْسُقُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.' (20)

Overview

In this part the *sūrah* speaks of human nature when it sticks to the right track and when it deviates, and at what end it arrives in either case. It begins by urging man to remain dutiful to his parents. This instruction often comes in the Qur'ān after it speaks about faith or in conjunction with such discourses. The reason for this is that the bond between children and parents is the strongest and most important after the bond of faith. It is the one that deserves to be honoured. Furthermore, grouping the two bonds together in this way in the Qur'ān makes it clear that the bond of faith takes precedence in human life. It is followed though by the family bond in its closest form.

This part of the *sūrah* gives us a scene portraying two types of human nature. In the first, the two bonds of faith and the one between parent and offspring work together in the same direction, seeking God's acceptance. In the second, the two bonds separate and have no meeting point. In the first case, the children concerned are given the good news of being admitted into heaven, while in the second, they are destined to suffer in hell. An image of the punishment meted out in hell is given, describing the end suffered by the arrogant who are guilty of transgression.

Dutiful to Parents

"*We have enjoined upon man to show kindness to his parents.*" (Verse 15) This is an order given to all mankind, based on the very fact of their being human with no need for any further qualification. They are all enjoined to show kindness in its absolute, unrestricted sense. Mere parenthood requires such absolute kindness. This order comes from the Creator of man, and it appears to apply to the human race in particular. It is unknown among birds, animals or insects for the young to take care of the old. What is clearly observed among these creatures is that by nature the old take care of the young. Nevertheless, this applies only to some species. Hence, the Divine order seems to apply only to man.

This instruction to be kind to one's parents is repeated several times in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet's pronouncements. By contrast,

kindness by parents to children occurs only rarely, addressing particular situations. Human nature itself ensures that parents take good care of their children, without the need for any other motivation. Parents often show a remarkable readiness to sacrifice whatever they have for their children, to the point of being willing to die for them. They show no hesitation in all this, seek no recompense, press no favour and expect no thanks. The new generation, however, rarely turns back to take care of the older one who had made such great sacrifices. Indeed, the younger generation moves forward to bring up another new generation and take care of it, making similar sacrifices in the process.

Islam considers the family the basic unit in its social structure. It is the nest where the young are reared, receiving their share of love, and learning the value of mutual cooperation and care. A child who does not have a family to look after it often suffers deprivation in some aspects of its life, even though all sorts of comfort remain available in its environment. The first thing such a child lacks as it grows up in an environment other than that of a family is love. It has been proven that by nature a child loves to have its mother's complete attention during its first two years of life. This cannot be provided in a non-family environment where one carer has to look after several children. In this situation, jealousy is bound to surface, and a grudging seed replaces that of love. Similarly, a child needs to be under one supervisory authority during a certain period of its life; this so that its character remains stable. Again, this cannot be provided anywhere other than the family environment. In a children's home, such an authority is lacking because supervisors work in shifts. Therefore, their charges can only but lack stability. Hence, we can see the wisdom behind making the family the basic unit of the Islamic social structure that meets all the needs of sound human nature.

The Qur'ān describes the mother's willing sacrifice, which cannot be compensated for by her children no matter how well they fulfil God's order to be kind to parents: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth. His bearing and weaning takes thirty months.*" (Verse 15) Here the very words and their rhythm

gives us a clear sense of the difficulty and hard times the mother has to go through: "*in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth.*" In Arabic this sounds akin to a great sigh, made by someone bearing a heavy burden and breathing with difficulty. It, thus reflects the latter stages of pregnancy, as also of labour and birth.

As embryology advances, it reveals to us more and more of the great sacrifice the mother makes during pregnancy. When the egg is fertilized, it clings to the uterus. As it needs to feed, it begins to tear the tissues around it and feed on it. Blood runs to it so that the egg begins now to swim in a pool of the mother's blood, which is rich in nutrients. The egg needs more and more of this blood to grow and develop, and thus it continues to feed on the mother. This means that the mother eats food, digests it and as it enters her blood stream, this, with all its nutrients, feeds the developing embryo. When the embryo begins to develop its bones, it increasingly absorbs calcium from its mother who may suffer a shortage of the same. All this is merely a fraction of what the mother gives to the embryo.

Childbirth is another very difficult process, but its great pain dwindles before natural instinct. The mother is delighted with the fruit it yields, which means giving life to a new shoot of an old tree: a child that starts life as its mother moves on.

Now that the child is born, it needs to be breast-fed and taken much care of. By her milk, the mother gives of her own constitution, and as she takes care of her child, she gives much of her heart and feelings. Yet in giving all of this, she is nothing less than delighted. She is never fed up with all the trouble her child gives her. The best reward she aspires to is to see her child grow in good health. How can anyone compensate a mother for all her sacrifice? "One of the Prophet's Companions was carrying his mother as they did the *ṭawāf*, walking around the Ka'bah, [a ritual of pilgrimage]. He asked the Prophet: 'Have I discharged my duty to her?' The Prophet said: 'No, not even for one sigh she made.'" [Related by al-Bazzār.]

Having given this example of what parents, particularly the mother, do for their children, the *sūrah* now paints an image of a child that has attained maturity, nurturing sound nature and following right guidance:

And so, when he attains to full manhood and reaches the age of forty, he prays: 'My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents, and that I may do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance. Grant me good descendants. To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.' (Verse 15)

Here, the Arabic text uses the term *ashudd*, translated here as full manhood, which is between 30 and 40. Indeed at 40, man attains full maturity, when all talents and potentials are at their best and man tends to think and reflect in a relaxed atmosphere. Then, sound human nature begins to reflect on life and what comes after life, thinking of the eventual destiny.

The Qur'ān describes the thoughts and feelings of a person with sound nature as he stands at the end of one half of life and the beginning of another half with an almost apparent end. He, therefore, turns to God with this prayer: "*My Lord! Grant me that I may be grateful for the blessings with which You have graced me and my parents.*" (Verse 15) It is a prayer from a heart that appreciates the great grace God has bestowed on him, feeling that it is far more than he deserves. He recognizes that such grace was also bestowed in abundance on his parents. He feels that all his efforts are insufficient expression of gratitude for such grace. Therefore, he prays that God will enable him to perform his duty of thanksgiving and not allow his efforts to be wasted on distractions.

In this same prayer, the person who enjoys sound nature prays that God will enable him to "*do good work that will meet with Your goodly acceptance.*" What he wishes for is to be able to do some work that is so good as to meet with God's pleasure and acceptance. His utmost aim is to earn his Lord's acceptance, for it is in Him that he places all his hopes.

He goes on with his prayer: "*Grant me good descendants.*" This prayer issues from a believer's heart who hopes that his good work will continue with his children and their children and so on. He would love to be sure that his offspring will continue to worship God alone and seek His pleasure. Such goodly descendants are more precious to a believer than the greatest of material treasures. Such a prayer expresses a hope

that children take over from parents in obeying God across many generations.

What he presents in support of his sincere prayer is a request for repentance of any sins and errors and a statement of his full submission to God's will: "*To You I turn in repentance. I am indeed one of those who submit themselves to You.*"

Thus is the attitude of a good servant of God, one equipped with sound, uncorrupted nature. The Qur'ān tells us of how God looks upon such people:

> *It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.* (Verse 16)

The reward is granted on the basis of the best of one's deeds, while bad ones are overlooked. The destination to which such people go is heaven where they join its rightful dwellers. All this is in fulfilment of the true promise they were given in this present life. God's promise is always fulfilled.

To the Other Place

The converse of all this is error and transgression:

> *But there is one who says to his parents: 'Fie on you both! Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?' And while they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true,' he answers: 'All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.' Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.* (Verses 17–18)

The parents are believers, but the child is disobedient. His first characteristic is that of being undutiful to them, addressing them with arrogance and insolence, hurting their feelings: "*Fie on you both.*" He

then denies the resurrection, citing the hollow argument that no one from past generations has ever come back to life: "*Do you promise me that I shall be resurrected, when generations have passed away before me?*" (Verse 17) The time of resurrection is determined by God, when all will be resurrected at the same time after this present world has completed its term. No one has ever said that resurrection will take place in instalments, with one generation resurrected during the lifetime of a later one. It is not a game; rather, it is a submitting of final accounts once the journey has come to its final destination.

The parents are shocked by their son's words that mark him out to be a clear disbeliever. They fear the outcome of what he says to God and to them. Therefore, they appeal to him and pray to God for help: "*they both implore God for help, [and say to him]: 'Alas for you! Believe! God's promise always comes true.'*" (Verse 17) These words give us a clear impression of their dread at the outcome of all this. The child, for his part, however, persists with disbelief and denial, saying: "*All this is nothing but fables of ancient times.*" (Verse 17) His inevitable end overwhelms him: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) The verdict passed on this person and others like him is the punishment incurred by unbelievers. There are large numbers of these across many generations of humans and *jinn*. God's promise which always comes true states that these '*will be utterly lost*'. What greater loss is there than the loss of faith in this life and the loss of God's pleasure in the life to come! Such a loss means inevitable suffering for such unbelievers.

Having given a general idea of the outcome that awaits the two groups, the *sūrah* gives us an image of the accurate accountability of every individual: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19) Every single one has their own grade, according to their deeds.

These two types of people are very common. Indeed, the description almost identifies two particular people to heighten the effect and make each mirror a life situation. There are reports suggesting that each example does refer to a particular case, but none of these carries any

degree of authenticity. It is better, therefore, to consider that they refer to two types rather than two individuals. This is endorsed by the way the *sūrah* comments on their situations. After describing the first type, the *sūrah* says: "*It is from such people that We shall accept the best that they ever did, and whose bad deeds We shall overlook. [They shall be] among the people destined for paradise. True is the promise that has been given them.*" (Verse 16) It refers to the second type with a similarly telling comment: "*Such are the ones upon whom the verdict is passed, together with other communities of* jinn *and humans that have passed away before their time. They will be utterly lost.*" (Verse 18) It finally comments on both types together: "*They all shall have their grades in accordance with their deeds; and so, He will repay them in full for their doings, and none shall be wronged.*" (Verse 19)

Submitting the Final Account

The *sūrah* then puts before the unbelievers their own fate as they face the reckoning on the Day of Resurrection which they were wont to deny:

> *On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, they will be told: 'You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure. So, today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.'* (Verse 20)

This is a fast moving scene, yet it has a profound, telling effect. The scene brings them before the fire, but just before they are driven into it, they are told the reasons which determined their fate in this way: "*You have exhausted your share of good things in your worldly life and took your fill of pleasure.*" They had their fair share of good things, but they used them all up in the life of this world, keeping nothing back for their future life. In fact, they did not reckon that there would even be a future life. Therefore, they enjoyed these good things to the full, showing no gratitude for them and expressing no thanks to God for

granting them. They did not refrain from committing what is forbidden in order to enjoy such pleasures. Therefore, they had their full share of good things in this world, leaving themselves nothing in the life to come. They exchanged the endless life of the hereafter for the short span of life on earth. Therefore, "*today you shall be requited with the suffering of humiliation for having been arrogant on earth without any right, and for all your transgression.*" (Verse 20) Everyone who behaves with arrogance on earth does so without any right. All pride belongs to God; none belongs to any creature, no matter what position he holds. To suffer humiliation is, therefore, a just reward for arrogance and deviation from the path God has charted.



3

When Prophets Are Challenged

وَٱذْكُرْ أَخَا عَادٍ إِذْ أَنذَرَ قَوْمَهُۥ بِٱلْأَحْقَافِ
وَقَدْ خَلَتِ ٱلنُّذُرُ مِنۢ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَمِنْ
خَلْفِهِۦٓ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّا ٱللَّهَ إِنِّىٓ أَخَافُ
عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٢١﴾

Remember that brother of the 'Ād who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.' (21)

قَالُوٓا۟ أَجِئْتَنَا لِتَأْفِكَنَا عَنْ ءَالِهَتِنَا فَأْتِنَا
بِمَا تَعِدُنَآ إِن كُنتَ مِنَ ٱلصَّٰدِقِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.' (22)

قَالَ إِنَّمَا ٱلْعِلْمُ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ وَأُبَلِّغُكُم مَّآ أُرْسِلْتُ
بِهِۦ وَلَٰكِنِّىٓ أَرَىٰكُمْ قَوْمًا تَجْهَلُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.' (23)

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْهُ عَارِضًا مُّسْتَقْبِلَ أَوْدِيَتِهِمْ قَالُوا۟
هَٰذَا عَارِضٌ مُّمْطِرُنَا ۚ بَلْ هُوَ مَا ٱسْتَعْجَلْتُم
بِهِۦ ۖ رِيحٌ فِيهَا عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering (24)

تُدَمِّرُ كُلَّ شَيْءٍۭ بِأَمْرِ رَبِّهَا فَأَصْبَحُوا۟ لَا يُرَىٰٓ إِلَّا مَسَٰكِنُهُمْ ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجْزِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people. (25)

وَلَقَدْ مَكَّنَّٰهُمْ فِيمَآ إِن مَّكَّنَّٰكُمْ فِيهِ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُمْ سَمْعًا وَأَبْصَٰرًا وَأَفْـِٔدَةً فَمَآ أَغْنَىٰ عَنْهُمْ سَمْعُهُمْ وَلَآ أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ وَلَآ أَفْـِٔدَتُهُم مِّن شَىْءٍ إِذْ كَانُوا۟ يَجْحَدُونَ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ وَحَاقَ بِهِم مَّا كَانُوا۟ بِهِۦ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked. (26)

وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَا مَا حَوْلَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْقُرَىٰ وَصَرَّفْنَا ٱلْـَٔايَٰتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. (27)

فَلَوْلَا نَصَرَهُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّخَذُوا۟ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ قُرْبَانًا ءَالِهَةً ۖ بَلْ ضَلُّوا۟ عَنْهُمْ ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ إِفْكُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا۟ يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions. (28)

Overview

This third part of the *sūrah* addresses its central question in a different way to that of its earlier parts. It speaks of the fate of the ʻĀd and other townships around Makkah. Towards Hūd, their brother, whom God sent as His messenger, they adopted a similar attitude to that of the idolaters in Makkah towards Muḥammad, their brother and God's messenger. Both raised the same objections. Hūd answered them in the splendid manner of prophets, but within the limits of his human ability and the mission assigned to him. When they paid no heed to his warnings, they were smitten by God's punishment that left them utterly destroyed. Although they were more powerful, wealthy and intelligent than the Makkan unbelievers, none of this was of any avail to them. Nor did their alleged deities, which they claimed would bring them closer to God, avail them of anything.

The Makkan unbelievers are also reminded of the fate their own ancestors met, given they too had adopted the same attitude. They are told in no uncertain terms that they will suffer the same fate. The *sūrah* also shows them the line the Divine message follows: it is consistent and unchanging. Likewise, God's law applies to all and does not change. We see the tree of faith with firm roots, its branches stretched wide across the generations. It is the same faith for all times and communities.

At the Sand Dunes

> *Remember that brother of the ʻĀd who warned his people who lived in the Valley of the Sand Dunes. Other warners have come and gone both before and after him. He said: 'Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.'* (Verse 21)

The brother of the ʻĀd is the Prophet Hūd (peace be upon him) who is mentioned here by his position as a brother to his people. This highlights the relation of mutual love and care that existed between him and his people, which should have made them more responsive to his call and motivated them to think well of him and what he taught. The same bond existed between Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his people who similarly opposed him.

The ʿĀd used to build their homes on the high sand dunes in a valley in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, said to be near Ḥadramawt.[1] God in His glory directs His messenger to remember Hūd and how he warned his people at the Valley of the Sand Dunes. This to give him encouragement as he realizes that Hūd was similarly rejected by his people. Such remembrance also serves to remind the Makkan unbelievers of the fate of those earlier communities that rejected God's messages.

