SŪRAH 48

Al-Fatḥ

(Victory)

Prologue

This *sūrah* belongs to the Madīnan period, revealed as it was shortly after the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah in year 6 of the Islamic calendar. It comments on the events leading to the momentous signing of this treaty as also describes the situation in which the Muslim community found itself at that time. Between the revelation of this *sūrah* and *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which precedes it in the Qur'ānic order, there was a lapse of three years which witnessed developments that had far-reaching effects on the life of the Muslim community in Madīnah. These involved changes in the attitudes of both the Muslim community and its opponents, and even greater changes in the Muslim community's psychological and mental framework. In this respect, it became far more mature in its understanding and implementing of faith.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* and its message, however, we need to review the major event that was the signing of the peace treaty so as to understand the circumstances then prevailing as the Muslim community received this new revelation.

The Prophet saw himself in a dream entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah together with his Companions, some of them having shaven their heads and some with their hair cut short. The unbelievers in Makkah had prevented them entry into Makkah since their migration

to Madīnah. They did not even allow them entry during the four sacred months that all Arabs honoured in the pre-Islamic period, laying down their arms and regarding fighting during these times as a great enormity. Entry into Makkah during these four months was free for all, in perfect safety. Even people involved in vengeance killings would meet in peace at this time. A man would come across the killer of his father or brother without raising a finger against him, or trying to prevent his entry into the Sacred Mosque. Nevertheless, the idolaters in Makkah violated their well-established traditions, preventing the Prophet and the Muslims from entering Makkah throughout the six years that followed their migration to Madīnah. In year 6, the Prophet had this dream and reported it to his Companions who were delighted with it, realizing that a dream by a prophet would certainly come true.

For further information about these events we will mainly rely on the report given by Ibn Hishām as this is more detailed than most and also provides a fuller picture. It is also generally in agreement with reports in the two *Ḥadīth* anthologies of Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Aḥmad, as well as the summary given by Ibn Ḥazm in his book *Jawāmi' al-Sīrah*, and with reports by other scholars.[1]

> The Prophet announced to his Companions and to the Arabian tribes around Madīnah that he intended to visit Makkah to honour the Ka'bah and to worship there. He invited them all to join him. Most of the Arabian tribes which had not yet accepted Islam were highly reluctant to join this peaceful expedition because they feared that the Quraysh were bound to resist the Muslims and prevent them from entering Makkah. If the Quraysh were determined to stop the Muslims, an armed conflict might erupt. Hence, those Arabian tribes wanted to stay out of it. The Muslims, however, were very glad to join the Prophet, who marched at the head of some 1,400 of his followers.[2]

1. I am quoting here my own version of the events. It is faithful to the report by Ibn Hishām, omitting only a few details that a reader who is unfamiliar with historical Arabic reports written more than 1,000 years ago would find difficult, and adding a few explanatory sentences. I do not, however, divert from the narrative as given by the author. – Editor's note.

2. Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, p. 497.

The Prophet, however, marched on until he arrived at a place called Ghadīr al-Ashṭāṭ where Bishr ibn Sufyān gave him his report that the Quraysh were mobilizing and seeking the help of others to fight him and prevent him from entering Makkah.[3]

The Prophet was distressed at this report. He said: "How ill-advised is the Quraysh! What would they lose if they were to leave me alone addressing my message to the rest of Arabia? If those Arabs were to kill me, the Quraysh would have what they wish. If I am to be the victorious, they must either accept Islam without having suffered any losses, or fight me with their forces intact. What do they think? By God, I will continue to strive for the message God has given me until it is triumphant or I die."

Reflecting on the new situation after he had learnt that the Quraysh were preparing for armed conflict, the Prophet decided to try to avoid such an eventuality. Hence, he asked whether anyone in his camp was able to lead them through a route which took them away from the Quraysh, so that they could avoid an armed conflict with their advance force. A man from the tribe of Aslam came forward and led them through a very rough route which was very hard for the Muslims. Eventually, they found themselves in an open area which was easy to cross. The Prophet commanded them to take the right-hand route until they finally arrived at the plain of al-Ḥudaybiyah, to the south of Makkah, which was only a day's walk from the Holy City.

A Declaration of Peace

Suddenly, the Prophet's she-camel sat down. People shouted at her to make her rise again, but she would not move. Some people suggested that she refused to go forward. The Prophet told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. He said: "She is held back for the same reason which held back the elephant." This was a reference to an incident which took place nearly 60 years earlier

3. Ibid., p. 499.

when Abrahah, the ruler of the Yemen, was riding an elephant at the head of a large force, whose aim was to destroy the Ka'bah. Shortly before arriving in Makkah, the elephant sat still and would not move forward; it was ready to go back. Shortly afterwards, Abrahah's army was attacked by birds which threw stones at the army and destroyed it. The story is mentioned in a short *sūrah* of the Qur'ān entitled, The Elephant, and which may be translated as follows: "*In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Are you not aware how your Lord dealt with people of the Elephant? Did He not utterly confound their treacherous plan, and send against them flocks of birds, which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves.*" (105: 1–5)

The Prophet then declared: "By Him Who holds my soul in His hand, I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today which helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." He then ordered his Companions to encamp.

The place was almost dry, with only one well with very little water. The Companions of the Prophet economized on water as much as they could, but the well soon dried up. When they were very thirsty, they complained to the Prophet. He came to the well, sat next to it and asked for a pail to be brought to him with whatever quantity of water they could find. He took some water in his hand, rinsed his mouth and prayed to God. He then asked his Companions to pour the water back into the well and told them to leave the well for a while. Some reports also suggest that the Prophet took an arrow from his bag and asked his Companions to throw it into the well. Soon the well was full of water and provided all the water the Muslims needed to drink, perform ablutions and give to their camels and other animals. They suffered no shortage of water until they departed.

Successive Emissaries

When the Quraysh realized that the Prophet had managed to evade their advance forces and that he was encamped at al-Ḥudaybiyah,

they decided to send a messenger to him. They were also aware that should they succeed in stopping Muḥammad from entering Makkah, when he had come with no purpose other than to visit the Sacred Mosque, their action would not go unquestioned by the other Arabs. Their prestige was derived from the fact that they were custodians of the Sacred House and that they prevented no one from worshipping there. The first emissary they sent was Budayl ibn Waraqā' of the tribe of Khuzā'ah, who went with a group of his fellow tribesmen. The tribe of Khuzā'ah was always sympathetic towards the Prophet. Some of its men had embraced Islam, but even those who had not were far from hostile to the message of Islam. Budayl spoke to the Prophet and told him that the Quraysh were determined to prevent him from entering Makkah. The Prophet assured him that he had no intention of fighting anyone. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah and to demonstrate the Muslims' recognition of its sanctity. The Prophet's comment on the Quraysh's attitude was given in these words: "The Quraysh are now in such a state that they can think only of war. I am prepared to agree a truce with them, if they so desire. I ask them only to leave me alone to speak to people. If I am successful and other people follow me, then the choice is theirs to do likewise. If they refuse, they will have preserved their strength. If they are determined to stop me, I swear by God that I will fight them over this cause of mine until I die, and even then they cannot prevent what God wills."

Budayl went back to the Quraysh and said to them: "We have come to you after seeing this man and hearing what he says. Would you like to hear what he told us?" Some of them shouted: "We do not wish to hear anything he says." Some wiser people requested him to report what he had heard. When he finished his report, he pleaded with them, saying that they were rash in their attitude because Muḥammad did not intend to fight them. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah.

The Quraysh leaders were not persuaded to moderate their attitude. They said: "Even if he does not want to fight, he will never be allowed to enter Makkah against our will. No one shall say that we allowed that to happen."

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafs to speak to the Prophet, and he came back with the same message as Budayl. The third envoy the Quraysh sent was al-Ḥulays ibn ʿAlqamah, the leader of the Ḥabshī tribe. When the Prophet saw him coming from a distance, he said to his Companions: "This is a man who belongs to a religious community. Drive the sacrificial animals towards him so that he may see them." When al-Ḥulays saw the sacrificial animals, he returned to the Quraysh without speaking to the Prophet, because he realized that there should have been no cause for contention. He advised the Quraysh to leave Muḥammad alone and allow him to worship at the Kaʿbah. They spoke harshly to him and told him to leave them alone. Al-Ḥulays was angered by the Quraysh's attitude, but they were not to be persuaded by any argument.

The Fourth Envoy

Having rejected the advice of all three envoys to allow Muḥammad to enter Makkah and worship at the Kaʿbah, the Quraysh decided to send a fourth emissary. None of the existing reports throws any light on the reasons which made the Quraysh feel that sending another envoy to speak to the Prophet would bring about any change in the situation. It is not known what the Quraysh hoped to achieve by sending these envoys when it was not prepared to listen to their advice. Perhaps it was all a mark of the Quraysh's confusion. On the other hand, it may have been an exercise in self-justification. The Quraysh might have wanted to be able to say that they tried all they could to reach accommodation with Muḥammad. Be that as it may, the man the Quraysh chose this time was ʿUrwah ibn Masʿūd, a leader of the tribe of Thaqīf, which lived in the town of Ṭā'if. ʿUrwah, however, wanted first to make sure that on his return he would not receive the same harsh treatment as the other envoys the Quraysh sent, should he come back with advice the Quraysh might not like. He, therefore, addressed the people of the Quraysh: "I have noted what sort of abuse you have poured on the heads of those you have sent to Muḥammad. You know that to me you are

parents and that I am your son. When I heard of your trouble, I gathered those of my people who obeyed my orders and have come to give you support." The Quraysh answered: "This is certainly true, and we have no doubts about you." When he sat down to speak to the Prophet, he said:

> Muḥammad, I have left your people mobilizing their forces. They are swearing that they will never let you reach the Sacred House until you have overwhelmed them. Should there be a fight between you and them, you are faced with one of two eventualities: either you conquer your own people – and we have never heard of any man who has conquered his own people or your soldiers will let you down. Have you gathered this mob to smash your own people? It is the Quraysh you are fighting, and the Quraysh have mobilized even their women and children, and are now in a very determined mood, pledging to God that you will never enter their city. My feeling is that you will be in a very difficult situation tomorrow, when this mob let you down. I certainly recognize no one among them and cannot see that any one of them comes from a respectable background.

At this moment Abū Bakr interrupted him and told him to be more respectful.

As he talked to the Prophet, ʿUrwah kept trying to hold the Prophet's beard, following the Arabian habit which indicated a sincere desire to maintain good relations. Al-Mughīrah ibn Shuʿbah, a Muslim nephew of ʿUrwah, was standing behind the Prophet, holding his sword in his hand and wearing his shield. Every time ʿUrwah raised his hand to touch the Prophet's beard, al-Mughīrah hit him with the bottom of his sword on his hand and said: "Keep your hand off the Prophet's face before it is chopped off." ʿUrwah did not recognize him, but when he persisted, ʿUrwah said: "Confound you – how ill-mannered you are." The Prophet smiled at this demonstration of his Companion's love and respect for him.

'Urwah tried his best to weaken the Prophet's determination to enter Makkah, raising before him the prospect of defeat and counselling him against causing a military conflict. The Prophet assured him that he wanted nothing more than to pay a visit to the Ka'bah in the same way as anyone else could visit it to worship, and was not prevented from so doing. After all, the Ka'bah did not belong to the Quraysh; they were only its custodians and as such they had no right to prevent anyone from worshipping there.

'Urwah did not fail to notice the Muslims' respect for the Prophet. When he went back to the Quraysh he advised them:

> People of the Quraysh, I have seen the Khosroe, the Persian Emperor, and the Caesar of the Byzantine Empire and Negus of Abyssinia, in their respective kingdoms. I swear that I have never seen a king enjoying among his people a similar position to that of Muḥammad among his Companions. They do not fix their eyes when they look at him; they do not raise their voices when they speak to him. He does not need to give more than a signal to any one of them for that man to do what he is bid. I have looked at those people and I have seen that they do not care what may happen to them if they are able to protect their master. Make up your minds. He has made a proposal to you and I counsel you to conclude a peace agreement with him, and to accept his offer. I am giving you my sincere advice and I certainly fear that you will not be able to overcome him.

The Quraysh, however did not like 'Urwah's opinion and were not willing to consider the idea of peace. 'Urwah, therefore, left them with his people and returned to Ṭā'if.

Thus, every envoy the Quraysh sent returned and counselled them to moderate their attitude and allow the Muslims to offer their worship at the Ka'bah. None, however, was able to persuade the Quraysh that its hard-line did not serve its own interest. Motivated by pride and anger, the Quraysh was determined not to give in, whatever the cost.

The Muslims, on the other hand, did not wish to overrun Makkah. That course would result in more bloodshed and a fight against their own people. They stayed calm, hoping that some solution to the problem could still be found.

One report suggests that the Quraysh sent a small force of 40 or 50 men, giving them orders to go around the Muslims' camp and try to take one of the Prophet's Companions prisoner. As it turned out, they were taken prisoner themselves and were brought before the Prophet. He, however, pardoned them and set them free. God mentions in the Qur'ān that He has bestowed calmness on His Messenger and the believers and caused them to abide by the rules of faith and piety. That is the attitude which best becomes them.

The Prophet's Envoy

Considering the situation and the fact that he had received four emissaries from the Quraysh without any sign that the Quraysh were mellowing their opposition to the Muslims' entry to Makkah, the Prophet thought it might be useful to bring some pressure to bear on the Quraysh. He therefore decided to send them an envoy to assure them that his objective was only to worship at the Ka'bah, not to pick a fight with anyone. The envoy was Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah of the tribe of Khuza'ah. As soon as Kharrāsh arrived in Makkah, however, his camel was wounded by the Quraysh people, who also wanted to kill him. He was saved by the Ḥabshī tribe, whose chief al-Ḥulays was one of the Quraysh's envoys to the Prophet. The treatment Kharrāsh received was against the age-honoured traditions of diplomacy, which gave immunity to messengers and envoys. The Prophet, however, did not wish to allow this incident to be an obstacle in his attempt to reach a peaceful solution to the problem. He therefore overlooked the matter and concentrated on maintaining contact with the Quraysh. He thought that sending a more prominent figure from among his Companions might be more useful.

The Prophet first thought of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb as a suitable messenger. 'Umar, however, pointed out that his own clan, Banī

'Adīy, no longer had any influence in Makkah. No one would protect him should he come to any harm. He suggested that 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān of the Umayyad branch of the Quraysh was better placed to act as the Prophet's ambassador.

Despite the fact that 'Uthmān's clan was very influential in Makkah, he had to go under the protection of his own cousin, Abān ibn Sa'īd ibn al-'Āṣ. Enjoying that protection, he was able to deliver his message, speak to the Quraysh elders and explain to them that the Muslims had come for the purpose of worship only and had no other intention. It was better for the Quraysh, 'Uthmān argued, that they should be seen by the Arabs as faithful to their charge as custodians of the Sacred House. The Quraysh, however, were adamant in their hard-line attitude. The only concession 'Uthmān could get from the Quraysh was that they allowed him to do the *ṭawāf* should he so desire. He made it clear to them that under the circumstances, he would not do so until the Prophet had done his own *ṭawāf*.

'Uthmān's discussions with the Quraysh leaders were prolonged and he was in Makkah for three days. Moreover, he was apparently able to contact some people from among the Quraysh who had adopted Islam and remained in Makkah, keeping the fact of their conversion to Islam a secret. Apparently there were quite a few of these people, who yearned for the day when they would be able to declare their stand and enjoy freedom of faith. 'Uthmān carried a message from the Prophet to them telling them that victory would be coming soon. They were greatly encouraged by that message and requested 'Uthmān to give the Prophet their respects and to tell him, on their behalf, that they believed that God, Who had enabled him to encamp at al-Ḥudaybiyah, was able to open the gates of Makkah for him.

Some reports suggest that 'Uthmān was arrested by the Quraysh when it discovered that he had made these contacts with the Qurayshi Muslims. Indeed, a rumour began to spread that 'Uthmān was killed. It did not take long before this rumour was heard in the Muslim camp. 'Uthmān's prolonged absence could only lend credence to that rumour. Receiving no indication to the contrary,

the Prophet concluded that the report of 'Uthmān's death was correct. The treatment which was meted out to his first envoy, Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah, served as supporting evidence. He felt that the situation had reached a stage where tolerance could only be counter-productive.

A Pledge to Fight and Die

Deeply hurt and very sad, the Prophet felt that by killing 'Uthmān, his Companion and envoy, the Quraysh had closed the door on all efforts which aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement. The other alternative was the one which he had tried hard to avoid: namely, war. He called on his Companions to give him a pledge to fight the Quraysh to the bitter end. He was standing underneath a tree when he requested that pledge, and his Companions rushed to give him what he asked of them. Every one of them pledged that he would fight and never flee from battle even if that meant his own death. The Prophet was pleased with his Companions' responses. He also made a pledge on behalf of 'Uthmān: "'Uthmān is on a mission given him by God and His Messenger. I, therefore, make a pledge on his behalf." He clasped his hands together and said: "This is for 'Uthmān." In comment on this pledge, the Qur'ān says: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise.*" (48: 18–19)

That pledge is known in Islamic history books as Bay'at al-Riḍwān, or 'the pledge earning God's pleasure', in view of the clear statement that God was pleased with those who took part in it. Indeed, the pledge warmed the Prophet's heart, since it was yet another demonstration that his Companions were always prepared to render whatever sacrifice they were called upon to make in defence of the cause of Islam. Those Companions of the Prophet realized that numerically the Quraysh were far superior to them. Besides, when they started their journey, they did not bring their

war equipment with them. War was completely absent from their minds. None of them wore body armour or carried it with him. They carried only the minimum armament which was absolutely necessary for travelling in the desert of Arabia: their swords in their sheaths. Their pledge meant, in effect, that they were determined to face the far superior strength of the Quraysh, on the Quraysh's own ground with swords only, leaving no room for withdrawal or escape. They were fully aware of what they had pledged to do. When they were subsequently asked about the terms of their pledge and what it entailed, their answer was: 'Death'. Such a pledge, readily given and sincerely meant, would definitely earn God's pleasure, as those people had definitely earned it. Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh, a Companion of the Prophet who took part in that pledge, said: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) told us on the day of al-Ḥudaybiyah: You are the best people on earth."

We should stress here a small but significant point about that tree beneath which the pledge was given. The tree was subsequently cut down and the place where it used to stand was forgotten. This is certainly good for Islam. Had it survived, people who are quick to give exaggerated significance to places and to things associated with historical events might have raised a monument in its place or built a mosque or some other building on that site and made it a shrine to visit. Islam does not recognize the sanctity of any such place or object. Had it been allowed to survive, the tree might have acquired, with the passage of time, more significance than the event which took place beneath it. The tree, however, is immaterial, while the pledge itself remains a lesson for every Muslim.

Shortly after the pledge was made, 'Uthmān arrived to give the Prophet an account of his mission. His arrival took the heat off the situation. The Prophet was very pleased to see him alive but was not happy to learn of the Quraysh's adamant attitude. He reflected on the situation, trying to assess the choices open to him.

The Quraysh, on the other hand, heard of the pledge given by the Muslims to the Prophet. Their chiefs were engaged in high level consultations. They realized that the Muslims' pledge meant that their determination to achieve their purpose was not

in doubt. Past experience suggested that should the two sides be engaged in a military conflict, the outcome might very well be a victory for the Muslims, despite their relatively small numbers and poor equipment. That the Muslims could always be relied upon to fight hard and well and not to weaken in the face of adversity was something not to be doubted. Now that they had given the Prophet such a clear commitment to fight to the bitter end, the Muslims would not just go away. Moreover, the Quraysh might not have been fully convinced that they acted within their rights when they tried to prevent the Muslims from worshipping at the Ka'bah. Their motives were nothing more than pride of position and conceit. Hence, the Quraysh realized that they must think seriously of the consequences, especially if the military conflict went against them.

A Delegation for Peace

Some wiser men among the Quraysh must have suggested that achieving a peaceful settlement might preserve the Quraysh's dignity better than war, even if the war ended in its favour. The views of its earlier envoys – particularly those of al-Ḥulays of the Ḥabshī tribe and 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd of the Thaqīf – began to appear highly valid. Moreover, should the Quraysh push matters to the point of flare-up, their action might mean a fight near the Sacred House and in the sacred month. This would, in effect, be setting a precedent which was certain to do more harm than good to the Quraysh. Hence the arguments for moderation suddenly began to appear much weightier. A delegation headed by Suhayl ibn 'Amr was, therefore, dispatched to negotiate the terms of a peace settlement with the Prophet.

The Prophet received Suhayl ibn 'Amr and his delegation well. He instructed his Companions to show their sacrificial animals and to raise their voices with phrases expressing the fact that they had come only in response to God's call to honour the Sacred House.

The talks between the two sides were not easy. Despite the fact that the Prophet was keen to achieve a peace settlement, the

negotiations had to deal with several issues of substance. The topics included: the Prophet's visit to the Sacred House; the Quraysh's determination not to seem to have given in to force; the possibility of agreeing a long term truce between the two sides, putting an end to their frequent military clashes; the sort of relations which should exist between the two sides; and the freedom of each side to make political moves on the wider horizon of the whole of Arabia.

There was, however, no reason to prolong the discussions. The Prophet accepted all the Quraysh's conditions readily. It was Suhayl ibn 'Amr who took a long time in his presentation of each of those conditions and what each of them entailed. Indeed, the Quraysh side were surprised that all their conditions were accepted by the Prophet without too much trouble. It was necessary, however, to write the agreement down and to have it signed by representatives of both sides.

Unease in the Muslim Camp

The Prophet's attitude caused a stir in the Muslim camp. They were not used to seeing the Prophet taking such a very soft attitude. It was also surprising for the Quraysh negotiators themselves. Not only did the Prophet accept all the terms the Quraysh stipulated, he did not consult his Companions in the matter, contrary to his normal practice. Moreover, the terms of the peace agreement were extremely surprising to the Muslims, because they tended to cast the Muslim side as much weaker than the Quraysh. To the Muslims, accepting such terms was neither useful nor necessary. Some of them could not hide their dissatisfaction. This is epitomized by the attitude of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. When the terms of the peace agreement were finalized and were about to be written down, 'Umar came to Abū Bakr and said: "Abū Bakr, is he not God's Messenger?" Abū Bakr answered in the affirmative. 'Umar again asked: "Are we not the Muslims?" When Abū Bakr gave the same answer, 'Umar went on: "Are they not the idolaters?" Abū Bakr again answered: "Yes." 'Umar then asked him: "Why then should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" Abū Bakr

answered with a piece of advice, saying to his questioner: "Follow him whatever he does, 'Umar. I believe that he is God's Messenger." But 'Umar was still perturbed and said: "And I too believe that he is God's Messenger."

'Umar's argument was that since what separated the two sides was really a single issue – right against wrong, faith against lack of faith – those who were on the side of right and truth must not give in to those who championed the cause of wrong and falsehood. The believers must never accept any sort of humiliation when it came to matters relating to faith. Indeed, they should always show pride in their religion. Hence, 'Umar was not to be deterred. He went to the Prophet and put to him the same questions: "Are you not God's Messenger? Are we not the Muslims? Are they not the idolaters?" To all these questions, the Prophet answered in the affirmative. The final question 'Umar put was again the same: "Why, then, should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?"

The Prophet's answer provided the clue to his attitude: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." The Prophet was indeed following Divine orders which he must have received at that time.

The Prophet then called in 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to write down the peace agreement so that it might be signed by both sides. Again, Suhayl ibn 'Amr showed maximum rigidity, while the Prophet showed complete flexibility.

The Prophet told 'Alī to write: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent." Suhayl interrupted: "I do not know this. Write down: 'In your name, Our Lord'." The Prophet told 'Alī to write the phrase Suhayl proposed. He continued with his dictation: "These are the terms of the peace agreement negotiated between Muḥammad, God's Messenger, and Suhayl ibn 'Amr." Again, Suhayl interrupted: "Had I accepted that you are God's Messenger, I would not have fought you. You have to write down your name and your father's name." The Prophet accepted Suhayl's point and revised his dictation, telling 'Alī to write:

These are the terms of the peace agreed by Muḥammad ibn 'Abdullāh and Suhayl ibn 'Amr.

- Both have agreed to a complete truce for a period of ten years, during which all people will enjoy peace and security and will not attack one another.
- Moreover, if anyone from the Quraysh joins Muḥammad without permission from his guardian or chief, he shall be returned to the Quraysh.
- If anyone from those in the camp of Muḥammad joins the Quraysh, they are not required to return him.
- Both sides agree that they harbour good intentions towards each other.
- No theft or treachery shall be condoned.
- Whoever wishes to enter into an alliance with Muḥammad may do so, and whoever wants to enter into an alliance with the Quraysh may do so.
- It is further agreed that you, Muḥammad, shall return home this year without entering Makkah. At the end of one year, we shall evacuate Makkah for you so that you may enter it with your followers to stay for three days only. You shall carry only the armament necessary for a traveller – namely, your swords in their sheaths. You shall not carry any other arms.

A Hard Test of Muslim Intentions

These were the terms of the peace agreement. When they were written down, witnesses from both sides were asked to sign the document. At that moment, something happened to test the patience of the believers and to give them another opportunity to prove the strength of their faith. A man from Makkah arrived in handcuffs and with his legs in chains. He was being kept prisoner there because he was a Muslim. This man was none other than Suhayl's own son, Abū Jandal. It was his father who imprisoned

him and fastened his shackles. Nevertheless, he had been able to escape and to take an unfamiliar route through the mountains surrounding Makkah until he arrived at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When the Muslims saw him, they were very glad that he had escaped and gave him a fine reception.

While the peace agreement was being written down, Suhayl was too busy to notice anything. When it was finished, Suhayl looked up and saw his son among the Muslims. He went up to him, hit him in the face and took him by the collar. Abū Jandal cried aloud: "My fellow Muslims, am I to be returned to the unbelievers to try to turn me away from my faith?" Those words were very painful to the Muslims, some of whom started to cry.

Suhayl ibn 'Amr, however, was unmoved. He said to God's Messenger: "This is the first person whose case I take up. You must return him to me." The Prophet referred to the fact that Abū Jandal arrived before the agreement was completed: "We have not finished drawing up the document yet." Suhayl said: "Then I have not agreed any terms with you whatsoever." The Prophet pleaded: "Then allow me him."

Suhayl said that he would not. Mikraz, another member of the Quraysh delegation, said that they should allow Muḥammad to have Abū Jandal. The father was adamant and refused all appeals to let his son join the Muslims. He went even further and began to hit his son with a thorny branch of a tree. The Prophet again pleaded with him to let his son go, or at least not to torture him. But Suhayl would accept nothing. Some of Suhayl's friends, however, extended their protection to Abū Jandal and his father stopped hitting him. The Prophet explained to Abū Jandal his inability to help him, speaking to him in a loud voice so that he could hear: "Abū Jandal, be patient and endure your situation for God's sake. He will certainly provide for you and those who are suffering with you a way out of your hardship. We have made a peace agreement with those people, giving them a pledge by God that we will be faithful to the terms of our agreement. We shall not violate our pledges."

Kill Your Father

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was again outraged by the situation. He could not understand why the Muslims should accept such humiliating terms or stand idle when a brother of theirs was subjected to harsh treatment for no reason other than the fact that he believed in God and His Messenger. As Abū Jandal was being led away, 'Umar went up to him and walked by his side. He spoke to him: "Be patient, Abū Jandal. These people are unbelievers. They are worthless. The blood of anyone of them is no more precious than the blood of a dog."

As he was walking by Abū Jandal's side and talking to him, he continued to move the handle of his sword towards Abū Jandal, hoping that Abū Jandal would take 'Umar's sword and kill his father. Abū Jandal either did not wish to kill his father or did not understand or notice 'Umar's gesture. He submitted to his fortune until God would help him get his release. He was led away in his shackles and chains. As the Muslims looked at him, their hearts were full of agony because they were unable to help him.

When the document detailing the peace terms was written down, the Prophet asked a number of his Companions to witness the agreement, in addition to witnesses from the Quraysh side. The Muslim witnesses were Abū Bakr, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Maḥmūd ibn Maslamah and 'Abdullāh ibn Suhayl, another son of the chief Quraysh negotiator himself. Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ and Ḥuwayṭib ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā were the Quraysh witnesses. When the witnessing was finally done, the Quraysh delegation went home.

This peace was supposed to last for ten years. Very few Muslims were able to bring themselves to accept it without experiencing a feeling of unease. What added to their bitterness was the fact that the terms of the agreement meant that they had to go back home without being able to fulfil their purpose of worshipping at the Ka'bah. It should be remembered that the Prophet and his Companions were in *iḥrām*, the state of consecration, having left Madīnah in order to perform the *'Umrah*. They were first prevented

from entering Makkah by the declared intention of the Quraysh to use force to stop them. Now they were prevented by the terms of the agreement which they signed with the Quraysh. They were, in effect, in the position of a *muḥṣar*, a person who sets out from home to do his pilgrimage or *'Umrah* but is unable to reach his destination owing to some reason beyond his control. God declares in the Qur'ān that such a person can release himself from *iḥrām* by slaughtering a sheep or some other sacrificial animal at the point where he cannot continue his journey.

Cancellation of Intended Worship

The Prophet said to his Companions: "Slaughter your animals and shave and release yourselves from *iḥrām.*" No one showed any sign of willingness to comply with this order. The Prophet repeated his command three times and still no one was willing to do as he was told. The Prophet was very angry indeed. He went into his tent where Umm Salamah, his wife who accompanied him on this expedition, was waiting. She immediately noticed how angry he was. She asked him the reason why and he answered: "The Muslims are ruining themselves. I have given them a command and they have not obeyed." He explained to her how his Companions received his orders with indifference and how not one of them was willing to obey. She tried to pacify him: "Messenger of God, do not blame them. They have been under great pressure because of all the trouble you have taken to achieve this peace settlement and because they now realize that they have to take the long way home without achieving their purpose." She then gave him a very sound piece of advice: she told him to go out and slaughter his own sacrificial animals and shave, without speaking to any one of them. The Prophet acted on his wife's advice and went out and slaughtered his camels. He then called someone to shave his head. When his Companions witnessed what he did, they rushed to do likewise. Some of them helped others to shave and they were extremely unhappy with themselves for not responding to the Prophet's orders in the first place.

> Not all of the Muslims at al-Ḥudaybiyah shaved their heads: some of them just cut their hair. The Prophet said: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." Some of his Companions said: "Messenger of God, what about those who have cut their hair?" He answered by repeating the same prayer: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." The same question about those who had cut their hair was put to him, but he answered by repeating the same prayer a third time. Once more, he was asked about the other group and the Prophet included them in his prayers, saying: "And those who have cut their hair." When he was asked the reason for repeating his prayers for mercy to the shavers three times before he included the other group, he answered: "They have entertained no doubt."[4]

Al-Zuhrī reports: "The Prophet then began his journey home. On the way back to Madīnah, the Prophet received new revelations – the *sūrah* entitled *al-Fatḥ*, or Victory. Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Mujammi' ibn Hārithah, an Anṣārī who had learnt the Qur'ān: "We were with the Prophet at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When we were on the way back, we noticed that people were agitating their camels. People began to ask what was going on. They learnt that the Prophet received a new revelation. We approached him feeling very apprehensive. We saw the Prophet on his camel at Kirā' al-Ghamīm. When people assembled, he read to them the *Sūrah al-Fatḥ*, starting with, '*We have granted you a glorious victory.*' One of his Companions asked him: 'Is it a victory, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Yes indeed. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, it is a grand victory.'"

Imām Aḥmad relates a report by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "We were with God's Messenger on an expedition. I asked him about something three times, but he did not reply to me. I thought that I had done badly. I mounted my camel and went ahead, apprehensive that something might be revealed to the Prophet concerning me. Soon someone called me by name. I went back to the Prophet fearing what might have been revealed. The Prophet said to me: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me

4. Ibid., pp. 500–516.

last night, and it is much dearer to me than the whole world and all it contains: '*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future.*'" (Also related by al-Bukhārī, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī quoting Imām Mālik.)

The General Atmosphere

Such was the atmosphere in the Muslim community prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*. The Prophet was certain of what God had inspired him. Therefore, he allowed himself no say in the drift of events other than what such divine inspiration pointed to. He referred to this inspiration at every point and before taking any step. Neither the unbelievers nor pressure by his Companions, who were infuriated by the unbelievers' hostility, would make him change his course. Eventually, God put tranquillity in the Muslims' hearts and they were reassured, accepting without hesitation what the Prophet told them, just like their brethren who never entertained any doubt in the first place. The prime example of these was Abū Bakr whose reassurance was never in doubt, not even for a brief moment.

Hence the opening of the *sūrah* gives the Prophet happy news that greatly delights his heart: "*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support.*" (Verses 1–3) The opening also refers to the tranquillity granted to the believers, acknowledging that they were true believers and promising them forgiveness of sins, reward and support from on high: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph.*" (Verses 4–5) By contrast, their enemies, hypocrites and idolaters alike, incur God's displeasure and suffering in the life to come: "*God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and*

they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination." (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* also notes the pledge the believers gave to the Prophet, considering it a pledge to God. Thus, it establishes a direct relation between the believers and their Lord, the Eternal: "*We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment, but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verses 8–10)

Before completing the discussion of the believers' attitude at al-Ḥudaybiyah, the *sūrah* refers, within the context of unkept pledges, to the desert Arabs who stayed behind and did not join the Prophet on this expedition. It shows their excuses to be unfounded and exposes their ill thoughts about God and their expectation that the Prophet and his Companions would encounter disaster. It directs the Prophet as to the attitude he should adopt towards them in future. The style here emphasizes the believers' strength and the weakness of those who stayed behind. It makes it clear that the Muslims would soon be able to make rich war gains, all of which would be coveted by those who were too slow to join the Prophet on this expedition: "*The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with*

you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11–16)

Within the same context, the *sūrah* tells us about those who have genuine excuses, justifying their staying behind. These are they who have some disability or illness that prevents their participation in war: "*No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish.*" (Verse 17)

The *sūrah* turns again to the believers, their thoughts and attitudes. It refers to them in a way that is full of honour and acceptance, delighting them with good news of what was soon to happen, praising their firm belief and readiness to sacrifice themselves for God's cause. We see here that God puts this select group of people under His direct care, bestowing on them His goodly acceptance and strengthening them in their noble attitude. He tells them in person that He in His glory was a witness with them as they offered their pledges at a particular spot, under the tree. He was certainly aware of their inner thoughts and feelings, was pleased with them and ensured that they would soon achieve victory that would yield great gains, relating this to God's law that operates throughout the universe. This is indeed a great and remarkable event witnessed by the whole universe: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. Were the unbelievers to fight you,*

they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way." (Verses 18–23)

The *sūrah* reminds the believers of God's grace as He stopped their enemies who were intent upon fighting them, denouncing those same enemies who prevented their entry into the Sacred Mosque, and refusing to allow their sacrificial animals to reach their place of slaughter. It reveals to them God's wisdom as He stopped conflict that year, and His grace in making what happened acceptable to them, bestowing tranquillity on them. All this was for a purpose unknown to them but known to God. It was the much better and greater prospect of bringing Makkah into the Islamic fold and making Islam prevail over all religions. All this was according to God's design and by His will: "*It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verses 24–28)

The *sūrah* concludes with an outline highlighting the special characteristics of this select group of humanity, the Prophet's Companions. It refers to their description in the Torah and the Gospel and emphasizes God's promise to them of forgiveness of their sins and

granting them rich reward: "*Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah and the Gospel: they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" (Verse 29)

Thus the *sūrah* gives a full image of the situation that led to its revelation. It does not relate the events in their chronological order, but highlights the lessons that must be learnt, linking individual events to their permanent rules, and special attitudes to the overall universal system. As always in the Qur'ān, it is hearts and minds that are addressed in a highly inspiring way.

A Community Attains Maturity

Looking at the *sūrah* as a whole and comparing it to the one that precedes it in the Qur'ānic order reveals the profound change in the general attitude of the Muslim community over the three years we believe to have separated the revelation of these two *sūrahs*. We realize the effects the Qur'ān had on that community and how it benefited by the careful education the Prophet imparted to it, enabling it to assume its unique position and play its unparalleled role in human history.

It is clear from the general ambience of this *sūrah* and the feelings it generates that the Muslim community had attained maturity, achieved a coherently high standard of faith, become reassured about its duties and no longer needed strong incentives in order to discharge such duties that required sacrificing life and property. It now needed a restraining influence so that it could look at things calmly and accept the decision of the Highest Leadership of the Islamic message to observe a temporary truce in its confrontation with the enemy.

No longer does the Muslim community need a directive of the type: "*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.*" (47: 35)

or an admonition like: "*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.*" (47: 38) Nor was there any more need to provide incentives to fight for God's cause by speaking about the nobility of martyrdom and the great honour God grants to martyrs. We do not have here any exposition of the purpose of putting the Muslim community to the test by imposing a duty to fight for God's cause, as we have in the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad: "*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.*" (47: 4–6)

By contrast, the discourse in the present *sūrah* highlights the tranquillity God placed in the believers' hearts, or bestowed on them, to restrain them from being over zealous. It also reassures them that what took place was by God's command, referring to the Prophet's wisdom as he opted for a lenient and conciliatory approach. It speaks of God's pleasure with those who offered their pledges to the Prophet under the tree, and paints at the end a bright picture of the Muslim community under the Prophet's leadership.

The *sūrah* certainly speaks of the need to fulfil the pledges given to the Prophet and threatens those who go back on their pledges: "*Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 10) Clearly the reference here is one of honour to those giving their pledges to the Prophet, emphasizing the seriousness of the pledge. Reference to breaking such pledges occurs in respect of the desert Arabs who stayed behind. The same consideration applies to the hypocrites, men and women. This reference in the *sūrah* is made in passing, indicating the weakness of this group as compared with the entire Muslim community which had purged its ranks and attained maturity. This reference is very quick, unlike what we have in

the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad, where the discussion of the hypocrites and their Jewish allies occupies a large part of it. This is yet another development in the external attitude of the Muslim community, one that is in harmony with the developments taking place within it.

There is also in the *sūrah* clear evidence of the strength of the Muslim community in relation to the strength of the unbelievers. This is evident in the *sūrah* as a whole and in specific verses. Other verses point out that further victories were to be achieved, making those who stayed behind eager to join the Muslims in order to share the promised war gains. The reference to the fact that Islam would prevail over all other religions is also indicative of the increasing strength of the Muslim community in the period separating the revelation of these two *sūrahs* that occur consecutively in the Qur'ānic order.

There was, then, a clear change in people's hearts, the overall condition of the Muslim community and the situation it was facing. This change can easily be recognized when we follow the events during the Prophet's lifetime as discussed in the Qur'ān. The change reflects the effects of the Qur'ānic approach to the type of education the Muslim community should undergo and the method the Prophet followed in effecting that education. That happy community of the Prophet's Companions was unique in history. However, the change has a telling lesson for those who are in the position of leadership of human communities. They must never become fed up with human weakness, or with what may linger on of past habits, influences of social environment, worldly desire and lack of motivation. All these may have strong effects at first, but persistence, patience and a wise approach ensure steady progress. Moreover, tests and experience are bound to produce their effects when they are utilized to reinforce educational efforts. Gradually, weaknesses dwindle and disappear and believers begin to aspire to higher horizons. They are able to see the superb light emanating from on High. In God's Messenger we have a great shining example to follow. In the Qur'ān we have guidance about the right path to take.

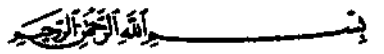
I

A Victory in the Making

Al-Fatḥ (Victory)



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

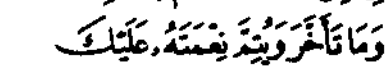


We have granted you a glorious victory, (1)

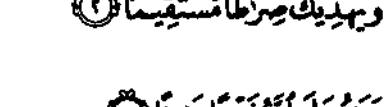


so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. (2)

God will certainly grant you His mighty support. (3)



It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. (4)



لِّيُدْخِلَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ
تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا
وَيُكَفِّرَ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ ۚ وَكَانَ
ذَٰلِكَ عِندَ اللَّهِ فَوْزًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٥﴾

He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (5)

وَيُعَذِّبَ الْمُنَافِقِينَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتِ
وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ وَالْمُشْرِكَاتِ الظَّانِّينَ
بِاللَّهِ ظَنَّ السَّوْءِ ۚ عَلَيْهِمْ دَائِرَةُ السَّوْءِ ۖ
وَغَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَنَهُمْ وَأَعَدَّ
لَهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ ۖ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. (6)

وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَكَانَ
اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٧﴾

To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (7)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَاهِدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا
وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner (8)

لِّتُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَتُعَزِّرُوهُ
وَتُوَقِّرُوهُ وَتُسَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً
وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٩﴾

so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. (9)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ ٱللَّهَ يَدُ ٱللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۚ فَمَن نَّكَثَ فَإِنَّمَا يَنكُثُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِۦ ۖ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِمَا عَٰهَدَ عَلَيْهُ ٱللَّهَ فَسَيُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward. (10)

سَيَقُولُ لَكَ ٱلْمُخَلَّفُونَ مِنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ شَغَلَتْنَآ أَمْوَٰلُنَا وَأَهْلُونَا فَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا ۚ يَقُولُونَ بِأَلْسِنَتِهِم مَّا لَيْسَ فِى قُلُوبِهِمْ ۚ قُلْ فَمَن يَمْلِكُ لَكُم مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ شَيْـًٔا إِنْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ ضَرًّا أَوْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ نَفْعًا ۚ بَلْ كَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿١١﴾

The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' (11)

بَلْ ظَنَنتُمْ أَن لَّن يَنقَلِبَ ٱلرَّسُولُ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِيهِمْ أَبَدًا وَزُيِّنَ ذَٰلِكَ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَظَنَنتُمْ ظَنَّ ٱلسَّوْءِ وَكُنتُمْ قَوْمًۢا بُورًا ﴿١٢﴾

No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. (12)

وَمَن لَّمْ يُؤْمِنۢ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ فَإِنَّآ أَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ سَعِيرًا ﴿١٣﴾

As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. (13)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ يَغْفِرُ
لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَكَانَ
ٱللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿١٤﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. (14)

سَيَقُولُ ٱلْمُخَلَّفُونَ إِذَا ٱنطَلَقْتُمْ
إِلَىٰ مَغَانِمَ لِتَأْخُذُوهَا ذَرُونَا نَتَّبِعْكُمْ ۖ
يُرِيدُونَ أَن يُبَدِّلُوا۟ كَلَٰمَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ قُل لَّن
تَتَّبِعُونَا كَذَٰلِكُمْ قَالَ ٱللَّهُ مِن
قَبْلُ ۖ فَسَيَقُولُونَ بَلْ تَحْسُدُونَنَا ۚ بَلْ كَانُوا۟
لَا يَفْقَهُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٥﴾

When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. (15)

قُل لِّلْمُخَلَّفِينَ مِنَ ٱلْأَعْرَابِ سَتُدْعَوْنَ
إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ أُو۟لِى بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ تُقَٰتِلُونَهُمْ أَوْ
يُسْلِمُونَ ۖ فَإِن تُطِيعُوا۟ يُؤْتِكُمُ ٱللَّهُ أَجْرًا
حَسَنًا ۖ وَإِن تَتَوَلَّوْا۟ كَمَا تَوَلَّيْتُم مِّن
قَبْلُ يُعَذِّبْكُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٦﴾

Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (16)

لَّيْسَ عَلَى ٱلْأَعْمَىٰ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى
ٱلْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى ٱلْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ ۗ
وَمَن يُطِعِ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّٰتٍ
تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ ۖ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ
يُعَذِّبْهُ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٧﴾

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish. (17)

A Different Concept of Victory

> *We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support.* (Verses 1–3)

The *sūrah* opens with a statement about the great favours bestowed by God on His Messenger, comprising glorious victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessing and assured guidance. Together, these favours are granted as a reward for complete, unshakeable trust in God's inspiration and directive, as well as a willing submission to His guidance. The Prophet demonstrated absolute trust, leaving no room whatsoever for his own judgement. He had a dream and proceeded to take action on its basis. His she-camel refused to move and people cried out that she had refused to go forward. He told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. "She is held back for the same reason as the elephant was held back. I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today that helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." 'Umar asked him: "Why should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" His answer was simple, emphasizing his unwavering trust in God's wisdom: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." By contrast, when it is rumoured that 'Uthmān was killed, he showed complete resolve and determination: "We shall not depart until we have fought these people." He called on people to pledge their loyalty. In turn, they gave him their pledges that brought lasting benefits to all who did so.

Such was the victory. Beside it too there was another victory embodied in the peace agreement at al-Ḥudaybiyah, to be followed by numerous other victories taking different forms.

It was a victory in advocating God's message. Al-Zuhrī[5] says: "This victory was the greatest achieved so far in the history of Islam. Battles were fought when armies met in the battlefield. With this peace

5. A prominent scholar of the second generation after the Prophet's Companions. He was the first to work on a *Ḥadīth* anthology, instructed to do so by Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. He died in 124 AH, 743 CE. – Editor's note.

agreement, war was at an end and people were able to talk to each other in safety. They met and discussed all issues. People with any degree of understanding who were approached about Islam soon declared themselves Muslims. In those two years, i.e. between the signing of the al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty and the fall of Makkah, the number of Muslims doubled or became even greater."

Ibn Hishām says: "The evidence in support of the above statement by al-Zuhrī is found in the fact that the Prophet's Companions at al-Ḥudaybiyah were 1,400, but when he marched to Makkah two years later,[6] he was at the head of an army of 10,000." Among those who became Muslim were Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ.

It was also a great victory on the ground. The Muslim community no longer faced danger from the Quraysh. Therefore, the Prophet was now free to address the problem represented by the Jews in Arabia. After the removal of the Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā', al-Naḍīr and Qurayẓah from Madīnah, following their repeated violations of their friendship agreement with the Muslim community, the Jewish threat came from Khaybar and its fortresses. From there, the Jews could easily make the road to Syria unsafe. Khaybar and all its fortresses fell to the Muslims a short while later, and the Muslims were able to take great war gains which the Prophet divided exclusively among those who accompanied him at al-Ḥudaybiyah.[7]

Al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty was a decisive victory in the confrontation between the Muslims in Madīnah and the Quraysh in Makkah, supported by all the unbelievers in Arabia. In his biography of the Prophet, Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwazah rightly says:

> Undoubtedly, this peace agreement described in the Qur'ān as a 'glorious victory' amply deserves this description. Indeed it is one of the most decisive and greatest events during the Prophet's lifetime and in Islamic history generally, consolidating the Muslim

6. The Prophet marched to Makkah when the Quraysh flagrantly breached the peace treaty. Makkah fell to Islam with very little fighting. – Editor's note.

7. The only exception was that the Prophet included with them those who came back from Abyssinia and joined him at Khaybar when the battle was over. He considered these to have been on an expedition advocating the Islamic message throughout their 15 years stay in Abyssinia. – Editor's note.

state. For the first time the Quraysh recognized the Prophet and the Muslim state, treating them on an equal footing. It was keen to avoid military confrontation, preferring to peacefully turn them away from their purpose of entering Makkah. Twice before, the Quraysh tried to invade Madīnah, and the second of these attempts took place only one year earlier. At the time, the Quraysh and other confederate tribes raised a great force avowing to exterminate Islam and the Muslims. When the Quraysh launched this attack, the Muslims in Madīnah went through an extremely hard time as, numerically, they were no match for the attacking forces. The new development leading to the signing of the peace treaty had a marked effect on the Arabs; up until then they had looked upon the Quraysh as the master in Arabia and were strongly influenced by its opposition to Islam. Indeed, when the Prophet embarked on his trip to Makkah, the desert Arabs believed that he would not return safely. The hypocrites in Madīnah were of similar views. Taking all this into consideration, we realize the great importance of this victory.

Subsequent events confirmed the wisdom of the Prophet's action, which was endorsed by the Qur'ān. These events highlighted the great material, moral, political, military and religious benefits that accrued to the Muslim community as a result of this peace agreement. They were now looked upon as the most important power in Arabia; the desert Arabs who stayed away from Islam came forward apologizing for their earlier stance, while the hypocrites could hardly raise a voice. Arab delegations came to Madīnah from distant parts pledging loyalty to the Prophet. Subsequently too, the Prophet was able to smash the strength of the Jews in Khaybar and their other villages on the road to Syria. He was able to send delegations to distant parts, such as Najd, Yemen and al-Balqā'. Only two years later, he was able to conquer Makkah peacefully, putting an end to the long drawn out conflict with the Quraysh. It was then that Islam achieved its final victory in Arabia, and people flocked to Islam in large numbers.[8]

8. Darwazah, Muḥammad 'Izzat, *Sīrat al-Rasūl: Ṣuwar Muqtabasah min al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Vol. 2, pp. 292–293.

Furthermore, the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah was a great victory in a different sense: it was a conquest of hearts and minds, epitomized by the pledge given by the Prophet's Companions that earned them God's pleasure as specifically mentioned in the *sūrah*. It is this conquest that made them worthy of the image drawn of them in the last verse of the *sūrah*. In the history of the divine message, this was a great victory that must be given its true value as we look at how it influenced the turn of events in subsequent years.

The Prophet was delighted with the revelation of this *sūrah*. He was overjoyed with the great favours God bestowed on him and his Companions: the victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessings, guidance on a straight way and God's acceptance of the believers and His beautiful description of them in the *sūrah*. He said: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me tonight, and it is much dearer to me than all that the sun overlooks put together." In another version, he is reported to have said: "A *sūrah* was revealed to me last night which is dearer to me than the whole world and all that it contains." He was keen to express his gratitude to God, and his thanksgiving took the form of long, voluntary prayers, described by his wife, 'Ā'ishah, as follows: "When the Prophet prayed, he would stand up until his feet swelled." She said to him: "Messenger of God! Will you continue to do this when God has forgiven you all your sins, past and future?" He replied: "Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.]

A Medley of Emotions

The first three verses of the *sūrah* were specifically addressed to the Prophet. The *sūrah* goes on to describe the great favours God bestowed on the Muslim community as He gave them such a victory, adding tranquillity to their hearts, and promising further favours in the life to come:

> *It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which*

running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (Verses 4–5)

Tranquillity, or *sakīnah* in Arabic, is a word with pleasant connotations. When a heart is blessed with it, it generates reassurance, trust, comfort, dignity and a ready acceptance of God's will.

The believers experienced conflicting emotions during this encounter. They were looking forward to the fulfilment of the Prophet's dream of entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, realizing that a prophet's dream always came true. They had then to endure a stand-off with the Quraysh, followed by the Prophet's acceptance to return without visiting the Sacred Mosque that year, even though they had entered into the state of consecration required for that Mosque's entry and had marked their animals for sacrifice following the completion of their worship at the Sacred Mosque. All of this was, therefore, very hard for them to swallow. In addition to what we have already quoted in recording the developments at al-Ḥudaybiyah, 'Umar is also reported to have gone to Abū Bakr and said in reference to the Prophet: "Did he not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" Abū Bakr, whose heart echoed the Prophet's own heartbeats, replied: "Did he say that you would do so this year?" 'Umar answered in the negative. Abū Bakr said: "Then you will visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." 'Umar left Abū Bakr and went straight to the Prophet asking: "Did you not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" The Prophet said: "I certainly did; but did I say that you would be doing that this year?" 'Umar again answered in the negative. The Prophet then said: "You will most certainly visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." This gives us a picture of the feelings the Muslims experienced during the stand-off with the Quraysh.

The believers found other conditions imposed by the Quraysh to be totally unfair. Specifically, they found unacceptable the condition that the Prophet should return to the Quraysh anyone from among them who came to him, declaring himself a Muslim, without being given the prior permission of his father or guardian. They were also totally displeased when the Quraysh delegation objected to the mention of God's name, *al-Raḥmān*, or the Lord of Grace, and with their objection to the Prophet's position as God's Messenger being included in the document.

It is reported that 'Alī, who was writing the document, refused to erase this reference, as requested by the Quraysh representative, Suhayl ibn 'Amr. In fact, the Prophet himself rubbed it out, saying: "My Lord! You know that I am Your Messenger."

The Muslims' dedication and enthusiasm to fight the unbelievers were total, as evidenced by the fact that they all pledged themselves to it. Yet the confrontation ended peacefully, requiring them to turn back and go home. Understandably, this was not easy for them to accept. We sense this in their reluctance to slaughter their sacrifices and shave their heads, indicating the end of their rituals. Indeed, the Prophet had to issue his command to them three times, and this to those who were always quick to put his every order into effect. Furthermore, 'Urwah, the fourth emissary of the Quraysh, reported on this to the Quraysh when he returned to give them his advice. As we have noted already, so great was the feeling among the Muslims that they did not slaughter their sacrifices, nor shave their heads until they saw the Prophet doing so himself. Only his action spurred them to follow suit; such was the state of their bewilderment.

The Muslims had travelled from Madīnah intending to perform *'Umrah*. The thought of fighting was not in their minds. Neither mentally nor practically were they prepared for war. They were surprised to see the Quraysh taking such an adamant stance against them, and they were greatly upset when they heard the news that 'Uthmān had been killed. To the Muslims, it was totally unexpected for the Quraysh to send some of its men to aim arrows and stone missiles at their camp. Therefore, when the Prophet, upon hearing of 'Uthmān's assassination, decided to fight the Quraysh and asked his Companions to give him their pledges in support, every single one of them did so. This did not, however, diminish their surprise to find themselves in a situation totally different from what they hoped to do. Such feelings were only a part of what they experienced. Moreover, they were heavily outnumbered, amounting to 1,400 pilgrims, while the Quraysh were in their own city, supported by desert Arabs and other idolaters.

When we consider all these aspects, we better understand the meaning and the effect of the Qur'ānic statement: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers.*" (Verse 4) We can imagine

the situation as though we are present there, and feel the comfort of this tranquillity and the peace it generated in the believers' hearts. God was fully aware that the feelings they experienced were motivated by faith. They were keen to defend their faith and fight for it. They did not look for any personal glory. Therefore, He bestowed His blessings on them, giving them such tranquillity, "*so that they may grow more firm in their faith.*" (Verse 4) Reassurance is of a higher rank than passion and enthusiasm. It carries with it a combination of trust, conviction and absence of worry.

The *sūrah* also indicates that military victory was in no way difficult. On the contrary, it was easy, had God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to gratify the believers' wishes. At His command there are countless forces that cannot be overcome. They would have ensured victory for the Muslims at His bidding, whenever He wished: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise.*" (Verse 4) Indeed everything moves as determined by God in His wisdom. It was through His knowledge and wisdom that He "*sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith.*" (Verse 4) He will thus bring about what He has decided to give them: victory and blessings: "*He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph.*" (Verse 5)

If in God's sight this is a great triumph, then it is indeed a great one. It was so for those who achieved it, giving it its right measure. The believers were delighted with what God granted them. Having listened to the opening of the *sūrah*, learning about the favours God bestowed on His Messenger, they were looking forward to their own share, asking about it. When they were told of it, they were delighted and reassured.

The *sūrah* then tells them of another aspect of God's wisdom in letting events develop in the way they did; namely, requiting the unbelievers and the hypocrites for their actions:

> *God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. To God belongs all*

the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (Verses 6–7)

These verses group together the hypocrites and the idolaters, men and women, highlighting their common characteristic of harbouring evil thoughts about God, having no trust in His forthcoming help to the believers. The *sūrah* makes clear that they are all encompassed by evil and cannot depart from its circle. They incur God's anger and, therefore, they are expelled from His mercy. Evil will be their end. In fact, hypocrisy is in no way less than idolatry; indeed it is more contemptible. The harm the hypocrites do to the Muslim community is no less than what the idolaters do, although the two types are different in nature and physical aspects.

The *sūrah* makes harbouring evil thoughts about God the distinctive feature of the hypocrites and the unbelievers. A believer always thinks well of God, expecting what is good in all situations, good and bad. He believes that God will bring him good in both conditions. The fact is that a believer's heart always looks up to God, whose grace and favours never cease. When we establish the bond of faith with God, we realize this fact and appreciate it. The hypocrites and the unbelievers, by contrast, have no bond with God. They have no feeling of this concept, which, in turn, leads them to entertain evil thoughts about Him, casting only a superficial look at things and judging situations by appearances. Thus, they expect only evil to befall them and to befall the believers whenever appearances so suggest. They have no idea of God's power, control of things and events, or His subtle and elaborate planning.

The verse groups together all types of enemies of Islam, describing their position with God and what He has prepared for them, adding a comment pointing to God's power and wisdom: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 7) Nothing of their situation escapes God, and nothing is too hard for Him.

The Promise and the Reward

Again the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, pointing out his role and its objective. It tells the believers about their duty towards God after having

received His message. It makes clear to them that the pledges they gave to the Prophet were indeed pledges given to God. Solemn indeed is a pledge made to God. Furthermore, this imparts to the pledge given to the Prophet even greater honour:

> *We have sent you [Muḥammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.* (Verses 8–10)

God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), is a witness who will testify that he has delivered the message entrusted to him to mankind, and he will speak of the reception people gave him. He will state that some people believed and accepted the faith while others rejected it denying its truth, and others still were hypocrites. Some did well and others did badly. He will give his testimony just as he delivered his message. He bears the good news of forgiveness and acceptance by God, as well as a good reward from Him to the believers. He also warns against the ill fate that awaits the unbelievers, hypocrites and evildoers, as they all incur God's anger.

Such is the Prophet's role. Addressing the believers, the *sūrah* makes clear to them the purpose of God's message: it is to believe in God and His Messenger, and to fulfil the tasks and duties of faith. Thus, they support God by implementing His law, and they honour Him in their hearts as they feel His majesty. They also extol His glory and praise Him at both ends of the day, which means in effect the whole day. What is meant here is that in their hearts and minds they feel their bond with God at all times. This is the result of faith which the believers will receive because God sent His Messenger and assigned to him his role outlined in the verse: "*a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner*". (Verse 8)

The Prophet came to them to establish their bond with God, and to solemnize a pledge they give to Him that continues even though the Prophet is no longer with them. When he stretches his hand out to accept their pledges, he is doing so on God's behalf: "*Those who pledge*

their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands." (Verse 10) This is an awesome description. When any of them put his hand in the Prophet's to give his pledge, he realized that God was there present, accepting the pledge, and that His hand also embraced their hands. How awesome and majestic.

This image puts an end to any thought anyone might have had about retracting their pledge. Should the Prophet disappear in person, God Himself will never disappear. It is He who accepts this pledge, watches its fulfilment and gives its reward. "*He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment.*" (Verse 10) Whatever pledge is made between God and any of His servants is richly profitable to God's servant. It is he who will profit by God's favours, while God is in no need of anyone. Therefore, when anyone breaks his pledge with God, he is the loser. Furthermore, he exposes himself to God's anger and punishment, because God loves those who are true to their promises and dislikes those who deliberately break them. "*But to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward.*" (Verse 10) No details are given here of the reward; it is merely described as rich, or great, as is the literal meaning of the Arabic adjective *'aẓīm* used here. This reward is rich by God's measure and value which we who dwell in this limited space of the earth can never imagine.

The Ones Left Behind

Having established the true nature of the pledge and referred to thoughts of breaking or honouring it, the *sūrah* now speaks of the desert Arabs who were left behind. They refused to accompany the Prophet on this expedition, entertaining no good thoughts about God, expecting defeat for the believers who were going to the Quraysh's own land, when it was the Quraysh that had attacked Madīnah twice over a short period of time.[9] The *sūrah* tells the Prophet of what excuses the desert Arabs would employ when they see him returning safely together with his Companions. They would realize that the treaty he

9. The original text says that the two attacks occurred in two successive years, i.e. within one year or a little more of each other. The fact is that the first, the Battle of Uḥud, took place in Shawwal, the 10th month of year 3, while the second, the Encounter of the Moat, occurred towards the end of year 5, which means that two full years separated them. – Editor's note.

had concluded with the Quraysh signified that the latter had climbed down. No matter how harsh its conditions may appear, the Quraysh now treated Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his followers as its equal, with whom it sought peace rather than confrontation. The *sūrah* also details the true reasons why these desert Arabs stayed behind, exposing their reality to the Prophet and the believers. It tells the Prophet of the rich war gains the Muslims would shortly achieve, and that these same Arabs would try to accompany them on their next encounter in order to receive a share of those. The *sūrah* tells the Prophet what he should say to them when this takes place. He must not allow them to be part of that expedition, which was certain to end in his favour. Only those present at al-Ḥudaybiyah would be permitted to accompany him. He was also to tell those Arabs left behind that they would be called upon to join the Muslims when they needed to fight other people known for their great war prowess. If they truly wanted to join the Muslim camp, they should join the Muslim army on that day, whatever outcome God may give them. If they obeyed, they would receive rich reward. If they turned away, as they did once before, they would be made to endure a painful suffering:

> *The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to*

the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11–16)

The Qur'ān does not merely reply to the excuses of those who stayed behind; it uses the occasion to treat minds and souls, identifying the points of weakness and deviation in order to treat them effectively. It then states those values that are true and permanent, as well as the proper basis on which to base attitudes and behaviour.

Those Arabs who stayed behind belonged to the tribes of Ghifār, Muzaynah, Ashja', Aslam and others who lived in the area close to Madīnah. They tried to excuse themselves, saying: "*Our property and our families kept us busy.*" (Verse 11) This is no excuse. People will always have families and property. If having these is a good excuse to exempt anyone from their duties towards their faith, no one would ever fulfil such duties. They also asked the Prophet: "*do then ask God to forgive us.*" (Verse 11) Even when they say this, they are not serious: "*Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts.*" (Verse 11) The reply given them stresses the truth of God's will that cannot be stopped or prevented by bravery in war or its avoidance. They are all subject to God's power, and He is fully aware of all things. His will controls everything as He determines: "*Say: Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.*" (Verse 11)

The question implies the instruction to submit to God's will and to obey His orders without hesitation. No hesitation will ever prevent harm or delay benefit. Excuses are no use, because nothing escapes God's knowledge and nothing affects the requital He decides on the basis of His perfect knowledge. This is a fitting directive, using the appropriate moment in order to heighten its effect.

"*No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness.*" (Verse 12) Thus they are shown the truth of their attitude. Their true thoughts and intentions, which they thought were concealed,

are placed before their very eyes. They thought that the Prophet and his Companions were going to their death, and that they would never return to their families in Madīnah. They said of the Prophet: 'Is he going to fight those who attacked him in his home city and killed his Companions?' They allowed no room for the care God takes of those of His servants who are dedicated to His cause. Moreover, since they lacked motivation based on faith, they could not feel the importance of duty and that a duty must be fulfilled, regardless of the cost. Nor did they realize that obedience to the Prophet must not be based on any thought of gain or loss. It must be fulfilled as a duty, regardless of the outcome.

The thoughts they had seemed pleasing to their hearts. They could not see any other possibility. Their ill thoughts about God derived from the fact that their hearts had always been devoid of goodness. The *sūrah* uses a single Arabic word, *būr*, for the phrase 'devoid of goodness'. This word is normally used to describe a dead land where no plant can grow. The same applies to these Arab's hearts, as also to them generally. Their hearts are lifeless, yield nothing good. How else would a human heart be when it harbours no good thought of God, having severed its bond with Him? It must be *būr*, lifeless, heading for nothing good.

The True Balance

Such do people think of the Muslim community. However, it is only people like those desert Arabs who have severed their bond with God, their hearts devoid of goodness, who view the Muslim community as being on the verge of eradication, heavily outnumbered by the forces of evil and deviation. They look at the limited numbers of the advocates of Islam, or their poor artillery, or their low position in society and conclude that they will inevitably be defeated. Like the desert Arabs of old, such people avoid every association with the believers, looking only for their own safety. God, however, will ensure that such ill thoughts inevitably end in failure, and will change positions as only He knows how, to set the true balance. It is He who holds this balance in His mighty hand, lowering some people and raising others above them. The hypocrites who harbour evil thoughts about God, throughout all places and generations, can never understand how this is done.

The true balance is that of faith. Therefore, those Arabs are referred to it. The *sūrah* outlines the general rule of rewarding people in accordance with this balance, highlighting the possibility of receiving God's grace. They are thus encouraged to take the opportunity available to them now in order to benefit by God's forgiveness and to enjoy His grace: "*As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verses 13–14)

They used to cite their families and property as the reasons why they stayed behind. Of what benefit will their families and property be to them when they are thrown in the blazing fire, which has been prepared for them if they continue to deny God and His Messenger? These verses show such people the two options available to them and they are invited to choose one. Then it is God who issues the promise and the warning to them. To Him belongs the heavens and the earth and all in between them. It is He who can extend forgiveness and inflict punishment, as He chooses.

God rewards people according to their deeds, but His will is free, unrestricted by anything. This truth is established here so that it is accepted by all. There is no conflict between it and the fact that people's reward is based on their actions, because this is the basis that God has willed to choose.

Nevertheless, God's forgiveness and mercy is close at hand. Let anyone who so wishes benefit by it, before the suffering befalls those who refuse to believe in God and His Messenger in accordance with His will.

Fine Prospects

The *sūrah* then shows a glimpse of the prospects God has in store for the believers, contrary to all the unbelievers' thoughts. This is done in such a way that suggests that it is all going to happen soon: "*When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: 'Let us come with you.' They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: 'You shall not come with us. God has already said so.' They will then say: 'You begrudge us [our share].' How little they understand.*" (Verse 15)

Most commentators on the Qur'ān take this verse to refer to the conquest of Khaybar. This may be so, but the statement also gives clear impressions that do not necessarily relate to Khaybar. It suggests that the Muslims would soon achieve an easy victory. Those who previously stayed behind would realize that it would be so and hence they ask to join the Muslims. Perhaps what makes Qur'ānic commentators specify Khaybar is that this occurred soon after al-Ḥudaybiyah. Indeed, it took place in the first month of year 7, less than two months after the signing of the treaty, and it brought the Muslims rich war gains. Khaybar was the last Jewish stronghold in the Arabian Peninsula. It was here that some of the Jews of al-Naḍīr and Qurayẓah had sought refuge after they were ordered out of Madīnah.

Commentators are almost unanimous that God promised those who give the Prophet their pledges at al-Ḥudaybiyah would have the war gains achieved at Khaybar, all for themselves, with no share for anyone else. I have not found any text to support this view, which may though be based on what actually happened. When the Prophet marched on Khaybar, he did not allow anyone to join him other than those who had taken part at al-Ḥudaybiyah.

Be that as it may, God instructed the Prophet to refuse permission to those who had previously stayed behind, assuming that they even offered to join the Muslim army. Specifically, he was to say that their participation would be contrary to God's orders. He also told the Prophet that when they were refused such permission, they would say: "*You begrudge us*", and want to deprive us of our legitimate share of any war gains. What they say thus betrays their lack of understanding of God's purpose. It is fitting that those who are eager to share in the booty be deprived of it, while those who are dedicated to God's cause, obeying His orders, should enjoy His grace and be the ones to enjoy the war gains He grants the Muslim community. They were the ones who had obeyed when they expected nothing other than a hard fight.

God further instructed the Prophet to tell them that they would be called upon to fight against people known for their war prowess, and that the fight would continue until this enemy had been subdued. Should those who formerly stayed behind pass this test, they will still receive their reward, but if they continue to disobey they will have failed what is their final test: "*Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: 'You will*

be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verse 16)

Reports differ as to the identity of this military might, and to whether this would occur during the Prophet's lifetime or after he passed away. It is most likely, however that it happened during his lifetime so as to further test the Arabs in the surrounding areas of Madīnah. What is important here is to note the Qur'ānic method of education, and how hearts and souls are treated by Qur'ānic directives and practical tests. We see this clearly in the way the inner thoughts of those who stayed behind were exposed before their very own eyes to the believers. We also see it in the way true values and the principles of proper behaviour are pointed out to them.

Since the test makes it a duty binding on everyone to join the Muslim army, God identifies those with real excuses who are exempt from so joining, without their being subject to any punishment: "*No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish.*" (Verse 17) A person who is blind or lame has a permanent disability exempting him from military engagement. A person who is sick has a temporary excuse, one that extends until he has recovered full health.

Ultimately, it is all a question of obedience or disobedience. It is a mental attitude, not a technical situation. Those who obey God and His Messenger will be rewarded by admittance into heaven. Those who turn away will receive painful suffering. Anyone can put the hardship of striving for God's cause in the balance against the comfort of staying behind and what it entails. He may then make his own choice.



2

People's Pledges and God's Promises

God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, (18)

لَّقَدْ رَضِيَ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ
إِذْ يُبَايِعُونَكَ تَحْتَ ٱلشَّجَرَةِ فَعَلِمَ
مَا فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ فَأَنزَلَ ٱلسَّكِينَةَ عَلَيْهِمْ
وَأَثَٰبَهُمْ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿١٨﴾

and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. (19)

وَمَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً يَأْخُذُونَهَا ۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ
عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٩﴾

God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. (20)

وَعَدَكُمُ ٱللَّهُ مَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً
تَأْخُذُونَهَا فَعَجَّلَ لَكُمْ هَٰذِهِ وَكَفَّ
أَيْدِيَ ٱلنَّاسِ عَنكُمْ وَلِتَكُونَ ءَايَةً
لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ صِرَٰطًا
مُّسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢٠﴾

There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. (21)

وَأُخْرَىٰ لَمْ تَقْدِرُوا عَلَيْهَا قَدْ أَحَاطَ
ٱللَّهُ بِهَا ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ
شَىْءٍ قَدِيرًا ﴿٢١﴾

Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. (22)

وَلَوْ قَٰتَلَكُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوَلَّوُا ٱلْأَدْبَٰرَ ثُمَّ
لَا يَجِدُونَ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا ﴿٢٢﴾

Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way. (23)

سُنَّةَ ٱللَّهِ ٱلَّتِى قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ
وَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ ٱللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. (24)

وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِى كَفَّ أَيْدِيَهُمْ عَنكُمْ
وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ عَنْهُم بِبَطْنِ مَكَّةَ مِنۢ
بَعْدِ أَنْ أَظْفَرَكُمْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَكَانَ
ٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرًا ﴿٢٤﴾

They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt.

هُمُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوكُمْ عَنِ
ٱلْمَسْجِدِ ٱلْحَرَامِ وَٱلْهَدْىَ مَعْكُوفًا أَن
يَبْلُغَ مَحِلَّهُۥ ۚ وَلَوْلَا رِجَالٌ مُّؤْمِنُونَ
وَنِسَآءٌ مُّؤْمِنَٰتٌ لَّمْ تَعْلَمُوهُمْ أَن
تَطَـُٔوهُمْ فَتُصِيبَكُم مِّنْهُم مَّعَرَّةٌۢ بِغَيْرِ

God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. (25)

عِلْمٍ ۚ لِّيُدْخِلَ ٱللَّهُ فِى رَحْمَتِهِۦ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ لَوْ تَزَيَّلُوا۟ لَعَذَّبْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ مِنْهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. (26)

إِذْ جَعَلَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ فِى قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلْحَمِيَّةَ حَمِيَّةَ ٱلْجَٰهِلِيَّةِ فَأَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ سَكِينَتَهُۥ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ وَعَلَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَأَلْزَمَهُمْ كَلِمَةَ ٱلتَّقْوَىٰ وَكَانُوٓا۟ أَحَقَّ بِهَا وَأَهْلَهَا ۚ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٢٦﴾

God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. (27)

لَّقَدْ صَدَقَ ٱللَّهُ رَسُولَهُ ٱلرُّءْيَا بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ لَتَدْخُلُنَّ ٱلْمَسْجِدَ ٱلْحَرَامَ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ءَامِنِينَ مُحَلِّقِينَ رُءُوسَكُمْ وَمُقَصِّرِينَ لَا تَخَافُونَ ۖ فَعَلِمَ مَا لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا۟ فَجَعَلَ مِن دُونِ ذَٰلِكَ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿٢٧﴾

It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness. (28)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِىٓ أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُۥ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ ٱلْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُۥ عَلَى ٱلدِّينِ كُلِّهِۦ ۚ وَكَفَىٰ بِٱللَّهِ شَهِيدًا ﴿٢٨﴾

Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward. (29)

مُّحَمَّدٌ رَّسُولُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَٱلَّذِينَ مَعَهُۥٓ أَشِدَّآءُ
عَلَى ٱلْكُفَّارِ رُحَمَآءُ بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ تَرَىٰهُمْ رُكَّعًا
سُجَّدًا يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِضْوَٰنًا ۖ
سِيمَاهُمْ فِى وُجُوهِهِم مِّنْ أَثَرِ ٱلسُّجُودِ ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ مَثَلُهُمْ فِى ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةِ ۚ وَمَثَلُهُمْ فِى
ٱلْإِنجِيلِ كَزَرْعٍ أَخْرَجَ شَطْـَٔهُۥ فَـَٔازَرَهُۥ
فَٱسْتَغْلَظَ فَٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَىٰ سُوقِهِۦ
يُعْجِبُ ٱلزُّرَّاعَ لِيَغِيظَ بِهِمُ ٱلْكُفَّارَ ۗ
وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟
ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ مِنْهُم مَّغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا
عَظِيمًۢا ﴿٢٩﴾

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* speaks only about and with the believers, with that unique and happy group of them who gave their pledges and commitments to the Prophet under the tree, in the presence of God, the witness who solemnized that pledge placing His hand over theirs. That elite group heard God's words revealed to His Messenger: "*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) They also listened to the Prophet as he said to them: "You are today the best people on earth." [Related by al-Bukhārī on the authority of Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh.]

What we have here is a discourse about this select group as God speaks to His Messenger. We also have God's words to this select group, giving them the happy news of forthcoming war gains and conquests. God also speaks about the care He took of them, protecting them from their enemies, during this trip and what He will do for them in future, assuring them of victory by means of the laws He has set in operation, which never fail. He strongly condemns the enemies of the Muslim community, explains the wisdom behind choosing peace this time, confirming the truth of the Prophet's dream about visiting the Sacred Mosque. He assures the Muslims that they will enter it in safety, fearing nothing, and that His faith will prevail over all religions on earth.

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse describing this community of believers, the Prophet's Companions, adding their descriptions to be found in the Torah and the Gospels, as well as His promise of forgiveness of their sins and granting them a great reward.

A Unique Event

> *God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise.* (Verses 18–19)

Today, fourteen hundred years after the event, I am trying to visualize the great moment when the universe witnessed the divine announcement from on high addressed by God Almighty to His trusted Messenger concerning the Muslim community. I want to see the whole universe at that great moment and its conscience as it responds to this most generous announcement, speaking of a group of people at a particular spot in this universe. I want to feel how those extremely happy people felt when they heard, with their own ears, that God was speaking about them, telling them that He was well pleased with them, defining the place where they were and what they had done in order to earn His pleasure: "*when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree.*" (Verse

18) They heard it all from the Prophet who never said anything but the truth, delivering it as a special message from God Almighty.

O my God! How did they – those happy people – receive that divine communication at that ecstatic moment? It is a communication that points to every single one of them and says, "to you in person God is saying that He was well pleased with you as you pledged your allegiance under the tree. He was aware of your inner feelings and He bestowed tranquillity on you."

When we read or hear God's statement: "*God is the Patron of the believers,*" (2: 257) or, "*God is with those who are patient,*" (2: 153) we may feel happy and reassured, hoping that we may be included among such. Those people, however, heard that God was speaking about them personally and individually, telling each of them that He was well pleased with them, knowing what was in their hearts. That is great indeed!

"*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) He knew that the passion they felt in their hearts was for their faith, not for their ego or for personal glory. He knew that their pledges were sincere, and that they were seriously restraining themselves so that they would stand behind the Prophet in all sincerity, obeying his orders, accepting any adversity with patience. Therefore, "*He sent down tranquillity upon them.*" We almost see this tranquillity being lowered calmly and with dignity, pouring an air of peace and reassurance on those hearts that were full of enthusiasm for direct action.

God also "*rewarded them with a speedy victory.*" (Verse 18) This peace treaty, coupled with the circumstances leading to it, was indeed a victory, heralding many more. The conquest of Khaybar, which most commentators cite as the one promised here, may indeed have been one of these. "*And with many war gains for them to take.*" (Verse 19) If the victory meant here is that of Khaybar, then the war gains would be with the victory itself. However, if the victory mentioned refers to the peace treaty itself, then the promised war gains would come later. Indeed, the peace treaty left the Muslims free to achieve victory on several fronts.

"*God is Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 19) This comment fits well with the preceding verses. God's pleasure, the victory and the promise of war

gains are all indicative of God's might, control, elaborate planning and wisdom.

As God Speaks

Now the *sūrah* addresses the believers themselves, speaking to them of the peace treaty, or victory, to which they resigned themselves:

> *God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things.* (Verses 20–21)

This is an announcement of happy things to happen, given by God to the believers who accept it as certain. They realize that God has prepared for them numerous gains and they lived afterwards to see this true promise fulfilled in the best way. God says to them here that He has hastened this one, which may be a reference to al-Ḥudaybiyah, as stated by Ibn 'Abbās, to emphasize its being a victory, as indeed it was, or it may be a reference to Khaybar, as Mujāhid says, since Khaybar produced the first war gains after al-Ḥudaybiyah. The first view is perhaps much weightier.

God also granted them a favour when He restrained the hands of hostile forces. He indeed held back the hands of the Quraysh, as well as other hostile groups who were waiting for a chance to attack the Muslims. Their opponents outnumbered them by far, but the believers were true to their pledges, fulfilling their duties. Therefore, God rewarded them by restraining and holding back their enemies' hands.

"*So that this may become a sign for the believers.*" (Verse 20) This encounter, which they disliked at first, feeling it to be too much of a demand, is described by God as a great sign, which will enable them to see the results of what He has planned for them and how they will be rewarded for obeying the Prophet and submitting to His will. Thus, they will come to realize that it is great, bringing them much benefit, and they will be doubly reassured.

"*He will guide you on a straight way.*" (Verse 20) This is again a reward for your obedience and true allegiance. Thus, they will have a combination of war gains and guidance on a straight way, giving them all that is good. All this comes about as a result of something they initially disliked. God, thus, teaches them that what He chooses for them is the best thing. This also trains them to show absolute obedience.

God also tells them of other favours He will grant them. There will be more war gains: these they are unable to secure by virtue of their own forces, but which God will let them have by cause of His power and planning: "*There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 21)

Again, reports differ as to what these gains refer to: is it to the conquest of Makkah? Or to Khaybar? Or is it the victories secured against the Byzantine and Persian Empires? Or does it refer to all other conquests achieved by the Muslim community after al-Ḥudaybiyah? Most probably, the *sūrah* refers here to the conquest of Makkah, which followed the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah and resulted from it. The peace treaty lasted only two years. Thereafter the unbelievers violated it, and God facilitated Makkah's conquest for the Muslims, with hardly any fighting. It was Makkah that had continued to present great difficulties for the Muslim community in Madīnah. It had attacked them twice, and was able to turn them away from the Sacred Mosque when they tried to visit it prior to signing the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah. God, however, overwhelmed Makkah with His power, handing it over to the Muslims without fighting: "*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 21) This was, then, an implicit piece of happy news. It was left undefined because at the time when the *sūrah* was revealed, it still belonged to the future, which is part of the realm that lies beyond human perception. Hence, God gives them this hint to reassure them and help them to look forward to what may be coming their way.

In line with the reference to the present war gains and the future ones they await, the *sūrah* clearly tells the Muslims that they will be victorious. The signing of the peace treaty was in no way due to their weakness, or because the unbelievers were too strong for them. Instead, it was meant to happen for a definite purpose God wanted to achieve. Had

the unbelievers fought them, they would have been crushed. Such is the rule whenever the believers and unbelievers meet in a decisive battle:

> *Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way.* (Verses 22–23)

Thus, victory for the believers and defeat of their enemies are part of the universal law God has set in operation. It is unchangeable. This is bound to give the believers immense confidence and reassurance. They know that God's law will never fail to operate. It may be delayed for some time, for reasons that are closely related to the adherence of the believers to the way God wants them to adhere, or for reasons that bring about the conditions that lead to victory for the believers against the unbelievers. There may be other reasons known to God for such delay, but God's law will continue to operate, without fail: "*Never will you find any change in God's way.*" (Verse 23)

God also reminds them of His favour when he stayed the unbelievers' hands from the Muslims, and stayed the Muslims' hands after they had gained victory over their attackers. This refers to an incident when about 40 of the unbelievers tried to launch an offensive. They were taken prisoner, but the Prophet pardoned them:

> *It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do.* (Verse 24)

This was an event the addressees witnessed, but God mentions it in this way to refer every move and every happening to His direct planning. They, thus, feel how God's hand directs everything for them, guides their footsteps and their feelings. They will then unhesitatingly surrender themselves to Him. They will be absolutely certain that everything is in God's hand, and that His choice is the best. They move according to His will in everything they choose or refuse. He wants only what is best for them. When they surrender to Him, every good thing comes their way easily and without delay. He sees them and knows the ins and outs

of their situation. What He chooses for them is based on His perfect knowledge. He will not let anything they deserve escape them: "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 24)

Exposing the Unbelievers

The *sūrah* then tells the believers about their opponents' position in God's sight. It explains how God considers the unbelievers' actions as they turn the believers away from His Sacred House, and how He looks at the believers in a totally different way from these others:

> *They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things.* (Verses 25–26)

According to God's measure, they are truly unbelievers, deserving this repugnant description: "*They were the ones who disbelieved.*" (Verse 25) This is recorded against them as if they are the only ones in this class, confirmed in disbelief. Hence, they deserve to be disliked by God who hates unbelief and unbelievers. Their other obnoxious deed of turning the believers away from the Sacred Mosque and forbidding the sacrificial animals from reaching their destination is also recorded: "*They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice.*" (Verse 25)

This amounted to gross misconduct according to Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions; it was gross according to all religions known in the Arabian Peninsula since the time of Abraham, their great ancestor.

Restraining the believers from fighting them was not, then, out of compassion or because their fault was small. It was for a different purpose which God explains to the believers: "*Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt...*" (Verse 25) There were a number of Muslims in Makkah who could not migrate to Madīnah because of their weak position, and did not declare their acceptance of Islam for fear of persecution by the unbelievers. Had the Muslims attacked Makkah and a fight taken place, the Muslims might have killed some of these since they did not know who they were. This would have meant Muslims killing Muslims; a situation that must be avoided. Moreover, the Muslims would have had to pay blood money to their families when it became known that they were Muslim.

Besides, God knew that among the unbelievers who prevented the Muslims' entry into the Sacred Mosque were some who would be good believers, and who would earn God's mercy. Had these two groups been separated from the rest of the unbelievers, God would have allowed the Muslims to attack and He would have punished the unbelievers severely: "*God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering.*" (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* then provides a further description of the unbelievers, showing their inner feelings after it has given an account of their apparent deeds: "*The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance.*" (Verse 26) This was not a passion for a particular faith or code of living, but rather a fury of arrogance and rigidity. This same fury led them to oppose the entry of the Prophet and his Companions to the Sacred Mosque, as also prevented the sacrificial animals from reaching their place of sacrifice. They were thus in breach of every tradition and religion. That they were prepared to commit such a breach had everything to do with their standing among all the Arab tribes so that it could not be said that Muḥammad entered Makkah in spite of them. Because of such ignorant passion, they perpetrated this gross offence against all tradition and all religion. They were prepared to violate the sanctity of the Sacred Mosque, which gave them their own

special position in Arabia, as well as the sanctity of the sacred months, which was observed under Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Their fury and ignorance was clearly apparent in their harsh response to everyone who suggested that they pursue a line of compromise, criticizing their plan to prevent Muḥammad and his Companions from entering the Mosque. This fury again manifested itself in the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn Amr's objection to include in the treaty God's attributes, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful, or the Prophet's status as God's Messenger. Such a hardened attitude could only have been the result of fury, ignorance and arrogance.

God left them to their fury and ignorance because He knew their adamant refusal to submit to the truth. At the same time, He protected the believers from entertaining such passion, giving them instead feelings of tranquillity and piety: "*Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well.*" (Verse 26) Calm tranquillity and piety are fine qualities suited to a believing heart which feels its bond with God, reassured by it. A person with such qualities always places his trust in God, and watches God in everything he says or does. Such a person does not behave arrogantly, nor do they let personal anger get the better of them. Instead, they are only motivated to anger in support of their faith and for God's sake. Therefore, if they are ordered to calm down, they willingly obey.

Therefore, the believers were most worthy and deserving of the word of piety. This is yet another point on which they are commended by God, who favoured them with the tranquillity He bestowed on them. This is all an honour given to them by the One who knows them well: "*God has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 26)

The Prophet's True Vision

We have already learnt that some of the Prophet's Companions on this trip, who were delighted with his dream knowing that prophets' dreams always come true, found it hard that his dream should not be fulfilled that year, and that they would be prevented entry to the Sacred Mosque. God assured them, however, that the Prophet's dream was true

Muḥammad ibn Maslamah went ahead with horses and arms until he arrived at Marr al-Ẓahrān, about one day's travel, by camel, from Makkah. There he found a few men from the Quraysh who were greatly worried at what they saw. They thought that he was about to attack Makkah in violation of the peace treaty, which stipulated that there would be no war between the two sides for ten years. When the Prophet encamped at Marr al-Ẓahrān where he could see the idols placed in the Sacred Mosque, he sent all the Muslims' arms, including bows, arrows and spears to a place called Baṭn Ya'juj. He then marched towards Makkah with his Companions having only their swords in their sheaths, as he had promised the people of Makkah.

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ at the head of a delegation to the Prophet. They said to him: "Muḥammad, we have never known you to break a promise ever since you were a young child." He asked why they were saying this. They replied: "You are trying to enter the city carrying all your arms; spears, bows and arrows." The Prophet said: "I am not going to carry arms into the city. We have sent them to Baṭn Ya'juj." Mikraz ibn Ḥafṣ then replied: "This is more like what we know of your faithfulness."

Many of the Quraysh nobility left Makkah and went into the surrounding mountains; this because they did not wish to look at the Muslims as they arrived at the city for worship. Indeed, the very sight infuriated them. The rest of the Makkans were either out in the streets or on rooftops looking at the Prophet and his Companions as they entered repeating their phrases that declared their submission to God. The Prophet was riding his she-camel, al-Qaṣwā', which he rode the previous year. His Companion, 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah, held the she-camel's rein and guided its march.

Thus the Prophet's dream came true and God's promise was fulfilled. The following year witnessed the fall of Makkah to Islam, and the divine faith came to reign in Makkah, then throughout the rest of Arabia. Then God's other promise and the other piece of good news were fulfilled: "*It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verse 28) The religion of truth prevailed, and not only in the Arabian Peninsula. Within half a century it prevailed across much of

the inhabited parts of the earth. It subdued the entire Persian Empire and took over much of the Byzantine Empire. It marched as far as India and China before moving into Malaysia, southern Asia and Indonesia. In the sixth and seventh centuries, these areas constituted most of the then known world.

This true religion continues to prevail over all religions, even after its political retreat from much of the areas it moved into, particularly in Europe and the major islands in the Mediterranean. It prevails even though the power of its people is very weak compared to the new powers that have recently emerged in the East and the West. Indeed, as a religion, Islam prevails over all else. It carries within itself and in its nature the elements of its strength. It moves forward, supported by neither sword nor gun drawn by its people. Its advance is due only to its inherent harmony with human nature and the natural laws of the universe, and to the fact that it satisfies, with perfect ease, the requirements of mind and soul, progress and civilization, regardless of whether people live in tents or in skyscrapers.

