

SŪRAH 107

Al-Mā`ūn

(Small Kindness)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Have you seen him who denies religion? (1)

أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يُكَذِّبُ بِالْإِيمَانِ ﴿١﴾

It is he who thrusts the orphan away (2)

فَذَلِكَ الَّذِي يَدُعُّ الْيَتِيمَ ﴿٢﴾

and does not urge others to feed the needy. (3)

وَلَا تَحْضُ عَلَىٰ طَعَامِ الْمَسْكِينِ ﴿٣﴾

Woe, then, to those who pray (4)

فَوَيْلٌ لِّلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٤﴾

but are heedless of their prayers; (5)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ ﴿٥﴾

who put on a show of piety (6)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَاءُونَ ﴿٦﴾

but refuse to give even the smallest help to others.

وَيَمْنَعُونَ الْمَاعُونَ ﴿٧﴾

(7)

Overview

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation according to some authorities and a Makkan-Madinan one according to others, with the first three verses said to have been revealed in Makkah and the rest in Madinah. The latter view is perhaps weightier. Yet the *sūrah* is one interwoven entity, aiming at the establishment of one of the most

fundamental aspects of faith. Hence we are more inclined to take it as being an entirely Madinan revelation. Its subject matter is more in line with the topics of the part of the Qur'ān revealed in Madinah. It relates to the phenomena of hypocrisy and false pretences which were unheard of among the Muslim community in Makkah. But there is no need to reject the assertion that the *sūrah* is a Makkan-Madinan one, because it is possible that the last four verses were revealed in Madinah and integrated with the first three on the grounds of similarity of subject matter. Having said that, let us now consider the *sūrah* and its theme.

Belief and Practice

This *sūrah* of seven short verses tackles an important and vital issue which could very well change the common meanings normally assigned to the terms 'faith', or *īmān*, and 'disbelief', or *kufr*. Moreover, it brings out the fundamental truth intrinsic in the nature of the Islamic faith, the enormous benefit it offers to all humanity and the abundant blessings with which God favoured mankind when He sent them His last message.

As a way of life, Islam is not built on ostentation and superficiality. The apparent aspects of the different acts of worship are, according to Islam, meaningless unless they are motivated by sincerity and devotion to God. Worship sincerely motivated produces effects within a person's heart, and these cause him to act righteously. The effects of worship are reflected in a type of social behaviour which elevates man's life on this earth.

No less true is the fact that Islam is not a loose, fragmentary, disjointed system from which one can pick and choose at leisure. On the contrary, it is a complete way of life with acts of worship and rites, as well as individual and collective obligations that are mutually complementary. Together they lead to a goal of which mankind is the sole beneficiary; a goal which ensures that hearts are purified, life is ennobled, and men co-operate for the common good and progress; a goal wherein abound God's blessings.

A person may profess to be a Muslim, that is, he accepts this religion and all its principles, offers prayers regularly and observes other acts of worship, and yet is lacking in the essence of faith and sincerity of belief. In fact, he may be very far from these. For there are signs which indicate the firm establishment of these qualities in people's hearts.

As explained in the commentary on *Sūrah* 103, *The Declining Day*, the essence of faith once firmly rooted in people's hearts and minds, immediately begins to operate and manifest itself in their behaviour. The *sūrah* stresses unequivocally that, if this is not the case, there is no faith.

“Have you seen him who denies religion? It is he who thrusts the orphan away and does not urge others to feed the needy.” (Verses 1-3) The *sūrah* starts with a question addressed to all who can see, generating suspense and holding their attention in order to make them discover the target and subject of the *sūrah*. Who is this creature identified by the Qur’ān as the one who denies the religion of Islam? The answer is given immediately: *“It is he who thrusts the orphan away and does not urge others to feed the needy.”* (Verses 2-3)

This definition of unbelievers may sound surprising when compared with a traditional definition of faith, but this is the crux of the matter. Indeed the one who denies the faith is he who harshly pushes away the orphan, humiliating him and hurting his feelings, and who does not care for the needy or their welfare. For if the truth of Islam has touched his heart in any degree, he would not commit such acts. True belief in Islam is not a verbal statement, but an overall change of the individual’s heart, motivating him to benevolence and goodwill for all his fellow beings that are in need of his care and protection. God does not want mere words from His servants but demands deeds to support the spoken words which, otherwise, are as weightless and valueless as blown ash. Nothing can be more forceful than these three verses in affirming this fact which represents the nature of faith.

We do not intend here to indulge in a juristic discussion on the boundaries of faith and Islam. These are required in legal affairs, whereas this *sūrah* states the facts from God’s point of view and judgement, which is quite different from the legal aspect.

Next, God offers a practical illustration of what is meant above: *“Woe, then, to those who pray but are heedless of their prayers.”* (Verses 4-5) These verses contain God’s invocation against, or a threat of destruction to, those who offer prayers but are careless about them. Who exactly are such people? They are those *“who put on a show of piety but refuse to give even the smallest help to others.”* (Verses 6-7) Those who perform prayers but who do not aptly meet their requirements. They execute the mechanical aspects and pronounce the verbal formulae of prayers but their hearts are never alive to them, nor do they benefit by the spiritual nourishment prayers give. The essence and purpose of prayer and its component parts, such as Qur’ānic recitation, supplication and glorification of God, are never present in their souls. They offer prayers only to deceive others and not out of devotion to God. Hence, they are inattentive when they pray. They only outwardly perform their prayers. Muslims are required to offer their prayers regularly, having in mind that their prayers are a manifestation of their servitude to God alone. Thus, prayer leaves no result in those who are neglectful and inattentive to it. Consequently they refuse to give any kindness or help to their fellow beings and deny the slightest charity to any of God’s servants.

Once again, we find ourselves presented with the fundamental truth and nature of this religion. A Qur'ānic verse threatens with destruction those who offer prayers precisely because they carry out meaningless movements devoid of any spirit or sense of purpose, intended for deceit and pretence, and not devoted to God. Since their prayers have not affected their hearts and behaviour, they are not merely useless but rather a sin for which they will be punished.

We thus gather the purpose behind what God demands of His servants when He instructs them to believe in, and worship Him. He seeks no benefit thereof for Himself, as He is in no need of anyone or anything. All He cares for is their own welfare and prosperity, purification of their hearts and happiness in their lives. God wishes human life to be elevated, happy, based on pure motives and characterized by mutual compassion, brotherhood and purity of hearts and behaviour.

To where then is humanity driving itself, moving away from this abundance of mercy; away from this wonderful and sublime path? How can mankind debase itself to living in the wilderness of a wretched and gloomy *jāhiliyyah* when it beholds the splendid light of faith before its very eyes at the cross-roads where it now stands?