Hūd warned his people, but he was not the first messenger to warn his community. Other messengers did the same before him: "*Other warners have come and gone both before and after him.*" Those messengers came close to him in time and place as also far from him. The chain of God's messages is a continuous one, and the warnings are given at all times. This whole issue is familiar to all. Hūd gave them the same warnings given by all messengers to their communities: "*Worship none but God. I fear lest suffering befall you on a terrible day.*" (Verse 21) Worshipping God means faith at heart and a code of living. To discard all this inevitably leads to terrible suffering in this present life, or in the life to come, or in both. When reference is made to a day, as it is made here, it means the Day of Judgement when the suffering is far greater and more terrible.

What response did Hūd's people give him for his caring instructions and warnings? "*They said to him: 'Have you come to turn us away from our gods? Bring, then, upon us that with which you threaten us, if what you say is true.'*" (Verse 22) Their response betrays mistrust, lack of understanding, rejection of the warning, hastening the punishment he warned them against, arrogance and a persistent adherence to false beliefs.

For his part, Hūd receives all this with patience, showing the manners that behove a prophet. He makes no personal claims as he outlines his attitude and makes his limits clear to them: "*He said: 'Only God knows when it will come. I only convey to you the message I am entrusted with; but I see that you are insolent people.'*" (Verse 23) I am giving you this

1. Recent reports based on satellite pictures suggest that a whole city is buried at a place close to Oman in the Empty Quarter, which means that it is to the west of Ḥadramout, a large province in Yemen. From the description given, this city might well be where the ʿĀd lived. – Editor's note.

warning as I was commanded to do, but I do not know when such punishment falls, or what form it will take. All this is known to God alone. I am only delivering a message entrusted to me, making no further claim. "*But I see that you are insolent people.*" (Verse 23) What could be more foolish and insolent than to give such a hostile reception to a brother who is only offering sincere and honest advice?

The *sūrah* gives no further details of the long argument that took place between Hūd and his people, moving straight to report on the fate they suffered. This is intended here as a reply to their challenge and hastening of punishment:

> *When they saw a cloud approaching their valleys, they said: 'This cloud will bring us rain.' 'No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.' When the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings. Thus do We requite guilty people.* (Verses 24–25)

Reports suggest that the ʿĀd suffered a period of intense heat, coupled with absence of rain. They endured this unbearable climate for some time. Then God sent them clouds, and they were delighted. They went into the surrounding valleys hoping that rain would quickly ensue. Yet the truth of what the clouds brought signified their ultimate demise: "*No, indeed. It is the very thing you wanted to hasten: a stormwind bearing painful suffering which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*" Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, this stormwind is described as "*furiously raging.*" (69: 6) Another description of it states that it "*spared nothing of what it came upon, but caused it all to become like bones dead and decayed.*" (51: 42)

The Qur'ānic text depicts the wind as if it was alive, aware of what it was doing, fulfilling its orders to destroy everything in its wake: "*which will destroy everything by the command of its Lord.*" This is a universal fact which the Qur'ān is wont to impress on people. This universe is alive, and every force in it is aware of what God wants of it, proceeding to fulfil it. Man is one of these forces. When he is a true believer, his heart becomes open to greater knowledge and he becomes

able to understand more of the universal forces around him and respond to them. This opens the way to a mutual response that differs from what people generally know of life and understanding. Everything around us has life, but we do not appreciate this because shapes and forms limit our understanding. The universe around us is full of secrets which are appreciated by faculties of understanding, even though they cannot be seen by our eyes.

The stormwind fulfilled the task assigned to it, destroying everything. Thus, "*when the morning came, there was nothing to see of them except their ruined dwellings.*" (Verse 25) No trace of the ʿĀd was left behind, not even their animals or belongings. Everything disappeared. All that was left were desolate dwellings, empty, lacking all signs of life: "*Thus do We requite guilty people.*" (Verse 25) This rule applies to all guilty people.

Useless Power

With this image of death and destruction, the *sūrah* addresses the present generation who follow in the ʿĀd's footsteps, giving them a telling reminder:

> *We had securely established them in a manner in which We have never established you; and We had endowed them with hearing, and sight, and hearts. Yet nothing did their hearing, sight and hearts avail them since they persisted in denying God's revelations. They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.* (Verse 26)

Those very people who were destroyed by the stormwind had once been established in the land in a way that had not been granted to the Arabs of Makkah. This is a general reference to what they had been given of power, wealth, knowledge and life's luxuries. They were also endowed with sharp faculties of hearing and sight, as well as hearts. The Qur'ān uses different ways of referring to the faculty of understanding, citing it alternatively as heart, mind or brain, when all refer to the same ability. Yet none of these faculties was of any use as the ʿĀd rendered them useless when "*they persisted in denying God's*

revelations." (Verse 26) Denying God's revelations suppresses senses and faculties and screens them from His source of light and understanding, blunting them altogether. "*They were overwhelmed by the very thing which they had mocked.* (Verse 26) This refers to the punishment they were warned about and which they derided.

The lesson to be drawn here is that no one should ever be too proud of his power, wealth or knowledge, thinking that these can afford him absolute protection. We see in what happened to the 'Ād a natural power being used against people, destroying them and all that they enjoyed. Nothing was left of them except their empty and desolate dwellings.

Winds are a universal power operating all the time in accordance with the system God has placed in the universe. He may use them to destroy certain places as part of His overall scheme of things. There is no need, then, within this context, to upset or disrupt the universal system, as some people mistakenly suggest. The One who has put the system in place is the One who has determined the fates of individuals and communities. Every single thing, event, movement and person are taken into account within the overall system and the operation of His law. Like all other universal powers, winds are controlled by God, fulfilling the role He has assigned to them and to the universe. The same applies to humans at whose disposal God has placed certain universal powers. When people undertake something, they are in fact fulfilling the role assigned to them by God, for His purpose. Their freedom of action and choice is part of the overall law that ensures universal harmony. Indeed everything is set according to a fine measure, with nothing falling short or causing disruption.

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by drawing people's attention to the lessons learnt from the fates suffered by the communities in the areas not far from around Makkah:

> *We have also destroyed other communities that once lived around you, and We gave Our message in various ways so that they might return to the right way. Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help? Indeed, they utterly failed them. Such were their lies and such their false inventions.* (Verses 27–28)

God destroyed the communities who rejected the messengers sent to them, such as the 'Ād in the Valley of the Sand Dunes in the south of Arabia, the Thamūd at Ḥijr in the north, the people of Sheba in Yemen, the Madyan whose former homes the Makkans passed on their way to Syria and the people of Lot whose dwellings were along the route the Arabs took on their summer journey to the north. God gave His message to these people in different ways so as to give such erring communities a chance to repent and change their ways. They, however, persisted with their errors and so incurred God's punishment, which was inflicted on them in various ways. What happened to them was so serious that it became part of the history one generation reports to the next. The idolaters in Makkah were aware of this, given they passed by these areas on their travels.

Their attentions are thus drawn to the real facts. God destroyed the unbelievers before them while their deities, whom they claimed drew them nearer to God, were utterly unable to save them: "*Why did those whom they had set up as deities beside God, hoping that they would bring them nearer to Him, give them no help?*" (Verse 28) They could not furnish them with any support. "*Indeed, they utterly failed them.*" They left them to their fate. Indeed, they did not know how to reach them, let alone spare them God's punishment. "*Such were their lies and such their false inventions.* (Verse 28) All their claims about so-called deities are lies and fabrications. These too will inevitably be destroyed. What end, then, did those Arabs who took false deities for themselves expect?



4

Jinn Listening to the Qur'ān

وَإِذْ صَرَفْنَآ إِلَيْكَ نَفَرًا مِّنَ ٱلْجِنِّ يَسْتَمِعُونَ
ٱلْقُرْءَانَ فَلَمَّا حَضَرُوهُ قَالُوٓا۟ أَنصِتُوا۟ ۖ فَلَمَّا
قُضِىَ وَلَّوْا۟ إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِم مُّنذِرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

We sent to you a group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. (29)

قَالُوا۟ يَٰقَوْمَنَآ إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا كِتَٰبًا
أُنزِلَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مُوسَىٰ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ
يَدَيْهِ يَهْدِىٓ إِلَى ٱلْحَقِّ وَإِلَىٰ طَرِيقٍ
مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. (30)

يَٰقَوْمَنَآ أَجِيبُوا۟ دَاعِىَ ٱللَّهِ وَءَامِنُوا۟ بِهِۦ
يَغْفِرْ لَكُم مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُجِرْكُم
مِّنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٣١﴾

'Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. (31)

وَمَن لَّا يُجِبْ دَاعِىَ ٱللَّهِ فَلَيْسَ بِمُعْجِزٍ
فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَلَيْسَ لَهُۥ مِن دُونِهِۦٓ أَوْلِيَآءُ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى ضَلَٰلٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

'He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error.' (32)

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَلَمْ يَعْيَ بِخَلْقِهِنَّ بِقَادِرٍ عَلَىٰ أَن يُحْيِيَ الْمَوْتَىٰ ۚ بَلَىٰ إِنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (33)

وَيَوْمَ يُعْرَضُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا عَلَى النَّارِ أَلَيْسَ هَٰذَا بِالْحَقِّ ۖ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّنَا ۚ قَالَ فَذُوقُوا الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.' (34)

فَاصْبِرْ كَمَا صَبَرَ أُولُو الْعَزْمِ مِنَ الرُّسُلِ وَلَا تَسْتَعْجِل لَّهُمْ ۚ كَأَنَّهُمْ يَوْمَ يَرَوْنَ مَا يُوعَدُونَ لَمْ يَلْبَثُوا إِلَّا سَاعَةً مِّن نَّهَارٍ ۚ بَلَاغٌ ۚ فَهَلْ يُهْلَكُ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers? (35)

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* presents a different way of tackling the basic question of faith. It tells us the story of a group of *jinn* who heard the Qur'ān being recited and who listened to it. They felt, at heart, that it was the word of truth and believed in it instantly. They then rushed to their own people calling on them to believe, giving

them the good news of earning forgiveness for their past sins and warning them against turning away and persisting in error. The effect of the Qur'ān on this group of *jinn* is clearly indicated in their advice to each other to hearken to its recitation, as well as the report they gave to their people about it, urging them to believe too. Reporting the story in this way should touch the hearts of human beings to whom the message of the Qur'ān is firstly addressed. It should have a telling and profound effect on them. At the same time, a reference to the link between the book given to Moses and the Qur'ān is mentioned by the *jinn*. This is a fact ignored by humans but highlighted by the *jinn*. Again this has a profound effect which is consistent with the message of the *sūrah*.

The *jinn*'s discourse also refers to the open book of the universe, testifying to God's great power manifested in the creation of the heavens and the earth and His ability to bring the dead back to life. Needless to say, people argue endlessly about this, often denying it altogether.

In the context of resurrection, the *sūrah* portrays a scene from the Day of Judgement speaking of the time when the unbelievers are brought before the fire of hell. Finally, the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity and not to hasten their punishment. Rather, he should leave them to live their lives until the appointed time, which is bound to come soon, in no more than an hour of a day, during which the message is given.

The *Jinn* Listening to the Qur'ān

> *We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them. 'Our people,' they said, 'we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path. Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering. He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest error. Are they not aware that*

God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things. (Verses 29–33)

Those *jinn* who listened to the Qur'ān in silence made a comment that embraced faith in its entirety: belief in God's revelation; the unity of the message given in the Torah and the Qur'ān; acknowledging the truth to which the Qur'ān guides; belief in the Day of Resurrection and which actions earn forgiveness and which incur punishment; acknowledging God's power of creation and His overall authority over all creatures, and recognizing the link between creation in the first place and bringing the dead back to life. These are the principles the *sūrah* discusses from start to finish. They are presented here by the *jinn*, in a voice that comes from beyond man's world.

The fact that the Qur'ān mentions how a number of *jinn* were sent to listen to the Qur'ān as the Prophet recited it, and reports what they did and said afterwards, is sufficient to confirm the existence of the *jinn* and the event related. It further confirms that they were able to listen to the Qur'ān in its Arabic wording as pronounced by the Prophet. It also makes clear that the *jinn* are able to accept faith or deny it, that they have the choice to follow guidance or continue in error. There is no need for any further confirmation. No person can add anything to the reliability of a fact stated by God in the Qur'ān. We, however, merely try to clarify it in our human perception.

The universe around us is full of secrets, as well as powers and creatures of which we know nothing: neither their nature, nor their shape, form or effect. We live in the midst of all these powers and secrets and every day discover some of these getting to know some of such creatures or their qualities and how they make their effect on the world around us. We are still, however, at the beginning of the road, leading to knowledge of the universe. We should bear in mind that all past generations of mankind, the present one and all future generations dwell on no more than a small particle in the vast universe, which is planet earth. When compared to human knowledge five centuries ago, what we now know when we are still just at the beginning of the road is considered stranger by far than the remarkable creatures known as

the *jinn*. Had someone told people five centuries ago anything about atomic energy, they would have considered him crazy, or at least considered his views far stranger than the *jinn*.

The secrets we discover and the knowledge we acquire remain within the limits of our human power, which is granted to us so that we can discharge our task of building life on earth, in accordance with the terms of reference set for us by God. Moreover, what we learn remains within what God has made available or subservient to us for use in fulfilment of our task. No matter how long human life on earth extends, human knowledge and discoveries will remain within this framework; i.e. the framework of what we need for the mission assigned to us when we were placed in charge of the earth, according to God's purpose and wisdom. We will discover and learn much more of the wonderful secrets and powers in the universe, compared to which the secrets of the atom may appear like child's play, but we will remain within the limited area of knowledge assigned to man. We will remain within the limits of the Qur'ānic statement: "*You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.*" (17: 85) It remains little compared to what the universe contains of secrets and facts known only to its Creator who controls all. We need to contrast this against God's representation of His limitless knowledge: "*Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted.*" (31: 27)

Therefore, we cannot say that something belonging to the realm that lies beyond our perception, or some secret or power in the universe, certainly exists or not, or is possible or impossible, merely because it is beyond our familiar world or our human experience. We have not yet discovered all the secrets of our own physical constitution, its systems and potentials, let alone the secrets of our minds and spirits.

There may be secrets that are beyond what is meant to be revealed to us, and secrets that we are not meant to understand, even though we get to learn about their qualities or effects, or even only their existence. What is withheld from us will not, should we learn about it, benefit us in the fulfilment of our assignment on earth. Therefore, when God tells us in His words, not through our experience and acquired knowledge, about these secrets and powers, we should accept

His gift with gratitude and take it as He gives it to us, adding nothing and omitting nothing. Such knowledge comes to us directly from God, and He has chosen to give it to us in a particular measure. There is simply no other source to give us more.

On the basis of the account given in this *sūrah* and that given in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*, (which most probably speaks of the same event), and from other references to the *jinn* in the Qur'ān as well as authentic *aḥādīth* referring to this event, we can understand certain facts about the *jinn*. We will add nothing further.

To sum up these facts we say that there is a type of God's creation named the *jinn*, which is created out of fire. This is evidenced by the Qur'ānic reports of *Iblīs*'s statement in reference to Adam: "*I am nobler than he: You created me out of fire, while You created him out of clay.*" (7: 12) *Iblīs*, or Satan, belongs to the *jinn*, as God says: "*When We said to the angels: 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves. Not so* Iblīs, *who belonged to the* jinn *and he disobeyed his Lord's command.*" (18: 50) This type of creation has different qualities to those of humans. One of these is that it is created out of fire, and another is that the *jinn* can see humans while humans cannot see them. In reference to *Iblīs*, who belongs to the *jinn*, God says: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27) This last statement also tells us that the *jinn* have their own groupings and communities, which are similar to human communities.