Any religious person who looks objectively at Islam is bound to recognise the soundness and inherent strength of this religion. Nor can they help but recognise its ability to lead humanity with wisdom and to answer its progressive needs in an easy and straightforward way: "*Sufficient is God as a witness.*" (Verse 28)

We see, then, that God's promise was fulfilled in the immediate, political form, before one century had elapsed after the Prophet's mission. God's promise continues to be fulfilled in its substantive form, as Islam prevails over all other religions. In fact, it is the only religion that continues to act and lead in all situations. Perhaps only the Muslims do not understand this truth. Other people know it and take it into account as they draw up their policies and programmes.

The Muslim Community

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse that paints a superb picture of the community of the Prophet's Companions, adding God's commendation of that unique and happy group of people who earned His pleasure and who were also informed of that fact:

> *Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.* (Verse 29)

This is a remarkable picture drawn by the superior style of the Qur'ān. It includes several snapshots depicting the group's main conditions, both subtle and clearly apparent. One shot portrays their attitude to the unbelievers and to one another. Thus, they are "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" Another shows them as they are in worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" Yet a third image reveals what preoccupies their minds and characterizes their feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" A fourth shot focuses on the apparent effect worship has on their faces as they dedicate all to God: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah.*" A number of additional quick images tell us how they are described in the Gospels: "*They are like a seed that brings forth its shoot; strengthens it; grows thick; stands firm on its stem; delights the sowers; through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*"

The verse begins by confirming the Prophet's status, denied by the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn 'Amr, and the unbelievers he represented at the time: "*Muḥammad is God's Messenger.*" The verse then goes on to paint its beautiful picture in the unique Qur'ānic style.

Needless to say, the believers go through different conditions and situations during their lifetimes. However, the images shown in the verse concentrate on their permanent features, highlighting these so that they serve as the main lines in the overall picture. The selection of these particular images clearly shows that God wants to bestow honour on this happy community. This is reflected right from the very first image

that depicts them as: "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" They take such a firm and unyielding attitude towards the unbelievers, despite the fact that those unbelievers included their parents, siblings, kinsfolk and friends. However, they severed all these relations with the unbelievers. They are at the same time full of mercy towards one another, when their only bond is brotherhood in faith. This means that in both conditions of unyielding firmness and flowing mercy the determining factor is faith. There is absolutely no personal consideration. Their feelings, emotions, behaviour and bonds are based on faith alone, making them hostile to its opponents, compassionate towards their fellow believers. They discard all selfish thoughts and make their bond with God the only one to which they attach any value.

Again God's wish to honour this community is clearly apparent in making prominent their condition as they worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" The way this is portrayed suggests that this is their permanent condition, one that we see whenever we look at them. In fact, bowing and prostration represent the condition of worship, which is the core feature of their personality. Therefore, it is expressed in a way that makes it permanent during their time, as if they spent their whole lives bowing and prostrating.

The same applies to the third image, which concentrates on their inner thoughts and feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" Such are their permanent feelings and what always preoccupies them. All they aspire for is God's favour and earning His pleasure.

The fourth image focuses on how apparent worship and inner feelings are reflected in their appearances: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations.*" Their faces shine with transparent clarity and the warmth that worship imparts. This is not a reference to the dark mark associated with prayer that appears on the foreheads of some people, as people may wrongly think when they hear the words, '*the marks of their prostration.*' What this expression refers to is the mark of worship, which is symbolized here by prostration as it expresses submission to God in the clearest form. The mark of this submission is seen on their faces; in other words there is no trace of pride, arrogance or selfishness. Instead, what is reflected is noble humility, purity and a serenity that adds to the shine on a believer's face.

This bright overall picture contains nothing new. It is also painted in the Torah as God gave the world the news of the emergence of this community of the Prophet's Companions.

The Gospels give another picture of Muḥammad and his community, describing them as "*And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot.*" It is a fertile seed that sends forth its shoot which does not weaken the stalk. On the contrary, it "*strengthens it*", or the shoot may be strengthened by the stalk. Thus the plant "*grows thick*", and its stem acquires strength and structure. The plant now "*stands firm on its stem*", upright, neither bending nor crooked. This is how the plant looks, but what feeling does it give to farmers who can immediately distinguish a fine plant that is bound to yield fruit? It gives them a feeling of pleasure: "*delighting the sowers*". A variant reading of this phrase puts the delighted onlookers in the singular, '*delighting the sower,*' which in this case refers to the Prophet, as he was the one that looked after the seeds until they harvested a noble and delightful community that was unique in history. The unbelievers experience a different feeling as they look on: "*Through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*" Sending such a feeling of rage into the unbelievers' hearts is clearly intended. It suggests that the planting was by God or by His Messenger, so as to yield a harvest that accomplishes God's purpose in enraging His enemies.

Again this picture is nothing new. It was painted before Muḥammad and his Companions began to walk the earth, in the Gospels as they herald the happy event of God sending Muḥammad with His final message.

Thus does God record in His book the qualities of this select group of the Prophet's Companions, so that it will be recognized by all creation. It remains the ideal and the role model for future generations, as the standard of faith they should emulate.

In addition to all this honour, God gives them a promise of forgiveness for their sins and a supreme reward: "*To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" The promise is given in such general terms after highlighting their special features so as to make them the first to whom the general description applies. The honour granted them is more than enough for anyone, but God's favours and bounty are limitless, unending. Therefore, they are granted forgiveness and a rich reward.

Once more I try today, fourteen centuries after the event, to visualize the beaming faces and rejoicing hearts of those people as they received this great honour and promise bestowed on them by God. I try to see them as they look at their own picture painted by God in His book. I look at them as they are on their way back from al-Ḥudaybiyah, when this *sūrah* was revealed and relayed to them; how they reflected on it, and how it touched their hearts and souls. I see them looking at one another, with each one seeing in his brother the mark of the grace he himself feels. I try again and again to live with them a moment of this splendid festival they experienced, but how can one who was not present there share all that, except from afar? It can only be by a special favour of God's grace, bringing close that which is indeed far. Lord! You know that I aspire to a special gift of this unique favour.



SŪRAH 49

Al-Ḥujurāt
(Compartments)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, composed of no more than 18 verses, is majestic, indeed superior. It includes a number of basic facts of faith, Islamic law and human existence. It opens up before our hearts and minds wide horizons and gives rise to a host of important thoughts. It refers to systems of formation and organization, principles of education and upbringing, fundamentals of legislation and essential directives which could take a hundred times its length. It puts before our eyes two great issues for reflection and deliberation.

The first thing that appears to us when we read this *sūrah* is that it lays down, almost independently, a complete sketch of a noble world, free of anything that may be described as unbecoming. It outlines the principles, concepts and approaches that form the foundation of this world, ensuring first that it comes into being, and then its continuity. This world derives its *raison d'etre* from God, looks up to God and is fit to be attributed to God. It is a world that combines purity of intention and feeling with a keen sense of propriety in what it says, feels and thinks. It maintains a high standard of morality and good manners in its dealings with God, His Messenger, its own affairs and interaction with others. This sense of morality penetrates into its deepest thoughts and manifests itself in its actions.

At the same time it has laws and regulations that ensure its continuity. These laws and regulations are based on its morality, emanate from it and fit with it. Thus this world benefits from such consistency of deep reality and surface appearance, the compatibility of its laws and feelings, the equilibrium between motives and checks, and the harmony between feelings and actions as it turns to God, appealing to Him. Hence, the existence and continuity of this noble and pure world are not left either to fine feelings and a sensitive conscience or to law and legislation. Nor are the establishment and maintenance of this world left to either the feelings and efforts of the individual or to the measures and systems of the state. Indeed, both individual and state have to work side by side, so that their efforts and duties complement each other in perfect harmony.

This world observes a certain code of behaviour with God and His Messenger, one that requires that everyone realizes his or her limits in relation to their Lord, and in relation to the Messenger who conveys His message: "*Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all.*" (Verse 1) Thus a servant of God does not precipitate His orders or prohibitions; nor does he or she suggest to Him any judgement or ruling. They neither exceed the limits of what God orders or prohibits, nor show that they have a will or an opinion independent from those of their Creator. This code is motivated by an attitude that combines fearing God with being modest and observing appropriate values in dealing with Him. Believers also observe special values when they address God's Messenger [peace be upon him]: "*Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.*" (Verses 2–5)

This noble world sets a well-defined approach for verifying what people may say or do, determining their accuracy before making any

judgement. This approach relies on fearing God and putting all matters to God's Messenger, without precipitating his judgement or suggesting to him what he has neither ordered nor recommended: "*Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.*" (Verses 6–8)

This noble world has its own rules and practical measures in sorting out any differences, conflicts and excesses that may occur within it, realizing that unless these are properly dealt with, they may undermine its very structure. Hence, it sets out certain procedures for dealing with them based on three main criteria: (1) that all believers are brethren; (2) that justice and peace must be maintained, and (3) that all believers are God-fearing and their goal is to earn God's pleasure and mercy. "*If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.*" (Verses 9–10)

Moreover, certain moral values apply in shaping the feelings of people in this world towards one another and in their behaviour towards each other. "*Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you deface one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers.*" (Verse 11)

It is a world with healthy feelings, guaranteed rights, where people's integrity is valued in both their presence and absence. No one is

condemned on suspicion. None seeks to publicize another's shortcomings. People's safety, security, integrity and freedom are fully respected by all. "*Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.*" (Verse 12)

In this noble world a complete concept of mankind's unity, despite its divergent races and communities, prevails. A single standard of evaluation, free of prejudice and error, applies to all people. "*Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13)

Having presented these fundamental concepts that ensures this noble world maintains a high standard of purity, the *sūrah* embarks on drawing an outline of the faith by which believers are called upon to establish this world. Indeed, it is by their quality of faith that they are required to rise to the task and see to its fulfilment. This is the quality that distinguishes them from others and motivates them to respond and submit. They are addressed by their quality of having faith, '*Believers*!' Anyone who is so addressed by God will be so embarrassed not to give the right response. It is an address that makes any duty, hard and demanding as it may be, easy to fulfil. Indeed hearts will be all too eager to listen and respond: "*The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verses 14–16)

Before it closes, the *sūrah* shows how great the favour God has bestowed on humanity is. It is the gift of faith with which God favours

people according to what He knows of what they deserve. "*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.*" (Verses 17–18)

The second very important thing that appears clearly to us when we read the *sūrah* and review the actual events leading to its revelation is the great and unwavering effort, represented by Qur'ānic verses and the Prophet's directives, to establish and educate the first Muslim community. Indeed it is the community that represents that noble world, providing a practical model of it. Thus, it is no longer a mere ideal that lingers in people's dreams and imaginations.

This community, which existed during a certain period of history, did not come into existence suddenly or by chance. It did not owe its existence to a sudden change in the nature of all things. Instead, it went through a process of natural and slow growth, like a great tree that stretches its roots deep into the earth and spreads its branches wide into the air. It took the necessary time to complete its growth and benefited from steady and consistent effort to ensure that growth. Patient care, penetrating insight, careful motivation, steady encouragement and far-sighted strengthening were also provided. Moreover, it needed to go through hard and testing experiences and to learn important lessons from such experiences. In all this we see the kind of care God took of that community. He in His wisdom chose to fulfil a great trust, thus bringing His will to pass. Yet that community had its own virtues and potentials that only needed to be brought into full play. All this worked together to bring about such remarkable light in human history and to start, in reality, a situation that seems closer to an imaginary world.



Al-Ḥujurāt (Compartments)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. (1)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تُقَدِّمُوا بَيْنَ يَدَيِ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. (2)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَرْفَعُوا أَصْوَاتَكُمْ فَوْقَ صَوْتِ النَّبِيِّ وَلَا تَجْهَرُوا لَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ كَجَهْرِ بَعْضِكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ أَنْ تَحْبَطَ أَعْمَالُكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢﴾

Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. (3)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَغُضُّونَ أَصْوَاتَهُمْ عِنْدَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ امْتَحَنَ اللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةٌ وَأَجْرٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٣﴾

Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. (4)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُنَادُونَكَ مِنْ وَرَاءِ الْحُجُرَاتِ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾

If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful. (5)

وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ صَبَرُوا حَتَّىٰ تَخْرُجَ إِلَيْهِمْ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٥﴾

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِن جَآءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌۢ
بِنَبَإٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوٓا۟ أَن تُصِيبُوا۟ قَوْمًۢا بِجَهَٰلَةٍ
فَتُصْبِحُوا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَعَلْتُمْ نَٰدِمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. (6)

وَٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ فِيكُمْ رَسُولَ ٱللَّهِ ۚ لَوْ يُطِيعُكُمْ
فِى كَثِيرٍ مِّنَ ٱلْأَمْرِ لَعَنِتُّمْ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ حَبَّبَ
إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْإِيمَٰنَ وَزَيَّنَهُۥ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَكَرَّهَ
إِلَيْكُمُ ٱلْكُفْرَ وَٱلْفُسُوقَ وَٱلْعِصْيَانَ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلرَّٰشِدُونَ ﴿٧﴾

And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. (7)

فَضْلًا مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَنِعْمَةً ۚ وَٱللَّهُ
عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٨﴾

[All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise. (8)

وَإِن طَآئِفَتَانِ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱقْتَتَلُوا۟
فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمَا ۖ فَإِنۢ بَغَتْ إِحْدَىٰهُمَا
عَلَى ٱلْأُخْرَىٰ فَقَٰتِلُوا۟ ٱلَّتِى تَبْغِى حَتَّىٰ تَفِىٓءَ
إِلَىٰٓ أَمْرِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ فَإِن فَآءَتْ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟
بَيْنَهُمَا بِٱلْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوٓا۟ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ
ٱلْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴿٩﴾

If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. (9)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا۟ بَيْنَ
أَخَوَيْكُمْ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy. (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ لَا يَسْخَرْ قَوْمٌ مِّن قَوْمٍ
عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُونُوا۟ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا نِسَآءٌ مِّن
نِّسَآءٍ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَكُنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُنَّ ۖ وَلَا تَلْمِزُوٓا۟
أَنفُسَكُمْ وَلَا تَنَابَزُوا۟ بِٱلْأَلْقَٰبِ ۖ بِئْسَ
ٱلِٱسْمُ ٱلْفُسُوقُ بَعْدَ ٱلْإِيمَٰنِ ۚ وَمَن لَّمْ
يَتُبْ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers. (11)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱجْتَنِبُوا۟ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلظَّنِّ
إِنَّ بَعْضَ ٱلظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ ۖ وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا۟ وَلَا
يَغْتَب بَّعْضُكُم بَعْضًا ۚ أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ
أَن يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ ۚ
وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful. (12)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ
وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَٰكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَآئِلَ
لِتَعَارَفُوٓا۟ ۚ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ
أَتْقَىٰكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٣﴾

Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware. (13)

قَالَتِ ٱلْأَعْرَابُ ءَامَنَّا ۖ قُل لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوا۟
وَلَٰكِن قُولُوٓا۟ أَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ
ٱلْإِيمَٰنُ فِى قُلُوبِكُمْ ۖ وَإِن تُطِيعُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ
وَرَسُولَهُۥ لَا يَلِتْكُم مِّنْ أَعْمَٰلِكُمْ
شَيْـًٔا ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٤﴾

The Bedouin say: "We have attained to faith." Say [to them]: "Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful." (14)

إِنَّمَا ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ
وَرَسُولِهِۦ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَرْتَابُوا۟ وَجَٰهَدُوا۟
بِأَمْوَٰلِهِمْ وَأَنفُسِهِمْ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلصَّٰدِقُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. (15)

قُلْ أَتُعَلِّمُونَ ٱللَّهَ بِدِينِكُمْ وَٱللَّهُ
يَعْلَمُ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَىْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٦﴾

Say: "Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything." (16)

They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: "Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth." (17)

يَمُنُّونَ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ أَسْلَمُوا ۖ قُلْ لَا تَمُنُّوا عَلَيَّ إِسْلَامَكُمْ ۖ بَلِ اللَّهُ يَمُنُّ عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْ هَدَاكُمْ لِلْإِيمَانِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do. (18)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

Refining Rough Manners

Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful. (Verses 1–5)

The *sūrah* starts with this first loving address that aims to alert hearts: "*Believers!*" It is an address by God to those who believe in Him, touching their hearts by highlighting the bond they have with Him, making them aware that they belong to Him, carry His mark, do His bidding and are His soldiers. They realize that they are in this world for a purpose He wants to accomplish. If He has made faith appealing to them and seem beautiful in their eyes, as part of His favour, it behoves them to stand

where He wants them to be, awaiting His orders and judgement. They should be glad to do His bidding in full submission to Him: *"Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 1)

Believers, do not make any suggestion to God or His Messenger, concerning any of your affairs or of life in general. Do not presume to have a say in any matter before God has stated, through His Messenger, what He wants concerning it. Do not attempt to judge any matter unless you first refer to what God and His Messenger say.

Qatādah says: "It has been reported that some people used to say: 'If there was some revelation concerning such and such,' or, 'If it could thus be true.' God disliked such suggestions." Al-'Awfī says: "They were told not to start speaking in his presence." Mujāhid says: "The verse orders believers not to precipitate what the Prophet might say. They must wait until God made His judgement clear through His Messenger." Al-Dhaḥḥāk says: "Do not make a judgement on any question relating to your faith without waiting for the judgement of God and His Messenger." Ibn 'Abbās is reported to have said: "Do not say anything that is not in line with the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*."

Thus, we see that it is all a question of a psychological attitude defining the standards to be observed in relation to God and His Messenger, and the process by which instructions are received and carried out. This is an essential part of how Islamic law is enacted and implemented. It is all based on an essential God-fearing quality and its reinforcement. This quality stems from the awareness that God hears all and knows all. Furthermore, this all-embracing truth is incorporated into one single, short verse.

The believers applied this standard to their relationship with their Lord and His Messenger. None of them would ever presume to suggest anything to God or His Messenger. None would voice an opinion unless God's Messenger asked him to do so. None would make a judgement concerning any matter without first referring to what God and His Messenger said about it.

Imām Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah relate that the Prophet asked Mu'ādh when he appointed him Governor of Yemen: "How will you judge?" Mu'ādh said: "According to God's book." The

Prophet asked: "What if you do not find in it what you need?" Mu'ādh answered: "Then according to the Sunnah of God's Messenger." Again the Prophet asked: "And if you do not find something relevant in that?" Mu'ādh replied: "In this case, I will exercise my judgement as best as I can." The Prophet put his hand on Mu'ādh's chest and said: "Praise be to God for guiding the messenger of God's Messenger to what pleases His Messenger." After the revelation of this verse, the Prophet might ask his Companions about their day and the places they had been to, but even then, they would hesitate to give an answer other than: "God and His Messenger know best." They feared that a direct answer might be treated as presumption in the presence of God and His Messenger.

When Speaking to the Prophet

In a *ḥadīth* reported by Abū Bakarah Nafi' ibn al-Ḥārith mentions that during his pilgrimage, the Prophet asked his Companions: "'Which month is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' He was silent until we thought that he would give it a different name. But he said: 'Is it not Dhū'l-Ḥijjah?' We said: 'Yes.' He then asked: 'Which city is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Again, he was silent until we thought that he would call it by a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the sanctified city?' We said: 'Yes, indeed.' So he went on and asked: 'What day is today?' We replied: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Once more he remained silent until we thought that he would give it a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the day of sacrifice?' We answered in the affirmative..." This is, then, an example of the standard the Prophet's Companions achieved in their God-fearing manners when they heard this instruction coupled with the order to maintain their fear of God, who hears all and knows all.

The second aspect of good manners concerned the Prophet's Companions' own discourse with him and the respect they should feel and show. This was to be observed in how they spoke to him and in the level of their voices. This was how they should manifest their respect for the Prophet as they sat with him. As God drew their attention to this requirement, He addressed them by that quality they loved to have and warned them that violation of His orders might bring grievous

consequences in its wake: *"Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it."* (Verse 2)

This kindly address coupled with its awesome warning had their profound effect on the Prophet's Companions. Al-Bukhārī reports that Abū Mulaykah said: "The two goodly ones, Abū Bakr and 'Umar [may God be pleased with them], were in a perilous situation, as they raised their voices in the presence of the Prophet. When the delegation of the Tamīm tribe arrived [in the ninth year of the Islamic calendar] one of them suggested al-Aqra' ibn Ḥābis [to be appointed as their chief], while the other suggested another man. [One reporter says that he does not remember the name of this second man, while another reporter mentions that he was al-Qa'qā' ibn Ma'bad.] Abū Bakr said to 'Umar: 'You merely want to oppose me.' The other replied: 'I do not wish to oppose you.' They were soon speaking loudly. The verse was revealed saying: *'Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it.'* (Verse 2) Ibn al-Zubayr says that after its revelation 'Umar would hardly use an audible voice when he spoke to the Prophet until the Prophet asked him to speak up. It is also reported that when this verse was revealed, Abū Bakr said to the Prophet: 'God's Messenger, I will only speak to you in a whisper.'

Imām Aḥmad relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālik that when this verse was revealed, Thābit ibn Qays, a man with a high-pitched voice thought: "I was the one who raised his voice in the presence of God's Messenger. I am destined to hell, because my deeds have come to waste." He stayed at home depressed. The Prophet noticed his absence and asked about him. Some people went to him and told him that the Prophet had asked about his absence. He said to them: "I am the one who raised his voice above the voice of the Prophet and spoke loudly to him. All my deeds are wasted. I am destined to hell." They went to the Prophet informing him of what Thābit had said. The Prophet said: "No. He certainly belongs to heaven." Anas says: "We subsequently saw him walking among us, knowing that he was certain to go to heaven."

Thus they felt a tremor in their hearts as they listened to this endearing address and its stern warning. Hence, they observed a high standard of fine manners in the Prophet's presence for fear that their deeds would come to nothing.

God praises their piety and lowered voices when they are with the Prophet in an unusual expression: *"Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them."* (Verse 3) Piety that manifests itself in a God-fearing attitude is a great gift God grants to certain hearts He chooses after initially testing them. It is thus implanted only in hearts that are suited to it, having first proven their merit. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are they who have proven themselves in a test of hearts. They are the ones who fear God, a quality that earns them forgiveness and a rich reward from God.

Here, then, is a tempting invitation that follows a stern warning. Both are part of how God educated and prepared his chosen servants for the great task that first generation of Muslims undertook.

It is reported that 'Umar heard two people speaking loudly in the Prophet's Mosque. He went to them and said: "Do you realize where you are? Where do you come from?" They said to him: "We come from Ṭā'if." He said: "Had you been from Madīnah, I would have had you soundly beaten."

Islamic scholars, having realized the extent of this injunction, state that it is reprehensible to raise one's voice near the Prophet's grave in the same way as it was reprehensible to do so in his presence. In this way, Muslims demonstrate their respect for the Prophet in all situations.

The ninth year of the Islamic calendar is called 'The year of delegations' because delegations from all over Arabia arrived in Madīnah to embrace Islam and pledge their loyalty to the Prophet. The *sūrah* refers to an incident that took place that year when the delegation of Tamīm arrived. These were unrefined Bedouins. They shouted to the Prophet from outside his wives' apartments that were situated next to the mosque: "Muḥammad, come out and speak to us!" The Prophet disliked their uncivilized manner. Hence, the next verse of the *sūrah* was revealed: *"Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience*

to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful." (Verses 4–5)

Thus does God describe most of them as being without reason. He censures their calling out to the Prophet in a way that is contrary to the sort of respect that should be shown to God's Messenger, the leader and educator of the community of believers. He explains to them that it better behoved them to wait patiently until the Prophet came out to them of his own accord. Furthermore, the *sūrah* highlights to them the value of repentance, making it clear that they should seek God's forgiveness and pray to Him to bestow His mercy on them.

Muslims have shown their awareness of this high standard of refinement, extending it to every teacher and scholar. They would not disturb their teachers or impose themselves on them until they came out or called them in. Abū 'Ubayd, a pious and reliable scholar of *Ḥadīth*, says: "I never knocked at the door of any scholar, but waited patiently until he came out in his own good time."

Making Sure Before Taking Action

> *Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.* (Verses 6–8)

The first address in the *sūrah* defines the leadership and the source from which to receive orders. The second establishes the standards of manners and respect to be maintained in dealing with this leadership. Both serve as the basis for all legislations and directives that follow in the *sūrah*. It is imperative for the source and the leadership to be well defined so that directives and instructions be given their true value and

so that they are properly obeyed. Hence, the third address explains to the believers how to receive news and reports and the need to verify their reliability. *"Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action."* (Verse 6)

The verse specifically mentions the evildoer because he is more likely to lie. It is important that suspicion should not be widely spread in the Muslim community. If every report is doubted, the system of gathering intelligence and information becomes paralyzed. In a Muslim community, individuals are normally treated as trustworthy, and the information they bring is considered reliable. An evildoer is treated differently: his information is not accepted until it is verified. Thus, the community steers a middle way between accepting and rejecting the information relayed to it. The community does not rush into action on the basis of a report given by someone whose behaviour leaves much to be desired. Such rash action might lead to committing a wrong against other people, and subsequent regret. Furthermore, such rash action may incur God's displeasure and put the community in a position of committing an injustice.

A number of commentators on the Qur'ān mention that this verse specifically referred to al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah ibn Abū Mu'ayṭ when the Prophet sent him to collect *zakāt* from the tribe of al-Muṣṭalaq. Ibn Kathīr quotes a report by Mujāhid and Qatādah, stating: "God's Messenger sent al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah to al-Muṣṭalaq tribe to collect their *zakāt* and they paid it to him. When he returned he reported to the Prophet that the tribe was raising a force to attack the Muslims. [In his report, Qatādah also states that al-Walīd added that the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe had renounced the Islamic faith.] The Prophet then sent Khālid ibn al-Walīd to them, ordering him to make sure of the information before taking any action. Khālid so went out to them arriving at night and sending out a number of soldiers to gather information. When they returned, they reported to him that the tribe were adhering to their Islamic faith and that they heard the call to prayer and saw people praying. In the morning, Khālid made his appearance at the tribe's quarters and saw what pleased him. He then returned to the Prophet and reported all this to him. Thereafter, this verse was then revealed."

Qatādah says that the Prophet used to say afterwards: "Verification complies with God's orders, while haste comes from Satan."

The import of this verse is general, making it clear that checking the accuracy of reports given by suspect people is necessary. On the other hand, a report by a God-fearing person is taken as correct, because this is the normal state of affairs in the Muslim community. A report by an evildoer is the exception, not the norm. Indeed, accepting reports by God-fearing people is part of proper verification and checking. To make doubt the norm, applicable to all sources and reports, is contrary to the principle of trust that is basic to the Muslim community. Furthermore, it could easily cause disruption in its life. Islam allows life to run its normal course while putting in place certain controls that guarantee its protection. Here we see how this operates in practice.

Making Life Too Hard

It appears that some Muslims wanted to take immediate action when they heard the first news reported by al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah. They advised the Prophet to immediately punish the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe. In doing so, they were motivated by a keen desire to ensure the status of Islam and to act against those who refused to pay *zakāt*. The next verse reminds them of the great blessing they had, namely the Prophet's presence in their midst. They should appreciate this blessing and be always mindful of its importance: "*And know that God's Messenger is among you.*" (Verse 7)

This is a reality that we can very easily imagine because it actually happened. However, when we reflect on it, we see that it is superior, beyond imagination. Is it easy to imagine a continuous, dynamic contact between heaven and earth, witnessed by all, whereby heaven speaks to people on earth about their public and private affairs, correcting their errors one by one, and giving them advice about their most intimate affairs? Any one of them might do or say something, or even entertain a thought, and yet heaven is aware of it all. What happens next is that God informs His Messenger of what has taken place and directs him to do or say whatever is necessary about it. This is something so great that it might not be fully appreciated by some of those present at the time. Hence, they are reminded of it in this particular way: "*And know*

that God's Messenger is among you." (Verse 7) In other words, be aware of this fact and give it its due importance.

One outcome of this new-found knowledge is that they must not act presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. The Qur'ān, however, puts this even more lucidly and forcefully, telling the Muslims that what God's Messenger decides on any matter, on the basis of God's revelation or inspiration, is good for them as it combines ease and mercy. Had God's Messenger obeyed all their thoughts, they would have found matters far more difficult. God is more aware than them of what is of benefit to them. His Messenger represents mercy in everything he chooses for them: "*Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm.*" (Verse 7) This implies that they should leave all their affairs in the hands of God and His Messenger. They should submit fully, surrendering themselves to God's will, implementing His orders as they receive them, and suggesting nothing to God's Messenger.

The *sūrah* then draws their attention to the grace of faith He guided them to, making their hearts warm to it as He revealed its beauty and benefit such that they would love it dearly. He has also made unbelief, wrongdoing and sin hateful to them. All this is part of God's grace which He bestows on them: "*But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.*" (Verses 7–8)

That God should select certain individuals from among His servants and grant them all this represents His immeasurable bounty and grace. Indeed, all other types of grace and bounty, including that which brings people into existence and gives them life, seem to dwindle by comparison to what faith represents. Later in the *sūrah* we will look in detail at God's words: "*It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.*" (Verse 17)

What is particularly significant here is that they are reminded that it is God who has willed that they should have all this bounty. It is He who has rid their hearts of all the evil of unbelief, wrongdoing and sin. It is He who willed that they should follow the right course, bestowing

on them His favours and bounty. All this He does in His wisdom and full knowledge of the truth. Again stating this truth implies that they should submit themselves to God's direction and planning, trusting that it is always for their own good. They should stop making suggestions and rushing hastily into what they consider to be good, before God has made His choice for them. God's Messenger takes them by the hand to gain all this goodness.

Man is hasty, but he is unaware of the likely consequences of his precipitate action. Man may also make suggestions concerning his own or other people's affairs, without knowing whether his suggestions will bring benefit or cause harm: "*Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty.*" (17: 11) If man would only submit himself to God, accepting what God chooses for him, knowing that God's choice is better, more compassionate and beneficial for him than what he may choose for himself, he would be much more comfortable. He would complete this short journey on this planet with ease and contentment. But this is also an aspect of God's grace which He grants to whomever He wills.

Fighting Between Muslim Believers

> *If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.* (Verses 9–10)

This is a practical rule to protect the community of believers from strife resulting from excesses and hard feelings. This rule is given immediately after the requirement to verify the reports given by evildoers, making sure that the believers do not rush into action that may be counterproductive. Whether this verse was revealed in consequence

of a particular case, as some reports suggest, or whether it was merely initiating a piece of legislation to outline what the Muslim community should do in such cases, it nonetheless provides a general and highly effective rule that stamps out strife and ensures solidarity within the Muslim community. It also establishes justice, rightness and fairness. All this is based on believers being God-fearing and their hope that He will bestow His grace on a community that deals with justice and works for reconciliation.

The Qur'ān either supposes or confronts the possibility of two groups of believers taking up arms against each other, yet it accepts that both are believers, even though one of them, or indeed both of them, may be in the wrong. It requires the Muslim community, other than the two fighting groups, to work for reconciliation between the two. But if one of them acts wrongfully, refusing to give up what it has no right to claim, or indeed if both act wrongfully, refusing reconciliation or refusing to abide by God's law over that which they dispute, then the believers must fight those who act wrongfully until they revert to God's commandment. The commandment at issue here is the ending of strife and conflict between believers and accepting God's judgement over anything contentious. Should those acting wrongfully revert to God's commandment, then the believers should establish reconciliation based on strict justice and equity, in obedience of God and seeking His pleasure: "*God loves those who act equitably.*" (Verse 9)

This judgement is followed by a touch that aims to bring out genuine feelings of brotherhood among believers. It is the bond that unites them after they have fallen out. They are also reminded of the need to always be God-fearing, suggesting that this is the only way to earn His grace. *"All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy."* (Verse 10)

The correlation of this is that love, peace, cooperation and unity are the essential characteristics of a Muslim community. Conflict and fighting are exceptions that must be dealt with as soon as they occur in order to bring about reconciliation and peace. For this end, it is permissible for other Muslims to fight those of their brethren who act

wrongfully towards others; this so as to bring them back into the fold and restore the proper situation. This is certainly a tough and decisive measure.

This rule also provides that no wounded man in such battles may be finished off, and no captive may be killed. Those who lay down their arms and flee the battlefield cannot be pursued. Furthermore, the property of the group in the wrong may not be looted. The purpose of fighting them is not to finish them off, but rather to bring them back into line with the rest of the Muslim community.

In the right order of things, all Muslims of the world should have one leader. Once a pledge of loyalty is given to a leader to rule over the Muslim community as a whole, and another person claims such leadership for himself, this claimant should be killed. He and his supporters are considered rebels whom believers should fight alongside their leader. It was on this basis that Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib fought those who rebelled in the battles of the Camel and Ṣiffīn. Many of the Prophet's distinguished Companions fought alongside him. However, a small number including Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Muḥammad ibn Maslamah, Usāmah ibn Zayd and 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar chose not to engage in the battle, either because they could not determine which side was right or because, as al-Jaṣṣāṣ says, they felt that Imām 'Alī had clear superiority and hence their absence would not affect the result. The first probability is clearly the stronger, especially as this is borne out by some of their reported statements. Ibn 'Umar, for example, is reported to have expressed regret for not fighting alongside 'Alī.

This proper state of affairs, whereby the Muslims have only one leader, should be the norm in all situations, including those exceptional situations when two or more political rulers are in power in different and separate Muslim areas. It is the duty of Muslims to fight on the side of the single ruler against the group acting wrongfully, if they rebel against his authority, or if one group acts wrongfully towards another group without rebelling against the Muslim ruler *per se*. It is also the duty of Muslims to fight such rebels if they affiliate themselves to a political ruler in a situation where more than one Muslim ruler is in power. All Muslims must close ranks and stand against those acting wrongfully

until they revert to God's commandment. In this way, this text remains operational in all situations.

It is clear that this system, based on arbitration and fighting the group in the wrong until they revert to God's commandment, precedes all human attempts in this regard. Moreover, it is free of all the flaws and shortcomings inherent in defective human endeavours. Moreover, it incorporates qualities of purity, honesty and absolute justice. The arbitration that it calls for is based on operating God's orders, which are equitable, free of any prejudice and defect. Alas for mankind! They look on, but go away limping and stumbling when the clear, paved and straight way beckons to them.

No Ridicule, Defamation or Insult

> *Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers.* (Verse 11)

The human society Islam establishes in the light of Qur'ānic guidance operates a high standard of manners. Every individual in this society has his or her integrity, which may not be compromised. Indeed, it is part of the integrity of the whole community. To slander anyone is to slander oneself, because the whole community is a single entity and its integrity is one.

In this verse, the Qur'ān again addresses the believers by their most beloved description, "*Believers*". It forbids that one group should deride another, be they men deriding other men, or women deriding other women. For how can they know whether or not the ones they deride enjoy a better status with God?

The way this order is expressed suggests that the apparent values that men or women may consider important may not be those that

give people their real status. There are other values, which people may not know about. These are known to God who operates them in fairness. A rich man may deride a poor one. Similarly, those who are strong, enjoying good health, intelligence, children and support, may deride those who are less fortunate than themselves, such as those who are weak, handicapped, simple-minded, childless or orphans without support. A woman who sees herself as pretty, young, perfectly shaped, or rich may deride another for being ugly, old, misshaped, or poor. But none of these earthly values is of any importance as a criterion of high status. In God's sight, people are raised in rank on the basis of totally different values.

The Qur'ān, however, does not stop at implying this. It works on the sentiment of brotherhood in faith, reminding the believers that they descend from a single soul. Whoever defames anyone actually defames all. Hence, the Qur'ān says: *"Neither shall you defame yourselves."* (Verse 11) It should be mentioned that the word the Qur'ān uses for defaming, *talmizū*, has a particular resonance that imparts a feeling that also has a physical effect.

Part of derision and defamation is to call others names that they dislike, or feel to be meant as ridicule. It is the right of a believer not to be called by a name that he or she dislikes, or feels to suggest disrespect. Moreover, Islamic standards require a believer not to call a brother or a sister by such a name that gives them pain. The Prophet changed the names or nicknames of some of his Companions because he felt, with his refined sense and compassionate heart, that they could bring ridicule or pain to the people concerned.

Having outlined the true values in God's measure, and appealed to feelings of brotherhood and of belonging to one soul, the *sūrah* now reaches out to the believers' sense of faith, warning them that they will lose this noble quality if they indulge in derision and ridicule: *"Nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed."* (Verse 11) To indulge in this is akin to renouncing faith after one has believed. The *sūrah* goes even further than this by threatening to consider this an act of wrongdoing, something that is often expressed in the Qur'ān as being synonymous with associating partners with God. *"Those who do*

not repent are indeed wrongdoers." (Verse 11) Thus, the *sūrah* establishes the rules for refined manners in a noble community.

No Suspicion or Backbiting

> *Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.* (Verse 12)

This verse establishes yet another fence in this noble society, protecting the integrity and freedom of individuals, while at the same time teaching people how to cleanse their feelings and consciences. Following the pattern of the *sūrah,* it begins with the endearing address, "*Believers*". It follows this by issuing an order to avoid most suspicion, so that they do not leave themselves open to thoughts of doubt about others. It justifies this order by saying that some suspicion is sinful. Since the prohibition applies to most suspicion and the rule is that some suspicion is sinful, then the verse implies that all negative suspicion should be avoided, because no one knows which part of his or her doubts are sinful.

Thus the Qur'ān purges a Muslim's inner conscience so that it is not contaminated with evil suspicion and consequently incurs sin. It leaves it clean, free of doubt, entertaining only friendly and affectionate thoughts towards one's brethren. In this way it steers society away from suspicion so that the community enjoys reassurance and is not marred by worry and apprehension. Life in a community where ill thoughts have no place is both serene and comfortable.

Islam does not, however, stop at this point in educating people's hearts and souls. The verse we are looking at establishes a principle that applies to people's dealings with each other. It protects the rights of those who live in its pure society so that they are not punished or tried on the basis of suspicion. Indeed, suspicion does not even form a proper basis for interrogating people or investigating their affairs. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "If you have doubts, do not investigate." [Related by al-Ṭabarānī.] What this means is that people remain innocent, enjoying

all their rights, freedom and status until it is absolutely clear that they have committed some offence. It is not sufficient just to suspect them of having committed something so they are then pursued with the aim of establishing whether they are guilty or not.

This verse shows us the limit to which Islam goes in protecting people's freedom, integrity, rights and status. How does this compare with what even the best democratic countries boast of with regard to protecting human rights? This standard, which the Qur'ān sets for believers, is far superior indeed. Moreover, Islam achieves this in real life, after it establishes it in people's hearts and consciences.

The verse moves on to lay down another principle that provides social guarantees: "*And do not spy on one another.*" (Verse 12) Spying may be an action that follows immediately on entertaining suspicion. On the other hand, it may be an independent action that seeks to look at other people's faults and errors. The Qur'ān opposes spying because it is morally base. It aims to purge people's hearts from sinking into this vile pursuit in order to keep up its high moral standards.

Yet the order goes beyond this. It states an essential principle of the Islamic social system and its legislative measures. People are entitled to have their freedom and integrity respected. These should not be violated or encroached upon in any way.

In an Islamic society people enjoy a high standard of values. They enjoy security in their lives, homes and personal affairs. Nothing whatsoever justifies any violation of these. Indeed, the investigation of a crime does not provide, in the Islamic system, justification for spying on people. We take people by their appearances, and no one is entitled to delve into others' affairs. Indeed, people may not be taken to task except for what is evident of their offences. No one may suspect, anticipate or even know that others are secretly committing some violation and resort to spying on them so as to establish this as a fact or to catch them red-handed. All that may be done against such people is that they be put to trial when they actually commit a crime.

Some people said to 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd, a learned scholar and a Companion of the Prophet: "We saw this man with his beard dripping wine." He said: "We have been forbidden to spy. If we see something

evident, we act on it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] Mujāhid says: "Do not spy on one another. Take people on the basis of what is apparent and do not look into what God has left concealed."

Imām Aḥmad quotes Dujayn, a clerk employed by 'Uqbah, saying: "I said to 'Uqbah that we have neighbours who drink and I want to call the police to take them to account." He said to me: "Do not do that. What you should do is to advise and warn them." Dujayn did this but his neighbours persisted in their prohibited ways. So he said to 'Uqbah again: "I have warned them, but they will not desist. I am calling the police." 'Uqbah said to him: "Do not do that. I heard the Prophet say: 'Whoever keeps to himself a fault of another believer is like one who rescues a girl buried alive.'" [Also related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā'ī.]

Abū Dāwūd quotes Mu'āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān as saying: "I heard the Prophet saying: 'If you pursue people's faults you corrupt them, or almost corrupt them'." Abū al-Dardā', a learned Companion of the Prophet, said: "This is a word Mu'āwiyah has heard from the Prophet, and God has enabled him to benefit by it."

Thus was the divine order implemented in practical life. It did not stop at being a form of practical education to purge hearts and consciences. It became like a fence protecting people's rights, freedom and sanctity, so that they could not be touched under any pretext. Far superior is this level to any achieved today, 1,400 years later, even by those societies which respect human rights and freedom most.

Next comes the order that forbids backbiting. This is given in such a way that it provides a graphic description of the disgusting nature of this action: *"Nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it."* (Verse 12) The order tells Muslims that they must not backbite. It then paints a scene that fills even the most insensitive of people with disgust, showing someone eating his dead brother's flesh. It immediately declares that they have, of course, a very strong and natural aversion to such behaviour. Hence, they also have a strong aversion against backbiting.

Following all these prohibitions against suspicion, spying and backbiting, the *sūrah* awakens believers' God-fearing instinct, inviting

anyone who has committed any of these unlawful acts to hasten and repent in the hope of God's mercy: *"And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful."* (Verse 12)

Once again we say that this text is meant in practice to be like a high boundary protecting people's sanctity and integrity. It provides Muslims with a profound sense of morality. The Prophet follows the Qur'ān's example in making backbiting appear so disgusting. Abū Hurayrah reports that the Prophet was asked to define backbiting. He said: "To say about your brother something he dislikes." Someone asked: "Suppose that what I say is true of my brother." The Prophet answered: "If you say what is true, you are guilty of backbiting; but if it is untrue, you are guilty of wilful defamation." [Related by al-Tirmidhī who states that it is authentic.]

'Ā'ishah reports that she said to the Prophet: "It is enough that Ṣafiyyah [another wife of the Prophet] is so and so [referring to the fact that she is short]." The Prophet said to her: "You have said a word that would contaminate the entire volume of seawater." She added that she imitated someone to him, but he said: "I would rather not imitate anyone, even if I would get so and so for it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Anas ibn Mālik quotes the Prophet as saying: "When I was taken on my ascension to heaven, I passed by people with copper nails, scratching their faces and chests. I said: 'Gabriel, who are these?' He said: 'These are the ones who eat the flesh of others and detract from their honour.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Mā'iz and the Ghāmidī woman confessed to the Prophet that they had committed adultery, insisting that the Prophet should administer the mandatory punishment to cleanse them. Hence he ordered that they be stoned. The Prophet subsequently heard one man say to another: "Have you seen this man whose offence God has concealed? Yet he insisted on being punished until he was stoned like a dog." The Prophet marched on with his Companions and soon passed by a dead donkey. He asked for the two men, and when they came forward, he said to them: "Get down and eat of this." Shocked, the two men said: "May God forgive you, Messenger of God! Is this something to be eaten?" He said: "What you said about your brother a short while ago is even more disgusting

than eating of this. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, he is now in heaven being bathed in its waters." [Related by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur'ān.]

With such consistent treatment the Muslim community was purged and attained its high standard. It became like a dream that came true, a model to be followed and relished.

The Brotherhood of Mankind

Having addressed the believers in such a way as to elevate them to a superior level of refined manners and morality, the *sūrah* then addresses all mankind, of all races, colours and communities, reminding them that they all share one origin. One standard applies to them all: it is the same one that elevates the Muslim community to its superior level of unparalleled purity.

> *Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.* (Verse 13)

All of you people, who present such different races and colours, communities and tribes, come from one origin. Hence, you should not divide into groups or fall out with each other and so waste your energy.

Mankind! You are being called by the One who created you out of a male and a female to inform you of the purpose of making you into nations and tribes. It is not so that you stir up conflict and enmity. It is rather for the purpose of getting to know one another and living peacefully together. Differences of language, colour, temperament, manners, talents and abilities do not lead to conflict and strife. In fact, they make for cooperation so that all tasks are fulfilled and all needs met. Colour, race, language, homeland and similar factors are of no importance in God's sight. There is only one criterion to determine people's worth: "*The noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is*

most genuinely God-fearing." (Verse 13) Noble indeed is the one who is noble in God's sight. He gives you your value on the basis of His perfect knowledge and His awareness of values and measures: "*God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13) Thus all dividing factors and values are discounted leaving only one measure and one value by which all mankind are tested.

Thus all reasons for conflict and quarrel on earth disappear, all considerations coveted by human beings lose their value. In their place, an important and distinctly clear reason for friendship and cooperation looms large: that is, God's Lordship of all and the fact that He has created all mankind from the same origin. A single banner is raised so that all compete to line up under it. That is the banner of fearing God alone. This is the banner raised by Islam in order to save humanity from the evil consequences of fanatic bonds of race, homeland, tribe, clan, family, etc. All these belong to the world of ignorance, or *Jāhiliyyah*, although they may take up different names, colours and fashions. In essence, though, they are ties of ignorance that have nothing to do with Islam.

Islam has fought ignorant fanaticism in all its forms and shapes so as to establish its world system under God's banner alone. In Islam, banners of nationality and race have neither place nor value. The Prophet said: "All of you descend from Adam, and Adam was created out of clay. Those people who seek pride in their ancestry should desist, or else God will bring them as low as beetles, or even lower." [Related by al-Bazzār on the authority of Hudhayfah.] Referring to the bonds valued in pre-Islamic days, the Prophet said: "Leave these altogether, because they stink." [Related by Muslim.]

This is the foundation of Islamic society: a human and global society. Humanity may stretch all its imagination and exert its best efforts to achieve even one aspect of it, but it fails because it does not follow the clear and straight road leading to it, as defined by God, and because it does not raise God's banner which unites us all.

The Meaning of True Faith

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it fittingly explains the truth of faith in reply to those Bedouins who claimed to be believers when they did not

even understand the nature of faith. This also serves as a reply to those who tried to press their acceptance of Islam as a favour they thought they did for the Prophet. In essence, they do not appreciate that it is only through God's favour that people believe.

> *The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: 'Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.' They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verses 14–18)

The first of these verses is said to have been revealed in relation to the Bedouins of the Asad tribe who, as soon as they accepted Islam, boasted saying, 'We have attained to faith.' They even counted this as a favour they performed for the Prophet. They said to him: "Messenger of God! We have become Muslims. Other Arabs have fought you, but we have not." God wanted to show them the truth of what was in their hearts when they said this, stating that they only embraced Islam in submission while the truth of faith had not touched their hearts or souls. "*Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts.*'" (Verse 14)

Nevertheless, God's grace has dictated that they will be rewarded for every good action they do, letting nothing go to waste. Even the outward manifestation of Islam, which has not yet penetrated into people's hearts to become genuine faith, is sufficient to make their

good deeds count and be recorded. Thus, their deeds are not wasted like those of unbelievers. No part of their reward is wasted as long as they continue to obey: "*If you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste.*" (Verse 14) This is because God is quick to grant forgiveness and bestow His mercy. He accepts from His servant the first step and rewards him for submission and obedience while waiting until faith settles in his heart: "*God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.*" (Verse 14)

God then explains to them the nature of genuine belief: "*True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word.*" (Verse 15)

True faith, then, means that deep in one's heart one believes in God and His Messenger, admitting no doubt or faltering. It is a solid, unshaken belief that allows no hesitation or oscillation. Moreover, it is a belief that motivates people to strive hard for God's cause, sacrificing their possessions and their lives. When a person's heart experiences the beauty of this belief and has the reassurance bred by such experience, he or she will take the necessary action to establish its meaning beyond their own hearts and souls, i.e. in real human life. They want to bring about union and harmony between the truth of faith they feel in their hearts and what takes place in the world around them. They simply will not tolerate any discordance between faith and practice, because such discordance jars at every moment. Hence, striving for God's cause, laying down one's life and possessions in order to achieve its goals. It is, then, a self-motivated action that aims to transfer the bright and enlightened image one sees in one's heart into practical human life. The rift between a believer and the worldly life around him based on *jāhiliyyah* is an inherent rift caused by the fact that a believer cannot lead a life of double standards, one based on faith and the other on people's practices. Similarly, he cannot give up his sound and beautiful concept of faith in favour of a practical model that is deficient, ugly and deviant. Hence, a confrontation with ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, is inevitable, until it gives up and adopts the light of faith.

"*Those are the ones who are true to their word.*" (Verse 15) They are true in their faith, and true to their claims that they are believers. Unless those feelings in a believer's heart are a reality, bringing tangible effects into practical life, faith remains theoretical.

We need to reflect a little on the precautionary note in this verse: "*True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt.*" (Verse 15) This point about never entertaining doubt is not a merely additional clause. It points to a real experience and provides treatment for a condition that may arise even after one has truly believed. The way this is phrased is significant, *'and never then entertained any doubt.'* A similar precautionary note is seen in the verse that says: "*Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way...*" (41: 30) The need to entertain no doubt and the need for the steadfast pursuit of the right way points to what a believing soul may experience under severe pressure and testing hardship. Doubt or hesitation may creep in. A believer may have to deal with severely testing times and calamities that shake the very foundation of his world. Hence, the one who remains steadfast, entertaining no doubt and pursuing the right way in all situations is the one who deserves high rank with God.

Putting the fact in this way alerts believers' hearts to the slips and risks in their way. This enables them to take precautions, prepare themselves to withstand any hardship that comes their way, and maintain their course even in the face of the most adverse circumstances.

The *sūrah* continues its address to the Bedouins, telling them that God knows what is in their hearts. Furthermore, He can tell them what they harbour in their minds, without waiting for them to tell Him:

> *Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 16)

Man may profess to have knowledge, yet he neither knows nor understands himself or his feelings. The human mind does not know how it works because it cannot monitor its own working. When the mind monitors itself, it stops working naturally, and thus it has nothing

to monitor. When it performs its natural work, the human mind cannot at the same time do any monitoring. Hence it is unable to know its own nature or how it functions. Yet it is his mind that man boasts of, giving it a superior status.

"*God knows all that is in the heavens and earth.*" (Verse 16) His is a perfect knowledge that comprehends the very nature of everything in the heavens and the earth. His knowledge is not based on appearances and effects, but on a perfect knowledge of the nature of things that is independent of time and free of any limitation. Moreover, "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 16) This encompasses the entire universe and everything in it.

God's Real Favour

Having explained the true nature of faith, the *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet, referring to those Bedouins and how they asserted that they had done the Prophet a favour by accepting Islam. This very action is clear evidence that the nature of faith had not yet penetrated their hearts. They had not yet experienced the beauty of faith:

> *They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.'* (Verse 17)

This answer clearly tells them that they cannot hold this as a favour and that if they truly believe, then they owe a great favour to God who has guided them to it.

We should reflect on this answer, because it highlights a very important fact, one that most people, including some believers, overlook. Faith is the supreme favour God grants to anyone of His servants on earth. It is indeed greater than man's very existence, which is a favour God grants to man in the first place. It is also superior to what relates to existence, such as the provision of sustenance, health and adornment. It is the favour that gives human existence a distinctive entity, and assigns to man a great role in the system of the universe.

The first thing that faith gives man, when it settles firmly in his heart, is a broader vision of the universe, how it relates to him, and his role in it; an accurate criterion with which to know the essence of values, people and events; genuine reassurance as he embarks on his journey through this planet up to the time when he meets his Lord; a friendly relation with everything around him in the universe; a warm, interactive relationship with God who has created him and the universe; a feeling that he is honoured and that he is fulfilling an important role to please God and to bring goodness to this universe and to all who live in it. A manifestation of this broad vision is that man breaks out of the narrow confinements of his own small and weak entity to function on the stage of the universe, with all its inherent forces and secrets.

In relation to his own kind, man is an individual of a humanity that goes back to a single origin, which, in the first place, acquired its distinction from God's spirit which was breathed into this creature made of clay so as to bring him into contact with the divine light. This is a light that is not confined to a heaven or earth, has neither a beginning nor an end, and knows no limit of time or place. It is this free factor that has made man what he is. It is enough that this concept is properly appreciated by man in order that he begins to have a better appreciation of his position of honour and to feel this light, even as he walks on earth. His heart will then certainly have wings of light to carry him to the original source of light that gives his life its distinctive character.

In as far as his affiliation is concerned, he, as an individual, belongs to the single community of believers that stretches over the centuries, forming a noble procession led by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and their brethren prophets [peace be upon them all]. When this fact is fully appreciated by anyone, they feel themselves to be a branch of a great tree with deep roots and widely stretching boughs. This feeling gives believers a different taste of life, one that imparts to it a sense of nobility.

Man's vision thus becomes even broader so as to transcend his own entity, his community and the human race as a whole. He begins to see this whole existence as it originates with God, from the breathing of whose spirit he has become a man. His faith then tells him that this universe is a living entity, composed of countless other living entities.

Everything in this universe, including the universe itself, has a spirit. Like his own spirit, all these spirits turn to their Creator with prayer, glorification, praise, submission and obedience. Thus, in this universe, a believer feels himself to be an inseparable part of a complete whole. He belongs to his Creator, his soul turns to Him and he eventually returns to Him. Thus, he feels himself to be bigger and greater than his own limited world. He is bigger in relation to his vision of this great universe. He thus feels befriended by all the spirits around him, and beyond that befriended by God who looks after him. He then feels himself able to have a bond with this universe and to grow in stature in relation to it. He can do many things, initiate great events, influence and be influenced by all around him, and can derive strength from the Supreme Power that initiated him as well as all forces and powers in the universe. That is the Power that never weakens, shrinks or disappears.

All For a Definite Purpose

From this broad vision a believer derives new standards and criteria to evaluate things, events, people, concerns, values and goals. He recognizes his true role in the universe and his task in this life. He looks at himself as a manifestation of God's will who sets him on his course to bring about whatever end He has determined. Thus, a believer continues his life on earth with clear vision, steady step and easy conscience. This knowledge gives believers what they feel of serenity, reassurance and delight with what takes place around them, including what happens to them. They have true answers to their questions: Where have they come from, and why? Where are they going, and what will they find there? They know that they are in this life for a particular purpose, and that whatever happens to them serves to bring about that purpose. They know that this life is the testing ground for the life to come; that they will be requited for every action they do, major or minor, and that they have not been created in vain, will not be abandoned or left to travel alone.

When we have such knowledge, all worries, doubts and feelings of insecurity disappear. After all, they are due to ignorance, on the part of those expressing or experiencing them, of our origin and destiny,

unawareness of what lies ahead in our way, and lack of trust in the purpose behind our existence and life journey. We will have no more feelings like those described by 'Umar al-Khayyām who says:

> Into this universe and *why* not knowing
> Nor, *whence*, like willy-nilly flowing;
> And out of it as wind along the waste,
> I know not *wither*, willy-nilly blowing.

Believers know that they wear the garment of life by God's will, and that God runs the universe, conducting all its affairs, with wisdom and knowledge. They also know that the hand that made them wear this garment is much wiser and more compassionate than they. Hence, there is no need to consult others, because they could not give a sound opinion like that which belongs to the Owner of that hand who knows all and sees all. They know that they are given this garment of life to wear in order to fulfil a certain role in the universe, being influenced by, and leaving their own influence on all things in it. This role is harmonious with all the other roles assigned to all other creatures from the beginning of life to its end.

Thus believers know why they have come to this life and to where they are heading. They do not experience any loss as they try to understand. They complete their journey, fulfilling their role, with trust and reassurance. They may even attain a higher degree of faith that enables them to carry on with their journey and the fulfilment of their role, with delight and happiness, feeling the great bounty God has given them. This is the bounty of life, or its garment, given to them by God, the most generous, the compassionate. This is the bounty of their role, which they fulfil regardless of what they may encounter of hardship, until they return to their Lord.

Similarly, feelings like those I myself experienced during a period of loss and worry also disappear. That was before I began to live 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān', when God took me by the hand and placed me under His blessed care. These were feelings that my tired soul imparted at the time to the entire universe and I expressed those feelings in poetry saying:

The universe stood there, not knowing which way it should go;
And why, and where, if at all, it should go;
It is all a waste, a child's play, and an aimless effort;
And it ends up in a masked destiny that gives no satisfaction.

Today, however, I know that, by God's grace, there is no aimless effort or wasted action, because every action and every effort will have its fruits and gain its reward. That same destiny will also give great satisfaction, because it is left to the One who is most just, most merciful. I also feel today, by the grace of God, that the universe never stands in that miserable position, because the soul of the universe believes in its Lord, turns to Him in glorification and praise. The universe operates in accordance with the law God has set for it, obedient, contented and submissive.

This is a great gain in the realm of feeling and thought, in the physical world of body and mind, as well as in the practical world of action and mutual influence.

Besides, faith is a great motivating force. When it is settled in a person's heart, it begins to work, fulfil itself and bring about perfect harmony between its inner image and its appearance. It takes control over all human motivations and harnesses them along the way. This is the secret of the strength of faith in the human soul and the power one gains through faith. It is the secret underlying the miracles faith has achieved in this world, and continues to achieve every day: miracles that change the whole appearance of life from one day to another. It is faith that motivates both the individual and the community to sacrifice their lives on earth in order to gain success in the greater and everlasting life to come. Furthermore, it is faith that gives an ordinary individual, with little or no support, the means to stand up to oppressive forces and to both temptation and persecution. All these forces are easily vanquished when they face the motivating power of faith in the heart of a single believer. It is not the individual that achieves success over all these forces; it is the great power that derives from the spirit of faith which is akin to a powerfully flowing and inexhaustible spring.

The miracles achieved through faith in the life of the individual and the community do not rely on mysterious myth, vision or superstition.

Instead, they are the result of well-defined causes and well-established rules. Faith is holistic: it is the force that establishes the relationship between man and the apparent and subtle forces in the universe, giving his soul trust and reassurance. It also gives the believer the ability to confront worldly powers and situations with the strength of one who is certain of victory, trusting to God's help. It makes it clear to the individual believer his relations with other people, events and situations, outlining for him his direction, way and goal. It harnesses all his strengths and potentials to direct them all to a clear goal, so that he moves towards it with force, confidence and reassurance.

What makes faith doubly powerful is that it operates along the same line that the universe follows in its deep and surface parts. Indeed, all the powers that work in the universe follow a direction set by faith. Thus, as they move along their way, believers meet these powers in their great march to give the truth its victory over falsehood, no matter how powerful the latter may appear.

God certainly tells the truth as He says: "*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.*" (Verse 17) Indeed faith is the supreme favour that can only be granted by God the Bounteous to whomever He knows to be deserving of it.

God certainly tells the truth! Does anyone who has had the privilege of knowing all these facts, meanings and feelings, experienced them to the full and lived through them in this present world ever feel that he has missed out on anything? Conversely, what does the one who misses out on all these gain, even though he may live in comfort and luxury? He may eat as he pleases, but animals also eat, although animals are better off because by their nature they submit to their Lord and turn towards their Creator.

> *God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verse 18)

The One who knows all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth also knows what is hidden in people's innermost souls. He knows people's

feelings and sees what they do. He does not derive His knowledge from the words they say, but from the feelings they harbour in their hearts and the actions that confirm their feelings.

Thus we come to the conclusion of this *sūrah*, comprising 18 verses, but delineating the features of a noble and pure world, outlining great truths and establishing them in people's inner consciences.



SŪRAH 50

Qāf

Prologue

The Prophet used to read this *sūrah* when he delivered a sermon on 'Īd occasions and before Friday prayers, making it the theme and the content of his speech for large audiences. It is certainly a momentous *sūrah*, outlining fundamental facts, using a strong rhythm, powerful expressions, clearly-delineated images, highlighted connotations and emphatic verse endings. It addresses our hearts and minds from all angles putting before us the truth that we are always under God's watchful eye, from birth to death, and then to the time of resurrection, gathering and reckoning. This is an ever-present watch of man at all times, losing nothing and overlooking nothing. Every breath, fleeting thought and feeling is known; every uttered word is recorded; every move is monitored. This complete watch accounts for thoughts and actions alike; nothing escapes it, and nothing is hidden from it. It monitors secret whispers in the same way as it records what is done in broad daylight.

All these are well-known facts. However, the *sūrah* outlines them here in a way that shows them to be totally new, with surprising effects that combine apprehension with wonder. It shakes us powerfully alerting us to a momentous event, about which we have thus far been oblivious. It uses images of life, death, decay and subsequent resurrection. It touches

on our expectations of life after death. It refers to a host of universal truths in the heavens and earth, water and plants, fruits ripening individually and in clusters. It all "*serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8)

It is very difficult to give a summary of this *sūrah*, as also list its main points, or outline the ideas discussed and the images portrayed in any manner of speech other than their original Qur'ānic style and expression. Therefore, we will proceed straightaway to our discussion of the *sūrah*, praying for God's help.



Qāf



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Qāf. By the glorious Qur'ān. (1)

قٓ ۚ وَٱلْقُرْءَانِ ٱلْمَجِيدِ ﴿١﴾

But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! (2)

بَلْ عَجِبُوٓا۟ أَن جَآءَهُم مُّنذِرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَقَالَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ هَٰذَا شَىْءٌ عَجِيبٌ ﴿٢﴾

When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.' (3)

أَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا ۖ ذَٰلِكَ رَجْعٌۢ بَعِيدٌ ﴿٣﴾

We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record. (4)

قَدْ عَلِمْنَا مَا تَنقُصُ ٱلْأَرْضُ مِنْهُمْ ۖ وَعِندَنَا كِتَٰبٌ حَفِيظٌۢ ﴿٤﴾

Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion. (5)

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِٱلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ فَهُمْ فِىٓ أَمْرٍ مَّرِيجٍ ﴿٥﴾

Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it. (6)

أَفَلَمْ يَنظُرُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَوْقَهُمْ كَيْفَ بَنَيْنَٰهَا وَزَيَّنَّٰهَا وَمَا لَهَا مِن فُرُوجٍ ﴿٦﴾

وَٱلْأَرْضَ مَدَدْنَٰهَا وَأَلْقَيْنَا فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ
وَأَنۢبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ زَوْجٍۭ بَهِيجٍ ﴿٧﴾

We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it, (7)

تَبْصِرَةً وَذِكْرَىٰ لِكُلِّ عَبْدٍ مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٨﴾

so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God. (8)

وَنَزَّلْنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً مُّبَٰرَكًا فَأَنۢبَتْنَا
بِهِۦ جَنَّٰتٍ وَحَبَّ ٱلْحَصِيدِ ﴿٩﴾

We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, (9)

وَٱلنَّخْلَ بَاسِقَٰتٍ لَّهَا طَلْعٌ نَّضِيدٌ ﴿١٠﴾

and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, (10)

رِّزْقًا لِّلْعِبَادِ ۖ وَأَحْيَيْنَا بِهِۦ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا ۚ
كَذَٰلِكَ ٱلْخُرُوجُ ﴿١١﴾

providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead. (11)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَأَصْحَٰبُ
ٱلرَّسِّ وَثَمُودُ ﴿١٢﴾

Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, (12)

وَعَادٌ وَفِرْعَوْنُ وَإِخْوَٰنُ لُوطٍ ﴿١٣﴾

'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, (13)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْأَيْكَةِ وَقَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ ۚ كُلٌّ كَذَّبَ
ٱلرُّسُلَ فَحَقَّ وَعِيدِ ﴿١٤﴾

the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. (14)

أَفَعَيِينَا بِالْخَلْقِ الْأَوَّلِ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ فِي لَبْسٍ مِّنْ خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ ﴿١٥﴾

Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation. (15)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ ۖ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ ﴿١٦﴾

It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; (16)

إِذْ يَتَلَقَّى الْمُتَلَقِّيَانِ عَنِ الْيَمِينِ وَعَنِ الشِّمَالِ قَعِيدٌ ﴿١٧﴾

with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, (17)

مَّا يَلْفِظُ مِن قَوْلٍ إِلَّا لَدَيْهِ رَقِيبٌ عَتِيدٌ ﴿١٨﴾

every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher. (18)

وَجَاءَتْ سَكْرَةُ الْمَوْتِ بِالْحَقِّ ۖ ذَٰلِكَ مَا كُنتَ مِنْهُ تَحِيدُ ﴿١٩﴾

The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: 'This is what you tried to escape.' (19)

وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ الْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٠﴾

The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' (20)

وَجَاءَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّعَهَا سَائِقٌ وَشَهِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾

Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. (21)

لَّقَدْ كُنتَ فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَٰذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنكَ غِطَاءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ الْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' (22)

وَقَالَ قَرِينُهُۥ هَٰذَا مَا لَدَيَّ عَتِيدٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

And his companion will say: 'Here is what I have recorded.' (23)

أَلْقِيَا فِي جَهَنَّمَ كُلَّ كَفَّارٍ عَنِيدٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

'Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, (24)

مَّنَّاعٍ لِّلْخَيْرِ مُعْتَدٍ مُّرِيبٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, (25)

ٱلَّذِي جَعَلَ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ فَأَلْقِيَاهُ فِي ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلشَّدِيدِ ﴿٢٦﴾

who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.' (26)

قَالَ قَرِينُهُۥ رَبَّنَا مَآ أَطْغَيْتُهُۥ وَلَٰكِن كَانَ فِي ضَلَٰلٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.' (27)

قَالَ لَا تَخْتَصِمُوا۟ لَدَيَّ وَقَدْ قَدَّمْتُ إِلَيْكُم بِٱلْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٨﴾

God will say: 'Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. (28)

مَا يُبَدَّلُ ٱلْقَوْلُ لَدَيَّ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ بِظَلَّٰمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٢٩﴾

My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.' (29)

يَوْمَ نَقُولُ لِجَهَنَّمَ هَلِ ٱمْتَلَأْتِ وَتَقُولُ هَلْ مِن مَّزِيدٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?' (30)

وَأُزْلِفَتِ ٱلْجَنَّةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٣١﴾

And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: (31)

هَٰذَا مَا تُوعَدُونَ لِكُلِّ أَوَّابٍ حَفِيظٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, (32)

مَّنْ خَشِيَ الرَّحْمَٰنَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَجَاءَ بِقَلْبٍ مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. (33)

ادْخُلُوهَا بِسَلَامٍ ۖ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ الْخُلُودِ ﴿٣٤﴾

Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' (34)

لَهُم مَّا يَشَاءُونَ فِيهَا وَلَدَيْنَا مَزِيدٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them. (35)

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُم مِّن قَرْنٍ هُمْ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُم بَطْشًا فَنَقَّبُوا فِي الْبِلَادِ هَلْ مِن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. (36)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَذِكْرَىٰ لِمَن كَانَ لَهُ قَلْبٌ أَوْ أَلْقَى السَّمْعَ وَهُوَ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٣٧﴾

In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. (37)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ وَمَا مَسَّنَا مِن لُّغُوبٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. (38)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَسَبِّحۡ
بِحَمۡدِ رَبِّكَ قَبۡلَ طُلُوعِ ٱلشَّمۡسِ
وَقَبۡلَ ٱلۡغُرُوبِ ﴿٣٩﴾

Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; (39)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ فَسَبِّحۡهُ وَأَدۡبَٰرَ ٱلسُّجُودِ ﴿٤٠﴾

and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. (40)

وَٱسۡتَمِعۡ يَوۡمَ يُنَادِ ٱلۡمُنَادِ مِن مَّكَانٖ
قَرِيبٖ ﴿٤١﴾

And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, (41)

يَوۡمَ يَسۡمَعُونَ ٱلصَّيۡحَةَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ ذَٰلِكَ
يَوۡمُ ٱلۡخُرُوجِ ﴿٤٢﴾

the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. (42)

إِنَّا نَحۡنُ نُحۡيِۦ وَنُمِيتُ وَإِلَيۡنَا ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ﴿٤٣﴾

It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. (43)

يَوۡمَ تَشَقَّقُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ عَنۡهُمۡ سِرَاعٗاۚ
ذَٰلِكَ حَشۡرٌ عَلَيۡنَا يَسِيرٞ ﴿٤٤﴾

On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. (44)

نَّحۡنُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيۡهِم بِجَبَّارٖۖ
فَذَكِّرۡ بِٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ مَن يَخَافُ وَعِيدِ ﴿٤٥﴾

We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning. (45)

Truth and Denial

In its initial section, comprising the first 15 verses, the *sūrah* speaks about resurrection and its denial by the unbelievers who wonder that it should even be mentioned, let alone asserted. The Qur'ān, however, not only addresses their denial of the truth of resurrection, it also aims to put their deviant minds back on the right track. It tries first to awaken their hearts, alerting them to contemplation of the great truths that are clearly manifest in the universe. It does not engage them in any intellectual argument about resurrection; instead, it tries to bring life into their hearts and minds so that they can reflect. It puts before them the truth that is clearly evident in everything around them so that they will respond. This method is especially effective and is one that should be carefully studied by advocates of the divine message.

The *sūrah* begins with an oath by the letter *Qāf* and by the glorious Qur'ān, which is composed of letters like *Qāf*. In fact, this is the first letter of the word 'Qur'ān'. The *sūrah* does not mention the subject matter of the oath, leaving it as a way to open the door to whatever the *sūrah* wants to say. Thus, the oath serves to alert us to the fact that what comes afterwards is momentous. This is indeed what is intended, as the *sūrah* immediately moves away from the oath using the conjunction *bal*, which has no English equivalent.[1] It now begins to discuss their amazement at what God's Messenger and the Qur'ān say about the dead being brought back to life: "*But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.'*" (Verses 2–3)

They think it strange that someone from among themselves should warn them when this is indeed the very thing that human nature easily accepts. It is most natural that God should have chosen one of them to deliver His message for he was someone who could readily share their feelings, speak their language, take part in their activities, be amongst them through their lives, appreciate their motives as also recognize their

1. Some translators use the word nay to render the Arabic conjunction *bal*, but this is rather unsatisfactory in most cases as nay has connotations of negation. Here we have used the term 'but', though admittedly this too is inadequate. – Editor's note.

abilities and limits. Such a person is the best one to warn them against what may happen should they persist in their erring ways, to teach them how to change course, and to outline the duties that they have to fulfil. He would be the first to discharge these duties.

They felt it strange, however, to have such a message delivered in the first place, and were particularly amazed that this Messenger should speak to them about their being raised from the dead. Resurrection is central to the Islamic faith; indeed, it is the foundation on which all requirements of Islam are based. Every Muslim is required to support the truth against falsehood and uphold goodness against evil. A Muslim needs to make everything he does in life an act of worship, by ensuring that whatever he does aims to win God's acceptance and serve His cause. All action must be rewarded, and reward might not be forthcoming during our life's journey on earth. It is thus deferred until the final reckoning is done. This means that another world is needed. Hence resurrection, so as to face the reckoning in the next world. Should this fundamental principle of a second life disappear from a person's mindset, that person cannot form a clear concept of Islam and so cannot follow it.

Those people in Makkah, however, did not look at the question in this light at all. They were too naïve to understand the true nature of life and death, or to visualize God's power. Hence they said: "*When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.*" (Verse 3) Thus, to them, it was a question of improbability of life after death when people's bodies have decomposed and turned to dust. Yet, since life takes place in the first place, why is it improbable for it to occur again. Moreover, this miracle of life occurs before their very eyes at every moment. It is there around them throughout the universe. It is to this that the Qur'ān draws their attention in this *sūrah*.

Before we continue with what the *sūrah* says about the universe and the images of life it portrays we need to reflect a little on the fact that people perish. This is pointed out by the unbelievers as they say: "*When we have died and become dust...?*" So people die and perish. Whoever reads what those unbelievers say will look at himself and people living in his vicinity and imagine how death occurs. In fact, he will begin to feel how he will turn to nothing when he is still alive, walking on earth.

Nothing shakes a person's heart like death, and nothing fills him with dread like perishing. The *sūrah's* comment strengthens this effect as it describes the earth eating them little by little: "*We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record.*" (Verse 4) The phraseology of this comment shows the earth as a living thing that swallows, little by little, their buried bodies in a steady progressive action asserting that God knows what the earth swallows and that it is all recorded. Nothing is lost even though they may die and perish. As for putting life back into this dust that remains from their bodies, this is merely a repeat of what had happened before and what continues to happen in endless processes of bringing forth life anew.

We see how the *sūrah* makes successive touches to soften hearts, readying them to receive what follows before addressing the main issue.

The *sūrah* then describes the state of mind that gives rise to their flimsy objections. They have denied the truth, which made the earth under their feet move. In this way they are completely unstable: "*Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion.*" (Verse 5) This is a telling image. The truth is the solid point where a believer stands, giving him a firm step as he walks on solid ground. Everything around him that is contrary to the truth is unstable, confused and lacking substance. Whoever steps outside the truth is bound to slip into such confusion and so lose stability. He is without reassurance, ever in a state of confusion. When someone moves away from the truth, he is pulled in all directions by different desires and motives, afflicted by doubt, hesitant, moving once to the right and once to the left. He has no solid basis, no safe refuge.

As the *sūrah* prepares to discuss their objections to resurrection, it touches on further aspects of this fundamental truth as it appears in the structure of the universe. It invites them to look at the heavens, the earth, mountains, rain, palm trees, gardens and plants. The style employed here is in full harmony with the magnificence of the solid truth: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it.*" (Verse 6)

The sky represents a page in the book of the universe, testifying to the truth they had abandoned. Do they not see its lofty and firm

structure, its adorned beauty and flawless freedom? Needless to say, stability, beauty and perfection are clear features common to both the sky and the truth. Hence they come in for special emphasis here, as do the facts that the sky is well built, adorned and is without holes and cracks in its structure.

Likewise, the earth is a page from the same book of the universe: "*We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it.*" (Verse 7) The wide spread of the earth, the firm mountains placed on it and the delectable plants that grow on it also project the same features of firmness, stability and beauty already associated with the sky.

Now that this universal image has been drawn, the *sūrah* touches their hearts directing them to reflect on the purpose of creation: "*so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Thus curtains are removed, insight is sharpened and hearts and souls are alerted to reflect on the origination, wisdom and harmony apparent in the universe. Such a reminder is especially useful to those who wish to turn to God.

This link between the human heart and the inspiration of the endless, beautiful universe is indeed what gives opening the book of the universe and contemplating it the effect it has on our hearts and the value it attaches to our lives. The Qur'ān establishes this link between knowledge and the man who has it. Yet this link is precisely that which is ignored by contemporary research methods that are often called 'scientific'. This also inevitably leads to a severance of the bond between people and the world they live in. Mankind is a part of the universe, and its life can only flourish when their hearts beat to the tune of the universe. Every new piece of knowledge about a star, a planet, a special characteristic or feature of a plant or an animal, or a feature of the universe as a whole and what it contains of animate or inanimate objects should be transformed into a message to the human heart that increases man's pleasant familiarity with the world around him. Thus are the bonds of friendship between human beings and other creatures strengthened, and the sense of unity that applies to all confirmed. This, in turn, stresses the oneness of God, the Creator of the universe and all it contains. Any knowledge, research

or scientific discipline that does not lead to this objective is incomplete, false or useless.

This universe is the open book of the truth, readable in all languages and by all methods. A simple person living in a hut or a tent can browse through it as easily as can a highly educated palace dweller, each according to their abilities, and each discovering that they have access to the truth through it. The book of the universe is open at all times: "*So that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Modern science, however, blocks this reminder, severs this link between the human heart and the universe. Why? Because it is controlled by people who have been blinded by the falsehood called the 'scientific method', a method that does not acknowledge a link between the universe and all the creatures living in it.

The approach based on faith does not take away anything of the results of the 'scientific method' in understanding individual facts. Indeed, it adds a link connecting these individual facts and relating them to the great truths. It is faith that establishes a bond between the human heart and the laws and facts of the universe, allowing them to play an inspiring tune to man's feelings and life. They are no longer cold facts that open up nothing of their beautiful secrets. It is the approach based on faith therefore that should direct studies and research.

The *sūrah* continues to present the pages of truth in the book of the universe, in preparation for tackling the question of resurrection: "*We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verses 9–11)

The water sent down from the sky is a great sign, sending life into hearts before it quickens dead land. It imparts a special feeling to all. It is not only children that rainfall delights; sensitive adults also experience a similar feeling of awe. The rain is described here as '*rich in blessings*', and a means by which to produce fruits and fields of grain, as well as palm trees of great beauty: "*And tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates.*" The description of the fruits these trees bear is intended to highlight this beautiful aspect, emphasizing harmony with the overpowering and

beautiful truth the universe presents. A touch on human feelings is added within the context of the rain and what it brings about of plant life: "*providing sustenance suitable for people.*" It is God who gives this sustenance, from the time it sends forth its shoots until it gives its yield. He is the Master and they, the servants, remain oblivious of their duty to appreciate and show gratitude.

At this point, the final goal is identified. "*Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verse 11) It is a continuing process, one that is familiar to them. However, they overlook it and this before they have even arrived at their objections. Yet resurrection is as simple as the shoot springing out of dead land after it has been quickened with rain. This is stated now, after a host of inspiring notes played for the human heart. Thus hearts are addressed by the Creator of hearts.

A Glance at History

The *sūrah* now opens some pages of the book of human history, speaking of the fate of past communities who argued about resurrection in the same way as did the Arab unbelievers, and who similarly denied God's messages. As a result, they incurred God's inevitable punishment:

> *Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, 'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.* (Verses 12–15)

Al-Rass signifies a well over which there is no built wall, and the dales signifies an area thick with trees. The people of the wooded dales most probably refer to Shu'ayb's people. We have no information about the people of al-Rass other than this reference here and a similar one in *Sūrah al-Furqān*, (25: 38) The same applies to the people of Tubba', a title used by the Yemeni kings of the Ḥimyar dynasty. The other peoples mentioned in this short passage are known to anyone who reads the Qur'ān.

The purpose of this quick reference to these peoples is certainly not to give any detailed information about them. It is only a reminder of the fate of earlier disbelieving communities. What is worth noting is that the verse mentions that each denied 'God's messengers', in the plural. This emphasizes the unity of the divine message as all messengers preached the same faith. Thus, whoever denies anyone of God's messengers actually denies them all, because he rejects the same message delivered by them all. Gods' messengers are brothers forming one community. They are like a tree with roots stretching far back into time. Each branch of that tree projects all its essential qualities, giving an image of the whole. Therefore, whoever cuts a branch actually cuts the tree and all its branches. Therefore, God's warnings came true and those communities suffered the fates known to listeners.

Having stated the fates of all these communities, the *sūrah* again picks up the question of resurrection, asking: "*Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.*" (Verse 15) The first creation is there before their eyes; therefore, the question needs no answer. However, because they do not look at the evidence presented by this first creation, they are in doubt about the second. What can be said about one who denies the truth when such irrefutable evidence is placed before his very own eyes?

A Journey Through Life

The second part of the *sūrah* continues with the theme of resurrection. It seeks to treat those hearts that deny resurrection from a new angle, but makes some frightening statements. It speaks about the accurate monitoring to which reference has been made in the Prologue. It presents clear images of this monitoring, followed by images of man in the throes of death, then we see the opening of records and the reckoning before we are shown hell opening to receive those destined for it. Whenever a new group of them are thrown into it, it asks whether it can have some more. This is contrasted by the scene of heaven and the honour and favours bestowed on its dwellers.

It is a single journey that begins with birth, goes through death and ends with resurrection and deed reckoning. It is a continuous, uninterrupted

journey, charting the only way we must travel. Throughout the journey we are in God's hands and under His careful watch. We cannot escape. When we realize this, our hearts are filled with awe and apprehension. How else should we feel realizing that we are in the hands of the Almighty who knows our innermost thoughts and who overlooks nothing?

When any of us thinks that the authorities, with all their intelligence and reporters, are after us, following our footsteps, we are perturbed and agitated. We lose our patience and our balance. No matter how widespread and far-reaching the intelligence apparatus is, any of us, however, can escape its attention once we close our door or our mouths. By contrast, God's watchful eye is with us wherever we may be. He monitors what is in our minds and knows all our secrets. What then should we feel, when we realize that we are under such watch, subject to the Almighty's power?

Every Little Secret

> *It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher.* (Verses 16–18)

The first clause in these verses, '*it is We who have created man*', indicates its message. A person who makes a machine is the one who best knows how it is put together and how it functions. Its maker did not create it, because he is not the one who originated the material used in its making; he is only the one who designed and manufactured it. How does this compare with the Creator who originates all things? Man is made by God's hand, and God knows every little detail about him. Hence He says: "*We know what his soul whispers to him.*" (Verse 16) Thus man realizes that his inner thoughts are laid open. Nothing is hidden. Even the whispers of his soul, secret as these may be, are known to God, in preparation for the Day of Reckoning, which people often deny.

"*We are closer to him than his jugular vein.*" (Verse 16) Closer than the vein that transports his blood! This expression clearly describes the

hand in control and the direct watch. When man imagines this fact, he is bound to experience a shiver down his spine. If man really understood the import of this statement, he would not dare say a single word that does not please God. He would not even allow a fleeting thought that is contrary to what is acceptable to God. This statement is sufficient to make man careful, always alert.

The *sūrah* makes the control even stricter, showing man throughout his life as being under the ever-present watch of two angels, on his right and left, who record every move he makes, every word he says and every thought he entertains: "*with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher.*" (Verses 17–18) We do not know how these two angels record what they monitor. We need not in any case indulge in conjecture. Our attitude towards information that relates to the world beyond our perception is to accept it as it stands, believing in its import without seeking to know more. Such knowledge, were we to gain it, would not be of any use to us. In fact, it remains outside human experience.

In our own world, we have come to know some means of recording that could have never been thought possible by our forefathers. Magnetic and video tapes record movement and voice and reproduce them for radio, cinema and television.[2] All this happens within our own human environment. Hence, there is no need to try to assign to the angels a method of recording based on our own human experience, which may be totally irrelevant to their realm of which we know only what God has told us.

It is enough that we should appreciate this fact, expressed here in a vivid picture, and feel when we are about to make any movement or utter a word that, to our right and left, there are two watchguards taking note of whatever we do or say, entering it in our record which will be presented to God who overlooks nothing. This is a fact, even though we may not understand how it is done. There is no doubt that it takes place, in some form. God has told us about it so that we take it

2. The author wrote this in the late 1950s, when CDs and DVDs were still beyond people's imagination. -- Editor's note.

into account, but also so we do not waste time and effort in trying to determine how it is done.

Such was the method adopted by people who benefited by the Qur'ān and by the Prophet's directives concerning the facts it speaks of. They took to heart what it said and acted on its basis. In a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Alqamah on the authority of Bilāl ibn al-Ḥārith, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "A man may say a word that is pleasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will credit him with His pleasure for it until the Day when he meets Him. Another man may say a word that is displeasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will record against him His displeasure for it until the Day when he meets Him." 'Alqamah commented: "Many are the words I refrained from saying on account of this hadith." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.] It is reported that when Imām Aḥmad was in the throes of death, he moaned in pain. It was said to him that even moans are recorded. He then stopped moaning until he died. In this way, such people practically lived the facts the Qur'ān tells us about.

As Life Draws to an End

That was the page of life, which is followed in man's book by the page of approaching death: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: This is what you tried to escape.*" (Verse 19) There is nothing man tries to escape more than death. He even tries to banish the thought of death from his mind. Yet how can he do so when death is a seeker that never stops. It continues its steady march, and never misses its appointed time. The mere mention of '*the stupor of death*' sends a shiver into brave hearts. Yet as the scene is shown, it is said to him: "*This is what you tried to escape.*" The mere sound makes him shudder when he is still full of life. How about if it is said when he is in the throes of death? It is authentically reported that when death was approaching the Prophet, he wiped sweat off his face and said: "All glory be to God! Death has its stupor!" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] He said this, even though he had chosen to be in God's company, longing to see Him. So how about ordinary mortals?

It is noteworthy that truth itself is mentioned here: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth.*" (Verse 19) This suggests that a human being sees the whole truth as he is about to die. The truth appears to him fully exposed. He sees what he did not know, and what he used to deny. It is, now too late for anything that may benefit him. It is too late for repentance, belief or the mending of ways. The unbelievers denied this very truth and their denial caused them confusion. Now that they realize all this, it is too late for them to do anything about it.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the shock of resurrection and the fearsome reckoning:

> *The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. 'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' And his companion will say: 'Here is what I have recorded.' 'Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.' His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.' God will say: 'Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.'* (Verses 20–29)

It is sufficient to put this scene before our eyes, for thereafter we will spend the rest of our lives in awe and anticipation. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "'How can I feel happy when I know that the one assigned to blow the Trumpet has lifted it to his mouth, lowering his forehead and awaiting permission.' The people listening asked him: 'What should we say, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Say: We seek none other than God; He is the best protector.' They all said it." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]

"*Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness.*" (Verse 21) It is the soul, every single one, that is held to account, and it is the one who receives the outcome. It comes with two assigned to it: one driving it on and the other to bear witness. These may be the ones who recorded everything a person does throughout life, which is more probable, but they may also be different entities. The

scene is akin to that of taking someone to trial, but this trial is before the Almighty.

In this extremely difficult situation, the person is told: "*Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.*" (Verse 22) There is nothing to blur your eyesight now. You can see clearly. This is the appointed time you ignored, the position you have not reckoned with, the end you did not expect. You can look all around you for your sight is now sharp indeed. At this point, his companion, which is most probably a reference to the witness who recorded all his actions, comes forward and says: "*Here is what I have recorded.*" (Verse 23)

The *sūrah* says nothing about examining the record. Instead, it states the divine verdict as it is given to the two angels: the one leading the person and the witness. They are told: "*Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.*" (Verses 24–26) These descriptions make the situation even more critical, for they show that the Almighty is displeased. They are all negative descriptions that deserve increased punishment. They are followed by His repeating the order, which needs no emphasis anyway: "*Cast him into severe suffering,*" indicating the unbeliever's position in hell.

This scares his companion who, thinking that his long association with the condemned person may reflect on him, hastens to dissociate himself from his doings: "*His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.'*" (Verse 27) The reference here may be to a different companion who submitted the records. This may be the devil who, throughout his life, tried to tempt him away from the truth. Now he tries to shirk his responsibility, asserting that the man was already far astray and, as such, accepted the tempting offer to go even further astray. There are other instances in the Qur'ān that tell us that the evil companion disowns the human one. Yet the first possibility we mentioned is also probable. The companion referred to in this verse could be the same angel who kept the record, but the hardship of the situation on the Day of Judgement makes him hasten to state his own

innocence even when he is truly innocent. He simply wants to prove that despite his long association with this miserable creature, he had no influence on his deeds. When an innocent person hastens to prove his truth-telling, this reveals much about the difficulty of the situation.

A final order is now issued to stop all argument: "*God will say: Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.*" (Verses 28–29) The occasion is not one for contention. Warnings were issued earlier, stating the nature of requital for every action. Everything has been recorded, and it is on the basis of this record that requital and reward are determined. No one is unjustly dealt with, for the one who looks into people's cases and determines their fate is the faultless arbiter.

Thus the fearsome scene of reckoning, with all its hardship, is thus ended, but the overall scene continues, with the *sūrah* revealing a more fearful aspect of it: "*On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?'*" (Verse 30) The whole scene is one of dialogue. Therefore, hell is portrayed here in the same way, with a question put to it and an answer given. This reveals something that is both amazing and awesome. We see every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, who was a sinful aggressor, a fomenter of doubt being thrown into hell where they pile up in great numbers. Then hell is asked whether it has had its full. Its reply is that of an unsatiated glutton: "*Are there no more?*" How frightening!

