

SURAH 90

Al-Balad

(The City)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

I swear by this city, (1)

لَا أَقْسِمُ بِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ ﴿١﴾

this city in which you are a dweller, (2)

وَأَنْتَ حِلٌّ بِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ ﴿٢﴾

by parent and offspring: (3)

وَوَالِدٍ وَمَا وَلَدَ ﴿٣﴾

indeed, We have created man in affliction. (4)

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي كَبَدٍ ﴿٤﴾

Does he think that no one has power over him? (5)

أَتَحْسَبُ أَنْ لَنْ يَقْدِرَ عَلَيْهِ أَحَدٌ ﴿٥﴾

He says: 'I have spent abundant wealth.' (6)

يَقُولُ أَهْلَكْتُ مَالًا لُبَدًا ﴿٦﴾

Does he think that none observes him? (7)

أَتَحْسَبُ أَنْ لَمْ يَرَهُ أَحَدٌ ﴿٧﴾

Have We not given him two eyes, (8)

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلْ لَهُ عَيْنَيْنِ ﴿٨﴾

a tongue, and two lips, (9)

وَلِسَانًا وَشَفَتَيْنِ ﴿٩﴾

and shown him the two paths? (10)

وَهَدَيْنَاهُ النَّجْدَيْنِ ﴿١٠﴾

Yet he would not scale the Ascent. (11)

فَلَا أَفْتَحَمُ الْعُقْبَةَ ﴿١١﴾

Would that you knew what the Ascent is. (12)

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْعُقْبَةُ ﴿١٢﴾

It is the freeing of a slave, (13)

فَكُّ رَقَبَةٍ ﴿١٣﴾

or the feeding, on a day of famine, (14)

أَوْ إِطْعَمٌ فِي يَوْمٍ ذِي مَسْغَبَةٍ ﴿١٤﴾

of an orphaned near of kin, (15)

يَتِيمًا ذَا مَقْرَبَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾

or a needy man in distress, (16)

أَوْ مِسْكِينًا ذَا مَتْرَبَةٍ ﴿١٦﴾

and to be of those who believe and enjoin on one another to be patient in adversity, and enjoin mercy on one another. (17)

ثُمَّ كَانَ مِنَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَتَوَاصَوْا
بِالصَّبْرِ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْمَرْحَمَةِ ﴿١٧﴾

Those who do this shall be on the right hand. (18)

أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ ﴿١٨﴾

And those who deny Our revelations shall be on the left hand, (19)

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِنَا هُمْ أَصْحَابُ
الْمَشْأَمَةِ ﴿١٩﴾

with fire closing in upon them. (20)

عَلَيْهِمْ نَارٌ مُّؤَصَّدَةٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

Overview

This short *sūrah* touches on a great many facts which are of central importance to human life. Its style is characterized by powerful allusions. Numerous facts of this nature are not easily combined in any form of concise writing except that of the

Qur'ān, with its unique ability to hit the right chords with such swift and penetrating strokes.

Affliction in Human Life

The *sūrah* opens with an emphatic oath asserting an inherent fact of human life: “I swear by this city, this city in which you are a dweller, by parent and offspring: indeed, We have created man in affliction.” (Verses 1-4) The city is Makkah, which houses the Ka`bah, the sacred house of God that was the first temple ever to be erected on this earth as a place of peace where people put down their weapons and forget their quarrels. They meet there in peace; each is sacred to all. Even the plants, the birds and all creatures that happen to be in this city enjoy full and complete security. It is the House built by Abraham, the father of Ishmael, who is the grandfather of all Arabs and Muslims.

God then honours His Prophet, Muḥammad, by mentioning him and his residence in Makkah, a fact which adds to the sanctity of the city, its honour and glory. This is a point of great significance in this context; for the unbelievers were violating the sanctity of the House by harassing the Prophet and the Muslims in it. But the House is sacred and the Prophet's dwelling in its neighbourhood makes it even more so. God's oath by this city and by the Prophet's residence in it adds even more to its sacredness and glory, which consequently makes the unbelievers' attitude grossly impertinent and objectionable. Their attitude becomes even more singular, considering their claims to be the custodians of the House, Ishmael's descendants and Abraham's followers.

This last reference supports the inclination to take the next-- verse, “by parent and offspring,” to refer to Abraham and Ishmael in particular. This reading includes in the oath the Prophet, the city where he lives, the founder of the House and his offspring. However, it does not preclude that the statement can also be a general one, referring to the phenomenon of reproduction which preserves the human race. This reference may be taken as an introduction to the discussion about man's nature, which is indeed the theme of the *sūrah*.