The *jinn* can live on earth, although we do not know where. When He turned them out of heaven, God said to both Adam and *Iblīs*: "*Get you down. You shall be enemies to one another. On earth you shall have an abode and sustenance, for a while.*" (2: 36) The *jinn* who were made subservient to Solomon performed for him certain works on land which, by necessity, meant that they had whatever was necessary for them to live on earth. Likewise, they can live and survive away from this planet. The Qur'ān reports a statement made by some of the *jinn* which says: "*We ascended to high heaven and found it filled with mighty guards and flames. We used to sit eavesdropping, but now eavesdroppers find flames lying in wait for them.*" (72: 8–9)

The *jinn* can also influence the understanding of humans, and they are given leave to lead such humans as go astray, but not those who are

God's true servants. In the Qur'ānic account of the exchange between God and *Iblīs*, the latter said: "*I swear by Your very might: I shall certainly tempt them all except Your true servants.*" (38: 82–83) Other texts also confirm this, but we do not know how the *jinn* whisper to humans and influence them, nor what tools they use in the process. They can hear man and understand his language. This is clearly the case when this group of *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān, understood it and were influenced by it. Like humans, the *jinn* can follow Divine guidance or go astray. As reported in *Sūrah* 72, this group of *jinn* said: "*Some of us surrender themselves to God and some are wrongdoers. Those that surrender themselves have attained to consciousness of what is right; whereas the wrongdoers are indeed the fuel of hell.*" (72: 14–15) Moreover, those of them who listened to the Qur'ān went straight to their people and called on them to accept the message of Islam, having themselves accepted it and learnt what their people had not yet learnt.

This is all that we can say with certainty about the *jinn*. We should not add to it anything that lacks supporting evidence. The event to which the present verses of the *sūrah* refer, as does, in all probability, *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*, is confirmed by several reports. Here, we will quote the most authentic of these.

"Ibn 'Abbās said: The Prophet neither recited anything to the *jinn*, nor did he see them. The Prophet went with a number of his Companions aiming for the 'Ukāẓ Market. By that time, the *jinn* were blocked from eavesdropping in the skies and flames were set against them. When they went to their people, they told them of the situation. Some of them said: 'You have been stopped from eavesdropping for something that must have taken place. Travel, therefore, throughout the earth and try to find out what has happened to cause this.' Groups of them travelled in every direction, searching for the cause that blocked them from eavesdropping. The company that went to Tihāmah drew close to the Prophet as he was at the Nakhlah Valley, aiming for 'Ukāẓ Market. He was leading the dawn prayer, with his Companions in the congregation. They listened to him reciting the Qur'ān in his prayer. Then they said to one another: 'This is indeed what blocked you from eavesdropping in the skies.' They then went to their people and said to them: '*We have heard a*

wondrous discourse, guiding towards consciousness of what is right, and so we have come to believe in it.' (72: 1–2) God subsequently revealed this *sūrah* to the Prophet which included what the *jinn* said." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.]

Ibn Mas'ūd was asked whether any of the Prophet's Companions was with him on the night when the *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān. He replied: "None of us accompanied him. We were with him one night when we missed him. We looked for him in the nearby valleys and paths. When we did not find him we thought that he might have been carried away or assassinated. Ours was an extremely terrible night then. In the morning we saw him coming towards us from the direction of Ḥirā'. We said to him: 'messenger of God! We missed you and searched for you. When we could not find you we had a terrible night.' He said: 'Someone came to me with a call from the *jinn*, and I went with him and read the Qur'ān to them.' He then took us to show us their traces and where they had their fires. They asked him for food and he said to them: 'You may have the bones of all animals at the slaughter of which God's name is invoked. When you hold a bone in your hand, it will be to you as though it has all the meat it can carry. Every dropping serves as fodder for your cattle.' The Prophet said to us: 'Do not, then, use these to clean yourself when you go to do stools.'" [Related by Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī.]

In his biography of the Prophet, Ibn Isḥāq narrates the *jinn* story after the Prophet's journey to Ṭā'if where he went to visit the Thaqīf tribe, seeking their support to deliver his message. By that time, Abū Ṭālib, his uncle who had provided him with protection against attack had died and the Prophet was now subjected to much harm and hostility. The Thaqīf, however, answered him very rudely and set their young lads and servants against him. In this way, the Prophet was stoned to the extent that both his feet bled. At this point, he prayed to God, making the following passionate appeal:

> To You, My Lord, I complain of my weakness, lack of support and the humiliation I am made to receive.
>
> Most compassionate and merciful! You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord. To whom do You leave me? To a

distant person who receives me with hostility? Or to an enemy to whom You have given power over me?

If You are not displeased with me, I do not care what I face. I would, however, be much happier with Your mercy.

I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses against incurring Your wrath or being the subject of Your anger. To You I submit, until I earn Your pleasure. Everything is powerless without Your support.[2]

After his account of the Prophet's trip to Ṭā'if, Ibn Isḥāq adds: "When the Prophet gave up hope of any positive response from the Thaqīf, he returned to Makkah. When he was at the valley of Nakhlah, he rose up in the middle of the night to pray. It was then that the group of *jinn* God mentioned in the Qur'ān came to him. They were, as I was told, seven in number and came from among the *jinn* of Nuṣaybīn. They listened to his recitation. When he finished his prayer, they went straight to their people to warn them, having believed in Islam and the Qur'ān. God then related what happened to the Prophet in verses 29–32 of *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, and also in *Sūrah* 72, The *Jinn*."

Ibn Kathīr comments on this last report by Ibn Isḥāq, saying: "This is correct, but the time at which Ibn Isḥāq says it occurred is questionable. The *jinn* listened to the Qur'ān in the early days of its revelation, as indicated by the *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn 'Abbās, while the Prophet went on his journey to Ṭā'if after his uncle's death, which means only one or two years before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah, as indicated by Ibn Isḥāq himself and others. However, God knows best."

There are many other reports concerning this event. From all these, we rely on the first by Ibn 'Abbās, mentioned above, because it is the one that fits most perfectly with the Qur'ānic texts speaking about the event. Moreover, it clearly states that the Prophet learnt of what took place through what was revealed to him and that he neither saw nor

2. The story is given in detail in: Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, pp. 178–182. – Editor's note.

felt the presence of the *jinn*. Moreover, this *ḥadīth* is the most authentic of all these reports, having the most reliable chain of transmission. As to the point that the Prophet learnt of the event through the Qur'ān, Ibn Isḥāq's version agrees with this. It is further supported by what the Qur'ān mentions about the *jinn* being able to see us but not the reverse: "*Surely, he and his tribe watch you from where you cannot perceive them.*" (7: 27)

A Telling Warning

> *We sent to you a group of* jinn *to listen to the Qur'ān. When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!' When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.* (Verse 29)

It was, then, a purposeful act of God's that He sent this group of *jinn* to listen to the Qur'ān; in other words, it was not mere coincidence. God wanted the *jinn* to know about His final message, just as they had earlier learnt about Moses' message. According to His design, some of them will then believe and spare themselves punishment in hell, which is the abode of unbelievers whether *jinn* or humans.

The *sūrah* draws before our eyes an image of this group, between three and ten *jinn*, as they listened to the Qur'ān. It paints for us their feelings as it was being recited: an overwhelming awe leading to submission and action. "*When they heard it, they said to one another, 'Listen in silence!'*" This short sentence gives a clear impression of their attitude as they hearkened to the Qur'ānic recitation. Then, "*When the recitation ended, they returned to their people to warn them.*" (Verse 29) This sentence confirms the effect the Qur'ān had on them. They listened in complete silence, attentions focused throughout the recitation. When it was over, they returned at speed to their own people. They felt that what they had heard must be immediately told and passed on. Their people needed to know so that they could be warned. It is a situation where one is highly influenced by something which motivates him to immediate action that seeks to spread the benefit and to get others to adopt the same serious attitude: "*Our people, they said, we have been listening to revelation bestowed from on high after*

Moses, confirming what came before it. It guides to the truth and to a straight path." (Verse 30)

The first thing they said to their people was that the revelation they had heard had been bestowed from on high after the book of Moses and that it confirmed the scriptures before it. Thus, they knew about Moses' book and recognized, once they heard the Qur'ān, that it was closely related to the Torah. What they heard of the Qur'ān might not have mentioned Moses or his book, but its very nature suggested that it came from the same source. This acknowledgement by the *jinn*, who are relatively unaffected by factors that operate in human life, has a clear and profound import.

They give expression to their feelings as they listened to the Qur'ān: "*It guides to the truth and to a straight path.*" (Verse 30) The truth and the guidance provided by the Qur'ān have a profound effect on people. Only a sealed heart and an arrogant, stubborn soul, motivated by selfish interests, will resist it. Hence, it had an immediate and telling effect on the hearts of those *jinn*, prompting them to give this testimony of its truth. They proceeded with their warning to their people, full of enthusiasm and expressing their firm conviction of the truth they had learnt. In other words, this recitation of the Qur'ān placed a duty on them to inform and warn others: "*Our people! Respond to God's call and have faith in Him. He will forgive you your sins and deliver you from grievous suffering.*" (Verse 31) They considered the revelation of the Qur'ān a call on everyone who learned of it, whether human or *jinn*, to believe. They also considered Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), to be the one who called them to believe in God merely by reciting the Qur'ān. Hence their appeal to their people: "*Respond to God's call and have faith in Him.*" (Verse 31) They also believed in the Day of Judgement and learnt that belief and positive response to the Divine call ensured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from punishment. So they imparted this news to their people.

Ibn Isḥāq considers that this concludes what the *jinn* said to their people, but the context suggests that the next two verses were also stated by them. We think that this is more likely, particularly the next verse: "*He who does not respond to God's call cannot elude Him on earth, nor will they have any protector against Him. They are indeed in manifest*

error." (Verse 32) This is a logical complement to the warning given by the *jinn* to their people whom they advised to believe in the new message. It is also likely that they explained that a negative response leads to dire consequences. No one who rejects the Divine call can escape God: He is always able to inflict punishment. The unbeliever will find none to support him against God or protect him from His punishment. He is, therefore, indeed in manifest error.

Likewise, the next verse most probably reports more of what the *jinn* said, as they wondered at those who reject God's call, thinking that they are immune from punishment or that there will be neither reckoning nor requital: "*Are they not aware that God, who has created the heavens and the earth and was not wearied by their creation, has the power to bring the dead back to life? Yes, indeed. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 33)

This is a reference to the book of the universe mentioned at the *sūrah*'s outset. The Qur'ān often provides such a close connection between a direct statement and a similar one occurring within a story or historical account, ensuring the confirmation of the same fact from two sources. The book of the universe testifies to His great might. It imparts to us the feeling that bringing the dead back to life is easy. This is what is intended here. That this point is made here in the form of a question and a reply makes it more emphatic. This is followed by the general comment that God has power over all things. Thus, bringing the dead back to life is included within His limitless power.

As Resurrection Takes Place

Having referred to bringing the dead back to life, the *sūrah* paints a picture of reckoning and accountability as though we see all this before our eyes:

> *On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire, [they will be asked]: 'Is this not the truth?' They will answer: 'Yes, by our Lord.' He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.'* (Verse 34)

The scene here begins with a narrative, or an introduction to a narrative: "*On the Day when the unbelievers will be brought before the fire...*" The audience are waiting for the narrative describing what will happen, but instead of a description, the scene is present before our eyes, with a dialogue taking place: "*Is this not the truth?*" What a question! It falls like a hammer on the heads of those who used to reject the truth, ridicule the message and hasten the punishment they were warned against. Now they are face to face with the truth they used to deny. They arrive at an answer, in fear and humility: "*Yes, by our Lord.*" Now they swear '*by our Lord*', the very Lord whose messenger they rejected and whose Lordship they denied. Now they swear by Him affirming the truth they once denied.

At this point, the matter reaches maximum rebuke. The dialogue is over and the issue is settled: "*He will say: 'Taste, then, this suffering, for you were unbelievers.'*" (Verse 34) It is just an answer to a simple question: the crime is seen in full clarity and the criminal admits his guilt. The outcome is settled.

This scene is portrayed very speedily. This is deliberate because the confrontation is decisive. There is no room for argument. They used to deny the truth; now they acknowledge it and are made to suffer the consequences.

Following this scene that decisively spells out the fate of the unbelievers, and the one that touches the hearts of a group from a different world, the *sūrah* makes its final statement. It instructs the Prophet to remain patient with them and not to hasten their punishment. He has seen what awaits them, which is close at hand:

> *Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment. On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day. This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?* (Verse 35)

Every word in this verse is charged with meaning; every phrase draws a whole world of images and impressions and refers to great issues and

values. "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*" (Verse 35) This is a directive given to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who had shown more patience than anyone can tolerate while suffering persecution at the hands of his people. He grew up an orphan in their midst, then lost his guardian as well as every human support, one by one, losing his father, mother, grandfather, uncle as well as the wife who was the symbol of loving care. Thus he was free of all preoccupations, dedicating himself totally to his message. Yet he received at the hands of his unbelieving relatives more trouble than at the hands of others unrelated to him. He had to approach tribe after tribe, as well as individuals, seeking support in delivering his message but only meeting with rejection time after time. Some even set their henchmen against him and he was stoned and injured. His response was nothing more than a passionate appeal to his Lord, as quoted earlier.

Yet after all this, the Prophet is given this directive by his Lord: "*Remain, then, patient in adversity, just as all messengers endowed with firm resolve bore themselves with patience. Do not seek to hasten their punishment.*" (Verse 35) This shows just how hard and difficult the call to Islam is. A man like Muḥammad, the symbol of dedication, unshakeable belief and purity of heart, still needs this Divine directive to remain patient and not to hasten God's punishment of the adversaries of his message. The hardships he met along this road required that he be comforted and counselled to remain patient. He also needed a sweet dose of Divine compassion, followed by reassurance: "*On the Day when they see what they were promised, it will seem to them as though they had dwelt [on earth] no more than an hour in a single day.*" (Verse 35) It is all a short duration, an hour of a day. This whole life is so short and trivial that all the effects it has on hearts and souls is no more than the effect of an hour in a day. Then they will meet their inevitable fate and abide endlessly.

This hour of a life serves only to make things clear before the fate is sealed: "*This has been made clear. Will, then, any be destroyed except the evildoers?*" (Verse 35) Certainly not. God wishes no injustice for anyone. Every advocate of the Divine message must remain patient in adversity. Last as much as it may, the adversity will be no longer than an hour of a day, and then everything is settled.