A contrasting image is drawn on the other side: it is pleasant, calm and friendly. Heaven is shown drawing near to the righteous such that they can see it for themselves. An honourable welcome awaits them:

> *And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: 'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.* (Verses 31–35)

Honour is shown with every word and move. Paradise is brought near so that they do not trouble themselves about going to it. The bliss of being accepted by God is extended to them there: "*This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion.*" It is those who are on high that state their qualities. Thus they realize that this is how they appear in God's records. Then they are admitted to heaven, in peace, a place from which they will not be turned out: "*Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.*" An announcement is made on high, noting their position and making it clear that their share with God is unlimited: "*There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.*" Whatever they may wish for will remain less than what is prepared for them. Since '*more*' is given by their Lord, it must be limitless.

An Easy Resurrection

The final part of the *sūrah* sounds like the final beat of a tune, as it repeats its strongest notes to an even faster time. It includes a glimpse of history and the fate of earlier unbelievers, an image from the open book of the universe and a new scene from the Day of Judgement, all coupled with a serious and inspiring directive:

> *How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is*

We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning. (Verses 36–45)

Although all these points have come under discussion earlier in the *sūrah*, they are repeated in conclusion with a new rhythm and added effect. They are noted here with more emphasis and greater speed. Thus they carry here a different effect from that produced by their more detailed discussion earlier. This is characteristic of the Qur'ānic style.

The *sūrah* stated earlier: "*Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, 'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': They all disbelieved their messengers, and therefore My warnings came true.*" (Verses 12–14) Here at the end the *sūrah* says: "*How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? they wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge.*" (Verse 36) It is a reference to the same fact, but in its new image it looks different. Then the *sūrah* adds the turn of time as generations followed generations, wandering through the lands. However, they remain within God's grasp from which no one can escape. A further comment is added to give it a more serious effect: "*In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees.*" (Verse 37)

There is indeed a reminder in the fate suffered by earlier communities for anyone with a heart to consider. A person who is not reminded by this is one whose heart is dead, or who has always been without a feeling heart. Indeed, in order to have due admonition, it is sufficient that a person should listen attentively. The story will undoubtedly have its telling effect. This is certain, because the human soul is very sensitive to the fate suffered by earlier peoples. Even the slightest degree of sensitivity is enough to bring back memories and inspiring images of such situations.

Earlier, the *sūrah* opened pages from the book of the universe, stating: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned*

it, leaving no flaws in it. We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it." (Verses 6–7) Now at the end of the *sūrah*, it says: "*We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us.*" (Verse 38) Thus it adds here a further touch, making it clear that the creation of everything in the universe, including the heavens and the earth, presented no difficulty for God. Compared with this, bringing the dead back to life is only a small matter.

A comment is then added, providing further shades and inspiration: "*Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer.*" (Verses 39–40) The rising and setting of the sun, and the spreading of the night after sunset, are all phenomena closely interlinked with the heavens and the earth. The *sūrah* delineates the bond between them, the glorification and praising of God and the prostrating of ourselves before Him. Within the same context, the *sūrah* also gives the instruction to bear patiently with whatever the unbelievers deny about resurrection and their refusal to believe in God's ability to bring creatures back to life. Thus a new aura of God's glorification, worship and patience is given to the same points repeated here. As this is all linked to aspects of the universe, these feelings are enhanced within a believer's heart whenever he looks at the skies or the earth, at every sunrise and approach of night, and whenever he prostrates himself before God.

A further touch is added to this portrait of the universe. The Prophet is instructed to have patience and to perform all this glorification and worship while remaining on the alert, expecting the great event that may come at any moment of the night or day. Only those who are totally oblivious of the truth will pay no attention to it. It is the event that provides the central theme of the *sūrah*: "*And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verses 41–44)

What we have here is a new scene depicting that most difficult day. When the first reference to it is made in the *sūrah*, it is shown differently: "*The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness...*" (Verses 20–21) Here the blowing of the trumpet is referred to as a '*mighty blast*'. It gives us a picture of how they will rush out as the earth is rent asunder all around them. This includes all those countless creatures of all generations, arising from graves they may have been buried in for a very long time. They are all ripped open, bringing up what remains of bones, dust, and lost cells in the earth. None except God knows their whereabouts. This, then, is an amazing image, one that the human mind can barely imagine.

Having drawn this bustling and inspirational scene, the *sūrah* states the truth which they deny and argue about: "*It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return.*" (Verse 43) "*That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verse 44) This is the most suitable time to state this truth.

The *sūrah* finally reassures the Prophet so that he is not troubled by the unbelievers' denials of this truth and the arguments they make in disputing it: "*We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.*" (Verse 45)

It is sufficient for you to reassure yourselves that "*We are fully aware of what they say.*" This is indeed an implicit warning of the consequences of this knowledge, which are bound to be terrible for them. "*You are not one to use coercion with them.*" You cannot force them to believe in God. You have no power over them. That power belongs to God alone. "*Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.*" (Verse 45) The Qur'ān shakes people's hearts. No heart that is alert and sensitive will ever reject the truths presented in the Qur'ān in its unique, remarkable style.

When a *sūrah* like this is presented, the matter does not require any mighty being to force people into submission to faith. The Qur'ān has far greater power than all tyrants could possess. A *sūrah* like this can easily produce on people's hearts an effect far more powerful than their whips. Whatever God says is the absolute truth.

SŪRAH 51

Al-Dhāriyāt

(The Scattering Winds)

Prologue

This *sūrah* has a special character. It begins by mentioning four forces that work by God's command, using ambiguous terms which give us an initial impression that we are being introduced to things wrapped in secrecy. God Almighty makes an oath by these four forces to emphasize a certain matter: "*By those that scatter far and wide; by those that are heavily laden; by those that speed along with gentle ease; by those that distribute by command; that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 1–6)

The words used in this opening for those four forces mentioned in the oath, i.e. *al-dhāriyāt, al-ḥāmilāt, al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt*, are not usually used to refer to immediately recognized objects. They invite questions and requests for explanation. Indeed, their very sounds impart this feeling of ambiguity, which is perhaps intended so as to give the *sūrah* its particular aura.

The first oath is hardly stated when it is followed by a second. God states this oath "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say.*" (Verses 7–8) What you say is inconsistent, based on conjecture, not fact.

With this particular opening and by its general drift, the *sūrah* sets itself a particular objective, which is the establishment of a bond between

the human heart and the sky, or rather what lies beyond the reach of human perception and known only to God. The human heart will thus become free of the constraints of this world, unchained by anything that prevents it from being dedicated to God's service. It will then be ready to move unhindered towards Him: "*Flee, then, to God.*" (Verse 50) This would fulfil God's purpose of creation: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind for any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56)

Since preoccupation with one's livelihood and what the future may bring with regard to it is one of the hardest of these hindrances, the *sūrah* takes particular care to free man of it, and to reassure him so that his heart turns to God, free of earthly chains. References to this point are found in several places in the *sūrah*. For example, explicit references include: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22) and "*God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verse 58) Other references are implicit, as in the verse describing the attitude of the righteous towards money. They "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) Likewise, the *sūrah* describes Abraham's hospitality and the welcome he gave to his guests, or rather the angels he thought to be his guests. When they greeted him, he went straight to his household and brought a fat calf, yet prior to their arrival at his doorstep, they were total strangers to him.

It is all, then, about freeing one's mind from the shackles of life on earth and earning one's living, so that one looks up to heaven, yearning for its bliss, eager to earn God's pleasure and seeking His acceptance. This is the focus of all the issues the *sūrah* raises. This explains the reason for its rather ambiguous start followed by an oath by the sky and the subsequent references made to it.

Thus we see in the picture the *sūrah* draws early on the main characteristics of those who are God-fearing: dedication to God, worship at night, sacrifice of money, assigning a portion of it to the poor and the deprived: "*The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verses 15–19)

To achieve the same purpose, the *sūrah* directs our attentions to God's signs on earth and within ourselves, while also emphasizing that provisions are given by heaven. We must not, therefore, give undue importance to its immediate means on earth: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verses 20–22)

The same may be said about the reference to the building of the skies with ample space, while the earth has been made easy for people to traverse, and to the fact that all creatures are created in pairs. All this leads to the all-important advice that we should all turn to God paying full heed to the warnings given by His Messenger: "*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning.*" (Verses 47–50)

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement reiterating the same message, making clear the purpose of creating humans and *jinn*, and their major roles in life: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verses 56–58)

Thus the *sūrah* plays on the same theme throughout, using different tunes but maintaining the same beat, directing man's heart to look to the sky.

The *sūrah* includes quick references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the ʿĀd, the Thamūd and Noah's people. In its account of Abraham, the *sūrah* makes a quick reference to money, as well as the realm beyond our perception when he is given the happy news of the birth of a son to be endowed with knowledge. He and his wife are given this child when they could have never expected it. In the other stories, the reference is mainly to the fact that God's promise always comes true, just as it is emphatically stated at the beginning: "*That which you are promised is true indeed.*" (Verse 5) Another reference to this is made at the conclusion, where the unbelievers are issued with a clear warning: "*The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it.*" (Verse 59) This comes after the statement that

implies that generations of unbelievers seem to have recommended to each other that they reject God's messengers: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds.*" (Verses 52–53)

Thus the historical accounts in the *sūrah* are closely related to its main theme, namely, pure and complete heart devotion to God, freeing it from all hindrances, strengthening its bond with heaven, first by faith and then by removing obstacles that prevent man from flying to that open horizon.



Al-Dhāriyāt
(The Scattering Winds)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the winds that scatter far and wide; (1)

وَالذَّارِيَاتِ ذَرْوًا ﴿١﴾

by those [clouds] that are heavily laden; (2)

فَالْحَامِلَاتِ وِقْرًا ﴿٢﴾

by those that speed along with gentle ease; (3)

فَالْجَارِيَاتِ يُسْرًا ﴿٣﴾

by those that distribute by command; (4)

فَالْمُقَسِّمَاتِ أَمْرًا ﴿٤﴾

that which you are promised is true indeed, (5)

إِنَّمَا تُوعَدُونَ لَصَادِقٌ ﴿٥﴾

and, for certain, judgement is bound to come. (6)

وَإِنَّ الدِّينَ لَوَاقِعٌ ﴿٦﴾

By the sky and its starry pathways (7)

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْحُبُكِ ﴿٧﴾

you people are at variance in what you say, (8)

إِنَّكُمْ لَفِي قَوْلٍ مُخْتَلِفٍ ﴿٨﴾

abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away. (9)

يُؤْفَكُ عَنْهُ مَنْ أُفِكَ ﴿٩﴾

Perish the ones given to blind guessing (10)

قُتِلَ الْخَرَّاصُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. (11)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي غَمْرَةٍ سَاهُونَ ﴿١١﴾

They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' (12)

يَسْأَلُونَ أَيَّانَ يَوْمُ الدِّينِ ﴿١٢﴾

That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. (13)

يَوْمَ هُمْ عَلَى النَّارِ يُفْتَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten. (14)

ذُوقُوا فِتْنَتَكُمْ هَٰذَا الَّذِي كُنتُم بِهِ تَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. (15)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٥﴾

They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. (16)

آخِذِينَ مَا آتَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَبْلَ ذَٰلِكَ مُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

They would sleep but little at night, (17)

كَانُوا قَلِيلًا مِّنَ اللَّيْلِ مَا يَهْجَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, (18)

وَبِالْأَسْحَارِ هُمْ يَسْتَغْفِرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived. (19)

وَفِي أَمْوَالِهِمْ حَقٌّ لِّلسَّائِلِ وَالْمَحْرُومِ ﴿١٩﴾

On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, (20)

وَفِي ٱلْأَرْضِ ءَايَٰتٌ لِّلْمُوقِنِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

and in yourselves too: can you not see? (21)

وَفِىٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. (22)

وَفِى ٱلسَّمَآءِ رِزْقُكُمْ وَمَا تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech. (23)

فَوَرَبِّ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُۥ لَحَقٌّ مِّثْلَ مَآ أَنَّكُمْ تَنطِقُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? (24)

هَلْ أَتَىٰكَ حَدِيثُ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَٰهِيمَ ٱلْمُكْرَمِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added to himself] 'These are strangers.' (25)

إِذْ دَخَلُوا۟ عَلَيْهِ فَقَالُوا۟ سَلَٰمًا ۖ قَالَ سَلَٰمٌ قَوْمٌ مُّنكَرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. (26)

فَرَاغَ إِلَىٰٓ أَهْلِهِۦ فَجَآءَ بِعِجْلٍ سَمِينٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' (27)

فَقَرَّبَهُۥٓ إِلَيْهِمْ قَالَ أَلَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

فَأَوْجَسَ مِنْهُمْ خِيفَةً ۖ قَالُوا لَا تَخَفْ ۖ
وَبَشَّرُوهُ بِغُلَامٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. (28)

فَأَقْبَلَتِ امْرَأَتُهُ فِي صَرَّةٍ فَصَكَّتْ وَجْهَهَا
وَقَالَتْ عَجُوزٌ عَقِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' (29)

قَالُوا كَذَٰلِكِ قَالَ رَبُّكِ ۖ إِنَّهُ هُوَ
الْحَكِيمُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٠﴾

Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' (30)

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' (31)

قَالُوا إِنَّا أُرْسِلْنَا إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, (32)

لِنُرْسِلَ عَلَيْهِمْ حِجَارَةً مِنْ طِينٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

to bring down on them stones of clay, (33)

مُسَوَّمَةً عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. (34)

فَأَخْرَجْنَا مَنْ كَانَ فِيهَا مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

We brought out such believers as were there; (35)

فَمَا وَجَدْنَا فِيهَا غَيْرَ بَيْتٍ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. (36)

We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (37)

وَتَرَكْنَا فِيهَآ ءَايَةً لِّلَّذِينَ يَخَافُونَ
ٱلْعَذَابَ ٱلْأَلِيمَ ﴿٣٧﴾

In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; (38)

وَفِى مُوسَىٰٓ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَٰهُ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ
بِسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (39)

فَتَوَلَّىٰ بِرُكْنِهِۦ وَقَالَ سَٰحِرٌ أَوْ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame. (40)

فَأَخَذْنَٰهُ وَجُنُودَهُۥ فَنَبَذْنَٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْيَمِّ
وَهُوَ مُلِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

In the 'Ād there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind (41)

وَفِى عَادٍ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلرِّيحَ ٱلْعَقِيمَ ﴿٤١﴾

which reduced to dust everything it came upon. (42)

مَا تَذَرُ مِن شَىْءٍ أَتَتْ عَلَيْهِ إِلَّا جَعَلَتْهُ
كَٱلرَّمِيمِ ﴿٤٢﴾

And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' (43)

وَفِى ثَمُودَ إِذْ قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَمَتَّعُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ
حِينٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. (44)

فَعَتَوْا عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ الصَّاعِقَةُ وَهُمْ يَنظُرُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves. (45)

فَمَا اسْتَطَاعُوا مِن قِيَامٍ وَمَا كَانُوا مُنتَصِرِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil. (46)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; (47)

وَالسَّمَاءَ بَنَيْنَاهَا بِأَيْدٍ وَإِنَّا لَمُوسِعُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! (48)

وَالْأَرْضَ فَرَشْنَاهَا فَنِعْمَ الْمَاهِدُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. (49)

وَمِن كُلِّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَا زَوْجَيْنِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; (50)

فَفِرُّوا إِلَى اللَّهِ ۖ إِنِّي لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning! (51)

وَلَا تَجْعَلُوا مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا آخَرَ ۖ إِنِّي لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥١﴾

كَذَٰلِكَ مَآ أَتَى ٱلَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّن
رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا قَالُوا۟ سَاحِرٌ أَوْ مَجْنُونٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (52)

أَتَوَاصَوْا۟ بِهِۦ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ طَاغُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. (53)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ فَمَآ أَنتَ بِمَلُومٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; (54)

وَذَكِّرْ فَإِنَّ ٱلذِّكْرَىٰ تَنفَعُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe. (55)

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ ٱلْجِنَّ وَٱلْإِنسَ
إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ ﴿٥٦﴾

I have not created the *jinn* and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. (56)

مَآ أُرِيدُ مِنْهُم مِّن رِّزْقٍ وَمَآ أُرِيدُ أَن
يُطْعِمُونِ ﴿٥٧﴾

No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. (57)

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ ٱلرَّزَّاقُ ذُو ٱلْقُوَّةِ ٱلْمَتِينُ ﴿٥٨﴾

God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty. (58)

فَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا۟ ذَنُوبًا مِّثْلَ ذَنُوبِ
أَصْحَٰبِهِمْ فَلَا يَسْتَعْجِلُونِ ﴿٥٩﴾

The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. (59)

Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised. (60)	فَوَيْلٌ لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِن يَوْمِهِمُ الَّذِي يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

A True Promise

> *By those that scatter far and wide; By those that are heavily laden; By those that speed along with gentle ease; By those that distribute by command; That which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.* (Verses 1–6)

The *sūrah* begins with a quick beat, using ambiguous phrases to imply that it is talking about a serious matter that deserves our full attention. Inevitably though, the four ambiguous words used in the first four verses – *al-dhāriyāt, al-ḥāmilāt, al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt* – have made people ask questions, even in the very early days of Islam, as they sought further explanation. In this respect, Ibn Kathīr reports:

> 'Alī was on the pulpit in Kufah one day when he said: 'If you have any query about a verse in the Qur'ān or a ḥadīth by the Prophet, I will give you an answer.' Ibn al-Kawwā' asked him the meaning of *al-dhāriyāt*, [those that scatter], and he answered, 'the winds'. Then he said: 'What about *al-ḥāmilāt* [those heavily laden]?' 'Alī answered, 'the clouds'. The man then asked about *al-jāriyāt* [those that speed along], and 'Alī's answer was, 'the ships'. The man asked: 'What about *al-muqassimāt* [those that distribute]?' 'Alī said, 'the angels'.[1]

Ṣabīgh ibn 'Isl al-Tamīmī asked 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb about these words and his reply was the same as above. 'Umar felt, however, that al-Tamīmī was asking only for argument's sake, thereby hinting at the ambiguity. By way of reprimand for his behaviour, 'Umar banned him from future social gatherings. Subsequently, Ṣabīgh al-Tamīmī repented

1. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, Dār el-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 248.

and swore most seriously that he no longer entertained any of his earlier doubts. This report suggests that the ambiguity contained in these words encouraged those who tried to raise doubts about the Qur'ān, making such words the point of their questioning. The same explanation of these words was given by Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn 'Umar, Mujāhid, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, al-Ḥasan, Qatādah, al-Suddī and many others.

God states an oath by the winds that move and scatter things such as dust, grain, pollen, clouds and other material known or unknown to us; by the clouds carrying water and driven by God Almighty to wherever He pleases; by the ships that easily float on water making use of the characteristics God has given to water, shipping and the whole universe, and by the angels carrying God's commands and delivering them as He pleases, giving details as to what matters they are concerned with.

The winds, the clouds, the ships and the angels are all God's creatures which He uses as a means to implement His will with regard to the universe and His servants. By using them in His oath, He draws attention to them and what they signify. In this way we are able to reflect on how God initiates these creatures, sets them in operation and uses them to fulfil what He wishes to be fulfilled. Mentioning them in this way invites our minds to think about the secrets they embody so that we look to their Creator. They may also, in some way, relate to the issue of sustenance, preoccupation with which the *sūrah* wants to free us from. The winds, the clouds and the ships have a definite connection with sustenance. Moreover, sustenance is one of the things that the angels distribute by God's command. Thus, we clearly see the relation between this opening and one of the main topics of the *sūrah*.

God states an oath by these four types of creation, confirming that "*that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 5–6) God has promised mankind that He will reward their good actions with what is better, and that He will requite their bad deeds with what is bad. If He delays holding them to account during their lives on earth, He will not ignore doing so in the life to come, where all reckoning and accounting will inevitably take place: "*For certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verse 6) The promise is undoubtedly true, and will be fulfilled in either life. He has also

promised people that their sustenance, in plenty or limited measure, is guaranteed. Again His promise in this matter is true.

God's promise to mankind is sure to be realized in the way and at the time He chooses. This needs no oath from Him. However, He makes this oath by these four types of His creation to draw attention to them, as they clearly point to His power and planning. When we contemplate these entities we have a clearer impression of the truth of God's promise and, therefore, our accountability for our deeds will inevitably take place. By their very nature, these entities suggest that life is not the result of idle play, accident or blind coincidence. Indeed, the oath leads us to view them as proofs of the divine message.

Differences and Blind Guessing

The same may be said about the second oath: "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say, abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away.*" (Verses 7–9) This oath is by the sky that is perfectly built, with pathways that are carefully interconnected, like the links of a chain. This may be one form clouds take as they gather in the sky, looking like a watery or sandy surface during or after a windy period. On the other hand, this description may be true of the permanent order of orbits that are perfectly coordinated and probably interconnected.

This oath, by the perfectly arranged sky, confirms that the unbelievers are at variance in what they say and believe. Their stand is shaky, lacking roots and foundations. People may abandon belief at will, or stick to it if they wish. There is no general agreement or coordination as to its validity. The situation is one of perpetual confusion and worry. Such is falsehood: shifting grounds and a maze without markings or light. It is always shifting like a desert sand, lacking firm basis and accurate measure. When people agree on some aspect of faith, they soon diverge and find themselves in dispute. Their confusion is seen even more clearly when it is shown against the background of the sky, which is perfectly ordered and coordinated.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that the unbelievers are deluded about the major question of the life to come. Their opinions are without a firm or true basis. They argue and dispute about a clear question of truth.

It then goes on to portray the Day of Judgement in such a way as they can actually see it:

> *Perish the ones given to blind guessing who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.* (Verses 10–14)

Such people indulge in blind guessing. It is God who invokes their killing. How terrible! Needless to say, such an invocation is a firm sentence, one that is certain to be enforced. "*Perish the ones given to blind guessing.*" (Verse (10) Further clarification of their identity is added: "*who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth.*" (Verse 11) They are so steeped in delusion and falsehood that they are unable to wake themselves up. The *sūrah* shows them to be totally unaware of anything around them, as if they are excessively drunk. They cannot see for themselves something that is very clear to anyone with a sound mind. "*They ask: When will this Day of Judgement come?*" (Verse 12) It is not a question that seeks information; rather, it is an expression of doubt and denial. Therefore, the *sūrah* shows them their position on that day which they claim to be highly improbable: "*That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire.*" (Verse 13) They will burn in the fire just as some metals are exposed to fire to determine their make up. This burning is coupled with strong remonstration: "*Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.*" (Verse 14) A quick scene showing their miserable end is the most fitting answer to their question that sought no information. This powerful scene of their end contrasts with the state of confusion that plagues their lives. Moreover, it confirms that God's invocation of their deaths is fulfilled in a most terrible way.

At the Opposite End

Next, a contrasting image is drawn. This depicts a different group, reassured in their certainty, eager to do what is good without boasting about it, fully awake at night when they volunteer their night worship:

> *The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.* (Verses 15–19)

This group are fully alert, sensitive to the fact that God watches them and, therefore, they carefully watch their own behaviour. These will be placed "*amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them.*" (Verses 15–16) God grants them blessings in abundance as a reward for what they do in this their first life, worshipping Him as if they see Him and realizing that He sees them: "*for they were keen to do good.*" (Verse 16) Their desire to excel is portrayed in a splendid image: "*They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn,*" (Verses 17–18) They are the ones who stay up at night when others are fast asleep. They turn to their Lord, appealing to Him to forgive them their sins. They sleep but little during the night, preferring to address their Lord and enjoy the pleasure of being in close contact with Him, when no one else is aware of that contact.

Al-Ḥasan says in commenting on the verse, "*They would sleep but little at night*": "They offered voluntary night worship, sleeping only a little and extending their worship until the late hours, shortly before dawn, when they would pray for forgiveness." Qatādah quotes al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment after reading this verse: "They slept only for a short while at night. I am not one to which this verse applies." Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī cites al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment: "I tried to compare my work to that of the people of heaven and I discovered that those people are ahead of us by a long way. We cannot aspire to what they achieved, sleeping but little at night. I then tried to compare my work to that of the people of hell and I found out that those are devoid of goodness, denying God's revelations and His messengers, refusing to believe in resurrection after death. I concluded that the best among us are those who mix good deeds with bad ones."

A man said to Zayd ibn Aslam that he felt that this quality of spending much of the night in voluntary worship does not apply to their

generation who only spend a little of the night time in such worship. Zayd said to him: "Blessed is the one who sleeps when he is sleepy and remains God-fearing when awake."

This is a standard to which a number of the *Tābi'īn* generation that immediately followed the Prophet's Companions, known for their firm belief and piety, aspired to. They felt that they were well below it. It is the standard only achieved by the elite God has chosen and who have been shown the way to achieve it.

This is their situation with regard to their relations with God. As for their relations with people and their attitude to money, these people are of the type that is keen to do good: they "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) They not only give a share of what they have to those who ask for help and the one who is too shy to ask and thus remains deprived of help, but they make that a rightful share, committing themselves to it as though they are duty bound to do so even though it is voluntary.

This point fits well with the treatment of the issue of possessions and earnings in the *sūrah*, as it helps to free the believer's heart of the shackles of personal greed and their preoccupation with livelihood. It also serves to prepare us for the next section of the *sūrah*.

Signs Galore

> *On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.* (Verses 20–23)

These verses turn our attentions to the countless signs testifying to God's oneness, both on earth and within ourselves. They also guide us to look to heaven for our means of sustenance, as it is all measured. They finish with a great oath by God Himself, the Lord of the heavens and earth, confirming that the message given to them from Him is absolutely true.

"*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verses 20–21) The earth on which we live is a great exhibition of God's signs and marvels. Until now, mankind has only been able to see a little of these marvels, even though we discover each day something new and remarkable. Likewise, there is a similarly breathtaking exhibition that takes place within us, within the human soul with its marvellous secrets that mirror those of the universe. These two short verses refer to these two great exhibitions, opening their gates wide for anyone who wishes to look and have faith. Such a person will, as a result, fill his life with pleasure and enjoyment, profound lessons and a wealth of true knowledge.

Qur'ānic texts are phrased in such a way as to make them relevant for all times, environments and situations. They can give every person, every mind and every understanding a wealth of knowledge that each is perfectly able to handle. As man's knowledge increases, his faculties of understanding develop, his experience broadens, and as he becomes more aware of the secrets of the universe and of his own self, he receives more of the import of the Qur'ānic texts. As the Prophet declares: "the Qur'ān is a book of endless marvels. It remains new no matter how repeatedly it is read." The Prophet who said this was the man on whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high and who understood its secrets and lived them fully. His description was based on the most direct and personal of experiences.

Those who were the first to listen to the Qur'ān saw of God's signs on earth and in themselves their share, according to their knowledge, experience and inspiration. Every succeeding generation also received their shares according to whatever further knowledge and experience they had accumulated. We, in our turn, have our own share in line with our increased knowledge in different fields, and with what we have been able to discover of the secrets of the universe. Those who come after us will also find a share kept for them of secrets yet unknown to man, in both the earth and within the human soul. These two exhibitions will remain, to the end of time, majestic, full of new wonders.

This planet earth was made ready to support life in a way that is almost unique in what we know of this great universe, with its unlimited number of planets and stars. What we know of these, which is only a

fraction of what we do not know, includes millions of galaxies, each of which contains hundreds of millions of stars, as well as planets, which are satellites of these stars. Yet out of such countless numbers, the earth uniquely seems to be the only one suited for this type of life. Should any of the many special characteristics of the earth change or be disturbed, life as we know it will become impossible on earth. If the earth's size changes so that it becomes larger or smaller, or if a change affects the position of the earth in relation to the sun, or the sun's size or level of heat, or the angle of the earth's axis, or its rotation in place, or the speed of its movement in its orbit, or the size of the moon, or its distance from it, or the proportion of sea to dry land, etc. no life on earth would be possible. Is this not a great sign, or a multitude of signs, for us to contemplate?

Consider also the endless variety of foods stored in the earth for all creatures that live on it, fly in its atmosphere, swim its waters, hide in its caves, and who disappear underground. Some types of food are simple, others are complex and sophisticated. They are available in all types and shapes to meet the endless needs of endless numbers and types of creatures. Such a great variety of food, including what may be inside the earth, or in its atmosphere, or growing on its surface, or may come from the sun or other worlds beyond, is given in due measure and proportion in accordance with the divine will that created the earth and made it a cradle for this type of life, equipping it with all that is needed.

Consider further the scenes of what the earth presents, wherever you look or move. There are no end of wonderful scenes: flat grounds and lowlands, hills and valleys, lakes and seas, rivers and streams, vineyards and fields of grains and date-palms of different varieties, etc. Every one of these scenes undergoes change by the creative hand whose inventiveness never stops. We pass by any of these in the dry season and capture a certain essence of it, and then we pass by again in the rainy season to find a totally different essence. It presents a third image at the time of growth and yet another totally different one at harvest time. Yet it is all in the same spot, unable to move an inch.

Then consider the creatures that live on earth: plants, animals, birds, fish, reptiles and insects. We need not mention mankind because the *sūrah* gives it special focus. We cannot give a figure for the number of

kinds and species of these creatures, let alone give accurate figures of their individual populations. Every kind is a community of its own; each individual is a great wonder: every animal, bird, reptile, worm and shoot. Indeed, the wonder extends further to every petal of a flower and every stalk in a leaf. Each presents a great exhibition with endless marvels. In this way, the *sūrah* alerts human minds to reflect and contemplate so that they appreciate and enjoy these wonders throughout their lives' journey.

Yet none truly appreciates these wonders and enjoys these pleasures except one whose heart carries the certainty of faith: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith.*" (Verse 20) It is only such certainty that brings the heart alive so that it sees, understands and appreciates the creating power behind them. Without such certainty, all remains cold and hollow, speechless and lifeless, while the heart remains unresponsive. Many are those who pass through this great open exhibition with closed eyes and hearts. They neither feel its life force nor understand its language, and all because they are devoid of that certainty of faith. Some may be reputable scientists, but "*they only know the outer surface of this world's life.*" (30: 7) The truth beyond the outer surface remains closed to them, because hearts can only open to receive the truth of existence by the key of faith and can only see it in the light of certainty.

Man: A World of Wonders

The other wonder that walks on earth is mentioned in the next verse: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) Man is indeed the greatest wonder, or miracle on earth, although he is often oblivious to his own real status and to the secret wonders in his own constitution. He is a great wonder in his outer and inner self; his body and soul. When man begins to think about himself, he always finds some great wonder to contemplate: the way his organs are made, their distribution in his body, their functions and the way they perform those functions; how food is digested and assimilated; the process of breathing; blood circulation; the neurological system; the glands and what they produce to ensure physical growth and keep the body functioning, as also the perfect coordination,

harmony and cooperation between all these systems. Every wonderful aspect encompasses many other wonders. Indeed, in every organ and part of an organ there is an amazing wonder.

Then there are the secrets of man's soul and its known and unknown abilities: how he understands, retains and retrieves information. Where are information and images stored and how? How and where are such images, scenes and visions printed, and how are they retrieved? In all this, we are speaking about abilities known to us. What is unknown is even greater. We see occasional glimpses of these during moments of great inspiration, pointing to what is beyond our current reach.

Consider also the bewildering nature of human procreation: one cell carries the entire treasure of characteristics of the human race, as well as the special characteristics of both parents and nearer grandparents. Where are all these characteristics stored within the single microscopic cell? How does it recognize, by itself, its long history and represent it so accurately, eventually culminating in reproducing this amazing creature called man?

A short pause at the moment when a newborn starts its life on earth, separating from its mother and starting its own independent life, allowing its heart and lungs to function and begin life is enough to leave us speechless. It is enough to give us an overwhelming feeling of faith. A similar pause for reflection on the moment when a newborn begins to use its tongue to utter its first sounds, syllables, words and then phrases, indeed reflection on the mechanics of speech, the vocalization through the tongue and the larynx, gives us the feeling that we are looking at a great miracle, one that we tend to take for granted because of its familiarity. Yet on reflection we can appreciate the truth that this great wonder could only have come from God. Indeed every small aspect of the creature that is man is a miracle that leaves us absolutely amazed: *"And in yourselves too: can you not see?"* (Verse 21)

Every individual human being is a world of its own; a mirror reflecting the whole universe in a special and unique image that is not repeated at any moment in history. There is no parallel for any one person in the entire human race, whether in shape, features, mind, faculties, spirit, feelings or even in the way the universe is reflected in that person's mind.

In this divine museum that includes millions of millions of individuals, each one is a unique sample that can never be repeated in the same way as fingerprints are unrepeated throughout human history.

Many of the wonders of the human race are open for all to see: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) What we see of these wonders point to that which we cannot see. These wonders cannot be listed in a book. Indeed, what we know of them will take volumes to explain and what is unknown to us is much greater than what we know. The Qur'ān does not attempt to enumerate them. It simply uses this touch to alert our hearts to this great divine show, which is presented before our very eyes and minds. Thus we go through our journey on earth reflecting and contemplating, deriving immense pleasure from looking carefully at this wonderful creature that lies within ourselves.

Furthermore, we gain much pleasure from looking carefully at people's faces, features, movements and habits, provided that such a look is cast through the eyes of one who acknowledges his position as a servant of God, taking a round in an exhibition of the greatest Creator's work. How about one who spends a lifetime in such pleasant exercise? With a pointer like this, the Qur'ān creates man anew, giving him a new faculty of perception, a new pleasant life and an enjoyment that is unparalleled by anything else on earth.

It is this level of reflection and contemplation that the Qur'ān wants us to achieve. Faith is what gives our hearts such a treasure and opens for us this superior enjoyment while we are still here on earth.

An Oath to Confirm the Truth

After the two exhibitions of the earth and man, the *sūrah* presents a third from the world above, where our perceptions cannot reach. It is there that our shares of provisions and livelihood are determined: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22)

This is a remarkable touch. The means of livelihood and provisions are all on earth. Man works hard and expects to receive his share as a result of his work. The Qur'ān, however, turns man's attention to the sky, to heaven, to God. It is there that shares are determined. The earth itself, and all its means of provisions, are signs for those who have certainty

of faith, pointing to God so that we ask Him for His bounty. Thus do we get rid of worldly burdens, personal greed and the immediate means of income so that these do not become a barrier preventing us from looking up to God who has created all such means.

Every believer understands this statement properly, realizing that it does not mean that one should abandon one's livelihood. He knows that God has assigned to man the task of building life on earth. He understands that it means that man must not make it the focus of his attention. He should work on earth whilst looking up to heaven. He should use the means of his livelihood, realizing that they are not what brings him his provisions. These provisions are assigned to him in heaven, and what God has promised is certain to be fulfilled. Thus his heart breaks the shackles of the immediate concerns about his livelihood, finding in them signs pointing to their Creator. Man thus revives his bond with heaven while standing firmly on the earth. This is what God wants for man, whom He created from clay, then breathed in him of His own spirit, to make him nobler than most of His creation. Faith is the means that puts man in the best situation, because it returns him to that state of pure nature God gave him, before it was affected by deviation and corruption.

Having touched on these three great signs: the earth, man and heaven, God states an oath by Himself, in His glory, that all this discourse is absolutely true: "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" (Verse 23) That humans speak is a fact they acknowledge. They entertain no doubt whatsoever about it. Likewise, this discourse is absolutely true. God tells only the absolute truth.

Al-Aṣma'ī, a famous literary figure who lived in the later part of the second century of the Islamic calendar, reports the following anecdote which is quoted by al-Zamakhsharī in his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*. We quote it here as it is interesting and relevant to our discussion.

> I came out of the main mosque in Basrah and I saw a Bedouin riding a young camel. He asked me to which tribe I belonged, and I told him that I was from Asma'. He asked where I had come from

and I said, 'From a place where the words of the Lord of Grace are recited.' He said: 'Then recite to me.' I began reading the *sūrah* entitled 'The Scattering Winds'. When I read the verse saying, "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised,*" he said, 'This is enough.' He immediately slaughtered his she-camel and distributed its meat to all the people around, then he broke his sword and bow, and left. When I subsequently went on pilgrimage with Caliph al-Rashīd and as I was doing *ṭawāf* around the Ka'bah, I heard someone with a sharp voice calling me. I looked around and I saw the Bedouin having grown thinner and paler. He greeted me and asked me to recite to him the same *sūrah* again. When I reached the same verse, he said, 'We have found God's promise to be true.' Then he asked me what came after that verse. I read the next verse, "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" He cried aloud, 'Limitless is God in His glory! Who has angered the Almighty to make Him swear? They would not believe His words so that He would say an oath!' He repeated this three times and then passed away.[2]

This may or may not be a true story, but it reminds us that this oath by God is awesome. It is an oath by God Himself and by His main attribute, 'the Lord of the heavens and earth', which adds to the certainty of the truth that is the subject of this oath. It is true, and it does not need an oath to make it so.

Abraham and the Angels

So far we have looked at the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part includes brief references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the 'Ād Prophet Hud's people, the Thamūd Prophet Ṣāliḥ's people, and Noah's people. This part closely relates to what preceded it in the *sūrah* and to what follows.

Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added

2. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, Dār al-Fikr, (n.d.), Vol. 4, p. 17.

to himself] 'These are strangers.' He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, to bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. We brought out such believers as were there; but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (Verses 24–37)

These verses speak of a sign or signs in the history of the divine message, just like those signs in the earth and in man to which the *sūrah* referred. It also refers to a promise or promises that are fulfilled, just like the promises the *sūrah* mentioned earlier.

It begins its reference to Abraham by the question: "*Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests?*" (Verse 24) This style is used to prepare our minds for what comes next. It describes Abraham's guests as '*honoured*', either because they are so in God's sight, or because of how Abraham paid honour to them as we soon learn. Abraham's hospitality appears very clearly from the first moment his guests arrived. Once they greeted him and received his reply, and despite the fact that they are total strangers, he immediately goes to his wife telling her to prepare food. He provides a large quantity of food, sufficient for scores of people: "*He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf.*" (Verse 26) According to some reports, there were only three guests, which means that a shoulder of that calf would have been sufficient to give them a good meal.

"*He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?'*" (Verse 27) He asked this question after he saw that their hands did not touch the food and it looked as if they would not eat the meal that had been provided.

"*He then became apprehensive of them*," either because a stranger who refuses to eat his host's food appears treacherous and causes an element of apprehension, or because he noticed something odd about them. Therefore, they revealed their identity, reassuring him and giving him the good news they had brought him: "*They said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge*." (Verse 28) This was the happy news of Isaac's birth.

"*His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!'*" (Verse 29) She overheard the good news, was stunned and surprised. She could not stop herself from crying out in amazement. In the habitual reaction of women, she slapped herself on both cheeks and said: '*A barren old woman!*' This was a further expression of her surprise given she was elderly, and had been barren throughout her life. Stunned by this totally unexpected piece of news, she forgot that those bringing the good news were angels. Therefore, the angels reminded her of the basic truth that there is no limit to God's power, and that He determines everything on the basis of perfect wisdom and absolute knowledge: "*Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.'*" (Verse 30)

Everything will come into existence once the command, 'Be', is given. God said it, so what can prevent His order from being fulfilled? Familiar habits limit our imagination and understanding. Therefore, we are surprised when we see something running counter to what is familiar. Yet God's will is free, unrestricted by anything that may be familiar to man in his small world. It creates whatever He wills, without limitation.

When Abraham realized who his guests were, he asked them about the mission they had been sent to accomplish: "*Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin*." (Verses 31–32) These were Lot's people as explained in other *sūrahs*. Those angels would "*bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds*." (Verses 33–34)

These stones of clay, marked or made ready by God for those who transgress the bounds, like Lot's people who transgressed the bounds of human nature, truth and religion, may well be stones from a volcanic eruption brought out from deep inside the earth. In this respect, they

are *'from your Lord,'* aimed, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, against any transgressors He has marked. Thus, they are determined in time and place according to His absolute knowledge and His will. There is nothing to prevent their being aimed, within the framework of His will and laws, by angels. Do we know the exact nature of God's angels? Do we know the nature of their relation to the universe and its inhabitants? Do we truly know the nature of the universal powers to which we give names according to what we may see of their characteristics? Why should we question the news given to us by God, saying that He sent some of these forces at a certain point of time, to aim some powers in a particular form, against certain people, at a certain place? How can we question such news when all our knowledge consists of some theories and supposed interpretations concerning what appears to us of these powers and forces? Their reality remains far removed from us. Let these stones be volcanic resulting from an eruption nearby, or some other such stones. What difference does it make? Both are the same in His hand, as He has made both and the secret is known to Him. He may reveal that secret when and if He so wishes.

"*We brought out such believers as were there,*" to protect and save them. "*But We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house.*" (Verse 36) Those were Lot's family, as reported in other *sūrahs*, and they were all saved except his wife who perished with her people. "*We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering.*" (Verse 37) Those who fear are the ones who see the sign, understand it and benefit from it. The others are blind, unable to see God's signs on earth, within themselves or in the events of history.

Moses and Earlier Communities

Another sign is cited from the history of Moses. A brief reference to this is made within the context of the signs from the history of God's messengers:

> *In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and*

said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame. (Verses 38–40)

The clear authority God gave to Moses was his powerful argument and irrefutable proof, as well as that people were in awe of his presence. Yet Pharaoh turned away, proud of his power, and rejected the clear truth and the decisive proof. When Moses showed him the miraculous signs God had given him, Pharaoh said that Moses was '*a sorcerer or a madman*'. This confirms that miracles will not guide a heart that is not prepared to believe. They cannot silence a voice that insists on repeating fabrications.

The *sūrah* does not give details of Moses' story. It proceeds straight to its conclusion: "*We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame.*" (Verse 40) Pharaoh certainly deserved all blame because of his transgression and rejection of God's message. The phraseology here clearly indicates God's direct action in seizing Pharaoh and his army and casting them into the sea. This is deliberately highlighted as it fits with the exhibition of God's signs on earth, in man and throughout history.

In the 'Ād there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind which reduced to dust everything it came upon. (Verses 41–42)

The wind is described in Arabic as *'aqīm*, which literally means 'sterile'. It is given this description because, unlike what they expected, it did not bring them water and life. Rather, it destroyed life and brought about death and total destruction. It left everything it came upon like a dead thing, reduced to dust.

Wind is one of the forces God has set in the universe, and one of God's troops which are known only to Him. He sends it, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, in a particular form, at an appointed time, bringing either destruction or life to whomever He wills. In such a situation there is no room for the naïve objection

voiced by some people who say that the wind blows according to a universal system and travels here or there as other natural forces and factors determine. The One who makes it blow and travel according to a certain system, forces and factors is the One who sends it against whom He wills at the time He chooses. He is able to send it as He wills within the system and factors He has put in place. No doubt or objection can be voiced.

> *And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves.* (Verses 43–45)

The statement referring to what was said to them, "*You can enjoy your life for a while*," may be a reference to their being given a period of three days after they killed the she-camel, which was a sign given to them by God. This is mentioned in another *sūrah*, when their prophet, Ṣālih, said to them: "*You have just three more days to enjoy life in your homes.*" (11: 65) It could also refer to the fact that they had their time of life and enjoyed it from the time the divine message was given to them to the time when they slew the she-camel. They clearly disobeyed God and deserved His punishment.

What was said about the stones aimed at Lot's people and the wind sent against the 'Ād is also applicable to the thunderbolt that struck the Thamūd. All of these are universal forces that work in accordance with God's will and His laws. He sends them against whomever He decides within these laws and they fulfil the role assigned to them by God like any of His other troops.

"*And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil.*" (Verse 46) This is just a quick reference, with no details or explanations. It is added as if to say, 'remember Noah's people.' This reference is followed by one to the skies and how they are built. Both are among God's signs, one from the universe and one from history. The *sūrah* puts them together, so joining its second and third parts.

Creatures in Pairs

> *We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!* (Verses 47–51)

These verses take us back to the great universal exhibition the *sūrah* presented in its opening, providing here yet another image the Qur'ān puts before our eyes and minds. Further references are added to God's signs, linking that provided by Noah and his people with that of the heavens, the earth and other creatures. This culminates with a call to mankind to flee to their Lord, submitting themselves to Him and associating no partners with Him.

"*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse.*" (Verse 47) Power is the clearest element in the solid, firm and well-coordinated structure of the '*skies*', whatever we take the term to mean: the orbits of the different stars and planets, any of the star clusters we normally call a galaxy which includes many millions of stars, a stratum of the huge space in which planets and stars are scattered, or any other of its many meanings. Vastness is another clearly recognizable element. These millions of huge stars are no more than small particles floating in the great expanse that is the universe.

This reference to the skies may also imply a pointer to the stores of sustenance, which were stated earlier in the *sūrah* to be in the sky. However, in the earlier reference it is merely a symbol indicating what is with God. Yet the Qur'ānic expression gives deliberate connotations so as to leave a clear impression on people's minds.

The same applies to the reference to the earth and its being spread out: "*And We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it!*" (Verse 48) As we explained before, God has made this earth to be a cradle for human life. That the earth has been spread out indicates that it serves as a cradle equipped with all that is necessary to support and enable life to flourish.

"*All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought.*" (Verse 49) This is a fascinating truth that reveals the basic rule common to all creation on earth, and possibly in the universe. As it stands, the statement does not limit the '*in pairs*' rule to the earth. It is clearly seen among living creatures, but the phrase, '*all things*', also includes inanimate objects. Hence, the statement means that both animate and inanimate things are created in pairs.

This statement was presented to people 14 centuries ago, when even the thought that living things, let alone inanimate objects, are all made in pairs was totally unknown. When we remember this we find the statement itself becomes amazing, as it presents such a universal fact to people at such an early time. Moreover, this statement confirms that recent scientific research is heading towards confirmation of this truth. Indeed, it has almost established that the whole universe is made of atoms, which contain a dual electric charge, positive and negative.[3]

These verses referring to the great universe, the width of the earth and the system of creation all culminate in a call on people to flee to God, the Creator of all, shedding all that shackles their souls, acknowledging His absolute unity: "*Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!*" (Verses 50–51) Use of the word *flee*, here is very significant. It points to the burdens, shackles and handcuffs that restrain people, pulling them towards the earth and its material life, preventing free movement and ensuring they are always restrained. Most cogent among these are the restraints of earning one's livelihood, maintaining one's income and preoccupation with improving one's lot. Therefore, the call to shed all these and flee to God, alone, without partners, is very powerful. It reminds people, twice in succession, that they have no excuse for not doing so: "*I am sent by Him to give you clear warning.*" (Verses 50–51)

It is as if the mention of the signs seen everywhere in the heavens, earth and among creatures is a continuation of the signs given to God's

3. The author wrote this in the late 1950s. Recent scientific research has moved further, looking at sub-atomic particles, the string theory, etc. These again confirm what is stated here that every thing is created in pairs. God certainly tells the truth. – Editor's note.

messengers. Next we have a comment on the references to earlier messengers mentioned in the *sūrah*:

> *Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.* (Verses 52–55)

It is the same nature common to all unbelievers. They all give the same response to the divine message: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.'*" (Verse 52) This is exactly what the Arab unbelievers said. It is as if one generation of unbelievers handed down such a legacy to the next in a continuing process. Needless to say, there was no such handing down. It is all in the nature of transgression and unbelief whereby present unbelievers and their predecessors are brought together.

The natural result of this repeated stand is that the Prophet should not pay any attention to what the unbelievers say. He is not responsible for them as they choose to remain in error. He has spared no effort in trying to get them to follow divine guidance: "*Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame.*" (Verse 54) His only task is to remind people and to continue to give them reminders, no matter how persistent they are in their rejection of the truth: "*And go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.*" (Verse 55) Such reminders will not benefit hardened unbelievers. Yet the task assigned to God's messengers is to give such reminders. It is not within their ability to ensure that people follow proper guidance. That is outside their remit. It is God alone who gives guidance.

The Purpose of Creation

The last note in the *sūrah* explains the meaning of fleeing to God and shedding all burdens and encumbrances in order to fulfil the mission for which He created people:

I have not created the jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.* (Verses 56–58)

This short statement embodies one of the greatest universal truths. Indeed, to fully understand this truth it is necessary for human life on earth to be set on the right track. This applies in equal measure to the life of the individual, the community and all humanity throughout history. Understanding this truth opens up a whole host of concepts and meanings. The first point in this truth is that there is a clear objective for the existence of humans and *jinn* on earth. This objective is represented in a task: whoever fulfils it achieves the objective of his existence, and whoever neglects it leads a life without purpose or objective. He who neglects it thus breaks away from the law that applied to him when he came into existence, and he ends in utter loss. This task which binds humans and *jinn* to the law of the universe is worship or servitude to God. Thus, there will be a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Man's life is thus set aright on this basis.

We then begin to see the other side of this great truth, realizing that the concept of worship must be much broader and more comprehensive than attending to worship rituals. Neither humans nor *jinn* spend their lives in worship rituals. Indeed, God does not require them to do so. On the contrary, He requires them to fulfil other tasks which take up most of their time. We do not know anything about the sort of duties God requires of the *jinn*, but we know the extent of what God requires of man. This is clearly stated in the Qur'ān, as God says: "*Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.'*" (2: 30) Being in charge of the earth is then the main function of human beings. This requires the exercise of different activities and the use of different talents in order to build human life on earth, after getting to know its resources and potentials. In doing so, man puts in effect God's will to use and develop the earth so as to ensure steady progress. Man's vicegerency also involves the implementation of God's law so that human society can be set on the proper foundation, one that is in harmony with the law governing the universe.

All this makes it absolutely clear that worship, which is the objective of human existence, or rather man's first duty, has a much broader sense than the mere observance of rituals. Indeed the entire concept of vicegerency is incorporated into the idea of worship, which must be reflected in two major ways. The first is that the concept of man's servitude to God should be well established in our hearts. This so that we fully realize that there is only a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Beyond this there is nothing: it is just the One Lord and all others are His servants, to whom they offer their worship. The second is that every thought, every action and every life affair must be addressed purely to God, seeking His acceptance. Every feeling other than that of submission to God and worshipping Him should be discarded.

When these two concepts are fully absorbed, the meaning of worship is fully realized. Thus, ordinary actions in man's life become like worship rituals; rituals like building human life on earth, striving for God's cause, ensuring patience in adversity and accepting God's will are all aspects of worship, fulfilling the main objective for which humans and *jinn* have been created. They are all a translation of submission to the overall law that governs the universe, which is submission and servitude to God, and to no one else.

Thus man will live on earth feeling that he is there to fulfil a task assigned to him by God, for a period of time. This task is to obey God and worship Him, without having any interest or objective in all this other than obedience of God. The reward for such obedience man finds within himself in the form of pleasant reassurance and satisfaction with his lot, as well as deep gratification from earning God's acceptance. He will then find greater reward in the life to come where he will receive honour and far-reaching blessings.

He will then have truly fled to God, discarding all worldly burdens, attractions and distractions and claimed his full freedom. He will have established his position in the general system of the universe as a servant of God who created him for His worship. He will have fulfilled the purpose of his existence. As we have said: an essential requirement of worship, in its proper and full sense, is that man should fulfil the duties of his position that places him in charge of the earth. He should achieve the best results he can in discharging his duties, while at the same

time look for no personal benefit. No worldly attraction should tempt him to change course. What he must realize is that when he fulfils his mission of building human life on earth, to the best standard he can, he is not doing so for himself or his position; he is doing it in order to put into effect the concept of worship and to flee to God from all worldly burdens and attractions.

A correlative of this is that man should evaluate deeds and actions on the basis of their motives, not their results. Let the outcome be as it may, man should not concern himself with it. He is only concerned with fulfilling his duty of worship when he does anything. His reward is not based on the outcome of his actions, but on the worship he fulfils in performing them.

This means that man's attitude to duties, responsibilities and actions will totally change. He will look only to the worship aspect involved in them all. When he fulfils this aspect, his objective is met, let the outcome be what it may. The outcome is not part of his responsibility. It is determined by God's will. Man himself, his efforts, intentions and actions are part of God's will.

When man offloads any concern about the outcome of his efforts and feels that his reward is guaranteed, as long as his motive for action fulfils the concept of worship, his heart will be free of the sort of aspirations that make people compete and quarrel over life's prizes. On the one side, he exerts his best efforts to fulfil his mission and discharge his duties on earth, and, on the other, he looks for no gain as a result of his efforts. What he achieves is solely to fulfil the concept of worship, not to make any personal gain.

The Qur'ān strengthens this feeling, letting man overcome his concerns about his livelihood and his selfish desires. Everybody's livelihood is guaranteed by God. Needless to say, He needs neither sustenance nor food from them when He asks them to spend some of their money on those who are in need: "*No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verses 57–58) What this means in effect is that a believer's incentive to work and exert his best efforts in discharging his duties of building human life on earth is not to earn a livelihood; his incentive is to fulfil the meaning of worship,

which requires him to exert his best efforts. Thus his mind is focused on the fulfilment of the worship concept in doing whatever he is doing. He is free of concerns about the results of this effort. These are, then, noble feelings, which can only exist within such a noble concept.

It is true that humanity does not understand or appreciate these feelings. This is because humanity has not lived with the guidance of the Qur'ān, as the first generation of Muslims did, nor has it derived its life value from the Islamic constitution.

When man rises to this sublime level of worship, or servitude to God, and maintains it, he will disdain any resort to foul means in order to achieve a noble end, even when this end is none other than to achieve victory for God's message. Foul means will, for one thing, destroy the noble meaning of worship. For another, a believer is not concerned with achieving goals. He is only concerned with the fulfilment of his duty. Goals and ends are left to God to determine in accordance with His will.

Moreover, a servant of God who attends to his worship in this way will enjoy ease of conscience, reassurance and a happy state in all situations, whether he sees the outcome of his efforts or not, and whether they bring the results he hoped for or not. He has done his duty and made sure of his reward once he has fulfilled the concept of worship in his work. The outcome is outside his remit. He knows that he is a servant of God. Therefore, in his feelings and appeals, he does not exceed the limits of a servant. He knows that God is the Lord. Therefore, he does not encroach on what belongs to the Lord. He thus earns God's acceptance and He is happy with what God gives him.

Thus do we understand some aspects of this great truth stated in a single short verse: "*I have not created the* jinn *and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56) This truth is great indeed; it can change how people live when it takes hold of their hearts.

In the light of this great truth, the *sūrah* concludes with a warning to the wrongdoers who hasten the fulfilment of God's warnings: "*The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised.*" (Verses 59–60)

SŪRAH 52

Al-Ṭūr
(Mount Sinai)

Prologue

This *sūrah* constitutes a profound and effective address to the human heart. It aims to eradicate doubts, misrepresentations and false assumptions that may linger in some corners of the human mind. It refutes every argument or excuse to justify deviation from the path of faith. It seeks to do this with an irresistible onslaught, one that inevitably forces submission. In order to achieve this, the *sūrah* employs all aspects of the Qur'ānic discourse including choice vocabulary, connotations, images, musical notes and beats. From start to finish, its verses flow like missiles fired in quick succession, its beats like thunderbolts and its images like a running, captivating film that does not stop for even a moment.

The *sūrah* begins with God's oath by some sacred things in the heavens and earth, some of which are well known and others that belong to the realm that lies beyond human perception: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea.*" (Verses 1–6) This oath confirms something really awesome and it fills its listeners with terror. It is expressed in words that most suit its feared outcome, painting an image that leaves the heart shuddering: "*your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 7–10) As we visualize this

scene, we see and hear the horror that causes violent shaking, coupled with a well-deserved rebuke: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.*" (Verses 11–16)

This represents the first part of the *sūrah*. It is immediately followed by a change of tone and colour. The *sūrah* now aims to hold before the very hearts and minds that saw the foregoing horror the prospect of safety and bliss. It depicts a scene of those who are God-fearing and the reward prepared for them. This is shown at ease, dwelling on pleasant details. It thus takes us from an air of punishment and suffering to one of happiness and enjoyment: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'*" (Verses 17–28)

In its third part the *sūrah* seeks to refute all doubts, misconceptions, excuses and false arguments. It presents the truth as simple, clear and powerful, and speaks with an irrefutable logic that allows no room for evasion. It holds out the truth forcing people to its acknowledgement and acceptance. This part begins by telling the Prophet to continue with his reminders to people, despite their ill treatment of him and his Companions. He should confront them with his overpowering logic:

"*So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him.*" (Verses 29–43)

This list of questions comes in quick succession, like thundering missiles that blow falsehood into smithereens, and silence every stubborn argument that tries to defy the truth. The *sūrah* portrays the unbelievers' stubbornness showing how they defy the truth in the face of every tangible reality: "*Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'*" (Verse 44) Needless to say, there is a huge difference between a portion of sky falling and clouds moving *en masse*. Yet still they try to justify themselves. Hence, the *sūrah* aims its final missile at them, threatening them with the prospect of hell that is promised at the beginning: "*Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support.*" (Verses 45–46) It then threatens them with a punishment that overtakes them before that promised day: "*Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it.*" (Verse 47)

The *sūrah* concludes on a happy note addressed to the Prophet whom they used to describe as a poet whose death they would await, or as a soothsayer or a madman. This happy ending is given so as to comfort and assure him of his position of honour. Indeed, this happy note has no parallel in the Qur'ān, and it was never previously addressed to any

other prophet or messenger: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*" (Verses 48–49) This is a note of kindness that ensures that all the troubles the Prophet met with would not have the least effect on him.



Al-Ṭūr (Mount Sinai)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By Mount Sinai; (1)

وَالطُّورِ ﴿١﴾

by a scripture inscribed (2)

وَكِتَابٍ مَّسْطُورٍ ﴿٢﴾

on unrolled parchment; (3)

فِي رَقٍّ مَّنشُورٍ ﴿٣﴾

by the much-visited House; (4)

وَالْبَيْتِ الْمَعْمُورِ ﴿٤﴾

by the vault raised high; (5)

وَالسَّقْفِ الْمَرْفُوعِ ﴿٥﴾

by the swelling sea; (6)

وَالْبَحْرِ الْمَسْجُورِ ﴿٦﴾

your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. (7)

إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّكَ لَوَاقِعٌ ﴿٧﴾

Nothing can stop it. (8)

مَّا لَهُ مِن دَافِعٍ ﴿٨﴾

On the day when the sky will shake and reel, (9)

يَوْمَ تَمُورُ السَّمَاءُ مَوْرًا ﴿٩﴾

and the mountains will move away. (10)

وَتَسِيرُ الْجِبَالُ سَيْرًا ﴿١٠﴾

Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, (11)

فَوَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِّلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١١﴾

who idly play with vain trifles. (12)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي خَوْضٍ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, (13)

يَوْمَ يُدَعُّونَ إِلَىٰ نَارِ جَهَنَّمَ دَعًّا ﴿١٣﴾

[and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! (14)

هَٰذِهِ النَّارُ الَّتِي كُنتُم بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

So is this sorcery, or do you not see? (15)

أَفَسِحْرٌ هَٰذَا أَمْ أَنتُمْ لَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.' (16)

اصْلَوْهَا فَاصْبِرُوا أَوْ لَا تَصْبِرُوا سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْكُمْ ۖ إِنَّمَا تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, (17)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَنَعِيمٍ ﴿١٧﴾

rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. (18)

فَاكِهِينَ بِمَا آتَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ وَوَقَاهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٨﴾

'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' (19)

كُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا هَنِيئًا بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مَّصْفُوفَةٍ ۖ وَزَوَّجْنَـٰهُم
بِحُورٍ عِينٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. (20)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَٱتَّبَعَتْهُمْ ذُرِّيَّتُهُم
بِإِيمَـٰنٍ أَلْحَقْنَا بِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَمَآ أَلَتْنَـٰهُم
مِّنْ عَمَلِهِم مِّن شَىْءٍ ۚ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍۭ بِمَا كَسَبَ
رَهِينٌ ﴿٢١﴾

As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. (21)

وَأَمْدَدْنَـٰهُم بِفَـٰكِهَةٍ وَلَحْمٍ مِّمَّا
يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. (22)

يَتَنَـٰزَعُونَ فِيهَا كَأْسًا لَّا لَغْوٌ فِيهَا
وَلَا تَأْثِيمٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. (23)

وَيَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ غِلْمَانٌ لَّهُمْ كَأَنَّهُمْ
لُؤْلُؤٌ مَّكْنُونٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. (24)

وَأَقْبَلَ بَعْضُهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ يَتَسَآءَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

They will turn to one another, asking each other. (25)

قَالُوٓا۟ إِنَّا كُنَّا قَبْلُ فِىٓ أَهْلِنَا مُشْفِقِينَ ﴿٢٦﴾

They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, (26)

فَمَنَّ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا وَوَقَىٰنَا عَذَابَ ٱلسَّمُومِ ﴿٢٧﴾

and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. (27)

إِنَّا كُنَّا مِن قَبْلُ نَدْعُوهُ ۖ إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْبَرُّ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٨﴾

We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.' (28)

فَذَكِّرْ فَمَآ أَنتَ بِنِعْمَتِ رَبِّكَ بِكَاهِنٍ وَلَا مَجْنُونٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. (29)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ شَاعِرٌ نَّتَرَبَّصُ بِهِۦ رَيْبَ ٱلْمَنُونِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' (30)

قُلْ تَرَبَّصُوا۟ فَإِنِّى مَعَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْمُتَرَبِّصِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' (31)

أَمْ تَأْمُرُهُمْ أَحْلَٰمُهُم بِهَٰذَآ ۚ أَمْ هُمْ قَوْمٌ طَاغُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude; or are they simply arrogant people? (32)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ تَقَوَّلَهُۥ ۚ بَل لَّا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. (33)

فَلْيَأْتُوا۟ بِحَدِيثٍ مِّثْلِهِۦٓ إِن كَانُوا۟ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. (34)

أَمْ خُلِقُوا۟ مِنْ غَيْرِ شَىْءٍ أَمْ هُمُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? (35)

أَمْ خَلَقُوا۟ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ ۚ بَل لَّا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. (36)

أَمْ عِندَهُمْ خَزَآئِنُ رَبِّكَ أَمْ هُمُ ٱلْمُصَيْطِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? (37)

أَمْ لَهُمْ سُلَّمٌ يَسْتَمِعُونَ فِيهِ ۖ فَلْيَأْتِ مُسْتَمِعُهُم بِسُلْطَٰنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. (38)

أَمْ لَهُ ٱلْبَنَٰتُ وَلَكُمُ ٱلْبَنُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Is He to have only daughters and you sons? (39)

أَمْ تَسْـَٔلُهُمْ أَجْرًا فَهُم مِّن مَّغْرَمٍ مُّثْقَلُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? (40)

أَمْ عِندَهُمُ ٱلْغَيْبُ فَهُمْ يَكْتُبُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? (41)

أَمْ يُرِيدُونَ كَيْدًا ۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ هُمُ ٱلْمَكِيدُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. (42)

أَمْ لَهُمْ إِلَٰهٌ غَيْرُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ سُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. (43)

Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (44)

وَإِن يَرَوْا كِسْفًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ سَاقِطًا يَقُولُوا سَحَابٌ مَّرْكُومٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; (45)

فَذَرْهُمْ حَتَّىٰ يُلَاقُوا يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي فِيهِ يُصْعَقُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. (46)

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي عَنْهُمْ كَيْدُهُمْ شَيْئًا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. (47)

وَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا عَذَابًا دُونَ ذَٰلِكَ وَلَٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, (48)

وَاصْبِرْ لِحُكْمِ رَبِّكَ فَإِنَّكَ بِأَعْيُنِنَا وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ حِينَ تَقُومُ ﴿٤٨﴾

and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat. (49)

وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْهُ وَإِدْبَارَ النُّجُومِ ﴿٤٩﴾

No Way Out

By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it. On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will

move away. Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles. On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, [and told:] 'This is the fire you used to deny! So is this sorcery, or do you not see? Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done. (Verses 1–16)

These short verses use varied rhyming endings and a measured cadence which they maintain. In the Arabic text, they begin with a verse with just one word. Then the verses combine two words, then add more words until we have the last verse in this section of 12 words, yet the same powerful note is maintained.

The first verse reads in Arabic as *Waṭ-Ṭūr*, translated here as *By Mount Sinai*. The Arabic word, *Ṭūr*, means a mountain with trees. Here, it most probably refers to the mountain mentioned in the Qur'ān, in Moses' story where he received the tablets. The overall ambience is one of sacred objects stated in an oath by God confirming that something momentous will certainly take place.

The scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment refers, most probably, to the book of Moses which was written for him on the tablets. This reading fits well with the mention of Mount Sinai in the first verse. However, some scholars say that the reference is to the 'imperishable tablet' in heaven, as this fits with what follows, referring to the *much-visited House* and the *vault raised high*. This again is a clearly possible meaning.

The *much-visited House* may refer to the Ka'bah although it is more likely that it refers to a house in heaven where the angels worship. An authentic *ḥadīth* giving details of the Prophet's night journey to heaven quotes him as saying: "Then I was taken up to the much-visited House. Seventy thousand enter it every day and they do not return to it. It is the last thing they have to do..." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] The Prophet's statement means that the angels perform *ṭawāf* around this House, just as people do around the Ka'bah.

According to most scholars, the *vault raised high* refers to the sky. As he gave this explanation, Sufyān quoted the verse that says: "*We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy.*" (21: 32)

The *swelling sea* means that it is full. This is the most appropriate thing to put together in a scene that depicts the sky. It is open, vast and full, which makes it a glorious and awesome sign that fits well with the other scenes making up the oath that confirms a great event. The adjective *masjūr*, translated here as swelling, may also mean set alight. In another *sūrah* we have a verse that says: "*When the seas are set alight.*" (81: 6) The phrase may also refer to some other creature.

God states an oath by these great creatures to confirm a great event. This opening makes us ready to receive it, fully aware that it is momentous: "*Your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it.*" (Verses 7–8) It is certain to happen. No one can stop it from happening. By their very sound, these two verses give the feeling that there is absolutely no question about its taking place. Furthermore, it overwhelms people: none can evade it. When a person receives this decisive note directly, without impediment, he feels its effect penetrate deep inside him. A report mentions that 'Umar went out one night to learn about people's conditions. As he passed by one house, he overheard someone reading this *sūrah* in prayer. When he read these two verses, he said: 'By God, the Lord of the Ka'bah, this is indeed a true oath.' He dismounted, leaned against a wall listening for a while. He then went home, feeling unwell. For a month, people continued to visit him, enquiring about his health, but no one knew his ailment.

'Umar knew this *sūrah*, having listened to it and read it many times before. Indeed, he listened to it as the Prophet used to read it in prayer. 'Umar was a learned person who was quick to appreciate such lessons. This time, however, his heart and feelings were ready recipients. Therefore, the message, powerful and focused as it is, was readily received by him, having a profound effect. It is as if 'Umar received these verses directly from their original source, just like the Prophet's heart did, but whereas the Prophet's heart was specially prepared to receive what God revealed to him, others do not have such abilities. Hence, when anyone experiences such a moment and receives some verses in this way, that person is bound to feel as 'Umar did.

These opening notes are followed by a fearful scene: "*On the day when the sky will shake and reel, and the mountains will move away.*" (Verses 9–10) We have here two images that leave us shaken, bewildered: the

sky that looks to us so firm and powerfully built is shaking and reeling, like high sea waves, and solid mountains slide away easily, lacking any firm base to stabilize them. It must be something extremely awesome that leaves the sky and the mountains in such chaos. So what will its effect on man be, a small and weak creature in the midst of a stupendous event?

Playing with Vain Trifles

In the midst of all this, the *sūrah* hurls on those who deny the truth of the divine message something more serious and frightening; namely, a prayer hastening their punishment by the Almighty: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, who idly play with vain trifles.*" (Verses 11–12) Needless to say, a prayer by God means a sentence that is impossible to avoid, certain to come to pass, on that fearful day when the sky shakes and reels and the mountains slip away. All these terrible aspects thus confirm one another and overwhelm the deniers of truth who continue to play with vain trifles.

This description applies in the first place to the pagan Arabs, their primitive beliefs, insupportable concepts and their way of life which the Qur'ān describes in several places. It is all trifling play, nothing serious. They play like one hanging around in the middle of a lake, not aiming to reach the shore. Yet the description equally applies to anyone who leads their life on the basis of any concept other than the Islamic one. We cannot appreciate this unless we examine well known human concepts, as reflected in beliefs, legends or philosophies, and compare these with the Islamic concept of human existence in particular and the existence of the universe generally. All concepts, even those advanced by famous philosophers seem to be no more than children's attempts to arrive at the truth as compared with the simple, profound and powerful truth as expressed by Islam and the Qur'ān. This Islamic concept puts its address directly to human nature, free of exertion or complexity. Human nature immediately responds because what is presented to it fits perfectly with the profound truth inherent in it. It explains its relation to the universe, as well as the relation between the universe and its Creator.

As I read theories and concepts advanced by different philosophers, I often wonder at the strenuous efforts they exert to explain the existence

of the universe and its relations. They appear like a child attempting to solve an extremely complex mathematical problem. I look at the clear, simple, easy and natural approach the Qur'ān presents, which is free of crookedness and complexity. This is only to be expected for the Qur'ānic explanation of the universe is stated by the Creator of the universe. Philosophers' attempts are the product of small parts of the universe trying to explain its whole. The result of such miserable attempts is a foregone conclusion. When compared to the mature, sound and holistic concept the Qur'ān puts forward, they seem to be a medley of confusion, absurdity and child's play. Yet some people abandon the Qur'ānic picture and adopt those confused attempts!

A person may be influenced by some imperfect or deviant human attempt to explain life, human existence and the universe, and he will be confused as a result. He may then listen to a few verses of the Qur'ān addressing the subject he is struggling with and he will find comfort, enlightenment and a steady measure. There he will find that everything falls into place, where facts are stable, held in position. He will then be reassured by the clear truth presented by the Qur'ān. All confusion and worry will have disappeared.

People also appear to be playing with vain trifles when their concerns in life are compared to those Islam puts before people's minds, calling on them to implement these in their lives. A Muslim will look at the absurdity of such concerns. He will also look at those who indulge in them and who value them as great universal truths as simply absurd. Indeed, he looks at such people as a young girl looks at her doll, treating it as if it were a human being and talking to it as if it could share her thoughts.

Islam elevates people's concerns in as much as it elevates their concept of human existence and man's role in the universe. Furthermore, it provides clear and truthful answers to the questions everyone asks: Where have I come from, and why? Where do I go to when my term here is over? The Islamic answers to these questions define the true concept of existence. Man is not a unique kind of creature. He comes from where all creatures do, and he shares with them the reasons for their existence. He goes to where the Creator, in His infinite wisdom, determines. This means that the answers Islam provides for man's questions also give

man a complete explanation of the universe, the interrelation between its inhabitants, its relation with man, and the bond between them all and the Creator of all.

This explanation positively reflects on human concerns in life, elevating them. Therefore, a Muslim tends to think that other people's concerns are too trivial when compared with his preoccupation and the fulfilment of his major role in life. A Muslim's life is large because it is attached to the discharge of a great mission, one that relates to the existence of the universe and has a bearing on it. It is too precious to be wasted in trivialities.

The *sūrah* issues a serious warning about what happens to those who play with vain trifles "*on that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell.*" (Verse 13) This is a violent image. The *sūrah* uses the Arabic word *da'an*, which signifies being pushed hard from behind. This suits those who spend their lives playing with trifles, unconcerned with what takes place around them. Hence, they are driven and pushed in the back until they stand at the edge of hell's fire, where they are told: "*This is the fire you used to deny.*" (Verse 14)

At this point of utter distress, being pushed hard in the back and facing the fire in front, the unbelievers are faced with a strong rebuke that refers to their earlier denials: "*So is this sorcery, or do you not see?*" (Verse 15) They used to label the Qur'ān as sorcery. Is the fire they are now facing also sorcery? Or is it the frightening truth? Or is it that they do not see the fire of hell in the same way as they could not see the truth of the Qur'ān?

When this sarcastic rebuke is over, they are made to despair of any relief for their distress: "*Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.*" (Verse 16) Nothing is more painful to one who has to face such a calamity than to know that bearing it with patience is the same as showing no patience at all. It will continue unabated and cannot be evaded in any way. Their suffering will be the same whether they panic or take things in their stride. Furthermore, it will continue regardless of what they do now. This suffering is the requital for what they have already done. Hence it cannot be altered.

For Believers and Offspring

The second section of the *sūrah* is one of excitement, spreading comfort and happiness, particularly after the preceding scenes of outright distress:

> *The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire. 'Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.' They will recline on couches arranged in rows, and We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes. As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward for their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds. We provide them with fruit and meat as they desire. They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin. They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells. They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'* (Verses 17–28)

This scene is close to material comfort. It is of the type that addresses feelings in the early period, tempting the human soul with physical pleasures in their refined form. It contrasts with the scene of crude painful suffering that those who are oblivious to the truth have to face: "*The believers will be in gardens and in bliss, rejoicing in all that their Lord will have granted them; for their Lord will have warded off from them the suffering of the blazing fire.*" (Verses 17–18) Just mere protection from the suffering of the fire which has already been described is a great blessing. How is it to be viewed then when it is coupled with admission into gardens and bliss? Moreover, these believers enjoy what God provides them with. It is all comfort and luxury plus hospitality and honour: "*Eat and drink with healthy enjoyment as a reward for what you have done.*" (Verse 19) This in itself is a great blessing.

As they are so addressed from on high, they are told that they deserve whatever reward they are given. Furthermore, they will "*recline on couches arranged in rows,*" giving them the pleasure of their brethren's company in such blissful surroundings. Yet, "*We shall pair them with companions having most beautiful eyes.*" (Verse 20) This represents man's best enjoyment.

Further honour is granted as their offspring, who are also believers, join them in their place of bliss. This is added care. Even if their offspring do not attain the standards of the God-fearing, as long as they are believers, they join their parents without detracting anything from their parents' reward. In no way, however, does this detract from personal responsibility and individual accountability. Rather, it is a favour that God bestows on them all: "*As for the believers whose offspring follow them in faith, We shall unite them with their offspring; and We shall not deny them anything of the reward of their deeds. Yet every individual will be held in pledge for his own deeds.*" (Verse 21)

More is added to the scene as we are introduced to other aspects of enjoyment in an atmosphere of perfect happiness. These dwellers of heaven are given varieties of fruits and meat, and they pass around a cup containing a drink that is totally different from the wines of this present world which loosen tongues with foul and dirty speech and tempt people into physical and mental sin. It is a pure drink causing no wrong: "*They pass around a cup which will not lead to idle talk or to sin.*" (Verse 23) They are gathered together as they pass it around, enjoying each other's company. At the same time they are served by youths who reflect pure innocence and a shining friendliness: "*They will be waited upon by youths of their own, [as pure] as pearls hidden in their shells.*" (Verse 24)

This warm and happy scene is carried further as we are shown how these people in heaven converse, recalling memories of their worldly lives and outlining the reasons that ensured their happy end, with all its security, luxury, gratification and bliss. Thus the secret is given out and the way leading to this blissful ending is marked for all travellers: "*They will turn to one another, asking each other. They will say: 'When we were still living with our kinsfolk, we were full of fear, and so God has been gracious to us, and warded off from us suffering through the scorching*

wind. We used to pray to Him: He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.'" (Verses 25–28)

Thus, the secret is that they were always apprehensive about their outcome on the Day of Judgement. They feared what would happen when their records would be laid open and they would be called to account for their deeds. They entertained such apprehensions when they were with their families, enjoying seeming security, deceptive safety and dealing with worldly preoccupations. Yet they were neither deceived nor distracted. Therefore, God bestowed His grace on them and spared them the sort of suffering that seeps through the blood system like scorching poison. They realize that they are spared such suffering only by God's grace, which is bestowed in response to their fearing what the Day of Judgement might bring them. They certainly know that on its own, good action is not enough to admit the person doing it into heaven unless God bestows His grace on the person doing it. All that good action achieves is to testify that its doer has done his best, choosing what pleases God and earning His grace.

With all this fear and apprehension, the believers used to pray in earnest: "*We used to pray to Him.*" They were fully aware of those attributes of God that ensure goodly reward for His servants: "*He is the Beneficent, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 28)

A Reminder of God's Blessings

The *sūrah* now begins a series of rhetorical questions fashioned to a fast beat, presenting clear facts and addressing any remaining doubts the human soul might have. This round is full of strong challenges which no human heart can withstand:

> *So, [Prophet,] remind people. By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman. Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.' Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.' Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people? Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?' They certainly do not believe. Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true. Were they created*

out of nothing? Were they the creators? Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith. Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control? Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof. Is He to have only daughters and you sons? Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt? Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down? Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped. Have they, then, any deity other than God? Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him. Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!' (Verses 29–44)

The address here is to the Prophet: "*So, remind people.*" (Verse 29) He should continue to remind people, undeterred by their rude and impolite behaviour or their false accusations. They used to say of him that he was a soothsayer, or a madman. These two descriptions are linked by the common notion that soothsayers received their information from the *jinn*, and that the *jinn* possessed those who were mad. Thus, the devil was the common element in both descriptions. What made them use either adjective – poet or sorcerer – to describe the Prophet was the fact that they were overwhelmed by the Qur'ān. Its address was so unfamiliar to them even though, by nature, they were highly eloquent. Since they could not even think of admitting that it was God's word, they felt that they needed to provide some plausible explanation for its superiority over anything they or others could say. Hence they claimed that it was imparted by the *jinn*, or that the *jinn* helped in its composition. They alleged that the man reciting it, i.e. Muḥammad, was either a soothsayer receiving information from the jinn, or a sorcerer relying on the *jinn*'s help, or a poet who had a *jinnee* friend, or a madman possessed by a *jinnee* who gave him such wonderful speech.

This is a wicked accusation. Therefore, God consoles His Messenger showing it to be of no importance and reassuring him that he continues to enjoy His favours which allow no element of soothsaying or madness to affect him: "*By the grace of your Lord, you are neither a soothsayer nor a madman.*" (Verse 29) This is followed by a denunciation of their

assertion that he was a poet: "*Or do they say, 'He is but a poet; let us await whatever misfortune time will bring him.'*" (Verse 30) They indeed said that. Some of them counselled others to "bear with him, stick to our ways and soon enough he will die and we will be rid of him." Hence the Prophet is instructed to give them an implicit threat in his reply: "*Say: 'Wait if you will. I too am waiting.'*" (Verse 31) Soon enough, you will know who will end up in a better position.

Some of the Quraysh elders were accorded a position of respect on account of their perceived wisdom in conducting affairs. These are referred to here with a clear note of sarcasm, as their attitude to Islam is the antithesis of wisdom and logic. The *sūrah* sarcastically wonders whether the descriptions they attach to Muḥammad (peace be upon him) are what their wise elders have arrived at? Or is it that they are arrogant, unjust people who do not listen to what the wise elders counsel: "*Is it their reason that prompts them to take this attitude? Or are they simply arrogant people?*" (Verse 32) The first question is loaded with sharp sarcasm; the second carries an accusation that should put them to shame. One or the other is indeed true when they adopt such an absurd attitude.

They were always rude in what they said about the Prophet. They even accused him of fabricating what he said to them. The *sūrah* disapprovingly wonders whether they have made such a claim of fabrication against the Prophet, implying that such an allegation could never have been made: "*Or do they say, 'He has fabricated it himself?'*" (Verse 33) It immediately explains what lies behind such a singular allegation: "*They certainly do not believe.*" (Verse 33) The fact that in their hearts they did not really believe is the reason why they made such a statement. They simply cannot appreciate the true nature of the Qur'ān. Had they appreciated it they would have known that no human being could have authored it, and that it could only have been delivered by a man of truth.

Since their hearts cannot appreciate the truth of this revelation, the *sūrah* challenges them to provide irrefutable proof: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34) This challenge occurs several times in the Qur'ān, yet those who deny the truth of the Qur'ān could not take up the challenge. Furthermore, this

challenge remains valid for the rest of time, and no one will ever be able to produce anything like the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān has a special secret which is felt by everyone who begins to look at its text, before even attempting to identify its many miraculous aspects. He feels that the very words themselves speak with special authority. He senses that there is something extra, beyond the meanings the words impart to us; something that is felt by the heart as soon as one listens to the Qur'ān. Some people feel this very clearly, while others sense it even though they cannot identify it. Nonetheless it is there. It cannot be traced back to anything in particular: the phraseology, the meaning, the images and connotations, the special music that is so different from the rhythm of any other speech. Or is it produced by a combination of all these elements, or by these and something else beyond them that we cannot identify? This is something that is present in every Qur'ānic text, and it is felt initially by everyone who handles a Qur'ānic *sūrah*. Beyond this, there are phenomena that we can recognize and understand when we study the Qur'ān and contemplate its meanings and construction.

These phenomena are recognized in the clear, comprehensive and true concept the Qur'ān presents to our hearts and minds of the truth of human existence, of existence as a whole, and the essential truth of God Almighty. They are seen in the Qur'ānic method that seeks to implant this concept in man's mind as it addresses his nature in a way that is totally unfamiliar in human address. The Qur'ān appeals to the human mind with all its many facets, reflecting profound knowledge of man's every angle. We see the superiority of the Qur'ān in the comprehensiveness, balance and coherence of its directives that are all placed on the same level. This phenomenon is unknown in the works of human beings that cannot maintain the same situation or the same standard, and cannot address all aspects at the same time. Nothing that man produces can reflect absolute balance that admits neither increase nor decrease, and suffers neither shortage nor extravagance. No human work achieves absolute coherence that admits no discord or conflict either in essence or detail.

These and similar phenomena, as well as the subtle and the undeniably secret, combine to give the Qur'ān its quality of an absolute miracle that

remains valid for all time. No self respecting person can argue about this. He will readily admit the truth that stares him clearly in the face whenever he looks at the Qur'ān with an open mind: "*Let them, then, produce a discourse like it, if what they say is true.*" (Verse 34)

The next question wonders at their own existence, a truth staring them in the face which they cannot explain in any way other than what the Qur'ān states: God, the Creator of all that exists has brought them into existence: "*Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators?*" (Verse 35) The thought that they just existed out of nothing is against the logic of nature. It merits no argument. On the other hand, neither they nor any other creature can claim that they created themselves. As neither case can be logically entertained, there only remains the true case stated in the Qur'ān, confirming that they are all creatures of God, the only Creator and Originator. Since no one can claim any share of His attributes of creation and origination, then Lordship and Godhead belong solely to Him. This is clear and true logic.

The *sūrah* then directs their attention to the heavens and the earth: are they the ones who created these? Needless to say, the heavens and the earth did not create themselves, in the same way as humans do not do so: "*Did they create the heavens and the earth? No. They have no faith.*" (Verse 36) Neither they, nor anyone listening to the logic of nature, claim that the heavens and the earth created themselves or came into existence without being created. Nor do those people claim that they created them. Yet they stand in front of people like a question requiring an answer. When those very unbelievers were asked who created the heavens and the earth, they said that God created them. Yet this truth did not acquire such clarity as to produce its normal effects in their hearts and minds, leading them to formulate true and clear conviction: "*They have no faith.*" (Verse 36)

The *sūrah* then takes them a step lower than that of the creation of either themselves or the world around them. It asks them whether they own God's treasures or have control of these so as to be able to cause benefit and harm: "*Do they possess your Lord's treasures? Or are they in ultimate control?*" (Verse 37) If they make no such claim, then who owns these treasures and controls all things? The Qur'ān says that God is the One who gives in plenty or in small measure, and who determines

all affairs in the universe. This is the only explanation of what happens in the universe.

A further step down is then taken, and the *sūrah* asks whether they have any means to listen to the source of revelation: "*Or have they a ladder to climb, in order to eavesdrop [on heaven's secrets]? Let their eavesdropper produce a clear proof.*" (Verse 38) Muḥammad (peace be upon him) tells them that he is a Messenger of God and that he receives revelations from on high. They reject this, claiming it as false. The *sūrah* asks whether they have the means to climb up and listen to what He says, gaining information that supports their claims that he receives no such revelations, and asserts that the truth is contrary to what he says. This requires that they provide compelling evidence in support of their claims. This is an allusion to the great authority the Qur'ān speaks with, yet they reject its clear and powerful message.

The *sūrah* then brings into focus one of their absurd claims, alleging that the angels are God's daughters. It addresses them directly, adding an element of further reproach: "*Is He to have only daughters and you sons?*" (Verse 39) They considered girls to be inferior to boys, and anyone of them would be full of gloom and frustration when they were told that they had begot girls. Yet they unashamedly attribute female offspring to God Almighty. Thus the *sūrah* uses their own traditions and values to shame them.

They disliked receiving the Prophet's address. They disliked his message of guidance, feeling that it was a burden, even though it was given to them clear and pure. He asked no wages or payment for his trouble. The least that such a free presentation deserves is an appreciative response and a gentle refusal if they did not want to accept what he offered. Hence, the *sūrah* denounces their unjustified attitude: "*Do you [Prophet] demand a payment from them that would be burdened with debt?*" (Verse 40) Since they are not asked to pay anything for it, their attitude appears to be totally indefensible and unwarranted. They should be ashamed of themselves.

Again, the *sūrah* puts before them their true position in this universe. They are creatures with certain limitations. They are given access to a certain portion of this world, beyond which they cannot penetrate. It all belongs to the Creator. What lies beyond their reach is God's own

preserve and they have no knowledge of it: "*Do they have knowledge of the hidden reality so that they can write it down?*" (Verse 41) They are well aware that they have no knowledge of what lies beyond their perception even though it is a reality. They have no means of accessing it. It is God who writes in its record whatever He determines for His creatures, while they cannot write a thing in it.

The One who is in control of that hidden reality and whatever occurs in that hidden realm is indeed the One who can determine and scheme. How come, then, that in their position of inability to record anything they try to scheme against you, aiming to entrap you? Why do they imagine that they can determine any future event, saying of the Prophet that he is a poet who would soon die? "*Or do they want to entrap you? It is the unbelievers who are truly entrapped.*" (Verse 42) It is they who are subject to whatever is determined by the Creator and Controller of the hidden reality. His schemes will certainly apply to them and take their effect. He is the best of all schemers.

"*Have they, then, any deity other than God?*" (Verse 43) Does such a deity, if they have one, protect them against what God determines for them? "*Exalted is God far above anything they associate with Him.*" (Verse 43) How absurd is their false concept of God!