In his commentary on this *sūrah* in *Tafsīr Juz `Amma*, the late Shaikh Muḥammad `Abdūh, makes a fine remark which is useful to quote here:

God then swears by parent and children to draw our attention to the great importance of this stage of reproduction in life, and to the infinite wisdom and perfection which this stage involves. It also emphasizes the great suffering encountered by parent and offspring during the process from its inception up to its conclusion, when the newcomer achieves a certain degree

of development.

Think of plants and the tough opposition met by a seed of a plant in the process of growth, until it adapts to the various factors of climate. Think of its attempts to absorb the food necessary for its survival from its surroundings, till it develops branches and leaves. It then prepares for the production of a similar seed or seeds that will repeat its function and add to the beauty of the world around it. Think of all this then consider the more advanced forms of animal and human life and you will see something much greater and far more wonderful concerning reproduction. You will have a feeling of the hardship and suffering met by all parents and offspring for the sake of preserving the species and the beauty of this world.

The oath reaffirms an intrinsic fact in human life: *"Indeed, We have created man in affliction."* (Verse 4) Indeed, man's life is a process of continued hardship that never ends, as stated in *Sūrah 84, The Rending*: *"O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet Him."* (84: 6)

No sooner does the first living cell settle in the mother's womb than it starts to encounter affliction and has to work hard in order to prepare for itself the right conditions for its survival, with the permission of its Lord. It continues to do so until it is ready for the process of birth, which is a great ordeal for both mother and baby. Before the baby finally sees the light it undergoes a great deal of pushing and squeezing to the point of near suffocation in its passage out of the womb.

A stage of harder endurance and greater suffering follows. The new-born baby begins to breathe the air, which is a new experience. It opens its mouth and inflates its lungs for the first time with a cry which tells of the harsh start. The digestive system then starts to function in a manner which is totally unfamiliar, as does blood circulation. Then it starts to empty its bowels, encountering great difficulty in adapting its system to this new function. Indeed, every new step or movement is attended by suffering. If one watches this baby when it begins to crawl and walk, one sees the kind of effort required to execute such minor and elementary movements. Such affliction continues with teething, and learning to stand, walk, learn and think. Indeed, in every new experience much affliction is involved.

Then the roads diverge and the struggle takes different forms. One person struggles with his muscles, another with his mind and a third with his soul. One toils for a mouthful of food or a rag to dress himself with, another to double or treble his wealth. One person strives to achieve a position of power or influence and another for the sake of God. One struggles for the sake of satisfying lusts and desires, and another for the sake of his faith or ideology. One strives but achieves no more than hell and another strives for paradise. Everyone is carrying his own burden and

climbing his own hill to arrive finally at the meeting place appointed by God, where the wretched shall endure their worst suffering while the blessed enjoy their endless happiness.

Affliction, life's foremost characteristic, takes various forms and shapes but it is always judged by its eventual results. The loser is the one who ends up suffering more affliction in the hereafter, and the prosperous is the one whose striving qualifies him to be released from affliction and ensures him the ultimate repose under his Lord's shelter. Yet there is some reward in this present life for the different kinds of struggle which people endure. The one who labours for a great cause differs from the one who labours for a trivial one, in the amount and the quality of gratification each of them gains from his labour and sacrifice.

Great Blessings

Having established this fact concerning human nature and human life, the *sūrah* goes on to discuss some of the claims that man makes and some of the concepts underlying his behaviour. *"Does he think that no one has power over him? He says: 'I have spent abundant wealth.' Does he think that none observes him?"* (Verses 5-7)

This creature, man, whose suffering and struggling never come to an end, forgets his real nature and becomes so conceited with what God has given him of power, ability, skill and prosperity that he behaves as if he is not accountable for what he does. He indulges in oppression, tyranny, victimization and exploitation, trying to acquire enormous wealth. He corrupts himself and others in total disregard of anything of value. Such is the character of a man whose heart is stripped of faith. When he is called upon to spend for good causes, he says, *"I have spent abundant wealth,"* and given more than enough. *"Does he think that none observes him?"* (Verse 7) Has he forgotten that God is watching over him? He sees what he has spent and for what purposes. But man still ignores this, thinking that God is unaware of what he has done.

In view of man's arrogance, which makes him believe that he is invincible, and in view of his meanness and claims of having spent abundantly, the Qur'ān puts before him the bounties God has bestowed on him which are manifested in his inherent abilities, although he has depreciated them: *"Have We not given him two eyes, a tongue and two lips, and shown him the two paths?"* (Verses 8-10)

Man is conceited because he feels himself powerful, but he is granted his power by God. He is mean with his wealth while God is the One who provided him with it. He neither follows right guidance nor shows gratitude, although God has given him the means to do so. He has given him eyes which are marvellous, precise and powerful. He has also granted him speech and the means of expression, *"a tongue, and two lips."*

He has equipped him with the ability to distinguish good from evil, and right from wrong: *and shown him the two paths,*" so that he can choose between them. Inherent in his make-up is the ability to take either way. It is God's will that man should be given such ability and such freedom of choice, to perfect His scheme of creation which assigns to every creature its role in life and equips it with the means necessary for its fulfilment.