SŪRAH 47

Muḥammad

Prologue

This *sūrah*, Muḥammad, was revealed in Madīnah. It also goes by another name, *al-Qitāl*, meaning 'Fighting'. This secondary title is very apt because fighting is the *sūrah*'s subject matter providing most of its images and giving it its distinctive beat. It begins with an explanation of the true nature of both the unbelievers and the believers which takes the form of a moral attack on the former and a monologue of praise of the latter. The clear implication is that God is the enemy of the unbelievers and the protector of those who have faith. Furthermore, this is a true fact in God's sight. Thus, the opening of the *sūrah* serves as a declaration of war by God against His enemies who are hostile to His faith: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verses 1–3)

Once this declaration of war against the unbelievers is made, an express, resounding order is given to the believers to join this war against

them. This order is followed by an outline of the rules that apply to captives of war once the bloody battle is over: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) Added to this order is an explanation about the purpose of fighting and encouragement to the believers to join with it and do well, and a promise of honour for those who fall as martyrs. A further promise of help is given to those who join the fighting in support of God's cause, with an added rejoinder making clear that the unbelievers will be destroyed and their deeds will come to nothing: "*Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste.*" (Verses 4–9)

A strong warning is issued to the unbelievers, coupled with a declaration from God about His protection of the believers. The unbelievers will, thus, lose all; they will remain weak and lack support from any quarter: "*Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verses 10–11) A further warning singles out the city which drove the Prophet out: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13)

Having opened with such a strong attack on the unbelievers, the *sūrah* adds a varied discourse on faith and unbelief, describing the states of the believers and the unbelievers both in this world and in the life to come. It distinguishes between a believer's enjoyment of

goodly things and the way unbelievers enjoy the pleasures of this world in a way that does not differ from that of cattle: "*God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.*" (Verse 12) It describes what the believers will drink in heaven, variously pure water, milk with unaltered taste, delightful wine and pure, clarified honey. These drinks are so plentiful that they flow like rivers. Moreover, they have plenty of every type of fruit, together with God's forgiveness and His being pleased with them. A rhetorical question is then added: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?*" (Verse 15)

This first round in the ever-raging battle between the believers and the unbelievers over, the *sūrah* starts another round with the hypocrites who, together with the Jews in Madīnah, represented a danger to the Muslim community. The problem they posed was no less serious than that of the idolaters who were waging open war on Islam from Makkah and its surrounding areas. The events to which the *sūrah* refers suggest that it talks about the period that followed the Battle of Badr but prior to the Encounter of the Moat.[1] The latter heralded a crushing defeat for the Jews and a serious setback for the hypocrites, as explained in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV.

References to the hypocrites are made in the same confrontational and fighting manner as the rest of the *sūrah*. This is noticeable right from their first mention, which describes how they are absent minded when they sit with the Prophet and its comment that describes them as being far astray, following their desires: "*Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16) They are warned that the Last Hour will inevitably come,

1. The Battle of Badr took place during Ramaḍān, year 2 of the Islamic calendar, while the Encounter of the Moat occured towards the end of year 5, (623 and 626 CE respectively) – Editor's note.

and, then, they will not even be able to take heed: "*Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" (Verse 18)

The *sūrah* then describes their panic when they are confronted with an express Qur'ānic order to fight. They have pretended to be believers, and here we see how the *sūrah* makes abundantly clear the difference between them and true believers: "*The believers say: 'Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.' Yet when a* sūrah *of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) While they are urged to obey God and His messenger and to be truthful and firm, the *sūrah* condemns their behaviour and declares war against them. They are expelled from God's mercy: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind.*" (Verses 20–23)

The hypocrites' schemes are exposed: they listen to Satan and befriend the Jews and conspire with them against the believers. Therefore, they are warned about torture that would be inflicted on them at the point of death. They are also warned about exposure within the Muslim community to which they pretend to belong when they are not really part of it. On the contrary, they scheme against it: "*Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put*

you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions." (Verses 25–31)

The *sūrah*'s third and final round again takes up the attack against the unbelievers from among the Quraysh and the Jews: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32) It warns the believers against falling into the same traps as their enemies: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*" (Verses 33–34) They are encouraged to remain firm during the fight: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35)

The life of this world is shown to be trivial. Believers are urged to spend some of their money to support God's cause. They are not meant to give away all they have; God knows their human nature and that they would find it too difficult to make such a sacrifice should it be asked of them: "*The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.*" (Verses 36–37) The *sūrah* concludes with a note of warning to the Muslims, should they be niggardly, unwilling to spend some of their money for God's cause: "*You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

The air of battle colours the *sūrah* from start to finish; it is characteristic of its every section. The ending of its verses sound like heavy bombardments. When such endings are given a softer tone, they seem like swords branded in the air. The images the *sūrah* draws are as hard as the words expressing them. When referring to actual fighting,

the *sūrah* says: "*when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.*" (Verse 4) The actual killing and the taking of prisoners is described graphically: "*Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.*" (Verse 4) The condemnation of the unbelievers is expressed in equally powerful words: "*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) The fate of earlier communities is also documented in a highly resounding way, both in words and connotations: "*God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) As they are made to suffer in hell the unbelievers are shown as being "*given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels*" (Verse 15) Likewise, the state of panic that overtakes the hypocrites is drawn intensely: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) Even the gentle warning to the believers against turning away is given in the form of a decisive threat: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Thus we see perfect harmony permeating the *sūrah*: its subject matter, images, connotations and rhythm.



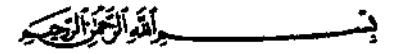
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Captives of War

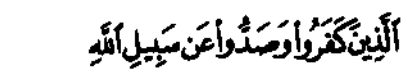
Muḥammad



In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful



Those who disbelieve and debar others from God's path will have their deeds brought to nothing by Him, (1)



whereas those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord – He will forgive them their bad deeds and bring them to a happy state. (2)

This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord. Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct. (3)



فَإِذَا لَقِيتُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَضَرْبَ الرِّقَابِ
حَتَّىٰ إِذَا أَثْخَنتُمُوهُمْ فَشُدُّوا الْوَثَاقَ فَإِمَّا
مَنًّا بَعْدُ وَإِمَّا فِدَاءً حَتَّىٰ تَضَعَ الْحَرْبُ
أَوْزَارَهَا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ وَلَوْ يَشَاءُ اللَّهُ لَانتَصَرَ
مِنْهُمْ وَلَٰكِن لِّيَبْلُوَ بَعْضَكُم بِبَعْضٍ ۗ
وَالَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَلَن يُضِلَّ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٤﴾

Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden. Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. (4)

سَيَهْدِيهِمْ وَيُصْلِحُ بَالَهُمْ ﴿٥﴾

He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, (5)

وَيُدْخِلُهُمُ الْجَنَّةَ عَرَّفَهَا لَهُمْ ﴿٦﴾

and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them. (6)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن تَنصُرُوا اللَّهَ
يَنصُرْكُمْ وَيُثَبِّتْ أَقْدَامَكُمْ ﴿٧﴾

Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; (7)

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَتَعْسًا لَّهُمْ وَأَضَلَّ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٨﴾

but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. (8)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَرِهُوا مَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ
فَأَحْبَطَ أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٩﴾

This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (9)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَيَنظُرُوا۟ كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَٰقِبَةُ ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۖ دَمَّرَ ٱللَّهُ
عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَلِلْكَٰفِرِينَ أَمْثَٰلُهَا ﴿١٠﴾

Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers. (10)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ ٱللَّهَ مَوْلَى ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَأَنَّ
ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ لَا مَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿١١﴾

This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them. (11)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُدْخِلُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا
ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ يَتَمَتَّعُونَ
وَيَأْكُلُونَ كَمَا تَأْكُلُ ٱلْأَنْعَٰمُ وَٱلنَّارُ
مَثْوًى لَّهُمْ ﴿١٢﴾

God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode. (12)

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن قَرْيَةٍ هِىَ أَشَدُّ قُوَّةً مِّن
قَرْيَتِكَ ٱلَّتِىٓ أَخْرَجَتْكَ أَهْلَكْنَٰهُمْ
فَلَا نَاصِرَ لَهُمْ ﴿١٣﴾

How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them. (13)

أَفَمَن كَانَ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِۦ كَمَن زُيِّنَ لَهُۥ
سُوٓءُ عَمَلِهِۦ وَٱتَّبَعُوٓا۟ أَهْوَآءَهُم ﴿١٤﴾

Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires? (14)

Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels? (15)

مَّثَلُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ٱلَّتِى وُعِدَ ٱلْمُتَّقُونَ ۖ فِيهَآ أَنْهَٰرٌ مِّن مَّآءٍ غَيْرِ ءَاسِنٍ ۖ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّن لَّبَنٍ لَّمْ يَتَغَيَّرْ طَعْمُهُۥ ۖ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّنْ خَمْرٍ لَّذَّةٍ لِّلشَّٰرِبِينَ ۖ وَأَنْهَٰرٌ مِّنْ عَسَلٍ مُّصَفًّى ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ ٱلثَّمَرَٰتِ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ ۖ كَمَنْ هُوَ خَٰلِدٌ فِى ٱلنَّارِ وَسُقُوا۟ مَآءً حَمِيمًا فَقَطَّعَ أَمْعَآءَهُمْ ﴿١٥﴾

Belief in Muḥammad's Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with a straightforward attack against the unbelievers, without any introduction or preparatory remarks. These unbelievers, who debar others from God's path, are faced with the prospect of their deeds going astray and ending up with nothing. This applies to all unbelievers whether they are those who debar others on their own initiative, or they themselves are debarred and then debar others from God's path. At the outset, the *sūrah* gives us a sense of deeds being animated, physically on the move, but their movements are erroneous, far astray, and without any defining goal. The result brings utter loss and destruction. Such animation is employed to provide an image of a battle in which the deeds separate themselves from the people who perform them: the result is that both go further astray from each other, and all ends in ruin.

These deeds that are brought to nothing may refer, in particular, to the ones that the unbelievers hoped would bring them good results; in other words, they appeared to them as good deeds. However, a good deed that is not based on faith loses its value; its goodness is superficial. What is important is the motive that gives rise to the deed, not the form

of the deed. Even if the motive is good, unless it relies on faith it may be only temporary or the result of sudden impulse. Faith, on the other hand, links all man's actions and feelings to a solid base. This gives deeds their meaning and aim, bringing them consistency and ensuring that their effects are in line with the Divine system that links all parts of the universe together. Thus, every action is seen to contribute to the overall progress of the universe, fulfilling a role and serving an end.

On the other side stand "*those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad, for it is indeed the truth from their Lord.*" (Verse 2) These people are described as having faith, which certainly includes believing in Muḥammad's revelations, but this aspect of belief is specifically highlighted in order to give it prominence since "*it is indeed the truth from their Lord.*" Faith that is established in one's heart and conscience must be accompanied by action that is clearly seen in life. Such action is the fruit of faith that indicates its presence. Such people have a special status: "*He will forgive them their bad deeds.*" (Verse 2) This contrasts with what happens to the deeds of the unbelievers: they go astray, even though they may initially seem to be good. Thus, while even good deeds done by unbelievers end up in nothing, the bad deeds of the believers are forgiven. The contrast here is perfect and absolute, emphasizing the value of faith in God's sight and in real life. Yet their reward goes further than this as God will "*bring them to a happy state.*" (Verse 2) This is a great blessing which is second to faith in importance and effect. The verse gives here connotations of perfect comfort, assurance, peace and happiness. When a person is in such a happy state, his thoughts are sound, his heart is reassured, his feelings are at ease, and his soul enjoys a sense of peace and security. What other blessing would anyone want?

Why do things go in these two opposite directions? There is no question of favouritism or coincidence in all this. Instead, it all relies on the fundamental law upon which the universe was established when God created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth, making the truth its basic foundation: "*This is because the unbelievers follow falsehood, whereas those who believe follow the truth from their Lord.*" (Verse 3) Falsehood cannot put down deep roots in the universe. Therefore, it ends up in nothing, as does everything founded upon it.

Since the unbelievers follow falsehood, their deeds go astray and are brought to nothing. By contrast, the truth is the foundation on which the structure of the universe is built. Therefore, everything related to it stays on. Since the believers follow the truth from their Lord, He will forgive them their sins and bring them to a happy state. It is all clear, based on solid principles. "*Thus does God lay down for mankind their rules of conduct.*" (Verse 3) The believers are clear about these rules, they know the basis around which they should make their choices.

An Order to Fight

The principle stated in the first verse of the *sūrah* is made the basis of the directive to the believers to fight the unbelievers. The believers are the ones who follow the truth that must be established in human life on earth. It, truth, should be given the power to conduct life's affairs. Thus, human life becomes based on the truth and refers everything to it. The unbelievers, on the other hand, follow falsehood. This should be removed with all its effects on human life: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This verse refers specifically to meeting in battle, not any other meeting between believers and unbelievers. Up to the revelation of this *sūrah*, idolaters lived in the Arabian Peninsula, some of whom were at war with the believers and some bound by peace treaties. *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, had not as then been revealed giving notice that treaties specifying dates of expiry would not be renewed. On the other hand, treaties without a specific term were given a four-month notice of termination. Thereafter, idolaters were to be killed if they were found anywhere in the Arabian Peninsula. The aim of these rules was to make the Peninsula the permanent base of Islam.[2]

The verse tells the believers specifically to smite the unbelievers' necks, but this only occurs after Islam is explained to them and they reject the call to accept it. The order is given in a way that describes the

2. This rule does not apply to idolaters outside the Arabian Peninsula; they could continue to live in the Muslim state but only in accordance with Islamic rules.

actual killing and the action it requires, so as to fit with the general ambience of the *sūrah*.

"*Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly.*" (Verse 4) The Arabic verb '*athkhana*', translated here as 'subdue', also connotes strong fighting involving killing of opponents. The situation the verse envisages as a result of fighting is the total collapse of the enemy's power so as to leave the enemy incapable of putting up any defence, let alone launching a counterattack. At this point only, captives are taken. While the enemy still has substantial force, the fight goes on to remove the danger it presents.

Thus, like most commentators on the Qur'ān, we see no conflict between this verse and the one in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, which remonstrates with the Prophet and the Muslims for taking many captives of war during the Battle of Badr. At the time, continuing the battle to kill more of the unbelievers was a better option. The relevant verses state: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land. You may desire the fleeting gains of this world, but God desires for you the good of the life to come. God is Almighty, Wise. Had it not been for a decree from God that had already gone forth, you would have been severely punished for what you have taken.*"[3] (8: 67–68) This means that killing the enemy and breaking its power comes first. When this has been accomplished, captives may be taken. The wisdom in all this is clearly apparent. To remove aggression by forces hostile to Islam must be the first objective of fighting, particularly when the numerical strength of the Muslim community is well below that of the unbelievers. In such circumstances as prevailed at the time of the Battle of Badr, killing an enemy fighter was far more important in the balance of power between the two sides. However, this ruling remains valid in general, and it should be applied in any armed conflict with the aim of making the enemy powerless.

The Ruling on Captives of War

The verse then sets the ruling concerning those who are taken captive in war. This is the only Qur'ānic text stating a ruling on such captives:

3. These verses are explained in Vol. VII, pp. 198–202.

"*Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4) This means that captives of war are to be set free gratis, without any compensation. No specified ransom or exchange of prisoners is required. The Qur'ānic verse does not mention any third option, such as putting idolater captives to death or binding them into slavery. Nevertheless, what happened in practice was that the Prophet and the caliphs succeeding him put some war captives into slavery, and killed specifically named individuals. We will quote what Imām Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ, of the Ḥanafī school of Islamic law, says about this verse in his book *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, making some comments as necessary. We will then conclude by stating our view of the relevant rulings:

> God says in this verse: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks.*" On the surface, the statement makes it clear that killing the unbelievers is the only option until they have been thoroughly subdued. This is consistent with what God says in the other verse: "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land.*" (8: 67) Ibn 'Abbās is quoted as saying that this last statement applied to the Battle of Badr, when the Muslims were a small minority. When their numbers increased and they became more powerful, God established the ruling: "*Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Thus, God allowed the Prophet and the believers all options: to kill their prisoners, enslave them or set them free. However, the transmitter of this *ḥadīth* doubts whether Ibn 'Abbās mentioned enslaving prisoners.

Since the reporter was uncertain that Ibn 'Abbās mentioned slavery in this context, we discard that option altogether. As for killing such prisoners of war, we see no basis for this in the verse under discussion. The verse mentions only freeing them either as an act of grace or against ransom.[4]

4. The author makes several comments on this lengthy quotation. We have included his comments in separate paragraphs so as to distinguish them from the quoted text. – Editor's note.