With this exaltation of God and its clear statement of His oneness this series of rhetorical questions, characterized by a powerful beat, is concluded. All their arguments have been refuted, and all doubts removed. They are presented with the clear truth and left without any excuse to justify their hostility to it. At this point their stubbornness in rejecting the clear truth is put clearly before their eyes: "*Even if they see a part of the sky falling down, they would say, 'It is but a mass of clouds!'*" (Verse 44) This means that even if God decides to punish them by making a part of the sky fall down upon them, destroying their world, and they see it falling on their heads, they would still claim that it is but a mass of clouds, bringing rain and prosperity. It is just like the one who denies the truth of what he sees, even with a sword piercing his neck, as it were. This may be a reference to what the people of ʿĀd said when they saw the clouds heralding their own destruction. They claimed: "*This cloud will bring us rain.*" (46: 24) The truth was then told to them: "*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." (46: 24–25)

Perfect Contrast

At this point, the *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to leave them alone. They will certainly face the day mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah* and the severe punishment it will bring them. He is to remain steadfast in the face of whatever is determined by his Lord who bestows His care on him. He is to glorify his Lord when he wakes up early in the morning, in the depths of the night and at the time when the stars disappear:

> *Leave them, then, until they face the day when they will be thunderstruck; the day when none of their scheming will be of any avail to them, when they will receive no support. Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it. So, await in patience your Lord's judgement; for you are under Our watchful eyes. Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.* (Verses 45–49)

This final passage begins with a clear warning against what will happen on that frightening day when the trumpet is first blown and they are all totally stunned. This takes place shortly before the resurrection, when nothing will be of benefit and no help can be expected from any quarter. If, in this life, they are able to scheme and take action, nothing can stave off what will happen on that day. However, they will also endure another type of suffering before that. This is left unspecified, but it is certain to happen: "*Closer at hand more suffering awaits the wrongdoers, but most of them are not aware of it.*" (Verse 47)

Thus this long and determined attack is concluded, bringing the unbelievers face to face with the severe punishments that await them, one close at hand and the other to occur later. The *sūrah* then speaks to the Prophet who was the target of their false accusations. He is instructed to face such adversity with patience. He is to remain steadfast, continuing his efforts to advocate God's message, and to leave the decision to God

who determines whatever He will: "*So, await in patience your Lord's judgement.*" (Verse 48)

Yet this directive is coupled with a confirmation of God's kindly care. Such loving care is certain to remove all hardship that the Prophet may have to face. Thus, perseverance in the face of adversity becomes acceptable, and even welcome, since it is the means to such compassionate care: "*For you are under Our watchful eyes.*" (Verse 48) This expression is unique, describing a position that has never been attained by any human being. Nowhere else in the Qur'ān is this expression used, even though some similar expressions of overflowing care are used.

Moses, for example, is told: "*Know that I have chosen you. Listen, then, to what is being revealed.*" (20: 13) "*I lavished My love on you, so that you may be reared under My watchful eye.*" (20: 39) "*I have chosen you for Myself.*" (20: 41) All these expressions speak of highly exalted positions, but Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is given an even higher distinction with this unique expression: "*For you are under Our watchful eyes.*" (Verse 48) This statement implies a unique aspect of friendliness and care. It imparts unparalleled connotations that no human expression can adequately describe. Therefore, we will not attempt any more than this reference to the fact.

Finally, the way to maintain this close contact is outlined: "*Extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise when you rise, and extol His glory at night, and at the time when the stars retreat.*" (Verses 48–49) Thus, throughout the day, as one wakes up, during the night, at the time when stars begin to disappear at dawn, there is a clear chance to enjoy such friendly care. Glorifying God imparts strength, friendliness and the chance of a heartfelt address to God Almighty. All this stems from a dearly loving heart!



SŪRAH 53

Al-Najm

(The Star)

Prologue

As a whole, this *sūrah* comes across as a superb symphony. From start to finish, a fine tune runs through its verbal structure, as well as its rhyming verse endings. This is especially apparent and deliberate at certain points, where a word is added or preferred to maintain the beat or the rhyme, in addition to how it enhances the meaning. One example is found in the two verses saying: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Had the second verse said, 'and Manāt, the third', the metre would have been broken and the beat would not have been maintained. On the other hand, had it said, 'and Manāt, the other one,' the rhyme would not have been maintained. Each of the words used contributes to the meaning, but maintaining the metre and the rhyme is also deliberate. The same may be said where the word then is used in the verses: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This word *idhan*, or then, is necessary to maintain the metre and the beat, but it also serves an artistic purpose.[1]

1. Needless to say, we are speaking here of the original Arabic text. The translation cannot maintain any metre or rhyme. The same rhyme is maintained throughout the *sūrah*, apart from the last six verses when it varies. – Editor's note.

The beat in this *sūrah* is of a special musical type in which we note an easy variation and flow, particularly in the first and the last sections. Such variation and flow are in harmony with the images, lively shades and connotations we note in the opening section, as also with the meanings and superb touches in the closing section.

The opening provides images from the world on high where the events to which the *sūrah* refers take place. Further connotations are added by reference to the free movement of the trustworthy Spirit, the Angel Gabriel, as he appeared before the Prophet. All these images, scenes, connotations, movements and spiritual atmosphere interact with the tune and the beat in perfect harmony, mutually strengthening their effects. This imparts a special atmosphere to the whole *sūrah*, leaving a marked effect on its succeeding sections, until it concludes on a profoundly powerful note, one that is felt by every part of our souls and every cell in our bodies.

The theme the *sūrah* tackles is the one that pervades all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah: faith and its major concepts consisting of revelation, God's oneness and the hereafter. The *sūrah* tackles this from a particular angle emphasizing the truth of revelation and the solid foundation of faith as compared with the fallacy of idolatry, which lacks foundation.

The first section illustrates the truth and nature of revelation. It describes two scenes that confirm its actual process. This documents the fact that the Prophet received revelation from Gabriel, the angel, whom he saw, as also from the greatest signs of his Lord.

In the second section, the *sūrah* speaks of the unbelievers' alleged deities, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt. It also discusses their superstitions about the angels being God's daughters. It states that the unbelievers rely on nothing but conjecture, which is devoid of truth. By contrast, the Prophet calls on them to believe in his message, which is certain to be true, with solid evidence.

The *sūrah* tells the Prophet in its third section that he should ignore those who turn away from God's message, those who preoccupy themselves with this present world, knowing nothing beyond it. It also refers to the hereafter and what it provides of requital for people's actions. It mentions that God knows all beings, ever since He originated them from the earth and when they were still in their mothers' wombs. Indeed,

He knows them better than they know their own selves. Their requital will be based on this certain knowledge; it defines their destiny.

The fourth and final section speaks about the main themes of faith, which have remained the same since the earliest of the divine messages: namely, individual responsibility, accurate reckoning, just reward, and the return of all creatures to their Lord who determines what happens to them as He wills. Added to this is a quick reference to the fate suffered by earlier communities that denied the divine message. The *sūrah* then concludes with a strong beat commanding all mankind to prostrate themselves before God and worship Him alone. Thus, the opening and the end provide a harmony of images, connotations, effects and musical tones.



Al-Najm (The Star)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the star as it sets. (1)

وَالنَّجْمِ إِذَا هَوَىٰ ﴿١﴾

This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. (2)

مَا ضَلَّ صَاحِبُكُمْ وَمَا غَوَىٰ ﴿٢﴾

He does not speak out of his own fancy. (3)

وَمَا يَنطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ ﴿٣﴾

That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, (4)

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ ﴿٤﴾

something that a very mighty one has taught him, (5)

عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ الْقُوَىٰ ﴿٥﴾

[an angel] of surpassing power, who stood (6)

ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ ﴿٦﴾

on the highest horizon, (7)

وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَىٰ ﴿٧﴾

and then drew near, and came close, (8)

ثُمَّ دَنَا فَتَدَلَّىٰ ﴿٨﴾

until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, (9)

فَكَانَ قَابَ قَوْسَيْنِ أَوْ أَدْنَىٰ ﴿٩﴾

and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. (10)

فَأَوْحَىٰ إِلَىٰ عَبْدِهِ مَا أَوْحَىٰ ﴿١٠﴾

[Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. (11)

مَا كَذَبَ ٱلْفُؤَادُ مَا رَأَىٰ ﴿١١﴾

Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? (12)

أَفَتُمَٰرُونَهُۥ عَلَىٰ مَا يَرَىٰ ﴿١٢﴾

Indeed, he saw him a second time (13)

وَلَقَدْ رَءَاهُ نَزْلَةً أُخْرَىٰ ﴿١٣﴾

by the lote tree of the farthest limit, (14)

عِندَ سِدْرَةِ ٱلْمُنتَهَىٰ ﴿١٤﴾

near to the garden of abode, (15)

عِندَهَا جَنَّةُ ٱلْمَأْوَىٰ ﴿١٥﴾

when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. (16)

إِذْ يَغْشَى ٱلسِّدْرَةَ مَا يَغْشَىٰ ﴿١٦﴾

The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; (17)

مَا زَاغَ ٱلْبَصَرُ وَمَا طَغَىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord. (18)

لَقَدْ رَأَىٰ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِ رَبِّهِ ٱلْكُبْرَىٰٓ ﴿١٨﴾

Have you considered al-Lāt and al-ʿUzzā, (19)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱللَّٰتَ وَٱلْعُزَّىٰ ﴿١٩﴾

and Manāt, the third other? (20)

وَمَنَوٰةَ ٱلثَّالِثَةَ ٱلْأُخْرَىٰٓ ﴿٢٠﴾

Are you to have the male and He the female? (21)

أَلَكُمُ ٱلذَّكَرُ وَلَهُ ٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٢١﴾

That would then be an unfair division. (22)

تِلْكَ إِذًا قِسْمَةٌ ضِيزَىٰٓ ﴿٢٢﴾

إِنْ هِيَ إِلَّآ أَسْمَآءٌ سَمَّيْتُمُوهَآ أَنتُمْ
وَءَابَآؤُكُم مَّآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ بِهَا مِن سُلْطَٰنٍ
إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ وَمَا تَهْوَى
ٱلْأَنفُسُ وَلَقَدْ جَآءَهُم مِّن رَّبِّهِمُ
ٱلْهُدَىٰٓ ﴿٢٣﴾

These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. (23)

أَمْ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ مَا تَمَنَّىٰ ﴿٢٤﴾

Is man to have all that he may wish for, (24)

فَلِلَّهِ ٱلْءَاخِرَةُ وَٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٢٥﴾

when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? (25)

وَكَم مِّن مَّلَكٍ فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ لَا تُغْنِى
شَفَٰعَتُهُمْ شَيْـًٔا إِلَّا مِنۢ بَعْدِ أَن يَأْذَنَ
ٱللَّهُ لِمَن يَشَآءُ وَيَرْضَىٰٓ ﴿٢٦﴾

Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. (26)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱلْءَاخِرَةِ لَيُسَمُّونَ
ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةَ تَسْمِيَةَ ٱلْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٢٧﴾

Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. (27)

وَمَا لَهُم بِهِۦ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِن يَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا ٱلظَّنَّ
وَإِنَّ ٱلظَّنَّ لَا يُغْنِى مِنَ ٱلْحَقِّ شَيْـًٔا ﴿٢٨﴾

Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth. (28)

فَأَعْرِضْ عَن مَّن تَوَلَّىٰ عَن ذِكْرِنَا وَلَمْ يُرِدْ
إِلَّا ٱلْحَيَوٰةَ ٱلدُّنْيَا ﴿٢٩﴾

So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. (29)

ذَٰلِكَ مَبْلَغُهُم مِّنَ ٱلْعِلْمِ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ
أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَنِ ٱهْتَدَىٰ ﴿٣٠﴾

Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. (30)

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَمَا فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
لِيَجْزِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسَٰٓـُٔوا۟ بِمَا عَمِلُوا۟ وَيَجْزِىَ
ٱلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا۟ بِٱلْحُسْنَى ﴿٣١﴾

Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. (31)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبَٰٓئِرَ ٱلْإِثْمِ وَٱلْفَوَٰحِشَ
إِلَّا ٱللَّمَمَ ۚ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ وَٰسِعُ ٱلْمَغْفِرَةِ ۚ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ
بِكُمْ إِذْ أَنشَأَكُم مِّنَ ٱلْأَرْضِ وَإِذْ أَنتُمْ
أَجِنَّةٌ فِى بُطُونِ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمْ ۖ فَلَا تُزَكُّوٓا۟
أَنفُسَكُمْ ۖ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ ٱتَّقَىٰٓ ﴿٣٢﴾

As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing. (32)

أَفَرَءَيْتَ ٱلَّذِى تَوَلَّىٰ ﴿٣٣﴾

Consider the one who turns away: (33)

وَأَعْطَىٰ قَلِيلًا وَأَكْدَىٰٓ ﴿٣٤﴾

he gives little at first then hardens and stops. (34)

أَعِندَهُۥ عِلْمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ فَهُوَ يَرَىٰٓ ﴿٣٥﴾

Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? (35)

Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, (36)

أَمْ لَمْ يُنَبَّأْ بِمَا فِي صُحُفِ مُوسَىٰ ﴿٣٦﴾

and to Abraham who was true to his trust: (37)

وَإِبْرَاهِيمَ الَّذِي وَفَّىٰ ﴿٣٧﴾

that no soul shall bear the burden of another; (38)

أَلَّا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ ﴿٣٨﴾

that man will only have what he strives for; (39)

وَأَن لَّيْسَ لِلْإِنسَانِ إِلَّا مَا سَعَىٰ ﴿٣٩﴾

that his labour will be seen (40)

وَأَنَّ سَعْيَهُ سَوْفَ يُرَىٰ ﴿٤٠﴾

and he will be given the fullest reward for it; (41)

ثُمَّ يُجْزَاهُ الْجَزَاءَ الْأَوْفَىٰ ﴿٤١﴾

that with your Lord is the ultimate end; (42)

وَأَنَّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ الْمُنتَهَىٰ ﴿٤٢﴾

that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; (43)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَضْحَكَ وَأَبْكَىٰ ﴿٤٣﴾

and it is He who deals death and gives life; (44)

وَأَنَّهُ هُوَ أَمَاتَ وَأَحْيَا ﴿٤٤﴾

that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, (45)

وَأَنَّهُ خَلَقَ الزَّوْجَيْنِ الذَّكَرَ وَالْأُنثَىٰ ﴿٤٥﴾

from a seed as it is lodged in place; (46)

مِن نُّطْفَةٍ إِذَا تُمْنَىٰ ﴿٤٦﴾

that it is He who brings about a second life; (47)

وَأَنَّ عَلَيْهِ النَّشْأَةَ الْأُخْرَىٰ ﴿٤٧﴾

that it is He who gives riches and possessions; (48)

وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ أَغْنَىٰ وَأَقْنَىٰ ﴿٤٨﴾

that He is the Lord of Sirius; (49)

وَأَنَّهُۥ هُوَ رَبُّ ٱلشِّعْرَىٰ ﴿٤٩﴾

that it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; (50)

وَأَنَّهُۥٓ أَهْلَكَ عَادًا ٱلْأُولَىٰ ﴿٥٠﴾

and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; (51)

وَثَمُودَا۟ فَمَآ أَبْقَىٰ ﴿٥١﴾

as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; (52)

وَقَوْمَ نُوحٍ مِّن قَبْلُ ۖ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ هُمْ أَظْلَمَ وَأَطْغَىٰ ﴿٥٢﴾

that it is He who brought down the ruined cities (53)

وَٱلْمُؤْتَفِكَةَ أَهْوَىٰ ﴿٥٣﴾

enveloping them with whatever came over them. (54)

فَغَشَّىٰهَا مَا غَشَّىٰ ﴿٥٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt? (55)

فَبِأَىِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكَ تَتَمَارَىٰ ﴿٥٥﴾

This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. (56)

هَٰذَا نَذِيرٌ مِّنَ ٱلنُّذُرِ ٱلْأُولَىٰٓ ﴿٥٦﴾

The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. (57)

أَزِفَتِ ٱلْآزِفَةُ ﴿٥٧﴾

None but God can remove it. (58)

لَيْسَ لَهَا مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ كَاشِفَةٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

Do you find this discourse strange? (59)	أَفَمِنْ هَٰذَا الْحَدِيثِ تَعْجَبُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾
Do you laugh instead of weeping, (60)	وَتَضْحَكُونَ وَلَا تَبْكُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾
and pay no heed? (61)	وَأَنتُمْ سَامِدُونَ ﴿٦١﴾
Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone. (62)	فَاسْجُدُوا لِلَّهِ وَاعْبُدُوا ﴿٦٢﴾

As the Prophet Receives Revelation

> *By the star when it sets. This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him, something that a very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees? Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* (Verses 1–18)

As we recite this opening, we live for a few moments on the sublime expanse experienced by the Prophet's heart. We rise over wings of light to join the company on high. We listen to the smooth beat echoed in the words, their meanings and the message they impart. We live with the Prophet's heart as it looks on, with all curtains and covers removed. He receives revelation from on high, listens and looks, and he commits to memory what was revealed to him. These moments were a special experience given only to his purified heart, but God favours His servants

by giving them an inspiring description that imparts to them a feeling of the message, its echoes and meanings. He describes to them the journey that took his blessed heart to the heavens above, step by step, scene by scene and stage after stage, as if they too are witnessing it all.

This inspiring description starts with an oath made by God: "*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) The brilliant shining of stars before they set on the horizon is similar to the image drawn of Gabriel, the object of the oath. He is first "*on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed.*" (Verses 7–10) Thus starts the harmony between the scene, the movement, the connotations and the rhythm.

"*By the star as it sets.*" (Verse 1) Reports differ as to the star referred to in this oath. The closest that comes to mind is that of Sirius, which was worshipped by some people in the past. It is mentioned later in the *sūrah*, as it says of God: "*He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) People in olden times paid special attention to this star. Ancient Egyptians used to link the flooding of the Nile to Sirius as it crossed the highest orbit. They watched it carefully to monitor the level of water in the Nile. It also has a special position in Persian and Arabian legends. It is probable, therefore, that the oath by the star at the beginning of the *sūrah* refers to it. That the image chosen here is that of the star's falling and setting is significant, as it suggests that no matter how great a star is in size and position, it falls down and changes place. It does not, then, deserve to be worshipped. What is worshipped should always be high and permanent.

The main object of the oath is the Prophet and the revelation given to him:

> *This fellow-man of yours has not gone astray, nor is he deluded. He does not speak out of his own fancy. That [which he delivers to you] is nothing less than a revelation sent down to him.* (Verses 2–4)

This friend of yours is on the right course, well guided, sincere, gives you good advice, delivering the truth, free of error, illusions, fabrications and fancy. It is all a revelation bestowed on him from on high, and he delivers what is revealed to him in all honesty. The one who brings

him this revelation is well known, following a well-charted course. The Prophet saw him with his own eyes and mind:

> *A very mighty one has taught him, [an angel] of surpassing power, who stood on the highest horizon, and then drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer, and revealed to God's servant what he revealed. [Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?* (Verses 5–12)

This mighty angel of surpassing power is Gabriel. It is he who has taught your friend, Muḥammad. His journey is detailed here. It began on the highest horizon where the Prophet saw him at the start of revelation. He saw Gabriel as God created him, covering the horizon with his enormous body. He then drew near and came closer towards the Prophet until he was very near to him, or, as the *sūrah* says, '*two bow-lengths away, or even closer*', which indicates very close proximity. He then revealed to him whatever he revealed, leaving the subject matter vague to indicate that it is momentous.

Thus, it is a case of seeing someone very close up after he had initially appeared at a distance, and then there is revelation, teaching, looking closely and being certain. In such conditions there can be no lie in what is reported. This truth does not allow for argument or dispute: "*[Muḥammad's] heart did not belie what he saw. Will you, then, contend with him over what he sees?*" (Verses 11–12) A heart's vision is more certain because it precludes any deception that might cloud a person's eyesight. He saw and made sure. His heart was then certain that he saw the angel bearing divine revelations. The angel is a messenger God sends to teach the Prophet and assign to him the task of delivering to mankind what he has learnt. There can be no more dispute or argument.

This was not the only time the Prophet saw the Angel Gabriel in his original form. The *sūrah* itself identifies there was another time:

> *Indeed, he saw him a second time by the lote tree of the farthest limit, near to the garden of abode, when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it. The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold; he certainly saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.* (Verses 13–18)

This was, according to weightier reports, when the Prophet went on his night journey and ascended to heaven. Gabriel came close to the Prophet in the shape and form God gave him, and this was '*by the lote tree of the farthest limit.*' The farthest limit may mean the point where everything ends, as it is close to the garden of abode. It may also mean the point at which the Prophet's journey taking him to heaven ended. Alternatively, it could mean where Gabriel's company ended, as he stood there when the Prophet ascended a further step taking him closer to his Lord's Throne. All this is known only to God, and He gave this knowledge to His chosen Messenger. This is the only information we have of it, and it is beyond our power to fathom. No human being can understand this except by God's will, the Creator of man and angel, who knows the capabilities of each.

The *sūrah* mentions what affected the scene at the lote tree of the farthest end to further emphasize that it was all real: "*when the lote tree was shrouded with whatever shrouded it.*" (Verse 16) We are given no details because the matter is too serious to think about anything further. All this was absolutely certain: "*The eye did not waver, nor was it too bold.*" (Verse 17) Nothing affected his eyesight so as to blur his vision. It was indeed a clear, well-defined vision that admitted no doubt. He saw on that trip some of the greatest signs of his Lord, looking directly at these essential truths as they appeared before him free of any make up.

Hence, the question of revelation is one based on clear vision, a well-defined scene, absolute certainty, direct contact, accurate knowledge, real company and an actual journey with its details outlined. It is on the basis of such certainty that your friend's mission is based, even though you continue to reject what he says, casting doubt about his claims. Yet you have known this friend for a very long time, testing his truthfulness and confirming it. His Lord confirms what he says and swears to its truth. He reports to you how he was given revelation and in what circumstances this was imparted. He tells you the circumstances when the revelation is given to him, and by whom: how he saw him and where.

Claiming Divinity for Idols

Such is the irrefutable truth in which Muḥammad (peace be upon him) called them to believe. What basis, then, do they have for their worship and superstitions of alleged deities? How can they justify their worship of al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt? How can they prove their dubious claims that these were angels, and that the angels were God's daughters, or that they can intercede with God on people's behalf? Do they have anything to support these claims?

> *Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other? Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them. Is man to have all that he may wish for, when both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone? Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased. Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.* (Verses 19–28)

Al-Lāt was a carved white rock, enclosed within a building covered with curtains, and with attendants serving it. Surrounding the building was a courtyard that the tribe of Thaqīf living in Ṭā'if, as well as tribes in the surrounding area, venerated. They were considered exceptionally honoured among Arab tribes, not however surpassing the Quraysh, for having it in their hometown. Needless to say, the Quraysh had the greater honour of having the Ka'bah, built by Abraham, in their city. It is thought that the name al-Lāt was considered as being the feminine form of God's Arabic name, Allah.

Al-'Uzzā was a tree around which a building was built and with curtains raised. It was at Nakhlah, between Makkah and Ṭā'if. The Quraysh in particular used to venerate al-'Uzzā. After the Battle of

Uḥud, the Quraysh leader stood boasting, 'We have al-'Uzzā, but you have no 'Uzzā', but the Prophet instructed his Companions to reply by saying: "God is our protecting Master, but you have no master to protect you." It is thought that the name al-'Uzzā was the feminine form of God's name, *al-'Azīz*, meaning the Almighty.

Manāt was stationed at a place called al-Mushallal in Qadīd, between Makkah and Madīnah. The tribes of Khuzā'ah, al-Aws and al-Khazraj used to venerate it in their pre-Islamic days, and used to start their pilgrimage from there.

There were many other idols venerated by different tribes, but these three were the major ones. It is thought that these idols were symbols representing angels whom the Arabs considered to be female and who they also claimed to be God's daughters. Hence, why they were originally worshipped. What happens in such cases is that the original idea is lost and the symbol becomes, for the majority of people, the thing to be worshipped. Only a handful of knowledgeable people continue to remember the original legend.

God mentions these three worshipped objects, implying in the very question He asks that to worship such things is indeed singular: "*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*" (Verses 19–20) Such singularity is clearly highlighted in His starting the question with, '*have you considered*', and in describing Manāt as '*the third other*'. After this initial question, He then adds that their other claim that He had daughters while they had sons was even more singular: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division.*" (Verses 21–22) This suggests that these worshipped objects related to the legend that the angels were females, begotten by God – far more exalted is God above all such false claims. This confirms what we have said about those Arabs: they hated that they should beget females, but were not ashamed to make the angels, about whom they knew nothing, females and to allege that they were God's offspring. God questions them here on the basis of their own concepts, ridiculing these and whoever upholds them: "*Are you to have the male and He the female?*" Such a division you make between yourselves and God is most unfair!

The whole thing is based on illusion. It has no basis in human knowledge or in reality. No evidence or argument can be given in

support of such claims: "*These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority. They [who disbelieve] follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls, even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them.*" (Verse 23) These names, al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, Manāt, and all others like them, which are called deities, angels, female and God's daughters, are false and cannot be substantiated. God has given you no evidence in support of such claims. What God does not sanction is certainly false and insupportable. It carries no weight.

This address to the unbelievers ends in the middle of the verse. The *sūrah* turns away from them as if they were not even there. Indeed, it speaks of them in the third person: "*They follow nothing but surmise and the whims of their own souls.*" (Verse 23) They lack argument, fact and certainty. They base their beliefs on surmise, and turn to their whims for evidence. Faith, however, cannot be based on either surmise or whim. True faith must be based on certainty and irrefutable evidence, without reference to whim or desire. The unbelievers had no excuse to justify their following whim and surmise: "*Even though right guidance from their Lord has now come to them.*" (Verse 23) When the deciding factor is one's own whim and desire, nothing can be right, and no guidance is of any use. The problem is not the absence of truth or evidence supporting it; the problem is a powerful desire that wants certain things, seeking justification for what it wants. This is the worst situation man can find himself in, because then no guidance is of any benefit and no proof is convincing.

Hence the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Is man to have all that he may wish for?*" (Verse 24) Will everything man wishes come true, have reality? Things are not like that. Truth and reality are different from wishful thinking, which cannot change facts. The fact is that man errs when he follows his own desires. He is too weak to change the nature of things. Everything in this life and the next belongs to God who accomplishes whatever He wills in both worlds: "*Both the life to come and this present life belong to God alone.*" (Verse 25)

We note here that the life to come is mentioned first, ahead of the present life, in order to maintain the rhyme. However, this gives an intended connotation, signifying that the life to come is more

important. This is normal in the Qur'ān, where the meaning fits well with the beat and the rhyme, allowing neither aspect to overshadow the other. This applies to everything of God's making throughout the universe, where beauty is maintained in harmony with the fulfilment of the function.

Since everything belongs to God in both this world and the life to come, there can be no basis for the unbelievers' conjectures that their false deities can intercede with God on their behalf. They used to say: "*We worship them for no reason other than that they would bring us nearer to God.*" (39: 3) Such conjecture is baseless. None of the angels in heaven can intercede with God except when God grants them permission to do so: "*Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased.*" (Verse 26)

Having been proved in the previous verses to be false, their claims now fall apart. All fallacy and doubt is now removed from faith. Everything in this world and the following one belongs to God. Whims and desires cannot change reality. Intercession can only be accepted by God's leave. The final judgement is His alone.

At the end of this section, a final discussion is given of the unbelievers' false concepts about the angels, showing them to be baseless: "*Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.*" (Verses 27–28) This final comment implicitly refers to the link between al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā and Manāt and the legend that makes angels female and that further alleges that they belong to God. This whole legend lacks all foundation. The unbelievers had no means whatsoever to learn anything true about the nature of the angels. As for the angels being God's offspring, this is a fallacy, ingrained in their false surmise, which can never be a substitute for the truth.

The Attitude to Take

At this point, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet. It directs him to ignore such people and turn away from them, leaving their fate to God. He knows the ones who do well and those who do badly, and it is He who

requites both those who follow His guidance and those who remain in error. He is the One who controls the universe, this life and the life to come. He is the One who deals in absolute justice, wronging no one, forgiving sins that are not persisted with. He knows everyone's intentions and inner thoughts, as He is the Creator of mankind who knows everyone's reality at every stage and at every moment:

> *So, ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world. Such is the sum of their knowledge. Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance. Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best. As for those who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence, your Lord is abounding in forgiveness. He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs. Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing.* (Verses 29–32)

This order to ignore those who turn away from God's message and remain preoccupied with this present life is directed in the first place to the Prophet. He should not concern himself with those unbelievers whose legends and attitudes have already been discussed in the *sūrah*. It is also directed at every Muslim who must adopt a similar attitude towards anyone who refuses to believe in God, focuses all his attention on this life, disbelieves in the life to come, considers the life of this world to be the ultimate goal and adopts a way of life based on this concept. Such people sever any relation between their consciences and belief in God, for it is He who holds them to account for their deeds after the end of their time on earth. Those who are nearest to this description in our time are those who advocate materialistic creeds.

Someone who believes in God and in the life to come cannot afford to give much thought to, let alone interact with, anyone who turns away from God's message and who discards the life to come altogether. Their ways of life are so different that they cannot meet over a single point. All their standards, values and goals in life are in disagreement.

Therefore, the two cannot cooperate or collaborate in any activity. With such being the case, why should a believer concern himself with the one who turns away from God and His message? To do so is to waste effort and energy.

Moreover, to ignore them is to put them low. No matter what sort of people they are, the ones who do not believe in God and have no preoccupation other than this present life cannot see the truth or understand it. They stand behind the walls of this present life. It represents the total sum of their knowledge. It is a scanty little sum even though it may appear substantial; narrow even if it appears vast; leading into error even though it seems enlightened. A person whose feelings, heart and mind are confined to this earth, despite the fact that we see with our eyes a huge world beyond, cannot know anything of value. This huge world we see has not created itself, and the possibility of its just coming into existence must automatically be rejected by human logic. Since it has a Creator, it could not have existed as a pastime. To say that this present life is the be all and end all of this huge universe is to indulge in triviality. When we understand the true nature of this universe, whatever angle we look at it from, we will inevitably believe in the Creator, and also in the life to come. The supreme Creator who originated this huge universe does not engage in trivialities.

Therefore, it is imperative that we should ignore those who turn away from God's message and limit themselves to the confines of this present life. For one thing, ignoring them will ensure that we care only for those who deserve to be cared for. Moreover, it puts in the right place those whose knowledge does not go beyond the present life. We are commanded to do so, and God's command must be obeyed.

"*Your Lord knows best who strays from His path, and He knows best who follows right guidance.*" (Verse 30) He knew that those people were in error. Therefore, He did not wish for his Messenger and those who follow His guidance to preoccupy themselves with the conditions of those in error, nor to befriend and associate with them. They must not be deceived by appearances that show their scanty and erroneous knowledge as great, for all such knowledge is confined to this world and prevents man from appreciating the truth that leads to believing in God and the life to come.

Errant and deviant people may acquire knowledge that appears to be great in the eyes of the masses. They may think such knowledge to have far-reaching effects in this present life. Yet possessing such knowledge does not alter the fact that they are in error, ignorant and have impaired understanding. The bond between the universe and its Creator and the link between man's action and reward are two aspects of truth that are necessary for anyone with true knowledge. Without these two truths any knowledge remains superficial. It has neither a real effect on human life, nor does it help its progress. The value of knowledge is measured by its effect on the human soul and people's moral relations. Otherwise, such knowledge produces nothing other than progress in machines and retrogression in human values. And knowledge that promotes machines at the expense of humans is miserable indeed.

A man who feels that his Creator created the universe according to a single, coherent law will inevitably find his attitude to life and all he sees around him influenced by this. He, thus, realizes that his existence has a higher objective than his own immediate life, because it is interlinked with the existence of the universe. He begins to look at himself in a different light. He will see himself as bigger than his own self with his limited lifespan. He will see himself as greater than his family with its few individuals, then of his community, country and class. He is at a higher level than all these formations.

To realize that he must submit an account to his Creator on the Day of Judgement when God will requite him for his deeds is bound to alter man's concepts, methods of evaluation, motives and goals. It will also provide a clear link between his moral sense and his destiny, for he will recognize that his salvation is dependent on how his moral values influence his actions. This is bound to strengthen and enhance his moral sense, making him stronger and better able to control his actions. He has now a watchful inner guard, keeping an eye on the final reckoning in the hereafter. Besides, he is reassured that goodness will eventually triumph, even if it appears to lose some rounds in the battle that takes place on earth. It is his duty to always support what is good and strive for its triumph, even though he himself may suffer defeat. The final outcome is not in this life on earth; it is there, with the final reckoning, in that most certain life to come.

This question of belief in God and in the Day of Judgement is of immense importance. As a human need, it is more important than food, drink and clothing. With it, man's humanity is assured, but without it, man is just another animal.

When standards, goals and life concepts are so different between believers and unbelievers, there can be no partnership, friendship, interaction or serious dealings. There can be nothing between one who believes in God and another whose preoccupation with this present life makes him turn away from God's message. To say anything different is to indulge in futile argument and to disobey God's clear order: "*Ignore those who turn away from Our message and care only for the life of this world.*" (Verse 29)

What Requital for Man

> *Indeed, to God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.* (Verse 31)

This statement, emphasizing God's full ownership of the heavens and earth, gives the question of the hereafter added strength and greater influence. The One who determines the life to come and its timing is the One to whom the heavens and earth belong. Only He is able to administer reward, and to ensure that it is administered with full justice for all: "*He will requite those who do evil in accordance with what they did, and will reward those who do good with what is best.*" (Verse 31)

The *sūrah* then defines the ones who do good, earning a reward according to what is best. They are the ones "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence.*" (Verse 32) Grave sins are cardinal, and shameful deeds are those sins that represent serious transgression. Scholars differ as to the meaning of the Arabic word *lamam*, translated here as casual indulgence.

Ibn Kathīr says that the exception indicated by the phrase, *apart from*, is unrelated, meaning that what follows it does not relate to what comes before it, because to him *lamam* means trivial sin. Imām Aḥmad quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "Nothing defines *lamam* better than the hadith

quoting the Prophet as saying, 'Everyone will inevitably have his share of fornication: the eye fornicates with glances, the tongue with words, and the mind with thoughts and desire; and ultimately one confirms all this going the whole way or discards it.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Ṭabarī quotes Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "The eye fornicates with glances, the lips with kissing, the hands with the use of force and the legs with walking. Ultimately one confirms all this with action going the whole way or not. If one goes the whole way, it is adultery, and if not then it is *lamam*." Similar views are expressed by Masrūq and al-Sha'bī, who were prominent early scholars. Likewise, Abū Hurayrah is quoted as explaining *lamam* as "a kiss, a glance, a gesture and minor action. Should genitals meet, then that is adultery requiring a full bath."

All these views are similar, defining *lamam* as trivial sin. Other scholars, however, express different views. A report by Ibn 'Abbās and Zayd ibn Aslam defines it as, 'what was done in the past'. Mujāhid says that "*lamam* means a person committing a serious sin and then desisting from it". Al-Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn 'Abbās a report saying that *lamam* means "a man indulges in a grave sin then repents". He refers to a *ḥadīth* quoting the Prophet as saying: "If You forgive me, My Lord, then You will forgive much. Who of Your servants has not dipped into *lamam*." Abū Hurayrah is also reported to have said in reference to this Qur'ānic statement, "*who avoid grave sins and shameful deeds, apart from casual indulgence*". (Verse 32): "This means a one-off indulgence in adultery then repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in stealing before repentance with no repeat, or a one-off indulgence in drinking then repentance with no repeat. Such is *lamam*." A similar view is attributed to al-Ḥasan, an early prominent scholar.

On balance, I feel that this second view is more appropriate, as it fits better with the statement that follows in the same verse: "*Your Lord is abounding in forgiveness.*" (Verse 32) Describing God's forgiveness as abounding fits well with the view that *lamam* is a casual indulgence in such grave sins and shameful conduct, followed by sincere and genuine repentance. This means that the definition the *sūrah* gives of those '*who do good*' means that they are the ones who '*avoid grave sins and shameful deeds,*' unless they slip, but repent soon after and refrain from repeating such sins. In another *sūrah*, God speaks of the 'God-fearing',

defining them as "*Those who, when they commit a gross indecency or wrong themselves, remember God and pray for the forgiveness of their sins – for who but God can forgive sins? – and do not knowingly persist in doing the wrong they may have done.*" (3: 135) He promises to reward them with forgiveness and admittance into a "*paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth.*" (3: 133) This is indeed more in line with the concept of God's mercy being ever present and far extending, and of His forgiveness being abounding.

The verse concludes by the statement that God's requital of people's deeds is based on His knowledge of their inner thoughts throughout all stages of their lives: "*He is fully aware of you when He brings you into being out of the earth, and when you are still hidden in your mothers' wombs.*" (Verse 32) His knowledge, then, precedes their own actions, as it is the knowledge of their true nature which they themselves do not even know. It is known only to God, their Creator. This knowledge was present when God originated them from the earth before they were brought into existence, and when they were still in their mothers' wombs, before they were brought into the light. It is the knowledge of their truth before it takes physical shape, and of their nature before it translates into action.

When we think of God's knowledge in this way, we realize that it is pointless, and indeed impudent for a man to tell Him about himself, trying to press his good points: "*Do not, then, assert your own goodness. He knows best those who are truly God-fearing.*" (Verse 32) He does not need for you to tell Him about yourselves, or to suggest how your deeds measure up. His knowledge is perfect, His measure accurate, His reward just, His judgement final, and to Him all creatures return.

On Their Own

The *sūrah* moves now to its final part which maintains the same rhythm as the first part. It states the basic concept of divine faith, as it has been ever since the time of Abraham, who delivered the first full code for living. It makes their Lord known to mankind. It shows them how His will influences their lives, portraying its effects one after another in a way that strongly shakes the human conscience. It builds its effect up

to the final beats, which are very powerful and are received with softened hearts and responsive minds.

> *Consider the one who turns away: he gives little at first then hardens and stops. Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see? Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust: that no soul shall bear the burden of another; that man will only have what he strives for; that his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it; that with your Lord is the ultimate end; that it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep; and it is He who deals death and gives life; that it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place; that it is He who brings about a second life; that it is He who gives riches and possessions; that He is the Lord of Sirius; that it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?*
>
> *This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it. Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed? Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.* (Verses 33–62)

This passage begins with a reference to the one who turns away, giving little at first before stopping altogether. His attitude is strange and the *sūrah* wonders at him. Some reports suggest that these two short verses refer to a particular man who began by making a small donation for God's cause before stopping for fear of becoming poor. In his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*, al-Zamakhsharī names this person as 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, reporting a story which has no solid basis and will be dismissed as totally unreliable by anyone who knows even a little about 'Uthmān and his history of very generous donations for Islam and the Muslim community. Such donations never stopped

at any time during his life. He was a most devoted servant of Islam, with a strong and sound faith, and with good knowledge of the Islamic principles, particularly with regard to individual responsibility.[2]

It may be that this Qur'ānic statement refers to a particular case, but it is equally possible that it is speaking about a type, rather than an individual. Anyone who abandons this line, weakening after having come forward with effort and money in support of God's cause, invites amazement. The Qur'ān uses this example to present and clarify certain basic principles of the Islamic faith.

"*Does he have knowledge of what lies beyond the reach of human perception so that he can clearly see?*" (Verse 35) Knowledge of what lies beyond our perception belongs to God and can only be seen by Him. No man can fathom it. No one can be sure what turn events will take and what effect such a turn will have on him. Therefore, one must work tirelessly, doing one's best throughout one's life. It is wrong to stop doing what is good, because nothing guarantees a good turn in the future life better than good action now, in this present life, coupled with a hope to earn God's forgiveness and pleasure.

"*Has he never been told of what is written in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham who was true to his trust.*" (Verses 36–37) This religion goes far back in history, and its latest version is closely related to its oldest one, with both having the same fundamental principles and values. Its different parts are mutually complementary, despite the fact that there have been many messages and messengers, with wide gulfs separating them in time and place. It is embodied in the revelations given to Moses, and to Abraham before him. Abraham is singled out here as having been true to his trust. He fulfilled every assignment given to him. This quality of Abraham's is highlighted here to provide contrast with that of doing a little good first, then stopping altogether.

2. The story mentions that 'Uthmān used to donate for good causes. 'Abdullāh ibn Sa'd, his brother through breast-feeding, i.e. one woman breast-fed them both when they were young, said to him: "If you continue at this rate, you will soon be without money." 'Uthmān said: "I committed sins, and I hope that what I am doing will earn me forgiveness by God." 'Abdullāh said: "Give me your she-camel, with its present load, and I will bear all your sins." He gave him that and called witnesses to solemnize the deal. He then stopped his donations. Therefore, these verses were revealed. This is the story, and it is clearly false. 'Uthmān could never have behaved in this way.

What do their revelations contain? The answer is clearly stated: "*That no soul shall bear the burden of another.*" (Verse 38) No one shall bear another's burden, making it heavier or lighter. Voluntary help is not acceptable in this respect.

"*That man will only have what he strives for.*" (Verse 39) Such is the rule. No one is to be credited with anything other than his own deeds. No man or woman will be given anything extra that someone else might have done; nor will anything be taken away so as to be credited to someone else. This present life is the chance given to all to work as they please. Once a person dies, the chance has gone. No further action can be credited, except as explained by the Prophet: "When a human being dies, his deeds come to a final end except in one of three ways: a continuing act of charity, a useful contribution to knowledge, and a dutiful child who prays for him." [Related by Muslim.] These three ways are, in essence, part of a person's own deeds:

> On this Qur'ānic verse, al-Shāfi'ī and other scholars base their view that reading the Qur'ān and requesting God to credit the reward for its recitation to the dead is not valid. They say that the reward for such a recitation will not be credited to a deceased person, because it is not his own deed. Therefore, the Prophet did not recommend it in any explicit or implicit way. Nor was this practised by any of the Prophet's Companions. Had it been valid, they would have done it before us. When we speak about virtuous actions earning reward, we must confine ourselves to what is expressly stated in the Qur'ān and the *aḥādīth*. We cannot rely on analogy or scholarly views. As for praying for the deceased and donating to charity on their behalf, these are unanimously agreed upon by scholars to be credited to them since they are expressly stated in authentic religious texts.[3]

"*That his labour will be seen and he will be given the fullest reward for it.*" (Verses 40–41) Nothing of a person's deeds will ever be lost, as nothing will be overlooked by Him. Every action, no matter how small,

3. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm*, Dār al-Ma'rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 276.

will be valued by God's fine and accurate measure so as to give everyone their full reward. No one will suffer even the slightest loss or injustice.

Thus, the principle of individual responsibility goes hand in hand with that of absolute justice for all. Man is thus given his full humanity based on his being a rational and responsible creature who can be trusted to look after himself. He is in a position of honour, given a chance to work for his future life and then submits his work for reckoning and reward. He is reassured that absolute justice will be done, as the reckoning is fair, unaffected by preferential treatment or oversight.

"*That with your Lord is the ultimate end.*" (Verse 42) The only road to follow is the one leading to Him. There is no refuge other than with Him, and no abode other than what He defines, in a place of bliss or one of suffering. This truth is extremely significant in shaping man's feelings and ideas. When man realizes that everything and everyone will ultimately end with God, he knows the inevitable outcome right from the beginning, and will try to determine his own actions in accordance with this truth. His heart and mind will remain, throughout his life journey, focused on the end he knows to be inevitable.

Life's Journey

Having given us a glimpse of the ultimate end, the *sūrah* takes us back to this life, showing us some aspects of the work of the divine will at every stage and in every situation: "*That it is He who causes [people] to laugh and weep.*" (Verse 43) These few words embody a number of facts and generate many inspiring images. It is God who gave man the two inner qualities of laughter and weeping. No one knows quite how they work in man's complex constitution, in which the psychology is as complex as the anatomy. Indeed, we realize that both psychological and physical factors closely interact to produce laughter or weeping.

It is God who causes man to laugh or weep, by creating what makes man laugh or weep. He makes man laugh in certain situations and weep in others according to the interplay of certain secret elements within him. Man may laugh tomorrow at what causes him to weep today, or may weep now because of something that made him laugh a short time

earlier. Yet this is due to no madness or absent-mindedness. It is merely the result of changing psychological conditions as influenced by a host of factors that affect our feelings and reactions.

God also makes different people laugh or weep at the same time, each according to different influences. Some may laugh at the very thing that makes others weep. Although the situation is the same, its circumstances and outcome give it widely different effects on people. Moreover, God causes the same person to laugh and weep at the same thing. He may react to something with laughter until its outcome becomes known to him when he cries. Then he wishes that he had not laughed or reacted in the way he had. Many are those who laugh in this present life only to find themselves weeping in the life to come when regret is of no use.

All these images, connotations, feelings and situations spring to mind as we read this short verse. More are generated as we gain further experience in life, and as causes of laughter and weeping come into play. This is one more aspect of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān.

"*And it is He who deals death and gives life.*" (Verse 44) Likewise, this short verse gives rise to endless images. It is God who initiates life and death. In another *sūrah*, we read that God "*has created death and life.*" (67: 2) Both are well known to man as they always occur, but both are deeply hidden when man tries to fathom their nature. What is death; what is life? What answers do we get when we try to understand them further than the two words and the two apparent conditions imply? How does life start in a living thing? Where does it come from; and how does it go into something to make it alive? How does it progress, taking this living thing with it on its way? What is death; how does it happen before the start of life, and after its departure from living things? It is all a deep secret hidden beyond thick curtains that God's hand has drawn.

It is God who deals death and gives life. As we listen, there appear before us millions of images of life and death, in all living worlds, all at the same moment. Consider how many millions upon millions of living things have died at this moment in time! Consider also how many millions upon millions have started their life's journeys, with life springing into them from where neither they nor anyone else, apart from God, knows! How many deaths have occurred at this moment, yet they themselves give rise to life? Now let us stretch our minds to

past generations: how many have lived and died across endless centuries before human life started on this planet? We will not say anything about other types of life and death elsewhere in the universe. No human mind can ever imagine these.

These few words give rise to endless images that shake man to the core. Inevitably, he is profoundly influenced by their rhythm and widely ranging echoes.

A Sperm and Two Sexes

"*That it is He who creates the two sexes, male and female, from a seed as it is lodged in place.*" (Verses 45–46) This is a fact of momentous significance, even though man is oblivious to it because he sees it taking place all the time. It is indeed greater than the most amazing thing human imagination can ever produce. A seed is discharged. It is merely one of many types of discharge the human body makes, such as sweat, tears, mucous, etc. Then after a certain period determined by God, this discharge becomes something different. It becomes a human being, either male or female. How does this miracle happen? Had we not seen it happen, it would not have even entered our imaginations or crossed our minds. Where was this human being, with its very sophisticated and complex constitution? Where was it lodged in that little drop of semen, or indeed in one of the millions of its sperms? Look at the bones, flesh, skin, veins, hair, nails, distinctive features, characteristics, potentials and moods of a human being, and think: where was all that hidden in a single microscopic cell floating, like millions similar to it, in a drop of liquid that a man discharges? Where in particular are lodged the characteristics of male and female in that single cell?

What human mind can contemplate this great fact and continue to arrogantly argue that it all just happens in this way, or that it just learnt to move in this line? Indeed, some people try to posit a seemingly enlightened argument, saying that the sperm acts in this way because, like all living things, it has the ability of reproduction. This is a circular argument, one that gives an explanation but needs an explanation itself. Who gave the sperm this potential? Who placed into it the latent desire to preserve its kind through reproduction? Weak and tiny as the sperm

is, who made it able to reproduce its kind? Who charted its journey so as to make it proceed with its task in such a well-defined way as to fulfil its desire of reproduction? Indeed, who gave it all the characteristics of its kind so as to reproduce them all? Moreover, why should it wish to reproduce its kind, and what interest is there for this sperm to reproduce all the characteristics of its kind? Can there be any other answer to all these questions other than a wise will that has a certain design for a certain objective, and that this will is able to fulfil its design and achieve its objective?

Having stated this first initiation of man, which is a continuously repeated event that no one denies, the *sūrah* moves directly to the second: "*That it is He who brings about a second life.*" (Verse 47) This second life belongs to the realm that is beyond our perception, but the first initiation provides ample evidence of its possibility. The One who created the two sexes from a single seed can easily bring life back to bones and other remains. Such bones and dust are no way less than an ejaculated seed as production material. Moreover, the first initiation provides evidence of the wisdom behind a second life. The subtle, yet elaborate planning that leads the tiny living cell along its arduous way until it becomes a male or a female must have a goal beyond this journey on earth in which nothing is complete and where people do not receive full reward or requital for their good or evil actions. This elaborate planning has made it thus because it includes a second life, which brings everything to its fullness. We see that the first initiation gives double evidence of the second life. Hence, it is mentioned first.

In both lives, God bestows riches on whomever He wills of His servants: "*That it is He who gives riches and possessions.*" (Verse 48) Many and diverse are the types of riches God grants to His servants in this world: wealth, health, offspring, contentedness, happiness, feeling, thought as well as the unique feeling of richness generated by feeling one's bond with God. He also bestows riches of the life to come on whomever He wills. Furthermore, He gives those He chooses possessions in plenty both in this life and the next. Human beings are poor, penniless. They cannot become rich and own things unless God grants them whatever He is pleased to grant them out of His treasures. They all know this and look up to Him for more, realizing that He is

the only source. They know that His treasures are the ones that are full and endless, while everything else is empty.

"*That He is the Lord of Sirius.*" (Verse 49) Sirius is a star that is 20 times heavier than the sun, gives 50 times the light the sun gives, and is a million times further away from us than the sun. Some people used to worship Sirius, and some used to watch it in particular, feeling that it had special importance. Therefore, stating that God is the Lord of Sirius is most fitting in this *sūrah*, which starts with an oath by the star as it sets, and speaks about the journey to the high heavens, focusing in all this on God's oneness and showing the fallacy of associating partners with Him.

The Communities of Old

> *That it is He who destroyed the ancient 'Ād; and Thamūd, leaving no trace of them; as well as Noah's people before them, for these were truly most unjust and most overweening; that it is He who brought down the ruined cities enveloping them with whatever came over them. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?* (Verses 50–55)

This is a quick round, with a short pause placed where the fate of each of those old communities is mentioned, coupled with a sharp touch with which we are certain to interact. The 'Ād, Thamūd and people of Noah are well known to the reader of the Qur'ān, as they are mentioned several times in this divine book. The ruined cities are those of Lot's people who were immersed in sin and went far astray. Their cities were turned upside down, but their fate is left vague here, '*enveloping them with whatever came over them,*' to add a feeling of suspense through which we see images of ruins upon ruins, leaving nothing clear or identifiable.

"*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you still doubt?*" (Verse 55) The calamities that befell those communities were blessings then. Did they not lead to the destruction of evil? Were they not events that hurled the truth over falsehood to make it disappear? Did they not leave signs for everyone to reflect upon? These are certainly blessings. Hence why should people still doubt them? The address here is to every heart and

mind which reflect on what God does and which see the blessing even when the event is one of calamity.

The *sūrah* now delivers its final beat, one that is profound and powerful. It is an outcry alerting us to the great, looming danger: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) This Messenger whom you doubt and who you argue about with the warnings he gives you is just like those warnings of old. When they were taken lightly, they were followed with well-known events. The imminent Hour is now close, it will sweep everything before it. It is the one that will envelop and strike all that this Messenger has been warning you about. Alternatively, the warning mentioned in the verse refers to the subject of the warning, or rather the suffering that may be inflicted. Its nature and timing are known only to God. When it takes place none but God can lift it: "*None but God can remove it.*"

The danger is now very close to you, and the compassionate warner is calling on you to save yourselves, but you are deeply indulged, paying no attention, oblivious of what is about to engulf you: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) This discourse is great and serious, defining heavy responsibilities for people while also providing them with a complete code for living. Why should they find it strange? Why should they laugh when it is given in all seriousness? The responsibilities it outlines and the fact that people will have to give full accounts of what they do in life put them in a situation that should invite weeping rather than laughter.

Now the *sūrah* ends with a loud command that strikes both their ears and hearts, telling them what they should do to save themselves from the abyss at the edge of which they perilously stand: "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone.*" (Verse 62) Coming after such a discourse creating immense influences, this command struck awe in their hearts and they prostrated themselves as commanded. These idolaters, who endlessly argued about the Qur'ān and revelation, and about God and His message, prostrated themselves at this point. All the people listening to the Prophet reciting this *sūrah* felt its strong beat like a blacksmith's hammer. All of them, Muslims and unbelievers alike, saw the Prophet prostrating himself at its end and they did likewise.

They could not resist the power of the Qur'ān or question its authority. When they came to, they were stunned as they realized what they had just done.

There are numerous reports describing this event. While they are all unanimous about its details, they differ in explaining what appears to be a strange happening. In fact, though, it is not strange at all. It is an example of the effect the Qur'ān produces and how hearts interact with it.

A Fabricated Story

To me, this event of unbelievers prostrating themselves before God, alongside the Muslims, needed an explanation. However, an experience I went through clarified for me its true reasons.

I used to read the false reports of what is known as the 'story of the birds' concerning this event. These are given by Ibn Sa'd in his *Al-Ṭabaqāt*, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī in his book on history, and by some commentators on the Qur'ān as they speak in detail about the verse that says: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-knowing, Wise.*" (22: 52) Ibn Kathīr gives the following comment on these reports: "They are all lacking in authenticity. I did not find any of them to have a sound chain of transmission."

The most detailed of these reports and the least in fabrication is the one given by Ibn Abī Ḥātim:

> Prior to the revelation of *Sūrah* 53, The Star, the unbelievers used to say: 'If only this man [meaning the Prophet] would speak in a good way about our deities, we would approve of him and his followers. Unfortunately, he speaks of our deities in a more derogatory way than he speaks of others who differ with him, such as the Jews and the Christians. The Prophet was deeply hurt by what the unbelievers inflicted on him and his Companions, causing them much harm and accusing him of lying. He was saddened by their stubborn rejection of his message, and was eager that they should

follow divine guidance. When God revealed to him *Sūrah* 53, The Star, and he read the verses saying, '*Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and Manāt, the third other?*' Satan threw some words at the mention of these idols, adding after their names the following couplet: 'These are exalted birds, whose intercession is desirable.' This rhyming couplet was of Satan's doing. Yet it went into the heart of every unbeliever in Makkah and they repeated it to one another, claiming that Muḥammad had reverted to his people's religion. However the Prophet continued to recite the *sūrah* to the end, when he prostrated himself, as did all those present, believers and unbelievers. The only exception was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, who was an old man. He took a handful of dust from the earth in his hand and put his forehead on it in a gesture of prostration.

Both parties were amazed at the fact that the unbelievers prostrated themselves when the Prophet did so. The Muslims, who did not hear Satan's words to the unbelievers, wondered how the unbelievers would prostrate themselves when they did not believe. The unbelievers were happy at the words Satan added, making them feel that the Prophet read them, and considered that their prostration was in acknowledgement of the praise given to their deities. This quickly circulated among people and Satan helped to spread it further until it reached Abyssinia where a large number of the early Muslims had migrated. On hearing of what happened, these Muslims in Abyssinia thought that the people of Makkah had all accepted Islam and prayed with the Prophet. They also heard that al-Walīd prostrated himself on his own palm. They felt that Makkah was now a safe place for Islam and its followers. Therefore some of them began to return.

God, however, rendered the aspersion cast by Satan as null and void, making His message clear in itself and by itself, and preserving His Messenger from the fabricated lie. He also revealed the verse saying: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes...*" (22: 52) When God confirmed His word, the unbelievers reverted to their practices of determined hostility, increasing their pressure on the believers.

Other reports go even further in fabricating lies, attributing those words about 'exalted birds' to the Prophet himself, justifying this by his desire to come to some arrangement with the Quraysh. Far be it for the Prophet (peace be upon him) to try to appease unbelievers.

Right from the outset, I rejected all these reports. For one thing, they go against the facts of the Prophet's infallibility and the preservation of the Qur'ān by God, keeping it immune from any distortion. The very flow of the *sūrah* makes such an addition absolutely impossible. In its entirety, the *sūrah* shows the fallacy of the idolaters' belief in those deities and the legends they weave around them. How can such a couplet of praise for them be inserted into such refutation? Even if we consider the argument of some who say that the couplet was heard only by the unbelievers, but not by the believers, it still remains unacceptable. Those unbelievers were Arabs who had a fine sense of their own language. How would they have felt had they heard this false couplet, followed by the verses stating: "*Are you to have the male and He the female? That would then be an unfair division. These are nothing but names which you have invented – you and your forefathers – for which God has given no authority.*" (Verses 21–23) Shortly afterwards they would have heard the verses: "*Those who do not believe in the life to come give the angels female names. Yet of this they have no knowledge. They follow nothing but surmise, but surmise can never take the place of truth.*" (Verses 27–28) And these are even preceded by the verse: "*Numerous are the angels in the heavens, yet their intercession will avail nothing until God has given leave to whomever He wills and with whom He is pleased.*" (Verse 26) Had those Arabs, endowed as they were with a fine sense of language, heard this sequence after a supposed couplet praising their idols and confirming that they can intercede with God, they would not have prostrated themselves, because the whole context would have been flawed and crooked. Those Arabs were not as stupid as the fabricators of these reports, to which Orientalists tried to give credence, either out of ignorance or to serve a purpose of their own.

The prostration by the unbelievers had, then, a reason other than this fabricated story. Likewise the return of some immigrants from Abyssinia was for a different reason. This is not the occasion to establish the reason for their return. Instead, we will only concentrate here on the question of the unbelievers' prostration.

A Personal Experience

I spent some time trying to discover the reason for this prostration. I even considered the possibility that it did not take place, and that it was rather a report explaining the return of the immigrants from Abyssinia. It was during this time, however, that I had the experience to which I referred earlier and will now recount.

We were a group of friends passing an evening together when we heard a recitation of the Qur'ān nearby. The reciter, who had an inspiring voice and a fine recitation, was reading this *sūrah*, The Star. Conversation between us ceased as we listened to the Qur'ān. Gradually, I began to feel what the reciter was reading deeply in my heart. I lived with him and felt how the Prophet went on this journey to join the community on high. I lived with him as he saw Gabriel in his angelic form God had created. That was a most remarkable event to contemplate. I reflected on his journey to the world beyond, to the tree at the farthest limit, and to the garden of abode in heaven. I lived all this, as far as my imagination could stretch, and my feelings bear. I followed him as the legends weaved by the idolaters about the angels, and how they worshipped them alleging that they were God's daughters, were shattered at the first touch of reality. I reflected on how a human being is brought into being out of the earth and how it becomes an embryo in its mother's womb, and how each of us is watched by God throughout our life's journey.

I felt a shiver as the reciter began the last part of the *sūrah*, referring to the world beyond the reach of our perception and known only to God; the actions recorded in full and accurate detail so that nothing is lost at the time of reckoning; the fact that all journeys end with God; the multitudes that laugh and the multitudes that cry; the dead and the living in countless numbers; the human seed as it finds its way in the dark before it begins to show its secrets revealing whether it is a male or a female; the second creation; the fate of past communities and the ruined cities of Lot's people as they were enveloped with whatever covered them.

I listened attentively to the last warning before the impending calamity: "*This is a warning like those warnings given in former times. The imminent Hour draws ever nearer. None but God can remove it.*" (Verses 56–58) I then heard the last cry and felt all my body and soul

trembling: "*Do you find this discourse strange? Do you laugh instead of weeping, and pay no heed?*" (Verses 59–61) When the reciter read the final verse, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone,*" the trembling was no longer only in my heart; it had spread to my whole body and took physical shape, which I could not resist. All my body was quivering and I could neither stop the quivering nor prevent my tears from pouring.

I realized then that the prostration by all those who were listening to the Prophet as he recited this *sūrah* was correct, and that its explanation is easy. Its secret is contained in the powerful effect the Qur'ān has on people and in particular the powerful rhythm this *sūrah* carries. It was not the first time I had read or listened to this *sūrah*, but on that particular occasion it had this effect on me, causing such a response. This is one of the secrets of the Qur'ān: there are special moments, which cannot be anticipated, when a verse or a *sūrah* touches special cords within us to establish direct contact with our hearts. The result is that we are profoundly affected by what we read or listen to.

One such moment touched the hearts of all present as the Prophet recited this *sūrah*, putting all his heart feelings into its recitation, living again all its images which he had already seen with his eyes. All the power in this *sūrah* poured forth from his recitation to touch the hearts of the audience, and they trembled and quivered. When they heard, "*Prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him alone,*" Muḥammad and the Muslims present prostrated themselves. The unbelievers could only follow suit, and so prostrated themselves.

Someone may say to me that I am basing my argument on a personal experience at a certain moment. Furthermore, I am a Muslim who believes in the Qur'ān and feels its special effect, while those others were idolaters, rejecting God's message and denying the Qur'ān. In reply I point out two considerations. The first is that the reciter in their case was Muḥammad, the Prophet, (peace be upon him). He had received the Qur'ān directly from its source and took heart from it, living every moment of his life with it. He loved the Qur'ān so much that when he heard a person reading it in his home, he would walk slowly and listen attentively at the door until the reciter had finished. As this particular *sūrah* was read, he was re-living an experience he had gone through

on high, and with the Holy Spirit as he saw him in his original form. I was listening to a fellow man reciting it, and the difference between the two cases is vast.

The second consideration is that those idolaters were not immune to trembling when they listened to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). It was their affected stubbornness that prevented them from acknowledging the truth. The following two cases provide enough evidence of their shaking and trembling when they listened to the Qur'ān.

In his biographical note on 'Utbah ibn Abī Lahab, Ibn 'Asākir reports on the authority of Hannād ibn al-Aswad:

> Both Abū Lahab and his son 'Utbah were preparing to travel to Syria, and I also was preparing to go with them. 'Utbah said: "I will go to Muḥammad and say some harsh words about his God." He went to Muḥammad and said to him that he would never believe in the one who '*drew near, and came close, until he was two bow-lengths away, or even closer.*' The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Set on him one of your dogs.' 'Utbah then left him and returned to his father who asked him what Muḥammad's reaction was and 'Utbah reported the Prophet's prayer. Abū Lahab said: 'Son, I really fear for you the effect of his prayer.' Then we set on our way until we stopped at Abrāh where we went into a monk's hermitage. The monk asked us: 'What makes you stop at this place where lions are as plentiful as cats?' Then Abū Lahab said to us: 'You know that I am your eldest and I have certain rights. You also know that this man prayed against my son and I fear what may happen to him as a result. Therefore, bring all your things into the hermitage and put it in the middle, laying my son's blanket on top of it. Then spread your blankets all around it.' We did as he asked us. During the night, a lion came in and smelled all our faces. When he did not find what he wanted, he pulled himself together and leapt landing on top of our things. He smelled 'Utbah's face before hitting him and breaking his head. Abū Lahab said: 'I knew that Muḥammad's prayer was certain to catch up with him.'

The first case documented above mentions Abū Lahab, one of the Prophet's most vehement opponents who used to set people against

him. He is the one the Qur'ān specifically condemns: "*Doomed are the hands of Abū Lahab; doomed is he. His wealth and his gains shall avail him nothing. He shall have to endure a flaming fire, and his wife, the carrier of firewood, shall have a rope of palm fibre round her neck.*" (111: 1–5) We see in this report his true feeling about Muḥammad and what he said. We see his profound fear that Muḥammad's prayer against his son would inevitably come true.

The second case refers to 'Utbah ibn Rabī'ah, one the Quraysh chiefs and its representative who tried to negotiate a deal with the Prophet. He suggested that the Prophet should stop his advocacy that led to division among the people and stop criticizing their beliefs. In return they would give him whatever he asked for in money, position and women. When he stated his offer, the Prophet said to him: 'Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you want to say?' When he affirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: 'Then listen to this that I want to read to you.' The Prophet then started to recite from the beginning of *Sūrah* 41: "*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.*" (41: 1–4) He continued his recitation until he 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.'*" At this point, 'Utbah sprang to his feet, put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and was full of terror as he said to the Prophet: "I appeal to you by all ties of kinship not to do so." He then went back to his people, reported on his mission and concluded by saying: "You, the Quraysh people, know that Muḥammad never lies. I feared that a terrible fate might befall you."

Such was the reaction of someone who never accepted Islam. Yet he clearly trembled even though his stubbornness got the better of him, preventing him from acting on what he knew to be true. When people like these listen to this *sūrah*, The Star, being recited by Muḥammad (peace be upon him), then they are very likely to experience a moment of total response which they cannot control. They will submit to the power of the Qur'ān and prostrate themselves with the believers. So let all fabricated stories, like that of the interceding birds, be dumped firmly in the rubbish bin.

SŪRAH 54

Al-Qamar

(The Moon)

Prologue

From start to finish, this *sūrah* represents an awesome onslaught against those who deny the warnings, but gives at the same time confident reassurance to the believers. It is divided into a series of scenes, each showing a different type of suffering inflicted on a community of unbelievers who denied God's messages. Each culminates with a violent shaking of the human heart, as it asks: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings!*" It then lets go, saying: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*"

The themes tackled in this *sūrah* are discussed in many *sūrahs* of Makkan revelation. It begins with a scene from the Day of Judgement and ends with a similar scene. In between, the *sūrah* dwells briefly on the fates of Noah's people, the ʿĀd, Thamūd, Lot's people and Pharaoh and his followers. All these are tackled in different ways in other *sūrahs*. Yet all these issues are presented here in a special way, making them appear totally new. Here we see each episode as violent, tempestuous, spreading fear, engendering collapse and a sweeping destruction.

The *sūrah*'s main characteristic is that each scene paints a fast episode of punishment presented to those who deny the divine faith. They feel that they personally are involved in it, witnessing the punishment and enduring its pain. When one scene is over and listeners begin to breathe

again, a new and more awesome scene of punishment is presented to them. When seven such episodes in this suffocating and fearful atmosphere are completed, the last image is presented, providing us with a totally different aura, delivering pleasant shades of security, serenity and reassurance. It shows us the righteous and their destiny: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) How different is this from the condition of the unbelievers who are also told of their fate: "*On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verse 48)



Al-Qamar (The Moon)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. (1)

اقْتَرَبَتِ السَّاعَةُ وَانشَقَّ الْقَمَرُ ﴿١﴾

Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' (2)

وَإِن يَرَوْا آيَةً يُعْرِضُوا وَيَقُولُوا سِحْرٌ مُّسْتَمِرٌّ ﴿٢﴾

They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. (3)

وَكَذَّبُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا أَهْوَاءَهُمْ ۚ وَكُلُّ أَمْرٍ مُّسْتَقِرٌّ ﴿٣﴾

There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], (4)

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَهُم مِّنَ الْأَنبَاءِ مَا فِيهِ مُزْدَجَرٌ ﴿٤﴾

far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. (5)

حِكْمَةٌ بَالِغَةٌ ۖ فَمَا تُغْنِ النُّذُرُ ﴿٥﴾

So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, (6)

فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ ۘ يَوْمَ يَدْعُ الدَّاعِ إِلَىٰ شَيْءٍ نُّكُرٍ ﴿٦﴾

with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts (7)

خُشَّعًا أَبْصَارُهُمْ يَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ الْأَجْدَاثِ كَأَنَّهُمْ جَرَادٌ مُّنتَشِرٌ ﴿٧﴾

rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.' (8)

مُّهْطِعِينَ إِلَى الدَّاعِ ۖ يَقُولُ الْكَافِرُونَ
هَٰذَا يَوْمٌ عَسِرٌ ﴿٨﴾

Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. (9)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ فَكَذَّبُوا عَبْدَنَا
وَقَالُوا مَجْنُونٌ وَازْدُجِرَ ﴿٩﴾

Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' (10)

فَدَعَا رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَغْلُوبٌ فَانتَصِرْ ﴿١٠﴾

So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, (11)

فَفَتَحْنَا أَبْوَابَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَاءٍ مُّنْهَمِرٍ ﴿١١﴾

and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. (12)

وَفَجَّرْنَا الْأَرْضَ عُيُونًا فَالْتَقَى الْمَاءُ
عَلَىٰ أَمْرٍ قَدْ قُدِرَ ﴿١٢﴾

We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails (13)

وَحَمَلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ ذَاتِ أَلْوَاحٍ وَدُسُرٍ ﴿١٣﴾

which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. (14)

تَجْرِي بِأَعْيُنِنَا جَزَاءً لِّمَن كَانَ كُفِرَ ﴿١٤﴾

We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? (15)

وَلَقَد تَّرَكْنَاهَا آيَةً فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿١٥﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (16)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ﴿١٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿١٧﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (17)

كَذَّبَتْ عَادٌ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿١٨﴾

The people of 'Ād also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (18)

إِنَّآ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِى يَوْمِ نَحْسٍ مُّسْتَمِرٍّ ﴿١٩﴾

We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: (19)

تَنزِعُ ٱلنَّاسَ كَأَنَّهُمْ أَعْجَازُ نَخْلٍ مُّنقَعِرٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. (20)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِى وَنُذُرِ ﴿٢١﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (21)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (22)

كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ﴿٢٣﴾

The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. (23)

فَقَالُوٓا۟ أَبَشَرًا مِّنَّا وَٰحِدًا نَّتَّبِعُهُۥٓ إِنَّآ إِذًا لَّفِى ضَلَٰلٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. (24)

أَءُلْقِيَ الذِّكْرُ عَلَيْهِ مِنۢ بَيْنِنَا بَلْ هُوَ كَذَّابٌ أَشِرٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' (25)

سَيَعْلَمُونَ غَدًا مَّنِ الْكَذَّابُ الْأَشِرُ ﴿٢٦﴾

Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. (26)

إِنَّا مُرْسِلُوا النَّاقَةِ فِتْنَةً لَّهُمْ فَارْتَقِبْهُمْ وَاصْطَبِرْ ﴿٢٧﴾

We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. (27)

وَنَبِّئْهُمْ أَنَّ الْمَاءَ قِسْمَةٌ بَيْنَهُمْ ۖ كُلُّ شِرْبٍ مُّحْتَضَرٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. (28)

فَنَادَوْا صَاحِبَهُمْ فَتَعَاطَىٰ فَعَقَرَ ﴿٢٩﴾

They called their friend, who took something and slew her. (29)

فَكَيْفَ كَانَ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ﴿٣٠﴾

How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. (30)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً فَكَانُوا كَهَشِيمِ الْمُحْتَظِرِ ﴿٣١﴾

We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. (31)

وَلَقَدْ يَسَّرْنَا الْقُرْآنَ لِلذِّكْرِ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (32)

كَذَّبَتْ قَوْمُ لُوطٍ بِالنُّذُرِ ﴿٣٣﴾

Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. (33)

إِنَّآ أَرۡسَلۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ حَاصِبًا إِلَّآ ءَالَ لُوطٖۖ نَّجَّيۡنَٰهُم بِسَحَرٖ ٣٤

We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, (34)

نِّعۡمَةٗ مِّنۡ عِندِنَاۚ كَذَٰلِكَ نَجۡزِي مَن شَكَرَ ٣٥

as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. (35)

وَلَقَدۡ أَنذَرَهُم بَطۡشَتَنَا فَتَمَارَوۡاْ بِٱلنُّذُرِ ٣٦

He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. (36)

وَلَقَدۡ رَٰوَدُوهُ عَن ضَيۡفِهِۦ فَطَمَسۡنَآ أَعۡيُنَهُمۡ فَذُوقُواْ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ٣٧

They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' (37)

وَلَقَدۡ صَبَّحَهُم بُكۡرَةً عَذَابٞ مُّسۡتَقِرّٞ ٣٨

At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. (38)

فَذُوقُواْ عَذَابِي وَنُذُرِ ٣٩

'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' (39)

وَلَقَدۡ يَسَّرۡنَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَ لِلذِّكۡرِ فَهَلۡ مِن مُّدَّكِرٖ ٤٠

We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (40)

وَلَقَدۡ جَآءَ ءَالَ فِرۡعَوۡنَ ٱلنُّذُرُ ٤١

Pharaoh's people also received warnings. (41)

كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَـٰتِنَا كُلِّهَا فَأَخَذْنَـٰهُمْ أَخْذَ عَزِيزٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task. (42)

أَكُفَّارُكُمْ خَيْرٌ مِّنْ أُو۟لَـٰٓئِكُمْ أَمْ لَكُمْ بَرَآءَةٌ فِى ٱلزُّبُرِ ﴿٤٣﴾

Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? (43)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ نَحْنُ جَمِيعٌ مُّنتَصِرٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? (44)

سَيُهْزَمُ ٱلْجَمْعُ وَيُوَلُّونَ ٱلدُّبُرَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. (45)

بَلِ ٱلسَّاعَةُ مَوْعِدُهُمْ وَٱلسَّاعَةُ أَدْهَىٰ وَأَمَرُّ ﴿٤٦﴾

But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. (46)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُجْرِمِينَ فِى ضَلَـٰلٍ وَسُعُرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

The evildoers are indeed in error and in raging flames of fire. (47)

يَوْمَ يُسْحَبُونَ فِى ٱلنَّارِ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمْ ذُوقُوا۟ مَسَّ سَقَرَ ﴿٤٨﴾

On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' (48)

إِنَّا كُلَّ شَىْءٍ خَلَقْنَـٰهُ بِقَدَرٍ ﴿٤٩﴾

We have created everything in due measure. (49)

وَمَآ أَمْرُنَآ إِلَّا وَٰحِدَةٌ كَلَمْحٍۭ بِٱلْبَصَرِ ﴿٥٠﴾

Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. (50)

We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? (51)	وَلَقَدْ أَهْلَكْنَآ أَشْيَاعَكُمْ فَهَلْ مِن مُّدَّكِرٍ ﴿٥١﴾
Everything they do is noted in their records. (52)	وَكُلُّ شَىْءٍ فَعَلُوهُ فِى ٱلزُّبُرِ ﴿٥٢﴾
Every single thing, small or great, is recorded. (53)	وَكُلُّ صَغِيرٍ وَكَبِيرٍ مُّسْتَطَرٌ ﴿٥٣﴾
The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, (54)	إِنَّ ٱلْمُتَّقِينَ فِى جَنَّٰتٍ وَنَهَرٍ ﴿٥٤﴾
in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign. (55)	فِى مَقْعَدِ صِدْقٍ عِندَ مَلِيكٍ مُّقْتَدِرٍ ﴿٥٥﴾

The Splitting of the Moon

> *The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder. Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail. So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.'* (Verses 1–8)

This is a highly inspiring opening, speaking of a momentous event in the wide universe that heralds an immeasurably greater event: "*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*" (Verse 1) What a piece

of news! They saw the first event with their own eyes, and they can only anticipate the greater one. The splitting of the moon, witnessed by the Arabs, is confirmed in numerous reports; all agree that this took place, though they differ in their general and detailed descriptions of how it occurred. Here, we will give a few of these reports:

Anas ibn Mālik reports: "The people of Makkah asked the Prophet to show them a miracle, and the moon was split in Makkah twice. He read: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder.*' [Related by Mālik.] The same report by Anas is given in another version stating the people's request for a miracle, then saying: "He showed them the moon split in two halves, and they could see Mount Ḥirā' in between." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Jubayr ibn Muṭ'im reports: "The moon was split during the Prophet's lifetime and it was seen in two halves, one over each mountain. People said: 'Muḥammad has cast a magic spell on us.' Then they said: 'If he could cast a spell on us, he cannot do that to all people.'" [Related by Aḥmad, and also by al-Ṭabarī and al-Bayhaqī with different chains of transmission.]

Ibn 'Abbās is quoted by various transmitters as having said: "The moon was once split during the Prophet's lifetime." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other versions add: "This took place before the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. They could see its two halves." Yet another version related by al-Ṭabaranī with a different chain of transmitters quotes Ibn 'Abbās as saying: "The moon was eclipsed during the Prophet's time. The unbelievers said, 'A spell is cast on the moon'. A Qur'ānic revelation was bestowed from on high stating: '*The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder*'.

'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar said: "The moon was split in two halves during the Prophet's time in Makkah, with one half seen at the near side of the mountain and the other at the far side. The Prophet said: 'My Lord! Be my witness.'" [Related by Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports: "During the Prophet's time, the moon was split in two and people could see it. The Prophet said: 'Look at it and be witnesses.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Al-Bukhārī adds another version of this report with a different chain of transmitters quoting Ibn Mas'ūd: "When the moon was split, the Quraysh said: 'This

is a magic spell cast by Ibn Abī Kabshah [a derogatory nickname they gave to the Prophet]. Wait until some travellers arrive, for Muḥammad cannot cast his spell on all people.' When travellers came they confirmed the splitting of the moon."

The Qur'ān clearly stated this event to the unbelievers at the time, but there is no report to suggest that they ever denied it. It must, then, have happened in a way that makes denial practically impossible. Had there been a way to deny it, they would have done so, if only for the sake of meaningless argument. All that has been reported of their reactions are their statements that the Prophet had cast a magic spell on them. Yet they too directly witnessed the event and so knew for themselves that this was no magic. Had the Prophet been able to cast a spell on them, he could not have done the same to the travellers in the desert. Such travellers, let us recall, confirmed that they had witnessed this extraordinary event.

A Miracle in Support?

We need to add here a word about the report that the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle and in response the moon was split in two showing them what they had asked for. This report is in conflict with a clear Qur'ānic statement that stipulates that the Prophet was not supported by any miracle of the type given to earlier messengers. The reason is explained in the following verse: "*Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false.*" (17: 59) This statement makes clear that, in His infinite wisdom, God decided not to show unbelievers miraculous signs in support of His message, because earlier communities had rejected them as false.

On every occasion the unbelievers asked the Prophet for a miracle, his reply was that this was outside his remit: he was no more than a human messenger. He always referred them to the Qur'ān, declaring that it was the only sign to confirm the veracity of his message. "*Say, 'If all mankind and the* jinn *were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'ān, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.' Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept*

anything other than unbelief. They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or you have a garden of date-palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.'" (17: 88–93)

Therefore, the claim that this splitting of the moon was in response to the unbelievers' demand for a miracle is contrary to clear Qur'ānic texts. It is also contrary to the strategy adopted by this final divine message in addressing the human mind only by the Qur'ān and its miraculous nature. It is the Qur'ān that directs people's minds to reflect on the signs available in the universe and in their own constitutions, as well as in historical events. The actual miracles that were given to the Prophet and confirmed by many authentic reports were merely aspects of God's grace which He extended to His Messenger. They did not constitute proofs of His message.

We, therefore, confirm that the splitting of the moon was indeed a reality, as stated in the Qur'ān and in many authentic reports indicating its place, time and appearance. We do not, however, endorse the causes stated in some of these reports, but we will highlight the combination of the Qur'ānic confirmation of its happening with the reference to the Last Hour drawing near. This is intended to awaken the human mind so that it responds to the divine message.

The splitting of the moon, then, was a clear sign to which the Qur'ān draws people's attention, just like it draws attention to other signs available in the universe around us. It wonders at the unbeliever's attitude to all these signs, including the splitting of the moon.

Physical miracles may appear amazing to the human mind prior to its maturity; that is prior to its ability to contemplate the permanent signs already available in the universe and being influenced by what these signs clearly prove. All the physical miracles that messengers were given before mankind had attained maturity were not as great as others already available in the world around us. Yet these do not excite man's instinctive reactions like those unfamiliar miracles.

Even if we consider the splitting of the moon on this occasion to be a physical miracle, the fact remains that the moon itself is a greater miracle. Its size, position, shape, nature, ever-changing stages, cycle, bearing on life on earth and how it stays in space without support make the moon a great miracle that people can see with their eyes and contemplate with their minds. It testifies to man's heart and mind as a witness to God's creation. It cannot be denied except by one who is a stubborn unbeliever.

The Qur'ān puts the human mind face to face with the universe and what it contains of God's signs. This is far better than providing an unfamiliar sign lasting only for a brief period and seen by only one generation of people in one particular place. The entire universe then is a great sign; here everything small or large is a sign of God's immeasurable ability. The human mind is invited at every moment to look at these permanent signs and to listen to their testimony, which is always lucid and decisive. It is also invited to enjoy all the marvellous aspects of creation, which combine beauty with perfection and excite a feeling of amazement to strengthen conviction. The present *sūrah* opens with a reference to the fact that the Last Hour is drawing near and to the splitting of the moon. It thus delivers a shock to the human mind, which then anticipates the Last Hour that is soon to happen, made all the more apparent by virtue of the great event that has just taken place. It can now stretch imagination to the events that will accompany the Last Hour.

How close is the Last Hour? The Prophet is quoted as saying: "I have been given my message as close to the Last Hour as these two", pointing with his index and middle finger. [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Reactions to Great Signs

Yet close as the dreaded Hour is, and despite the exciting and great event they have just witnessed and the numerous signs around them, the unbelievers continued to stubbornly reject the message, insisting on their erring ways. Not only did they ignore the warnings, they also did not properly reflect on the pointers to the great truth that should have

brought them to faith: "*Yet when the unbelievers see a sign, they turn away and say, 'Yet another act of continuous sorcery.' They deny the truth and follow their own desires. Yet everything is ultimately settled. There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance], far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail.*" (Verses 2–5)

They indeed turned away and when they saw the moon split in two, they said that it was a magical spell cast over their eyes. They said the same thing about the Qur'ān, which is itself a great sign. They alleged that it too was another act of sorcery. Since signs to the truth are given all the time, they argue that such sorcery is continuous and never ending. They turn away from every sign, unwilling to reflect on their nature or understand their message. Prompted by arbitrary feelings that lack all evidence, they deny these signs and what messages they deliver, refusing to reflect on the fundamental truth confirmed by everything around them in the universe.

"*Yet everything is ultimately settled.*" (Verse 3) Everything in the universe is in its proper place, well settled, and not subject to any upheaval. The whole universe is well fixed, unaffected by fleeting desires, changing whims or blind coincidences. Everything occurs at its appropriate time, in its right place. This is clearly seen in everything around them: universal cycles, the laws of life, the stages of growth of plants and animals, the apparent characteristics of all materials, and indeed in the physiology of people's own bodies and organs which they cannot control. With everything around them settled in perfect order, as they clearly see, they are the only ones who act on the promptings of transitory whims and desires.

"*There has come to them tidings that should have restrained [their arrogance].*" (Verse 4) They received the truth about the universal signs highlighted in the Qur'ān, news of what happened to earlier communities when they denied God's messages, news of the life to come vividly depicted in the Qur'ān. All these should have been enough to stop anyone who wants to indulge in excess. Such news and tidings carried enough wisdom to direct people's minds to God's elaborate and wise planning. Twisted minds, however, do not open to acknowledge great signs, benefit by news or heed warnings: "*far-reaching wisdom, but warnings have been of no avail.*" (Verse 5) It is only a mind that is ready

to receive faith that benefits by all this and enjoys the great blessings of faith.

Having given a full picture of their stubborn rejection, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to turn away from them, leaving them to face their fate on the day to the approach of which they pay little heed, despite seeing a sign like the splitting of the moon heralding it: "*So turn you away from them. On the day the Summoner will summon them to something unknown, with eyes downcast, they will come out of their graves like swarming locusts rushing towards the Summoner. The unbelievers will say: 'Hard indeed is this day.'* (Verses 6–8) These verses paint a scene of that day which is fierce and grim, consistent with the ambience of the *sūrah*. They also warn of the closeness of the Last Hour, highlighted by the splitting of the moon in two. All of this fits perfectly with the rhythm maintained throughout the *sūrah*.

It is a scene full of quick movement, yet it is also prominent, with clear lines and features: multitudes of people are rising from their graves, like swarming locusts, yet their eyes are downcast, humble, fearful. They rush towards the one who calls them forward, but they do not know what they are called to, and they cannot be reassured. As this gathering continues to take place, and amidst all this humility, the unbelievers say in a tone of distress that reflects their dawning awareness of the hardship ahead of them: "*Hard indeed is this day.*" (Verse 8)

Such, then, is the day which draws near; still they continue to deny it. Therefore, the Prophet is to turn away from them when that day arrives. He is to leave them to face their miserable destiny.

Far Back in History

After this powerful opening, the *sūrah* begins to portray scenes of the punishment meted out to earlier communities of unbelievers, who traversed the same way as the Arabs who denied the Prophet Muḥammad's message:

> *Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth. They rejected Our servant, saying: 'He is mad!' and he was harshly rebuffed. Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!' So We opened the*

gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose. We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected. We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed? How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed? (Verses 9–17)

"*Before them, Noah's people rejected the truth.*" (Verse 9) They rejected the divine message and the signs given to them. "*They rejected Our servant,*" Noah, and said, "*He is mad!*" just like the Quraysh unjustly said of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), threatening to stone him, but still ridiculing him and demanding that he desist. "*And he was harshly rebuffed.*" (Verse 9) They though should have been the ones who took heed and desisted.

Having suffered all this rejection, Noah referred to his Lord who had entrusted him with His message requiring him to deliver it to his people. He submitted his report on how things stood between him and his people and the results of his efforts. He wanted the decision to be made by God after he himself had exerted every effort: "*Therefore, he called out to his Lord: 'I am overcome. Grant me help!'*" (Verse 10) I have done my best and I am now powerless. I can do no more. You are the One to grant help and support to Your message. All power belongs to You and the decision is Yours.

Hardly is the word uttered and the matter handed over to the Almighty when God's mighty hand points to the great universe and its crushing wheel starts to roll: "*So We opened the gates of heaven with water pouring down in torrents, and caused the earth to burst forth with springs. Thus the waters met for a preordained purpose.*" (Verses 11–12) This is a huge and overwhelming universal action described in well-chosen words and phrases. It begins by attributing the action directly to God: "*We opened*", so that we see that it is the hand of the Almighty that opened "*the gates of heaven,*" in the plural, "*with water pouring down in torrents,*" one wave after another. By the same token and movement, We "*caused the earth to burst forth with springs*". We see through the words water bursting forth everywhere, as though the whole earth has become an

immense and gushing spring. Thus the water pouring from the skies and the water gushing from the earth "*met for a preordained purpose*". These waters met in implementation of what God had preordained, obeying His divine command and bringing it to fulfilment.

When it was a huge flood, covering the face of the land, washing off the dirt that had lingered for long until the messenger despaired of ever being able to remove it, the Mighty and Compassionate hand was extended to that messenger ensuring his safety and giving him the honour he deserved: "*We carried him in a vessel made of planks and nails which floated under Our eyes: a reward for him who had been rejected.* (Verses 13–14) It is clear in the phraseology of these verses that it is intended to impart an air of grandeur to the vessel, which is described as having planks and nails. It is only described, rather than named, to add to its importance. It floats under God's own eyes and care. This is all "*a reward for him who had been rejected*", and threatened. It is a reward that replaces people's rejection by divine care and ridicule by honour. It describes the great power at the disposal of one who is defeated after having done his best. This is what is available to those who exert their maximum efforts in advocating His cause, and also then put the matter to Him praying for His help. All powers in the universe are mobilized to support such people, and all, with God's permission and under His guidance.

This scene of truth's complete victory and the total eradication of advocates of unbelief is followed by an address to those who look at it as if it were happening before their very eyes: "*We have left this as a sign: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 15) This great event, with its well-known circumstances and results, is left as a sign and a reminder for future generations. Will any take heed? Then another gesture is added to awaken people's hearts telling them that the warnings given to them are all correct and the punishment that might be inflicted is severe indeed: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 16)

It all took place as the Qur'ān describes. The Qur'ān remains present, available to all, easy to understand, attractive by its sincerity and straightforwardness, consistent with nature, full of wonders and always retaining its power. Never is it weakened by familiarity. But rather

whenever it is contemplated, it gives more of its treasures. The more it is read, the better we are comforted by it: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 17)

This last verse provides the comment that occurs after each scene. The *sūrah* uses it by way of a pause inviting hearts to reflect after they have been shown one of the calamities that befell earlier deniers of the truth.

The 'Ād and the Stormwind

> *The people of 'Ād also rejected the truth. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings? We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 18–22)

This is the second scene of powerful punishment that befell a whole community of unbelievers. It begins by reporting that the 'Ād rejected the truth, but before any details are given, the *sūrah* adds the question intended to magnify the severity of the punishment meted out: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 18) The answer is immediately given by the *sūrah*: "*We sent against them a howling, cold wind on a day of unceasing misfortune: it swept people away as though they were uprooted palm trunks.*" (Verses 19–20) The Arabic description of the wind, *ṣarṣar*, gives by its very sound a feeling of that wind which carries unceasing misfortune. Probably no misfortune could be worse than that which happened to the 'Ād. The wind lifted the people and smashed them, leaving them like uprooted palm trunks.