Al-Suddī is reported to have commented on the ruling, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" saying that it has been abrogated by the subsequent verse in *Sūrah* 9, stating: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) However, we say that the Qur'ānic statements: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks,*" and "*It does not behove a Prophet to have captives unless he has battled strenuously in the land,*" and "*Should you meet them in battle, make of them a fearsome example for those who follow them,*" are most probably outlining valid rulings, none of which has been abrogated. God commanded His messenger to kill the unbelievers and not to take captives from among them until they had been thoroughly subdued. This was the case when the Muslims were small in number, compared with their enemy. In that situation, only when the unbelievers were subdued after being killed in numbers and were made an example of to those who followed them, was it then permissible to take some of them captive, keeping them alive. This should be a permanent rule, applicable at any time when the Muslims are in a similar situation to that which prevailed in the early days of Islam.

In comment, we say that the order to kill the idolaters wherever they were found applied specifically to the idolaters in the Arabian Peninsula. The verse in the present *sūrah* is general in its import. When the enemy is thoroughly subdued and its power is smashed, it is permissible to take prisoners. This was the practice followed by the caliphs after the Prophet. Prisoners were killed only in particular cases which we will explain presently.

The statement, "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" provides for one of two alternatives: freeing the prisoners either by an act of grace or against ransom, which suggests that killing them was prohibited. However, early scholars differ on this point. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have objected to killing prisoners of war, saying that they should be freed against ransom or indeed without it. 'Aṭā' is also reported to have held this view.

When asked what to do with prisoners, al-Ḥasan answered: 'Do with them what the Prophet did with the prisoners taken in the Battle of Badr: they were freed by an act of grace or against ransom.' Ibn 'Umar was given a prisoner, a man of high position from the city of Iṣṭakhr, so that he could kill him, but he refused to do so citing the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Likewise, Mujāhid and Ibn Sīrīn are reported to have spoken against killing prisoners of war. We have already mentioned al-Suddī's view that this ruling was abrogated by the other Qur'ānic instruction: "*slay the idolaters wherever you find them.*" (9: 5) Likewise, Ibn Jurayj is of this view. He cited the case of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayṭ whom the Prophet ordered to be killed after he was taken prisoner during the Battle of Badr.

Scholars from all provinces are unanimous that a prisoner of war may be killed, and we do not know of any taking a different view. Reports are numerous that the Prophet sanctioned such killing. He ordered the execution of 'Uqbah ibn Abī Mu'ayṭ and al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith after the Battle of Badr, and Abū 'Azzah, the poet, after the Battle of Uḥud. He also put the Qurayẓah prisoners to death when they accepted Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh's judgement to the effect that their men must be executed and their offspring be enslaved. From among them, he set al-Zubayr ibn Bāṭā free by an act of grace. When he conquered Khaybar, partly by war and partly by peaceful agreement, he stipulated a clear condition on Ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq, but when his treachery was exposed, he ordered his execution. When he later entered Makkah, he ordered the killing of a number of people, stating that they should be killed, 'even if found clinging to the robes of the Ka'bah.' However, he freed the people of Makkah and took nothing of their property.

Abū Bakr is quoted to have said: "I wish I had not ordered al-Fujā'ah to be burnt when he was brought to me. I wish I had ordered his execution normally or set him free." Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī mentions that he executed the chief priest of al-Sūs, after he had given him a guarantee of safety for a number of people

whom the priest named. However, he forgot to include himself, and therefore, the guarantee of safety did not apply to him. So, Abū Mūsā ordered his execution.

All these reports and *aḥādīth* confirm, without any doubt, that the Prophet and his Companions approved the execution of prisoners of war or setting them free. This is the consensus of scholars in all regions.

The permissibility of executing prisoners of war cannot, however, just be based on the Qur'ānic statement. It should instead be viewed against the actions of the Prophet and some of his Companions. When we carefully consider all the cases where prisoners were killed, we find that they were all special; in other words, there were additional militating factors other than merely fighting against Muslims and subsequent captivity. The men killed after the Battles of Badr and Uḥud, namely, ʿUqbah, al-Naḍr and Abū ʿAzzah, respectively, were all hostile opponents who were determined to harm the Prophet. The case of the Qurayẓah Jews was also special, given they had agreed, in advance, for judgement to be passed on them by Saʿd ibn Muʿādh. In all these cases we find special reasons placing them outside the general rule on prisoners of war stated in this verse: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" (Verse 4)

Scholars differed on setting prisoners free against ransom. Those of our school, the Ḥanafī, maintain that a prisoner cannot be set free against financial ransom, and cannot be sold to the enemy so as to join them again in fighting. Abū Ḥanīfah also states that a prisoner of war cannot be set free in exchange for Muslim prisoners. In no way should he ever be returned to join an enemy army. Abū Yūsuf and Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan differ with Abū Ḥanīfah on this point, allowing the exchange of prisoners of war between Muslims and non-Muslims. This last view is subscribed to by major scholars like al-Thawrī and al-Awzāʿī. Al-Awzāʿī adds that it is permissible to sell prisoners of war to the enemy, but the men among them may not be sold except in an exchange of prisoners. On the other hand, al-Muznī quotes al-Shāfiʿī as saying

that a Muslim ruler may set male prisoners of war free by an act of grace or against ransom after their defeat.

Those who approve of exchange of prisoners and setting enemy prisoners free against financial ransom cite in support of their view the Qur'ānic statement: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" This apparently permits setting them free against ransom and in exchange for Muslim prisoners. They also cite the fact that the Prophet set Quraysh prisoners from the Battle of Badr free against financial ransom. As for the permissibility of an exchange of prisoners, they cite in support a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Imrān ibn Ḥuṣayn: "The Thaqīf tribe took two Companions of the Prophet prisoner, and the Muslims took a man from the tribe of 'Āmir ibn Ṣa'ṣa'ah prisoner. The Prophet passed by this prisoner when he was tied up, and the man called him. The Prophet went to him. He asked: 'Why am I taken prisoner?' The Prophet said: 'Because of your allies' offence.' The man said: 'But I am a Muslim.' The Prophet replied: 'Had you said this when you were free, you would have greatly prospered.' The Prophet moved away, but the man called him again. When the Prophet went to him, he said: 'Feed me, for I am hungry.' The Prophet said: 'This is what you need.' The Prophet then exchanged him for the two men taken captive by the Thaqīf."

In our view, the evidence in support of those who say that prisoners of war may be set free against ransom is weightier and more valid than that stated in support of the view of al-Jaṣṣāṣ's school. This is true even though they differ concerning the form of ransom and whether it is financial or in exchange with Muslim prisoners of war. Imām al-Jaṣṣāṣ concludes his discussion by endorsing the view of his Ḥanafī school of Islamic law:

> As for the mention in this verse of freeing prisoners as an act of grace or against ransom, along with what is reported of the action concerning the prisoners during the Battle of Badr, all this is

abrogated by the Qur'ānic verse that says: "*Slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every conceivable place. Yet if they should repent, take to prayer and pay the* zakāt, *let them go their way.*" (9: 5) We have mentioned that this is the view of al-Suddī and Ibn Jurayj. Further confirmation of the abrogation is seen in the verse that says: "*Fight against those who – despite having been given Scriptures – do not truly believe in God and the Last Day, and do not treat as forbidden that which God and His messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, till they [agree to] pay the submission tax with a willing hand, after they have been humbled.*" (9: 29) Both verses speak of the duty to fight against the unbelievers until they accept Islam or pay tribute, or *jizyah*. To free them against ransom runs contrary to this. All commentators on the Qur'ān and scholars of *ḥadīth* agree that *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed later than *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which means that the rulings it states abrogate the earlier ones including that of freeing them against ransom.

We have already stated that this ruling to kill idolaters unless they adopt Islam is specific to idolaters living in the Arabian Peninsula. Others living outside it can live in the Muslim state and pay a tribute, just like the payment of tribute is accepted from followers of earlier religions. That the tribute is accepted from them when they submit to the rule of the Muslim state does not preclude that some of them may fall prisoner before such submission. What ruling applies to such prisoners, then? We say that a Muslim ruler may free them by an act of grace if he determines that this serves the interests of the Muslim community. He may also free them against financial ransom or in exchange for Muslim prisoners, when their people continue to have a fighting force and remain hostile. When the enemy renounces hostility by agreeing to pay tribute to the Muslim state, a different situation applies with clearly specified rulings. This means that the ruling concerning prisoners of war continues to be valid in cases that are not settled by the payment of tribute.

What We Say

To sum up, this is the only Qur'ānic text providing a ruling on prisoners of war. All other texts relate to situations other than that of taking prisoners. Therefore, this represents the permanent basis for dealing with this question. In those cases where the practice differed, this was the result of specific and temporary situations. Putting some prisoners to death applied only in individual cases, which could be similar to future ones. Those individuals were executed for actions they committed before being taken prisoner. They were not killed merely for fighting the Muslims. A spy, for example, may be taken prisoner and tried. In this case, he is tried for spying, not for being an enemy soldier taken prisoner in open battle. His captivity merely brought him under the authority of the Muslim state.

A word needs to be said about placing prisoners of war in slavery. We have already stated on more than one occasion that this was in response to prevalent universal situations and common practices in war. These situations made it impossible for Islam to implement in all circumstances the general statement "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom,*" when enemy camps used to put any Muslim taken prisoner into slavery. Therefore, this ruling was applied by the Prophet in certain situations: he set free some prisoners in acts of grace, while in other cases he exchanged prisoners and in still other cases, he accepted financial ransom. In some cases prisoners were made slaves in order to deal with situations that could not be otherwise dealt with.

Should all camps agree not to treat prisoners of war as slaves, Islam reverts to its single positive ruling in the matter: "*set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom.*" Putting prisoners into slavery is not an Islamic rule; it is a procedure dealing with special circumstances. This is the view that we derive from this clear Qur'ānic statement and from carefully studying different cases, events and situations.

I should perhaps make it clear that I support this view because the Qur'ānic statements and the study of events and cases support it. It does not occur to me that I should defend Islam against the accusation that it puts prisoners into slavery. Such a thought I never entertain. Had Islam adopted this practice, it would have been the right and

better one. No human being with any degree of good manners would ever say that his view is better than God's ruling. I only look at the Qur'ānic text, its wording and spirit. It is on this basis that I have formulated my view.

All this, i.e fighting, smiting the necks of unbelievers, binding them firmly and dealing with the captives according to this rule, continues "*until war shall lay down its burden.*" (Verse 4) This means until war is over between Islam and its opponents. It remains the permanent Islamic rule. According to a *ḥadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd on Anas's authority, the Prophet says: "*Jihād* shall continue until the Day of Judgement." Its purpose is to ensure that God's word remains supreme.

The Purpose of *Jihād*

God does not require believers to fight and go on *jihād* because He needs their help against the unbelievers. Far be it from Him to need help. He is able, should He wish, to destroy those unbelievers utterly. It is all a test for mankind which determines everyone's position:

> *Thus [shall it be]. Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6)

Those unbelievers who debar people from God's path, and their ilk throughout the earth, at all times, and those despots who exercise power unjustly and appear to command force and authority, behaving in all arrogance, are no more than a handful of creatures living on earth. The earth is nothing but a tiny little planet floating in the midst of countless other planets, stars, celestial systems and galaxies whose sizes and numbers are known only to God. In the universal expanse, worlds and galaxies appear merely as scattered points, and as though they float aimlessly. None other than God controls them all and ensures harmony between them.

Despots, their entourages and followers, indeed all people on earth, are no more than small ants when compared with God's power. No indeed, they are not even like tiny particles blown everywhere by a light breeze. They are just nothing. When God commands believers to smite the necks of unbelievers and to bind them firmly after they have been utterly subdued, He only makes of them a tool of His power. Had He so willed, He would have dealt with them directly, as He did with those whom he destroyed by floods, a stunning blast or wind. He can indeed punish them Himself, without using any of these forces. God, however, wants the best for the believers. Therefore, He tests them and cultivates what is good in them, making it easier for them to do the best of good works.

God wants to test the believers, bringing out the best potential in man. The highest level a human being attains is when the truth he believes in becomes so dear to him that he will fight for it, exposing himself to death, but also being willing to kill his opponents. He simply will not compromise on this truth he believes in, and cannot live or love life unless it be under such truth. God wants to cultivate the believers, so that every desire and aspiration pertaining to this transitory life on earth, dear as it may be normally to man, is progressively weakened. He wants to purge them of their weaknesses and compensate them for their shortcomings until all their desires respond to the call to *jihād* and the earning of His pleasure. God will thus know that those people have successfully passed the test and have been properly cultivated. They do not make their choices on impulse, but on the basis of careful consideration.

God also wants to elevate the believers. When they go through the hardships of *jihād*, exposing themselves to the danger of death at every turn, they learn to care little for this danger. For most people, however, this is so frightening that they shed much of their moral values and dignity to avoid it. Yet it is of little consequence to those who are used to exposing themselves to it, whether they eventually avoid it or not. To turn to God alone at every moment of danger produces an effect which is best compared to an electric shock. It is like remoulding people's hearts and souls in full clarity and purity.

Moreover, such a test provides the means to put the affairs of the whole community on the right basis, placing its leadership in the hands of those who strive so strenuously for God's cause ready to sacrifice themselves for it. Such people care little for worldly riches and luxuries. When they are the ones who have the leadership of human society, the whole world will be set on the right footing. Furthermore, it facilitates the way for people to earn God's pleasure and His reward without having to face the reckoning. By contrast, those in the opposite camp find it easy to do what incurs God's displeasure and exposes them to His punishment. Everyone will have his way made easy for him to follow, according to God's knowledge of the true nature of all.

Thus, God tells us about those who are killed, fighting for His cause: "*And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verses 4–6) The first thing to note here is the contrast between what happens to the deeds of martyrs and what happens to those of unbelievers. In the case of the unbelievers, the *sūrah* started with the statement that "*their deeds [are] brought to nothing*," by God. Here the verse says of martyrs: "*never will He let their deeds go to waste.*" Theirs are good deeds, done in accordance with Divine guidance, linked to the solid truth by which they are motivated and in defence of which they are undertaken. They will remain because the truth is permanent and will never be lost.

We then face the great truth of the continuing life of martyrs killed in God's cause. This is a fact already stated in the Qur'ān: "*Do not say of those who are killed in God's cause, 'They are dead.' They are alive, although you do not perceive that.*" (2: 154) This great truth is presented here in a new light. We see the life of the martyr extending and growing in the way it followed before it left this world, the way of obedience to God and sacrifice for His cause: "*He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state.*" (Verse 5) It was for the cause of God that they were slain and so He will continue to guide them after their martyrdom, promising them that they will attain to a happy state, as their souls will be purged of any traces of earthly life's burdens. They will grow in purity so as to be suited to the absolute purity of the ones

on high to which they are raised. This means that theirs is a continuing, uninterrupted life except in an earthly sense. God takes care of their lives, increases them in guidance, purity and shining. Ultimately, He fulfils His promise to them, for He "*will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them.* (Verse 6)

A *ḥadīth* related by Aḥmad quotes the Prophet as saying: "A martyr is given six special privileges: with the first drop of his blood, he is forgiven every sin he has ever committed; he sees his position in heaven; and he is given his maiden companions, security from the greatest fear, torment in the grave and his adornment of true faith." Another *ḥadīth* related by al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah specifically states that a martyr is made to see his position in heaven. This is how God makes heaven known to martyrs, and such is the end of continuing guidance and the happy state they are brought into after departing life on earth.

Purely for God's Sake

The *sūrah* then urges the believers to dedicate themselves to God and the implementation of His code in human life. It promises them His support in battle as well as defeat and hardship for His and their enemies:

> *Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm; but as for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing. This is because they hate what God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste.* (Verses 7–9)

How do believers support God so as to fulfil the condition and receive what He has promised them of His support and steadying their step? What God requires of them is that they should be fully dedicated to Him, associating no partners with Him whatsoever, whether in a subtle or open way. They must love God more than they love themselves or their desires. They must refer to His rulings on everything they desire or wish for, as well as on their public and private actions, their thoughts and feelings. Such is the way to support God within ourselves.

Moreover, we know that God has laid down a complete code for life, based on certain rules and values; in short, a complete concept of life and the universe. In practical life, our supporting God is fulfilled when we make this code the arbiter of everything we do, when we implement His way of life in all aspects.

We need to reflect for a moment on the two phrases: "*those who are slain in God's cause*," and "*If you support God.*" In both cases of being slain and giving support, the basic condition is that the action should be dedicated to God and serve His cause. Although this goes without saying, it is often blurred when faith suffers from deviation in one generation or another. In such cases we notice that words like martyrdom and *jihād* are twisted to serve cheap causes. It should be clear that there is no such thing as *jihād*, martyrdom or admission into heaven unless such *jihād* is for God's cause only, death for His sake alone, and the support we give within ourselves and in society is to Him alone. The objective must be that His word should be supreme; that His law and code of living should rule over people's consciences, morality, behaviour, laws and systems. Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī reports: "The Prophet was asked about a person who fights to prove his bravery, support his people or to show off: which of these could be fighting in God's cause? He answered: 'Only the one who fights so that God's word remains supreme fights for God's cause.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī.] There can be no other banner or goal under or for which people can fight and fall martyrs to be included in God's promise of admission to heaven other than His banner and His cause. This is true no matter what banner is raised and no matter what goals are defined under deviant systems and governments.

Advocates of Divine faith are best advised to understand this truth and keep it in their minds pure of any deviant concept. They must never allow thoughts that are alien to the Islamic faith to creep into their minds. If people strive for any purpose other than making God's word supreme, then their striving is not for Him, and when they are killed they do not earn martyr status. They cannot expect God's help and cannot hope to be in heaven. Advocates of Divine faith must make their vision clear. If they find this hard, the least they can do is to free

their thoughts and feelings from the concepts of their environment which are in conflict with the essence of God's conditional statement: "*Believers! If you support [the cause of] God, He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" (Verse 7)

Such is the condition God requires to be fulfilled by believers. What He gives them in return is His support, ensuring victory and making their steps firm. This is God's promise which never fails. If it is delayed at some point, its delay serves another purpose which is accomplished when God's support, victory and firmness of step are fulfilled.[5]

We need to reflect a little on the way God's promise is stated: "*He will support you and will make your steps firm.*" The Arabic word, *yanṣurkum*, translated here as '*support you*', also means '*gives you victory*'. We tend to think first that firmness of step is necessary before victory can be achieved; in fact, it is an important element in gaining victory. This is so true. That it occurs second in this text indicates a different meaning. What is intended here is that believers remain firm when victory has been achieved so that they can shoulder the responsibilities that come with victory. Victory is not the end of the battle between faith and unfaith, the truth and falsehood. Victory imposes certain duties within the minds of the victorious and in life generally. Those who achieve victory must not allow conceit to creep into their minds, nor should they grow complacent. Many people may remain steadfast when the going is tough and the hardships are plenty, but few are those who do not weaken after victory or when life is easy and comfortable. To remain steadfast, upholding the truth after victory, is an even higher grade than gaining victory. Perhaps this is the meaning intended in this verse, but God knows best.

"*As for the unbelievers, ill fortune awaits them as He will bring their deeds to nothing.*" (Verse 8) This is the opposite of granting help and firmness of step. This is an invocation of ill fortune which means that they will inevitably have ill fortune, humiliation and lack of support. Furthermore, their deeds will come to nothing, which means utter loss. The reason for all this is stated: "*This is because they hate what*

5. For further clarification of this point, see Vol. XII, pp. 134–142.

God has bestowed from on high, and thus He causes their deeds to go to waste. (Verse 9)

This describes what they entertain of hatred to what God has revealed: the Qur'ān containing His law and the code He lays down for human life. This is what prompts them to stubbornly reject the faith and entertain futile argument about it. Many are those with corrupt minds who hate the sound Divine code and find themselves, by nature, in conflict with it. We often meet such people and we sense their deep hatred of Islam and everything related to it. They are scared by the mere mention of it. In fact, such hatred is easily noticed these days.

Because of their hatred of God's revelations, He let their deeds go to waste. Again the Qur'ān uses its preferred method of drawing images. The Arabic word, *aḥbaṭa*, translated here as *'cause to go to waste'*, normally describes cattle with swollen bellies as a result of feeding on poisoned grass. This ends in certain death. In the same way, those people who hate God's revelations find their deeds swollen and apparently growing, only to end in waste and utter loss. It is a vivid image that shows motion, and an end corresponding to that of the ones who hate God's revelations and admire their own works that appear to them great. Yet they are only swollen in the same way as the bellies of cattle grazing on poisonous grass.

Superficial Enjoyment

The unbelievers' attention is forcibly drawn to the fates of earlier ignorant communities:

> *Have they never travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before their time? God destroyed them utterly. A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.* (Verse 10)

This is a strong and forceful statement accompanied by loud noises and an image of the earlier communities witnessing the destruction of everything around them. All their possessions are amassed in heaps while they themselves are buried under the debris; it is an image of

total destruction. They are told that such a fate awaits all unbelievers; they will reap nothing but devastation and ruin: "*A similar fate awaits the unbelievers.*" (Verse 10) This fearful prospect contrasts with that of the believers who will receive support and victory: "*This is because God protects the believers, while the unbelievers have no one to protect them.*" (Verse 11) The constant rule being that when God is his protector, man need not worry about anything. Whatever happens to him should be seen as a test that heralds something good. It is never a sign of being abandoned by God, nor can it be seen as failure by God to fulfil His promise to support His servants. The one who is not so protected by God, however, will have no protection, even if all of mankind and the *jinn* are his patrons and supporters. Ultimately, he will be lost even though all means of protection and all sources of power known to mankind are at his disposal.

Having explained the lots of both believers and unbelievers when conflict and war erupt between them, the *sūrah* outlines their shares of enjoyment, making clear the distinction between the two:

> *God will indeed admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, while those who disbelieve will enjoy their life [in this world] and eat as cattle eat; but the fire shall be their abode.* (Verse 12)

Believers who do good may sometimes be given luxuries and comforts of the best type to enjoy, but the comparison here is drawn between the believers' truly great share in heaven on the one hand and the total lot of the unbelievers on the other. The believers receive their share from God's hand in the heavens through which running waters flow. It is God who admits them there. Hence, it is a great, noble share given to them in reward for their faith and good deeds. By contrast, the share of the unbelievers is merely some enjoyment and the partaking of food '*as cattle eat*'. This is a miserable image unfit for man. It is an image of vulgar enjoyment and an animal-like approach to food, lacking both taste and manners. It is an enjoyment that is subject to no control; man has neither will, choice nor conscience in all this. Furthermore, it is unchecked by any sense of fear of God.

Regardless of their beliefs, people may have very fine culinary tastes and may be very selective in what they enjoy. This is certainly true of most people who grow up in wealthy families. This is not, however, what is referred to here. Rather, what the verse points to is that when man is in control of his will and has his values in place, he will choose only what is good in God's sight. He makes his choice using his will, free of the pressure of desire and cheap enjoyment. With such a will, he does not look at life as if it is a sumptuous feast of food and drink, or as though it is a chance for uncontrolled pleasure, paying little or no attention to what is lawful or unlawful.

The essential difference between man and animals is that man is equipped with free will and has a concept of life based on values stated by God, the Creator of all life. When man loses this, he sheds the most important qualities that distinguish him from other creatures and for which God has granted him special honour.

This series of comparisons between believers and unbelievers is interrupted by a reference to the city that drove the Prophet out, comparing it with other cities and communities that perished even though they were far more powerful: "*How many cities of greater power than this your city which has driven you out have We destroyed, and they had none to help them.*" (Verse 13) This verse is reported to have been revealed when the Prophet was on his way from Makkah to Madīnah, having been driven out by the unbelievers. It was revealed by way of consolation to him, reminding him that those unbelievers who had opposed his message so determinedly, until he and his followers had to abandon their land and property and migrate for the sake of their faith, are truly powerless. In the end, they are subject to God's power.

The Reward: a Physical Image

The comparison between the two groups continues. This by virtue of an explanation outlining why the believers are admitted into gardens of bliss in the life to come after they have been given support and honour in this present life. It also explains why the unbelievers who lived a life of animal enjoyment in this world, are subjected to punishment in the next life:

> *Is he who takes his stand on a clear evidence from his Lord like one to whom the evil of his own deeds seems goodly, or like those who follow their own desires?* (Verse 14)

There is a fundamental difference between the conditions, codes of life and behaviour of the two groups. The believers are equipped with clear evidence from their Lord. They recognize the truth and are certain of its source. They receive their directives and instructions from God and are sure of what they receive. No deception or error exists in their way of life. The unbelievers, by contrast, are deceived, thinking their deeds to be good when they are essentially bad. They do not make certain of what they receive nor whether it is true or good. They only '*follow their own desires*' with no standard of control to refer to and with no light to help them distinguish what is true and what is false. Are these two groups alike? The answer can only be in the negative for they are fundamentally different in their conditions and practices. Hence, they cannot be the same in their rewards and destinies.

Then follows an image of the differences between the two in the ends to which they are heading:

> *Such is the paradise which the God-fearing are promised: In it are rivers of water for ever pure, rivers of milk the taste of which never alters, rivers of wine, a delight for those who drink, and rivers of honey pure and clarified. In it they shall have all kinds of fruit. And they receive there forgiveness by their Lord. Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?* (Verse 15)

Such physical descriptions of reward and punishment in the hereafter occur in several places in the Qur'ān. They may be accompanied with other mental images or given on their own. Likewise, mental images are often given on their own in the Qur'ān. It is God who has created mankind, and He knows best what affects and influences them and what is conducive to cultivating the better elements in their nature. He also knows what enjoyment or suffering is best in bringing out the best in them. People possess different qualities and characteristics that

are all combined within human nature but differ in their manifestation in each individual. Hence, God has given us detailed accounts of the types of comfort and suffering, pleasure and pain, according to His absolute knowledge of His creatures.

Some people are best motivated to good action and most contented with their reward when they are told that they shall have rivers of pure water, healthy milk, pure, clarified honey and delightful wine, as well as fruits of all kinds, together with forgiveness that ensures their admission to heaven. These people are given what is suitable to cultivate the best in them and ensure that they receive their fitting reward. There are others who worship God because they want to thank Him for the countless blessings He has given them, or because they love Him and try to draw closer to Him through their worship, just as lovers lean towards each other, or because they are too ashamed to be seen in any condition that does not please God. In their worship, they do not look up to heaven and hell, bliss or suffering. These are best motivated when they read God's words: "*As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, God will certainly bestow love on them.*" (19: 96) They feel their greatest bliss when they learn that they will be "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (54: 55)

It is reported that the Prophet used to stand up in night worship until his feet swelled. 'Ā'ishah, his wife, asked him why he did so when God had assured him of total forgiveness for all his sins, past and future. He replied: "'Ā'ishah! Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.] Rābi'ah al-'Adawiyyah wondered: "Would it be true that without heaven and hell, no one would have worshipped or feared God?" When Sufyān al-Thawrī, a leading scholar of the *Tābi'īn* generation, asked her about the nature of her faith in God, she said to him: "I do not worship God for fear of hell or craving for heaven. I would then be no better than a miserable hired servant. I worship Him because I yearn to meet Him."

In between these two types there is a wide range of different natures and mentalities. They all find in what God describes of bliss and suffering, reward and punishment, what ensures the cultivation of what is best in them in this present life and what is fitting as a reward in the life to come. It should be noted that the images of happiness and

suffering grow in sophistication as the listeners become more refined by greater exposure to the Qur'ān, and according to the types of situations being addressed. This is true of all generations and communities.

The requital is of two types: the first includes all these rivers together with plentiful and varied fruit as well as God's forgiveness. The other is thus outlined: "*Are they to be compared to those who are to abide in the fire and be given a drink of scalding water that tears their bowels?* (Verse 15) Again, this is a physical image of fierce torture that fits the ambience of the *sūrah*. It also fits the crude nature of the unbelievers, for they are the ones who approach their enjoyments and their food like animals. It is a crude atmosphere. Hence, they are requited with boiling water that tears at their bowels and bellies. The two groups are totally different in their nature and code of life. Most certainly their requital will not be the same.



2

What Fate for Sealed Hearts

وَمِنْهُم مَّن يَسْتَمِعُ إِلَيْكَ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا خَرَجُوا
مِنْ عِندِكَ قَالُوا لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ مَاذَا
قَالَ آنِفًا ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ طَبَعَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ
قُلُوبِهِمْ وَاتَّبَعُوا أَهْوَاءَهُمْ ﴿١٦﴾

Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires. (16)

وَالَّذِينَ اهْتَدَوْا زَادَهُمْ هُدًى وَآتَاهُمْ
تَقْوَاهُمْ ﴿١٧﴾

As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing. (17)

فَهَلْ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَّا السَّاعَةَ أَن تَأْتِيَهُم بَغْتَةً ۖ
فَقَدْ جَاءَ أَشْرَاطُهَا ۖ فَأَنَّىٰ لَهُمْ إِذَا جَاءَتْهُمْ
ذِكْرَاهُمْ ﴿١٨﴾

Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed? (18)

فَاعْلَمْ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ
لِذَنبِكَ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ
يَعْلَمُ مُتَقَلَّبَكُمْ وَمَثْوَاكُمْ ﴿١٩﴾

Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest. (19)

The believers say: 'Would that a *sūrah* had been revealed.' Yet when a *sūrah* of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be (20)

وَيَقُولُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَوْلَا نُزِّلَتْ سُورَةٌ ۖ فَإِذَآ أُنزِلَتْ سُورَةٌ مُّحْكَمَةٌ وَذُكِرَ فِيهَا ٱلْقِتَالُ ۙ رَأَيْتَ ٱلَّذِينَ فِى قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ يَنظُرُونَ إِلَيْكَ نَظَرَ ٱلْمَغْشِىِّ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلْمَوْتِ ۖ فَأَوْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿٢٠﴾

obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. (21)

طَاعَةٌ وَقَوْلٌ مَّعْرُوفٌ ۚ فَإِذَا عَزَمَ ٱلْأَمْرُ فَلَوْ صَدَقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَّهُمْ ﴿٢١﴾

If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? (22)

فَهَلْ عَسَيْتُمْ إِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ أَن تُفْسِدُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَتُقَطِّعُوٓا۟ أَرْحَامَكُمْ ﴿٢٢﴾

It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. (23)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ لَعَنَهُمُ ٱللَّهُ فَأَصَمَّهُمْ وَأَعْمَىٰٓ أَبْصَٰرَهُمْ ﴿٢٣﴾

Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts? (24)

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ ٱلْقُرْءَانَ أَمْ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَآ ﴿٢٤﴾

Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. (25)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱرْتَدُّوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَدْبَٰرِهِم مِّنۢ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ لَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَى ۙ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ سَوَّلَ لَهُمْ وَأَمْلَىٰ لَهُمْ ﴿٢٥﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا لِلَّذِينَ كَرِهُوا مَا
نَزَّلَ اللَّهُ سَنُطِيعُكُمْ فِي بَعْضِ
الْأَمْرِ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ إِسْرَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٦﴾

That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (26)

فَكَيْفَ إِذَا تَوَفَّتْهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَضْرِبُونَ
وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَدْبَارَهُمْ ﴿٢٧﴾

How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs? (27)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمُ اتَّبَعُوا مَا أَسْخَطَ
اللَّهَ وَكَرِهُوا رِضْوَانَهُ فَأَحْبَطَ
أَعْمَالَهُمْ ﴿٢٨﴾

That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (28)

أَمْ حَسِبَ الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ أَن
لَّن يُخْرِجَ اللَّهُ أَضْغَانَهُمْ ﴿٢٩﴾

Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? (29)

وَلَوْ نَشَاءُ لَأَرَيْنَاكَهُمْ فَلَعَرَفْتَهُم
بِسِيمَاهُمْ ۚ وَلَتَعْرِفَنَّهُمْ فِي لَحْنِ
الْقَوْلِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ أَعْمَالَكُمْ ﴿٣٠﴾

Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. (30)

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ حَتَّىٰ نَعْلَمَ الْمُجَاهِدِينَ مِنكُمْ
وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَنَبْلُوَ أَخْبَارَكُمْ ﴿٣١﴾

Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions. (31)

Overview

In this passage the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites. In the first instance it depicts their attitude towards the Prophet and the Qur'ān, then their attitude to fighting which God requires Muslims to undertake in the service of His cause. Finally, it reveals their attitude towards the Jews and their conspiring with them against Islam and the Muslim community.