The scene is violent and fearful; the stormwind sent against the 'Ād was one of God's forces. It is a natural phenomenon God has placed in the universe. It operates according to the universal system He has chosen. He sends it against whomever He wishes. It continues to operate within natural laws, where there is no conflict between its normal operation in the planned order of things and its fulfilment of God's orders whatever they happen to be. It is He who set this natural law and issued the

command. "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings.*" (Verse 21) This statement is now repeated after the scene has been shown providing the answer. The episode concludes with the other comment repeated throughout the *sūrah* according to its own flow: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 22)

Aggressors Against God's Sign

> *The people of Thamūd also rejected [My] warnings. They said: 'Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.' Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar. We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient. Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn. They called their friend, who took something and slew her. How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings. We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder. We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 23–32)

The Thamūd was the tribe that succeeded the 'Ād as the major power in Arabia. The 'Ād lived in the south, while the Thamūd were based in the north of the Peninsula. Despite the fact that the 'Ād's fate was well documented in the whole of Arabia, the Thamūd took no heed and rejected God's warnings just like the 'Ād before them.

"*They said: Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly. Could a message have been sent to him alone out of all of us? No, he is indeed an insolent liar.*" (Verses 24–25) This reiterates the same old argument that troubled unbelievers one generation after another. Could this man have been chosen from among us all to receive a divine message? Again, their attitude smacks of a hollow arrogance that does not consider the message itself, but rather looks at the person advocating it: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves?*" (Verse 24)

Yet, why should it seem strange that God, who knows best to whom to entrust His message, should choose one particular person and give him revelations embodying reminders and directives? Why should it trouble them that God makes a choice when it is He, the Creator of all, who knows the one whose abilities and qualities make him the right choice. After all, it is God who gives the message. Their argument is baseless, and can only be entertained by deviant minds that do not look at the message itself to realize how true it is. They only look at the man advocating it, feeling too proud to follow one of their own number. They do not want to grant him position and status. Hence they say: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24)

The most peculiar thing is that they describe themselves to be in error if they were to follow divine guidance, and to be lost in folly if they accept faith. Hence, they point their fingers at the messenger God has chosen to lead them along the way of truth, accusing him of lying and of being greedy: "*No, he is indeed an insolent liar.*" (Verse 25) The accusation of lying means that he did not receive a message from God, and the accusation of insolence means that he was after a position of honour for himself. The same accusations have been levelled at all advocates of divine faith. They are often accused of using the divine message as a cover to seek position and personal interest. Such false accusations are the product of twisted minds that cannot discern what motivates people.

As the *sūrah* reports the story in narrative form, it suddenly changes course and continues as though it is happening at this very instance. It now speaks about what is going to happen, stating it in the form of a threat: "*Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar.*" (Verse 26) This is one of the tools employed in Qur'ānic narratives to give an air of actuality, transforming them from a mere tale to events taking place before spectators who are full of anticipation about their development.

"*Tomorrow they will know who is the insolent liar.*" (Verse 26) They will see the truth for themselves. They will not be immune to the consequences of this truth which heralds destruction for insolent liars: "*We shall send them a she-camel as a test. So watch them and be patient.*

Tell them that the water is to be equitably shared between them: each should drink in turn." (Verses 27–28) We stand watching with expectation to see what will happen when God sends them the she-camel as a test to prove their reality. Their messenger is also looking with expectation, carrying out the divine order that he should wait patiently until the test is completed. He has to deliver the instructions: the water the tribe has is to be shared equally, assigning one share to all the cattle and one to this she-camel alone. This must have been a she-camel with very special qualities, making her a miraculous sign. She takes the water one day, but does not disturb the other cattle on their day. She alternates with them in fairness.

The *sūrah* then reverts to the narrative style, reporting what happened afterwards: "*They called their friend, who took something and slew her.*" (Verse 29) This friend belonged to a group of evildoers in their city. The group itself is described in the Qur'ān thus: "*There were in the city nine men who did evil deeds in the land, and would not do any good.*" (27: 48) This one in particular is given an even apter description: "*their most hapless wretch.*" (91: 12) It is reported that this man got himself so drunk that he did not hesitate to undertake the miserable deed of killing the she-camel God had sent them as a sign. Their messenger had warned them against harming her, as this would render them liable to God's punishment. "*They called their friend, who took something and slew her.*" (Verse 29) Thus the test ended and the punishment was incurred: "*How grievous was My punishment and how true were My warnings?*" (Verse 30) It is a question meant to emphasize the seriousness of what happened before mentioning the punishment inflicted when the warnings were not heeded.

"*We sent against them a single blast, and they became like the dry twigs of the sheepfold builder.*" (Verse 31) The Qur'ān does not give us any details here about this blast. However, it is described in *Sūrah* 41 as a thunderbolt: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*" (41: 13) The thunderbolt may only be a description of the blast making it a 'thunderbolt blast', or it may be a true description of its nature making the blast and the thunderbolt one and the same thing. Alternatively, the blast may be the sound produced by the thunderbolt, or the thunderbolt may merely

be an effect of the blast about which we know very little. Be that as it may, one blast was sent against those people, causing great havoc and leaving them like the *dry twigs* of one who needs such material to build a sheepfold, or used by a farmer as food for his cattle kept in a sheepfold. That blast reduced the people of Thamūd to a state of *dry twigs*. It is a fearful image raised against their earlier arrogance. All that remains of them is utter humiliation.

Now the *sūrah* draws its addressees' attention to the Qur'ān so that they may reflect. The Qur'ān provides an easy reminder: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 32) The curtains are drawn, leaving a glimpse of dry twigs that irritate one's eyes and shudder one's mind, while the Qur'ān steadfastly calls upon people to reflect and take heed.

Lot's People

When the curtains are raised again, we have another episode taking place close to Arabia:

> *Lot's people also rejected [My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful. He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?* (Verses 33–40)

The story of Lot's people is given in detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Its mention here is not intended to provide details, but rather to draw a lesson from what happens when people deny the truth and to remind them of the severe punishment that they may suffer. Hence, it starts with reporting their rejection of God's warning, followed by mentioning the punishment they suffered in consequence: "*Lot's people also rejected*

[My] warnings. We sent a stone-bearing wind against them, and only Lot's family did We save at the break of dawn, as an act of grace from Us: thus do We reward the thankful." (Verses 33–35) Elsewhere in the Qur'ān their punishment is described in the form of "*stones of clay,*" (51: 33) Here, the description adds that it was a wind that bears the sound of hurling stones. This description fits well with the fierce atmosphere that characterizes the whole *sūrah*. Only Lot's family, except his wife, were saved in an act of God's grace and as a reward for their faith in and gratitude to Him: "*Thus do We reward the thankful.*" They are to be blessed even in the midst of a great calamity.

The story is thus told from both ends: the unbelievers' initial rejection of the truth and their ultimate punishment. Then the *sūrah* provides us with some further details. Again, this is one of the methods the Qur'ān uses in its narratives to emphasize certain ideas.

The details given here are: "*He warned them of Our punishment, but they were in doubt about his warnings. They even asked him to hand his guests over to them, so We sealed their eyes. 'Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.' At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verses 36–38) Lot took much pain in warning his people against the perverted indecency they used to practise, but they doubted all his warnings, circulating their doubts among themselves. They argued with him, disputing what he said. Their reckless audacity went beyond limits, to the extent that they even tried to persuade him to hand over his angel guests. They thought them to be handsome young men, and their dirty and perverted lust was uncontrollable. They shamelessly wanted to assault his guests. They cared little for the sanctity of their prophet's home, despite his repeated warnings against their perverted practices.

At this point, God's mighty hand took action. The angels began to do what they were assigned to do: "*So We sealed their eyes.*" The unbelievers could no longer see anything or anyone. They could not persuade Lot or catch his guests. The reference to sealing their eyes occurs so clearly only in this instance. In another *sūrah* the angels say to Lot: "*We are messengers from your Lord. They shall not touch you.*" (11: 81) Here, what made the unbelievers unable to do what they wanted is specified as sealing their eyes.

As the *sūrah* tells its narrative, it suddenly shows the event as if it is happening now. The address is made to those who deserve punishment: "*Taste, then, My punishment and the fulfilment of [My] warnings.*" You have been warned against incurring this punishment, but you disputed those very warnings.

The sealing of their eyes took place in the evening, but it was in the morning that God determined to inflict punishment on them all: "*At daybreak abiding suffering befell them.*" (Verse 38) This refers to the punishment already mentioned, which was the stone-bearing wind that purged the earth of their perversions.

Once more the mode of address changes so that we see the event as if it is taking place now. The punished are addressed as they suffer: "*Taste, then, My punishment and [the fulfilment of] My warnings.*" (Verse 39) This is followed by the familiar comment mentioned after the scene of turmoil: "*We have made the Qur'ān easy to bear in mind: will anyone take heed?*" (Verse 40)

These historical accounts are concluded with a brief reference to the fate of a famous community of unbelievers, outside Arabia: "*Pharaoh's people also received warnings. They rejected all Our signs; so We took them to task as only the Almighty, who is able to carry out His will, can take to task.*" (Verses 41–42) Thus the whole story of Pharaoh and his entourage is summed up by mentioning its beginning and end: their receiving warnings, their rejection of all the signs and miracles that the messenger sent to them showed them, and their subsequent punishment by the Almighty. The reference here to God's might and ability to carry out His will indicate that their end was violent and calamitous. It implies an allusion to the hollowness of Pharaoh's power and his ability to inflict injustice. All his might is shown to be worthless. He could avail himself of nothing. God inflicted such a punishment on him and his host that can only be carried out by the Almighty. This is most fitting because of the injustice and tyranny they practised for so long.

A New and Powerful Warning

Now that the curtains have fallen after all these scenes of punishment and suffering, the *sūrah* addresses those who rejected the final message.

They have been reminded of the fates of those earlier peoples, and those images are still present in their minds. Now, they are given their own warning so that they avoid a similar fate. Indeed, they are warned against an even more terrible fate:

> *Are your unbelievers better than those others? Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books? Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'? Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee. But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter. The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.' We have created everything in due measure. Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye. We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.* (Verses 43–53)

It is a warning of punishment in this life and further suffering in the life to come. It removes any doubt about the veracity of this warning, sealing any loophole of hope to escape it, and any possibility of false accounting to evade it.

All those communities met their respective fates: what prevents a similar fate happening to you? "*Are your unbelievers better than those others?*" (Verse 43) What distinguishes you from earlier unbelievers? "*Or have you been given an immunity in the sacred books?*" (Verse 43) Such immunity recorded in sacred books might have had some effect. However, neither situation applies: you are no better than them and you have no immunity. Therefore, the only fate awaiting you is one similar to theirs, in the form God determines.

The *sūrah* then makes a general address, wondering at their attitude, particularly when they inspect their forces and feel themselves very powerful. They claim that they cannot be defeated: "*Or do they say, 'We are a great host and we will be victorious'?*" (Verse 44) At this point, a clear and decisive statement is loudly echoed: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" (Verse 45) Neither large forces

nor powerful hosts will be of any avail. The One who announces this to them is none other than God Almighty. It came true at the time and it will always be true.

Al-Bukhārī reports on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās that on the day of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet was standing under a canopy and praying: "Lord! I appeal to You to fulfil Your promise. Lord! If You so wish, You may not be worshipped on earth again." Abū Bakr held his hand and said: "Messenger of God! This is enough. You have appealed hard to your Lord." He came out rushing, and saying: "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee.*" In another report attributed to 'Ikrimah: "When this verse was revealed, 'Umar said: 'What host will be defeated and routed?' He later said: 'When on the day of the Battle of Badr I saw God's Messenger coming out and reading, "*Their hosts will be routed, and they will turn tail and flee,*" I knew its fulfilment."

Such was the defeat in this present life, but it is neither the final nor the most crushing and bitter one. Therefore, the *sūrah* leaves it aside to speak about the one that is to follow: "*But the Last Hour is their appointed time, and the Last Hour is most calamitous and most bitter.*" (Verse 46) It is far more bitter and terrible than any suffering they could ever experience in this life on earth. It is more calamitous than any scene of punishment drawn for their understanding: worse than the floods, the howling, cold wind, the blast, the stone-bearing wind and Pharaoh and his host's drowning.

Details are given to indicate how it is more calamitous and bitter. In this way, a powerful image of the Day of Judgement is drawn: "*The evildoers are indeed in error, and in raging flames of fire. On the day when they are dragged into the fire, their faces down, [they will be told], 'Taste now the touch of hell-fire.'*" (Verses 47–48) They are in an error that torments minds and souls, and in a raging fire that burns skin and bodies. This is because they and their like used to say in this world: "*Are we to follow one single mortal from among ourselves? In that case, we would surely be in error, lost in utter folly.*" (Verse 24) They will come to realize where error lies and what folly leads to. They will be dragged on their faces into the raging fire. Such humiliation contrasts with the pride they used to take in their might. Their suffering is increased even further by mental

pain, and all this is painted as though it were taking place now: "*Taste now the touch of hell-fire.*" (Verse 48)

Most Accurate Measure

The *sūrah* now makes a clear statement addressed to all mankind, but specifically to those Arabs, to drive home to them the fact that everything is subject to God's will, wisdom and planning. The punishment administered in this life and the one inflicted in the life to come, the messages and warnings given before them, the revelations given to God's messengers, and everything surrounding all this in terms of creation, events and planning are all subject to God's plan and will. All these and everything large or small are created in accordance with an accurate measure and are wisely planned. Nothing occurs haphazardly or by coincidence: "*We have created everything in due measure.*" (Verse 49) This applies to all creatures, silent or endowed with speech, moving or motionless, past and present, known or unknown: their creation is subject to an accurate measure. It is this measure that determines the nature, qualities, quantities, time and place of everything, as well as their links with others around them and the effect they produce.

This short Qur'ānic statement refers to a major and momentous truth that is confirmed by the universe. It is acknowledged by the mind as it looks at the world around it and responds to it. The human mind is bound to feel that the universe is finely coordinated. Everything in it is according to a measure that achieves absolute balance and coordination.

Observation, research and experience will understand this truth in as far as these methods can achieve and the human mind can fathom. Yet there remains beyond it what is greater and more perfect. Human nature appreciates the harmonious influence the universe leaves on it, since it is indeed part of this same coordinated and harmonious universe, in which everything is created in due measure.

Modern science has managed to reach some aspects of this truth, using what is available of tools and practises. It knows now the relative distances between planets and stars, their sizes and gravity to the extent that scientists are able to determine the positions of some planets before

they can actually see them. They make their assumptions on the basis that overall coordination requires that such planets be in the positions they have defined. Only the existence of such planets in their positions explains certain aspects of the movement of the planets they have monitored. Later on, their assumptions are proved true, which means that all celestial bodies are placed in space according to accurate relations that admit no error.

Scientists now realize that balance and coordination in the position of our planet earth are absolutely necessary to ensure the continuity of the type of life God has willed to place on it. They say that should this balance be disturbed in any aspect, all life on earth will be destroyed or would not have been possible in the first place. The size of the earth, its mass, distance from the sun, the mass of the sun, its temperature, the angle of its axis, its speed as it rotates and moves in orbit, the position of the moon in relation to the earth, its size and mass, the relation between sea and dry land on earth, and scores of other aspects and relations are all made according to an accurate measure. Should any of these be disturbed, everything would change resulting in the end of life on earth.

Our understanding of the balance and coordination between a large number of factors that are necessary to keep life on earth under control and establish the proper interrelations between living creatures and the conditions in which they live, and between different species of creatures, is such that we can now appreciate the profound truth the Qur'ānic verse refers to. The factors of life and survival on the one hand and those of death and extinction on the other in the environment and the nature of living creatures are always kept in such a fine balance as to ensure the continuity of life and its progress without allowing it to increase to the extent that there would not come a time when there is not enough of what is necessary for sustenance and survival.

We spoke at length on the harmony and balance in the universe and on earth in an earlier volume,[1] and it is fitting that we discuss here the balance in the interrelation between different species:

1. Volume XII, pp. 370–382.

Birds of prey are small in numbers because they lay few eggs. They also live in a special environment. On the other hand, they live longer than other birds. Had they been able to procreate at a higher rate and to live as long as they do in all environments, they would have ensured the extinction of smaller and more numerous birds or greatly reduced their numbers. These smaller birds are needed in such large numbers because they are part of the food chain and they fulfil an important role in the continuity of life on earth.

A fly lays millions of eggs, but its life span is two weeks. Had flies lived for a few years laying eggs at the same rate, the face of the earth would have been entirely covered with flies. Human life, as well as the life of many other species, would have become impossible. However, the balance established by the Almighty determines the relation between life span and the rate of procreation to ensure the continuity of life.

Among all living things, microbes are the largest in number and fastest in multiplication and devastation; but at the same time they have the weakest resistance and the shortest life span. They die in their millions as a result of many factors, such as cold, heat, light, acids, plasma, etc. They overpower only a limited number of animals and humans. Had they had stronger resistance or a longer life span, they would have destroyed life altogether.

Every living species is equipped with a weapon to protect itself against its natural enemies and to ensure its own survival. Such weapons vary from moving in numbers to ferocity of attack. In between there is a great variety of weapons and methods of self defence. Small snakes have their poison and move at speed to evade their enemies, while large ones rely on the strength of their muscles. Hence, the poisonous ones are fewer among large snakes. Beetles, which have little in the way of self defence, can discharge on whatever touches them a foul-smelling caustic substance to protect themselves. Deers can jump and run at a fast speed, while lions are extremely powerful. Such are all living creatures, large and small.

Likewise, man, animals, birds and all other creatures, including the lowest species, are equipped with the means to obtain their

food and to benefit by what they feed upon. The fertilized egg which clings to the uterus needs nourishment. It causes a tear in the wall of the uterus, making a pool of blood which it can feed upon, and thus it grows. An embryo feeds through the umbilical cord that links it to its mother. Had the cord been too long, the food would have become fermented before it reached the embryo, and had it been too short, the food would have gushed through it, and harmed the embryo.[2]

When birth takes place a white, slightly yellowish liquid is produced from the mother's breasts. One of the wonders of God's creation is that this liquid consists of dissolved chemicals to protect the newborn from illness. One day after the child's birth milk begins to flow. God's elaborate planning ensures that the quantity of the mother's milk is increased day after day, amounting to one and a half litres a day by the time the child is one year old, while it weighs only a few ounces in the early days. It is not merely the quantity of the milk that increases to satisfy the child's needs, but also its ingredients change in kind and concentration. In the early days it is more like water containing a small amount of carbohydrates, but as time goes on the concentration of sugar, carbohydrates and proteins increases day after day, to ensure the child's healthy growth.[3]

When we study the different systems in man's body, their functions, physiology and role in ensuring man's health and survival, we are amazed at the elaborate planning. We see God's hand taking care of every individual, and indeed every organ and cell. We cannot discuss here this world of wonders. Therefore, we will only refer to the fine tuning of endocrine glands:

> These are small chemical factories providing the body with the chemicals it needs. They are so powerful that a fraction of one billionth of them will seriously affect the body. They function in such an order that the secretion of each gland complements the secretion of another. All that we know about these secretions is that

2. Nawfal, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo (n.d.), pp. 46–47.
3. Ibid., pp. 47–48.

> they are surprisingly complex. Should their secretion be disturbed, this will cause general harm in the body, which could be very serious if it continues even for a short while.[4]

Animals have different systems according to their different natures, as well as the environments and circumstances in which they live.

> Lions, tigers, wolves, hyenas, and other predators that need to hunt and kill their prey, have sharp teeth and firm molars. They also have strong leg muscles, as well as sharp claws. Their stomachs secrete the necessary acids and enzymes to digest raw meat and bones.[5]

Ruminant animals that graze in meadows have been equipped with different tools:

> Their digestive systems have been designed in a way that suits their environments. Their mouths are relatively wide, without canine teeth or molars. Instead they have sharp front teeth that help them to eat grass and plants quickly, swallowing them in gulps so as to be able to provide their natural service for man. Divine care has given these animals a most peculiar digestive system. The food they eat goes first to the rumen, which serves as a storage place. When the animal has finished its day's work and sits for rest, the food it has eaten goes to another part called the reticulum, and then it is sent back to the mouth where it will now be chewed well before it is sent to a third compartment of the stomach called the omasum. The final stage is a fourth compartment called the abomasum. This very long process also serves to protect these animals which are often attacked in their grazing places by predators. Therefore, they often need to swallow their food fast and hide. Scientists say that this process of digestion is necessary, indeed vital. Grass is hard to digest because of the cellulose it contains, which means that the animal needs a long time for digesting its food. Had it not had a rumen to store the food, these animals would have had to spend

4. Ibid., pp. 51–52.
5. Ibid., pp. 71–72.

a long time, may be a whole day, in grazing without even giving them enough nourishment. The very process of cutting the grass and eating it would have been tiring to the animal. As it is, taking the food in gulps and storing it in the rumen where it is softened and fermented somewhat, then bringing it back to the mouth for further chewing, enables these animals to fulfil all functions: doing their work, eating and proper digestion. All glory belongs to God who created everything in an elaborate design.[6]

Birds of prey such as the owl and the kite are given sharp, curved, hook-like beaks to be able to tear flesh. Geese and ducks are, by contrast, given wide, flat and spoon-like beaks suitable for catching food in mud and water. They even have on both sides of their beaks little lumps which serve as teeth to cut grass. Domestic fowls and pigeons which pick up seeds from the ground have short and pointed beaks. The swan has a conspicuously long beak at the bottom of which there is a sack that serves like a fisherman's net because swans feed mainly on fish. The hoopoe has a long and pointed beak that serves to look for insects and worms that are often below the surface of the ground. Scientists often say that a glance at a bird's beak is enough to tell us what it feeds on. The rest of the digestive system of birds is wonderfully peculiar. Since birds do not have teeth, they are given a crop and a gizzard for digestion. Birds also pick some hard objects and stones to help the gizzard in its digestive function.[7]

If we were to look at all the different species in the same way, it would take far too long in this exercise and would deviate from the method we have followed in this work. Therefore, we will now just look at the amoeba, the single-celled creature, to see how God has set its role in life and how He takes care of it.

The amoeba is a microscopic organism that lives in ponds or stagnant water, or on stones settled at the bottom of such waters. Its body is jellylike, changing shape as needed. When it moves, it

6. Ibid., pp. 72–73.
7. Ibid., pp. 73–74.

> pushes forwards parts of its body to use like feet. When it finds food, it picks it up with similar protrusions. It secretes a digestive fluid so as to digest what is useful to it and ejects the remainder. It breathes with all its body, taking oxygen from water. Imagine this little creature which can never be seen with the naked eye performing all life functions, including taking nourishment, breathing, discharging unwanted stuff and moving around. When it has completed its growth, it divides into two, with each forming a separate amoeba...

The wonders of the plant world are no less amazing than those of human, animal and bird life. Elaborate planning is equally observed in plants: "*It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions.*"[8] (25: 2)

A Far Greater Perspective

Yet the question of elaborate planning is far greater than this. Indeed everything that takes place in the universe: all events in all directions, large and small, take place according to a plan and in a set measure. This applies to every occurrence in history, every feeling experienced by every individual, every breath, etc. Each breath takes place in due measure with regard to time, place and other factors and circumstances. It is related to the universal system and taken into account in the overall universal balance, just like major events. A wild, little plant that sends out its shoot in the open desert is placed there according to an accurate measure. It fulfils a function that is related to the existence of the universe. The same applies to a single ant moving to its destination, a particle in the air, an organism floating on water, just as it applies to the huge celestial bodies in this vast universe. All are there in due measure with regard to time, place, quantity, shape and form, maintaining due balance in all situations.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Jacob's marriage to a second wife who gave him his two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, was not

8. Ibid., pp. 101–102.

a personal affair, but rather an intended event serving an overall plan? It was planned that Joseph's half brothers should feel very jealous of him, take him and throw him in the well, after they had thought of killing him, so that a travelling caravan would pick him up and sell him in Egypt where he would find a home in the palace of the Chief Minister. There, he would then be subjected to the Minister's wife's advances, but he resisted all temptation and as a result was thrown into prison. Why? There he would meet two of Pharaoh's servants and interpret their dreams. Why? Until that moment, there is absolutely no answer. People wonder why Joseph should go through all this suffering? Why should his father, who is a prophet, suffer until he loses his eyesight? The first answer comes after a quarter of a century of suffering. Divine will has been preparing him to supervise the affairs of Egypt, its people and the populations of the surrounding areas during seven years of drought. And then what? He brings his parents and brothers to Egypt where their offspring constitute the Children of Israel who were later persecuted by Pharaoh. Then Moses is born and his life is also carefully planned. Beyond that, various issues, events and trends arise, having a bearing on human life throughout the world until today.

Who can say, for example, that the Prophet Abraham's marriage to Hagar, the Egyptian woman, was not a personal affair, but rather, along with the events preceding it in Abraham's life, part of a careful plan. It involved all the events leading to his forsaking his home town in Iraq, going to Egypt where he married Hagar and she gave him his first son, Ishmael. Then he took Ishmael and his mother, leaving them in the neighbourhood of the yet to be built Sacred Mosque in Makkah. Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), would then be born out of Abraham's seed in Arabia, the most suitable place on earth for the Islamic message. This series of events then culminated in the most important one in the history of mankind.

God's will remains behind the far end of every thread, every event: birth, point, step, change and ultimate result. All occur in accordance with His will which is profound, all comprehensive and inevitable. People sometimes see only the near end of the thread, but not its far end. There could be an extended, long span of time between the beginning and end in their own lives, which makes them unable to see the wisdom

behind what takes place. They will then try to hasten things, and may also offer suggestions. They may even go beyond this, demonstrating anger and impudence. God teaches them in the Qur'ān that everything occurs in due measure and appropriate proportion. Therefore, they should leave things to the One who controls all. This will give them comfort and reassurance, and they will then be sure of the balance and coordination brought about by God's will.

Operating the Divine Will

Along with the elaborate planning and the assigning of due measures goes God's power, which accomplishes the greatest of events by the simplest means: "*Our command is but once, like the twinkling of an eye.*" (Verse 50) It takes just a signal or one word and everything, great or tiny, is done. In fact there is nothing to distinguish great from tiny; it is all part of how human beings see things. Nor is there a question of time, not even the twinkling of an eye; it is merely a metaphor to help people understand. Time is no more than a human conception that arises from the position of the earth and its rotation. As far as God and His plans are concerned, it has no significance.

The command is given just once and this entire universe comes into existence. Similarly, any change in it can be accomplished. Just one command and it will all go away as God wishes. In everything, the command is given once only: bringing anyone into life, taking it here or there, causing it to die, bringing it back in some shape or form, resurrecting all creatures from all generations to gather them for the reckoning and reward. It is a once only command that requires no effort or time, because it comes from the Almighty in due measure and with perfect ease.

It was always a once-only command to bring about the terrible fate of communities that rejected the truth of God's message. The *sūrah* reminds its addressees of the fates suffered by communities who, like them, rejected the truth: "*We destroyed people like you in the past. Will anyone take heed? Everything they do is noted in their records. Every single thing, small or great, is recorded.*" (Verses 51–53) Those fates are mentioned in the *sūrah*, but people need to take heed and think of the likely outcome

of the position they take towards God's message. Yet the story is not over for those communities that suffered such calamities; they have to face further reckoning that takes account of every little thing: "*Everything they do is noted in their records,*" which will be submitted on the Day of Reckoning. "*Every single thing, small or great, is recorded,*" so that nothing is forgotten.

Now the *sūrah* shows a different image of trust and safety. It is the destiny enjoyed by the righteous: "*The God-fearing will be in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" (Verses 54–55) They enjoy all this while the evildoers are in error, in raging flames where they are dragged with their faces down and rebuked.

This image describes the bliss which the God-fearing enjoy in its two components, the physical and the spiritual. The physical aspect, granted for the senses, is summed up in an all-embracing phrase, '*in gardens and running waters*'. The very sound of these words adds connotations of ease, comfort and enjoyment. The spiritual component touches the heart and mind; it is the bliss of being close to God: "*in a seat of truth, in the presence of an all-powerful Sovereign.*" It is a steady, firm seat, giving pleasure and reassurance because it is close to where all eyes are focused. This is all because these righteous people fear God and are apprehensive of what may become of them. God will not allow double fear to overwhelm anyone: fearing Him in this present life and fear in the life to come. Whoever truly fears Him in this world will be safe and reassured in the next. As good believers enjoy security at the time and place of greatest fear, they are granted a pleasant environment and honour.

With this soft rhythm and pleasant outcome, the *sūrah* that portrayed a series of distressing and fearful images comes to an end. This gives its conclusion a more profound effect. It is a perfect way of educating by the One who knows how to influence hearts and souls. This is yet another aspect of operating the accurate measure by the One who has created everything in due measure. All glory to the One who knows all.

SŪRAH 55

Al-Raḥmān

(The Lord of Grace)

Prologue

The composition of this Makkan *sūrah* has a special and prominent pattern. Essentially, it provides a general announcement, made in the open space of the universe, highlighting the blessings God bestows from on high. These are easily discernible in the beauty of everything He has created, in the great favours He grants to all, in the way He controls all existence, and in the fact that all creatures look up to see His face, etc. It is an invitation to all the universe to be witnesses against the two worlds of *jinn* and humans. Both are addressed in this *sūrah* on an equal basis, in the presence of all creatures in this vast universe. Both are challenged to deny, if they can, any of God's blessings. The challenge is repeated after every single blessing mentioned, each with their detailed aspects. The great universe, then, is the stage where all these blessings are exhibited.

The distinctive ring of the announcement is apparent in the *sūrah*'s structure as also in the endings of its verses, with a final rising note in each, coupled with a long vowel pointing far. It is also apparent in the opening of the *sūrah*, which gives an air of expectation of what will follow. It begins with a single word, *al-Raḥmān*, as a subject without a predicate. This word, which is a name and an attribute of God that we

translate as *the Lord of Grace,* stresses mercy and adds emphasis to the announcement. Beyond that, the *sūrah* is a great exhibition of God's grace and blessings.

The first blessing put forward in this great exhibition is the teaching of the Qur'ān, the greatest favour God has bestowed on man. This is mentioned ahead of man's own creation as also his faculty of speech, his most important and distinctive quality. The *sūrah* then opens up pages of the universe that show God's blessings: the sun, the moon, the stars, the trees, the skies, the balance, the earth and what it contains of fruit, dates, grains and aromatic plants, the *jinn*, mankind, the two risings and the two settings, the two great bodies of water and the barrier between them, what is taken out from them and what goes through them. When these great pages have been shown in full, the *sūrah* then adds an image showing them all as perished, where no creature is left alive yet God's face remains full of majesty. To Him all creatures turn awaiting His decision regarding them.

Against the background of these two extremes of absolute extinction and absolute presence, a fearsome warning is issued to both man and *jinn*: "*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind]. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without [God's] authority. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 31–36)

This is followed by a scene of the end, i.e. the Day of Judgement, against a backdrop of the universe in which we see the sky flowing with the colour of a red rose, and the suffering endured by evildoers. A long and detailed scene of the reward given to the God-fearing then follows. This great exhibition of God's blessings aptly concludes with a verse that says: "*Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace.*" (Verse 78)

Al-Raḥmān
(The Lord of Grace)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

[It is] the Lord of Grace (1)

الرَّحْمَٰنُ ﴿١﴾

who has taught the Qur'ān. (2)

عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ ﴿٢﴾

He created man (3)

خَلَقَ الْإِنسَانَ ﴿٣﴾

and taught him to articulate thought and speech. (4)

عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ ﴿٤﴾

The sun and the moon function in due measure. (5)

الشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ بِحُسْبَانٍ ﴿٥﴾

The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him]. (6)

وَالنَّجْمُ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ ﴿٦﴾

He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, (7)

وَالسَّمَاءَ رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ الْمِيزَانَ ﴿٧﴾

so that you may not exceed the balance. (8)

أَلَّا تَطْغَوْا فِي الْمِيزَانِ ﴿٨﴾

Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance. (9)

وَأَقِيمُوا الْوَزْنَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا تُخْسِرُوا الْمِيزَانَ ﴿٩﴾

He has laid the earth for His creatures, (10)

وَالْأَرْضَ وَضَعَهَا لِلْأَنَامِ ﴿١٠﴾

فِيهَا فَٰكِهَةٌ وَٱلنَّخْلُ ذَاتُ ٱلْأَكْمَامِ ﴿١١﴾

with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, (11)

وَٱلْحَبُّ ذُو ٱلْعَصْفِ وَٱلرَّيْحَانُ ﴿١٢﴾

its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants. (12)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (13)

خَلَقَ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ مِن صَلْصَٰلٍ كَٱلْفَخَّارِ ﴿١٤﴾

He created man from dried clay, like pottery, (14)

وَخَلَقَ ٱلْجَآنَّ مِن مَّارِجٍ مِّن نَّارٍ ﴿١٥﴾

and created the *jinn* from raging flames of fire. (15)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (16)

رَبُّ ٱلْمَشْرِقَيْنِ وَرَبُّ ٱلْمَغْرِبَيْنِ ﴿١٧﴾

He is the Lord of the two risings and the Lord of the two settings. (17)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (18)

مَرَجَ ٱلْبَحْرَيْنِ يَلْتَقِيَانِ ﴿١٩﴾

He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they may meet; (19)

بَيْنَهُمَا بَرْزَخٌ لَّا يَبْغِيَانِ ﴿٢٠﴾

yet between them is a barrier which they do not cross. (20)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (21)

يَخْرُجُ مِنْهُمَا اللُّؤْلُؤُ وَالْمَرْجَانُ ﴿٢٢﴾

Pearls and corals come from both. (22)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (23)

وَلَهُ الْجَوَارِ الْمُنشَـَٔاتُ فِي الْبَحْرِ كَالْأَعْلَامِ ﴿٢٤﴾

His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. (24)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (25)

كُلُّ مَنْ عَلَيْهَا فَانٍ ﴿٢٦﴾

All that lives on it perishes; (26)

وَيَبْقَىٰ وَجْهُ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٢٧﴾

but forever will remain the face of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. (27)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٢٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (28)

يَسْـَٔلُهُ مَن فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ كُلَّ يَوْمٍ هُوَ فِي شَأْنٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

Everyone in heaven and earth entreats Him. Every day He manifests Himself in some wonderful way. (29)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (30)

سَنَفْرُغُ لَكُمْ أَيُّهَ الثَّقَلَانِ ﴿٣١﴾

We shall attend to you two huge communities [of *jinn* and mankind]. (31)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (32)

يَٰمَعْشَرَ ٱلْجِنِّ وَٱلْإِنسِ إِنِ ٱسْتَطَعْتُمْ أَن تَنفُذُوا۟ مِنْ أَقْطَارِ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ فَٱنفُذُوا۟ ۚ لَا تَنفُذُونَ إِلَّا بِسُلْطَٰنٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

Jinn and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without authority. (33)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (34)

يُرْسَلُ عَلَيْكُمَا شُوَاظٌ مِّن نَّارٍ وَنُحَاسٌ فَلَا تَنتَصِرَانِ ﴿٣٥﴾

A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. (35)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (36)

فَإِذَا ٱنشَقَّتِ ٱلسَّمَآءُ فَكَانَتْ وَرْدَةً كَٱلدِّهَانِ ﴿٣٧﴾

When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil. (37)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٣٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (38)

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَّا يُسْـَٔلُ عَن ذَنۢبِهِۦٓ إِنسٌ وَلَا جَآنٌّ ﴿٣٩﴾

On that day neither mankind nor *jinn* will be asked about their sins. (39)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (40)

يُعْرَفُ ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ بِسِيمَٰهُمْ فَيُؤْخَذُ بِٱلنَّوَٰصِى وَٱلْأَقْدَامِ ﴿٤١﴾

The guilty ones will be known by their mark and shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet. (41)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (42)

هَٰذِهِۦ جَهَنَّمُ ٱلَّتِى يُكَذِّبُ بِهَا ٱلْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

This is the hell which the guilty deny. (43)

يَطُوفُونَ بَيْنَهَا وَبَيْنَ حَمِيمٍ ءَانٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

They will go round between its flames and scalding water. (44)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (45)

وَلِمَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِۦ جَنَّتَانِ ﴿٤٦﴾

For those who stand in fear of their Lord's presence there shall be two gardens. (46)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (47)

ذَوَاتَآ أَفْنَانٍ ﴿٤٨﴾

With shading branches. (48)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٤٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (49)

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ تَجْرِيَانِ ﴿٥٠﴾

With a pair of flowing springs. (50)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (51)

فِيهِمَا مِن كُلِّ فَٰكِهَةٍ زَوْجَانِ ﴿٥٢﴾

With every kind of fruit in pairs. (52)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (53)

مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ فُرُشٍۭ بَطَآئِنُهَا مِنْ إِسْتَبْرَقٍ ۚ وَجَنَى ٱلْجَنَّتَيْنِ دَانٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

They will recline on carpets lined with rich brocade; and the fruit of both these gardens will be within easy reach. (54)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (55)

فِيهِنَّ قَٰصِرَٰتُ ٱلطَّرْفِ لَمْ يَطْمِثْهُنَّ إِنسٌ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جَآنٌّ ﴿٥٦﴾

In both [gardens] will be mates of modest gaze, whom neither man nor *jinn* will have touched before. (56)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٧﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (57)

كَأَنَّهُنَّ ٱلْيَاقُوتُ وَٱلْمَرْجَانُ ﴿٥٨﴾

[These mates look] like rubies and corals. (58)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٥٩﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (59)

هَلْ جَزَآءُ ٱلْإِحْسَٰنِ إِلَّا ٱلْإِحْسَٰنُ ﴿٦٠﴾

Shall the reward of good be anything but good? (60)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦١﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (61)

وَمِن دُونِهِمَا جَنَّتَانِ ﴿٦٢﴾

Besides these two there are two other gardens. (62)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٣﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (63)

مُدْهَامَّتَانِ ﴿٦٤﴾

Both of the deepest green. (64)

فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٥﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (65)

With two gushing springs. (66)

فِيهِمَا عَيْنَانِ نَضَّاخَتَانِ ﴿٦٦﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (67)

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٧﴾

With fruits, date-palms and pomegranate trees. (68)

فِيهِمَا فَاكِهَةٌ وَنَخْلٌ وَرُمَّانٌ ﴿٦٨﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (69)

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٦٩﴾

There will be in [these gardens] all things most excellent and beautiful. (70)

فِيهِنَّ خَيْرَاتٌ حِسَانٌ ﴿٧٠﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (71)

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧١﴾

[They will have] dark-eyed and modest companions, sheltered in pavilions. (72)

حُورٌ مَقْصُورَاتٌ فِي الْخِيَامِ ﴿٧٢﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (73)

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٣﴾

Neither man nor *jinn* will have touched them before. (74)

لَمْ يَطْمِثْهُنَّ إِنْسٌ قَبْلَهُمْ وَلَا جَانٌّ ﴿٧٤﴾

Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (75)

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٥﴾

They will recline on green cushions and fine carpets. (76)	مُتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَىٰ رَفْرَفٍ خُضْرٍ وَعَبْقَرِيٍّ حِسَانٍ ﴿٧٦﴾
Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (77)	فَبِأَيِّ ءَالَآءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿٧٧﴾
Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. (78)	تَبَارَكَ ٱسْمُ رَبِّكَ ذِى ٱلْجَلَـٰلِ وَٱلْإِكْرَامِ ﴿٧٨﴾

Man's Creation and Education

In total, the *sūrah* is a general announcement issued from on high and echoed throughout the universe. Furthermore, it is understood by all who dwell in the universe.

It begins with a verse consisting of one word, *al-Raḥmān*, which we translate as '*the Lord of Grace*'. This opening is intended in meaning, pronunciation and cadence. *Al-Raḥmān:* the word has a ring which is echoed everywhere far and loud. *Al-Raḥmān:* its rising intonation resonates throughout the universe, speaking to every creature. It fills the skies and the earth, and reaches every ear and every heart.

Al-Raḥmān. Just the one word, and the verse is finished. The whole universe hearkens, awaiting the great news that follows this great opening. It comes immediately:

> *[It is] the Lord of Grace who has taught the Qur'ān. He created man and taught him to articulate thought and speech. The sun and the moon function in due measure. The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him]. He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance. He has laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 1–13)

This is the first section detailing some of the blessings bestowed by the Lord of Grace. It gives the first news after the announcement He "*has taught the Qur'ān.*" This is indeed the highest possible favour that most splendidly reflects God's grace as it is bestowed on man. The Qur'ān is the complete and accurate translation of the laws of the universe and the code of living chosen by heaven for people on earth. It establishes a clear relation between such laws and code, building faith, concepts, values, standards, systems and affairs on the same solid foundation of the universe. It thus gives man comfort, reassurance, understanding and a mutual response with the universe.

The Qur'ān opens up man's senses and feelings to this beautiful universe, just as if it were being seen for the first time. It thus renews people's feelings about their own existence and the existence of the universe around them. It also goes even further than this, giving everything around them life such that it interrelates with humans. Thus wherever man travels or stays, throughout his journey on earth, he finds himself among caring and loving friends.

The Qur'ān instils in people's minds that they are placed in charge of the earth, honoured by God, given the great trust that the heavens, the earth and the mountains were reluctant to undertake. It thus enables them to feel their own value, derived from the fulfilment of their higher human quality that can only be acquired through faith. It is faith that awakens the breath of God's spirit in people's souls and brings alive the highest favour God bestows on man.

The Faculty of Speech

Therefore, the *sūrah* mentions teaching the Qur'ān ahead of man's creation: "*He created man and taught him to articulate thought and speech.*" (Verses 3–4) We will leave aside for now the point of man's creation, as the *sūrah* will presently mention this again. What is specifically intended here is man's teaching so that he is able to express what is in his mind.

We see man speaking and articulating his thoughts, explaining his ideas, and responding to others, but we do not give much thought to this great favour God has granted. It is indeed a great miracle to which

the Qur'ān often alerts us. What is man? How does he begin? And how does he learn to articulate himself?

It is one cell that begins its life journey in the uterus, infinitely small, hardly visible under the microscope, and cannot reveal anything by itself. Yet soon enough this single cell becomes an embryo made up of millions of cells of a great variety: some are bone, some cartilage, flesh, nerve, skin, etc. They make up the different organs with their fascinating functions, such as hearing, sight, taste, smell, touch, and even the most important and greatest of these priceless favours: mental perception, verbal articulation, sensing and inspiration. All this from that microscopic cell: how? With what power? It is all from the Lord of Grace, and by His making.

Let us consider how such articulation occurs, remembering the facts mentioned in the following Qur'ānic verse: "*God has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs devoid of all knowledge, but He has given you hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you may be grateful.*" (16: 78)

The system of speech is an infinitely amazing wonder: the lips, tongue, jaws, teeth, larynx, trachea, bronchi and lungs, all participate in the vocalization process and form a ring in the chain of speech articulation. Greatly amazing as this is, it represents only the mechanical aspect of this highly complex process, which is also related to the brain, hearing and nerves. More significant is the fact that it relates to the mind, which we only know by name. We know nothing about its nature or formation, or even about how it functions.

How does a speaker articulate one word? It is a highly complex process, with numerous steps and stages, involving several organs and systems. In some stages it remains unknown to us. It begins with a feeling of a need to utter this word for a specific purpose. This feeling is transmitted in some unknown way from the faculty of perception, or the mind, or the soul to the action centre, i.e. the brain, which in turn issues a command through the nervous system to utter this word. The word itself is part of what God has taught man, as He gave him its meaning. When the command is made, the lungs expel a measure of air that passes from the bronchi, to the trachea, to the larynx where it goes through the vocal cords. These are incomparably superior to the strings of any man-made musical instrument, and indeed to all musical instruments

with their greatly varied sounds. At the larynx, the air movement makes the sound desired by the brain: high or low, fast or slow, coarse or soft, gentle or sharp, etc. This sound now passes through the mouth where certain pressures are applied at different points. The tongue is so agile at this point that it ensures the production of different sounds through pressures at different points of articulation. All this is needed to utter one word, let alone an expression, a sentence, an idea, past and present feelings, etc. Each one of these is an amazing world, initiated by man, the most extraordinary of creatures. It all comes by the grace of God, the Lord of Grace.

The Sun and the Moon

The *sūrah* moves on highlighting God's favours: "*The sun and the moon function in due measure.*" (Verse 5) The accuracy of each such measure and coordinated movement fills us with wonder as we try to appreciate the facts to which this statement refers. The sun is certainly not the largest celestial body. In open space, to which we can offer no definition of boundaries, there are millions upon millions of celestial bodies, many of which are larger and hotter, and produce more light than the sun. Sirius, for example, is 20 times heavier than the sun, and gives off 50 times more light. Arcturus is 80 times bigger in size than the sun and emanates 8,000 times more light. Other celestial bodies are even greater in size, weight and light. Yet for us, the inhabitants of this little planet earth that rely on the sun for light and heat, the sun is the most important of all of these.

The moon is a small satellite of the earth, but has a great influence on its life. It is indeed the most important element in the tidal movements of the sea.

The sizes of both the sun and the moon, their respective temperatures, distances from us and movement in their orbits are most accurately calculated so as to produce their desirable effects on life on earth. Furthermore, they are placed in their proper respective positions in relation to other celestial bodies.

We will now point out some of the accurate measures regarding life on earth. The sun is 92.5 million miles away from the earth. Had it been

nearer, the earth would have been burnt, or melted or evaporated. Had it been further away, all living creatures on earth would have been frozen. The amount of heat that reaches the earth from the sun represents no more than one of two-million parts of the heat emanating from that body. It is this little fraction only that best suits our life here. Had Sirius, in its present size and heat, been placed in the position of the sun, the earth would have evaporated and been lost in space, long ago.

The same applies to the moon. Had it been larger in size, or nearer in position, the tides it effects in the seas would have drowned everything on earth.

The gravity of both the sun and the moon is also an important factor on the earth's stability, position and movement in space. Our solar system moves in space at a speed of 20,000 miles an hour, heading in one direction. Yet it never collides with any other celestial body.

In this great expanse, not a single star or planet moves even a hairbreadth out of orbit. Absolute balance of size and movement is maintained for all celestial bodies. It is just as God Almighty says: "*The sun and the moon function in due measure.*" (Verse 5)

Submissive Universe

"*The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him].*" (Verse 6) The last reference was to the accurate measure observed in the structure of the great universe. Now the reference is to what direction the universe follows. This brief statement contains a highly inspiring reference to an enlightening and fundamental truth.

There is a bond of worship and submission between this universe and its Creator and Originator, God Almighty. The stars and the trees are two examples of creatures that live in the universe. They give a clear idea of the direction the universe follows. Commentators have different views about the meaning of the word *najm*, or star, which occurs in this verse, with some saying that it refers to the stars in the sky, while others claim that it refers to plants that do not stand erect like trees. Whichever interpretation we take the point this verse stresses is the same, identifying the bond between the universe and its Creator. The universe is a living

creature with a soul that differs in degree and nature from one creature to another, but its essence remains the same.

Long ago, the human heart realized this fact about the universe and its soul. This realization is based on the sensitive quality God gave it. This fact, however, became blurred every time man tried to capture it with his mind, in the light of his own experience. Man, however, has recently been able to recognize the unity of the structure of the universe, but he remains far from understanding the nature of the universe's living soul. Scientists tend to believe that the atom is the unit of the universe, and that the atom is essentially radiation. They also believe that movement is the characteristic common to everything in the universe. It is pertinent to ask, then, what goal does the universe try to achieve?

The Qur'ān says that every apparent step of the universe, which is in essence an expression of its spirit, looks up to its Originator. This is stated in numerous verses of the Qur'ān, such as the one we are discussing: "*The stars and the trees prostrate themselves [before Him].*" (Verse 6) Two other such verses expressing the same idea are as follows: "*The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises.*" (17: 44) "*Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him.*" (24: 41) To contemplate this truth and observe the universe as it worships and glorifies its Lord gives our hearts a special type of comfort and pleasure. We feel a mutual sympathy with everything around us as all looks up to the Lord, the Creator of all. We feel that we are in a friendly universe where everything and all creatures have the same aim. This is a feeling with far reaching and profound effects.

"*He has raised the skies high, and has set the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance. Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance.*" (Verses 7–9) The reference to the skies is intended, like all other references in the Qur'ān to the two immediate aspects of the universe, to awaken minds and hearts that have become oblivious to the wonders around them, because of long familiarity. These minds and hearts should look at the universe, appreciate its wonderful beauty, harmony and coordination, and glorify the One who initiated all.

Whatever is meant by the skies, the reference to them lifts our sight to the great space above us, which appears without boundaries, and in which float trillions of huge celestial bodies, yet no collision occurs between them, either individually or in clusters. A cluster may include as many as a billion stars, as in the galaxy which includes our own solar system. Our sun has a diameter of 2.3 million kilometres, yet within our galaxy there are many smaller stars and many that are larger by thousands of times. All these stars and clusters of stars and planets move in space at frightening speeds, but in the great space above they are no more than particles floating far apart from each other.

Along with raising the sky high, God has '*set the balance*' of truth. This is well established so as to define the values of things, events and people. Thus, values are measured by the balance of truth, not according to different, ignorant desires or personal preferences. Moreover, this balance is set within human nature and in the divine message advocated by all God's messengers and defined in the Qur'ān. He has set the balance, "*so that you may not exceed the balance*," going too high or too low. "*Weigh, therefore, with justice and do not fall short in the balance*," so as to ensure justice to all in all situations.

Thus, the truth on earth and in human life relates to the universe and its structure. It relates to the sky in its abstract significance that points to the source of revelation, and in its physical significance as a manifestation of God's infinite power. The two meanings converge to add further inspiration.

"*He has laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits, its palm trees with sheathed clusters, its husked grain and its sweet-smelling plants.*" (Verses 10–12) Because we have lived on earth for so long, and we are well familiar with all that is on it, we do not feel the significance of its being '*laid*' for God's creatures, and to enable us to function so comfortably. Therefore, we do not feel the great significance of the stability of the earth and how much grace God has bestowed on us by such stability unless a volcano erupts or an earthquake occurs, filling us with fear. Only at such times do we fully appreciate God's grace in making the earth stable.

Yet people should remember this truth at every moment. They should remember that this planet where they feel so secure is no more than

to suit. Therefore, when God reminds humans and *jinn* of His favour of having created them, He is referring to a blessing that is beyond comprehension.

God – all glory belongs to Him – then states the substances used for creating humans and *jinn*. These are also created by God. Man is created from clay that has dried and gives a sound when beaten with a stick or the human hand. The verse may refer to a stage in the process of creation from dust or clay, or it may simply be a reference to the fact that man and the earth are made of the same material.

> Modern science has proven that the human body contains the same elements as the earth, including carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, nitrogen, calcium, potassium, sodium, chlorine, magnesium, iron, manganese, copper, iodine, fluorine, cobalt, zinc, silicon and aluminium. These are the same elements that form dust. Their proportions differ from one person to another. Needless to say, they differ in man from dust. Yet they are the same elements.[1]

What science has proven should not be taken as the ultimate interpretation of the Qur'ānic text. The fact to which the Qur'ān refers may mean what has been scientifically proven, or it may mean something totally different. It may refer to another of the numerous aspects that endorse the meaning of man's creation out of dust, or wet or dry clay.

We stress, most emphatically, that we must not limit the meaning of a Qur'ānic text to a scientific discovery that admits the possibility of error, or the possibility of change with human progress. Some scholars with sincere intentions try to highlight that Qur'ānic statements give identical import to scientific discoveries, proven or still under observation. They cite this as a proof of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān. What we say is that the Qur'ān is miraculous, whether its statements are confirmed by scientific discoveries or not. What the Qur'ān says is broader in scope than what science says at any one time. Scientific discoveries are always subject to amendment and change, and sometimes they are proven erroneous. We can certainly use science to broaden our understanding

1. Nawfal, 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Allah wal-'ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 180.

of Qur'ānic texts, whenever it explains some aspects of the wonders pertaining to man and the universe. We must not, however, say that a certain Qur'ānic text refers only to a particular scientific discovery. All that we can say is that the scientific discovery may be part of what the Qur'ānic text refers to.

As for the creation of the *jinn* from raging flames of fire, this is something beyond human knowledge. The only source on this is the Qur'ān, given by God who knows what He has created. The fire is described here as *mārij*, which means lit and moving like flames in a windy place. The *jinn* have been given the ability to live on this earth, together with man. However, we do not know how the *jinn* live. What is certain, though, is that they are also addressed by the Qur'ān; it is as much a message to them as it is to man. We explained this in Volume XV, when discussing the verse that says: "*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.*" (46: 29) This is also confirmed in this *sūrah*.

The address here is to both *jinn* and humans, reminding both of God's blessing in their creation out of their respective origins. This is the central blessing, which brings with it all other blessings. Therefore, it is followed by the comment that signifies putting their testimony on record: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 16) Needless to say, denial is pointless.

"*He is the Lord of the two risings and the Lord of the two settings. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 17–18) This reference fills our hearts with great feelings of God's presence, wherever we turn or move, and wherever we look on the wide horizon. Wherever something rises or sets, there is God, the Lord of all, the Sovereign who extends His light and guidance to all. The two risings and two settings may refer to the rising and setting of the sun and the moon, considering that both have already been mentioned in the *sūrah* as part of God's blessings. The verse may also be understood as a reference to the two different positions of sunrise and sunset in summer and winter respectively.

Be that as it may, the import of this reference is more worthy of attention. It points to the fact that God's hand controls stars, planets

and everything else in the universe. His Lordship is seen more clearly on the horizon. When we contemplate universal phenomena and look at the stars rising and setting, our hearts, minds and souls are filled with greater reassurance.

God's Lordship of the two risings and the two settings reflects some of His blessings. Hence, the comment familiar in this *sūrah* is repeated: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 18) The two risings and settings are not only signs pointing to God, but are also part of His blessings granted to humans and *jinn*. They bring much good to all inhabitants of the earth. We see how life begins with the sun rising. It certainly also needs the sunset. Should either one of them, or both, suffer some dysfunction, life itself would be disrupted.

Blessings in Seas and Rivers

We now turn back to the earth and its waters, which God has made in exact measure that determines quantity, type, how it runs and how it is used:

> *He has given freedom to the two great bodies of water, so that they may meet; yet between them is a barrier which they do not cross. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? Pearls and corals come from both. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 19–25)

The two bodies of water, expressed in the Arabic text as '*the two seas*', are in fact the salty bodies of water including seas and oceans and the unsalty ones or rivers. God left them free to run and to meet, but did not allow them to exceed their limits. Each will fulfil its own function. In between them there is a barrier of the same nature, which God has put in place. The quantities of water on earth are not the result of any coincidence; they are determined by exact measure. Salty waters cover three-quarters of the earth's surface and they are mostly connected, while dry land represents only about one quarter of the earth. This very large quantity of salty water is the amount needed to keep the earth's atmosphere clean and suitable for supporting life.

> In spite of all the gaseous emanations from the earth of all the ages, most of them poisonous, the atmosphere remains practically uncontaminated and unchanging in its balanced relationship necessary to man's very existence. The great balance wheel is that vast mass of water, the sea.[2]

From this great mass of water evaporation takes place because of the heat of the sun, and what evaporates comes back in the form of rain which is the source of sweet water in all its forms, the most important of which finds its way into rivers. The careful proportion of the vastness of the sea, the heat of the sun, the cold temperatures in the upper atmosphere and other climatic conditions produce rain that provides unsalty waters, which is the mainstay of life for plants, animals and man.

Almost all rivers end in the sea, transporting various salts and compounds from land to sea. Thus, rivers do not change the nature of sea water. Normally rivers run at a higher elevation than sea level. Thus, the sea does not encroach on a river's course, flooding it with salty water. Had that been the case, the nature of rivers would have altered and their function ceased. In between the two there is always this barrier which God has put in place, ensuring that these two water bodies continue to fulfil their respective natural functions. It is no wonder that all this is mentioned here as being among God's great blessings: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 21)

The *sūrah* also adds here some of the blessings God has placed in these two bodies of water, some of which can easily be seen: "*Pearls and corals come from both.*" (Verse 22) The pearl is originally formed by a mollusc animal.

> Perhaps the pearl is one of the most marvellous wonders of the sea. The mollusc goes to the bottom of the sea inside its hard shell which keeps it safe from danger. It is different from other animals in form and life pattern. It has a fine, wonderful net, similar to that of a fisherman, which allows air, water and food to enter, but

2. Morrison, A.C., *Man Does not Stand Alone*, The World's Work, Surrey, p. 28.

stops sand, stone and similarly unwanted objects. Below it are the mouths of the animal, each with four lips. Should a grain of sand or a small stone or a harmful organism get through the net, the mollusc immediately covers it with a sticky discharge which then solidifies to form a pearl. The size of the pearl differs according to the size of the foreign object that finds its way inside.[3]

Coral is among God's amazing creation. It is found in the sea at depths ranging from 5 to 300 metres. It fixes its lower edge to a rock or weeds, keeping its mouth at the top. Around its mouth it has several protrusions used to capture food. Should a little creature touch any of these protrusions, it is immediately paralysed and sticks to the protrusion, which then shrinks and bends towards the coral mouth where the paralysed prey is pushed through a small passage similar to man's oesophagus.

Coral reproduces itself by discharging reproductive cells which fertilize the eggs, and the baby coral will then stick itself to a stone or a weed, starting an independent life like its mother.

Another sign of God's wonderful creation is that corals reproduce in another way, producing extensions that remain stuck to the main body. Thus the coral tree is formed with a wide trunk and narrower branches that may become very fine. The coral tree can reach 30 centimetres in length. Coral concentrations differ in colour: some are orange, some are of red carnation colour, some emerald blue, and others pale and dusty in colour. Red coral is the solid stem that remains after the living part has died. Coral stone-like concentrations can form large colonies. One of these is a chain of coral rocks known as the Great Barrier Reef, to the north east of Australia. The reef is 1,350 miles long and 50 miles wide.[4]

Man makes precious jewellery from both pearls and corals. God mentions both as part of His blessings and the *sūrah* adds here the usual comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 23)

3. Nawfal, op. cit., p. 105.
4. Nawfal, ibid., pp. 106–107.

The *sūrah* then mentions the ships that sail through the sea, some of which are very large, looking like mountains: "*His are the lofty ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas.*" (Verse 24) The *sūrah* refers to these floating ships as belonging to God. They indeed sail by God's will. Nothing keeps them afloat in the sea, through its waves and currents except God's care. Hence, they belong to Him. They remain among the great favours with which He blesses human life. They provide a means of livelihood, transportation and comfort that people cannot deny. Hence, the comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 25)

The Eternal

Having taken us on this round in the great universe, referring to different types of creatures that will inevitably die, the *sūrah* now mentions the only One who is eternal, and to whom all glory and majesty belong. As we see death overtaking all creatures, we are conscious of the truth of God, the Eternal:

> *All that lives on it perishes; but forever will remain the face of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 26–28)

All sounds become hushed, breathing faint, and limbs stop moving. The air of death spreads over all living creatures, stopping every move throughout the heavens and earth. Only the majesty of the Eternal face overshadows all creatures, time, place and the entire universe. Human expression cannot depict the scene. It cannot add to the Qur'ānic text which gives us a feeling of humble tranquillity, complete silence and total majesty. It paints a scene of total emptiness that leaves the whole universe motionless after it had been bustling with life. Yet it instils in us an image which we cannot understand from our experience but can comprehend. The same comment is added, as the *sūrah* considers the full understanding of this fact to be one of the blessings humans and *jinn* are reminded of: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verse 28)

It is indeed a blessing; nay, it is the source of all blessings. It is this Eternal Existence that creates all and gives them their special characteristics, systems, forms and laws. It is what determines their fate and destiny. God the Eternal is the One who creates, originates, protects and looks after His creation, holds them to account and gives them their reward. It is then the truth of His being the Eternal that gives all blessings. Indeed this world and all its affairs are put in place as a result of the truth of God's eternity while all else comes to an end.

Appeals from All

The truth of God's eternity gives rise to another truth: all creatures are bound to perish and, therefore, they all address everything related to their existence to the One who is without equal, eternal and in control of everything in the universe:

> *Everyone in heaven and earth entreats Him. Every day He manifests Himself in some wonderful way. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?"* (Verses 29–30)

They all address their entreaties and appeals to Him alone because He is the only One to receive such requests. All else will perish, so they cannot be addressed with such appeals. He is the only One to answer requests, and none who appeals to Him alone will ever end in failure. Anyone who entreats or appeals to someone other than God is utterly in error. What can a creature that will inevitably perish do to another who will also perish? What can one in need give to another also in need?

All glory to Him, He manifests Himself every day in a different way. This universe, the limits of which are unknown to us, is in its entirety subject to His will, functioning under His control. Such control applies generally to the universe as a whole, and applies at the same time to every individual creature on its own, and to every organ, cell and molecule in every individual. He gives everything its due, assigns to it its function and watches how it fulfils that function. Such controls monitor every shoot that comes out of the earth, every leaf that falls, every grain in the earth's deep darkness, every fresh or dry thing, every fish at sea, worm in

the ground, every insect, beast or bird in their hiding places, every egg, chick, feather and cell in everything that lives. The One who controls all is never preoccupied with something so as to turn aside from some other thing. Nothing hidden or manifest ever escapes His knowledge. Part of what He controls is the affairs of His creatures on earth, humans and *jinn*. Hence He records this blessing as He addresses them: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 30)

A Frightening Threat

Having stated this fundamental truth of God's eternity while everything else perishes and its correlate making clear that He controls all the affairs of all His creatures, the *sūrah* begins a new section that starts with a threat that sends fear into all hearts. This is a prelude to the discussion of the Day of Judgement that follows later in the *sūrah*:

> *We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind]. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so. You cannot pass beyond them without authority. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?* (Verses 31–36)

"*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind].*" (Verse 31) What a frightening threat that neither man nor *jinn* can face. Indeed firm mountains, stars and galaxies tremble to hear it. God Almighty, in all His power and majesty, says that He will attend to the reckoning of these two humble creatures, man and *jinn*, giving His statement an air of warning! It is unimaginably terrible!

A more literal translation of the threat would say: "We shall be free to attend to you two..." God – limitless is He in His glory – is not preoccupied with something so as to need to free Himself of what preoccupies Him. This is merely an expression intended to make it easier for us to understand, and to deliver the warning in a stunning and crushing way. This entire universe was originated and put in place with

a single word, 'Be', and once the word was uttered the whole universe came into existence. Likewise, its total disappearance needs nothing more than the command to be issued once, in less than the twinkling of an eye. What can happen, then, to these two communities of creatures, man and *jinn*, when God attends fully to them alone, administering their punishment? Under the shadow of this fearful threat, they are both asked: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 32)

The *sūrah* continues with this frightening tone, challenging both man and *jinn* to pass beyond their own world: "Jinn *and mankind, if you can pass beyond the regions of heaven and earth, then do so.*" (Verse 33) How, and where to? "*You cannot pass beyond them without authority.*" (Verse 33) No authority can be given except by the One who has it. Once more, they are faced with the question: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 34) Do they have, within themselves, anything that amounts to a lie to say, or even a word to utter? Nonetheless the onslaught continues to the end, adding further threats and revealing their miserable end: "*A flash of fire will be sent against you, and molten brass, and you will be left without support. Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verses 35–36) The horror painted in this image is beyond the scope of human imagination, or any creature's imagination for that matter. It is a unique image. Although there are a few images akin to it in the Qur'ān, none are exactly similar to this one: "*Leave Me alone with those who deny the truth and enjoy life's blessings.*" (73: 11) "*Leave Me alone [to deal] with him whom I have created alone.*" (74: 11) The fact remains that this present verse, and the warning it implies, is far more frightful: "*We shall attend to you two huge communities [of* jinn *and mankind].*" (Verse 31)

The Last Day

The *sūrah* devotes its remaining part to images and scenes of the Last Day, starting with a universal upheaval, followed by images of reckoning, requital and reward. This commences with an image of the universe that fits with the opening of the *sūrah*: "*When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil.*" (Verse 37) We are introduced to a picture of the sky turning rose-red or looking like a red rose and

flowing like oil. The sum of the verses describing the universe on the Day of Judgement confirm the total destruction of all celestial bodies, after they break loose of the system which controls their operation and coordinates their orbits and movements. One of these verses is the one we are now discussing. Others may be cited, such as: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" (56: 4–6) "*When eyes are dazzled, and the moon eclipsed, and the sun and the moon are brought together.*" (75: 7–9) "*When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away, when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended, when the wild beasts are brought together, when the seas are set alight.*" (81: 1–6) "*When the sky is cleft asunder, when the stars are scattered, when the oceans are made to explode...*" (82: 1–3) "*When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission!*" (84: 1–5) All these verses, and many others, refer to this great event that will overcome the entire universe, the nature of which is known only to God.

"*When the sky is rent asunder and becomes rose-red like [burning] oil.*" (Verse 37) The same question is again asked: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 38) No denial can then be either contemplated or uttered.

"*On that day neither mankind nor* jinn *will be asked about their sins.*" (Verse 39) This applies to a particular situation on that day when all will be present. It is a day with different situations: in some people will be questioned and in some others no question will be put to them. In some, every soul will argue its own case, trying to put the blame on its associates, and in others no word of argument or dispute will be allowed. It is a long, extended day, with many positions and situations, each of which is awesome, and each is witnessed by multitudes of creatures. This verse speaks of a particular situation when no human or *jinn* will be asked about their sins. Everything is already well known, and the deeds of all are out in the open. Signs of misery appear as black on some faces, and signs of triumph appear white on others. Every face tells of what is going to happen. Can there by any denial on that day?

Hence, the question: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 40)

"*The guilty ones will be known by their mark and shall be seized by their forelocks and their feet.*" (Verse 41) This is a scene that combines force with humiliation: forelocks and feet are tied together and the guilty are so cast into hell. Can there be any denial then? As this is going on, the *sūrah* addresses its audience, as if they are witnessing this continuing process of casting the guilty, with their forelocks and feet combined, into hell: "*This is the hell which the guilty deny.*" (Verse 43) It is present here, as you are now seeing it. "*They will go round between its flames and scalding water.*" (Verse 44) It is exceedingly hot; they have nowhere to go other than round and between the flames and scorching fluids. Look at them as they go round now: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 45)

This is all that is said about those enduring this most painful suffering. The *sūrah* then turns its attention to those enjoying honour and bliss.

The Four Gardens

For the first time in the Qur'ān so far two gardens are mentioned, and there are probably more within the great garden of heaven. Their mention here, in particular, may be to stress their importance. In the next *sūrah*, The Inevitable Event, we learn that the dwellers of heaven form two large groups: the ones to the fore who will be brought nearest to God, and the people to the right. Each will experience great bliss. Here also we feel that these two gardens are designated for a group with a high position. It may be the group described in the next *sūrah* as being closest to God. We see another two gardens which are less refined than the first two and we feel that they belong to a group that comes next to the ones already mentioned. This group may be the people to the right. Whatever the case may be, let us look at this first grouping of two gardens, feeling their bliss. They are "*With shading branches.*" (Verse 48) The Arabic word used for branches, *afnān*, conveys in particular newly springing branches that spread an air of freshness. These gardens have "*a pair of flowing springs.*" (Verse 50) Thus, they are never short of water.

Moreover, they are "*With every kind of fruit in pairs.*" (Verse 52) Their fruits are plentiful and varied. How will the dwellers of these gardens live? "*They will recline on carpets lined with rich brocade.*" (Verse 54) Such is the lining of their couches: the top is left to our imagination. And then "*the fruit of both these gardens will be within easy reach.*" (Verse 54) It is near and easy to reach.

This, however, does not complete the aspects of luxury that await these people. There is still more to consider: "*In both [gardens] will be mates of modest gaze, whom neither man nor* jinn *will have touched before.*" (Verse 56) Their modest gaze reflects their chastity. They do not look to anyone other than their spouses. Besides, they instil a sense of luxury and brightness, appearing "*like rubies and corals.*" (Verse 58)

All this comes as the reward for a person who stands in this life in fear of his Lord's presence and worships Him as if he sees Him. He feels that God sees him and he works to attain the superior grade of excellence that the Prophet described as "to worship God as if you see Him. If you do not, then know that He sees you." As such they deserve more from the Lord of Grace for their excellence: "*Shall the reward of good be anything but good?*" (Verse 60)

In this presentation of these two lofty gardens and what they contain, every aspect of blessing and comfort is followed by the familiar comment: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 61)

The *sūrah* then describes what the other group, also with two gardens, will have: "*Besides these two there are two other gardens.*" (Verse 62) The description shows them to be in some way less than the first two: "*Both of the deepest green.*" (Verse 64) Their green colour is very dark, almost black. They have "*two gushing springs.*" (Verse 66) Their water gushes forth, which is again different from, or less than, the flowing water of the springs in the first two gardens. Here we have "*fruits, date-palms and pomegranate trees,* (Verse 68) while we had there "*every kind of fruit in pairs.*" (Verse 52) Moreover, "*there will be in [these gardens] all things most excellent and beautiful.*" (Verse 70) Further aspects are added in the next verse: "*[They will have] dark-eyed and modest companions, sheltered in pavilions.*" (Verse 72) The pavilions, or decorated tents, add connotations of bedouin luxury, gratifying those used to desert life. The mates they have here are '*sheltered*', while the ones in the other two gardens are '*of*

modest gaze'. However both groups of mates share in the same qualities of chastity and faithful devotion: "*Neither man nor* jinn *will have touched them before.*" (Verse 74)

We see the dwellers of these two gardens enjoying their luxuries: "*They will recline on green cushions and fine carpets.*" (Verse 76) The fine quality of the carpets in these gardens is given a special description in Arabic, *'abqarī*, which is an adjective used of the 'Abqar Valley; in olden times the Arabs believed this to be the dwelling place of the *jinn*. Hence they attributed every marvellous thing to this valley, describing it as *'abqarī*, as the carpets are here described. When compared with what the first two gardens contain, these are clearly more modest. Yet the familiar comment is added after every aspect of blessing mentioned here: "*Which, then, of your Lord's blessings do you both deny?*" (Verse 77)

The *sūrah* concludes with a final note of glorification of the Lord whose face, full of majesty, will remain after all creation has perished. This is the most apt conclusion to a *sūrah* that bears the name of the Lord of Grace: "*Blessed is the name of your Lord, full of majesty, granting grace.*" (Verse 78)



SŪRAH 56

Al-Wāqi ʿah

(The Inevitable Event)

Prologue

Al-Wāqi ʿah, The Inevitable Event, is the name given to this Makkan *sūrah* explaining its subject matter. The main issue discussed is resurrection. The *sūrah* specifically refutes the argument of those who doubt it, denying the Qur'ān and associating partners with God. They always wonder: "*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 47–48) Therefore, the *sūrah* begins by describing resurrection, giving it a name, *al-wāqi ʿah*, that makes its happening absolutely clear, leaving no room for doubt: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verses 1–2) It highlights the events that distinguish that day from all others: people's positions are totally changed, as is the earth's appearance. These fearful events produce a different earth and entirely new values: "*abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust, you shall be divided into three classes.*" (Verses 3–7)

The *sūrah* then describes the fates of these three classes, the ones to the fore, those to the right and those to the left. It gives us a very detailed description of what they receive of favours and blessings, or misery and suffering. This makes us feel that it will all undoubtedly happen, and

especially as every detail is set before our eyes. The unbelievers are made to see their fate and that of the believers and hear what is said about them after detailing their misery: "*In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?'*" (Verses 45–48) The description gives the impression that the punishment is being meted out now and that life on earth is long gone, mentioned only to show how hideous and repugnant some people's way of life was.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part discusses the question of faith in its entirety, placing particular emphasis on the main topic, i.e. resurrection. The *sūrah* then makes a number of highly effective touches, pinpointing matters that all people know and see, whatever their environment and level of experience. It cites the beginning of each person's life journey with the discharge of semen, and shows their death only to be replaced by a new generation. This is cited as evidence of the second life, which is just as easy and simple as the first one, which they all know. The *sūrah* then cites the evidence provided by plants and agriculture, which is an initiation of a certain form of life by God's will. Had He willed, it would not have come about and would not have yielded its fruit. Next, water is cited; this commodity is necessary for all life. Its availability is totally dependent on God's will since it is He who sends it down from the clouds. Had He willed, He would have made it salty, unsuitable for bringing about or sustaining life. Finally, fire is cited together with its basic material, the trees. At this point, a warning is given reminding them of the fire of hell which they doubt. All these images are familiar to them, and they are only asked to reflect on how they come about by God's will.

This part also speaks about the Qur'ān, which tells them about the inevitable event yet still they doubt its warnings. A very serious oath follows, emphasizing that these revelations constitute a noble reading preserved in a well-guarded record, touched only by purified angels.

As the *sūrah* draws to a close, it paints a very powerful scene of man's situation at the point of death, when his soul is in his throat. All those around him stand helpless, unable to assist. They know nothing about what is happening inside or to this person. As he is about to depart this

life, none other than God can do aught to him. He sees his path ahead, but he cannot say anything about what he sees.

The *sūrah* concludes by re-emphasizing the true news, adding further glorification of God, the Supreme: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) It thus ensures that the beginning and the end form a perfect harmony.



Al-Wāqi'ah
(The Inevitable Event)

سُورَةُ الْوَاقِعَةِ

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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass (1)

إِذَا وَقَعَتِ الْوَاقِعَةُ ﴿١﴾

no one will then deny its having come to pass, (2)

لَيْسَ لِوَقْعَتِهَا كَاذِبَةٌ ﴿٢﴾

abasing [some], exalting [others]. (3)

خَافِضَةٌ رَّافِعَةٌ ﴿٣﴾

When the earth is violently shaken (4)

إِذَا رُجَّتِ الْأَرْضُ رَجًّا ﴿٤﴾

and the mountains crumble away (5)

وَبُسَّتِ الْجِبَالُ بَسًّا ﴿٥﴾

and scatter abroad into fine dust, (6)

فَكَانَتْ هَبَاءً مُّنۢبَثًّا ﴿٦﴾

you shall be divided into three classes: (7)

وَكُنتُمْ أَزْوَاجًا ثَلَاثَةً ﴿٧﴾

There are the people of the right side: what people are they? (8)

فَأَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ ﴿٨﴾

And the people of the left side: what people are they? (9)

وَأَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ ﴿٩﴾

And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost. (10)	وَٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ٱلسَّٰبِقُونَ ﴿١٠﴾
These will be brought nearest to God, (11)	أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ ٱلْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿١١﴾
in gardens of bliss. (12)	فِى جَنَّٰتِ ٱلنَّعِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾
A good many of them are from earlier times (13)	ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣﴾
and a few from later generations. (14)	وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنَ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾
On gold-encrusted couches (15)	عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مَّوْضُونَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾
they will recline facing each other. (16)	مُّتَّكِـِٔينَ عَلَيْهَا مُتَقَٰبِلِينَ ﴿١٦﴾
Immortal youths shall wait upon them (17)	يَطُوفُ عَلَيْهِمْ وِلْدَٰنٌ مُّخَلَّدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾
with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. (18)	بِأَكْوَابٍ وَأَبَارِيقَ وَكَأْسٍ مِّن مَّعِينٍ ﴿١٨﴾
From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. (19)	لَّا يُصَدَّعُونَ عَنْهَا وَلَا يُنزِفُونَ ﴿١٩﴾
And with fruit of any kind they may choose, (20)	وَفَٰكِهَةٍ مِّمَّا يَتَخَيَّرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾
and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. (21)	وَلَحْمِ طَيْرٍ مِّمَّا يَشْتَهُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes (22)

وَحُورٌ عِينٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

like hidden pearls: (23)

كَأَمْثَالِ اللُّؤْلُؤِ الْمَكْنُونِ ﴿٢٣﴾

a reward for what they used to do. (24)

جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, (25)

لَا يَسْمَعُونَ فِيهَا لَغْوًا وَلَا تَأْثِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'. (26)

إِلَّا قِيلًا سَلَامًا سَلَامًا ﴿٢٦﴾

As for those on the right, what people are they? (27)

وَأَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ مَا أَصْحَابُ الْيَمِينِ ﴿٢٧﴾

They will dwell amid thornless lote trees (28)

فِي سِدْرٍ مَخْضُودٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

and flower-clad acacias (29)

وَطَلْحٍ مَنْضُودٍ ﴿٢٩﴾

with extended shade, (30)

وَظِلٍّ مَمْدُودٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

constantly flowing water, (31)

وَمَاءٍ مَسْكُوبٍ ﴿٣١﴾

abundant fruits, (32)

وَفَاكِهَةٍ كَثِيرَةٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

unfailing, never out of reach, (33)

لَا مَقْطُوعَةٍ وَلَا مَمْنُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

[reclining on] couches raised high. (34)

وَفُرُشٍ مَّرْفُوعَةٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation, (35)

إِنَّآ أَنشَأْنَٰهُنَّ إِنشَآءً ﴿٣٥﴾

making them virgins, (36)

فَجَعَلْنَٰهُنَّ أَبْكَارًا ﴿٣٦﴾

full of love, of matching age, (37)

عُرُبًا أَتْرَابًا ﴿٣٧﴾

for those on the right. (38)

لِّأَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٣٨﴾

A good many of them are from earlier times (39)

ثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

and a good many from later generations. (40)

وَثُلَّةٌ مِّنَ ٱلْءَاخِرِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

And those on the left, what people are they? (41)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلشِّمَالِ مَآ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلشِّمَالِ ﴿٤١﴾

They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water (42)

فِى سَمُومٍ وَحَمِيمٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

in the shadows of black smoke, (43)

وَظِلٍّ مِّن يَحْمُومٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

neither cool nor refreshing. (44)

لَّا بَارِدٍ وَلَا كَرِيمٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury (45)

إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا۟ قَبْلَ ذَٰلِكَ مُتْرَفِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

وَكَانُوا۟ يُصِرُّونَ عَلَى ٱلْحِنثِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٤٦﴾

and persisted in heinous sin, (46)

وَكَانُوا۟ يَقُولُونَ أَئِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا وَعِظَٰمًا أَءِنَّا لَمَبْعُوثُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? (47)

أَوَءَابَآؤُنَا ٱلْأَوَّلُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

And our forefathers, too? (48)

قُلْ إِنَّ ٱلْأَوَّلِينَ وَٱلْـَٔاخِرِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations (49)

لَمَجْمُوعُونَ إِلَىٰ مِيقَٰتِ يَوْمٍ مَّعْلُومٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. (50)

ثُمَّ إِنَّكُمْ أَيُّهَا ٱلضَّآلُّونَ ٱلْمُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth (51)

لَـَٔاكِلُونَ مِن شَجَرٍ مِّن زَقُّومٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, (52)

فَمَالِـُٔونَ مِنْهَا ٱلْبُطُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

filling your bellies with it, (53)

فَشَٰرِبُونَ عَلَيْهِ مِنَ ٱلْحَمِيمِ ﴿٥٤﴾

and will drink scalding water; (54)

فَشَٰرِبُونَ شُرْبَ ٱلْهِيمِ ﴿٥٥﴾

yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' (55)

هَٰذَا نُزُلُهُمْ يَوْمَ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٥٦﴾

Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement. (56)

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? (57)

نَحْنُ خَلَقْنَٰكُمْ فَلَوْلَا تُصَدِّقُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

Consider the semen you discharge: (58)

أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تُمْنُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

do you create it, or are We the Creator? (59)

ءَأَنتُمْ تَخْلُقُونَهُۥٓ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us (60)

نَحْنُ قَدَّرْنَا بَيْنَكُمُ ٱلْمَوْتَ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. (61)

عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّبَدِّلَ أَمْثَٰلَكُمْ وَنُنشِئَكُمْ فِى مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (62)

وَلَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمُ ٱلنَّشْأَةَ ٱلْأُولَىٰ فَلَوْلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: (63)

أَفَرَءَيْتُم مَّا تَحْرُثُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

is it you who makes them grow, or We? (64)

ءَأَنتُمْ تَزْرَعُونَهُۥٓ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلزَّٰرِعُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, (65)

لَوْ نَشَآءُ لَجَعَلْنَٰهُ حُطَٰمًا فَظَلْتُمْ تَفَكَّهُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

'We are burdened with debt; (66)

إِنَّا لَمُغْرَمُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

we have been deprived.' (67)

بَلْ نَحْنُ مَحْرُومُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

Consider the water you drink: (68)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱلْمَآءَ ٱلَّذِى تَشْرَبُونَ ﴿٦٨﴾

is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? (69)

ءَأَنتُمْ أَنزَلْتُمُوهُ مِنَ ٱلْمُزْنِ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْمُنزِلُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks? (70)

لَوْ نَشَآءُ جَعَلْنَٰهُ أُجَاجًا فَلَوْلَا تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

Consider the fire you kindle: (71)

أَفَرَءَيْتُمُ ٱلنَّارَ ٱلَّتِى تُورُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

is it you who grows its tree, or We? (72)

ءَأَنتُمْ أَنشَأْتُمْ شَجَرَتَهَآ أَمْ نَحْنُ ٱلْمُنشِـُٔونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers. (73)

نَحْنُ جَعَلْنَٰهَا تَذْكِرَةً وَمَتَٰعًا لِّلْمُقْوِينَ ﴿٧٣﴾

Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (74)

فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٧٤﴾

I do swear by the positions of the stars (75)

فَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِمَوَٰقِعِ ٱلنُّجُومِ ﴿٧٥﴾

– a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – (76)

وَإِنَّهُۥ لَقَسَمٌ لَّوْ تَعْلَمُونَ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٧٦﴾

إِنَّهُۥ لَقُرْءَانٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٧٧﴾

that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, (77)

فِى كِتَٰبٍ مَّكْنُونٍ ﴿٧٨﴾

in a well-guarded record (78)

لَّا يَمَسُّهُۥٓ إِلَّا ٱلْمُطَهَّرُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

that only the purified can touch: (79)

تَنزِيلٌ مِّن رَّبِّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿٨٠﴾

a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds. (80)

أَفَبِهَٰذَا ٱلْحَدِيثِ أَنتُم مُّدْهِنُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

Would you look on this discourse with disdain? (81)

وَتَجْعَلُونَ رِزْقَكُمْ أَنَّكُمْ تُكَذِّبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? (82)

فَلَوْلَآ إِذَا بَلَغَتِ ٱلْحُلْقُومَ ﴿٨٣﴾

When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat (83)

وَأَنتُمْ حِينَئِذٍ تَنظُرُونَ ﴿٨٤﴾

while you are helplessly looking on (84)

وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنكُمْ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. (85)

فَلَوْلَآ إِن كُنتُمْ غَيْرَ مَدِينِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

Why, if you think you are not to be judged, (86)

تَرْجِعُونَهَآ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true? (87)

If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, (88)	فَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُقَرَّبِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾
he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. (89)	فَرَوْحٌ وَرَيْحَانٌ وَجَنَّتُ نَعِيمٍ ﴿٨٩﴾
If he is one of those on the right, (90)	وَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٩٠﴾
a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. (91)	فَسَلَٰمٌ لَّكَ مِنْ أَصْحَٰبِ ٱلْيَمِينِ ﴿٩١﴾
But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, (92)	وَأَمَّآ إِن كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ٱلضَّآلِّينَ ﴿٩٢﴾
he will be welcomed with scalding water, (93)	فَنُزُلٌ مِّنْ حَمِيمٍ ﴿٩٣﴾
and the heat of a blazing fire. (94)	وَتَصْلِيَةُ جَحِيمٍ ﴿٩٤﴾
This is surely the indubitable truth. (95)	إِنَّ هَٰذَا لَهُوَ حَقُّ ٱلْيَقِينِ ﴿٩٥﴾
Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme. (96)	فَسَبِّحْ بِٱسْمِ رَبِّكَ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٩٦﴾

Unfinished Conditional

When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others]. When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust. (Verses 1–6)

This opening is clearly intended to add suspense to its presentation of this awesome but inevitable event. It employs a special style that clearly indicates this. Twice, it begins a conditional sentence, employing the word 'when', without finishing what the result or the outcome will be. It first says: "*When that which is certain to happen will have come to pass no one will then deny its having come to pass, abasing [some], exalting [others].*" (Verses 1–3) But it does not say what will take place when this inevitable event comes to pass. It simply says there can be no denying that it will happen. Without saying what comes next, the *sūrah* commences a new beginning with another conditional sentence: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" (Verses 4–6) Again, the *sūrah* does not tell us what happens after this exceedingly alarming event. Thus we are left with the impression that all this is merely an introduction to results that are so frightful that no words can adequately describe them.

This special style particularly suits the extremely frightening image the *sūrah* opens with. The *sūrah* denotes the event of resurrection by the term *al-wāqi'ah*, which primarily refers to something that falls hard. The very sound of the word gives the impression of a heavy object dropping from a high position and then settling where it cannot be moved or removed: "*No one will then deny its having come to pass.*" (Verse 2) As this heavy object falls, we expect it to produce some turmoil or shaking up. This expectation is fulfilled as the event is described as "*abasing [some] exalting [others].*" (Verse 3) It will certainly put down people who were looked up to during their lives on earth, and it will elevate others who were thought of as commanding little respect. Standards and values will be set straight in God's scale, after they have been out of balance in this world.

The frightening event then begins to take shape in the very structure of the earth, which people always think to be firm and stable. The event shows it being violently shaken, a reality that fits well with the sound of the fall. Firm and solid mountains are transformed into heaps of dust that the wind blows away: "*When the earth is violently shaken and the mountains crumble away and scatter abroad into fine dust.*" How ignorant and feeble-minded those people are who face this fearful prospect in full denial of the Day of Judgement, refusing to believe in God's oneness when it produces such an effect on the earth and its mountains.

Three Groups

As this strongly shaking scene concludes, we are then introduced to the effects of this inevitable event as some people are elevated while others are abased. This takes place when everyone faces their different fate:

> *You shall be divided into three classes: There are the people of the right side: what people are they? And the people of the left side: what people are they? And there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.* (Verses 7–10)

Here, people are divided into three groups, unlike in most other Qur'ānic statements where they are shown to be in two groups. The *sūrah* first mentions the people of the right side, but does not give us any details about them. Instead, a question is asked about them, enhancing the feeling of expectation: "*There are the people of the right side: what people are they?*" (Verse 8) The same method is used for the opposite group: "*And the people of the left side: what people are they?*" (Verse 9) The third group is then mentioned, and these are the ones to the fore. They are described by the same quality of being ahead of all: "*there are those to the fore, who shall be foremost.*" (Verse 10) It is as if the *sūrah* says these are the ones, and this is enough. No further description is necessary, it would add nothing.

The *sūrah* then mentions their position with their Lord and describes in detail what blessings He has prepared for them. This is all described in a way that the addressees can understand, in light of their own knowledge and experience:

> *These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss. A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations. On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other. Immortal youths shall wait upon them with goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs. From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply. And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire. There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls: a reward for what they used to do. There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.* (Verses 11–26)

The *sūrah* begins this detailed account by mentioning the greatest aspect of their elevated position, the bliss of being close to their Lord: "*These will be brought nearest to God, in gardens of bliss.*" (Verses 11–12) The gardens of bliss, with all that they contain, is nothing compared to that topmost favour of being nearest to God.