It should be remembered that hypocrisy first started in Madīnah. It did not exist in Makkah, as the situation there made it totally unnecessary. In Makkah, the Muslims suffered persecution and no one needed to appease them. When God facilitated support for Islam with its acceptance by the two tribes of Madīnah, the Aws and the Khazraj, the new faith spread into all clans and families. There were Muslims in every home in Madīnah. Some, however, hated to see the Prophet and Islam gaining power but dared not make their hostility public. Therefore, they pretended to be Muslim when in reality they were full of hatred for Islam. They were also keen for ill fortune to befall the Prophet and his Companions. Their chief was 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl.

A Jewish community also lived in Madīnah. The Jews had a military and economic presence as well as organizational strength at the time the Prophet settled in Madīnah. They also hated the Prophet, his faith and his followers. The presence of such Jews offered encouragement to the hypocrites: essentially, the two groups were united in their hatred of Islam and the Muslims. As a result, they conspired and exploited every opportunity to undermine the Muslim community. When the Muslim community experienced difficult circumstances, their opponents made their hostility all the more apparent; and when the Muslims enjoyed good times, they resorted to covert action and wicked conspiracy. Up to the middle of the Prophet's stay in Madīnah, these two groups represented a real danger to Islam and the Muslim community.

Repeated mention of the hypocrites and their schemes occur in the *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah, and in which they come in for clear denunciation. Their contacts with the Jews and cooperation with them

is also referred to in such revelations. In the present passage, we have such references to both the hypocrites and the Jews.

How Divine Guidance Works

> *Some of them listen to you, but no sooner do they leave your presence than they [scornfully] say to those endowed with knowledge: 'What is it that he said just now?' Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.* (Verse 16)

The phrase, '*some of them*', may refer to the unbelievers who were the subject of discussion in the first passage of the *sūrah*. In this case, the hypocrites are considered as a group of unbelievers, although they conceal their reality. In this sense, the *sūrah* is referring to their true status. On the other hand, the phrase may refer to the Muslims, considering that the hypocrites were integrated with them, pretending to belong to their community. They were indeed treated as Muslims, as Islam requires us to deal with people on the basis of what they profess to be. In either case, however, they are hypocrites as their description in the *sūrah* and their deeds indicate.

The hypocrites' question, after they had listened to the Prophet, shows how they only pretended to pay attention to what he was saying when their minds were inattentive, preoccupied with other things, or rather were sealed altogether. It also suggests an implicit ridicule. Since they address their question to people endowed with knowledge asking about the meaning of what they heard, they imply that what Muḥammad said was incomprehensible. Despite having paid attention to it, they still could not understand its meaning. It further implies ridicule of those knowledgeable people who attended carefully to everything the Prophet said, making an effort to understand it fully and memorize it, as the Prophet's Companions used to do. In this way, using blatant or subtle mockery, these hypocrites asked them to repeat the Prophet's words. In all these possibilities we see wickedness, deep resentment and hatred: "*Such are the ones whose hearts God has sealed, and who follow their desires.*" (Verse 16)

Such is the condition of the hypocrites. Those who follow Divine guidance, however, are totally different:

> *As for those who accept Divine guidance, God increases them in guidance and causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.* (Verse 17)

The order of reporting events in this verse calls for reflection. The believers start by accepting guidance, and God rewards them by increasing this guidance so that they do not err. He further gives them an even more profound reward, as He "*causes them to grow in the quality of God-fearing.*" This quality makes a person's heart always apprehensive, feeling that God is watching him, fearing that he might incur God's displeasure whilst hoping to earn His pleasure, and ashamed that God may see him in a situation of which He disapproves. Such a keen sensitivity is the essence of being God-fearing. It is a great prize which God grants to whomever He chooses of His servants when they accept His guidance and strive to earn His pleasure. Guidance, sensitivity and being God-fearing describe a condition that is the opposite of the hypocrisy described in the previous verse.

The *sūrah* picks up its description of the hypocrites who leave the Prophet's presence having understood nothing of his teachings, which aim to enhance people's fear of God, and remind them of what is certain to come of reckoning and requital:

> *Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them of a sudden? Its portents have already come; but once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?* (Verse 18)

What do these people who sit with the Prophet and later leave, having understood or learnt nothing, wait for? Are they waiting for the Last Hour to come upon them all of a sudden while they are preoccupied with worldly matters? Well, the portents of the Last Hour have already come, as have its signs. The revelation of the last Divine message is the clearest of all these portents. It announces that it is the last warning before the appointed time for the Last Hour. The Prophet

is quoted as saying: "I was sent with my message, nothing separates me from the Last Hour more than what separates my two fingers." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] If time appears to have extended long since the Prophet's time, we should remember that God's days are different from our days. According to God's reckoning, its first signs have already come. No reasonable person should allow it to come upon him all of a sudden, when he can no longer attend to a duty: "*Once it has arrived, what benefit will it then be to them if they take heed?*" This serves as a strong reminder to those who are oblivious.

The *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet and the well-guided people who follow him telling them to follow a different course based on true knowledge, remembrance of God and seeking His forgiveness and feeling that He watches over them and knows everything about them. They will then be on their guard as they await the Last Hour:

> *Know, then, that there is no deity other than God, and pray to Him to forgive you your sins, and to forgive all believing men and women. God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.* (Verse 19)

This directive points first of all to the need to always remember the first truth which the Prophet and those who follow him uphold: "*Know, then, that there is no deity other than God.*" Once this truth is firmly established in man's conscience, other directives are given: "*And pray to Him to forgive you your sins.*" This is said to the Prophet whom God has already forgiven his past and future sins, because it is the duty of every believer who is aware that his efforts fall short of fulfilling his duty, no matter how hard he tries. In this way, every believer feels that his prayer for forgiveness serves as an aspect of glorifying God and thanking Him for His forgiveness. Moreover, it is a lesson to the Prophet's Companions and followers who know his high position with his Lord, yet see that he is instructed to remember God and to pray to Him for forgiveness for himself and all believers, men and women. They know that God always answers the Prophet's prayers. They then feel that God has bestowed on them a great blessing by sending them this noble Prophet and instructing

him to pray to Him to forgive them. Thus, they are sure that He will forgive them their sins.

The final point in this directive is that "*God knows all your comings and goings, as well as your abiding at rest.*" (Verse 19) Thus a believer feels both reassurance and fear at the same time. He is reassured that he is under God's care wherever he is, and he is in fear because God knows every feeling and thought he may have, and is aware of his every secret. This is all part of education that keeps a believer always on the look out, keen to remain always on the right track.

The Hypocrites and *Jihād*

The *sūrah* describes the attitude of the hypocrites to fighting for God's cause and their utter cowardice when it is made obligatory upon Muslims. It exposes their true feelings about the whole idea of fighting, and explains what awaits them if they persist with hypocrisy. It warns them that they have to purge their hearts of hypocrisy, be true in their response to God and join the Muslim ranks with sincerity of purpose:

> *The believers say: 'Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.' Yet when a* sūrah *of clear import is revealed, and fighting is mentioned in it, you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death. Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God. If you turn away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship? It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts?* (Verses 20–24)

The believers express their wishes for a new *sūrah* to be revealed because they love the Qur'ān and find in every part of it something that appeals to them and warms their hearts. Alternatively, this expression may be indicative of their desire to have certain aspects of *jihād* and fighting outlined to them. Therefore they say: "*Would that a* sūrah *had been revealed.*" (Verse 20)

We are then told that a *sūrah* with clear import that admits no divergence of opinion has been bestowed from on high. "*Fighting is mentioned in it,*" which means that this *sūrah* gives an order to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause, or outlines a ruling concerning those who disobey such an order. This is seen as a calamity by the hypocrites: they lose control of their feelings and their pretence is exposed. They appear weak, cowardly and spineless. Their pathetic condition is described in full colours: "*you see those who are sick at heart staring at you like one who is about to faint for fear of death.*" (Verse 20) This is a unique way of describing extreme fear, one that shows them shaking with fear, too weak to stand up. This inimitable image applies to everyone deprived of faith, true courage and a sense of shame when they face the possibility of death in war. This is the true nature of the hypocrites who are sick at heart.

When all false appearances are shed and the reality of cowardice is exposed, the hand of faith is stretched out to offer them what strengthens their resolve and gives them power if they would only take it with sincerity: "*Far better for them would be obedience and an appropriate word. Moreover, when fighting is decided upon, it is better for them to be true to God.*" (Verses 20–21) Undoubtedly, this is better for them than a scandal that exposes them as trembling, spineless cowards. It is better for them to be obedient to God's order, reassured that it is for their benefit and the benefit of their community, and to say a good, appropriate word expressing sincerity and purity of heart. When matters are resolved and fighting is decided upon, it is even better for them to be true to what they claim of commitment to His cause, manifesting this commitment with unwavering resolve and determined action. He will then give them added power and clear support that removes hardship, lightens the danger and ensures that they enjoy one of two noble prospects: either victory and safety on the one hand or martyrdom and admittance to heaven on the other. Such is the gift of faith that replaces fear with reassurance and weakness with courage and resolve.

The *sūrah* then addresses them directly, threatening them with dire consequences should their cowardice persist to the point where they abandon Islam altogether and revert to outright unbelief: "*If you turn*

away now, is it to be expected of you that you will spread corruption in the land and break your ties of kinship?" (Verse 22) The interrogative form, '*is it to be expected of you*', suggests that this is likely and gives a warning that this will lead them back into the ignorance that prevailed in their community before it was reformed by Islam. This is a state that makes people spread corruption and sever their ties of kinship.

Having made this direct address, the *sūrah* then speaks about them, rather than to them, showing what happens should matters reach the point they have been warned against: "*It is such as these whom God rejects, leaving them deaf and blind. Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān? Or are there locks on their hearts?*" (Verses 23–24) '*It is such as these*' who persist with hypocrisy until they finally discard all pretence of belief in Islam who are the ones whom God rejects. He leaves them deprived of guidance, '*deaf and blind.*' They have not lost their hearing or their eyesight, but they have put these faculties to no use. Alternatively, they have deliberately stopped themselves from understanding what they hear and see. Thus, their faculties no longer function.

A rhetorical question is then asked: "*Will they not, then, try to understand the Qur'ān?*" (Verse 24) When people try to understand the Qur'ān, they see things in full clarity. They see the light. Their hearts and feelings enjoy new vigour and their souls are full of life. "*Or are there locks on their hearts?*" (Verse 24) When hearts are thus locked they are deprived of the light the Qur'ān spreads; they are in complete darkness.

Evil Conspiracy

The *sūrah* then shows the reason that made the hypocrites turn away from faith after having come close to it. We learn that this was because they conspired with the Jews of Madīnah and promised them help and support:

> *Those who turn their backs after guidance has been given to them are seduced by Satan who fills them with false hopes. That is because*

they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters,' but God knows all their secret schemes. (Verses 25–26)

The first of these two verses gives a physical image ofthe hypocrites abandoning Divine guidance after they came to know it. It is an image which shows them turning their backs and going away. It tells of what lies behind all this: it is Satan whispering to them and delivering all manner of temptations. Thus we see their movement for what it is in reality and appearance. The *sūrah* then tells us why Satan has such power over them, making them turn their backs on the truth after they knew it: "*That is because they say to those who abhor all that God has revealed, 'We will obey you in some matters'.*" (Verse 26)

The Jews of Madīnah were the first to hate what God revealed. They expected that God's final message would be given to them, with the last messenger chosen from among their own kind. They used to tell the pagan Arabs about this expected message and that its time was close to hand, saying that the new prophet would lead them and ensure that they would have power and that they would regain their kingdom. God, however, chose His last messenger from a different branch of Abraham's seed. This made them hate his message all the more. When the Prophet migrated to Madīnah, they hated his arrival there because they felt it threatened their own position. Therefore, they were hostile towards him from his very first day in Madīnah. When they realized that they were no match for the Muslims in open warfare, they resorted to wicked scheming and conspiracies. They were joined in this by all those bearing a grudge against Islam and every hypocrite. This war between them and the Prophet continued, going to and fro, until the Prophet removed them from Madīnah and then ensured that the Arabian Peninsula would remain totally for Islam.

Those hypocrites who turned their backs on Divine guidance said to the Jews: "*We will obey you in some matters.*" Most probably this refers to their wicked schemes and conspiracies against Islam and the Prophet. "*But God knows all their secret schemes.*" (Verse 26) This is a comment that implies a stern warning. What harm can their schemes produce when they are all known to God and exposed to His might?

This is followed by an open threat, one that puts them in the hands of God's own troops as they approach the ends of their lives: "*How will they feel when the angels gather them in death, striking their faces and their backs?*" (Verse 27) Here, we have another image of the utter humiliation suffered by the hypocrites. They are at the point when they depart from this life. Weak and powerless, they are about to start their second life, but this commences with their faces and backs being smitten. This happens to them at the point of death, when they are in utter distress. They are indeed completely forsaken: "*That is because they follow what incurs God's anger, and hate what pleases Him. Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They brought themselves to this end. It is they who have been hypocrites, disobeying God and conspiring with His enemies and the enemies of His messenger. It is they who hated what pleases God and adopted what incurs His displeasure. "*Therefore, He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 28) They used to admire their own deeds, thinking themselves clever as they schemed against the believers. Now they see how these deeds swell and grow only to be lost and to come to nothing.

The Threat of Exposure

At the end of this passage, they are warned that God may decide to expose them to the Prophet and the Muslims. They will then be known to all for what they really are: hypocrites living among Muslims, pretending to belong to them but conspiring against them:

> *Do those who are sick at heart assume that God will never bring their malice to light? Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks; but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech. God knows all that you people do. Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.* (Verses 29–31)

The hypocrites thought that they were adept in hiding their reality, making the Muslims think they were like them, true believers. The

sūrah shows how naïve their thinking is and threatens them with an exposure that makes all their grudges known to the Muslims. God says to His messenger: "*Had We so willed, We could have pointed them out to you, and you would have recognized them by their marks.*" (Verse 30) This means that if God so wishes, He could point them out to the Prophet by name and position so he can recognize them from their features. This verse was revealed before God actually made some of them known to him by name. Nevertheless, the way they speak and their twisting of words and meanings, and the manner in which they address you tells you of their hypocrisy: "*but you will most certainly recognize them by the tone of their speech.*" (Verse 30) A comment is then added emphasizing God's knowledge of every deed and its motives: "*God knows all that you people do.*" (Verse 30) Nothing escapes His perfect knowledge.

Then follows God's promise to test the Muslim community as a whole so as to distinguish those who strive for His cause and remain steadfast through all difficulties. These people will then be known to all, with everything about them made clear. No confusion will persist, and the whole issue of hypocrisy and the hypocrites will be sorted out: "*Most certainly We shall put you to the proof to see who of you strive hard and remain firm; and We shall test the truth of your assertions.*" (Verse 31)

God is fully aware of everyone's true nature, as well as of their thoughts and inner feelings. He knows all this just as He knows what happens and what will happen. What need is there, then, for such a test? Who needs to know what the test will prove?

In His infinite wisdom, God deals with human beings on the basis of their nature, ability and potential. They do not know what He knows of inner facts. These must come into the open before they can know and understand them, and then make use of them. Testing people with what is good or bad, affluence and poverty, comfort and hardship certainly proves everyone's metal. Through such tests people may even come to know certain things about themselves of which they were otherwise unaware. As for God's knowledge of what the test reveals of people's nature, this refers only to His knowledge of their reality as it is exposed to people and they too are able to see it. It is when people

see this in a form they can comprehend that they are influenced by it. It shapes their feelings and charts the direction in which their lives move according to the means available to them. In this way God's purpose of testing people produces its results.

Nevertheless, believers always hope that they will not be put to God's tests and also hope that they will be spared such difficulties. Yet, should they be tested with hardship, they remain patient in adversity, aware that there is a good purpose behind this test. They submit to God's will, assured of His wisdom, and looking forward to His grace that follows the test. One devoted person, named al-Fuḍayl, was said to be in tears whenever he read this verse. He would appeal to God, saying: "My Lord, do not test us, because if You do, the truth about us will be known and the curtains we put up will be drawn apart. We will then be in trouble."



3

An Invitation to Sacrifice

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ
ٱللَّهِ وَشَآقُّوا۟ ٱلرَّسُولَ مِنۢ بَعْدِ مَا تَبَيَّنَ
لَهُمُ ٱلْهُدَىٰ لَن يَضُرُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ شَيْـًٔا
وَسَيُحْبِطُ أَعْمَٰلَهُمْ ﴿٣٢﴾

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing. (32)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟
ٱلرَّسُولَ وَلَا تُبْطِلُوٓا۟ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٣﴾

Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing. (33)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَصَدُّوا۟ عَن سَبِيلِ
ٱللَّهِ ثُمَّ مَاتُوا۟ وَهُمْ كُفَّارٌ فَلَن يَغْفِرَ ٱللَّهُ
لَهُمْ ﴿٣٤﴾

Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God. (34)

فَلَا تَهِنُوا۟ وَتَدْعُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلسَّلْمِ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْأَعْلَوْنَ
وَٱللَّهُ مَعَكُمْ وَلَن يَتِرَكُمْ أَعْمَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٥﴾

Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste. (35)

The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. (36)

إِنَّمَا الْحَيَوٰةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ ۚ وَإِن تُؤْمِنُوا وَتَتَّقُوا يُؤْتِكُمْ أُجُورَكُمْ وَلَا يَسْـَٔلْكُمْ أَمْوَٰلَكُمْ ﴿٣٦﴾

If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light. (37)

إِن يَسْـَٔلْكُمُوهَا فَيُحْفِكُمْ تَبْخَلُوا وَيُخْرِجْ أَضْغَٰنَكُمْ ﴿٣٧﴾

You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you. (38)

هَٰٓأَنتُمْ هَٰٓؤُلَآءِ تُدْعَوْنَ لِتُنفِقُوا فِى سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ۖ فَمِنكُم مَّن يَبْخَلُ ۖ وَمَن يَبْخَلْ فَإِنَّمَا يَبْخَلُ عَن نَّفْسِهِۦ ۚ وَاللَّهُ ٱلْغَنِىُّ وَأَنتُمُ ٱلْفُقَرَآءُ ۚ وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا يَسْتَبْدِلْ قَوْمًا غَيْرَكُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَكُونُوٓا أَمْثَٰلَكُم ﴿٣٨﴾

Overview

This last part of the *sūrah* speaks first about the unbelievers who debar others from God's way and are hostile to the Prophet despite being aware of the truth of his message. Most probably this refers to the idolaters the *sūrah* spoke about earlier. They are the ones who fit the description of bearing arrogant hostility towards the Islamic message. However, this new discourse may refer to all those who adopt such a hostile attitude including the Jews and the hypocrites in Madīnah. In this light, the present verses may be seen as a warning to them, should they adopt such an attitude, in public or private. The first possibility is perhaps more likely.

This part then devotes its final verses to an address to the believers, inviting them to carry on with their *jihād,* being ready to sacrifice their lives and their property, never slackening or giving in to calls for a truce in the fight against unbelieving aggressors. They must not be influenced by any consideration of their apparent weakness, or immediate interest. Nor can they be niggardly when they are asked for financial sacrifice. After all, God who knows man's natural instinct to hold tight to what he owns wants them to contribute only what they can easily afford. Should they fail to prove themselves worthy of advocating His message, God will deprive them of this honour and put in their place some other people who will shoulder the responsibility and fulfil the task. This is a strong warning that fits the general ambience of the *sūrah*. It also suggests that it was needed to deal with certain cases within the Muslim community, among true Muslims, not hypocrites. There could have been those who found it hard to make financial contributions side by side with those who gave great examples of courage, dedication and preparedness to sacrifice their all for the cause of Islam. Both types existed, and the Qur'ān aimed to motivate the lower group to rise and try to join the other in its sublime standards.

They Cannot Harm God

> *Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and take a hostile stand against the Prophet after they have seen the light of guidance, can in no way harm God; but He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.* (Verse 32)

This verse states a true promise by God in relation to those who disbelieve and oppose the truth, trying to prevent it from being delivered to people, using their power, money and other means for the purpose. Such people are hostile to the Prophet, waging war against him and physically opposing him during his lifetime or suppressing his faith and code of life and persecuting the advocates of his message after his death. Yet such people have seen the light of guidance and recognized the truth embodied in the Islamic message, but they

stubbornly choose to remain blind to it and feel that their immediate interests are served by such an attitude.

God's true promise is that such people "*can in no way harm God.*" They are far too small and weak to be mentioned in the context of adversely affecting God. This is certainly not what is intended here. What the verse means is that they cannot harm God's faith, the code He laid down for human life, or those who advocate His message. Powerful as such people may become, they cannot affect or disturb the laws of nature He has set in operation. They may be able to harm some of the Muslims for a period of time, but this is merely a test that takes place for a purpose God wants to be fulfilled. It constitutes no real harm to God's laws or to His servants who advocate His faith and system. Moreover, the ultimate result of all the efforts of such hostile unbelievers is clearly set in advance: "*He will surely make all their deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 32)

At the same time, the believers are warned against doing anything that could lead them to a similar fate. They are urged to remain obedient to God and His messenger: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*" (Verse 33) This directive suggests that within the Muslim community there were some who might not have been fully obedient, or who might have found it hard to fulfil some of the duties and sacrifices that combating the different powerful groups opposing Islam required. Some might have been tied by bonds of kinship or common interests with others on the opposing side and found it hard to sever such ties.

This directive had a profound effect on true believers. They were shaken by the implied threat that they might do something that would do away with their good deeds and bring them to nothing. Several reports speak of the way this verse was received. One of them mentions that "the Prophet's Companions used to think that when a person truly believed in God's oneness, then no sin he committed would harm him, in the same way as no good deed is of any use when done by a person who associates partners with God. However, when this verse was revealed, they feared that sins might ruin their good deeds: "*Believers, obey God and obey the messenger, and do not let your deeds come to nothing.*"

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar is quoted as saying: "We, the Prophet's Companions, used to think that every good deed would inevitably be accepted by God until this verse was revealed. We wondered what thing could render our deeds worthless. We thought that it must be cardinal and grave sins. However, God revealed this verse: "*For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills.*" (4: 116) We stopped speaking about this issue. We only feared for those who committed cardinal sins and hoped for good reward for those who avoided them."

Such reports clearly show how true Muslims used to receive Qur'ānic verses. They were profoundly affected by them, fearing every warning, careful lest it applied to them and keen to do what the Qur'ān required of them. With such sensitivity, they achieved superb standards.

The next verse explains what fate awaits those who are hostile to the Prophet. These are they who are determined not to obey him and who continue in their rejection of the truth until death overtakes them: "*Those who disbelieve and debar others from the path of God, and in the end die unbelievers shall not be granted forgiveness by God.*" (Verse 34) The chance to ensure forgiveness of sins is available only in this present life. The gates of repentance, which ensure forgiveness, are open for both unbelievers and sinners up to the moment of death. When the spirit is at the point of departing the body, then the chance to repent and earn forgiveness is lost and can never be regained.

Verses like this one address both believers and unbelievers. It warns the latter to take the right action before it is too late, to repent and turn back to God before the chance is lost and doors are closed. It tells the former to take care so as to avoid all causes that bring them nearer to such ill-fated ways. This is clearly understood from the fact that what the believers are cautioned against in the next verse are seen as reasons leading to the same fate of the unbelievers mentioned in the preceding verse:

> *Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.* (Verse 35)

Such are the things believers are cautioned against. They are presented with the fate of the unbelievers who are hostile to the Prophet, so that they take care not to do anything that brings them nearer to such an outcome. This warning suggests that there might have been some individuals among the Muslims who felt the burden and strain of *jihād* to be too heavy. They might have weakened and advocated making some sort of a peace deal in order to avoid fighting. Some of them might have looked to their relatives in the ranks of the unbelievers, or had some financial interests with them. All such reasons may make a person prefer peaceful arrangements. Human beings are always the same and Islam deals with such weaknesses and natural tendencies in its own way, which has proven to be remarkably successful. This, however, does not preclude that there remained, particularly in that early period in Madīnah, some traces of such tendencies and weaknesses.

The present verse aims to deal with such elements. Let us look carefully at how the Qur'ān progresses with its method of educating people and raising them to its standards: "*Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 35) You are the ones who are superior in faith and concept of life, because of your close link with the One who is the Most High. You have higher standards in your way of life, goals, objectives, feelings, morality, manners and behaviour. Therefore, you must not lose heart or sue for peace because you have the upper hand in strength, position and support. The Supreme Power grants you support: "*God is with you.*" You are not alone. God Almighty, with all His power, defends you and gives you help. How insignificant do your enemies appear when God is the One who helps you? Moreover, every effort you exert, everything you spend and every sacrifice you make is credited to you. Nothing is lost: "*He will never let your deeds go to waste.*" The reward for every iota of good work you do will certainly be yours. Why would anyone assured by God to have the upper hand, to be supported by Him and to have every effort rewarded lose heart? Why would he weaken when God tells him that he is honoured, victorious and rewarded?

The life of this world is of little importance. Believers may have to make some sacrifices during their lives on earth, but they will have

their reward in full in the life to come. Moreover, they are not asked to pay heavily in order to ensure such rewards:

> *The life of this world is but play and amusement, but if you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward. He does not ask you to give up all your possessions.* (Verse 36)

When life has no noble goal to achieve, and when people go through it heedless of the Divine code, it is no more than play and amusement. It is the code laid down by God that makes this life a prelude to a better and longer lasting life, makes of this life a period of action that yields its results in the life to come. Success in the life to come is, therefore, conditional upon good works in this present life. This is the message emphasized in the second sentence in the verse: "*If you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward.*" (Verse 36) Belief in God during this life and action based on fearing Him are the qualities that gives this present life an air of seriousness elevating it from being a time of play, amusement and material enjoyment to a standard fulfilling the assignment God has given man and for which He has provided proper and complete guidance. When man attends to his assignment in this way, he is a God-fearing believer. What he spends of worldly possessions to serve this cause will not be lost to him. In fact, it produces a far greater reward in the everlasting second life.

Even then, God does not require people to sacrifice all their property. He knows that by nature, man is tight-fisted with what he owns. He does not require him to do what is too hard for him. In fact, He does not charge anyone with more than what that person can reasonably attend to. He is too kind to ask people to sacrifice all they possess. If He were to ask them this, they would be troubled and their ill feelings would become apparent.

> *He does not ask you to give up all your possessions. If He were to ask you all and press you hard, you would grow tight-fisted, and He would bring your malice to light.* (Verses 36–37)

We see here how kind God is to man and how, in His infinite wisdom, He only requires people to do what they can, taking human

nature, with all its facets, into consideration. Islam is a Divine faith which aims to establish a human system on a Divine basis. It is God who lays down its foundation and fundamental principles, but it is human abilities and needs that should be considered in determining its responsibilities. It is God who created man and He knows best what He has created. He is the One who knows all.

Niggardly Man

The final step in this approach deals with the believers' prevailing conditions when they are called upon to make financial sacrifices for God's cause. Their niggardly attitude is dealt with in the same way that the Qur'ān dealt with the reluctance to make personal sacrifices when people are called upon to fight for His cause:

> *You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.* (Verse 38)

This verse provides an accurate description of the Muslim community at the time and how people in all communities react when they are called upon to make sacrifices. It says that some people will be niggardly. This means that others are not niggardly at all; they are prepared to sacrifice everything they have. This was certainly true as is authentically reported by several of the Prophet's Companions. In fact, the Qur'ān describes several such instances in different *sūrahs*. In this respect, Islam produced miraculous examples of people coming forward, with apparent joy, and making really exemplary sacrifices. However, this does not mean that there were not individuals who found it hard to make sacrifices. Indeed, some people may find it easier to put their lives at risk than to make financial sacrifices.

The present verse deals with this natural tendency: "*Whoever is niggardly is niggardly towards himself.*" Whatever contribution people

make is credited to them, and they need it on the Day when they are resurrected. Then, they will have nothing of whatever they owned in this life. All that is left for them is what is credited to their account. Therefore, when they are niggardly, they keep their balance low, depriving themselves of the great reward that financial sacrifice for God's cause surely earns. Thus, they are niggardly towards themselves.

This is absolutely true. God does not require them to make financial contributions for any reason other than the fact that He wants what is best for them. He benefits nothing by anything they spend on His cause. He is not in need of anything: "*God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need.*" (Verse 38) It is He who gave you your money and possessions. He is also the One who saves for you whatever contributions you make. He does not need what He has given you in this life or the reward credited to you in the life to come. You are the ones who are in need of Him in both situations. You have nothing unless He grants it to you. Indeed, you will need all the reward He grants you in the hereafter. You cannot pay back to Him anything of what He has bestowed on you in this life, let alone have anything left in the hereafter. It is all given to you out of His grace. How can you be so niggardly?

The last word is decisive. That God has chosen you to be the advocates of His message is an honour and a great favour He bestows on you. You have to prove yourselves worthy of this honour. Unless you so prove yourselves by fulfilling the trust assigned to you, appreciating its value by discarding anything that is contrary to it, God will take back what He has favoured you with, granting this honour to some other people: "*If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you.*" (Verse 38)

Anyone who has experienced the great favour of faith, feeling the honour it represents and appreciating the great position he has in the universe as a result of being entrusted with this Divine mission recognizes this last statement in the *sūrah* as a very serious warning. As he walks on earth, such a person feels God's power and experiences His light filling his soul. He bears the emblem of faith. Should such a believer be deprived of true faith, be expelled from Divine care, and find God's door slammed in his face, he will not bear to live. Indeed, life would

become like hell for anyone who has experienced contact with his Lord and then been cut off.

Faith is a great favour and honour, unequalled by anything in the universe. Life becomes so cheap and money so trivial when faith is put on the scales against anything else. Therefore, the warning this last statement in the *sūrah* embodies is the most serious one a believer can receive from God Almighty.