The *sūrah* takes a short pause here to say who achieves this grade. Thus, we are told: "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a few from later generations.*" (Verses 13–14) They are, then, the chosen ones, constituting a limited number. Most of them belong to earlier generations, but a minority come from later ones. Views differ as to which are the earlier generations and which are the later ones. The first view suggests that the earlier generations refer to those who attained to a high degree of faith from among the communities that lived prior to the advent of Islam, while the few from the later generations refers to the ones who were the first to accept Islam and strive hard for its cause. The second view says that both the majority and the minority belong to the followers of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), with the ones of '*earlier times*' belonging to its first generations, and the others to later ones.

This second view is the one preferred by Ibn Kathīr, who cites in support quotations from al-Ḥasan and Ibn Sīrīn. Al-Ḥasan is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Those to the fore are gone, but we pray to God to include us among the people of the right side." Then he explained the meaning of "*A good many of them are from earlier times*," saying that these are "from the earlier generations of the Muslim community." Muḥammad ibn Sīrīn is reported to have said after reading these two verses: "Scholars used to say, or to hope, that they all belong to the Muslim community."

Now the *sūrah* begins to enumerate the types of luxuries they will enjoy in heaven. These are of course of the types they can imagine and visualize. Beyond these there are other luxuries and aspects of happiness and bliss, which they will recognize when they are ready to appreciate them in their future lives. These are things 'no eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard of and no mind has ever imagined.'

"*On gold-encrusted couches they will recline facing each other.*" (Verses 15–16) They are comfortable, free of all worries and preoccupations,

reassured as to the continuity of their happiness, knowing that it will never end. Hence, they come together, in an atmosphere of mutual love. "*Immortal youths shall wait upon them.*" (Verse 17) These youths are unaffected by the passage of time; they retain their youthful looks. They go round carrying "*goblets, ewers, and cups filled with water from unsullied springs.*" (Verse 18) Their drink is made of pure wine that causes no intoxication. "*From it they will not be dispersed, nor will they be in short supply.*" (Verse 19) They are not turned away from it, nor will it ever be used up. Everything here is always plentiful; nothing is ever out of stock. "*And with fruit of any kind they may choose, and with the meat of any fowl they may desire.*" (Verses 20–21) Nothing is unavailable, while everything is given in the way those happy ones may desire. "*There will be for them companions with large beautiful eyes like hidden pearls.*" (Verses 22–23) Hidden pearls are those that are carefully treasured. No hand has ever put a needle through them, and no eye has ever cast a piercing look at them. A host of gentle connotations, both mental and physical, are implied in this description of these companions with their large beautiful eyes. All this is "*a reward for what they used to do.*" (Verse 24) It is a reward for what is done during that stage of life where action is required. In that life, nothing people do attains perfection, but here in this life, in heaven, the reward is absolutely perfect.

Moreover, they are greeted gently in a way that disdains all idle talk: "*There they will hear no idle talk, no sinful speech, only the saying, 'Peace! Peace'.*" (Verses 25–26) Their lives are peaceful; peace that spreads all around them. They are saluted by the angels with a greeting of peace, and they exchange the same greeting with one another, and an even better greeting of peace is extended to them from the Lord of Grace. It is all then a life of peace.

The Other Groups

The *sūrah* follows this account of the superior group with a similarly detailed one of the second group, to which a quick reference was made in the opening of the *sūrah*. The details of their situation in the life to come are now provided at the right point, beginning with a repetition

of the same question posed at the outset that gives a sense of seriousness and awe: "*As for those on the right, what people are they?*" (Verse 27).

This group are also enjoying a luxurious and happy life, but its description gives a sense of nomadic roughness. It answers all the needs of a nomadic people as they can best imagine a life of comfort and bliss. Thus, "*They will dwell amid thornless lote trees.*" (Verse 28). The lote tree is known for its thorns, but here it is thornless. "*And flower-clad acacias.*" (Verse 29) The acacia is a thorny type of leguminous tree well known in the Hijaz region of Arabia. However, the acacia trees in heaven are without thorns, have abundant fruit and are so situated as to enable real comfort. "*With extended shade, constantly flowing water.*" (Verses 30–31) These are all types of comfort dreamt of by the bedouin. "*Abundant fruits, unfailing, never out of reach.*" (Verses 32–33) These are left undetailed here, after having already outlined those types well-known by name to the bedouins. "*[Reclining on] couches raised high.*" (Verse 34) These couches are not described as gold-encrusted, nor as having fine embroidery. They are merely 'raised high'. Raising high contains a double meaning, physical and mental, both of which complement each other. As they are raised high, both meanings converge. In position, they are far removed from all types of impurity, kept clean. Mental elevation, on the other hand, is also far removed from all that stains. Therefore, the next aspect of their blessing describes the companions they have in heaven: "*We will have brought forth [their mates] in perfect creation.*" (Verse 35) These mates are either new ones, referring to the mates God assigns them from among the creatures that originally dwell in heaven, or they are their wives in this world, after they have been resurrected as virgins in the prime of youth, "*making them virgins.*" (Verse 36) They are "*full of love, of matching age.*" (Verse 37) And they are specially assigned and devoted "*for those on the right.*" (Verse 38)

These people on the right consist of "*A good many of them are from earlier times and a good many from later generations.*" (Verses 39–40) This means that they are greater in number than the first group of people to the fore, taking into account the two views we explained in reference to earlier and later generations.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the third group, the people on the left, to whom a general reference was made earlier on:

And those on the left, what people are they? They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing. In times gone by, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in heinous sin, saying, 'What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too? Say: 'All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day. Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree, filling your bellies with it, and will drink scalding water; yet you will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.' Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement. (Verses 41–56)

While the people on the right enjoy extended shade and constantly flowing water, these on the left "*dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadows of black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing.*" (Verses 42–44) The whole atmosphere is of a scorching heat that penetrates and burns the skin. The water they have to drink is also scalding, giving no refreshment. They also have shade, but it is no more than the shadows of black smoke. It is a shade painted in irony, for such shade is devoid of coolness, inviting no rest, and giving no sensation other than that produced by suffocating heat. Such hardship is a fitting requital, for "*in times gone by, they overindulged in luxury.*" (Verse 45) The absence of comfort for those who are used to indulging and excessing in luxury is hard indeed. They also "*persisted in heinous sin*", associating partners with God. The Arabic word used here for sin is *ḥinth*, which means 'breach, violation'. It implies, thus, a reference to the pledge given by human nature to maintain faith in God's oneness and not to associate partners with Him. They are certainly in breach of that pledge. They used to say: "*What! When we have died and become mere dust and bones, are we to be raised up again? And our forefathers, too?*" (Verses 47–48) The *sūrah* clearly uses the past tense in these last two points, saying that they persisted in sin and denied the resurrection, thus treating this present life of the addressees as though it has already ended. In other words, this scene of suffering is made to appear as though it is presently occurring.

After all, this whole life is no more than a twinkling of the eye, whilst the life to come is ultimate and permanent.

The *sūrah* seizes this appropriate moment to answer their question, which they unfold in an exaggerated sense of incredulity: "*Say: All people of the earliest and latest generations will indeed be gathered together at an appointed time on a specific day.*" (Verses 49–50) The specific day is the one that has just been painted. It has been shown as though they are enduring it right now.

The *sūrah* resumes the description of the suffering that awaits those who deny the truth of God's oneness: "*Then, you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree.*" (Verses 51–52) No one knows anything about the Zaqqūm tree other than the description God gives us in another *sūrah*, stating that "*its fruit is like devils' heads.*" (37: 65) Again no one has ever seen devils' heads, but the very phrase gives us a clear sense. Besides, the very name, Zaqqūm, implies a hard, rough surface with thorns that pierce hands and throats. This is in contrast to the thornless lote trees and flower-clad acacias that the people on the right enjoy. Although the fruit of the Zaqqūm tree looks like devils' heads, these people will eat it "*filling your bellies with it.*" (Verse 53) Hunger is overpowering. Hard and thorny food will inevitably require a drink to ease its swallowing and refresh the stomach. They, however, "*will drink scalding water.*" (Verse 54) Such a drink can never refresh or satisfy a thirsty person. Yet these people "*will drink it like insatiably thirsty camels drink.*" (Verse 55) These camels have a well known illness making them always thirsty. "*Such will be their dwelling place on the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 56) A dwelling place is one that is supposed to give comfort and a sense of permanent settlement, but this dwelling for those on the left gives neither. This is how they are welcomed and this is the place assigned to them on the Day of Judgement, which they held in doubt, always rejecting what the Qur'ān told them about it. They also associated partners with God, disbelieving His warnings of what they may suffer on that day.

Thus ends the first part of the *sūrah* which has given us a detailed account of people's fates on the day when the inevitable takes place.

Stating the Case

The second part of the *sūrah* aims to establish the Islamic faith in full, but the issue of resurrection and future life receives the main focus. This provides an example of the Qur'ānic method of addressing human nature, utilizing indicators that encourage faith. It makes a gentle address to people's hearts as it presents great issues in an easy to understand way.

The Qur'ān presents phenomena that are very familiar to us and often repeated in our lives as great facts setting clear universal laws. It, thus, moulds this into a profound and comprehensive faith giving a complete concept of existence. It also uses such phenomena as a method for reflection, alerting minds and souls and awakening feelings. Thus people are able to clearly understand universal phenomena that they may often be oblivious to, despite the fact that they are always before their eyes. They can also be better aware of wonders that take place within their own selves.

The Qur'ān does not rely on a few individual miracles in its address to mankind. It does not require people to look for miracles and signs that are far removed from them, their lives and immediate natural phenomena. It does not lead them through sophisticated philosophical theories, or complex mental tasks, or through scientific experiments that no one can undertake in order to present them with the faith it advocates.

They themselves are of God's own making, and the natural phenomena in their immediate world are all His creation. There is a miracle in everything He makes. This Qur'ān is His own book. The One who takes them by the hand to such miracles within themselves and in the world around them is simply highlighting to them what is familiar and happening before their own eyes, yet they do not appreciate this because of long familiarity with them. He opens their eyes to these so that they can appreciate their great secret, the secret of His creative power and His absolute oneness. It is the secret of the eternal law that works within their own constitution and throughout the universe around them. It is the law that embodies the proofs of divine faith, alerting their nature to these proofs.

This is the line the *sūrah* follows in its second part. It shows them signs of God's limitless power in their own creation, in the plants they cultivate with their own hands, in the water they drink and the fire they light. These are among the simplest things they see all the time. It describes the approaching end of their lives on earth and the beginning of the next life in the world beyond. This is the inevitable moment everyone will have to face. At this moment, all are powerless. All creatures stand face to face before God's limitless power, as He executes His will. At this moment, all excuses are false. Only the truth prevails.

The method of the Qur'ān in addressing human nature is itself proof of its own source. It is the same source that gave rise to the universe. The same method of structure applies to the Qur'ān as it does to the universe, whereby elementary materials are used to produce gigantic and complex entities. Scientists think that the atom is the material from which the universe is built, and the cell is the unit used to build life. Yet infinitely small as they are, the atom and the cell are miracles in their own right. Here, the Qur'ān uses some simple scenes that have long been familiar to man to build the most profound religious faith and the broadest concept of existence. These scenes or observations are part of every human being's experience: newborns, plants, water, fire and death. Which human being, indeed which cave dweller has not witnessed the birth of a child, a new plant shoot, water falling, fire being lit, or a moment of death? The Qur'ān uses such scenes to present its faith, because it addresses every human being in every social environment. Yet these very simple scenes, as well as the reference to the positions of stars, are among the most important universal truths and divine secrets. In their profound simplicity, they address the nature of every human being; and in their essence they have been, and will always remain, the subject of study by the greatest scientists.

The positions of stars refer to the way the universe is designed. The origin of human life is the secret of all secrets, and the origin of plants is, like the origin of animal life, the mother of all miracles. Water is the essence of life, and fire is the miracle behind human civilization. This method of building the case for faith is not one man uses. When human beings address such issues, they do not pay attention to such elementary

materials. Should they even do so, they still do not present them in such a gentle and easy way. On the contrary, they employ an abstract, complex logic, that may only be grasped by the intellectual elite.

God's method is the one we see in this *sūrah*: using basic materials to build faith in total ease and simplicity. He does the same with the universe, building it with basic materials. The same method appears in both, and the Creator's stamp is clearly evident in both.

The Beginning and End

It is We who have created you: will you not believe? Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator? We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you. You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do you not reflect? (Verses 57–62)

This whole issue of faith is the same as the first instance of creation and the end, the giving of life and inevitable death. It is familiar, seen at all times. How come, then, that people do not believe that it is God who creates them? The weight of this truth on human nature is too heavy for anyone to challenge: "*It is We who have created you: will you not believe?*" (Verse 57)

"*Consider the semen you discharge: do you create it, or are We the Creator?*" (Verses 58–59) Man's role in the process of creation is no more than the man depositing his seed in the woman's body. Their respective roles are finished at that. From then on, the hand of God takes over. It works on its own, giving the embryo growth and development, building its skeleton and dressing it up, then breathing spirit into it. Right from the first moment, and at every subsequent moment, a miracle occurs that remains totally unknown to man. Indeed, man does not know how it occurs, let alone plays a role in it.

This measure of reflection on creation is understood by all people. It is enough to appreciate the miracle that takes place and reflect on its message. In fact, the story of this single cell, from the moment it is deposited until it becomes a full-fledged human being, surpasses all

imagination. The human mind would never have believed it, except for the fact that it occurs with all people as witnesses.

This single cell begins to multiply, and within a short period of time the number of cells reaches many millions, divided into groups with different characteristics. Each group is assigned its own task, to produce a particular aspect of the human being: one group produces bones, another muscles, a third nerves, and a different one produces the skin, while others produce nerves, etc. Another group of cells make an eye, another a tongue and a third an ear. A more specialized group will produce glands. Each group knows its position of work. The cells which make an eye will never miss its position so as to produce the eye, say, in the abdomen or the foot. Had these cells been transplanted so as to be based in the abdomen, they would make an eye there. However, each cell is guided to its proper place, and we never find a case where the eye's cells produce an eye in the abdomen, or the ear's cells produce an ear in the foot. All function properly to produce a human being, who is given the best shape and form, under God's care. Humans have no role in all this.

Such is the beginning; but the end is in no way less miraculous or amazing, even though it is so familiar a sight: "*We have decreed that death shall be among you. Nothing can prevent Us.*" (Verse 60) What is death, the inevitable end of every living thing? What is it? How does it occur? How come it overpowers all? It is nothing less than God's decree. Hence, no one can escape it. No one can spring ahead of it so as to miss it. It is a stage in the chain of existence that must be completed: "*Nothing can prevent Us from replacing you by others like yourselves,*" to be in charge of the earth after you have gone. God who has decreed death has also decreed life. He has decreed that people shall die, and that He will replace them with others like them, until the time span decreed for this stage of life comes to its end. Once it is over, then the second life begins: "*or bringing you into being anew in a way unknown to you.*" (Verse 61) This is in the realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception. It is a great realm about which humans know nothing other than what God is pleased to tell them. At that point, the journey comes to its end.

Such is how people are brought into being a second time: "*You have learned how you have come into being in the first instance. Why, then, do*

you not reflect?" (Verse 62) The two are not dissimilar in nature. There is nothing strange about it.

In such a simple approach, and with such ease the Qur'ān portrays the two great events of bringing humans into being. With such ease and simplicity, it makes human nature face the logic it knows well. It cannot dispute this logic because it is based on its own basic facts and on what people see in their own lives. It is an approach that is free of complication, abstraction and sophistication. It is the approach of God, the Creator of man and the universe who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high.

Plant, Water and Fire

Once more the Qur'ān, in perfect ease and simplicity, puts before people something which is well known to them and which they repeatedly see. It shows how God's hand works to bring it about, showing them the miracle they overlook when it is always happening in front of their very own eyes:

> *Consider the seeds you sow in the ground: is it you who makes them grow, or We? Were it Our will, We could turn it into chaff and leave you to wail, 'We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.'* (Verses 63–67)

What role do humans play in plant growth that culminates in fruition? They certainly till the earth and plant the seeds made by God, but that is about it. Their role is then finished, leaving the matter entirely to God's hand. It is He who completes this miraculous work.

The seed or the grain begins its journey to reproduce its kind, moving on like one who knows the way, stage after stage, one who will never commit the like of a human error, who will never change course or deviate from the path. It is the hand of God that guides it throughout this remarkable journey. No one could have ever believed this miracle, and no mind could have imagined it; yet it happens all the time and everyone of us sees it in one form or another. How else could anyone have believed that a wheat grain incorporates a stalk and leaves, as well

as an ear holding together a large number of grains? Who could have imagined that a date stone can produce such a large palm tree, with all that it contains?

What mind could have gone so far as to imagine this amazing wonder, had it not been for the fact that it happens before our very eyes? Can any person claim any role in producing this miracle other than planting the seeds and grains which are of God's own making?

Yet people say: "We have planted" when they have not gone beyond laying the seeds. As for the miracle that shoots out and grows, it is all of God's making. Had He willed, it would not have started its journey, or would not have completed it. Had He willed, He would have turned it into chaff even before it yielded its crop. It is by God's will that the seed and grain progress along the way to the end of their respective journeys. Had any of this not taken place, people would say: "*We are burdened with debt; we have been deprived.*" (Verses 66–67) It is God who, in His grace, grants them the fruits of their plants, allowing the plant to complete its cycle of life, which is similar to that which a human seed goes through from the moment it is discharged. Both are pictures of life as God makes it.

Such is the first time life comes into being. Why should a second time be thought strange?

> *Consider the water you drink: is it you who brings it down from the clouds, or We? Were it Our will, We could make it salty and bitter. Why, then, do you not give thanks?* (Verses 68–70)

Water is the source of life, its most essential component. God has so willed that without water no life is possible. What role does man play with water? Is it anything beyond the fact that he drinks it? The One who made water out of the elements that produce it, and who caused it to fall from the clouds bearing it, is none other than God – limitless is He in His glory. It is He who has made water sweet. Had He willed otherwise, He could have made it '*salty and bitter*', undrinkable, and unable to produce life. Is it not right then that they should express their gratitude to God for having willed it so?

Those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān realized that the very water that falls from the clouds was essential for their lives. They were always delighted to see it falling. Indeed, talking about it gave them pleasure; they even sang its praises in their poetry. Human progress and civilization has in no way reduced the importance of water; on the contrary, it has almost doubled. Scientists who try to understand how water first came about realize its importance to a higher degree. Thus we see that water is the focus of attention for a bedouin in the desert as well as for a scientist in his laboratory.

> *Consider the fire you kindle: is it you who grows its tree, or We? We made it a reminder for man, and a comfort for desert travellers* (Verses 71–73)

The discovery of fire was a greatly important event in mankind's life. It was perhaps its most important event as it signalled the beginning of civilization. Fire, however, has become so familiar that it stirs no interest. Man certainly kindles fire, but who grows the tree that becomes its fuel? The *sūrah* has already mentioned plants, and trees are a type of plant. Yet another point is mentioned by the reference to '*its tree*' The Arabs used to ignite fire by rubbing a branch of one tree against another from a different tree, in the way still used in some primitive social environments. This, thus makes this description a close parallel of their own experience. As for the miracle of fire and its secret which scientists study, these are areas that deserve more attention. The mention of fire here is also used as a reminder of the fire of hell: "*We made it a reminder for man,*" reminding man of the life to come. God has also made fire "*a comfort for desert travellers.*" (Verse 73) This last point was particularly relevant to the Arabs addressed by the Qur'ān, as it referred to their own life experience.

The *sūrah* now points to the ultimate truth that all these facts lead to: God's Lordship of the universe and His ultimate power that now manifests itself, in all its glory, to human nature. It instructs the Prophet to recognize this truth, give it its due, and bring it to the forefront so that it exercises its profound influence on people's hearts: "*Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verse 74)

A Great Oath

Now the *sūrah* directs its address to those who denied the truth of the Qur'ān in another way, providing a relationship between it and the universe in a great oath by God, the Lord of all the worlds:

> *I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it! – that this is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.* (Verses 75–80)

Those addressed by the Qur'ān at the time of its revelation knew no more about the positions of the stars than what they could see with the naked eye. Therefore, the *sūrah* tells them that the oath already made was a mighty one, even though they did not know it at the time. Today, we appreciate the greatness of this oath far more than they did, but we too know only very little about the greatness of the positions of the stars. The little we have discovered with our seemingly advanced observatories and allegedly powerful telescopes tells us that one of the countless clusters in open space, the one that constitutes the galaxy that contains our solar system, includes one billion stars.[1]

> Astronomers say that some of these stars and planets, which number many billions, can be seen with the naked eye, while others can only be seen with powerful telescopes. Others still can only be sensed by such very powerful telescopes. All these run in their respective orbits in space. The possibility of a magnetic field of one of these stars coming close to another, or of a planet crashing into another, is as remote as that of a boat in the Mediterranean crashing into one travelling in the Indian Ocean, when both are travelling in the same direction at the same speed. The chances of such a crash ever taking place are so remote that it is certainly impossible.[2]

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1. In its shorter version, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentions that "The Milky Way system contains hundreds of billions of stars and large amounts of interstellar gas and dust." It is well known that the earth's solar system is part of the Milky Way galaxy. The author's mention that it includes one billion stars was perhaps the estimate at the time he wrote. – Editor's note.
2. Nawfal, A.R., *Allah wal-'Ilm al-Ḥadīth*, Cairo, (n.d.), p. 33.

Every star in its position, which is so distant from its sister stars, is placed there in accordance with God's wisdom and careful measure. Each interacts with other stars and planets to produce a measured equilibrium between all these entities floating in space. All this is part of the greatness of the positions of the stars. It goes far beyond the knowledge of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān. At the same time, it is immeasurably less than the total truth of the greatness of stars and their positions.

"*I do swear by the positions of the stars – a mighty oath, if you but knew it!*" (Verses 75–76) These verses make an oath which is correctly rendered in the translation here. However, the *sūrah* employs a special mode of expression, often used in the Qur'ān which would say, if literally translated, "I do not swear by..." This stylistic feature mentions an oath, then appears to turn away from it. It is as if God is saying: "I do not need to make this oath by..." Yet this does not convey exactly the same meaning. The Arabic original is far more powerful in its deliverance of what is intended. Hence, the emphasis on the oath in the way it is rendered in English. The point is that this great truth does not need an oath to establish it, as it is already clear and well confirmed: "*This is indeed a most honourable Qur'ān, in a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch: a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verses 77–80)

The Qur'ān is indeed a most honourable discourse. It is unlike anything the unbelievers allege about it, claiming that it is the work of a monk or a madman or that it is fabricated, or a host of ancient legends, or that it is delivered by devils, or whatever. It is most honourable by its source, by itself and by the message and teachings it imparts.

Further description of the Qur'ān is added in the next two verses, the second of which provides an explanation of the first: "*In a well-guarded record that only the purified can touch.*" (Verses 78–79) The unbelievers alleged that the Qur'ān was given to the Prophet by devils. This verse refutes this. No devil can touch this record, which is well-guarded, kept safe under God's care. It is purified by angels that bring it down to the Prophet. This is the better explanation of the verse that says that only the purified can touch the Qur'ān. The negation here is a statement, not a command. In this life on earth anyone can handle the Qur'ān: someone who is purified or someone who is contaminated, a believer or

an unbeliever. To take the negation as applying to the book containing the Qur'ān would be erroneous. It can only be true when we take it as refuting the unbelievers' allegations. The divine record containing the Qur'ān in heaven is untouchable by anyone other than purified angels. This is further confirmed by the statement that follows, confirming that the Qur'ān is "*a revelation from the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 80)

Two *ḥadīth* reports state a different meaning, implying that only a person who has purified himself by ablution can touch the Qur'ān. Ibn Kathīr, however, makes clear that neither of these reports has been authentically transmitted.

At the Moment of Death

The final passage in the *sūrah* speaks of the moment of death, which sends a shudder of fear into everyone. This is the moment when all argument stops, when a person stands at the end of one road and the beginning of another. It is a point of no return:

> *Would you look on this discourse with disdain? Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it? When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us. Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?* (Verses 81–87)

Are you in doubt about what you are told concerning a second life, denying the truth of the Qur'ān and what it tells you about the Day of Judgement, or the principles of faith it lays down for you? "*Do you make it your livelihood that you persistently deny it?*" (Verse 82) Your denial is all that you earn and save in this life for your second life. How miserable a livelihood! What will you do when your soul is in your throat, standing on a road that leads you to the unknown?

The *sūrah* paints this situation in an inspiring way, drawing all its aspects in quick touches: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat while you are helplessly looking on We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verses 83–85) We almost hear a rattling

sound in the throat, see the features decline and sense the distress: "*When the soul [of a dying person] comes up to the throat.*" We almost see the despair on the faces of those attending the dying person: "*while you are helplessly looking on.*"

At this point, when the soul is no longer concerned with anything in this world; when it has put the whole earthly world behind it; when it is about to see a world totally unknown and for which it has no provisions other than its deeds in this life; when it sees a new world and cannot say anything about it; when it has separated from all around it who only see a dying body but who stand helpless, then human power and knowledge are at their end. At this point, people realize that they are absolutely helpless: they see nothing, know nothing and can do nothing. All power and knowledge belong to God alone, with no one able to cast any doubt about this truth: "*We are closer to him than you, although you do not see Us.*" (Verse 85)

At this point God's majesty is clearly felt, and people experience a sense of awe resulting from His presence. He is no doubt present at all times, but the Qur'ānic statement reawakens the feeling of this truth which people often overlook. Hence, the scene of death is overshadowed by feelings of God's majesty and awe, in addition to people's own helplessness.

The *sūrah* now puts forward a challenge that ends all argument: "*Why, if you think you are not to be judged, can you not restore that [ebbing life], if what you claim is true?*" (Verses 86–87) If it is true that there will be no reckoning of deeds and no requital for them and you are free, with no accounting to make, then try, if you can, to restore this soul that has come up to the throat and put it back in place. Try, if you can, to prevent its march towards that reckoning while you helplessly look on.

Thus all excuses, arguments and disputes end. This truth is felt to be so weighty that no man can stand up to it, except through stubborn and baseless denial.

The Final Destination

The *sūrah* now explains the fate of the soul that has turned its back on this world to begin its new and permanent life:

> *If that dying person is one of those who are drawn close to God, he will have repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss. If he is one of those on the right, a greeting of peace will welcome you by the ones on the right. But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire.* (Verses 88–94)

In the early part of the *sūrah* we saw images of the blessings granted to those who are close to God. The soul of such a person will now see what awaits it: '*repose, fulfilment and a garden of bliss.*' The very sound of these words overflows with comfort, ease and happiness.

"*If he is one of those on the right.*" This person is now directly addressed with a greeting sent to him by his brethren who are on the right. It is a gentle and delightful greeting, giving him reassurance. He begins to look forward to his forthcoming life with the people on the right.

"*But if he happens to be one of those who denied the truth and went astray, he will be welcomed with scalding water, and the heat of a blazing fire.*" (Verses 92–94) How miserable a welcome! How terrible is the suffering of scalding water and blazing fire! It all appears before such a person and he knows that he will have to experience it.

Now that this climax has been reached, the conclusion is profound and serious in its tone: "*This is surely the indubitable truth. Extol, then, the glory of the name of your Lord, the Supreme.*" (Verses 95–96) The great weight assigned to this absolute truth in God's scales thus combines with the inevitable event mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The final feeling reflects the effect of this firm belief with glorification of God, the Supreme.



SŪRAH 57

Al-Ḥadīd

(Iron)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, in its totality, is an address to the Muslim community, calling upon it to fulfil faith within its own society. The community should become an embodiment of the truth of faith, enabling hearts to become so dedicated that they are ready to sacrifice all, life and property, feelings and emotions, for it. With this truth, human souls are elevated to a divine level while they still live on earth. Thus, their standards are those that God has established, and their values are those that are given weight on God's scales. This truth enables hearts to feel the presence of God, to humble themselves when He is mentioned and to discard everything that may hinder them from turning to Him in complete dedication.

On the basis of this truth of faith, the *sūrah* calls upon the Muslim community to sacrifice life and property for God's cause: "*Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. Why should you not spend freely*

in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do." (Verses 7–10)

The Muslim community is also called upon to humble themselves at the remembrance of God and the truth He has bestowed. This so that their sacrifices are the result of this humble acceptance of the truth of faith: "*Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors!*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* puts the values of this world against those of the next world in the balance of the truth. It invites the Muslim community to choose the clearly preponderant scale and to uphold the true value: "*Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure. Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.*" (Verses 20–21)

It is clear from the *sūrah*'s drift that it addresses a real situation within the Muslim community, one that existed at the time of its revelation. This situation existed in Madīnah during the period stretching from the fourth year after the Prophet's immigration up to the time after Makkah had fallen to Islam. In Madīnah at that time were the early Muslims, the Muhājirīn who had migrated from Makkah, and the Anṣār who had welcomed them into their city. Both groups set the highest example ever in human history in translating the truth of faith into practical reality. They hastened to sacrifice life and property in total dedication to their

cause, undeterred by any worldly consideration, personal desire or temptation. Yet besides these there was within the Muslim community a second group that did not attain the same high level of faith, particularly after Makkah had fallen to Islam. By then Islam was clearly triumphant and people flocked to it in large groups. Many of these new converts did not yet fully understand the basic truth of faith, nor did they dedicate their lives to it as the first group did.

People belonging to this second group found it difficult to make sacrifices of self and property for God's cause. Such duties seemed too hard, while the comforts of this worldly life were too appealing and impossible to resist. It is to those in particular that the *sūrah* makes its inspiring address so that their souls eradicate such temptations and elevate them to the level required by the great truth of faith.

There was also in Madīnah at this time a third group consisting of hypocrites. These were unseparated from the body of the Muslim community, especially so once Islam's power became clearly apparent. These hypocrites were forced to hide themselves, pretending to be Muslims when deep in their hearts there was doubt. They also looked for opportunities to create problems for the Muslim community and contributed to any cause of strife. The *sūrah* describes their situation when they are called out and separated from the Muslim community: "*On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. [Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you. Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!*" (Verses 12–15)

There were, in addition, a number of Jews and Christians who still lived in Arabia. The *sūrah* refers to their situation and some of their past and present attitudes. We have already quoted the verse that requires the believers "*not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time.*" (Verse 16) This reference was most probably to the Jews. A reference to the Christians is given towards the end of the *sūrah*: "*We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors.*" (Verse 27)

In establishing the great truth of faith in people's hearts the *sūrah* follows an inspiring course, akin to Makkan *sūrahs* in aligning a host of influences that captivate hearts and feelings. Its opening in particular strikes a combination of highly inspiring notes, presenting a number of God's attributes that emphasize the Islamic concept of Him. This includes a subtle but captivating invitation to dedicate oneself totally to God as a result of understanding the true meaning of His oneness, His total control of the universe, the fact that everything eventually returns to Him, His knowledge of what people harbour in their hearts and the fact that all beings submit to Him and extol His glory: "*Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verses 1–6)

This very opening is enough to strongly shake people's hearts, inspiring them with awe and strengthening their desire to dedicate themselves to God. They should turn to God after discarding all that constitutes a hindrance to sacrifice for His cause. The rest of the *sūrah*, however, includes a number of elements that reaffirm this call to sacrifice, such as the bright picture it paints of believing men and women, who are seen "*with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right.*" (Verse 12) Another image shows this life and its value as trifling, compared with those of the life to come.

The *sūrah* also portrays how God's will is in complete control of the whole world: "*No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.*" (Verses 22–24) These verses give our hearts and souls all the necessary reassurance, no matter what befalls us of good or evil as we proceed along the way seeking His acceptance. We will neither despair nor be mad with joy when either eventuality happens to us; nor will we attribute whatever happens to any cause, event or circumstance. All takes place by God's will, in accordance with what He has planned. All ultimately return to Him.

The *sūrah* may be divided into two closely interrelated parts, each of which we will now deal with separately.



I

Who Gives God a Loan?

Al-Ḥadīd (Iron)



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

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ
وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. (2)

لَهُۥ مُلْكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ يُحْيِۦ وَيُمِيتُ ۖ
وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢﴾

He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. (3)

هُوَ ٱلْأَوَّلُ وَٱلْآخِرُ وَٱلظَّٰهِرُ وَٱلْبَاطِنُ ۖ
وَهُوَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣﴾

It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends

هُوَ ٱلَّذِي خَلَقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضَ
فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَوَىٰ عَلَى ٱلْعَرْشِ ۚ يَعْلَمُ
مَا يَلِجُ فِي ٱلْأَرْضِ وَمَا يَخْرُجُ مِنْهَا وَمَا يَنزِلُ

مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَمَا يَعۡرُجُ فِيهَاۖ وَهُوَ مَعَكُمۡ أَيۡنَ
مَا كُنتُمۡۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعۡمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٤﴾

from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. (4)

لَهُۥ مُلۡكُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۚ وَإِلَى ٱللَّهِ
تُرۡجَعُ ٱلۡأُمُورُ ﴿٥﴾

His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. (5)

يُولِجُ ٱلَّيۡلَ فِي ٱلنَّهَارِ وَيُولِجُ ٱلنَّهَارَ فِي
ٱلَّيۡلِۚ وَهُوَ عَلِيمُۢ بِذَاتِ ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿٦﴾

He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (6)

ءَامِنُواْ بِٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَأَنفِقُواْ مِمَّا
جَعَلَكُم مُّسۡتَخۡلَفِينَ فِيهِۖ فَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ
مِنكُمۡ وَأَنفَقُواْ لَهُمۡ أَجۡرٞ كَبِيرٞ ﴿٧﴾

Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. (7)

وَمَا لَكُمۡ لَا تُؤۡمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلرَّسُولُ
يَدۡعُوكُمۡ لِتُؤۡمِنُواْ بِرَبِّكُمۡ وَقَدۡ أَخَذَ
مِيثَٰقَكُمۡ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤۡمِنِينَ ﴿٨﴾

Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? (8)

هُوَ ٱلَّذِي يُنَزِّلُ عَلَىٰ عَبۡدِهِۦٓ ءَايَٰتِۭ
بَيِّنَٰتٖ لِّيُخۡرِجَكُم مِّنَ ٱلظُّلُمَٰتِ إِلَى
ٱلنُّورِۚ وَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ بِكُمۡ لَرَءُوفٞ رَّحِيمٞ ﴿٩﴾

It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. (9)

وَمَا لَكُمْ أَلَّا تُنفِقُوا۟ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِلَّهِ
مِيرَٰثُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۚ لَا يَسْتَوِى
مِنكُم مَّنْ أَنفَقَ مِن قَبْلِ ٱلْفَتْحِ وَقَٰتَلَ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَعْظَمُ دَرَجَةً مِّنَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَنفَقُوا۟
مِنۢ بَعْدُ وَقَٰتَلُوا۟ ۚ وَكُلًّا وَعَدَ ٱللَّهُ
ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do. (10)

مَّن ذَا ٱلَّذِى يُقْرِضُ ٱللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا
فَيُضَٰعِفَهُۥ لَهُۥ وَلَهُۥٓ أَجْرٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him? (11)

يَوْمَ تَرَى ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتِ يَسْعَىٰ
نُورُهُم بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَٰنِهِم بُشْرَىٰكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ
جَنَّٰتٌ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿١٢﴾

On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' (12)

يَوْمَ يَقُولُ ٱلْمُنَٰفِقُونَ وَٱلْمُنَٰفِقَٰتُ لِلَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱنظُرُونَا نَقْتَبِسْ مِن نُّورِكُمْ قِيلَ
ٱرْجِعُوا۟ وَرَآءَكُمْ فَٱلْتَمِسُوا۟ نُورًا فَضُرِبَ
بَيْنَهُم بِسُورٍ لَّهُۥ بَابٌۢ بَاطِنُهُۥ فِيهِ ٱلرَّحْمَةُ
وَظَٰهِرُهُۥ مِن قِبَلِهِ ٱلْعَذَابُ ﴿١٣﴾

On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. (13)

[Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you. (14)

يُنَادُونَهُمْ أَلَمْ نَكُن مَّعَكُمْ ۖ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ
وَلَٰكِنَّكُمْ فَتَنتُمْ أَنفُسَكُمْ وَتَرَبَّصْتُمْ
وَارْتَبْتُمْ وَغَرَّتْكُمُ الْأَمَانِيُّ حَتَّىٰ جَاءَ
أَمْرُ اللَّهِ وَغَرَّكُم بِاللَّهِ الْغَرُورُ ﴿١٤﴾

Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!' (15)

فَالْيَوْمَ لَا يُؤْخَذُ مِنكُمْ فِدْيَةٌ وَلَا مِنَ
الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا ۚ مَأْوَاكُمُ النَّارُ ۖ هِيَ
مَوْلَاكُمْ ۖ وَبِئْسَ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿١٥﴾

All Glorify God

Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things. He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things. It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in every heart. (Verses 1–6)

This opening brings together a number of the attributes of Godhead as they manifest themselves in action. We see clearly that it is God who originates all, encompasses all, controls all and knows all. We see the hand of God as it works throughout the heavens and earth, tackles

innermost feelings, brings out deeply-buried secrets and looks from above on the universe and all who abide there. This powerful opening strongly shakes our hearts as it takes us on a round through the universe where we find, see and hear none other than God. We realize that we cannot escape His will, hide from His knowledge, seek refuge with, or appeal to anyone other than Him.

"*Everything in the heavens and earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 1) Thus the *sūrah* begins and the entire universe echoes God's glorifications. Everything in the universe joins in so that every open heart, no longer shielded by preoccupations with the transitory life of this world, hears this glorification. We do not need to dig for any further meaning to the text other than the apparent significance of its words. We do not know anything about the nature of the universe that is truer and more accurate than what God tells us. Therefore, when God says that everything in the universe '*extols God's limitless glory,*' then this is exactly what this sentence means. No other words highlight this meaning better or closer. We may understand from this that everything in the heavens and earth has a soul that turns to God and glorifies Him. This is the verse's closest meaning, confirmed by a number of authentic *aḥādīth*. It is also the experience of some people, who at moments when their hearts and souls were at a high point of clarity, related to the truth inherent in everything and who could see beyond apparent shapes and forms.

In the Qur'ān, we read about the Prophet David: "*We said: You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!*" (34: 10) And that is what happened: the mountains and the birds sang God's praises with David who himself had a pleasant and melodious voice. In his anthology of authentic *aḥādīth*, Muslim relates, on the authority of Jābir ibn Samurah: "The Prophet said: 'There is in Makkah a rock that used to greet me during the early days of my mission. I can identify it now'." 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib reports: "I was with the Prophet in Makkah when we went out in a certain direction. Every tree or mountain he faced said to him: 'Peace be to you, Messenger of God'." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of Mālik ibn Anas: "The Prophet used to give his sermons leaning on the branch of a tree. When the pulpit was made for him to stand on and he stood there delivering

his sermon, the branch yearned like a she-camel. The Prophet went down and rubbed it with his hand and it stopped."

There are many Qur'ānic verses that clearly express this universal fact, such as: "*Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him.*" (24: 41) "*Are you not aware that to God bow down in worship all those who are in the heavens and on earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and a great number of human beings?*" (22: 18) "*Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises.*" (17: 44) There is no need to try to explain these clear texts in a way that suits our own preconceptions of the nature of things when these are not based on the Qur'ān. Whatever ideas or thoughts we entertain about the universe should rely, first and foremost, on what is stated by God, the Creator and Originator of the universe, who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high.

"*He is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 1) His glorification by everything in the heavens and earth is a result of His surpassing power and wisdom. He is the One who has power over everything and who controls everything according to His flawless wisdom.

Absolute Dominion

We hardly catch our breath after this first verse has portrayed this great universal festival of God's glorification. The *sūrah* immediately takes us on another round in the universe: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He grants life and causes death; and He has power over all things.*" (Verse 2) We have learnt that everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory, as He is the sole owner of the universe who has no partner in His dominion. It is, thus, a case of glorifying the Owner by His property. It is He who creates life and death, granting life to every living thing and then determining its death. Nothing happens other than what He wills.

Life continues to be a secret in its nature and source. No one can tell where it came from or how. Indeed, no one knows what life truly is. The Qur'ān says that it is God who grants life to every living entity. No

one can deny this or prove anything contrary to it. Likewise, death is a deeply hidden secret whose nature is unknown to all. No one can cause it because none can take life away other than the One who granted it in the first place. Both life and death are aspects of His absolute dominion over the heavens and the earth.

"*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 2) His power is absolute, unrestricted by anything. God's will operates without any restriction whatsoever. Any limitation, of any type, form or colour, our minds try to apply to God's will, according to our own logic, is false as it is conceived by man's finite mind. The fact that God's will determines and operates the laws that operate in the universe is part of the overall picture of His free, unrestricted will. The choice is made without restriction, and the operation of these laws does not impose any limitation on God's will to make it operate within these laws. God's choice remains free and unrestricted.

The Qur'ān lays much emphasis on this fact, reiterating it on every occasion in a way that accentuates that God's will is absolutely free, unrestricted even by the results of its own actions. Thus, this fact remains clear, uncoloured by any alien conception. For example, God has promised the people of heaven that they will abide there forever, and the same promise is given to the people of hell. This promise is issued by His will, but His will is kept free beyond the very promise He has chosen to give. Therefore, He says about both groups that they will "*abide [there] as long as the heavens and the earth endure, unless your Lord wills it otherwise.*" (11: 107 and 108) This is repeated on every occasion so as to make it clear that no exception can be made. Human logic has no say on this other than what is stated in the Qur'ān.

In this way, we can appreciate the significance of this verse that states God's absolute power in His dominion in which He has no partner, where everything rightly extols His praises.

The One and Only

We are then introduced to another truth that may be greater and more profound than the previous ones: it is the truth that the only true entity is God – limitless is He in His glory. Therefore, He encompasses

everything and knows everything: "*He is the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. He has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 3) He is the First, which means that nothing was before Him; and He is the Last, which means that nothing remains after Him. He is the Outer, which means that nothing is above Him; and He is the Inner, which means that nothing is beyond Him. The first two attributes encompass the nature of time, and the other two the nature of place. The human mind may look everywhere, but it will find that nothing has any entity except God. Indeed all qualities of existence apply to Him alone. The very existence of the human mind materializes only through God's existence, which is the only true existence. Everything else receives its existence from Him. This is the basic truth that gives everything its nature. Nothing has an independent existence beyond this truth.

"*He has full knowledge of all things.*" (Verse 3) His is the knowledge of the truth absolute. Since every existence is derived from God, it is included in His absolute knowledge, which belongs to Him alone. No one shares in God's knowledge, much as people may get to know some aspects of the nature of their own world. Still, they will only know about what appears to them.

If this great truth is well established in a person's heart, why should he give any consideration to anything in the universe other than God? Nothing, including that very heart, has any true existence other than what it derives from that great truth. Everything else is a transitory delusion. Only God remains, as He is the only One who is eternal. Until this great truth is firmly established in our hearts, we should look at this Qur'ānic verse, contemplate and truly appreciate its message.

Sufis upheld this truth and went far and wide with it. Some of them said they could see God in everything in the universe, while others said they saw God beyond everything, and others still said that as they saw God, they could see no one else in the universe. These statements, inadequate as they are, simply point to the truth. What the Sufis are generally criticized for is that their concept led them to neglect life. Islam though is a balanced way of life. It wants the human heart to appreciate this truth, live with it and for it, while at the same time discharging all incumbent duties as vicegerents of this earth. Each person should work hard to implement the divine code of life on earth. Such implementation

is the result of a balanced appreciation of this great truth, consistent with the nature of man and the nature of the universe as created by God.

Creation, Knowledge and Dominion

Now the *sūrah* tells us how other truths branched out from that great one:

> *It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days and established Himself on the throne. He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them. He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do. His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God. He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.* (Verses 4–6)

These verses mention several truths: God's creation of the heavens and the earth; His establishing Himself on the throne; His knowledge of particular matters about His creation; His presence with everyone wherever they happen to be; the return of everything to Him; His conduct of the affairs of this world; and His knowledge of what is in people's hearts. All these spring out of the first great truth, but their presentation against this universal background gives them special effect. The heavens and the earth strike awe in our hearts by their expanse, beauty, harmony, accuracy of position and movement and in the consistency of their phenomena. Like the human heart, they are God's creatures. Thus, they too relate to man's heart. They strike some heavenly tunes on it when man looks and reflects on their creation. They say to man that they are all created by God, and that they extol His praises. Man should do the same. Like them, he should derive the truth of his existence from God's existence.

The six days in which God created the heavens and earth are known only to God. Our own days are accidental results of the earth's rotation in relation to the sun. This earth day came into existence after the creation of the earth and the sun. Therefore, we cannot apply this earth day to the

creation of the universe. We, therefore, leave such knowledge to God. He gives us such information in due course, if He so pleases.

The same applies to the throne. We believe in it as God has mentioned it, but we do not know its nature. As for God 'establishing' Himself on the throne, we can say that it is an expression that stresses God's control of all His creation. This is based on what the Qur'ān says and, as a result, we know for certain that God does not change situation or position. He is not unestablished on the throne in one situation and then in another established. To say, as some scholars do, that we believe in God's establishing Himself on the throne without knowing how does not give us an adequate explanation of the phrase "*and established Himself on the throne.*" It is preferable to say that this refers to God's absolute control of all creation. To so explain this does not depart from our method of abstaining from personal views about the meaning of things that do not belong to our world. Instead, we are relying on what the Qur'ān states and the impression it gives of God and His attributes.

Added to creation and control is absolute and careful knowledge. The Qur'ān describes the extent of this knowledge in a marvellous way, one that captures our minds as we try to follow it against the great expanse of the universe in a never-ceasing movement. This is far more than mere knowledge. It is an inspiring image that captures imaginations: "*He knows all that goes into the earth and all that comes out of it; all that descends from the skies and all that ascends to them.*" (Verse 4)

At every moment, countless numbers of creatures and things enter the earth, and countless others go out from it. Likewise, at every moment, unimaginable numbers of raindrops, rays, meteors, comets, angels, secret objects, etc. come down from the skies and similar numbers of visible and invisible creatures ascend to them. This short Qur'ānic statement refers to this ever-continuous multi-way movement and to great events that are beyond count. It leaves our minds looking everywhere, watching what goes into the earth or out of it, and what comes down from the skies or goes up into them. In this way we can have a glimpse of God's perfect knowledge as He is aware of everything that takes place everywhere. Our minds can thus roam in God's universe while we are still placed on earth. We travel on with alert senses, shuddering at the majesty of what we experience.

As our minds continue looking at the great expanse of the universe, the Qur'ān brings us back to ourselves and touches our inner feelings. We learn that God is with us, looking at us and seeing our actions. He is so close: "*He is with you wherever you may be; and God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 4) This is a factual statement, not a figurative one. God is with everyone and everything, at all times and in all places. He sees everything every creature does. This is a great truth. When we fully understand it, we experience a sense of awe together with a sense of joy as we learn that He is with us. This true statement is enough, when fully understood, to elevate us above earthly considerations, while keeping us all the time on our guard, wary of indulgence in what is unbecoming.

Once more the *sūrah* mentions God's dominion, putting it in a different context: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God.*" (Verse 5) This was mentioned the first time in the context of granting life, causing death and absolute power. Here, it is mentioned in the context of the return of everything to God. Such return closely relates to dominion over the universe. Appreciating this truth ensures that our hearts and minds never turn to anyone other than God in any situation or for any matter, at any time. Whatever we ask, we ask of God, and whatever we do will be done only to please God. Thus we are sure to follow the right way in public and private, in action and rest, in feelings and leanings, always knowing that none other than God can provide any help or protection against any adverse eventuality.

This opening concludes with a reference to a gentle aspect of God's power we see around us in the universe, and within us in our inner feelings: "*He causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 6) The passing of the night into the day and the day into the night is a continuous and gentle movement. This may mean that the night extends taking part of the day at one stage and the day extends at another stage taking part of the night. Or it may mean the actual penetration of the night into the day at the time of sunset and the penetration of the day into night at the time of sunrise. A similarly gentle action is the knowledge of what is in people's hearts, which means their guarded

secrets that are told to no one. The feeling of God's hand pushing the night into the day and the day into the night, in a very subtle and gentle way, makes our minds sensitive and reflective. The same can be said about feeling that God is fully aware of inner thoughts and feelings.

Degrees of Believers

Having softened our hearts with this opening, the *sūrah* calls on all people to believe and be ready to sacrifice money and property. The opening has made us ready to listen and pay full attention. Yet the address also brings its own inspiring touches and encouraging tones:

> *Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees. Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward. Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord, and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful. Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth? Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards, although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them. God is well aware of all that you do.* (Verses 7–10)

Here, God is addressing the hearts He has created. He knows them, knows what influences them, as well as what feelings they harbour. He knows that for faith to be pure and well established in our hearts so that it gives results in practical life is very hard. He knows how hard and long the struggle is for hearts to be ready to sacrifice purely for His sake. Therefore, the *sūrah* brings in such a host of factors and puts before us a number of universal truths. Their combined effect makes us measure things with the accurate measure of the great truth. The Qur'ān deals with these hearts time and again, step after step. It is not satisfied with a single address or influence presenting the case. Hence advocates of

the divine faith are well advised to reflect on the way the Qur'ān treats people's hearts, so that they can follow its guidance.

The beat at the *sūrah*'s opening is so powerful and profound that it shakes and softens hardened hearts, making them sensitive. The Qur'ān, however, does not use only those influences as it calls on people to believe and to be charitable: "*Believe in God and His Messenger, and give [in charity] of that of which He has made you trustees.*" (Verse 7) The addressees now are Muslims, yet they are called upon to believe in God and His Messenger. This means that they are called upon to ensure that the truth of faith, in its full meaning, takes hold of their hearts. This is a fine touch. They are also called upon to spend in charity, and this call is also coupled with an inspiring touch. They do not spend out of their own property, but rather out of the portion of God's kingdom that He has given them on trust. It is He who has the '*dominion over the heavens and the earth*,' which means that it is He who made the human race generally trustees over a part of His property. It is He who '*grants life and causes death*.' In this way He passes the trust from one generation to another.

Thus, this instruction is linked to what the opening of the *sūrah* said of universal facts, before it makes people ashamed of their behaviour before God. It is He who has given them all they have. What then will they say when He asks them to give in charity some of what He has given them? It is God who gives everything, and what He has will never end. What, then, stops them giving in charity when what they have depends on what God granted them. The *sūrah* does not merely give them this reminder, with all its connotations of shame, kindness and hope. Instead, it also gives them another incentive, making them aspire to more of what God bestows: "*Those of you who believe and give [in charity] will have a great reward.*" (Verse 7) How can anyone abstain from belief and giving in charity when they are shown such limitless kindness and generosity?

The *sūrah* goes further presenting more incentives to believe and accept the divine message. This time it highlights facts from people's own lives and what takes place in their very midst: "*Why should you not believe in God when the Messenger calls upon you to believe in your Lord,*

and He has already taken a pledge from you, if you are true believers? It is He who bestows from on high clear revelations to His servant, to lead you out of the deep darkness into light. God is indeed most compassionate to you, ever merciful." (Verses 8–9) The *sūrah* asks: what stops them from being truly believers when the Prophet calls on them to believe, and when they have already given him pledges of allegiance? What stops them from higher degrees of faith in God when it is He who bestows on His servant clear revelations that are sure to replace their error, doubt and anxiety with the light of faith and certainty? These are indeed aspects of God's compassion and mercy that He bestows on all.

The fact that the Prophet was among those people, calling on them to believe, addressing them with God's own words, establishing a link between them and God which they felt within their own souls was a great blessing, one that we now find difficult to imagine. That period of revelation when the Prophet was living among the Muslims was indeed remarkable. It was a time when God – limitless is He in His glory – addressed man, whom He created, through His servant, (peace be upon him), in a kindly and compassionate way. He said to them: 'Take this and leave that. This is My way, so follow it. You have slipped here, so pick up this rope leading to Me. You have erred and sinned, so repent; My door remains open, so come forward and never let despair creep into you, for My grace will erase all. You man! You said this and that which is wrong; or intended such and such which is a sin; or committed that, which is an act of disobedience. Therefore, come now before Me, declare your repentance, purging yourself of all that and return to My fold. And you man! Here is the solution to the problem you have been struggling with; or this is the answer to the question that has been troubling you; or this is the value of the deed you have committed.'

It is God who says this to people. They live under His care, feeling that He is truly and actually with them, listening to their complaints in the middle of the night and providing their solutions, guiding their every step.

This is something too great to imagine by a person who did not live during that period. The people these verses address actually lived through it, and yet they needed this treatment and these compassionate touches and reminders. This is another aspect of God's grace added to the first

aspect. Both can be appreciated by us who did not have the blessing of living during that remarkable period. "The Prophet said once to his Companions: 'Which believers do you think most remarkable?' They said: 'The angels.' He said: 'Why would they not believe when they are with their Lord?' They rejoined: 'The prophets, then.' He said: 'Why would they not believe when revelations were given to them from on high?' Said they: 'Then we ourselves.' He said: 'Why would you not believe when I am in your midst? The most remarkable of believers are people who come after you, look at scriptures and believe in what is in them'." [Related by al-Bukhārī.]

It is true what the Prophet says. It is true that the gulf is indeed wide. The pointers and incentives to faith in their case were great and remarkable. Hence the *sūrah* asks: 'Why would you not believe?' Then, it requires them to translate their faith into reality, if they are truly believers.

Classes of Actions

The *sūrah* then adds the incentive to spend in charity, putting this in an emphatic way: "*Why should you not spend freely in the cause of God, seeing that God's alone is the heritage of the heavens and the earth?*" (Verse 10) This reference takes us back to the fact already mentioned in the opening verses: "*His is the dominion over the heavens and the earth. Everything goes back to God.*" (Verse 5) The heavens and the earth are His own property and they revert back to Him. What has been assigned to people on trust will also go back to Him as part of this inheritance. Why should they, then, not be charitable when He is asking them to spend in charity? When this is put into perspective, there can be no justification for stinginess.

The elite community of the early believers, the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, came forward with what they could of sacrifice, in life and property, during a very hard time, before the great triumph was achieved. The victory mentioned here may refer to either the fall of Makkah to Islam, or to the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah. Both were events that greatly consolidated the position of Islam at a time when it was still besieged by enemies on all fronts. These people offered their

sacrifices to God, entertaining no thought of worldly gain or currying favour with a powerful Muslim state, for there was none. Their sacrifice was the result of a choice they made for God's sake. It was in support of a faith they wholeheartedly accepted and loved, valuing it dearer than their lives and properties. Yet what they sacrificed was, in quantity, much less than what those who flocked to Islam after its victory were able to sacrifice. Some of these offered sacrifices, stopping at the amount they heard the early Muslims gave. Therefore, the Qur'ān gives these offerings their true values, making it clear that it is not the quantity that determines the value; rather, it is the motive pointing to the truth of faith: "*Those of you who gave and fought [for God's cause] before the victory are not like others: they are higher in rank than those who gave and fought afterwards.*" (Verse 10)

A person who makes financial sacrifices and fights when the faith he believes in is struggling against great odds, able to call on the support of only a few, and when there is little hope of personal gain is totally different from the one who makes such sacrifices and fights at the time of security, when supporters are plentiful and victory is assured. The first is totally dedicated to his faith, placing his complete trust in God, with no quick gains to be hoped for. Nothing but faith urges him to make such sacrifices. The other always finds those who encourage him to do good deeds, even when his intention is right and he is totally dedicated to faith. Anas reports: "Some verbal disagreement occurred between Khālid ibn al-Walīd and 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf. Khālid said to 'Abd al-Raḥmān: 'You take pride against us because of the period you had ahead of us.'[1] We heard that this was mentioned to the Prophet. He said: 'Leave my Companions alone. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, should any of you spend the like of Mount Uḥud, [or he might have said, 'the weight of mountains'] in gold, he would not achieve the like of their deeds'." [Related by Aḥmad.] The Prophet is also authentically quoted as saying: "Do not curse my Companions. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, should any of you spend the like of Mount Uḥud

1. Khālid, who believed in Islam shortly before the conquest of Makkah but after the peace treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah, meant that 'Abd al-Raḥmān's position in the Muslim community was only due to his being among the early Muslims. In fact, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf was one of the first ten people to accept Islam. – Editor's note.

in gold, he would not achieve the measure of any one of them, not even half that measure."[2]

Having established the true measure of both groups in God's sight, the *sūrah* now states that they will all reside in heaven: "*Although God has promised the ultimate good to all of them.*" (Verse 10) Despite their difference in degree, they have all done well. This difference in rank and the promise of the great reward to all are due to God's knowledge of their respective situations, intentions, determination and actions: "*God is well aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 10) This is a reference to real intentions beyond apparent actions. It is after all the intention that determines the value of any action.

A Breathtaking Scene

The *sūrah* goes a stage further in motivating addressees to be true believers and to make financial sacrifices. It provides further incentives and inspiration:

> *Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him? On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right, [they will be told], 'The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.' On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!' They will be told: 'Turn back and seek some other light.' A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering. [Those without] will call out to those [within], 'Were we not with you?' They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation, you wavered, you doubted, and you were deceived by false hopes until God's command came to pass, and indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God*

2. These *aḥādīth*, and similar ones, provide a definite meaning to the group that formed the Prophet's Companions. They are those who accepted Islam in its early days. The Prophet used to say to the Muslims around him, who ranked among his Companions: 'Leave my Companions alone...' This indicates that he was referring to a special companionship. Referring to Abū Bakr, he once said: 'Leave my Companion alone.'

delude you. Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!' (Verses 11–15)

This address is not merely inspiring; it is captivating. It says to those who are always in need of help, '*Who will offer God a generous loan?*' The mere thought that he, a poor, little human being, can offer a loan to God should make a Muslim rush to do so. People normally compete to lend to someone who is rich – when they, including the rich, are all poor – because they know that repayment is certain. They are proud to lend money to such a wealthy person. So how would they feel when they make a loan to the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise?

The *sūrah*, however, does not leave it at this, but instead promises to repay such a goodly loan, given purely to Him without any thought of pleasing anyone else, in double or multiples. In addition, it promises a very generous reward: "*Who will offer God a generous loan, which He will repay in multiples and will generously reward him?*" (Verse 11) The *sūrah* then presents a brilliant image of this generous reward in a scene of the day when this is granted: "*On the day when you see all believers, men and women, with their light spreading rapidly before them and to their right.*" (Verse 12)

The scene presented here is unique both in framework and detail. It is a scene brought to life by a dialogue that enhances the clearly delineated image. As we read, a lustrous image is drawn before us in which we see believing men and women and a gently shining light radiating through them and flowing to their right. These human bodies are beaming with a light that spreads from them so that it can be seen both before them and to their right. It is the light into which God brought them out of darkness; the light that beamed into their souls to overshadow their original nature. Or is it, perhaps, that the light from which God created this universe and all who live in it,[3] now appears in this group of people who have been true to their nature?

3. It is now believed that the original substance from which the universe was created is light, and that it is composed of atoms, and that the atom is, in essence, radiation. This theory may be the closest to the truth because it appears to be in line with the Qur'ān.

We then listen to the address made to believers, men and women, combining honour with good news: "*The good news for you today is that you shall for ever abide in gardens through which running waters flow. This is indeed the supreme triumph.*" (Verse 12)

The scene does not end with this pleasant image. We have a contrasting one in which we see the hypocrites, men and women, lost in error, abandoned and humiliated. They try to cling to the believers: "*On that day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the believers, 'Wait for us! Let us have a ray of your light!'*" (Verse 13) Wherever the believers look, their gentle, transparent light spreads before them. How can hypocrites, who have spent all their lives in darkness, enjoy even a ray of that light? A voice coming from where they do not know tells them: "*Turn back and seek some other light.*" (Verse 13) This seems to be said in a sarcastic way, reminding them of what they used to do in their first lives when they engaged in hypocrisy, conspiring in the dark. They are told to go back to this world where light is sought through good action. On this Last Day, no light can be sought.

Immediately a barrier is erected to separate the believers from the hypocrites. These two groups were mixed in their first lives, but now they are sorted out: "*A wall with a gate will be raised between them: within it will be mercy, and outside will be suffering.*" (Verse 13) It appears that they cannot see through this wall, but it does not stop the people on both sides talking to and hearing each other. Now the hypocrites call out to the believers asking them: "*Were we not with you?*" (Verse 14) Were we not living with you at the same place, and were we not resurrected with you on the same plane? The believers confirm this, but their ways were different: "*They will reply, 'Yes, but you allowed yourselves to be led into temptation.*" Thus you turned yourselves away from divine guidance. "*You wavered.*" You did not make the right choice. "*You doubted.*" You could not bring yourselves to have certainty of faith and make the right choice. "*And you were deceived by false hopes.*" You were always deluding yourselves thinking that by holding the stick in the middle would ensure your safety in all situations. "*Until God's command came to pass,*" and all was lost. "*Indeed you let your deceptive thoughts about God delude you.*" (Verse 14) These thoughts were whispered by Satan who deceived you by raising false hopes before your eyes.

The believers go on with this reminder and statement, as if they are the ones assigned to make the judgement: "*Today no ransom will be accepted from you or from the unbelievers. The fire shall be your home: it is where you belong; and how evil a destination!*" (Verse 15) Or perhaps this is said by angels, or maybe by God Almighty.

From an artistic point of view, the image of light in this particular instance is most appropriate. The *sūrah* is speaking about hypocrites, men and women, who conceal their feelings and intentions, giving false appearances. They live in darkness, engage in hypocrisy and conspiracy and cause trouble. Light will expose what has been carefully hidden. Moreover, it provides a bright image that contrasts with the grimly dark one of hypocrisy. It is the best image to radiate the whole scene, and to flow before the believers and to their right while the hypocrites remain lost in what amounts to double darkness.

What heart would not aspire to have that sort of light on that day? What heart would not respond to the call to donate in plenty when listening to such an inspiring discourse? Thus, the Qur'ān deals with human hearts in a steady, consistent way, basing its address on perfect knowledge of their nature, how they are influenced and how they respond.

The second part of the *sūrah* continues this same line of address and inspiration.



2

A Race to Forgiveness

أَلَمْ يَأْنِ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَن تَخْشَعَ
قُلُوبُهُمْ لِذِكْرِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا نَزَلَ مِنَ
ٱلْحَقِّ وَلَا يَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟
ٱلْكِتَٰبَ مِن قَبْلُ فَطَالَ عَلَيْهِمُ
ٱلْأَمَدُ فَقَسَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ ۖ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ
فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors! (16)

ٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحْىِ ٱلْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا ۚ قَدْ
بَيَّنَّا لَكُمُ ٱلْءَايَٰتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless. We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason. (17)

إِنَّ ٱلْمُصَّدِّقِينَ وَٱلْمُصَّدِّقَٰتِ وَأَقْرَضُوا۟
ٱللَّهَ قَرْضًا حَسَنًا يُضَٰعَفُ لَهُمْ وَلَهُمْ
أَجْرٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿١٨﴾

Those who give generously in charity, men and women, and thus offer a goodly loan to God, [their loan] will be repaid in multiples, and they will have a generous reward. (18)

وَٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦٓ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلصِّدِّيقُونَ ۖ وَٱلشُّهَدَآءُ عِندَ رَبِّهِمْ ۖ لَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ وَنُورُهُمْ ۖ وَٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ وَكَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَآ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٩﴾

Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth, and who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light. Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire. (19)

ٱعْلَمُوٓا۟ أَنَّمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهْوٌ وَزِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌۢ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ فِى ٱلْأَمْوَٰلِ وَٱلْأَوْلَٰدِ ۖ كَمَثَلِ غَيْثٍ أَعْجَبَ ٱلْكُفَّارَ نَبَاتُهُۥ ثُمَّ يَهِيجُ فَتَرَىٰهُ مُصْفَرًّا ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطَٰمًا ۖ وَفِى ٱلْءَاخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرِضْوَٰنٌ ۚ وَمَا ٱلْحَيَوٰةُ ٱلدُّنْيَآ إِلَّا مَتَٰعُ ٱلْغُرُورِ ﴿٢٠﴾

Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure. (20)

سَابِقُوٓا۟ إِلَىٰ مَغْفِرَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَجَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا كَعَرْضِ ٱلسَّمَآءِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ أُعِدَّتْ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ بِٱللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِۦ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٢١﴾

Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed. (21)

مَآ أَصَابَ مِن مُّصِيبَةٍ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ
وَلَا فِىٓ أَنفُسِكُمْ إِلَّا فِى كِتَٰبٍ
مِّن قَبْلِ أَن نَّبْرَأَهَآ ۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى
ٱللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – (22)

لِّكَيْلَا تَأْسَوْا۟ عَلَىٰ مَا فَاتَكُمْ
وَلَا تَفْرَحُوا۟ بِمَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ
لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; (23)

ٱلَّذِينَ يَبْخَلُونَ وَيَأْمُرُونَ ٱلنَّاسَ
بِٱلْبُخْلِ ۗ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ هُوَ
ٱلْغَنِىُّ ٱلْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٤﴾

[nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise. (24)

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِٱلْبَيِّنَٰتِ وَأَنزَلْنَا
مَعَهُمُ ٱلْكِتَٰبَ وَٱلْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ
ٱلنَّاسُ بِٱلْقِسْطِ ۖ وَأَنزَلْنَا ٱلْحَدِيدَ فِيهِ
بَأْسٌ شَدِيدٌ وَمَنَٰفِعُ لِلنَّاسِ وَلِيَعْلَمَ
ٱللَّهُ مَن يَنصُرُهُۥ وَرُسُلَهُۥ بِٱلْغَيْبِ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
قَوِىٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٢٥﴾

We sent Our messengers with clear evidence of the truth, and through them We bestowed the book from on high, setting the balance, so that people could uphold justice. We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception. God is indeed powerful, almighty. (25)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا وَإِبْرَٰهِيمَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِى
ذُرِّيَّتِهِمَا ٱلنُّبُوَّةَ وَٱلْكِتَٰبَ فَمِنْهُم
مُّهْتَدٍ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants. Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors. (26)

ثُمَّ قَفَّيْنَا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِم بِرُسُلِنَا
وَقَفَّيْنَا بِعِيسَى ٱبْنِ مَرْيَمَ وَءَاتَيْنَٰهُ
ٱلْإِنجِيلَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِى قُلُوبِ
ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّبَعُوهُ رَأْفَةً وَرَحْمَةً وَرَهْبَانِيَّةً
ٱبْتَدَعُوهَا مَا كَتَبْنَٰهَا عَلَيْهِمْ
إِلَّا ٱبْتِغَآءَ رِضْوَٰنِ ٱللَّهِ فَمَا رَعَوْهَا
حَقَّ رِعَايَتِهَا فَـَٔاتَيْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا۟ مِنْهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنْهُمْ
فَٰسِقُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors. (27)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ
وَءَامِنُوا۟ بِرَسُولِهِۦ يُؤْتِكُمْ كِفْلَيْنِ
مِن رَّحْمَتِهِۦ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ نُورًا
تَمْشُونَ بِهِۦ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ
غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy, and will provide you with a light to walk in, and will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (28)

The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills. God's bounty is limitless. (29

لِّئَلَّا يَعْلَمَ أَهْلُ ٱلْكِتَٰبِ أَلَّا يَقْدِرُونَ
عَلَىٰ شَىْءٍ مِّن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ وَأَنَّ ٱلْفَضْلَ بِيَدِ
ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ
ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٢٩﴾

Overview

This part continues with the main theme of the *sūrah*: fulfilment of the true meaning of faith in people's hearts so that they come forward with financial sacrifice purely for God's sake. It includes inspiring touches similar to those found in the first part. It begins with a note of remonstration addressed to the believers who had not at that time attained the standard God wanted them to attain. It puts before them the situation of communities from among the people of earlier revelations whose hearts had hardened as time went by and, as a result, transgressed. The believers are warned against ending up in the same position, but a pleasant prospect is also put before them, telling them that God gives hearts a fresh life in the same way as He restores life to the earth after it has been lifeless.

Then we take a look at the next world. This is coupled with a repeat call to offer a generous loan to God, one that promises multiple repayment and a generous reward. This, thus, mirrors what was stated in the first part of the *sūrah*.

All values of this present life are then put on God's scales and weighed against the values of the life to come. The first seem like small and light playthings while the others appear serious, capturing our attention. Believers are, therefore, invited to hasten to those real values so that they can enjoy their results in a heaven that is immeasurably vast. Furthermore, this heaven has been made ready to receive those who believe in God and His messengers.

The believers are then brought back to their present condition in this life and its events. They realize that whatever happens, good or bad, is by God's will. Thus, financial sacrifice becomes easy for them and the

luxuries of this world are of no consequence. Instead, all their thoughts and feelings aspire to heaven.

The *sūrah* then presents an aspect of the history of the divine message, reflecting its unity of approach and direction. Those who deviate from this line, no matter what generation they belong to, are transgressors. Again, an image of what people who were given scriptures in the past did is shown to the believers. This concludes with a final address to them to remain God-fearing and to truly believe in Him and His Messenger so that He will then give them a double share of His grace, provide them with light in their lives and forgive them their slips. God's bounty is not limited to the people of earlier revelations, as such people allege. It is limitless and remains in God's hands, who grants it to whom He wills.

We thus see that from start to finish the *sūrah* is closely knit. It follows a consistent line playing varying and similar notes and using repetition to the extent that is needed. All to make a strong impression on our hearts.

A Higher Degree of Faith

> *Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high, and not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors! Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless. We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason.* (Verses 16–17)

This profoundly touching remonstration by God, the Ever Merciful, urges a complete response from hearts that have been slow to bask in His grace after He has sent them His Messenger calling on them to believe. He granted him revelations that are sure to take them out of darkness into light. He has also shown them enlightening signs in the universe around them and in all His creation. This note of remonstration overflows with tenderness as it arouses in them feelings of His majesty so that they humble themselves when He is mentioned. In this way can they receive the truth bestowed from on high with what it deserves of

obedience, submission and obedience to God. This is coupled with a touch of criticism for their slow response: *"Is it not time for believers that their hearts should feel humble at the remembrance of God and the truth that has been bestowed from on high."* (Verse 16)

To this note of urging and encouragement is added a warning against slackening and negligence. It tells them how hearts harden when time passes without refreshment provided by remembrance of God and His truth: "*And not to be like those who were granted revelations before them and whose hearts have hardened with the passing of time? Many of these are now transgressors.*" (Verse 16) When hearts harden, all they produce is sin and disobedience. The human heart is subject to quick changes, it easily forgets. When it brightens up it is like a ray of light spreading life. Should it stay long without reminders, it becomes blunted, hardened and loses its light. Therefore, it requires constant reminders so that it remains soft and enlightened. It must always be alert so as not to harden.

If a heart does become hardened, this must not, however, lead to despair. It can be brought back to life and revived with divine light. God restores the earth to life. After it has been lifeless for long, it quickens and produces plants, flowers, fruits and rich varieties in plenty. The same applies to hearts, by God's will: "*Know that God restores the earth to life after it has been lifeless.*" (Verse 17) This Qur'ān has plenty of what brings hearts back to life, supplying them with proper nourishment, just like lifeless earth is restored to life: "*We have made Our revelations clear to you so that you may use your reason.*" (Verse 17)

In the Highest Position

A new incentive to sacrifice now follows:

> *Those who give generously in charity, men and women, and thus offer a goodly loan to God, [their loan] will be repaid in multiples, and they will have a generous reward. Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth, and who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light. Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire.* (Verses 18–19)

Those who give generously in charity do not couple their action by pressing for favours from the recipients of that charity. In all this, they do not deal with people. They deal directly with God, offering Him a loan. What better incentive for charity! Can there be a more profound feeling for a charitable believer than that he is giving a loan to God who has no need of anyone and who repays good deeds in multiples. Can he hope for anything better than dealing with the One who has dominion over the entire universe, and that whatever he spends in charity will be given back in multiples together with a generous reward?

Those who uphold the truth enjoy a very high status, as indicated by several statements made by the Prophet. Yet this high status is, by the grace of God, easy to achieve. It is not reserved for any individual or group. Whoever truly believes in God and His messengers can aspire to this height. God's grace is without limit: "*Those who believe in God and His messengers are the ones who uphold the truth.*" (Verse 19) This is the distinctive characteristic of this religion. It is a way open to all people, a lofty standard to which all can aspire. There is no privileged position for anyone in particular. Only good action elevates people to the highest level. There is no class system in this religion.

Imām Mālik reports on the authority of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī that the Prophet said: "The people of heaven look up to those in lofty mansions above them as you would try to locate a bright star moving away in the far horizon to the east or the west." People asked him whether these are mansions reserved for prophets and whether none other than a prophet achieves them. He said: "By Him who holds my soul in His hand, others achieve them: people who believe in God and in his messengers." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

This speaks about belief, which is followed by a reference to sacrificing one's life, speaking about those who '*bear witness*', which is a reference to martyrs. In Arabic, the term '*shahīd*' carries both meanings: "*And who will bear witness to it before their Lord. They will have their reward and their light.*" (Verse 19) The high position given to martyrs is mentioned several times in the Qur'ān, and in numerous statements made by the Prophet. This religion cannot be properly established in human life without having a guarding force, and without a hard struggle. The struggle aims to secure the faith, protect its followers when they face

testing times, and preserve its code from corruption. Therefore, martyrs for God's cause, who are the only ones to deserve this name and to bear witness, have their special status and position close to their Lord.

In an authentic *ḥadīth* the Prophet says: "The spirits of martyrs are in the craws of green birds which fly in heaven unrestricted. They ultimately home back to these lanterns. God looks at them and asks what they wish for. They say: 'We would love to go back to the world so that we can fight again for your cause and be killed like we were the first time.' He will say to them: 'I have already decreed that people will never return there'." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Anas quotes the Prophet as saying: "None of the people of heaven would ever like to return to this world even though he would have all that the earth contains, except for martyrs who wish to return and be killed ten times fighting for God's cause. This is because of the honour that is given to them." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Thus life seemed too trivial for those who listened to all this and realized what position God grants to martyrs. Imām Mālik reports on the authority of Yaḥyā ibn Sa'īd: "God's Messenger encouraged people to fight for God's cause and he mentioned the garden of heaven. A man from the Anṣār who was eating a few dates as he listened said: 'If I continue sitting here and eating these dates, I am certainly of those who are eager to stay in this life.' He then threw his dates away and pushed forward in the fighting until he was killed."

Having mentioned the positions of those who uphold the truth and those who bear witness to it, the *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers who deny God's revelations: "*Those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations are the dwellers of the blazing fire.*" (Verse 19) Who would wish to abandon a position of honour in order to be among the dwellers of hell?

A Life of Trivialities

The next touch comments on this call to a high standard of faith and the sacrifice of life and property. It shows the life of this world to be too trivial to have any value for people who aspire to heaven.

> *Know that the life of this world is but a play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, a cause of boasting among you and a quest for more*

> *riches and children. It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers. Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow, and in the end it crumbles into dust. In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance. The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure.* (Verse 20)

When evaluated by its own measures and standards, this world appears great indeed. However, when it is looked at against the life to come and its standards, it appears trivial. In the picture drawn in this verse, it looks like children's toys compared to the seriousness of the life to come where people's fates are decided. A play, a passing delight, a beautiful show, mutual boasting, and a quest for riches; this is the truth behind all our apparent hard work and preoccupation. An animated picture gives an example of what this life is like: "*It is like the rain that causes the plants to grow, and thus gives delight to the sowers.*" (Verse 20) The word used in this verse for '*sowers*' is '*kuffār*' which primarily means 'unbelievers'. The choice is deliberate as it provides a clear hint to the fact that unbelievers are delighted by the riches of this world. "*Then it withers, and you can see it turn yellow.*" (Verse 20) It is ready for harvest. It is all temporary, lasting but for a short while. It attains its fullness "*and in the end it crumbles into dust.*" Thus the film of life, shown in a host of lively and familiar images, comes to an end as it all crumbles into dust.

The life to come has a totally different appearance. People should not only take this into account but also prepare themselves for it: "*In the life to come there is terrible suffering, as well as God's forgiveness and His goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 20) It does not end in a moment, like this present world. It does not crumble into nothing like those withered plants. It involves reckoning, accountability, and continuity. "*The life of this world is no more than an illusory pleasure.*" (Verse 20) Its pleasure has no real substance. Its attraction is based on illusions that make people overlook reality.

When we think carefully about all this, it immediately appears true. As the Qur'ān states this truth, it does not want us to ignore the life of this world altogether, or to forget the duty requiring us to build human

life on earth.[4] Rather, it aims to rectify our standards and values so that we rise above the temptation of worldly pleasures, for these are transitory in nature. Rising above such temptations was needed by those addressed by the *sūrah* in order that they make faith their reality. It is also needed by anyone with faith if he wants his faith to become reality. This is not an easy task; it may also ultimately require sacrifice of one's life for it.

A Great Prize to Compete for

The *sūrah* calls the believers to compete in the proper field for the one and only worthwhile prize that will define their permanent status in the everlasting world:

> *Vie with one another in seeking to attain your Lord's forgiveness, and a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in God and His messengers. Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.* (Verse 21)

Competing in play, pastimes and delightful pursuits, and seeking more riches and offspring are not worthy of adults who have outgrown childish play. The real race aims to win the greatest of all prizes, '*a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth.*' In the past, before the facts about the vastness of this universe were discovered, people might have thought this verse and similar statements made by the Prophet to be figurative. Today, with observatories indicating the great, endless dimensions of the universe, the reference to the widths of heaven and the lofty mansions seen over the horizon sound factual and need not be treated as figurative. The distance between the earth and the sun, for example, seems insignificant when set against other distances in the universe.

This great prize in the garden of heaven is there for anyone to achieve. All are invited to strive for it. The only requirement to taking part is to believe in God and His Messenger: "*Such is God's bounty which He grants to whomever He pleases. God's bounty is great indeed.*" (Verse 21) God's bounty is not restricted in any way. It is available to all. This is

4. This is discussed in detail in the commentary on verse 51 of *Sūrah* 56 in this volume.

the prize to compete for. A believer must deal with this great existence, not limiting himself or restricting his concerns and feelings to life in this little earthly world. He needs to do this if he is to fulfil the role worthy of a person who has faith, the role that is in conflict with the petty greed of ordinary people, and with erring thoughts, deviant ideas and twisted minds. He will face stiff resistance by falsehood and its exponents, all of whom will defend their positions aggressively. No one can withstand this except a believer who looks at an existence that is greater than this life, bigger than the earth and everlasting.

Earthly standards and values do not represent truth that should be established in a believer's consciousness. In relation to the truth, earthly standards and values are as small as the earth in relation to the universe, and as short as the earth's lifespan to immortality. The difference is simply immeasurable by any earthly standard.

Thus a believer who looks up to the great horizon of the truth rises above the trifling reality of this earth, no matter how large or extensive it appears. Instead, he deals with this great immortal truth, one that belongs to the life to come, and he upholds the values of faith that cannot be swayed by any thing. Such is the role of faith in the life of its advocates.

The Will That Will Be Done

The *sūrah* now adds a profound note about God's will, which will always be done:

> *No incident can take place, either on earth or in yourselves, unless it be recorded in a decree before We bring it into being – that is easy for God – so you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain. God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly. Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.* (Verses 22–24)

This universe is so perfectly designed that nothing happens in it unless it has been preordained and pre-planned. Nothing occurs as a

result of coincidence or blind accident. Prior to the creation of the earth and those who live and have lived on it, God's perfect and accurate knowledge encompassed every happening seen at its appropriate time. As far as God's knowledge is concerned, there is no past, present or future. Such time demarcations serve a purpose for us, who are mortal, so as to put things within suitable frameworks. We cannot comprehend and distinguish things without limits. In particular, humans need time and place limits. We cannot go beyond these to touch the absolute except in certain flashes when our spirit receives such contact in some way other than that which we normally use to comprehend what is around us. God Almighty is the absolute truth who looks at life and existence in its totality, without boundaries, limits or restraints. This universe, its events and the stages it goes through from its beginning to its end exists in God's knowledge as one complete whole, with no limits or separations of time and place. Every event has its place in an overall design known only to God. Every incident, good or bad, occurring in any part of the earth or to people generally or those addressed at the time of the *sūrah*'s revelation in particular, is entered in that eternal record prior to the earth's creation or people in the form they have been created in: "*That is easy for God.*" (Verse 22)

When our minds contemplate the great truth of existence, we realize that this is the inevitable fact resulting from it. Hence, it gives us peace and reassurance about whatever may happen, good or bad. Thus, we are not overwhelmed with grief when suffering terrible misfortune, nor are we too overjoyed with life's pleasantries: "*So you need not grieve for what you miss or be overjoyed at what you gain.*" (Verse 23) When we look with a broad perspective, remember eternity, and see events in their respective positions as defined in the design of the universe and determined by God's knowledge, this gives us a steadier outlook on passing events. Man panics when he separates himself from the universe and looks at events as though they are accidents that collide with his own small existence. Conversely, when he realizes fully that he and the events that occur to him or to anyone else or to the whole earth are merely molecules in a great body, which is the universe, and that these molecules are all in their right positions in this perfect design, and that they are all mutually complementary, he feels reassured and comfortable. He does not grieve

for what he has missed, nor is he overly joyed with what he gains. He accepts God's will with comfort, realizing that what takes place is what actually should take place.

This is a level to which only the elite few can rise. Other believers are only required not to let their feelings of grief at misfortune or joy at good fortune take them away from their duty to remember God in both situations, attributing everything to Him. They must moderate their feelings in either case. 'Ikrimah says: "Everyone experiences joy and sorrow. Therefore, make your joy an occasion for thanksgiving and your sorrow one for showing patience." Such is the balanced attitude Islam encourages.

"*God does not love those who are arrogant and boastful; [nor] those who are niggardly and bid others to be niggardly.*" (Verses 23–24) The link between what we have been discussing and arrogance and boastfulness on the one hand, and being niggardly and encouraging niggardliness on the other, is that a person who truly feels that whatever befalls him, good or bad, comes from God will not show any of these feelings. It is the one who does not feel this that thinks that the wealth, position or honour he has is of his own making and, therefore, he boasts and behaves arrogantly. He is the one who then becomes niggardly, unwilling to give away any of what he has. He also encourages others to be similarly niggardly in a demonstration that his is the right approach.

"*Those who turn away should remember that God alone is self-sufficient, worthy of praise.*" (Verse 24) When a person spends money in charity, he does so to his own good; when he responds to God's call, he serves his own interest. God needs none of His creatures. He is worthy of all praise, but in need of none.

Far Back in History

The third part of the *sūrah* briefly outlines the history of the divine message, starting with Noah and Abraham. It states its aims and objectives in people's lives, referring briefly to the conditions of the people of earlier revelations, particularly those who followed Jesus (peace be upon him).

We sent Our messengers with clear evidence of the truth, and through them We bestowed the book from on high, setting the balance, so that people could uphold justice. We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception. God is indeed powerful, almighty. And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants. Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors. We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary. We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him. As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance. Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors. (Verses 25–27)

In essence, the divine message is the same. All messengers preached it, equipped with clear evidence of the truth it teaches. Most of them were also given miracles of a preternatural kind. Some were given books of scripture. In reference to this, the *sūrah* says, '*through them We bestowed the book from on high*,' making them all one unit in the same way as all divine revelations are one. This confirms the unity of the divine message. The divine message also sets '*the balance*,' because all divine messages were given to establish a proper balance in human life to which people should refer in their evaluation of actions, events, people, indeed in everything. It is this balance that keeps human life safe from conflicting desires and interests that pull in different directions. The balance does not give special favour to anyone because it works for all on the basis of divine truth. It does no injustice to anyone because God is the Lord of all.

This balance or standard bestowed by God is the only guarantee of safety for humanity in the midst of tempests, earthquakes and other turmoil that overwhelms it as it finds itself in the middle of an ocean of conflicting desires and sentiments, competition and selfishness. Hence it is imperative that people should have an accurately balanced and

steady standard that points them to the truth, justice and fairness with no favouritism whatsoever. The purpose of this balance, then, is "*that people could uphold justice.*" (Verse 25) This accurate balance that is an essential part of divine law is indispensable. Without it, people would not be able to recognize justice. Even if they recognized it, it would not remain steady and consistent in their hands.

"*We have also sent down iron, with its mighty strength and diverse uses for mankind. Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception.*" (Verse 25) The phrase, '*We have also sent down iron,*' is similar to the statement, '*He has bestowed on you four kinds of cattle in pairs.*' (39: 6) Both refer to God's will and planning as He creates things and events. Thus, they are all sent down, or bestowed from on high, by God's will and wisdom. Use here of the expression '*sent down*' in reference to iron ensures harmony within the verse which speaks of sending down, or bestowing from on high, the book setting the balance. Likewise, everything God creates is according to His accurate planning.

So, God has sent down iron which gives strength in war and peace. In addition to its '*mighty strength*', iron provides '*diverse uses for mankind.*' Indeed the present human civilization is based primarily on iron and its uses. "*Thus God may mark out those who would stand up for Him and His messengers, even though He is beyond the reach of human perception.*" (Verse 25) This is a reference to using arms in *Jihād*, or striving for God's cause. This is the appropriate place to refer to such striving in the *sūrah* that speaks of sacrifice of life and property for God's cause. The comment at the end of the verse explains the meaning of people 'standing up' for Him and His messengers. It means standing up for and advocating His message. God Himself is in no need of support from any quarter: "*God is indeed powerful, almighty.*" (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* then speaks of the unity of the divine message in the men who advocated it, i.e. His messengers. They are all descendants of Noah and Abraham. "*And We sent Noah and Abraham, and gave prophethood and revelation to their descendants.*" (Verse 26) They form a single tree, with interlinked branches stretching wide, bearing prophethood and receiving divine revelations, stretching from the dawn of humanity at the time of Noah. When it reached the time of Abraham, it branched

out further. Thus all prophethood belonged to that main branch that has become a root in its own right.

The offspring to whom prophets and messengers were sent were not of the same type: "*Among them there are some who were rightly guided, but many who were transgressors.*" (Verse 26) Towards the end of the line, Jesus was sent with his message: "*We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After these We sent Jesus, son of Mary.*" (Verse 27) He followed in the footsteps of earlier messengers from among the descendants of Noah and Abraham, making the divine message a continuous chain, with one coming after another, up to Jesus' own time.

At this point, the *sūrah* mentions a prominent characteristic of those who followed Jesus: "*We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of those who truly follow him.*" (Verse 27) These are the natural fruits of his message that emphasizes spiritual purity. Indeed such compassion and mercy are clearly noticed among those who truly believe in Jesus' message and who properly follow him. Other verses in the Qur'ān refer to these qualities. History has given us some images of these, with reports about Negus, the ruler of Abyssinia, and the Christian delegation from Najran who came to the city of Islam willing to accept it, motivated by the truth established in their hearts, since they truly followed Jesus, son of Mary.

The *sūrah* mentions another phenomenon that prevailed among the followers of Jesus: "*As for monastic asceticism, We did not enjoin it upon them. They invented it themselves out of a desire for God's goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 27) The weightier explanation of this statement is that monastic asceticism, well known in Christian history, was a personal choice, an invention made by some of Jesus' followers who sought to win God's acceptance. Through it, they sought to steer themselves away from the burdens of this life and its many attractions. It was not something that God imposed on them in the first place. Yet when they made this choice, binding themselves to it, they were committed before God to observe its requirements such as purity, contentment, chastity, worship and piety; this so as to dedicate themselves to God's cause. However, such asceticism lost its grip on reality, and ended up as mere rituals devoid of spirituality. Many are those who make a show of it, without real substance. The fact is that only the very few are capable of rigorously

fulfilling its requirements: "*Even so, they did not observe it as it should properly be observed. So We gave those of them who truly believed their due reward, but many of them were transgressors.* (Verse 27) God does not value people by appearances and rituals; He assigns their value on the basis of their actions and intentions. He holds them to account on the basis of what they truly feel and how they actually conduct themselves. He alone knows the reality of what they harbour in their hearts.

Twice the Mercy

Now, the *sūrah* makes its final address to the believers in Islam. They are the last chain of believers in the divine message in its long history. They will continue to be the custodians of the heritage of this divine message until the Day of Judgement:

> *Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy, and will provide you with a light to walk in, and will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills. God's bounty is limitless.* (Verses 28–29)

Addressing them as '*believers*' touches their hearts tenderly. It arouses in them their sense of belief and reminds them of their duty to give their faith its due. It brings alive their bond with their Lord who addresses them by this quality that is so dear to them. It is on the basis of this bond that they are called upon to be God-fearing and to believe in His Messenger. Thus, such belief possesses a special meaning, one that reflects true faith and all its practical manifestations.

"*Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger. He will then give you a double measure of His mercy.*" (Verse 28) This is an unusual expression speaking of a double measure of God's mercy, which is indivisible. It is enough that God's mercy should touch a person for that person to receive it in full. The wording here gives a feeling of extended mercy and kindness.

"*And will provide you with a light to walk in.*" (Verse 28) This is a reference to a divine gift which God bestows on hearts that are truly conscious of Him, fear Him, and truly believe in His Messenger. This gift makes those hearts beam with light so as to see the truth, see beyond appearances shedding the covers and barriers that try to screen it. Thus, they are not prone to confusion, nor do they follow divergent ways. They have the '*light to walk in.*' "*And will forgive you. God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 28) No matter how much light a person has, he remains human: he may slip despite knowing the way. Hence, he needs God's forgiveness and mercy.

"*Believers, remain God-fearing and believe in His Messenger,*" so that you may receive a double measure of His mercy, be granted light to walk in, and benefit by God's mercy when you slip or fail in your duty. "*The people of earlier revelations should know that they have no power whatever over any of God's bounty. All bounty is in God's hand: He grants it to whomever He wills.*" (Verse 29) Peoples of earlier revelations claim that they are God's chosen people, or that they are God's sons and beloved ones. "*They say, 'Follow the Jewish faith – or, follow the Christian faith – and you shall be rightly guided.'*" (2: 135) "*They declare, 'None shall enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian.'*" (2: 111) God, therefore, calls on believers to act so that they become well deserving of His mercy, forgiveness and admittance to His heaven. In this way, those people of earlier religions will realize that they cannot monopolize God's bounty or even a measure of it. It is all in His hands, and He grants it to whomever He wills. His bounty is not reserved for any community or group, nor is it limited or scanty. Indeed, "*God's bounty is limitless.*" (Verse 29)

The *sūrah* concludes with this address to the believers that is full of encouragement to compete for the great prize of God's mercy and heaven. It is a fitting conclusion to a *sūrah* that repeatedly calls on believers to fulfil the requirements of their faith, humble themselves before God and make the necessary sacrifices of self and property, in complete dedication to Him.

In conclusion, we say that this *sūrah* is a clear example of the Qur'ānic method of addressing human hearts in a profound and effective way. In its opening, flow and conclusion, in its music, images and connotations, in its handling of its subject matter and how it develops it stage after

stage, the *sūrah* provides a highly effective lesson to advocates of the divine message. It teaches them how to address people and how to bring human nature and hearts alive. It is a lesson taught by the Maker of hearts, the author of the Qur'ān, and the Creator of everything in due measure. It is from this school that successful advocates of God's message graduate.



SŪRAH 58

Al-Mujādalah

(The Pleading)

Prologue

In this *sūrah*, as in several that follow, we are invited to witness some of the events that the first Islamic society experienced as it began to take shape in Madīnah. In this way, we see how it was moulded and prepared to undertake its role in the world. It was a huge undertaking, starting with the development of a new, complete and comprehensive concept of life that continues to serve as the basis for how the Muslim community conducts its practical affairs. That first Muslim community, however, was to present this concept to the world; it was its responsibility to establish a new foundation for life based on this concept.

That first Muslim community, which was being prepared for this great role, consisted of ordinary human beings. Its elite were the Muhājirīn and Anṣār whose concept of their new faith had matured and who now dedicated themselves to it completely. They understood the truth of their existence as part of the existence of the universe. Thus, they realized that they were part of God's will manifested in the universe. They neither deviated from it nor lagged behind in their march with it. They were, in fact, as they are described in the last verse of the *sūrah*: "*You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose*

hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful." (Verse 22)

This elite group formed a minority in the ever-increasing numbers that swelled the Muslim community's ranks, particularly after it came to be held in awe, and this before Makkah had fallen to Islam. People flocked to the Muslim community but without having received enough Islamic education or having lived long enough in an Islamic environment. Moreover, hypocrites found their way into the Muslim community, trying to serve their own interests or avoid personal trouble. These vacillated between the Muslim community and its still powerful opponents, whether idolaters or Jews.

To educate this community in preparation for its great and important role in the world at large required strenuous effort, patience and slow but sure treatment in small and serious matters alike. All in all, it was a major social engineering project that Islam and the Prophet undertook. It sought to build individuals who could establish an Islamic society and an Islamic state based on the divine constitution. Each person had to understand this code of living, implement it and carry it to the world at large in the form of a vibrant society. It was not therefore a mere theory devoid of substance.

In this *sūrah*, and several *sūrahs* that follow, we are shown some practical examples of this great endeavour as well as some aspects of the Qur'ānic method of building the Islamic character and dealing with events, personal whims and habits. We also see some aspects of the long conflict between Islam and its opponents: Jews, idolaters and hypocrites.

This *sūrah* in particular gives us an inspiring image of the care God took of this fledgling Muslim community as He provided it with a sound education and purged its unwanted streaks, developing His presence within its consciousness. He showed the Muslim community that He was with them looking after even their most private affairs and minor events, protecting it from its enemies' schemes, whether subtle or apparent. God had placed it fully under His care and, therefore, He moulded

its morality, manners, habits and traditions. Those Muslims formed His party in human society and they carried His banner, identifying themselves as His people on earth.

Thus the *sūrah* draws right at the start a picture from that unique period of human history, characterized by direct contact between heaven and earth, and with heaven's direct involvement in the daily life of this particular group of people: "*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 1) What we see here is the involvement of heaven, providing judgment, in the ordinary affair of a small, poor family. God listened to the woman's argument as she pleaded with the Prophet, yet 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife who was nearby, could hardly hear her. This picture fills us with the pleasure of feeling God to be near us, taking care of our concerns.

The *sūrah* then confirms that those who contend with God and His Messenger, i.e. enemies of the Muslim community, are destined to be the losers on earth and to endure humiliating suffering in the life to come. They will be punished for their evil deeds which God reckons but they forget, even though these are their own deeds: "*God is witness to all things.*" (Verse 6)

This is followed by a reminder that God is present when any group of people, three or more, engage in secret discussion, thinking that they are totally unobserved. God is with them wherever they happen to be: "*On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 7) Our feelings of God's presence are here enhanced by the realization that He is fully aware of all that takes place.

This reminder of God's presence serves as preparation for the warning issued to those who in their secret conversations conspire to harm the Muslims and cause them grief. They are warned that God sees all their scheming and records all their conspiring. He knows what they intend of sin, aggression and disobedience of God's Messenger. They are told that God will take them to account for all this. He will punish them as they deserve to be punished. The Muslims are also issued with a command not to speak in secret about anything that is in conflict with righteousness and God-consciousness.

The *sūrah* continues with its purpose of educating the Muslim community, urging the believers to adopt good and friendly manners, showing their obedience, when they attend the Prophet's circle or any circle of study or worship. It lays down some rules for discussion with the Prophet, highlighting the seriousness of such discussion.

The remainder of the *sūrah* speaks about the hypocrites who befriend the Jews and conspire with them, and who then try to conceal this with false swearing before the Prophet and the Muslim community. It depicts an image of them in the life to come when they are also quick to repeat their false oaths, trying thus to avoid God's punishment. They think that since their swearing in this world spared them the anger of the Prophet and his followers, it may spare them God's anger on the Day of Resurrection. The *sūrah* re-emphasizes that those who contend with God and His Messenger are the ones to suffer humiliation; they are the losers. This is something that God has decreed, just as He decreed that He and His messengers will prevail. This is stated in order to show the weakness of any hostile position. Yet at the time, some Muslims thought such people to be too strong and tried to maintain good relations with them. They did not realize the importance of the Muslim community having an independent stand under God's banner, and feeling safe under His care.

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it paints a bright picture of God's party, represented at that time by the elite community of Muhājirīn and Anṣār. This is the situation that the Qur'ān wants the Muslim community to end up with.



Al-Mujādalah (The Pleading)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all. (1)

قَدْ سَمِعَ اللَّهُ قَوْلَ الَّتِي تُجَادِلُكَ فِي زَوْجِهَا
وَتَشْتَكِي إِلَى اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ يَسْمَعُ تَحَاوُرَكُمَا
إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ بَصِيرٌ ﴿١﴾

Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. (2)

الَّذِينَ يُظَاهِرُونَ مِنكُم مِّن نِّسَائِهِم
مَّا هُنَّ أُمَّهَاتِهِمْ ۖ إِنْ أُمَّهَاتُهُمْ إِلَّا اللَّائِي
وَلَدْنَهُمْ ۚ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَيَقُولُونَ مُنكَرًا
مِّنَ الْقَوْلِ وَزُورًا ۚ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَعَفُوٌّ
غَفُورٌ ﴿٢﴾

Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do. (3)

وَالَّذِينَ يُظَاهِرُونَ مِن نِّسَائِهِمْ ثُمَّ
يَعُودُونَ لِمَا قَالُوا فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ
مِّن قَبْلِ أَن يَتَمَاسَّا ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ
تُوعَظُونَ بِهِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ
خَبِيرٌ ﴿٣﴾

فَمَن لَّمْ يَجِدْ فَصِيَامُ شَهْرَيْنِ مُتَتَابِعَيْنِ
مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَتَمَاسَّا ۚ فَمَن لَّمْ يَسْتَطِعْ
فَإِطْعَامُ سِتِّينَ مِسْكِينًا ۚ ذَٰلِكَ لِتُؤْمِنُوا
بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ۚ وَتِلْكَ حُدُودُ اللَّهِ ۗ
وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger. Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (4)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُحَادُّونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ كُبِتُوا
كَمَا كُبِتَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ وَقَدْ أَنزَلْنَا
آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ ۚ وَلِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ
مُّهِينٌ ﴿٥﴾

Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low. We have bestowed from on high clear revelations. Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers (5)

يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُهُم
بِمَا عَمِلُوا ۚ أَحْصَاهُ اللَّهُ وَنَسُوهُ ۚ
وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٦﴾

on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things. (6)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي
الْأَرْضِ ۖ مَا يَكُونُ مِن نَّجْوَىٰ
ثَلَاثَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ رَابِعُهُمْ وَلَا خَمْسَةٍ إِلَّا هُوَ

Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is

سَادِسُهُمْ وَلَآ أَدْنَىٰ مِن ذَٰلِكَ وَلَآ أَكْثَرَ
إِلَّا هُوَ مَعَهُمْ أَيْنَ مَا كَانُوا ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُم
بِمَا عَمِلُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ
عَلِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be. On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything. (7)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ نُهُوا عَنِ النَّجْوَىٰ ثُمَّ
يَعُودُونَ لِمَا نُهُوا عَنْهُ وَيَتَنَاجَوْنَ
بِالْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ
الرَّسُولِ وَإِذَا جَاءُوكَ حَيَّوْكَ بِمَا لَمْ
يُحَيِّكَ بِهِ اللَّهُ وَيَقُولُونَ فِي
أَنفُسِهِمْ لَوْلَا يُعَذِّبُنَا اللَّهُ بِمَا نَقُولُ ۚ
حَسْبُهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ يَصْلَوْنَهَا ۖ فَبِئْسَ
الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٨﴾

Have you not seen how those that have been forbidden to hold secret conversations still revert to what they have been forbidden? They conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger. When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you. They say to themselves, 'Why does God not punish us for what we say?' Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end! (8)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا تَنَاجَيْتُمْ فَلَا تَتَنَاجَوْا
بِالْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَمَعْصِيَتِ الرَّسُولِ
وَتَنَاجَوْا بِالْبِرِّ وَالتَّقْوَىٰ ۖ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي
إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Believers, when you converse in secret, do not do so with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger, but rather hold counsel to promote righteousness and God-consciousness. Always remain God-fearing; to Him you will be gathered. (9)

إِنَّمَا ٱلنَّجْوَىٰ مِنَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ لِيَحْزُنَ
ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَلَيْسَ بِضَآرِّهِمْ شَيْـًٔا
إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَعَلَى ٱللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ
ٱلْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

[All other kinds of] secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (10)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ
تَفَسَّحُوا۟ فِى ٱلْمَجَٰلِسِ فَٱفْسَحُوا۟
يَفْسَحِ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ۖ وَإِذَا قِيلَ ٱنشُزُوا۟
فَٱنشُزُوا۟ يَرْفَعِ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟
مِنكُمْ وَٱلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا۟ ٱلْعِلْمَ دَرَجَٰتٍ ۚ
وَٱللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١١﴾

Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then do so, and God will make room for you. If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you do. (11)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا نَٰجَيْتُمُ ٱلرَّسُولَ
فَقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىْ نَجْوَىٰكُمْ صَدَقَةً ۚ ذَٰلِكَ
خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ وَأَطْهَرُ ۚ فَإِن لَّمْ تَجِدُوا۟ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Believers, when you wish to speak to God's Messenger in private, offer something in charity before you speak to him. That is better for you and more conducive to purity. If you do not have the means, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (12)

ءَأَشْفَقْتُمْ أَن تُقَدِّمُوا۟ بَيْنَ يَدَىْ نَجْوَىٰكُمْ
صَدَقَٰتٍ ۚ فَإِذْ لَمْ تَفْعَلُوا۟ وَتَابَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمْ
فَأَقِيمُوا۟ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلزَّكَوٰةَ وَأَطِيعُوا۟
ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Do you hesitate to offer charity before you speak with the Prophet? Since you did not offer charity, and God has turned to you in His mercy, attend regularly to prayer and pay your *zakāt* [i.e. obligatory charity] and obey God and His Messenger. God is well aware of your actions. (13)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ تَوَلَّوْا قَوْمًا غَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِم مَّا هُم مِّنكُمْ وَلَا مِنْهُمْ وَيَحْلِفُونَ عَلَى الْكَذِبِ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Have you not seen those who would be friends with people who have incurred God's anger? They belong neither to you nor to them. They knowingly swear to falsehood. (14)

أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ سَاءَ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do. (15)

اتَّخَذُوا أَيْمَانَهُمْ جُنَّةً فَصَدُّوا عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿١٦﴾

They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. (16)

لَن تُغْنِيَ عَنْهُمْ أَمْوَالُهُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُهُم مِّنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ ۖ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined for the fire, where they will abide. (17)

يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيَحْلِفُونَ لَهُ كَمَا يَحْلِفُونَ لَكُمْ وَيَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ عَلَىٰ شَيْءٍ ۚ أَلَا إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ الْكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you, thinking that they have something to stand upon. It is they who are indeed liars. (18)

اسْتَحْوَذَ عَلَيْهِمُ الشَّيْطَانُ فَأَنسَاهُمْ ذِكْرَ اللَّهِ ۚ أُولَٰئِكَ حِزْبُ الشَّيْطَانِ ۚ أَلَا إِنَّ حِزْبَ الشَّيْطَانِ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. They are the party of Satan. It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers. (19)

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ يُحَآدُّونَ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥٓ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
فِى ٱلْأَذَلِّينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be among the most abject. (20)

كَتَبَ ٱللَّهُ لَأَغْلِبَنَّ أَنَا۠ وَرُسُلِىٓ ۚ
إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ قَوِىٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٢١﴾

God has thus ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed powerful, almighty. (21)

لَّا تَجِدُ قَوْمًا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِٱللَّهِ وَٱلْيَوْمِ
ٱلْءَاخِرِ يُوَآدُّونَ مَنْ حَآدَّ ٱللَّهَ
وَرَسُولَهُۥ وَلَوْ كَانُوٓا۟ ءَابَآءَهُمْ
أَوْ أَبْنَآءَهُمْ أَوْ إِخْوَٰنَهُمْ أَوْ
عَشِيرَتَهُمْ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ كَتَبَ فِى
قُلُوبِهِمُ ٱلْإِيمَٰنَ وَأَيَّدَهُم
بِرُوحٍ مِّنْهُ ۖ وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ
تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ خَٰلِدِينَ
فِيهَا ۚ رَضِىَ ٱللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا۟ عَنْهُ ۚ
أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ حِزْبُ ٱللَّهِ ۚ أَلَآ إِنَّ حِزْبَ
ٱللَّهِ هُمُ ٱلْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful. (22)

A Personal Case in Dispute

God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all. Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers;

their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives. Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do. However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people; this, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger. Such are the bounds set by God. Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe. (Verses 1–4)

In pre-Islamic days, a man who became angry with his wife might say to her, "You are to me like the back of my mother", and thereafter she was forbidden to him. She was not divorced however, but rather in a state of suspense. She could neither have normal marital relations with her husband nor be free to find some other arrangement for herself. This was yet another aspect of the unfair treatment of women in pre-Islamic Arabia.

These verses speak of one such event that took place before the ruling on this problem, known as *ẓihār*,[1] had been laid down. The details of the case are related in the following *ḥadīth* quoting the woman at the centre of the case, Khuwaylah bint Tha'labah:

> It was concerning me and Aws ibn al-Ṣāmit that God revealed the opening verses of the *sūrah*, The Pleading. I was married to him and he had grown old, with a quick temper. He came in one day and I questioned something he had said. He was angry as a result and said to me, 'You are to me like my mother's back'. He then went out and sat with his people for some time. He came back later and he indicated that he wanted to have sex. I said: "In no way! By Him who holds Khuwaylah's soul in His hand, you cannot approach me

1. The word *ẓihār* is derived from *ẓahr*, which means 'back', in reference to the formula used in these cases when a man would tell his wife that she was to him as unlawful as his mother's back. – Editor's note.

when you have said what you said until God and His Messenger have ruled in our case. He tried to force me, but I overpowered him in the way a woman can overpower a weak old man. I left him and went to one of my neighbours to borrow a dress from her.

I went to the Prophet and sat in front of him. I told him what had happened and complained strongly about my husband's bad manners. The Prophet said to me: "Khuwaylah! Your cousin is an old man; so be kind and God-fearing in your treatment of him." Before I left, revelations were bestowed from on high concerning me. The Prophet experienced what he usually experienced when revelations were given to him. Then he came to and said: "Khuwylah! God has revealed Qur'ānic verses concerning you and your mate." He then read to me the verses starting with "*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all,*" up to "*grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe.*"

The Prophet then said to me: "Tell him to free a slave." I said: "Messenger of God! He does not have the means to do so." He said: "Then let him fast two consecutive months." I said: "He is certainly an old man who cannot fast." He said: "He should then feed sixty poor people with a *wisq*[2] of dates." I said: "Messenger of God! By God, he cannot afford that." The Prophet then said: "We will help him, then, with a sack of dates." I said: "Messenger of God! I, too, will help him with another sack." The Prophet said: "That is good and kind of you. Go and give this to charity on his behalf, and take good care of your cousin." I did as the Prophet told me. [Related by Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd.]

This, then, is the case of the woman whose argument with the Prophet God in His majesty heard and listened to. It is on the basis of this case that God pronounced His ruling from on high, giving this woman her right so that she and her husband could be free of worry. He thus showed the Muslims what to do if such a family problem occurred.

2. A *wisq* is a measure of volume estimated to weigh about 130 kilogrammes of wheat. – Editor's note.

This is the personal situation that opens a *sūrah* of the Qur'ān, God's book, whose words are echoed by the universe as they are bestowed from on high. It opens with the statement, '*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband...*' We see here that God is present in this private case of a woman who is a mere individual in the community at large. God is not so preoccupied with conducting the affairs of the universe as not to listen to an individual's case and give His ruling on it.

It was indeed a serious matter that such an event should take place and that a community of people should feel that God was present with them as they went about their daily business. He, in His majesty, the Supreme, the Overpowering, to whom belong the heavens and the earth, responds to such ordinary problems; how compassionately overwhelming!

'Ā'ishah says: "All praise is due to God who hears all sounds. The pleading woman, Khawlah, came to the Prophet and spoke to him in a corner of my home. I could not hear what she said. Then God revealed that '*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband...*'" [Related by al-Bukhārī and al-Nasā'ī.]

As given by Khawlah – or Khuwaylah, which is a form of endearment – this report and how she went to the Prophet and argued with him, then the verdict given in the Qur'ān gives us a picture of the life of this unique community during that amazing period of history. People in that community felt their direct bond with heaven and awaited directives from on high regarding its ordinary affairs. The response was soon forthcoming, often given as people were waiting. Thus the whole community felt that they were God's dependents: He took care of them and they looked for His care just as young children expect to be cared for by their parents.

Education Through Practice

When we look at the Qur'ānic report of this case, we cannot miss that elements of education and guidance are given side by side with the verdict and the comment on it. This is the usual method of the Qur'ān, providing all that is necessary.

"*God has heard the words of the woman who pleads with you concerning her husband, and complained to God. God has heard what you both had to say. God hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 1) This is an amazing opening that says, you have not been alone; God was present, listening to you. He heard what the woman said, pleading with you and complaining to Him. He already knew the whole story and was fully aware of what discussion had taken place. He hears all and sees all. In this highly inspiring way the Qur'ān presents all that occurred but without the involvement of a third party.

The *sūrah* then states the principle that governs such cases: "*Even if any of you say to your wives, 'You are to me like my mother's back,' they are not your mothers; their only mothers are those who gave them birth. What they say is iniquitous and false. Yet God pardons and forgives.*" (Verse 2) This deals with the case in its entirety. *Ẓihār* does not rely on any solid basis. A wife is not a mother so as to become forbidden like one. Somebody's mother is the woman that gave birth to that person. A wife cannot become a mother at the utterance of a word or a few words. Such a statement lacks all substance, it is utter nonsense. In life, all relations should be based on what is true, clear and solid so as to prevent any muddle or confusion. "*Yet God pardons and forgives*" what has passed of such incidents.

Having laid down the principle so clearly, the verdict is stated in detail: "*Those who separate themselves from their wives by saying, 'You are as unlawful to me as my mother,' and then go back on what they have said, must atone by freeing a slave before the couple may resume their full marital relation. This is an admonition to you, and God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 3) God has made freeing a slave a way of atonement for various offences. This is one way Islam freed those who had fallen into slavery in consequence of the system prevalent at the time, which allowed for the enslavement of prisoners of war. Various views have been stated with regard to the phrase, "*then go back on what they have said.*" We choose the view that says that they resume marital relations which they had earlier forbidden themselves by *ẓihār*. The freeing of a slave should occur before it becomes permissible for them to so go back. A comment is added here: "*This is an admonition to you.*" (Verse 3) The atonement required is an admonition and a warning against reverting

to this totally unacceptable practice. "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 3) He knows its nature, how it happens and your intention in doing it.

This comment is given before the verdict is completed. It serves to keep hearts alert and to strengthen discipline, reminding people of God's authority and His knowledge of whatever is apparent or concealed. The *sūrah* then states: "*However, he who does not have the means shall fast instead for two consecutive months before the couple may resume their full marital relation; and he who is unable to do it shall feed sixty needy people.*" (Verse 4) This is followed by a comment and a directive: "*This, so that you may prove your faith in God and His Messenger.*" (Verse 4) These people were indeed believers. However, this clarification and these penalties provide a direct link between their affairs and God's order. This makes belief operative in ordinary life, giving faith real authority in society. "*Such are the bounds set by God.*" (Verse 4) He has set these bounds so that people will not transgress them. He is also angry with those who do not observe these bounds. "*Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe,*" because of their transgression, lack of faith and going beyond the limits He has defined.

In Contention Against God

The last sentence in the verse, '*Grievous suffering awaits those who will not believe,*' is certainly a fitting ending as it completes the discussion of the woman's situation, while also providing a bridge to the theme of the next verse that speaks about those who contend against God and His Messenger. This is characteristic of the superb Qur'ānic method as it smoothly moves from one theme to another:

> *Those who contend against God and His Messenger shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low. We have bestowed from on high clear revelations. Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things.* (Verses 5–6)

The opening passage of the *sūrah* provided an aspect of the care shown to the Muslim community, while this second passage provides an aspect of antagonism to the opposite group who contend against God and His Messenger. The Arabic term, *yuḥāddūn*, translated here as 'contend' is derived from the same root as the word used earlier, *ḥudūd*, which means 'boundaries'. Thus, this group are defined as taking a stand at the other boundary, confronting God and His Messenger. This gives an image of two parties in contention and confrontation. As such, it serves to show their action in a very bad light. How miserable for a creature to be in open hostility to his Creator when it is He who provides him with sustenance.

These people who are in contention "*shall be brought low as those who lived before them were brought low.*" The way this sentence is phrased in Arabic may be understood as a prayer against them. A prayer by God is a sentence of judgement that makes it inevitable since it is He who pronounces this sentence, and His will is always done. The phrase, '*those who lived before them,*' refers either to earlier communities who were punished by God, or to the then unbelievers who suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the Muslims prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*, as happened, for example, at the Battle of Badr.

"*We have bestowed from on high clear revelations.*" This sentence separates the two fates suffered by the unbelievers in this life and in the life to come, in order to point out that both fates are clearly stated in these verses. It also tells us that these unbelievers do not face these fates as a result of ignorance or any ambiguity in the truth. Indeed, the truth has been put to them clearly and lucidly in these revelations, which they too have been given.

As the *sūrah* refers to their fate in the hereafter, it adds an inspiring comment that serves an educational purpose: "*Shameful suffering awaits the unbelievers on the day when God will raise them all from the dead and tell them exactly all that they did in life. God will have taken it all into account, even though they may have forgotten it. God is witness to all things.* (Verses 5–6) They are made to suffer shame in punishment for their arrogance. This shameful suffering will take place on the day when all will be resurrected. Thus, it will be seen by all. Besides, the suffering is determined on the basis of a true account of their deeds. If they have

forgotten these, God has recorded them all, as nothing escapes His knowledge: "*God is witness to all things.*"

The opposite cases of care and antagonism take place in God's presence and with His knowledge. He witnesses the help and care granted to the believers as well as the hostility shown to the other group. The believers should be reassured by His presence, while the unbelievers should take heed.

Whispers and Conspiracies

The *sūrah* then portrays God's presence in an inspiring image that leaves a telling effect on our hearts:

> *Are you not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth? Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be. On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do. God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 7)

The verse begins by stating God's knowledge that takes in everything in the heavens and earth. Our imagination is left to roam across the wide horizons and the remote corners of the earth, drawing a picture of this knowledge that leaves out nothing large or small, apparent or hidden, in this vast universe. It then draws gradually closer touching its addressees' hearts, presenting an image of God's knowledge that shakes them strongly: "*Never can a secret conversation take place between three people where He is not the fourth; nor between five where He is not the sixth, nor between less or more than that without Him being with them, wherever they may be.*" (Verse 7)

This is a true statement, but it is expressed in a profoundly effective way. It leaves our hearts with two contrasting feelings, trembling with awe on the one hand and reassured on the other as we amazedly feel the friendly presence of the Almighty. Thus, wherever three people meet in secret they feel that God is their fourth, and if they are five, they

realize that He is their sixth. Indeed, wherever two people whisper in secret, God is with them as He is with any larger group. Whenever we contemplate this image we are overwhelmed with awe. It is true that God's presence gives us a feeling of friendly reassurance, but it is at the same time very awesome. It is the Almighty who is present "*wherever they may be.*"

"*On the Day of Resurrection He will tell them the truth of what they used to do.*" (Verse 7) This statement sends a shudder of fear into people's hearts. The mere presence of God and His hearing of all conversations is ominous. Now they look at the consequences of this presence in the form of punishment. What happens when that which people say in secret is publicized in the presence of all on the Day of Resurrection, when all mankind of all generations are witnesses!

The verse ends in the same way as it started, giving a general image: "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 7) Thus the notion of God's full and comprehensive knowledge, which is stated in various ways in this verse, is driven home to everyone. This inevitably leaves a profound effect on our hearts and minds.

This awesome picture of God's knowledge serves as an introduction to a warning issued to the hypocrites who held secret conversations, conspiring against the Prophet and the Muslim community in Madīnah:

> *Have you not seen how those that have been forbidden to hold secret conversations still revert to what they have been forbidden? They conspire with one another with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger. When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you. They say to themselves, 'Why does God not punish us for what we say?' Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end!* (Verse 8)

The verse suggests that the Prophet's initial policy in dealing with the hypocrites was to advise them to be clear and sincere in their attitude, and to stop conspiring with the Jews against Islam. Yet still they persisted in their deviant ways, scheming against the Muslim community, trying in every way possible to disobey the Prophet and cause disruption.

The verse also suggests that some of them used to offer their greeting to the Prophet in a twisted way, giving it a bad meaning: "*When these people come to you they greet you with words God does not use to greet you.*" (Verse 8) They might have used the same means as the Jews did when they pronounced the greeting *assalām 'alaikum*, which means 'peace be to you', as, *assām 'alaikum*, which means 'death to you'. They might have used some other way that appeared innocent but which nonetheless concealed an ill wish. They even thought that had Muḥammad been truly a prophet, then God would have punished them for what they said by way of greeting or in their whispers and secret conversations.

It is clear from the way the *sūrah* opens then unfolds that God had told the Prophet of what they said and schemed. The *sūrah* began with the announcement that God heard the woman pleading with the Prophet, and then it stated that God is witness with any group, large or small. All this suggests that He informed the Prophet of the hypocrites' schemes and the thoughts they harboured.

An answer is given to their ill-conceived thoughts: "*Hell will be punishment enough for them. They will burn there. How vile a journey's end!*" (Verse 8)

What to Say in Secret

The *sūrah* then addresses the believers by their very quality of having accepted the faith. It tells them that they must not indulge in the sort of secret whispers the hypocrites resorted to, encouraging each other to commit sin, aggression and disobedience of the Prophet. It reminds them to remain God-fearing and tells them that such whispers as the hypocrites engage in is inspired by Satan who aims to cause grief to the believers. Hence, it is totally unbecoming of those who have faith:

> *Believers, when you converse in secret, do not do so with a view to sinful doings, aggressive conduct and disobedience of God's Messenger, but rather hold counsel to promote righteousness and God-consciousness. Always remain God-fearing; to Him you will be gathered. [All other kinds of] secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it*

be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust. (Verses 9–10)

It seems that some in the Muslim community had not fully absorbed the sense of Islamic discipline. Such people met when times were hard to consult among themselves, and this was unknown to their leadership. This is something contrary to the nature of the Muslim community and the spirit of Islamic discipline, which together require that every view or suggestion first be presented to the leadership, not to fringe groups. It also appears that some of these fringe groups might have stirred up trouble that could have had negative effects on the Muslim community. These people may also not have had any intention of causing harm or difficulty for the Muslim community, but by raising certain subjects and discussing them without having a full picture of the matter this could cause such harm.

The *sūrah* addresses them as believers, using their quality that establishes their bond with God. This makes the address especially effective. It tells them that should they converse in private, then their conversation must not involve anything that connotes sin, aggressive conduct or disobedience of the Prophet. The only subjects that are fitting for believers are those that '*promote righteousness and God-consciousness,*' with the aim of facilitating them and bringing about their results, which are always good. The *sūrah* reminds them that they should remain God-fearing, for they will certainly be gathered to Him and He will hold them to account for their deeds; these He knows no matter how hard they try to conceal them.

A man stopped 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar as he was walking with a friend and asked him: "'What did you hear the Prophet say about secret conversations on the Day of Judgement?' He answered: 'I heard the Prophet when he said that God will bring a believer close to Him and shield him with His cover, so that he will not be seen by others. He will ask him about his sins, naming them one after one. When the man has acknowledged all his sins and feels that he will be doomed, God will say to him: 'I have kept these sins secret for you during your life on earth; now I forgive you them.' He will then be given the record of his good deeds. As for the unbelievers and the hypocrites, the witnesses

will point to them and say: 'These are the ones who have lied about their Lord. God's curse befalls the wrongdoers.'" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

In this way, such people are put off secret conversations and side whispers unknown to the Muslim community to which they belong and whose interests are the same as their own. In other words, they must not think themselves separate from the Muslim community in any way. The *sūrah* tells them that when other Muslims see such side whispering and secret conversations, they are hurt by them. They feel apprehensive, concerned that a lack of trust has crept into the community. Satan always tries to tempt whisperers to go further in order to cause worry and grief to others. However, the *sūrah* reassures the believers that Satan will not achieve his purpose: "*Secret conversation is the work of Satan, designed to cause grief to the believers. Yet he cannot harm them in the least, unless it be by God's leave. In God, then, let the believers place their trust.* (Verse 10) Believers place their trust in God and in no one else.

The Prophet repeatedly advised against secret conversations whenever such talk caused doubt, anxiety and apprehension. He is quoted by Ibn Mas'ūd as saying: "When there are only three of you, let there be no discussion between two of them to the exclusion of the third, for this is bound to grieve him." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

This is an aspect of fine manners, and a wise precaution against what causes suspicion. Sometimes, however, there is need for a private discussion in order to keep a secret, or to avoid a scandal. This is acceptable and it normally takes place among community leaders. It must never, however, be through a side group with the rest of the community unaware of what is going on. Such a practice is divisive and leads to friction and grief, which is Satan's aim. God's promise is definitive. Satan will not achieve his purpose by such means, because God will protect the Muslim community. He is fully aware of every secret conversation, every conspiracy against the Muslim community. Satan can never harm the believers "*unless it be by God's leave.*" (Verse 10) This exception is added to emphasize that God's will is absolute and free of restriction in any situation to which His promise applies.

"*In God, then, let the believers place their trust.*" (Verse 10) He is the Guardian who protects the believers. He is the Almighty who knows all,

the Witness to all things. Nothing in the universe escapes His knowledge. Nothing occurs unless it be by His will. He has promised to protect the believers. Could there by anything more reassuring?

Refined Manners

The believers are encouraged to maintain another aspect of good behaviour and fine manners:

> *Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then do so, and God will make room for you. If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge. God is fully aware of all that you do.* (Verse 11)

Reports speaking about the revelation of this verse suggest that it actually related to the hypocrites, which makes it more relevant to the flow of the *sūrah*. Qatādah mentions that this verse speaks about gatherings for voluntary worship. When those who were already sitting with the Prophet saw someone coming to join them, they were obviously keen to retain their own positions close to the Prophet. Here, God orders them to make room for each other.

Muqātil ibn Ḥayyān reports:

> This verse was revealed on a Friday, when the Prophet was at al-Ṣuffah where the place was rather narrow. He used to honour those who attended the Battle of Badr from among the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār. Some people who fought at Badr came to join him but the place was already taken up. They stood facing the Prophet and greeted him. He replied to their greeting. Then they greeted the people sitting with the Prophet and those replied. They continued to stand, hoping that those present would make room for them. The Prophet realized why they remained standing and that nobody had made room for them. He was displeased. Therefore, he said to some of those from the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār who did not take part in Badr to stand up, choosing them by name. He asked to stand up as many as there were standing. Those who were thus asked to

> stand felt this to be hard. The Prophet noticed that they looked upset. Some hypocrites exploited this, saying to the believers: 'Do you not say that your man is fair to all people? We certainly saw him being unfair to these. Here were some people who had already sat in their places, eager to be close to their Prophet, yet he asked them to stand up, giving their places to ones who came late...' The Prophet is reported to have said a prayer: 'May God have mercy on one who makes room for his brother.' After that, people used to quickly rise in order to make room for their brothers.

If this report is authentic, it should be understood as not being in conflict with other *aḥādīth* that forbid someone to ask his brother to stand up so as to sit in his place, such as that which says: "Let no man make another rise from his position so as to sit in his place. Rather, move closer and make room for others." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Other instructions by the Prophet make it clear that a person who is joining a sitting group should sit at the end. He must not walk over people's shoulders so as to be in front. The Qur'ānic verse urges those who are sitting to make room for those joining them. It also urges obedience, requiring the one who is seated to rise if he is asked to do so. This order, however, is given by the leader responsible for organizing the group, not by the newcomer.

The purpose behind all this is to instil into people the feeling of welcome towards the newcomer before actually making room for him to sit. When that feeling is genuine, people are pleased to see others joining them, and those seated receive the newcomers warmly, willingly making room for them. However, if the person in charge thinks that a particular place should be given to a newcomer for a special reason, his instructions should be readily and happily complied with, observing at the same time the overall rules of not walking over people's shoulders or making one person stand to let another sit in his place. It should all be done with mutual tolerance.

Again we note the Qur'ānic method of making people willing to comply with every instruction. The *sūrah* promises those who make room for others that God will make good room for them: "*Believers, when you are told to make room for one another in your gatherings, then*

do so, and God will make room for you." (Verse 11) It also promises those who were instructed to leave their place so as to give it to others that they will enjoy an elevated position with God: "*If you are told to rise up, then do so. God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge.*" (Verse 11) This, in recompense for their obedience and accommodating attitude.

The occasion was one of being close to the Prophet in order to learn from him. The *sūrah* teaches believers that good faith, which makes people accommodating and obedient, and knowledge, which refines hearts and manners, will ensure a higher position with God. This as a reward for willingly vacating a position close to the Prophet, obeying his order given for a particular purpose he had in mind: "*God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 11) He rewards people according to what He knows of their feelings and intentions.

This is yet another example of the Qur'ānic method of educating Muslims, teaching them to be kindly, accommodating and helpful by bringing out their better feelings. Religion does not work by giving firm instructions that must be literally obeyed; rather, it relies on changing people's feelings and sensitivities.

The Qur'ān also teaches them to refine their manners when dealing with the Prophet. It appears that people were eager to talk to the Prophet privately, each seeking his advice concerning his own private matter, or merely to have the pleasure of being alone with him. People did not seem to appreciate the demands on the Prophet's time, with all his social and public responsibilities, or they did not realize that a matter for which they wanted a private conference with the Prophet must be a serious one. Therefore, God wanted them to understand that it was necessary to impose a tax, for the benefit of the community, to be paid by the person who wanted the Prophet to attend to his personal problem because he was taking up some of the Prophet's time which was devoted to the community. This tax took the form of a charity which should be paid before attending the Prophet:

> *Believers, when you wish to speak to God's Messenger in private, offer something in charity before you speak to him. That is better for you and more conducive to purity. If you do not have the means, God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful.* (Verse 12)

'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib was the one who acted on the instructions given in this verse. According to reports, he set aside a number of dirhams, i.e. the silver currency of the time. Whenever he wanted to speak alone to the Prophet he gave one dirham in charity. This requirement was nonetheless difficult for the Muslims, as they were generally poor. The instruction, however, fulfilled its purpose, making them aware of the value of a private conference with the Prophet. God lightened their burden, revealing the next verse which abrogated the requirement of paying to charity before such a conference took place. The verse also directed the Muslims to attend better to their various aspects of worship:

> *Do you hesitate to offer charity before you speak with the Prophet? Since you did not offer charity, and God has turned to you in His mercy, attend regularly to prayer and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. obligatory charity] and obey God and His Messenger. God is well aware of your actions.* (Verse 13)

These two verses and the reports we have about the occasions in which they were revealed provide an aspect of the educational efforts that aimed to cultivate the manners and social approach of the Muslim community, even in matters of detail that were not particularly serious.

False Swearing

The *sūrah* speaks anew about the hypocrites who befriended the Jews in Madīnah, describing their true position and attitude. It threatens to expose their hypocrisy and to inflict a terrible end upon them. It makes clear that Islam will be triumphant, despite all their schemes and conspiracies:

> *Have you not seen those who would be friends with people who have incurred God's anger? They belong neither to you nor to them. They knowingly swear to falsehood. God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do. They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God. Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined*

for the fire, where they will abide. On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you, thinking that they have something to stand upon. It is they who are indeed liars. Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the remembrance of God. They are the party of Satan. It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers. (Verses 14–19)

This strong denunciation of the hypocrites who befriended those who had incurred God's anger, i.e. the Jews, suggests that these hypocrites were very active in scheming against the Muslim community, conspiring with its avowed enemies. It also suggests that the authority of Islam had now been consolidated so as to strike fear into the hypocrites' hearts. Thus, when the Prophet and the believers confronted them with what God might have exposed of their scheming, they resorted to swearing falsely, denying what was attributed to them, knowing, however, that they lied as they swore. They hoped that by thus forswearing they would spare themselves any punishment for scheming against the Muslim community: "*They use their oaths as a cover [for their falseness], and they turn people away from the path of God.*" (Verse 16)

Repeated warnings are issued to them in this passage: "*God has prepared for them grievous suffering. Evil indeed is what they do.*" (Verse 15) "*Hence, shameful suffering awaits them. Neither their wealth nor their children will be of the least avail to them against God. They are destined for the fire, where they will abide.*" (Verses 16–17) The *sūrah* describes their abject and miserable position on the Day of Judgement when they will swear to God as they used to swear to people: "*On the day when God will raise them all from the dead, they will swear before Him as they swear now before you.*" This description suggests that hypocrisy had become so entrenched in their hearts that it would remain with them on the Day of Judgement, in the presence of God who knows people's deepest secrets and innermost thoughts: "*Thinking that they have something to stand upon,*" when they actually stand on nothing, not even thin air.

The *sūrah* brands them as confirmed liars: "*It is they who are indeed liars.*" (Verse 18) It then explains the cause of their condition: "*Satan has gained mastery over them and thus caused them to remain oblivious of the*

remembrance of God." (Verse 19) A heart that forgets to remember God becomes corrupt and given to evil: "*They are the party of Satan.*" (Verse 19) They stand under his banner, act in his name, obey his instructions, work for his objectives. This situation of unmitigated evil ends in total loss: "*It is the partisans of Satan who will truly be the losers.*" (Verse 19)

Such a strong denunciation certainly fits the evil and the harm those hypocrites intended towards the Muslim community. It also reassures the Muslims that God is with them, exposing their hidden enemies.

Such hypocrites were intimate with the Jews, thinking that they were a power to be reckoned with. Hence they always sought their help and advice. Therefore, God makes it clear to them that His enemies will always suffer defeat and humiliation, while His cause and His messengers will be victorious:

> *Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be among the most abject. God has thus ordained: 'I shall most certainly prevail, I and My messengers.' God is indeed powerful, almighty.* (Verses 20–21)

This is indeed a true promise made by God: it came true in the past and will always come true, despite appearances that may suggest that it will not be so fulfilled. What actually happened was that the message of God's oneness overpowered unbelief and idolatry. The Islamic faith was well established on earth and humanity accepted its supremacy after a long struggle against unbelief, polytheism and atheism that ended in the total defeat of these evil forces. There were periods in which atheism or polytheism managed to gain power in certain areas, as happens today with some states that are openly atheist or polytheistic, yet belief in God generally remains dominant in the world. Besides, atheism and polytheism will always be short lived, because they are not fit to survive.[3] Humanity discovers every day new evidence guiding it to believe in God and to the consolidation of faith and belief in His oneness.

A believer treats a promise by God as a confirmed and undoubted fact. Should what be on the ground at any time or place be contrary to this, then that which is on the ground is false and transitory. It occurs on

3. Future events, viz. the collapse of Communism, confirmed the author's view. He wrote this in the early 1960s when Communism was in its heyday. – Editor's note.

earth for a limited period and for a purpose only God knows. It may be there to awaken faith in people's hearts, so that it takes over and God's promise is fulfilled at its appointed time.

When we look today at the determined onslaught against the people of faith, in its numerous forms of suppression, pressure and scheming, we remember God's true promise. The onslaught has been so ferocious that large numbers of believers have been killed, tortured, left destitute and deprived of their livelihoods. Yet faith remained firm in believers' hearts, protecting them from yielding and protecting their communities from loss of identity and annihilation by attacking forces. It has also saved these communities from submitting to tyranny except for short periods during which they rallied their forces to defeat such oppression. When we look at this across the generations we realize that God's promise will undoubtedly come true. We find this now in the present situation without need to wait for long.

Anyhow, a believer will never entertain any doubt that God's promise is the truth and that this will certainly take place. Those who contend against God and His Messenger will be the most abject of people, for God and His messengers will triumph. A believer is absolutely certain that all this is inevitable, that it will be done, regardless of appearances to the contrary.

The Measure of Faith

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, it outlines the constant rule that believers apply, or the accurate measure of faith as it settles in people's hearts:

> *You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger, even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred. These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith, and whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own. He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide. Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him. They are the party of God. It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful.* (Verse 22)

This provides complete comparison between God's party and the party of Satan. It is a question of taking one's final and unhesitating position with the party of distinction, after discarding all burdens and temptations, so as to uphold the one and only tie. "*You shall not find people who truly believe in God and the Last Day on friendly terms with those who contend against God and His Messenger.*" (Verse 22) Never has God put two hearts in one man's body. Never can anyone harbour two loves in his heart: one love for God and His Messenger and one for their enemies. It is all a question of faith or unfaith; the two can never meet.

"*Even though they may be their fathers, sons, brothers, or kindred.*" (Verse 22) All bonds of kinship and blood relations are severed when they come into conflict with faith. These bonds may however be maintained and respected if there is no contention or dispute between the two camps. The Qur'ān instructs believers to maintain good relations with parents if they are unbelievers, provided that there is no war going on between God's party and Satan's party. Should there be contention, war and conflict, these bonds are to be totally severed. Abū 'Ubaydah killed his father during the Battle of Badr; Abū Bakr wanted to kill his son 'Abd al-Raḥmān; Muṣ'ab ibn 'Umayr killed his brother 'Ubayd ibn 'Umayr; and 'Umar, Ḥamzah, 'Alī and 'Ubaydah ibn al-Ḥārith all killed their relatives. All discarded ties of blood and kinship, opting for the bond of faith. This was the best implementation of the standard of bonds and values as classified in God's measure.

"*These are the people in whose hearts God has inscribed faith.*" (Verse 22) Faith is confirmed in their hearts by God's hand, written in their breasts by His right hand. It cannot be erased or be subject to ambiguity or confusion. "*And whom He has strengthened with a spirit of His own.*" (Verse 22) They cannot achieve such resolve without the support of a spirit of His own making. Their hearts cannot beam so brightly without the light that emanates from this spirit, gives them strength and binds them to the only true source of strength and light.

"*He will admit them into gardens through which running waters flow, where they will abide.*" (Verse 22) This is their reward for abandoning every tie and bond, and discarding all desire for worldly temptation. "*Well pleased is God with them, and they with Him.*" (Verse 22) This is a pleasant picture that radiates contentment and reassurance. It shows

us the situation of these believers in their lofty position and pleasant surroundings. They bask in their feeling of mutual pleasure with their Lord. They maintain their links with Him and discard all others. He then accepts them, admits them to His presence and makes it clear to them that He is pleased with them. They are gratified by this closeness to Him.

"*They are the party of God.*" They rank under His banner, move under His leadership, follow His guidance, implement His code of living, and do on earth what He has willed, as they are part of His will. "*It is the partisans of God that will be truly successful.*" (Verse 22) Who will be successful if God's partisans are not?

Thus humanity is split into two groups: God's party and Satan's party, raising two banners: the banner of the truth and the banner of falsehood. Every person must choose to either belong to God's party and support the truth or to side with Satan, standing under the banner of falsehood. The two parties are clearly separated. They can neither meet nor mix.

There is no room for ties of kinship, marriage, clan, community, country, race or nation. The only admissible tie is that of faith. Whoever chooses it will find that all those who stand under its banner maintain a tie of brotherhood. They might belong to different races, colours, countries, tribes and families, but they all share in the tie that forms God's party. Thus all differences between them disappear. Anyone who stands under the banner of falsehood will not enjoy a tie or bond with any among God's party. The main tie, to which all other ties are secondary, has been severed, so all ties are severed.

This verse suggests that there were some people within the Muslim community who still felt the strength of ties of blood, kindred and friendship. It thus seeks to put things very clearly. It also shows that others in the ranks of the Muslim community had managed to achieve the required standard, discarding all bonds other than that of faith.

This picture provides the finest possible ending to this *sūrah*. It started by portraying the care God takes of His community of believers, outlining the case of a poor woman who pleaded with the Prophet about her husband, stating that God listened to her concerns. With such care granted by God, placing the tie with Him above all else is the natural response. Opting for God's party is the only course acceptable from the community God has chosen to fulfil the role He has assigned to it.

SŪRAH 59

Al-Ḥashr
(The Gathering)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed shortly after the Muslims' encounter with the Jewish tribe of al-Naḍīr, which took place early in the fourth year following the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. It describes how the event occurred and why, and what regulations were put in place in the Muslim community once it was over. All this is reported in the unique style of the Qur'ān. Comments are added so as to educate the Muslim community and refine its attitudes, and the events themselves are used to highlight certain aspects and to give directives.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* in detail, we will look at some of the reports concerning the encounter that provided the occasion for its revelation. This will enable us to appreciate how the Qur'ān presents the story, firstly summing up its details and then looking far beyond these particular events to a much broader purpose.

These events took place after the Battle of Uḥud but before the Battle of the Moat. The Prophet along with ten leading figures from among his Companions, including Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Alī, had gone to the al-Naḍīr's quarters to request them to contribute to the blood money the Muslims had to pay for the accidental killing of two innocent men by 'Amr ibn Umayyah, one of the Prophet's Companions. The Prophet asked for their help on the basis of the covenant signed between the

Muslim community and the Jews of Madīnah soon after the Prophet's settlement there. The elders of al-Naḍīr received the Prophet well and asked him to wait while they raised the money. In actual fact, it occurred to them that this was their opportunity to assassinate the Prophet as he sat against the wall of one of their homes. Some of them said: "You will never find the man as easy prey as he is now. Let a strong person go onto the roof of the house next to which Muḥammad is sitting and drop a large stone or rock over his head and rid us of him." One of them, 'Amr ibn Jiḥāsh ibn Ka'b, volunteered to commit this treacherous crime, and went on to the roof of the house to throw such a stone on the Prophet's head. The Prophet, however, had been informed by God of the al-Naḍīr's design and so he had left his Companions where they were; giving the impression that he would shortly return. Instead, he had gone straight back to Madīnah. When the Prophet's Companions who were with him felt that he had been absent for too long, they started to worry and went looking for him. Soon they met a man on his way from Madīnah who told them that he had seen the Prophet entering the city.

In Madīnah, the Prophet had ordered his Companions to ready themselves to fight the al-Naḍīr because of their treachery, breaching the treaty between the two parties. Prior to that, one of their leading figures, Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, had gone too far in abusing the Prophet and raising enemies against the Muslims. It had been reported to the Prophet that Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf and others from al-Naḍīr were in contact with the Quraysh aiming to forge an alliance with them so as to undermine the Muslim community; this despite the treaty they had with the Prophet. Hence why the Prophet gave Muḥammad ibn Maslamah permission to assassinate Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, which he did.

As the Jews of al-Naḍīr tribe took treacherous steps against the Prophet and the Muslim community, it was necessary to revoke the treaty with them, in accordance with the Islamic rule that says: "*If you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous.*" (8: 58)

When the Prophet and his Companions were ready, they laid siege to the al-Naḍīr in their quarters, giving them three days' notice to vacate and leave their homes. Some reports suggest that the notice gave them ten days. They were allowed to take all their possessions with them

and to appoint agents to manage their fields and farms on their behalf. However, the hypocrites in Madīnah, led by 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, sent word to them encouraging them to resist and pledging their support. They assured them that they would fight alongside them, and should they be made to leave, they promised to leave with them. It is in reference to these assurances that the *sūrah* says: "*Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verses 11–13)

The al-Naḍīr withdrew to their forts. The Prophet ordered that their palm trees should be cut and burnt. They called out to him, saying: 'Muḥammad! You have always criticized those who destroy places and lay land to waste. How come that you are now felling palm trees and burning them?' In reply, the *sūrah* states: "*Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors.*" (Verse 5)

After 26 nights of siege, the al-Naḍīr despaired that the promises of their hypocrite friends would ever come true. God had cast terror in their hearts. They sent to the Prophet requesting him to allow them to leave on the same terms as the Qaynuqā' Jews who had earlier been evacuated.[1] This would afford them safe conduct and they would be allowed to take what their camels could carry of their possessions, except their arms. The Prophet accepted this. Thus, they loaded their camels with their possessions. They also destroyed their own homes so that these would not be taken over by Muslims. During the siege, the Muslims had destroyed some of the walls of their fortifications. In reference to this, the *sūrah* says: "*It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people*

1. The details of that evacuation are given in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV, pp. 52–54.

of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution." (Verses 2–4)

Some of the al-Naḍīr went to Khaybar, others headed for Syria. Among their leading figures who headed for Khaybar were Sallām ibn Mishkam ibn Abū al-Ḥuqayq, his cousin Kinānah ibn al-Rabī' ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq and Ḥuyayy ibn Akhṭab to whom reference is made in *Sūrah* 33; these managed to raise an alliance against the Muslim community, leading to the Battle of the Moat. Some of them are also referred to in *Sūrah* 48, in connection with the Battle of Khaybar.

The property left behind by the al-Naḍīr tribe was a free gain for the Prophet. The Muslims had not had to spur a horse or a camel in order to achieve that gain. Therefore, it belonged purely to God and His Messenger. The Prophet divided it among the Muhājirīn, his Companions who had migrated from Makkah, and two from among the Anṣār, Sahl ibn Ḥanīf and Abū Dujānah ibn Simāk, both of whom were poor. The Muhājirīn had no property in Madīnah, having had to abandon everything they had in Makkah. The Anṣār welcomed them and accommodated them in their own homes, showing a very high degree of generosity and hospitality. As this occasion presented itself, the Prophet wanted to set things right within the Muslim community, so that the poor would have their own property. Thus, wealth would not circulate only among the rich in society.

Some people – most probably hypocrites – spoke out, criticizing the Prophet's action. God states in this *sūrah*: "*Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6) The Prophet said to the Anṣār: "If you wish, you may give a share of your property

and your homes to your brethren, the Muhājirīn, and then you will share with them this gain. On the other hand, if you prefer, you keep your property and your homes for yourselves but you will have no share of this gain." True to their generous character, the Anṣār said: "We will give them a share of our property and homes and we will leave this gain to them, taking no share of it."

Commenting on this, the *sūrah* says: "*[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. And to those who were already firmly established in their homes and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verses 8–9)

Such were the events that led to the revelation of this *sūrah*, and to which its statements and rules refer, including the verses close to its end which address the believers who witnessed these events. This is in line with the Qur'ānic method of educating believers and refining their Islamic sense as it comments on events and demonstrates the link between them and fundamental truths. The last note in the *sūrah* mentions a number of God's attributes that have a direct bearing on the universe and its affairs. When these are fully understood, belief in God becomes enlightened, based on full awareness of the truth.

The *sūrah* begins and ends with glorification of God, to whom the heavens and the earth belong, the Almighty, the Wise. Thus, the beginning and end are in perfect harmony with the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the call to the believers to remain God-fearing and to reflect on God's planning.



Al-Ḥashr (The Gathering)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Everything in the heavens and everything on earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. (2)

هُوَ الَّذِي أَخْرَجَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مِن دِيَارِهِمْ لِأَوَّلِ الْحَشْرِ ۚ مَا ظَنَنتُمْ أَن يَخْرُجُوا ۖ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُم مَّانِعَتُهُمْ حُصُونُهُم مِّنَ اللَّهِ فَأَتَاهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَمْ يَحْتَسِبُوا ۖ وَقَذَفَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الرُّعْبَ يُخْرِبُونَ بُيُوتَهُم بِأَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَيْدِي الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فَاعْتَبِرُوا يَا أُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ ﴿٢﴾

Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire (3)

وَلَوْلَا أَن كَتَبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْجَلَاءَ لَعَذَّبَهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابُ النَّارِ ﴿٣﴾

because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution. (4)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ شَآقُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ ۖ وَمَن يُشَآقِّ ٱللَّهَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٤﴾

Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors. (5)

مَا قَطَعْتُم مِّن لِّينَةٍ أَوْ تَرَكْتُمُوهَا قَآئِمَةً عَلَىٰٓ أُصُولِهَا فَبِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِيُخْزِىَ ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things. (6)

وَمَآ أَفَآءَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ مِنْهُمْ فَمَآ أَوْجَفْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ خَيْلٍ وَلَا رِكَابٍ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُسَلِّطُ رُسُلَهُۥ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٦﴾

Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution. (7)

مَّآ أَفَآءَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ مِنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْقُرَىٰ فَلِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ وَلِذِى ٱلْقُرْبَىٰ وَٱلْيَتَٰمَىٰ وَٱلْمَسَٰكِينِ وَٱبْنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ كَىْ لَا يَكُونَ دُولَةًۢ بَيْنَ ٱلْأَغْنِيَآءِ مِنكُمْ ۚ وَمَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمُ ٱلرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَىٰكُمْ عَنْهُ فَٱنتَهُوا۟ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٧﴾

لِلْفُقَرَاءِ الْمُهَاجِرِينَ الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِن
دِيَارِهِمْ وَأَمْوَالِهِمْ يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِّنَ
اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانًا وَيَنصُرُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ ۚ
أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الصَّادِقُونَ ﴿٨﴾

[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. (8)

وَالَّذِينَ تَبَوَّءُو الدَّارَ وَالْإِيمَانَ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ يُحِبُّونَ مَنْ هَاجَرَ إِلَيْهِمْ
وَلَا يَجِدُونَ فِي صُدُورِهِمْ حَاجَةً
مِّمَّا أُوتُوا وَيُؤْثِرُونَ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ
وَلَوْ كَانَ بِهِمْ خَصَاصَةٌ ۚ وَمَن يُوقَ شُحَّ
نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٩﴾

And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful. (9)

وَالَّذِينَ جَاءُو مِن بَعْدِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَلِإِخْوَانِنَا الَّذِينَ
سَبَقُونَا بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَا تَجْعَلْ فِي قُلُوبِنَا
غِلًّا لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ رَءُوفٌ
رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.' (10)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ نَافَقُوا يَقُولُونَ
لِإِخْوَانِهِمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ
الْكِتَابِ لَئِنْ أُخْرِجْتُمْ لَنَخْرُجَنَّ

Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall

never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. (11)

مَعَكُمْ وَلَا نُطِيعُ فِيكُمْ أَحَدًا أَبَدًا وَإِن
قُوتِلْتُمْ لَنَنصُرَنَّكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّهُمْ
لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١١﴾

If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. (12)

لَئِنْ أُخْرِجُوا لَا يَخْرُجُونَ مَعَهُمْ وَلَئِن
قُوتِلُوا لَا يَنصُرُونَهُمْ وَلَئِن نَّصَرُوهُمْ
لَيُوَلُّنَّ الْأَدْبَارَ ثُمَّ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding. (13)

لَأَنتُمْ أَشَدُّ رَهْبَةً فِي صُدُورِهِم مِّنَ
اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason. (14)

لَا يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ جَمِيعًا إِلَّا فِي قُرًى
مُّحَصَّنَةٍ أَوْ مِن وَرَاءِ جُدُرٍ ۚ بَأْسُهُم بَيْنَهُمْ
شَدِيدٌ ۚ تَحْسَبُهُمْ جَمِيعًا وَقُلُوبُهُمْ شَتَّىٰ ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them. (15)

كَمَثَلِ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ قَرِيبًا ذَاقُوا
وَبَالَ أَمْرِهِمْ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

كَمَثَلِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ إِذْ قَالَ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ ٱكْفُرْ
فَلَمَّا كَفَرَ قَالَ إِنِّى بَرِىٓءٌ مِّنكَ إِنِّىٓ
أَخَافُ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (16)

فَكَانَ عَٰقِبَتَهُمَآ أَنَّهُمَا فِى ٱلنَّارِ خَٰلِدَيْنِ
فِيهَا ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers. (17)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَلْتَنظُرْ
نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

Believers, have fear of God. Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow. Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do. (18)

وَلَا تَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ نَسُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ فَأَنسَىٰهُمْ
أَنفُسَهُمْ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls. They are the transgressors. (19)

لَا يَسْتَوِىٓ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۚ
أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ هُمُ ٱلْفَآئِزُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph. (20)

لَوْ أَنزَلْنَا هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ عَلَىٰ جَبَلٍ لَّرَأَيْتَهُۥ
خَٰشِعًا مُّتَصَدِّعًا مِّنْ خَشْيَةِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ
وَتِلْكَ ٱلْأَمْثَٰلُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God. We put such images before people so that they may reflect. (21)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ عَٰلِمُ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ ۖ هُوَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٢﴾

He is God: there is no deity other than Him. It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed. He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful. (22)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلْمَلِكُ ٱلْقُدُّوسُ ٱلسَّلَٰمُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُ ٱلْمُهَيْمِنُ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْجَبَّارُ ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرُ ۚ سُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He is God: there is no deity other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Faith, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs. Exalted is God in His limitless glory above anything they associate as partner with Him. (23)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُ ٱلْبَارِئُ ٱلْمُصَوِّرُ ۖ لَهُ ٱلْأَسْمَآءُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُۥ مَا فِى ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٤﴾

He is God: the Creator, the Maker who gives shape and form to all. His are the most gracious names. Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (24)

God's Direct Action

Everything in the heavens and everything on earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (Verse 1)

This opening verse states a truth that takes place in the universe, where everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory and praises Him alone. This is how the *sūrah* that relates the events leading to the evacuation of the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations and

giving their land as a free gain to the believers who extol His glory and praise Him with His attributes begins. It is He who is the Almighty, able to give victory to those who believe in Him and destroy His enemies, the Wise who plans everything in accordance with a definite purpose.

The *sūrah* then gives us an account of the events leading to its revelation:

> *It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution.* (Verses 2–4)

From these verses we learn that it was God who drove those unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes, which is described here as the first gathering. God is indeed the doer of whatever takes place, but the way the statement is phrased lays direct emphasis on this fact, implying that God undertook to drive them out, without putting it under the cover of human action. It was He who drove them to the land from where they will be gathered, which means that they could not return to the land from which they were evacuated.

God's direct action is further emphasized in the following sentences in the verse: "*You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God.*" (Verse 2) You did not expect them to leave, and they could not have imagined that this would happen to them. Within their fortifications, so they believed, they were just too strong to be driven out. They felt themselves secure, forgetting God's power that cannot be stopped by mere fortifications.

"*God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts.*" (Verse 2) He came upon them from within themselves,

not from within their fortifications. He struck fear in their hearts, and so they opened the gates to their fortifications with their own hands. He showed them that they were not in possession of their own souls, and could not control their hearts. They could not defy God with their willpower, let alone with buildings and forts. They reckoned with every possibility except that they would be attacked from within themselves. Thus is the case when God wills something to happen. He approaches it as He knows best and from where He can; He certainly knows everything and is able to accomplish what He wants. There is no need, then, for the means people resort to. Instead, the means for Him are always there, ready to use. All means and causes are of His own making; none is difficult for Him to employ. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.

Those unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations sought to shield themselves from attack by staying within their fortifications, but God came upon them from where they least expected, scaring them to the bone. They thought they had protection within their homes, but God made them destroy their own homes themselves and He allowed the believers to partake in this destruction: "*Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers.*" (Verse 2) Thus the account of what happened to those people is complete, portrayed in a telling image.

Here the *sūrah* adds the first comment: "*Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight.*" (Verse 2) This instruction comes at the right moment, when minds are ready to receive a lesson and learn from it.

The next verse establishes that since God willed to take them to task for their treachery, they could not escape some form of punishment in this life, in addition to what awaits them in the life to come: "*Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire.*" (Verse 3) That they would be made to suffer in this life, in some form or another, was a foregone conclusion. Had God not chosen their evacuation, He would have punished them in some other way, and whatever punishment they would have suffered in this life was in addition to what they will receive in the hereafter.

They merited both, "*because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 4) The Arabic word, *shāqqū*, translated here as 'defied', means to take a side other than God's. As He explains why they merited such punishment, God made His Messenger's side His own. Therefore, in the second half of the verse He mentions their being in defiance of Him only, as this automatically includes defying the Prophet. When defiant people take a side opposite to God's, they behave insolently. Rather stupidly, such small, powerless creatures expose themselves to God's anger and incur His severe retribution.

Thus, as we look at what happened to those unbelievers of the people of earlier religions, we understand the fate that is bound to overtake those who defy God at any time and place. We should not fail to notice that the *sūrah* repeatedly refers to them as '*unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations*'. This is certainly true because they disbelieved in the divine faith in its final and complete form revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Those Jews were expecting his message. Moreover, referring to them in this way explains why they were punished. It also reassures the believers of the correctness of what they did to them.

The *sūrah* then reassures the believers that all that they did to those who defied God and His Messenger, such as cutting and burning their palm trees, was right. It thus gives God's verdict on it, particularly because some Muslims were rather unsure about their actions:

> *Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors.* (Verse 5)

Prior to this event and subsequently, the Muslims were and are not permitted to cause such destruction. This case, then, provided an exception, and it needed explanation and reassurance. It is thus explained in this verse that both what they did or did not do in respect of the palm trees was by God's permission. It is He who handled this encounter, putting His will into effect. All that happened was by His leave, for the purpose of bringing disgrace upon the transgressors. Cutting their trees

caused the al-Naḍīr grief, while leaving some standing similarly grieved them because they had to leave these behind.

Thus the believers were reassured that they were only the tool for God's will to be fulfilled.

Gains Achieved Without a War

The second part of the *sūrah* lays down the rules concerning gains that were granted by God to the Muslim community in this encounter and in similar ones, where the Muslims achieved victory without having to fight. These rules apply to any conflict where God's hand works directly, without human cover:

> *Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things. Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution. [Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful. Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.* (Verses 6–10)

These verses include a description of the conditions prevailing for the Muslim community at that time. They also state the nature and

distinctive features of the Muslim community that make its strong bonds survive from one generation, race and individual to another, across the centuries and throughout the world. This is a great truth that we should reflect upon.

"*Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6) This verse mentions that these gains left over by the al-Naḍīr Jews were taken by the Muslims without them having to ride a horse or a camel, let alone fight in order to lay their hands upon them. Hence, it is not to be treated like war booty. Only one fifth of what the Muslims gain in war is reserved for God, His Messenger, his own kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and travellers in want. The rest, i.e. four-fifths, is distributed among those who take part in the war itself. This rule concerning war gains was laid down in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, revealed shortly after the Battle of Badr. Here, however, the present *sūrah* rules that these new gains, made without a fight, belong only to God, His Messenger, his own kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and travellers in want. It is God's Messenger who undertakes the spending of these gains in this way and for these purposes.

The Prophet's own kinsfolk are singled out here as beneficiaries of such gains because the poor among them are not allowed to take *zakāt* money or charity. Moreover, the Prophet was not to be inherited by his relatives. Whatever he left behind was to be given to charity, charity in which his relatives had no share.[2] Since there were poor people among his relatives, God gave them a share of any war gains as well as gains made without war. They were included among the beneficiaries of enemy gains that God had assigned to His Messenger: one fifth of war gains and all gains without war. The other beneficiaries of these gains are well known.

This ruling is clearly stated in the *sūrah*. However, it does not stop at stating the immediate reason for this ruling, but rather opens our eyes

2. Scholars differ as to whether only the poor among the Prophet's relatives received this share, or whether it was given to all of them, even those who were not poor. The weightier view is that they all received a share.

to an important truth: "*God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills.*" (Verse 6) It is all by God's will, and His messengers are part of that will, giving them power over anyone or any community He chooses: "*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6)

Thus the role of God's messengers is seen to be closely linked to God's direct will. Although they are ordinary human beings, they have a special link with God's will, giving them a particular role in how God brings about what He wants to happen on earth. They do not act at their own behest; nor do they take or leave anything for their own interest. When they go to war, face anyone in conflict, or make peace with any one, they only do so to fulfil an aspect of God's will that has been made dependent on their own actions. It is God who is the actor behind all this. It is He who has power over all things.

Money Circulation

"*Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 7) This verse gives the details of the ruling before stating a major rule of the Muslim community's economic and social system: thus, money "*would not just circulate among those of you who are rich.*" (Verse 7) This is followed by a major constitutional rule: "*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it.*" (Verse 7) Although these two rules are stated in connection with the gains made in this encounter and how they were to be distributed, both rules go beyond the immediate event to state fundamental principles for the Islamic social system.

The first of these two rules defines a major aspect of the Islamic economic system which approves private ownership but makes it subject to this rule that excludes the possibility of wealth being circulated only among the rich in society. Whatever situation leads to the poor being outside the general circulation of wealth, keeping it only in the hands of

the rich, is contrary to the Islamic economic system and works against one of its major social organization objectives. All transactions in the Muslim community must be so organized so as not to allow such a situation to develop, and to dismantle it if it does exist.

The Islamic system is actually based on this rule. Thus, it makes *zakāt* an essential duty. Its revenue consists of 2.5% of money including financial assets, 5% or 10% of all agricultural produce, a similar percentage of cattle and one-fifth of mineral resources.[3] These are substantial shares. In addition, Islam gives 80% of war gains to those who so fight, whether they are rich or poor, but gains made without war are paid totally to those in need. The system Islam approves of for renting agricultural land is based on sharing the produce between the owner and the renter. Moreover, the Islamic system allows the Islamic government, in periods of hardship, to take all surplus the rich have to distribute to the poor. If it happens that the state treasury runs out of funds, such surplus may be invested for the public interest. Islam strictly forbids monopoly and usury, which are the two main tools that lead to money being circulated purely among the rich. This shows that the whole economic system Islam lays down is geared to implementing this most important rule. Furthermore, whilst this constitutes a major check on private ownership, Islam also places other checks on it as well.[4]

Thus, we see that the Islamic system allows for private ownership, but it is not a capitalist system. Nor is capitalism borrowed from the Islamic economic system. No capitalist system can function without monopoly or usury. The Islamic system is unique, laid down by the One who is Wise, All-Aware. It started on its own, developed on its own and remains unique, well balanced between rights and duties. It maintains the same balance as the rest of the universe, because it is made by the Creator of the universe.

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3. The author mentions that the *zakāt* revenue from mineral resources is taxed at the same percentage as money. This is either a mistake or based on a certain scholar's view. The consensus is rather that one-fifth of mineral resources is paid to *zakāt*. – Editor's note.

4. This is explained in detail in a chapter on 'monetary policy' in our book *Social Justice in Islam*, which is available in Engish.

The Only Source of Legislation

The second rule laid down in the verse defines the only source of legislation: "*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it.*" (Verse 7) This rule sums up the Islamic constitution. The authority of the law in the Islamic system is based on the fact that legislation is given to us by the Prophet in the form of the Qur'ān or the *Sunnah*. The entire community, including the ruler and government machinery, cannot enact any law that is contrary to what is given to us by the Prophet. Should it enact such a law, that law is devoid of authority, because it lacks the very basis of authority. This system is contrary to all man-made theories, including those which make the community, or the nation, the source of all authorities, giving the nation the right to enact whatever legislations it chooses. Under Islam, authority belongs to God's legislation as stated and explained by His Messenger. The Muslim community's role is to keep Islamic law intact and to implement it. The ruler and the government undertake this task on behalf of the community. These are the limits of the Muslim community, and it cannot act contrary to what the Prophet has stated in any aspect of the law.

In any area where no legislation is stated, the community may enact what it deems to be suitable, provided that it is not contrary to any principle stated by the Prophet. This is part of the Islamic system. Any legislation to be enacted must follow what the Prophet taught, if there is a statement about it, and must not be in conflict with any Islamic principle if no such statement is available. The authority of the Muslim community, and its government, remains within these limits. This is a unique system, unlike any man-made system. It ensures harmony between the legislation for human society, which is from God, and the law that governs the universe, which is set by God. Should there be conflict between human law and universal law, man would be in utter misery.

The Qur'ānic verse inspires believers' hearts to see the link between these two major rules and their original source, i.e. God, calling on them to remain conscious of Him: "*Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 7) This is the best guarantee that cannot

be evaded. Believers realize that God knows their inner thoughts and feelings, is aware of all actions, and that to Him all will return. They also know that His punishment is severe indeed. They are aware that God wants them to ensure that wealth does not circulate only among the rich in the community. They further know that it is their duty to accept willingly and obediently whatever the Prophet gives them and to discard whatever he forbids them.

The distribution of the gains made from the al-Naḍīr among the Muhājirīn only and two people from the Anṣār was a special measure that applied only in this case, to achieve the purpose of the main rule that states that wealth "*would not just circulate among those of you who are rich.*" (Verse 7) The general rule is that it should be divided among the poor generally, from among the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, and also those of later generations. This is stated in the verses that follow. However, the Qur'ān does not state its rulings in abstracts. It puts them in a context that interacts with people. Hence, it gives each one of the three groups qualities that mirror its true nature.

Three Groups of Distinction

"*[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true.*" (Verse 8) This is a true picture highlighting the main features of the Muhājirīn. They were certainly forced to flee their home town, Makkah, under much pressure and persecution by their own kinsfolk and tribesmen. They committed no offence other than believing in God alone. They abandoned their homes and possessions "*seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 8) They realized that they had no helper or protector other than Him. Although they were few in number, chased everywhere, they "*help God and His Messenger,*" with their hearts and swords, even at the hardest and most critical of times. Hence, they have earned the good description given to them in the Qur'ān: "*These are the ones who are true.*" (Verse 8) They said the word indicating their belief and confirmed it with their actions. They were true to their claim that they had chosen Him above all else, and true to their pledge to God's

Messenger that they would follow him. They were true to the truth, making of themselves a living version of it.

"*And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verse 9) This is again a bright, true picture showing the Anṣār's main distinctive features. These were a unique group of people. They achieved, in practice, standards which most people would think too idealistic to be true and rose to levels that were too high even for our imaginations.

"*And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith.*" (Verse 9) The Home means the town, Yathrib, to which the Prophet and his followers in Makkah migrated. Thereafter, it has been known as Madīnah, meaning The City, or the Prophet's own city. The Anṣār were firmly settled there, long before the arrival of the Muhājirīn. They were also firmly established in faith, as if faith had become a part of their own dwelling place. The image here has clear connotations, yet it is the closest description of the Anṣār's attitude towards faith. It became their place of living where their hearts and souls settled in peace. They flocked to it like homing pigeons.

The Anṣār "*love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given.*" (Verse 9) We do not find in human history an event similar to the reception given by the Anṣār to the Muhājirīn: it reflected genuine love and unparalleled generosity. The Anṣār happily shared their possessions with their immigrant brethren, competing with each other in offering them their homes and shouldering the burden of hospitality. It is reported that in every case, lots were drawn to decide where each one of the Muhājirīn would settle, because the numbers of the Anṣār offering their homes were more than the numbers of the Muhājirīn needing to be settled. They "*harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given.*" (Verse 9) The Muhājirīn are, at times, given an exceptionally high position, but the Anṣār harbour no feeling of envy as a result. They may be given special treatment, as in the case of the gains made in this encounter. Again the Anṣār accept this willingly.

We note that the verse does not say that they 'harbour no grudge', but rather it uses the word 'desire', which adds to the impression we have of the Anṣār's pure hearts.

"*They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want.*" (Verse 9) To give preference to others when one is in need oneself is a high summit to reach, one which the Anṣār scaled in a way unknown anywhere else in human history. This was their true description in every case. They always exceeded what is normal in people's lives.

"*Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verse 9) It is personal greed that hinders every good thing. Goodness means giving in one way or another: one gives away money, love, emotions, effort and indeed one gives one's life when necessary. A person with greed cannot do what is good, because he always wants to take and not give. Therefore, a person saved from his own greed is spared the need to overcome this obstacle. He moves on to give generously with a feeling of gratification. This is true success.

"*Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.'*" (Verse 10) This is the third bright picture that brings into sharp relief the features of the generation that was to follow, as well as the features of the Muslim community at all places and times.

When this *sūrah* was revealed, this group that was to follow on the heels of the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār had not yet come into existence. They were there in God's knowledge, which is free of restrictions of time and place. The main feature of this group is that they would appeal to God for forgiveness, not only for themselves but also for those believers who went ahead of them. They would also appeal to be free of all grudges against all believers, with whom they share the bond of faith. They recognized that God is most compassionate and merciful, so they would appeal to Him by these two qualities: "*Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.*" (Verse 10)

The true nature and wonder of the Muslim community is clearly depicted in these verses. We recognize the strong bond that unites all generations of believers generating feelings of love and compassion between them, as well as a feeling of closeness that transcends time, place,

race and family. It is a bond that takes precedence over all else, stirring pleasant feelings across generations. A believer remembers another who lived many centuries earlier, just like he remembers one who lives next door, and warms to him with love and honour. The present generation of believers takes into account the needs of future generations, and the ones still to come will follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. They all constitute one rank, in the same brigade, across generations, despite belonging to countries and times that may be very wide apart. They all march steadily, under God's banner, trying to achieve the high standards expected of them, looking up to their Lord, the Compassionate, the Ever Merciful.

It is a wonderful, amazing picture, yet it represents a reality as well as the best ideal cherished by noble hearts. The beauty and nobility of this picture of humanity can be best appreciated when compared to the image of malice and rancour that Communism glorifies in Marx's gospel.[5] That malice continues to perpetuate itself in an increasing grudge against social classes, past generations of humanity, contemporary communities that reject such social grudges, and against religion and believers of all faiths and communities.

The two situations are wide apart: they share no feature, colour or shade. One of them elevates humanity to the highest standards it can achieve, and the other takes it down to its lowest possible level. The first represents generations of humanity transcending barriers of time, place, race, country, tribe and family and promoting a bond of love and compassion, with pure hearts that are free of all grudges or selfishness, seeking only God's pleasure. The other shows humanity in conflict, with people always in strife, harbouring wicked feelings towards each other and resorting to deception, cheating and evil. It shows people doing so even when they are praying in their temples, because it looks at prayer as a trick and considers religion to be nothing but a trap set by capitalists for their workers.

"*Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You*

5. The author wrote this in the heyday of Communism when it was making long strides in the Third World generally, and in Egypt specifically where he was imprisoned and Communists were on the ascendancy. – Editor's note.

are compassionate, ever merciful." (Verse 10) Such is the prayer of the believers marching in the procession of faith. It is a noble prayer for a noble procession.

False Promises

The *sūrah* now turns back to discuss the event itself, painting a picture of another group that played a role in it, the hypocrites:

> *Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding. They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason. Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them. Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers.* (Verses 11–17)

The *sūrah* reports on what the hypocrites said to the al-Naḍīr Jews, promising them support, but then letting them down and showing that they cared nothing for their own promises. Every sentence in these verses states a fact, touches hearts, stirs up feelings and establishes a principle of education, knowledge and unshakeable faith.

The first of these establishes a bond of kinship between the hypocrites and the unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations: "*Are*

you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations..." (Verse 11) The ones to whom the *sūrah* refers as people of earlier revelations are unbelievers, and the hypocrites are their brethren, despite the fact that they claim to be Muslims. Then the *sūrah* gives a full and vivid picture of the hypocrites' promises and assurances to their brethren: "*If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'?*" (Verse 11) God, who knows what they truly are, states and confirms otherwise: "*God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help.*" (Verses 11–12) Events confirmed that what God stated was true and what they promised their brethren was false.

The *sūrah* then states a fact explaining what those people, hypocrites and unbelievers from among the people of earlier religions, truly felt: "*You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 13) They feared the believers more than they feared God. Had they truly feared God, they would not have feared anyone else. Only one type of fear can exist in a person's heart; fear of God can never exist side by side with fear of anyone else. All might belongs to God alone. All powers in the universe are subject to His will: "*There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock.*" (11: 56) Why, then, would a God-fearing person feel afraid of anyone else? However, the people who do not understand this truth fear God's creatures more than they fear Him. This, "*because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 13)

Thus the *sūrah* exposes the truth about those people, and adds another general truth. Now, the *sūrah* goes on to describe a condition particular to the two parties, the hypocrites and the unbelievers among the people of earlier religions. This condition arises from the fact that they fear the believers more than they fear God: "*They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact*

their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason." (Verse 14)

Time continues to reveal the absolute accuracy of this delineation of the true character of the hypocrites and the people of earlier revelations whenever and wherever they meet the believers in battle. Recent clashes in the Holy Land between volunteer believers and the Jews have confirmed the accuracy of this description. They would not fight the believers except in their own fortified settlements in Palestine.[6] Whenever they were exposed, they scuttled away like rats. It is almost as if this verse was referring to what happened recently. All glory belongs to God, the All-Knowing, the All-Aware.

The verse adds other features of their mentality: "*Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another.*" (Verse 14) This picture contrasts with that of the believers who are united by the bond of faith across all generations and whose brotherhood transcends barriers of time, place, race, country and tribe. The hypocrites and unbelievers conversely are in disarray "*because they are people who will not use their reason.*" (Verse 14)

Appearances may at times be deceptive so as to give us an impression that the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations stand in solid alliance, supporting one another. We may also see the hypocrites closing ranks in one group. However, we are told their true condition by God Himself who says that they are not truly so; it is all deception. This cover is lifted at times to reveal the truth of God's description, exposing conflicts within the same alliance, because those allies have different interests, preferences and directions. Never have the believers been true to their faith without seeing the opposite party revealing such differences and conflicts. The believers need only be determined, show perseverance in adversity, and they will inevitably see that the bonds uniting those followers of falsehood disappear to show their acute differences; this then leads them to scheme against each other.

6. The author is referring here to the battles that took place in 1948, when groups of Islamic volunteers took part in the war, trying to prevent the establishment of the state of Israel. The Jewish fighters did not fear the Arab armies as much as they feared those volunteers. – Editor's note.

The hypocrites and the unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations are able to gain the upper hand against the Muslims when the Muslims are disunited. In this way, the Muslims no longer reflect the true conditions of believers as outlined earlier in the *sūrah*. Otherwise, the hypocrites and unbelievers are too weak to be able to gain mastery over believers. Besides, they have different leanings and interests: "*Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another.*" (Verse 14)

The Qur'ān wants this fact to be firmly settled in believers' minds so that they know the truth about their enemies and do not stand in awe of them. It thus seeks to influence their feelings and morale on the basis of established fact. When Muslims take the Qur'ān seriously, they think little of their enemies, who are God's own enemies. They stand united, in one line. When they do so, no worldly power can match them.

Those who believe in God must know the truth about themselves and their enemies. This is half the battle. The Qur'ān puts this truth to them in the context of an event that has already taken place, enlightening them about the true factors that were at play and explaining what it signified and the facts to which it pointed. This explanation was useful to those who witnessed that event as it unfolded. It should provide great enlightenment to future generations who should reflect on it and learn the truth from the One who knows all truth.

In Satan's Footsteps

This evacuation of the al-Naḍīr from Madīnah was not the first of its kind. It was preceded by the evacuation of the Qaynuqā' tribe, to which the following verse most probably refers:

> *Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them.* (Verse 15)

The encounter with the Jewish tribe of Qaynuqā' took place after the Battle of Badr, but before the Battle of Uḥud. The Qaynuqā' were bound by a treaty with the Prophet and the Muslims. When the Muslims won a great victory against the unbelievers in Badr, the Jews

were upset and harboured a grudge against the Muslims. They feared that their position in Madīnah would be weakened while the position of the Muslims would be strengthened. The Prophet got wind of what they were whispering to one another and learnt of their ill intentions. He reminded them of the treaty he had signed with them and warned them that their attitude might augur ill. They replied rudely to him, saying: "Muḥammad! Do not think too highly of your power. You have only encountered a group who knew little about fighting a war and you managed to score a victory against them. Should you engage us in battle, you will certainly know that we are true fighters."

They followed this with repeated provocations against the Muslims. Reports mention that a Muslim woman took some merchandise to sell at the Qaynuqā' market place, and sat close to a jeweller's shop. People there tried to get her to lift her head covering, but she refused. The jeweller held the edge of her dress and fixed it behind her back while she was unaware. When she rose, the lower part of her body was exposed. The Jews around laughed at her, while she cried out in shame. A Muslim was near by and he immediately attacked the jeweller and killed him. The Jews rushed to the Muslim and killed him. The family of the Muslim who was killed appealed to other Muslims for help, and the Muslim community was in anger. Tension rose and there was a confrontation between the Muslim community and the Jewish Qaynuqā' tribe.

The Prophet laid siege to the Qaynuqā' Jews until they gave up and declared that they would accept the Prophet's ruling. 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the chief of the hypocrites, argued with the Prophet on their behalf, citing the fact that for long they were allies of the al-Khazraj Anṣārī tribe. His true motive, however, was the strong bond between the hypocrites and the unbelievers among the people of earlier religions. The Prophet accepted his pleas and allowed them to leave Madīnah, taking with them all their property, except for arms. They left for Syria.

It is to this encounter that the *sūrah* refers. It cites it as a comparable case to that of the al-Naḍīr and the true facts behind the attitude they took towards the Muslim community and the reality of their collaboration with the hypocrites.

The *sūrah* also refers to how the hypocrites tried hard to persuade their brethren unbelievers, the Jews of al-Naḍīr, to put up stiff resistance, and

thus led them to their miserable fate. It compares this to a permanent situation in which Satan always lets down anyone who responds to his persuasion and disbelieves in God. Thus both end up in the worst of all situations:

> *Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers.* (Verses 16–17)

Satan's role with any human being who responds to his promptings, as described in these verses, is in line with his nature and the aim he defined for himself. It is most singular for any human being to listen to him when he is out to trick them and lead them to their ruin. Yet this is the permanent truth which the *sūrah* states as its discussion of the event progresses further. It thus links the individual event with this permanent truth, setting it in real context. The Qur'ān does not state abstract theories, true as these may be, because a truth stated in an abstract setting does not influence hearts, feelings and minds. This is the difference between the Qur'ānic method that seeks to involve people's hearts and the methods followed by philosophers and those engaged in research.

Thus the *sūrah* completes its discussion of the al-Naḍīr, having put into it a large number of images, facts and directives, linking its local events to great and permanent facts. The *sūrah* thus represents a journey taking us far into the real world and into the world of human conscience. It goes far beyond the event itself. Its reporting in God's book is so different from the way it is reported in books written by human beings. The difference is as immeasurable as the difference between anything of man's making and what God makes.

Two Unequal Groups

The *sūrah* now addresses the believers, calling them by the quality they love best, distinguishing them from all others and making it easy for them to be positive. They are called upon to remain God-fearing, to

take stock of what they prepare for their life to come, to be always alert and make sure that they do not follow in the footsteps of those earlier people who forgot God. The believers have already seen the fate that befell some of these who are destined for the fire of hell:

> *Believers, have fear of God. Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow. Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do. Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls. They are the transgressors. Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.* (Verses 18–20)

Such fear of God is a mental state that words cannot fully describe. It is a condition that makes the human heart alert, feeling God's presence at every moment. It keeps man always on the watch, fearing that God may see him in a condition that displeases Him. A believer knows that God's eye watches everyone and every heart at every moment. How and when can man be in a situation that God does not see?

"*Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow.*" (Verse 18) Again, this is a statement that means far more than the total sum of its words. The mere thought of it places before a man's heart the record of all actions he did throughout his life. He looks carefully at every line, adding up his total sum after looking at every detail. When he has done so, he knows what he has sent ahead of him for his future life. This alerts him to his weaknesses and shortcomings, even though he has done much good. How would he feel if his net balance shows little in the way of good actions? This is bound to keep the human heart always awake, looking always for ways and means to improve its record of good deeds.

This verse, which excites all these feelings among believers, adds further notes to increase their sensitivity and strengthen their feelings of awe as they look at their position with God: "*Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 18)

The next verse warns them against a totally different situation: "*Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls.*"

(Verse 19) This is a very strange situation, but a true one. Anyone who forgets God will remain in this present life without a bond that pulls him towards a higher horizon. He lives without a goal that gives his life a meaning higher than that of grazing cattle. In such a situation man becomes oblivious of his own humanity. This fact leads to another whereby such a person forgets his own soul. He makes no preparation for his next life, which is long-lasting, permanent. He does not take account of it when he looks at the balance of his deeds. "*They are the transgressors.*" (Verse 19)

The following verse states that such people are the dwellers of the fire. It advises the believers to take a route different from theirs. After all, the believers are the ones going to heaven and their route is bound to be different: "*Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.*" (Verse 20)

The two groups are different in nature, condition, way of life, direction and destiny. They are set on two different courses, which cannot meet in line, feature, plan, strategy or method of action. They cannot be in the same camp, neither in this present life nor in the future one. "*Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.*" (Verse 20) Thus their fate is clearly stated, but that of the ones destined for the fire of hell is not even mentioned. It is too well known to deserve mention.

The Influence of the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* now adds a powerful note that shakes hearts to the core. It portrays what effect the Qur'ān would have had on solid rocks had it been so sent down:

> *Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God. We put such images before people so that they may reflect.* (Verse 21)

This image reflects the truth. This Qur'ān has such weight, power and shaking influence that is absolutely irresistible when we receive it

as it truly is. 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb had such an experience when he overheard a reciter reading the opening of *Sūrah* 52: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it...*" (52: 1–8) As he listened, he leaned on a wall nearby. He then went back home and felt ill. People kept visiting him for a month, enquiring after his health.

The moments when a person is fully receptive of some truth contained in the Qur'ān will see him shake and shudder. He will experience such changes that are best represented in the physical world by the effects of magnetism and electricity or even stronger. God, the Creator of the mountains who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, says: "*Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God.*" (Verse 21) Anyone who has had some experience of the Qur'ān touching their inner souls will appreciate this truth in a way that cannot be otherwise expressed. "*We put such images before people so that they may reflect.*" (Verse 21) Such an image should keep hearts thinking and reflecting.

God's Attributes

The rest of the *sūrah* is devoted to a long glorification of God, citing a number of His names and attributes. This serves as an aspect of the influence of the Qur'ān on the universe. It is as if we see the universe as a person expressing this glorification with his mouth, and a vast kingdom echoing it in every corner. These attributes of God have clear effects on the very nature of the universe, its phenomena and interactions. As it offers this glorification, it testifies to the truth of these attributes and their effects:

> *He is God: there is no deity other than Him. It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed. He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful. He is God: there is no deity other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Faith, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs. Exalted is God in His limitless*

glory above anything they associate as partner with Him. He is God: the Creator, the Maker who gives shape and form to all. His are the most gracious names. Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (Verses 22–24)

It is an expansive glorification that puts together a number of God's glorious attributes. It consists of three parts, with each beginning with God's oneness in the form of either, "*He is God: there is no deity other than Him,*" or, "*He is God,*" on its own. Each one of these most gracious names or attributes has its clear bearing on the universe and a felt influence on human life. Thus they bring home to the human heart their effect on life and the living. They are not negative attributes. Nor are they isolated from the universe, its situations, phenomena and events.

"*He is God: there is no deity other than Him.*" This imprints on our consciousness the truth of God's oneness in belief, worship, action and life conduct from the beginning of creation to its final end. On the basis of this oneness a whole code of living is based, regulating our way of thinking, feeling, behaviour, relations with the universe and its living creatures, as well as relations with people.

"*It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed.*" (Verse 22) This divine attribute makes us clearly conscious of God's knowledge of everything, apparent or hidden. This awakes in our consciences the need to watch out, keeping God always in our thoughts, public and private. Thus, man will go about his life feeling that he is being watched by God and that he himself is on the watch for God's sake, realizing that he does not live alone, not even when he is in seclusion or locked alone with one other in private conversation. His actions will be coloured by this feeling that keeps him always on guard.

"*He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 22) Now a feeling of reassurance spreads within man's conscience as he feels the air of God's mercy spread over him. Feelings of awe and hope, fear and reassurance are well balanced within him. In the believer's concept, God does not chase His creatures, but watches them; He does not wish them harm, but loves that they should adhere to His guidance; He does not abandon them to struggle against evil without providing help for them.

"*He is God: there is no deity other than Him.*" (Verse 23) This is repeated at the beginning of the second part of this expansive glorification of God, because it provides the basis for all divine attributes.

"*The Sovereign.*" (Verse 23) This attribute imprints on our hearts the truth that there is no sovereignty or dominion to anyone other than God who has no partners. When there is one sovereign, those who are subject to that sovereignty will have only one master to serve. No one can serve two masters at the same time: "*Never has God put two hearts in one man's body.*" (33: 4)

"*The Holy.*" (Verse 23) This attribute radiates absolute holiness and purity. It strikes our hearts with purity, keeps them cleansed, suited to receive the grace of the Holy Sovereign, and all to extol His limitless glory.

"*The Source of Peace.*" (Verse 23) Again, this attribute radiates peace, security and reassurance throughout the universe and in man's own soul. Man feels that he is safe, under God's care and protection, in peace with the world around him and all its dwellers. As man reflects on this attribute, he is reassured, regaining a feeling of peace and extending peace to all.

"*The Giver of Faith.*" (Verse 23) The very pronunciation of this attribute, *al-Mu'min*, gives a believer a clear sense of the value of faith. Here, a believer meets with God and draws on one of His attributes, rising by virtue of his faith to join the community on high.

"*The Guardian over all.*" (Verse 23) This begins a new set of attributes that contribute to our concept of Him. The previous attributes related to Him only. These new ones relate to His action as He conducts life, the universe and all affairs. These attributes imply His absolute control and watchfulness.

The same applies to the other three attributes stated in this verse, "*The Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs.*" (Verse 23) They all emphasize power, authority and superiority. None is more powerful or has greater authority than Him, just as no one can be in any way superior to Him. These attributes belong to God alone; none share them with Him in any way. Hence the verse ends with the statement: "*Exalted is God in His limitless glory above anything they associate as partner with Him.*" (Verse 23)

The last verse of the *sūrah* begins the third section of this expansive glorification of God, and again it begins with a statement of His oneness: "*He is God.*" (Verse 24) Whoever else is not God. He is "*the Creator, the Maker.*" The Creator stresses design and proportion, while the Maker stresses the process of bringing things into reality. The two attributes are intertwined, and the difference between them is subtle. "*Who gives shape and form to all.*" (Verse 24) This attribute is also closely related to the two before it. It means that God is the One who gives every creature its distinctive features and specific qualities that make up its personality.

The succession of these interlinked qualities, with their subtle differences, prompts us to follow the process of creation and initiation, stage by stage, as we humans conceive of it. In actual fact, there are no stages or steps. What we know of these attributes is not their absolute reality, because this is known only to God. We only know some of the effects they produce, as this is the limit of our understanding.

"*His are the most gracious names.*" (Verse 24) His names are, in themselves, most gracious. They need not be praised or admired by creatures. The Arabic adjective *al-ḥusnā*, translated here as '*the most gracious*', also means 'beautiful, attractive, etc.' They are the attributes a believer reflects upon in order to mould himself and his life in accordance with their meaning. He knows that God loves that he should try to live up to them so that he can elevate himself as He seeks God's acceptance.

This long and expansive glorification of God, citing many of His most gracious attributes, with all their inspiring effects, is brought to a close with the image that God's glorification is echoed throughout the universe, with every creature joining in: "*Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 24) This is the most suitable and expected of images after the mentioning of all God's attributes. Thus the human heart joins in with all creatures and living things in a glorification that brings the opening of the *sūrah* and its ending into perfect harmony.

SŪRAH 60

Al-Mumtaḥanah

(Women Tested)

Prologue

The present *sūrah* provides yet another episode in the cultivation of the Muslim community, its social organization and state building during the Madīnah period. It thus forms a link in the chain that is the divine system, a system laid down for the community chosen to implement it in society. With such a well-defined and distinctive system humanity would be able to strive to achieve its goals, but there would be times when its efforts would fall short of what is required. Nonetheless, humanity would always look up to it, aiming to mirror that ideal form when the first Muslim community put it into practice.

This objective required, as we have stated on more than one occasion, long preparations each involving different stages. The events that happened within or around the Muslim community provided some of the material necessary for such preparations. While the events themselves were determined according to God's knowledge, they also provided the context for their explanation and interpretation, as also for comments and directives.

In the midst of all these events, the process of building the characters of the people who undertook the task of implementing the Islamic system was completed. Thus, in its formative stage, the Muslim community separated itself from the rest of society insofar as it needed

to remain pure, free of any alien aspect. Furthermore, it should also be acknowledged that this distinctive concept of faith, Islam, represented something new, unknown anywhere else in the world, and especially not in Arabia. All this, however, did not mean that Islam isolated itself from events occurring in the larger society. Indeed the Muslims were part of these events, interacting with them as they took place. This process of interaction also meant that they might be repeatedly influenced, and in different ways, by the same event. God, who created those people, knew that they do not all respond in the same way to the first touch, and that they might need more than one such touch for a certain effect to settle in. He also knew that remnants of the past, natural attractions and tendencies, human weaknesses, practical considerations, as well as old habits and traditions might represent obstacles that could hinder the process of cultivation. To overcome such difficulties necessitated repeated reminders. Events took place in succession, as determined by God's will, providing the required admonition and the basis for issuing warnings and directives.

Sharp, alert and blessed with keen insight, the Prophet used such events and occasions wisely, at every turn, to help this process of character cultivation. He was supported in this process by revelations that directed and endorsed what he did to mould that first Muslim community.

The Process of Cultivation

This *sūrah* represents a stage in that long process of cultivation aiming to establish within the conscience of every Muslim a pure world, with faith as the pivot around which it turns. In this world, Muslims congregate around this axis of faith, having only one unseverable bond. They purge their hearts of all ties of nationality, race, country, clan or family, replacing them all with the single bond of belief in God and being members of God's party.

The world Islam wants to build is both divine and human: it is divine in the sense that it derives all its principles and values from God's directives and wisdom, and addresses all its actions to God hoping to earn His pleasure. It is human in the sense that it encompasses all humanity within the broad scope of faith. Hence, in such a world the barriers of

race, country, language, family and all that separates one person from another are removed to leave only the tie of faith. Such is the noble world that is worthy of man, a creature God has honoured, breathing of His spirit into him.

Obstacles hindering the building of such a world were numerous in the Arabian environment, as also in our world today. Attachments to family, clan, race and land accounted for some of these obstacles. Others included personal leanings and desires, such as selfishness, pride, greed, psychological preferences and prejudices, as well as many other elements that work on man's mind. Islam needed to deal with all this in the community that had been chosen to implement the divine system and provide a practical example of it. This *sūrah*, then, is a step in that long process.

Some of the Muslims who migrated to Madīnah, leaving their possessions, homes and families behind for the sake of their faith continued to feel some attachment to those they had left behind in Makkah, specifically, for example, their spouses and offspring. Furthermore, despite all the persecution they had suffered at the hands of the Makkans, some Muslims still wished for a reconciliation that would see an end to fighting against relatives and family members.

On the other hand, God wanted to purge their hearts of all these bonds, so that they dedicated themselves to His faith and the system He wanted implemented. God knew the heavy pressures of natural tendencies and old practices on people. Indeed, the Arabs valued the ties of family, clan and tribe more strongly than any other community. Therefore, the Qur'ān continued to administer its effective treatment through events and comments on those events. Thus, the treatment would be administered on the stage of reality, just at the appropriate moment.

Treasonable Action

Reports mention a particular incident that led to the revelation of the first part of the present *sūrah*. This may be so, with the incident providing the immediate reason for such revelation, but Qur'ānic texts always go much further than particular events.

Ḥāṭib ibn Abū Balta'ah was one of the Muhājirīn who migrated with the Prophet from Makkah to Madīnah and was one of those who took part in the Battle of Badr. He had children and property he had left behind in Makkah. He did not belong to the Quraysh, but was an ally of 'Uthmān. When the Prophet decided to march to Makkah after its people were in breach of the peace treaty he had concluded with them two years earlier, he ordered his Companions to get ready. He prayed to God that the Quraysh would remain unaware of his intentions. He did, however, tell some of his Companions what he was planning to do; Ḥāṭib was among those. Ḥāṭib then wrote a letter to the Quraysh warning them that the Prophet intended to mount an attack against them. He gave it to a woman who concealed it and managed to leave Madīnah without being detected by any of the guards appointed by the Prophet on all exits and entrances. By so doing, Ḥāṭib hoped the Quraysh would consider his action as a favour and so not harm his family. The Prophet was informed by God of Ḥāṭib's action. He therefore sent chasers to retrieve the letter from that woman.

Al-Bukhārī relates on the authority of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib: "God's Messenger sent me and al-Zubayr ibn al-'Awwām, on horseback, telling us to go as far as a place called Rawḍat Khākh, where we would find a woman unbeliever carrying a letter written by Ḥāṭib ibn Abī Balta'ah to the unbelievers, which we were to retrieve. We caught up with her as she was riding her camel. We asked her to give us the letter, but she denied having any such thing. We sat her camel down and tried to find the letter but we could see none. We said to her: 'We swear by God, the Prophet has not lied. You will either do as we tell you and give us the letter or we will undress you.' She realized that we were serious and that she had no option but to comply. She undid her hair, which was covered and took the letter out. She gave it to us and we went straight back to Madīnah to hand it to the Prophet."

The Prophet called Ḥāṭib in and questioned him about what he had done. Ḥāṭib appealed to the Prophet not to jump to any conclusions. He said: "I am certainly a believer in God and His Messenger. I have not changed at all. It is not that I have any doubts in matters of faith. I only thought of doing the Quraysh a favour by which God would protect my children and family. All your Companions who have families

or property in Makkah have relatives and clans there to whom God provides protection."

The Prophet recognized that Ḥāṭib was telling the truth. He said to those around him: "What he has told you is certainly the truth. Therefore, say nothing but good about him." 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said to the Prophet: "He has betrayed God, His Messenger and the believers. Allow me to behead this hypocrite." The Prophet said to him: "Was he not one of the people who fought the Battle of Badr? How would you know, 'Umar, that God has not looked at the soldiers of Badr and said to them: I have forgiven you whatever you will do?" Tears sprang to 'Umar's eyes as he said: "God and His Messenger know better."

Al-Bukhārī adds in another version of this story that the present *sūrah* was revealed in connection with this event. In a third version he says that the Prophet sent three men, the other being al-Miqdād, to retrieve the letter.

Lessons Derived

To reflect a little on this event and its consequences does not go beyond our purpose of looking at how the Qur'ān uses events to cultivate the Muslim community and refine its attitudes through both the Prophet and Qur'ānic instructions and commentaries.

The first thing to look at is the deed itself done by Ḥāṭib, an early Muslim who belonged to the elite of the Muhājirīn and one of the few who were informed by the Prophet of the objective behind his intended campaign. The event shows us how the human soul may experience moments of weakness, no matter how strong it may be in its faith. Only God can protect us from such moments.

Then we see the Prophet's great attitude through it all, waiting to establish the facts before coming to any conclusion. He patiently questioned Ḥāṭib about his motives. We see the sympathy for his Companion in his moment of weakness, realizing that he told the truth. Therefore, he stopped his Companions from having a go at him, telling them: "What he has told you is certainly the truth. Therefore, say nothing but good about him." Thus he helped him to rise after he had slipped. He did not allow anyone to taunt him. By contrast, we see

'Umar's seriousness in such a matter as he said to the Prophet: "He has betrayed God, His Messenger and the believers. Allow me to behead this hypocrite." 'Umar looked at the deed itself and his reaction reflects his uncompromising attitude. The Prophet, on the other hand, looked at it from a broader perspective, with his thorough understanding of human nature. His sympathy was that of a caring educator, with profound and comprehensive knowledge, looking at all circumstances.

We also need to reflect a little on Ḥāṭib's own words explaining his momentary weakness, even though his concept of God's will and the factors at play in worldly matters was perfectly sound. He said to the Prophet: "I only thought of doing the Quraysh a favour by which God would protect my children and family..." Thus, he knew that it is God who protects, not the favour he wanted to do the Quraysh. This is confirmed in the remainder of his explanation: "All your Companions who have families or property in Makkah have relatives and clans there to whom God provides protection." We see how he maintained that it is God who protects, not relatives or clans. They are merely the tools by which God's purpose may be done.

Perhaps the Prophet's reaction took this right concept into account. Perhaps he realized that Ḥāṭib was telling the truth. Hence, what he said to his Companions required them only to say good words to Ḥāṭib.

Another point of reflection looks at God's will as this event unfolds. Ḥāṭib was one of the few people who knew from the Prophet the true goal behind this campaign, yet here we see a moment of weakness affect one of these select few. Then, God's will ensured that this moment of weakness had no adverse consequences for the Muslims. It is as if the whole purpose was to unravel this weakness and treat it. None of the Prophet's other Companions who had not been informed of the Prophet's secret objective tried to exploit this moment, pressing their own claims of being more worthy of trust. This reflected the Muslims' attitude towards their leadership, and their own humility, as well as their desire to learn the lesson of what had happened to their brother.

The event itself is related in confirmed and authentic *aḥādīth*. As for its being the direct cause of the revelation of these verses, this is mentioned in one of the versions related by al-Bukhārī. We do not exclude the possibility that this report is accurate. However, the significance of

the Qur'ānic texts goes much further than this individual case. These Qur'ānic verses deal with a psychological situation that could affect anyone. They follow the Qur'ānic method of using a particular event to press home certain instructions and directives.

The Qur'ān deals here with the question of close relations, narrow affiliations, as well as adherence to what is familiar and what one generation inherits from another. It wants to instil new bonds, values and standards into believers as well as a new outlook on the universe, life, man, their role as believers and the purpose for human existence. It was, in effect, bringing together these new plants, the believers, under God's care so that He could teach and enlighten them about their existence and role. It wanted to open their eyes to the hostilities around them and to the schemes of their enemies. God wanted them to feel that they belonged to Him, making up His party, and that He wanted them to bring about something He willed to happen. They were to be marked out as His, known among all communities as His own, both in this life and in the life to come. Let them, then, dedicate themselves to His cause, maintaining no ties other than His.

The *sūrah* in its entirety moves in this direction. Even the legislative verses at the end, which speak about how believing women who migrate to join the Muslim community should be treated, the pledge of loyalty given by women who accept Islam, separating women believers from their husbands who are not Muslim, and relations between male believers and their wives who reject the faith, all lay down regulations in line with that general direction.

The *sūrah* concludes in the same way as it started, ordering the believers not to make God's enemies, whether idolaters or Jews, their intimate friends. This ensures that the separation between believers and unbelievers is complete, and that all ties except that of faith, are abandoned.



Al-Mumtaḥanah
(Women Tested)

سُورَةُ الْمُمْتَحَنَةِ

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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَّخِذُوا عَدُوِّي وَعَدُوَّكُمْ أَوْلِيَاءَ تُلْقُونَ إِلَيْهِم بِالْمَوَدَّةِ وَقَدْ كَفَرُوا بِمَا جَاءَكُم مِّنَ الْحَقِّ يُخْرِجُونَ الرَّسُولَ وَإِيَّاكُمْ أَن تُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ رَبِّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ خَرَجْتُمْ جِهَادًا فِي سَبِيلِي وَابْتِغَاءَ مَرْضَاتِي تُسِرُّونَ إِلَيْهِم بِالْمَوَدَّةِ وَأَنَا أَعْلَمُ بِمَا أَخْفَيْتُمْ وَمَا أَعْلَنتُمْ ۚ وَمَن يَفْعَلْهُ مِنكُمْ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ سَوَاءَ السَّبِيلِ ﴿١﴾

Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection when they have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord. If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure, then do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal. Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path. (1)

إِن يَثْقَفُوكُمْ يَكُونُوا لَكُمْ أَعْدَاءً وَيَبْسُطُوا إِلَيْكُمْ أَيْدِيَهُمْ وَأَلْسِنَتَهُم بِالسُّوءِ وَوَدُّوا لَوْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٢﴾

If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers. (2)

لَن تَنفَعَكُمْ أَرْحَامُكُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُكُمْ ۚ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ يَفْصِلُ بَيْنَكُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٣﴾

Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you. On the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you. God sees all that you do. (3)

قَدْ كَانَتْ لَكُمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ
وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ إِذْ قَالُوا لِقَوْمِهِمْ إِنَّا بُرَآءُ
مِنكُمْ وَمِمَّا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ كَفَرْنَا
بِكُمْ وَبَدَا بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ الْعَدَاوَةُ
وَالْبَغْضَاءُ أَبَدًا حَتَّىٰ تُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَحْدَهُ
إِلَّا قَوْلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ لِأَبِيهِ لَأَسْتَغْفِرَنَّ لَكَ
وَمَا أَمْلِكُ لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِن شَيْءٍ رَّبَّنَا عَلَيْكَ
تَوَكَّلْنَا وَإِلَيْكَ أَنَبْنَا وَإِلَيْكَ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٤﴾

You have a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you. The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone.' The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you, although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God.' 'Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination. (4)

رَبَّنَا لَا تَجْعَلْنَا فِتْنَةً لِّلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَاغْفِرْ
لَنَا رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ أَنتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers. Forgive us, Lord. You are the Almighty, the Wise.' (5)

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِيهِمْ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ
يَرْجُو اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ فَإِنَّ
اللَّهَ هُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ ﴿٦﴾

In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (6)

عَسَى اللَّهُ أَن يَجْعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَ
الَّذِينَ عَادَيْتُم مِّنْهُم مَّوَدَّةً وَاللَّهُ قَدِيرٌ
وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٧﴾

It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies. God is all powerful; God is much forgiving, ever merciful. (7)

لَّا يَنْهَىٰكُمُ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَٰتِلُوكُمْ
فِى ٱلدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُم مِّن دِيَٰرِكُمْ أَن
تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوٓا۟ إِلَيْهِمْ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ
ٱلْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴿٨﴾

God does not forbid you to deal kindly and with full equity with those who do not fight you on account of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes. God loves those who behave equitably. (8)

إِنَّمَا يَنْهَىٰكُمُ ٱللَّهُ عَنِ ٱلَّذِينَ قَٰتَلُوكُمْ فِى ٱلدِّينِ
وَأَخْرَجُوكُم مِّن دِيَٰرِكُمْ وَظَٰهَرُوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ
إِخْرَاجِكُمْ أَن تَوَلَّوْهُمْ ۚ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ
هُمُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ ﴿٩﴾

God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards those who fight against you because of your faith, and drive you from your homes, and help others to drive you out. Those of you who turn towards them in friendship are indeed wrongdoers. (9)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا جَآءَكُمُ
ٱلْمُؤْمِنَٰتُ مُهَٰجِرَٰتٍ فَٱمْتَحِنُوهُنَّ ۖ
ٱللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِإِيمَٰنِهِنَّ ۖ فَإِنْ عَلِمْتُمُوهُنَّ
مُؤْمِنَٰتٍ فَلَا تَرْجِعُوهُنَّ إِلَى ٱلْكُفَّارِ ۖ
لَا هُنَّ حِلٌّ لَّهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحِلُّونَ لَهُنَّ ۖ
وَءَاتُوهُم مَّآ أَنفَقُوا۟ ۚ وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ
أَن تَنكِحُوهُنَّ إِذَآ ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ ۚ
وَلَا تُمْسِكُوا۟ بِعِصَمِ ٱلْكَوَافِرِ وَسْـَٔلُوا۟
مَآ أَنفَقْتُمْ وَلْيَسْـَٔلُوا۟ مَآ أَنفَقُوا۟ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ
حُكْمُ ٱللَّهِ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ
حَكِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Believers! When believing women come to you as migrants, test them. God knows best their faith. If you ascertain that they are believers, do not send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them. None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries. Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise. (10)

وَإِن فَاتَكُمْ شَيْءٌ مِّنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ إِلَى الْكُفَّارِ فَعَاقَبْتُمْ فَآتُوا الَّذِينَ ذَهَبَتْ أَزْوَاجُهُم مِّثْلَ مَا أَنفَقُوا ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي أَنتُم بِهِ مُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١١﴾

Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid. Fear God, in whom you believe. (11)

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ إِذَا جَاءَكَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتُ يُبَايِعْنَكَ عَلَىٰ أَن لَّا يُشْرِكْنَ بِاللَّهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَسْرِقْنَ وَلَا يَزْنِينَ وَلَا يَقْتُلْنَ أَوْلَادَهُنَّ وَلَا يَأْتِينَ بِبُهْتَانٍ يَفْتَرِينَهُ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِنَّ وَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ وَلَا يَعْصِينَكَ فِي مَعْرُوفٍ فَبَايِعْهُنَّ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُنَّ اللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Prophet! When believing women come and pledge to you that they will not associate any partner with God, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor lie about who fathered their children, nor disobey you in anything reasonable, then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful. (12)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَتَوَلَّوْا قَوْمًا غَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ قَدْ يَئِسُوا مِنَ الْآخِرَةِ كَمَا يَئِسَ الْكُفَّارُ مِنْ أَصْحَابِ الْقُبُورِ ﴿١٣﴾

Believers! Do not take as friends any people with whom God is angry. They despair of the life to come just as the unbelievers despair of those buried in their graves. (13)

What Friends?

> *Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection when they have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord. If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure, then do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal. Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path. If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers.* (Verses 1–2)

The *sūrah* begins with this friendly and inspiring address, calling on '*believers*'. It is an address by their Lord in whom they believe, who calls on them in the name of faith that establishes their bond with Him, to carefully consider their position. He also warns them against their enemies' schemes and reminds them of the task they have been assigned. In a kindly and friendly way, God makes their enemies His enemies: "*Believers! Do not take My enemies, who are your enemies as well, for your friends, showing them affection.*" (Verse 1) Thus, He makes the believers feel that they belong to Him. Whoever is hostile to them is actually hostile to Him. They are the people who bear His insignia on earth and the ones He loves. Therefore, it is inconceivable that they should show affection to those who are His and their enemies.

God reminds them of the crimes, aggression and injustice committed by those people against them, their faith and His Messenger: "*They have rejected the truth you have received, and have driven the Messenger and yourselves out only because you believe in God, your Lord.*" (Verse 1) Having committed all such injustices, what basis could there be for friendship and affection? They rejected the truth and drove the Prophet and his followers out of their homes for no other reason than that they believed in God. He reminds the believers of all this, stating in effect that it was for their faith that the unbelievers fought them, not for any other reason. The real issue of contention, i.e. faith, is brought to the fore. They were driven out of their homes for no reason other than faith.

Having thus stated the true issue of conflict, the *sūrah* reminds the believers that there is no room for intimacy between them and the unbelievers, if they have truly left their homes for God's sake, and in quest of His pleasure: "*If you have left your homes to strive in My cause and to seek My pleasure.*" (Verse 1) It is not possible for someone to migrate seeking God's pleasure and His cause to combine this with friendship with those who drove him out because of it. Such people are the enemies of God and His Messenger.

The *sūrah* then adds an implicit warning against what they conceal in their hearts of friendly feelings towards their enemies, God's enemies. He is fully aware of what hearts may secretly harbour and what they leave in the open: "*Do not secretly lean towards them with affection. I well know all that you conceal and all that you reveal.*" (Verse 1) This is followed by a fearsome warning that strikes fear in believers' hearts: "*Whoever of you does this has already strayed from the right path.*" (Verse 1) A believer fears nothing worse than going astray after he has known and followed guidance.

The threat and the warning come right in the middle of an explanation of the unbelievers' true character and their evil intentions. Further explanation follows: "*If they get the better of you, they will remain your enemies and stretch out their hands and tongues to you with evil. They dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2) Whenever they have the chance to take advantage of the Muslims, they will act as open enemies, causing them whatever harm they can, verbal and physical, using every means available.

What is even worse is that "*they dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2) To a believer, this is worse than any verbal or physical harm that can be done to him. To wish him to lose his most valuable treasure of faith and revert to disbelief is to be his worst enemy. A person who has tasted the sweetness of faith after being an unbeliever, who has seen its light after the darkness of unbelief, and who has experienced the reassurance and happiness generated by holding the concepts and feelings of a believer will hate to revert to disbelief, just as much as he would hate being thrown into a fire. It is only an enemy of God who wishes to see him return to the hell of unbelief after he has experienced the happiness of living in the heaven of faith. How could he tolerate

the emptiness of unbelief after he has enjoyed life in the active world of belief? The Qur'ān gradually builds up the believers' reaction against their enemies until it culminates in a true description of their dearest wish: "*they dearly wish to see you unbelievers.*" (Verse 2)

The second round makes only one comment about the strong bond of blood relations, a tie that is deeply rooted in people's hearts. It is a bond that often forces its presence in the form of warm friendliness:

> *Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you. On the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you. God sees all that you do.* (Verse 3)

A believer works for the life to come, on which he focuses his hopes. Whatever he does in this life is merely the planting of the seeds. The harvest he awaits is in the life to come. This verse touches his heart with what happens there when all ties of blood are severed, and if the bond of faith is non-existent. This should make it easier for him to abandon such ties in the short life of this world, preferring the permanent bond that remains strong in both this life and the life to come. Hence, the *sūrah* says to the believers: "*Neither your kinsfolk nor your own children will be of any benefit to you.*" (Verse 3) These ties which you cherish, and the preservation of which forces you to befriend your's and God's enemies happened to Ḥāṭib in his eagerness to preserve his bond with his family, and as happened to others who left their relatives and children. All these ties will be of no benefit to you, because "*on the Day of Resurrection He will decide between you.*" (Verse 3) You will be separated from them, because the tie that binds people together is already severed. Belief is the only tie that counts in God's sight. "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 3) He is aware of the action itself and the intention behind it.

A Long Historical Relation

The third round establishes a clear link between all Muslims and the first generation of believers in God's oneness. They all join the same procession that moves across countless generations, distinguished by faith and shedding all ties except faith. They are all the same community,

starting with Abraham, who preached the first version of the pure faith. He provided an example to be followed, not only in faith but also in practice. He struggled with the bonds of kinship before he, and those with him, managed to purge their feelings of any bond other than that of faith:

> *You have a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said to their people: 'We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you. The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone.' The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you, although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God.' 'Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination. Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers. Forgive us, Lord. You are the Almighty, the Wise.' In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.* (Verses 4–6)

When a Muslim reflects on these verses, he discovers that he has a great, well-established ancestry, a long history, and an example to follow set long ago. He goes back to Abraham, not only in his faith but also in his personal experience. Thus, his experience goes beyond his own personal one and that of his generation. People in this great procession of the faithful have gone through a similar experience to what he is now facing, and they came to a certain conclusion, taking a firm decision. The question is far from new, and the requirement does not constitute a very heavy burden. Besides, should ties with relatives who are hostile to his faith be severed, he still belongs to a great community, cherishing the bond of faith with all its members. He is only a branch of a great tree with firm roots and many branches that spreads its shade wide. This tree was planted by Abraham, the first to surrender himself to God.

So, Abraham and his followers went through the same experience as the Muhājirīn, and they provide a good example: "*They said to their people: We disown you and what you worship instead of God. We reject you.*

The enmity and hate that have arisen between us and you will last until you believe in God alone." (Verse 4) Abraham and his followers made their stand clear: they dissociated themselves from their people, the deities they worshipped and their beliefs. They rejected them altogether and believed in God alone. The only feelings they had towards them were ones of enmity and hate until those people also came to believe in God alone. It was a total break that left no ties or bonds after the one of faith had been severed. This is the absolute verdict in such a situation. The example set by Abraham and his followers is good enough for every believer until the end of time.

Some Muslims, however, found a loophole enabling them to continue to maintain warm feelings towards idolatrous blood relatives. This loophole was Abraham insofar as he prayed to God to forgive his father who was an idolater. The Qur'ān explains Abraham's attitude when he promised his father that he would seek God's forgiveness for him: "*The only exception was Abraham, when he said to his father, 'I shall pray for forgiveness for you'.*" (Verse 4) Abraham said this before he was certain that his father still held stubbornly to his idolatrous beliefs. Abraham was hoping and expecting that his father would see the truth and accept the faith. In another *sūrah* we are told: "*Abraham prayed for the forgiveness of his father only because of a promise he had made to him. But when it became clear to him that he was God's enemy, he disowned him.*" (9: 114)

When Abraham assessed the situation properly, he placed the matter in God's hands, turning to Him for guidance, placing his trust completely in Him in all situations: "*Although it is not in my power to be of any avail to you against God. Our Lord! In You we have placed our trust, and to You do we turn, and with You is the final destination.*" (Verse 4) This total self-surrender to God is the essential feature of Abraham's faith placed under special focus so that his Muslim offspring properly appreciate it. Here again we see the Qur'ānic method of cultivating the Muslim community with directives based on stories and the lessons derived from them.

Therefore, the remainder of Abraham's supplication is also stated: "*Our Lord! Do not make of us a test for the unbelievers.*" (Verse 5) This prayer is an appeal to God not to give the unbelievers mastery over the believers, which would strengthen the former's rejection of true faith.

They would think that had faith provided any protection to its followers, they themselves would not have been able to subdue them. This is a confusing point, one that often surfaces when falsehood manages to gain the upper hand for a time and purpose known only to God. In such periods, tyranny is able to treat believers very badly. Good believers endure this test with patience, but this should not prevent them from praying to God to spare them such hardship that makes of them a test to others and a basis for creeping doubt.

Abraham and his group continue their supplication: "*Forgive us.*" This is said by Abraham, God's own friend, realizing that the standard of worship which is worthy of God is beyond his reach. As a human being, he cannot attain the level of worship which gives due thanks for God's favours and which sufficiently glorifies Him. Therefore, he appeals for forgiveness, setting an example for his own group and all later believers.

Concluding his prayer, Abraham addresses his Lord by His attributes that are the most suitable here: "*Lord! You are the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 5)

Concluding its account of Abraham and his followers' attitude, of those who surrendered themselves to God, the *sūrah* repeats the fact that they provided a good example for all believers: "*In them, indeed, you have a good example for everyone who looks forward with hope to God and the Last Day. Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 6) The example is there for those who look forward with hope to God and the Last Day. These are the ones who truly appreciate the experience that Abraham and his followers went through, and treat it as the example to follow. This, then, encourages the present generation of believers to strengthen their resolve. Anyone who abandons this way, leaving the noble procession of believers and disowns the bond with those great ancestors may do so. God needs no one: "*Anyone who turns away should remember that God is truly self-sufficient, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 6)

In this round, the believers have been taken back to the early period of their long history, remembering their first origins on earth. They have learnt from the experience of those earlier generations and reviewed the conclusion to which such experience led. The way to follow is

not difficult, especially since they are not the first to tread it. The Qur'ān repeats this conclusion so as to make the procession of faith uninterrupted. No one who follows the same way should feel lonely, even if he finds himself the only one in his generation following that way! He will not find it difficult to discharge his duty because previous travellers discharged it before him.

Whom to Boycott

God knows how eager the early Muslims were to see the hostility and conflict with their own people come to an end. Therefore, the *sūrah* raises before them the hope that those enemies might yet join the Muslims and accept the Islamic faith. In this way, hostility between the two camps would be replaced by firmly-based affection. Again, the *sūrah* lightens their burden, stating the main rule on which international relations between the Muslim community and other powers are based. Thus, boycott and enmity are applied only in cases of aggression and hostility by unbelievers. When there is no aggression against Muslims and hostilities are absent, then Muslims should treat others kindly, as they deserve, always maintaining fairness and justice:

> *It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies. God is all powerful; God is much forgiving, ever merciful. God does not forbid you to deal kindly and with full equity with those who do not fight you on account of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes. God loves those who behave equitably. God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards those who fight against you because of your faith, and drive you from your homes, and help others to drive you out. Those of you who turn towards them in friendship are indeed wrongdoers.* (Verses 7–9)

Islam is a religion of peace, a faith based on love. It wants only for others to benefit from and implement its sound way of life. It wants all people to come together, under God's banner, as a fraternity based on love. Nothing prevents this other than aggression by Islam's enemies. Should those enemies wish to live in peace with Islam and Muslims,

Islam will not be the one to start enmity. Even if enmity and hostility exists, Islam preserves the seeds of friendship by extending justice and good treatment to its enemies, hoping that they will one day be convinced that their own advantage lies in adopting its noble beliefs. Islam never despairs of this possibility.

The first verse of this section refers to this hope that is never extinguished by despair. It seeks to lighten the burden of some of the Muhājirīn who were troubled by conflict with their own people: "*It may well be that God will bring about affection between you and those who are now your enemies.*" (Verse 7) As this prospect of hope is raised by God, it was certain to become a reality. When the Muslims heard it, they were certain that it would be fulfilled. Indeed, it was not long after, when Makkah fell to Islam, that the people of the Quraysh became Muslims, and all joined together under the same banner. All enmity between them disappeared and all were united as brethren.

"*God is all powerful.*" (Verse 7) He accomplishes what He wills, and no one can raise an objection, let alone try to stop Him. "*God is much forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verse 7) He will forgive past sins and hostility.

Until God's promise is fulfilled, expressed here in the form of a hope, God gives them permission to be friendly with those who did not fight them or drive them out of their homes on account of their faith. No blame would attach to them if they maintained friendly relations with such people, treating them fairly, giving them all their due. On the other hand, there is a strict prohibition against friendship with those who fought them, drove them out of their land, or even helped in driving them out. Those who violate this prohibition are judged as wrongdoers. Wrongdoing is equated with unbelief, as God says in the Qur'ān: "*To associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.*" (31: 13) This is, then, a very serious warning that strikes awe in a believer's heart.

This rule about how to treat non-Muslims is most fair and fits with the nature of Islam and its outlook on human life and on the universe as a whole. It represents the basis of its international law, which considers the state of peace to be the permanent state with all peoples and groupings. This state of peace is revoked only when military aggression against Islam and its people takes place, for it is imperative that such aggression be

repelled; or when treason is feared after a treaty with others has been signed, for this represents a threat of aggression; or when freedom of belief and advocating Islam is forcibly suppressed, which again represents aggression. In all other cases, Islam extends the hand of peace, affection and justice to all people.

This rule fits perfectly with the overall Islamic concept, which makes the only bone of contention between them and their opponents that of faith. The only value a Muslim will not compromise, even if this forces him to fight, is faith. Nothing puts Muslims in conflict and hostility with other communities except the question of the freedom to present their faith to people, the freedom of belief, the freedom to implement the divine code in human life.

This directive fits with the drift of the *sūrah* which aims to give prominence to faith, making it the only banner Muslims raise. Whoever stands under it belongs to them, and whoever fights them on account of it is their enemy. Anyone who maintains peace with them, leaving them to their faith, preventing no one from listening to it and adopting it, and putting no pressure on those who believe in it is a person at peace. Islam allows kindly treatment to be extended to such people.

A Muslim lives for his faith, making it his sole purpose within himself and with all people. He does not enter into conflict for gain, nor does he fight for ties of race, land, tribe or family. His only struggle is to ensure that God's word reigns supreme, and that His faith is the code to be followed.

Sometime later *Sūrah* 9, Repentance, was revealed, starting with the verse that gave notice to communities that held peace treaties with the Muslim state. It gave a four-month notice of termination of any treaty that did not specify a term of expiry. Treaties that ran for a specified notice remained valid until the end of their terms. This measure was taken after practical experience showed that the idolaters in Arabia only observed their treaties with the Muslim community until they had a chance of victory should they violate such treaties. This brought into operation the other rule concerning such treaties: "*If you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous.*" (8: 58) To give notice of termination in a fair way was necessary to secure the Islamic base, which at the time

included the whole of the Arabian Peninsula, against its enemies living alongside them. These were the idolaters and people of earlier religions who were repeatedly in breach of their treaties, trying to take the Muslim community unawares. This was essentially a permanent situation of aggression. Another reason for this measure was the fact that the two superpowers at the time, the Byzantine and Persian Empires, began to feel that Islam could become a source of danger to them and this they wanted to pre-empt. Therefore, they started to encourage Arab tribes living close to them to take a hostile attitude towards the Muslim state. All this necessitated that the Islamic base be made solid and secure from any internal enemy before any clash with outside powers could take place.

Women Migrants

The *sūrah* issues a ruling concerning women believers who might join the Muslim community:

> *Believers! When believing women come to you as migrants, test them. God knows best their faith. If you ascertain that they are believers, do not send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them. None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries. Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise. Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid. Fear God, in whom you believe.* (Verses 10–11)

The Prophet concluded the al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty with the Quraysh in Makkah and this specified a condition whereby the Prophet and the Muslim community would return to them anyone who went over to the

Muslims, even though that person might be a Muslim. Reports mention that when the Prophet was about to leave al-Ḥudaybiyah, a few women came over to him seeking to join the Muslim community in Madīnah. The Quraysh asked for their extradition in accordance with the terms of the treaty. It appears that those terms were not conclusive in the case of women. These two verses were revealed to block returning women believers to the unbelievers, for fear that they would be persecuted on account of their faith.[1]

This was a situation requiring rules of international law. These rules outlined here regulate such cases on the basis of absolute fairness, without allowing the behaviour of the other party, unfair as it may be, to influence the Islamic stand. Furthermore, Islam's stance is that it ensures justice in all internal and external dealings.

The first step required by these rules was to test migrating women in order to determine their reasons for migration. In other words, they must not be trying to escape from a marriage that had gone wrong, or be pursuing some other material benefit, or hoping to marry men they were in love with in the Muslim community. Ibn 'Abbās reports that the Prophet tested any such woman, asking her: "By God, have you fled to us because you hate your husband? By God, have you come to us merely to migrate to a new land? By God, are you coming to us in pursuit of some material gain? By God, have you come to us only because you love God and His Messenger?"

'Ikrimah explains that the test was a form of questioning so as to establish whether the woman was migrating only because she loved God and His Messenger or for some other purpose. The test was also to establish whether or not she was in love with a man from the Muslim community, and whether or not she was fleeing from her husband.

1. It should be mentioned here that the Prophet and the Muslims abided by this treaty, right from the first moment after its signing. Hardly had the treaty been so signed when Suhayl ibn 'Amr, the Quraysh negotiator, saw his son coming to the Muslim camp seeking refuge. He was a Muslim but his father had imprisoned him and tried to force him to revert to idolatry. Suhayl demanded that his son be handed back to him, and the Prophet granted his request. He explained that Muslims are always true to their pledges. The events leading to the signing of this peace treaty are dealt with in detail in the commentary on *Sūrah* 48 in this volume. – Editor's note.

Such, then, was the test. It relied on statements made under oath. Whether such a woman had any different motive, God only knew. People simply cannot establish this with any measure of certainty: "*God knows best their faith.*" (Verse 10) When they have made their statements under oath, confirming that they are believers, then the Muslim community cannot "*send them back to the unbelievers. They are no longer lawful [as wives] for the unbelievers, and these are no longer lawful to them.*" (Verse 10) When the most important bond of faith has been severed, nothing can repair the relationship. Marriage is a union of permanent settlement and it cannot be properly established when the primary bond of faith is absent. Faith is the basic and vital emotion that keeps a heart alive; it cannot be replaced by any other. A believer's heart cannot warm to another that is devoid of faith. There can be no true feeling of mutual inclination or security between two hearts when only one of them has faith. Marriage survives on mutual affection, compassion, inclination and security.

After the Prophet's migration to Madīnah this issue had been left open, with no rule stated about it in the Qur'ān. Therefore, no couple were separated even if only one accepted Islam while the other did not. This was due to the fact that the Muslim society had not yet by then established firm roots. When al-Ḥudaybiyah Treaty was concluded, it was time that such a separation be made. Muslims, men and women, should understand that the bond that overrides all other bonds is faith, and they should put this rule into practice.

The provision for separating such couples was accompanied by a provision for compensation. Thus, an unbeliever whose wife left him because she was Muslim was entitled to receive back whatever he had paid to her in dowry at the time of their marriage. The same applied in reverse, should the man be a believer and his wife not.

When this had been done, the Muslims could marry such migrant women, provided that they paid them dowries. Scholars differ as to whether such women should observe a waiting period; as also over the length of the waiting period. Some scholars say that it is the same as that observed by a divorced woman, i.e. until she has gone through three menstrual periods, while others maintain that it lasts only until she has completed one period, to make sure that she is not pregnant. It

is agreed that if any such woman is pregnant, her waiting period lasts until she has given birth.

"*None the less, hand back to the unbelievers the dowries they have paid them. It is no offence for you to marry them after giving them their dowries. Do not hold on to marriage ties with unbelieving women. Ask for repayment of the dowries you have paid, just as they have the right to ask for repayment of their dowries.*" (Verse 10) All these rules are then tied to the strongest guarantee a believer has, which is that of watching God and fearing Him: "*Such is God's judgement. He judges between you in equity. God is all-knowing, wise.*" (Verse 10) Indeed, this is the only inviolable guarantee. God's judgement is that of the One who knows what is in people's hearts, the Almighty who has power over all creatures. It is enough that a Muslim should realize the source of this judgement in order to implement it fully, because he knows that he will ultimately return to God.

Should a believer lose what he had paid in dowry, because his unbeliever wife or her family refuses to refund her Muslim husband, as happened in some cases, the Muslim ruler would compensate him for this, taking this from any money due to the unbelievers whose Muslim wives had migrated to join the Muslim community, or from any war gains made by the Muslim community: "*Should any of your wives go over to the unbelievers and you subsequently acquire gains from them, then pay those whose wives have gone away the equivalent of whatever dowry they had paid.*" (Verse 11) Again this ruling is tied to the same guarantee that ensures the implementation of every Islamic rule: "*Fear God, in whom you believe.*" (Verse 11) This is a profound and touching instruction for believers.

We see how these rulings concerning the separation of married couples provide an example of the practical implementation of the Islamic concept of life values and ties. They reflect the unity of the Muslim community and its being distinct from any other. It is a community where all life is based on faith, where all distinctions of race, colour, language, family and land are insignificant. There is only one sign that distinguishes between people – the sign of the party to which they belong. There are only two parties: the party of God and the party of Satan.

Women's Pledge of Allegiance

The Prophet is then instructed on how women should pledge their allegiance, and what the terms of their pledge should be:

> *Prophet! When believing women come and pledge to you that they will not associate any partner with God, nor steal, nor commit adultery, nor kill their children, nor lie about who fathered their children, nor disobey you in anything reasonable, then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful.* (Verse 12)

These terms outline the major elements of faith, and provide the framework of the new social system established by Islam. They comprise associating no partners with God in any way whatsoever. They confirm that offences with prescribed penalties, such as theft and adultery, should never be committed. Women should also pledge never to kill their children. This is a reference to the pre-Islamic practice of burying girls alive, and includes killing embryos for any reason. Women are placed in trust of their pregnancies. Another term of the pledge women give is that they should never "*lie about who fathered their children.*"[2] Ibn 'Abbās says: "This means that they must not attribute to their husbands any child that does not belong to them. The same view is stated by Muqātil. Perhaps this term, coming as it does after that of refraining from adultery altogether, was to address some practices of pre-Islamic days, when a woman might sleep with several men and when she gave birth to a child, she would choose its father from among them on the basis of looks, or perhaps on some other basis when she knew who its true father was. However, the text includes this and any other case of falsehood in this regard. Perhaps Ibn 'Abbās and Muqātil referred to this particular situation because of a case at the time.

The last term in women's pledge of allegiance is that they must not "*disobey you in anything reasonable.*" This means a commitment to obey

2. A more literal translation of this term of the pledge is "nor perpetrate any falsehood of their invention with regard to what is between their hands and legs." The chosen translation is based on the views of most leading scholars, as indicated in the commentary above. – Editor's note.

the Prophet in everything he says, because he never ordered anything other than what is reasonable and good. However, this term is also one of the main elements of the Islamic constitution. It makes clear that obedience of the Muslim ruler remains valid only within what is reasonable, i.e. what is in line with Islam and its laws. It does not give blanket cover, requiring obedience in every situation whatsoever. This rule ensures that the force of any legislation is derived from its being based on God's law, not the will of the ruler or the nation should they differ with God's law. Both ruler and nation are subject to God's law and derive their authority from it.

When women give such a comprehensive pledge of allegiance, their pledges are accepted. The Prophet is asked to pray to God to forgive them what they might have done in the past: "*Then accept their pledge of allegiance and pray to God to forgive them. God is most forgiving, ever merciful.*" (Verse 12) It is God who forgives and pardons.

The *sūrah* concludes with a general directive:

> *Believers! Do not take as friends any people with whom God is angry. They despair of the life to come just as the unbelievers despair of those buried in their graves.* (Verse 13)

This is addressed to believers in their capacity of faith, a faith that distinguishes them from all other communities. Some reports suggest that the description of '*people with whom God is angry*' refers to the Jews, since they have been branded as such elsewhere in the Qur'ān. However, we have here a general text that applies to the Jews, the polytheists and all other enemies of God. All these groups have incurred God's anger. All of them despair of the life to come. They never take it seriously, and never give it a thought. Their despair of it is the same as that of unbelievers who think that those who died will never return and be resurrected.

This final address sums up the theme of the *sūrah*, giving it a conclusion akin to its opening. Its message is thus very clearly stated.

SŪRAH 61

Al-Ṣaff
(The Ranks)

Prologue

This *sūrah* seeks to establish two major themes which permeate its entire text. It also includes a number of secondary references which relate to those major themes.

The first aim of the *sūrah* is to establish in the conscience of every Muslim the fact that his religion is the final version of the divine system God has laid down for mankind. There were earlier versions, each suited for a particular period of human history. There were also experiences in the lives of earlier messengers and past communities that afforded much to reflect upon. All these have paved the way for this final version of the one divine faith. It incorporates God's final message for mankind, which He has willed to prevail over all other religions.

Hence, the *sūrah* mentions Moses' message, making it clear that his people caused him much grief and deviated from his message. They had gone astray and were no longer to be trustees of the divine faith: "*Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: 'My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?' So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers.*" (Verse 5)

The *sūrah* then mentions Jesus' message to establish that Jesus was sent to carry on Moses' earlier message, confirming what was revealed before him of the Torah. He was also given the task of paving the way for the final message, giving news of the Messenger who was to carry it, and serving as a link between the first and the last divine religions. *"And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad."* (Verse 6) Hence, his task was to carry the trust of the divine faith after Moses and then to give it to the Messenger whose coming he announced.

It was always confirmed, according to God's knowledge and by His will, that these steps would eventually lead to a final and permanent version to establish God's faith in human life, and this by the final Messenger: *"It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters."* (Verse 9)

This first clear purpose of the *sūrah* gives rise to its second purpose. When a Muslim is fully aware of this fact, knows the history of the divine faith and is aware of his share of it, he realizes the duties that this trust involves. Hence, he has a clear and sincere motive for striving to ensure that this faith prevails over all other religions, just as God wants it to do. There is no longer any vacillation in practically carrying out what one verbally has proposed to do. It is inappropriate for a believer to declare his intention to strive for God's cause but then to refrain from doing so. According to some reports, it appears that there were some cases of this sort. Hence, the *sūrah* starts with a proclamation that the entire universe and all that is in it unceasingly glorify God. *"Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building."* (Verses 2–4)

In the middle of the *sūrah*, the believers are called upon to take part in the most profitable transaction that they could have in this life and in the life to come: *"Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? You are to believe in God and His Messenger,*

and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers." (Verses 10–13)

The *sūrah* ends with an appeal to the believers to be the helpers in furthering God's cause, just like Jesus' disciples who supported him when the Israelites continued to deny his message and were hostile towards him: "*Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: "Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" The disciples said: "We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause." And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.*" (Verse 14)

These two purposes are very clear throughout the *sūrah*, taking up nearly all of its text. There only remains a denunciation of those who reject the final message, which is clearly linked to the two main themes. We see this clearly stated after Jesus gave the news of the impending appearance of the final Messenger, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him): "*But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*"(Verses 6–8)

Thus, every Muslim is clear in his mind that his faith is the final version of the religion God wants to be established on earth. He realizes that the trust of this divine faith is given to him, and he knows that he is required to strive for God's cause as God wants. His line is clear, leaving no room for ambiguity, hesitation or faltering. The goal is well defined and the way to achieve it is made clear.

With this goal-defining directive we also have clear pointers to the nature of the moral code a Muslim must follow. A Muslim must

demonstrate consistency between his conscience and his action. He cannot say one thing and then do another. His appearance must not fundamentally differ from what he conceals within himself. He must be consistent in all situations, dedicated in his service to God's cause, clear in both his intention and action, moving with steady steps, collaborating with his brothers so that the Muslim community is seen to be solid and firm like a building with strong foundations.



Al-Ṣaff (The Ranks)



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

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All that is in the heavens and in the earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is the almighty, truly wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? (2)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لِمَ تَقُولُونَ مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! (3)

كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِندَ اللَّهِ أَن تَقُولُوا مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٣﴾

God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building. (4)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِهِ صَفًّا كَأَنَّهُم بُنْيَانٌ مَّرْصُوصٌ ﴿٤﴾

Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: "My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?" So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers. (5)

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ يَا قَوْمِ لِمَ تُؤْذُونَنِي وَقَد تَّعْلَمُونَ أَنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ ۖ فَلَمَّا زَاغُوا أَزَاغَ اللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ ۚ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٥﴾

وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي
رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ
التَّوْرَاةِ وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ
أَحْمَدُ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالُوا هَذَا سِحْرٌ
مُبِينٌ ﴿٦﴾

And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad." But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: "This is plain sorcery." (6)

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ
وَهُوَ يُدْعَىٰ إِلَى الْإِسْلَامِ ۚ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي
الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٧﴾

Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. (7)

يُرِيدُونَ لِيُطْفِئُوا نُورَ اللَّهِ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَاللَّهُ مُتِمُّ
نُورِهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨﴾

They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (8)

هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَىٰ وَدِينِ
الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ
الْمُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٩﴾

It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters. (9)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا هَلْ أَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَىٰ تِجَارَةٍ
تُنجِيكُم مِّنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿١٠﴾

Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? (10)

تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ وَتُجَٰهِدُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ بِأَمْوَٰلِكُمْ وَأَنفُسِكُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

You are to believe in God and His Messenger, and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. (11)

يَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَيُدْخِلْكُمْ جَنَّٰتٍ تَجْرِى مِن تَحْتِهَا ٱلْأَنْهَٰرُ وَمَسَٰكِنَ طَيِّبَةً فِى جَنَّٰتِ عَدْنٍ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ ﴿١٢﴾

He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! (12)

وَأُخْرَىٰ تُحِبُّونَهَا ۖ نَصْرٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَفَتْحٌ قَرِيبٌ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers. (13)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ كُونُوٓا۟ أَنصَارَ ٱللَّهِ كَمَا قَالَ عِيسَى ٱبْنُ مَرْيَمَ لِلْحَوَارِيِّۧنَ مَنْ أَنصَارِىٓ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ ۖ قَالَ ٱلْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ أَنصَارُ ٱللَّهِ ۖ فَـَٔامَنَت طَّآئِفَةٌ مِّنۢ بَنِىٓ إِسْرَٰٓءِيلَ وَكَفَرَت طَّآئِفَةٌ ۖ فَأَيَّدْنَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ عَلَىٰ عَدُوِّهِمْ فَأَصْبَحُوا۟ ظَٰهِرِينَ ﴿١٤﴾

Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: "Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" The disciples said: "We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause." And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail. (14)

Words and Actions

> *All that is in the heavens and in the earth extols God's limitless glory: for He alone is the almighty, truly wise.* (Verse 1)

The whole universe participates in this glorification of God Almighty whose might is combined with His infinite wisdom. This glorification begins this *sūrah*, which declares to Muslims that their religion is the last and final version of the divine faith. They are placed in a position of trustees of this faith based on God's oneness, denouncing all deviation perpetrated by unbelievers and idolaters. Muslims are also called upon to strive in support of this faith, which God has willed to prevail over all other religions, hateful as this may be to unbelievers. This opening, thus, implies that the trust given to Muslims belongs to the entire universe; the faith they strive for is the faith of all creatures in the heavens and the earth. Hence, this religion's prevalence is a universal phenomenon, one that is in line with the whole universe as it turns to God Almighty.

A group of believers are strongly reproached for something they did that was particularly hateful to God. This was inappropriate behaviour for believers:

> *Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do! God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.* (Verses 2–4)

Ibn 'Abbās reports that prior to making *Jihād* obligatory, some believers used to say: "We wish that God would tell us what action is most loved by Him, so that we could do it." God instructed His Messenger to say that what God loves most is a belief in Him that allows no room for doubt, and striving against deviant people who reject the faith. However, when *Jihād* was made obligatory, a number of believers found it difficult, and they disliked itdistasteful. Hence the revelation of the verses saying: "*Believers! Why do you say what you do not do? Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do!*" (Verse 2–3) Al-Ṭabarī also confirmed this in his commentary on the *sūrah*.

On the other hand, Ibn Kathīr says in his commentary that the majority of scholars agree that these verses were revealed when some Muslims turned away from *Jihād* when it was declared a duty. He adds that this is the same as other verses in the Qur'ān: "*Are you not aware of those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. the purifying dues]'? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, 'Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!' Say, 'Brief is the enjoyment of this world, whereas the life to come is the best for all who are God-fearing. None of you shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. Wherever you may be death will overtake you, even though you be in towers built up strong and high.*'" (4: 77–78)

Qatādah and al-Ḍaḥḥāq say that this verse reproaches those who used to boast about their exploits, claiming that they had fought and killed the enemy, when they had not done so.

Looking at these verses, their context and the mention of fighting, we feel that the occasion inviting their revelation was the one mentioned by the majority of scholars and by Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī. However, Qur'ānic texts always take dimensions that go beyond the individual events which they address. They also comment on many other events in addition to the immediate occasion. Therefore, we look at these verses according to their general import, without forgetting the immediate events for which they were revealed.

The *sūrah* starts then with a reproach for behaviour in one or more actual events: "*Believers! Why do you say what you do not do?*" (Verse 2) It then denounces this action and its lack of morality in a doubly powerful way: "*Most loathsome is it in the sight of God that you say what you do not do!*" (Verse 3) What is viewed by God as most loathsome must certainly be very hateful and repugnant. This statement is sufficient then to make believers view this in the vilest of terms, particularly as they are addressed by God as people who have accepted His religion and who believe in Him.

The next verse refers to that particular matter when they did something different to what they used to profess, namely *Jihād*. It defines what God

likes in this question and what earns His pleasure: "*God loves indeed those who fight in His cause in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*" (Verse 4) This is not mere fighting, but fighting for God's cause, in collaboration with the Muslim community, within its ranks, and with resolve and steadfastness, so that believers remain "*in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*"

Moral Values in Practice

We have said on several occasions that as it was being revealed, the Qur'ān was carrying on with a process of nation building. Its aim was to build a community that carried the trust of the divine message, implemented its approach and established its system in human life. It was necessary for this purpose that the Qur'ān should undertake the reform of its individuals, establish its bonds as a community, and build it as a living nation in practice. All of this was to be accomplished at the same time. A Muslim is not a Muslim unless he functions within a community. It is inconceivable for Islam to be put into practice unless it functions in a community with well-defined bonds, a system and goal. Its ultimate goal applies to the community as a whole, but it also applies at the same time to each individual. This goal consists of establishing the divine system in people's consciences and practices on earth. To achieve the latter, Islam must live in an actual community that implements it fully.

Islam places much emphasis on the individual's conscience and responsibility, but it is certainly not a religion of individuals who dedicate themselves to worship in their respective little corners. This does not establish Islam within the individual's own conscience, let alone in his whole life. Islam was not revealed in such isolation. Rather, it was revealed to establish its criteria and standards in human life. It aims to put its mark on every individual and collective activity in every direction. Mankind do not live as individuals, but as groups, communities and nations. And Islam wants to provide people with its controls as they conduct their lives. Hence, it is so structured as to cater for people as they live. Its morality, manners, rules and systems are all formulated on this basis. When Islam directs its attention to the conscience of the

individual, it moulds this conscience on the basis that the individual lives in a community. Both the individual and the community turn to God and seek His pleasure. Therefore, a Muslim works within his community to fulfil the religious trust on earth and to establish the Islamic system in life.

Right from the very first day of the Islamic message, a Muslim community was established under the leadership of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Its individuals had their commitments towards their community, which also had its special entity distinguishing it from all other communities. It had its values that related to the human conscience but which looked at the same time to the life and welfare of the community. All this took place before the Islamic state was established in Madīnah. Indeed, the formation of this community was the means by which the Islamic state was later established.

When we look at these three verses we find that the morality of the individual is intertwined with the needs of the community, under the authority of religious faith. By its very nature, this faith can function fully in human life only in the form of a system that is properly served and protected.

The first two of the three verses under discussion refer to God's punishment and a strong censure if believers say something that is belied by their deeds. Thus, these two verses delineate the hugely important qualities of truthfulness and consistency in a Muslim's personality. A Muslim must reflect the same image in his inner self and in his appearance. His actions must be consistent with his words. This applies in all situations and goes far beyond the call to *Jihād* to which the third verse refers.

The Qur'ān places great emphasis on this Islamic characteristic, which is also repeatedly emphasized in the *sunnah*. Denouncing the Jews, God says: "*How can you bid others to piety and forget yourselves even while you are reciting the Book? Do you not understand?*" (2: 44) "*They say: 'We do obey you,' but when they leave you, some of them devise, in secret, something different from what you advocate.*" (4: 81) "*There is a kind of man who pleases you greatly in the present life by what he says, and he cites God as witness to what is in his heart, whereas he is the most antagonistic of adversaries. Yet, no sooner does he turn away than he strives to spread corruption in*

the world, destroying crops and progeny. God does not love corruption." (2: 204–205) The Prophet says: "The three distinctive marks of a hypocrite are: he lies when he speaks, and breaks his promises, and he is untrue to his trust." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.] There are numerous *aḥādīth* that emphasize the same concept. Perhaps the *ḥadīth* we will quote now includes one of the most subtle and refined directives by the Prophet to reiterate this moral aspect of Islam. Imām Aḥmad and Abū Dāwūd relate this report by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Āmir ibn Rabī'ah: "God's Messenger came to us when I was a young boy. I wanted to go out to play, but my mother said to me, ''Abdullāh, come and I will give you something.' The Prophet said to her, 'What do you want to give him?' She replied, 'Dates.' He said, 'If you would not give him anything, it would have been recorded against you as a lie'."

Perhaps Imām Aḥmad was guided by this *ḥadīth* when he travelled a long distance to meet someone whom he wanted to ask about another *ḥadīth*. However, when he arrived at the man's place, he saw him raising his robe in a way that suggested to his mule that it contained food, but there was nothing in the robe. Imām Aḥmad then felt that he should not report the *ḥadīth* reported by this man simply because he had lied to his mule.

A Muslim's conscience is reared to such a fine moral standard so as to build the character that can be entrusted with the establishment of the divine system in human life. This is what we see in this *sūrah*, which provides an important aspect of education for the Muslim community and its preparation to shoulder its great trust.

The *Jihād* Duty

Let us now consider the issue of *Jihād* which these verses addressed at the time of their revelation. We find here several points that need to be appreciated.

We see firstly that human beings may experience moments of weakness and this is when they need God's help to combat such shortcomings. They need repeated reminders and regular education. These verses refer to a group of Muslims who, according to some reports, belonged to the Muhājirīn, the early Muslims who migrated with the Prophet from

Makkah to Madīnah. Whilst in Makkah, they wished, in all enthusiasm, that God would allow them to fight, but they were told to hold back and attend to their worship duties instead. However, when later in Madīnah they were told to fight, at the time that was considered appropriate, they held a different attitude: "*Are you not aware of those who have been told, 'Hold back your hands [from fighting], and attend regularly to prayer, and pay your* zakāt *[i.e. the purifying dues]'? When, at length, the order for fighting was issued to them, some of them stood in awe of men as one should stand in awe of God – or in even greater awe – and said, 'Our Lord! Why have you ordered us to fight? If only You had granted us a delay for a little while!'*" (4: 77) Other reports suggest that they were a group of the Madīnan Muslims who asked about the action God loves most so that they could perform it. However, when they were ordered to fight for God's cause, they disliked this.

As we reflect on this, we realize that regular and repeated encouragement, directives and strengthening are all necessary for the human soul as it faces difficult tasks and responsibilities. Only with such repeated encouragement can the human soul maintain its path and overcome its weaknesses, setting its sight on higher objectives. Moreover, we realize that we must not ask to be given great goals when we face neither pressure nor difficulty. This because we may not be able to fulfil what we ask God to assign to us. Here, we see some early Muslims weakening to the extent that they say one thing and do another. Hence they faced this strong reproach from God.

Secondly, we need to reflect on the phraseology of the verse that speaks of God's love for those who fight for His cause in closed ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building. This represents profound encouragement to fight for God's cause. This statement was first made to deal with a case of reluctance and turning away from fighting, but this immediate cause does not change the fact that the encouragement is meant for all times and all peoples. Hence, there is a definite and constant purpose behind it.

Islam neither likes nor encourages fighting, but it makes it a duty on Muslims because life necessitates it, and because the purpose behind it is very important. Islam presents the final version of the divine system to humanity. Although this system meets all the needs of an upright

human nature, it requires that people exert themselves to rise to its standard and maintain it. On the other hand, there are numerous forces on earth that dislike this system and try to undermine it, because it deprives those forces of many privileges that are based on values Islam considers false and which it aims to eradicate from human life. These evil forces try to exploit people's weaknesses and their slackening after they have attained the high standard to which Islam elevates them. They also exploit people's ignorance and inherited values to oppose Islam and prevent the establishment of its system. Evil can muster great forces and falsehood is wont to boast of its power; Satan is indeed wicked and cunning. Hence, the advocates of faith who try to establish the Islamic system and protect it must be strong in order to overcome the agents of evil and Satan's supporters. They must be strong in their moral values, and tough in their fighting against evil. They must resort to combat when it is the only way to guarantee the freedom of action that promotes the Islamic system, and the freedom to believe in it and implement it in human life.

They fight for God's cause, not for their own glory or for any bonds of race, nationality, tribe or clan. The aim of their fight is that God's word reigns supreme, for the Prophet says: "Whoever fights to make God's word supreme fights for God's cause." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

God's word in this context is an expression of His will. What appears to us human beings, of God's will is that which conforms to the system that operates the universe, which in its entirety glorifies God and praises Him. The final version of God's divine faith, Islam, is the one that fits perfectly with the universal system. It makes the whole universe, including human beings, implement God's law, to the exclusion of all other laws.

It was inevitable that this faith should be opposed by individuals, classes and states. It was also inevitable that Islam should proceed along its way despite such opposition. Hence, it was necessary that *Jihād* should become obligatory on Muslims in support of this faith and for the purpose of making God's word supreme on earth. Hence, God loves those who fight for His cause with complete unity of hearts and unwavering dedication.

Finally, we need to reflect a little on the description of the state fighters should be in when they undertake *Jihād* for God's cause. They should be "*in solid ranks, as though they were a firm and compact building.*" (Verse 4) This is an individual's obligation discharged in a collective form, i.e. in a community with a clear system. This is because those who stand against Islam marshal their forces and try to raise great coalitions against it. Hence, the soldiers of Islam must face its enemies standing in solid and straight ranks. It is in the nature of the Islamic faith that when it triumphs it moves to establish a solid community. Hence, the image of an individual believer, worshipping God on his own, striving and living alone is far removed from the nature of this faith and its duties. This is true both at the time of *Jihād* and fighting, and at a time when victory has been secured and the Islamic community established.

This condition, which God loves for believers, portrays the nature of their faith and explains for them the landmarks on their way. It illustrates the nature of the close cooperation between them as portrayed by this creative Qur'ānic image: solid ranks like a firm and compact building. It is a building in which every brick is firmly placed in position, fulfilling its specific function. The whole edifice may collapse if one of its bricks moves out of place, whether forward or backward, so as not to firmly link with the one next to it in the higher or lower row or on either of its two sides. This is an expression that shows the reality, not merely gives a simile. It raises before us the nature of the Muslim community, the relations between individuals in this community, their feelings and united action within the overall system and towards a well-defined goal.

Denounced Attitude

The *sūrah* moves on to speak about the history of this divine system and the stages it went through with the messages revealed before Islam:

> *Now when Moses spoke to his people, he said: 'My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?' So, when they swerved from the right way, God let their hearts swerve from the truth. God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers. And also Jesus, the son of Mary, said: 'Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you, [sent] to confirm the Torah revealed before*

me, and to give news of a Messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad.' (Verses 5–6)

Moses was the one who saved the Children of Israel from Pharaoh and his tyranny. He was God's messenger to them, their leader and teacher. Yet the grief that they caused him was of the extended type, taking many colours and forms. His struggle to put them on the right course was hard, tiring and trying. In the accounts the Qur'ān gives of Moses and his people we read about the different aspects of the grief they caused him and how hard he had to struggle to reform their belief system.

For example, they discouraged Moses' efforts to persuade Pharaoh to let them go free. So whilst he exposed himself to Pharaoh's wrath, they were safe having accepted their lot and humiliation. They even blamed Moses for worsening their plight: "*We have been oppressed before you came to us, and since you have come to us.*" (7: 129) The suggestion being that they did not see much good coming their way as a result of his message, or that they blamed him for this latest round of oppression.

No sooner did Moses, guided by God, deliver them from Pharaoh's humiliation – He caused Pharaoh and his people to drown before their very eyes – than they inclined themselves to a type of worship akin to Pharaoh's people: *We led the Children of Israel across the sea; and thereupon they came upon people who were dedicated to the worship of some idols of theirs. Said the Children of Israel: "Moses, set up a god for us like the gods they have."* (7: 138) Again, Moses had not been gone long for the appointment with his Lord to receive the tablets when the Sāmirī led them astray as he "*produced for them the effigy of a calf, which made a lowing sound. 'This,' they said, 'is your deity and the deity of Moses; but he has forgotten.'*" (20: 88)

They were also dissatisfied with their desert food, which was manna and quails. Thus they complained to their prophet: "*Moses! We can no longer put up with one kind of food. Pray to your Lord, then, to bring forth for us some of what the earth produces of green herbs, cucumber, garlic, lentils and onions.*" (2: 61) Mention should also be made here of the cow they were required to slaughter, yet they continued to demand explanations, seeking excuses and behaving impolitely to their prophet and to their

Lord. Time after time they said to Moses: "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us what kind of cow she should be.*" (2: 68) "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make clear to us of what colour she should be.*" (2: 69) "*Pray on our behalf to your Lord to make plain to us of what exact type she should be, for to us cows are much alike.*" (2: 70) When finally they ran out of excuses, "*They sacrificed her, although they had almost left it undone.*" (2: 71)

They requested that a day be assigned to them when they would not work. But when the Sabbath was ordained for them, they violated its rules. Later, when they were close to the Holy Land, which God told them they would enter, they stalled, not daring to go forward, while at the same time they spoke insolently to Moses: "*Mighty people dwell in that land, and we will surely not enter it unless they depart from it. If they do depart, then we will enter.*" (5: 22) He kept encouraging them, assuring them of the great success awaiting them, if they would only do what God had bidden them to do. Nonetheless, their insolence and disbelief reached new heights: "*They said, Moses, we will never go in so long as they are in it. Go forth, then, you and your Lord, and fight, both of you. We shall stay here.*" (5: 24)

They gave Moses much more grief, putting questions to him, making suggestions, and even starting a rebellion. Furthermore, as related in *aḥādīth*, they also falsely accused him. The *sūrah* mentions here how Moses remonstrated with them in a friendly way: "*My people! Why do you cause me grief, when you know that I am a messenger God has sent to you?*" (Verse 5) They knew for certain that he was God's messenger, but he did not put this fact across in a strong and assertive way. Rather, he simply gave them a remonstrating reminder. The result was that they swerved from the right way after being given every possible means of sticking to it. Hence, God let them go further astray and their hearts were no longer fit to receive guidance. "*God does not bestow His guidance upon evildoers.*" (Verse 5) Thus their trusteeship of the divine faith was over. They were no longer fit to carry God's message after they had gone so far astray.

Then Jesus came, saying: "*Children of Israel! I am God's messenger to you.*" (Verse 6) He did not say to them that he was God or the son of God or a manifestation of God. He was simply a messenger sent "*to*

confirm the Torah revealed before me, and to give news of a messenger that will come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad." (Verse 6)

Thus we see how the divine faith moved from one stage to the next, with all the stages interrelated, moving in the same direction, stretching from heaven to the earth: a long chain moving from link to link. This is the proper image, one worthy of God's design and constitution. It is basically the same approach, taking slightly different forms, according to what suits the needs, experience, knowledge and potential of humanity at each particular stage, until it reaches full maturity. Only then does the last stage arrive and the final form of divine faith be given: perfect, complete, addressing a mature mind that has benefited from all past experience. It opens the way so that the human mind works to its full potential within the method set for man and his abilities.

That Jesus gave the news of the impending arrival of Aḥmad, (another name of the Prophet Muḥammad), is absolutely confirmed by this verse, whether the Gospels mention this or not. Note also that the circumstances surrounding the writing of these Gospels and the way they were written make them totally unreliable on this issue.

The Qur'ān was read to the Jews and Christians in the Arabian Peninsula, including the verse that speaks of the Prophet Muḥammad as "*the unlettered Prophet whom they shall find described in the Torah and the Gospel.*" (7: 157) Some of their genuine scholars who embraced Islam, such as 'Abdullāh ibn Sallām, acknowledged this fact, but they counselled each other to suppress.

Several reports also confirm that the Jews were awaiting the arrival of a new messenger; this was considered imminent. The same was stated by a number of Christian priests in Arabia who were unitarians, living in isolation. But the Jews wanted this messenger to be one of their own. When God so willed that he should belong to the other branch of Abraham's seed, the Jews disliked and opposed this. Needless to say, the Qur'ānic statement is the ultimate verdict on such matters. It is the final say.

Trying to Extinguish God's Light

It seems that the verses that follow are mostly concerned with the way the Jews and the Christians received the Prophet mentioned in their

scriptures. They are denounced for the reception they gave Muḥammad and for their designs to undermine the new and final message God willed to prevail over all other religions:

> *But when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: 'This is plain sorcery.' Who could be more wicked than one who invents a falsehood about God, when he is only being called upon to submit to Him? God does not bestow His guidance upon the wrongdoers. They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.* (Verses 6–8)

The Jews' attitude to this new faith was a combination of hostility, evil scheming and misrepresentation. They waged a determined fight against Islam, using all means and resources, and this has continued to the present day. They levelled charges against it: "*when he came to them with all evidence of the truth, they said: This is plain sorcery.*" (Verse 6) This echoes the allegations of idolaters who had no scriptures and had no advance news of the new faith. The Jews also sought to create discord within the Muslim community. In particular, they tried to create division between the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār in Madīnah, and between the two tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj. They conspired with the hypocrites at times and with the idolaters at others. They also joined with the idolaters' attack on Madīnah, as happened in the Battle of the Moat. Their designs against the new faith also included spreading false rumours, as happened in what is known as the story of falsehood in which the main culprit was 'Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl. Later, they used the same tactics in the events masterminded by 'Abdullāh ibn Saba', which led to the assassination of 'Uthmān, the third Caliph. Thereafter, they tried further to undermine Islam with the fabrications and false stories they managed to infiltrate into *ḥadīth*, the reports of the history of the Prophet and the books of commentary on the Qur'ān. All this after they found themselves totally incapable of implanting any falsehood into the Qur'ān itself.

This war has continued unabated until the present day. Zionism and Christian imperialism have continued to scheme against Islam, launching or supporting aggression against Islam in every generation.

They launched the Crusades against the Muslim east, and they fought against the Muslims in Andalus in the west. They also fought against Islam in its central area launching one attack after another against the last Caliphate, i.e. the Ottoman Caliphate, which they called 'the sick man of Europe', until they managed to destroy it and divide its provinces. They needed to create false heroes in the land of Islam to carry out their schemes against it. When they needed to destroy the Caliphate as the last symbol of Islamic rule, they created in Turkey a national 'hero' and groomed his image. Thus, the Allied forces, which were in control of the Ottoman capital, retreated before his army in order to make him a great hero. In this way was he able to abolish the Caliphate regime and the Arabic language, and to separate Turkey from the rest of the Muslim world making of it a secular state. The Jews and Christians continue to create such false heroes whenever they feel the need to smash an Islamic movement in any Muslim country and replace Islamic ties with other bonds.

"*They aim to extinguish God's light with their mouths, but God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 8) This verse expresses a fact and paints a pathetic image of those enemies of Islam. It is true that they used to say about the Prophet and his message, '*This is plain sorcery*'. It is also true that they continued to scheme against Islam, trying to undermine it. It is a pathetic picture we see of them as they try to extinguish God's light with a blow from their mouths. How naïve and weak they are!

"*But God will spread His light in all its fullness, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.*" (Verse 8) There is no doubt that God's promise will always come true. He brought His light to fullness during the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), when the Muslim community came into being as a living and practical representation of the system He had chosen for mankind. It was a well-defined religion with clearly delineated features so that future generations could follow in its footsteps. It was a fact of history, not a theory explained in books. He also brought His light to fullness when he perfected the favour He bestowed on Muslims, choosing Islam as their religion and making it complete. Thus, they loved their religion and were keen to fight for its cause. Anyone of them would prefer to be thrown in a fire rather than

revert to disbelief. Thus the truth of the faith lived in people's hearts and in their world. This truth continues to spring up time after time, showing that it continues to live in spite of all the sustained aggression, repeated scheming and unabated persecution campaigns waged against Islam and its followers. The fact is that God's light cannot be extinguished by people's mouths, nor can it be stifled by fire and iron-fisted tactics to which some small people resort. It may appear to tyrants, stooges made up as heroes and to Zionists that they can achieve this goal and put out God's light, but all their efforts will come to nothing.

It is God's will that this religion should prevail. Hence, it is inevitable that it will:

> *It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, so that He may cause it to prevail over all other religions, however hateful this may be to the idolaters.* (Verse 9)

That God testifies that this religion of Islam is '*guidance and the religion of truth*' is the final word. God's will has been fulfilled, and this religion has prevailed over all other religions. It has prevailed by its very nature as a religion. No other religion compares with it in its nature. Pagan and idolatrous religions cannot stand up to it for a moment. Divine religions, on the other hand, find it as their final and complete version. So, in essence, Islam is the perfect and complete version of these faiths, and it will preserve its pure form for the rest of time.

Earlier divine religions were distorted by omissions and additions. Thus, they became unfit to lead human life in any direction. Even if they had remained free of distortion, they are no more than earlier versions of the divine faith which did not cater for ever-increasing life requirements, because they were intended by God to serve for a limited time only.

This shows that God's promise has come true from the viewpoint of the nature of faith. As for real life, God's promise was fulfilled at one time when Islam gained power and established its own system of government. Within one century, most of the populated world came under its rule. Then it moved peacefully into Asia and Africa to win, through advocacy efforts, more than five times the numbers who embraced it during the early *Jihād* efforts. It continues to spread without having a single state implementing it fully, after Zionism and Christian imperialism

destroyed the last Caliphate in Turkey at the hands of the 'hero' they manufactured for this purpose. It continues to spread by God's grace, despite all the schemes devised to stop its march and undermine it, and the persecution of Islamic revivalist movements everywhere at the hands of other 'heroes' Zionism and imperialism create.

This religion will continue to have other roles to fulfil in the life of humanity. It will prevail in fulfilment of God's promise. Human efforts cannot stop God's will, no matter how powerful they may be or how wicked their schemes of misrepresentation are.

These verses served as motivation to the believers to carry the trust for which God has chosen them, after it was abandoned by the Jews and Christians who were not true to it. These verses reassure the believers that they are simply the means of fulfilling God's will. They continue to provide such motivation and reassurance to new believers who are certain that God's promise will always come true. They will give new generations the same motives and reassurance until God's promise comes to be fulfilled in people's real life once more, God willing.

A Most Profitable Bargain

When the history of faith has thus been outlined and the inevitable triumph the final version of the divine faith has been promised, the Qur'ān addresses the believers – those living at the time and those of later generations – offering them the bargain of their lives. This is a transaction in which the merchandise is faith and the means to achieve it is *Jihād*:

> *Believers! Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering? You are to believe in God and His Messenger, and to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives. This is for your own good, if you but knew it. He will forgive you your sins, and [in the life to come] will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden. That is the supreme triumph! And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers.* (Verses 10–13)

The style employed here uses a variety of forms, such as splitting sentences and reconnecting them, putting forward a question and providing the answer, inversion and transposition all aiming to drive a certain message home. The address starts in the name of faith, "*Believers!*" It is followed by an inspiring question. It is God who puts the question and holds their expectation of an answer: "*Shall I point out to you a bargain that will save you from grievous suffering?*"

Who would not wish to know what this bargain is and what its terms are! Yet here the verse ends, providing a break between two sentences to add to the expectation. The answer is given when interest in it has been heightened: "*You are to believe in God and His Messenger.*" Since they were truly believers in God and His Messenger, they are happy that this part of the answer is already met by them. "*And to strive hard in God's cause with your possessions and your lives.*" This is the main theme of the *sūrah*, and it is given here in this particular fashion to reiterate a message that has already been clarified. God knows that human beings need such repetition and variety of modes and styles in order to rise to the occasion. Realizing this, they will exert their maximum efforts to establish and preserve the divine system.

The *sūrah* goes further, presenting the bargain in an even more attractive way: "*This is for your own good, if you but knew it.*" Knowledge of the truth will encourage the person who knows it to try to obtain this beneficial matter. But the thing that is referred to as being good for us is given in more detail in the next verse. This again heightens the effect even further; providing the details after a general statement drives the point home and makes it even more desirable. "*He will forgive you your sins.*" On its own, this is more than enough. Who would need any further reward when he is assured of God's forgiveness? Who would begrudge anything if he is certain to obtain God's forgiveness? But God's grace has no limit, for the reward also includes something for the life to come. God "*will admit you into gardens through which running waters flow, and into goodly mansions in the gardens of Eden.*" This is the most profitable bargain of all, because all that is needed for this deal to be concluded is that a believer should fight for God's cause during his short life on earth. Even if this means him losing his life in this fight, he will be compensated for it with heaven and these goodly mansions where he lives in permanent bliss. "*That is the supreme triumph!*"

The account of this transaction appears to conclude here. It is indeed a highly profitable bargain which the believer makes, bartering the life of this world for that of the hereafter. A person who receives a profit ten times his capital will be the envy of everyone in the marketplace. What about one who puts up a few days of life on earth and its limited and narrow comforts to earn an eternal life with God in pure happiness and enjoyment that knows no end?

The deal was concluded between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah on the night when the Anṣār (the Prophet's Companions from Madīnah) pledged their support to him. 'Abdullāh said to the Prophet: "Make whatever conditions you wish, for yourself and for your Lord." He said: "My condition for my Lord is that you worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. And my condition for myself is that you pledge you will protect me as you protect your own womenfolk and children." 'Abdullāh said: "What will our reward be if we honour our commitments?" The Prophet said: "Paradise." They said: "It is a profitable bargain. We will never seek release from our commitments, nor do we accept any cancellation."

God's grace is limitless. He knows that human beings always look for something close, in this world, which fits human nature. Therefore, He gives them the happy news of what He has determined of making this religion of Islam prevail in this world, and making its system and code triumph in the life of that same generation: "*And [He will grant you] yet another thing that you dearly love: help from God and a victory soon to come. Give you the good news to the believers.*" (Verse 13)

At this point, the bargain attains the point of supreme returns which only God, whose stores are endless, and whose grace is interminable, can give. What He gives in return, then, are forgiveness, heaven, goodly dwelling and eternal bliss, but in addition to all such profits He gives a soon-to-happen victory. Who would hold back, hesitate when God tells him of this bargain?

With all this temptation and goodly prospects, a thought may well occur to us. A believer who knows the Islamic concept of life and the universe, and appreciates the great horizons this concept opens up before us, and then looks at life without faith, with its narrow concerns and lowly levels, cannot tolerate life without faith even for a moment. He

will not hesitate for a second in joining the struggle for God's cause in order to establish the great concept of faith in real life, so that he may live with the rest of mankind in its superior reality. It may be that he would not need to have any reward other than such a life, because the struggle for God's cause is, in itself, a reward, giving us contentment and happiness in this life. Moreover, such a believer cannot live in a world devoid of faith, and cannot sit idle, not striving to establish a world governed by faith. Thus, he is strongly motivated to struggle, no matter what happens to him as a result.

Echoing Jesus' Appeal

God, however, knows that people may slacken, and that enthusiasm may dampen, efforts may wane and love of safety may lead people to accept the *status quo*, even though its level is too low. Hence, the Qur'ān administers this treatment, providing motivation and images to enhance feelings and enthusiasm, making use of every occasion and possible means to appeal to human hearts and souls. It does not rely merely on faith or on one mode of address in the name of this faith. Hence, the *sūrah* ends with a new and distinctive address, and one that carries new appeal:

> *Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God; just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.' And so some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.* (Verse 14)

The disciples were Jesus Christ's pupils. It is said that they were 12 men who were close to him and who dedicated themselves to learning from him. They continued to spread his message and commandments after his term was over. This verse does not give us a detailed story: it simply outlines an attitude. Hence, we look at it in the context it is given and for the purpose it serves.

"*Believers! Be helpers [in the cause] of God.*" (Verse 14) Place yourselves in this noble position to which He elevates you. Is there a position that

is higher and more noble than that of being a supporter of God and His cause? This bargain bestows an honour that is greater than heaven and its happiness: be helpers of God, "*just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.'*" (Verse 14) They were chosen for this task and earned this honour. Jesus came to give the news of the last Prophet and the last religion. It is only fitting that Muḥammad's followers should be chosen for this permanent task, just as Christ's disciples were chosen for it during their period of time. This is clearly apparent in the way the dialogue is presented in this verse.

But what was the result then? "*Some of the Children of Israel came to believe whereas others denied the truth. But We have given those who believed strength over their enemy and they were the ones to prevail.*" (Verse 14) This statement may be interpreted in one of two ways: either the believers in Christ's message are all Christians, whether they remained faithful to its original form or they are those whose faith was subject to distortion. God supported them over the Jews who did not believe in Him at all, as known from history. Or the believers were only those who continued to believe in God's oneness in defiance of those who gave Jesus divine status, those who believed in the Trinity, or those who deviated in some other way. The believers prevailed in argument, giving irrefutable evidence. Alternatively, we may understand the verse as meaning that those who continued to believe in God's oneness were supported by the last religion that endorsed their beliefs. God has made the final victory assured to this religion, as happened in history. This last sense is perhaps the most probable.

The aim of this last address is to strengthen the resolve of the believers in the last religion, the heirs of the divine message. They are the ones charged with a great task, namely the implementation of God's system on earth. They are encouraged to come forward to support God's cause: "*just as Jesus, the son of Mary, said to the disciples: 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' The disciples said: 'We shall be [your] helpers in God's cause.'*" Eventual victory is assured for believers who support God's cause.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes with a verse that fits the general context and drift of the *sūrah*, yet has a special colour and effect. It enriches an already rich variety of colours and effects.