This verse explains the essence of human nature. In fact, the basis of the Islamic viewpoint of human psychology is contained in this verse and four verses in the next *sūrah*, The Sun: *"By the soul and its moulding and inspiration with knowledge of wickedness and righteousness. Successful is the one who keeps it pure, and ruined is the one who corrupts it."* (91: 7-10)

Scaling the Ascent

These are the favours bestowed on man to help him follow right guidance: his eyes with which he recognizes the evidence of God's might and the signs throughout the universe which should prompt him to adopt the faith, and his tongue and lips which are his means of speech and expression. One word sometimes does the job of a sword or a shotgun and can be even more effective than either. It may, on the other hand, plunge a man into the fire of hell. Mu 'ādh ibn Jabal said: "I was with the Prophet on a journey. One day I was walking beside him when I said, 'Messenger of God! Point out to me something I may do to take me to paradise and keep me away from hell.' He said, 'You have indeed asked about something great, yet it is quite attainable by those for whom God has made it easy. Worship God alone, assigning to Him no partner, offer your prayers regularly, pay out your *zakāt* [i.e. what is due to the poor of one's money], fast in the month of Ramadān and offer the pilgrimage.' The Prophet then said, 'Shall I point out to you the gates of goodness?' I said, 'Yes, Messenger of God, please do.' He said, 'Fasting is a safeguard and a means of protecting yourself; charity erases your errors just as water extinguishes a burning fire; and your praying in the late hours of the night is the sign of piety.' He then recited the verse, *"[those] who forsake their beds as they call on their Lord in fear and in hope; and who give in charity of what We have bestowed on them. No soul knows what bliss and comfort is in store for these as reward for their labours."* (32: 16-17) The Prophet then added: 'Shall I tell you what the heart of the matter is, its backbone and its highest grade?' I said, 'Yes, Messenger of God, please do.' He said, 'The heart is Islam, i.e. submission to God, the backbone is prayers, and the highest grade is *jihād*, i.e. struggle for the cause of God.' He then said, 'Shall I tell you what commands all these?' I said, 'Yes, Messenger of God, please do.' He said, 'Control this,' pointing to his tongue. I said, 'Are we, Prophet of God, really accountable for what we say?' He said 'Watch what you are saying.

For what else are people dragged on their faces in hell apart from what their tongues produce?" [Related by Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.]"

All these bounties have not motivated man to attempt the Ascent that stands between him and heaven. God explains the nature of the Ascent in the following verses: *"Yet he would not scale the Ascent. Would that you knew what the Ascent is. It is the freeing of a slave, or the feeding, on a day of famine, of an orphaned near of kin, or a needy man in distress, and to be of those who believe and enjoin on one another to be patient in adversity, and enjoin mercy on one another. Those who do this shall be on the right hand."* (Verses 11-18)

This is the ascent which man, except those who equip themselves with faith, refrains from attempting, and which separates him from paradise. If he crosses it he will arrive! Putting it in such a way serves as a powerful incentive and stimulus to take up the challenge. For the ascent has been clearly marked as the obstacle depriving man of such an enormous fortune. The importance of scaling the ascent in God's sight is then emphasized to encourage man to scale it no matter what the effort. For struggle he must, in any case. But if he attempts it, his struggle will not be wasted but will bring him favourable results.

Then follows an explanation of this ascent and its nature by means of, first, pointing out some actions which were totally lacking in the particular surroundings that the message of Islam was facing at the time: the freeing of slaves and the feeding of the poor who were subjected to the cruelty of an ungracious and greedy society. It then adds what is applicable to all ages and societies and needed by all who wish to attempt the ascent: *"To be of those who believe and enjoin on one another to be patient in adversity, and enjoin mercy on one another."* (Verse 17) There are reports which comment on the particular usage of freeing slaves in this *sūrah*, explaining that it includes even sharing in an effort to free a slave, not merely bearing all the expense involved. Even then the outcome is the same.

Setting Practical Examples

This *sūrah* was revealed in Ikkah when Islam was surrounded by powerful enemies and the state that would implement its laws was non-existent. Slavery was widespread in Arabia and the world large. The treatment meted out to slaves was brutal. When some of the slaves or former slaves, like `Ammār ibn Yāsir and his family, Bilāl ibn Rabah, and others, accepted Islam their plight became worse, and their cruel masters subjected them to unbearable torture. Then became clear that the only way to save them was to buy them from their masters. Abū Bakr, the Prophet's Companion, was, as usual, the first to rise to the occasion, with all the boldness and gallantry it required.

Ibn Isḥāq relates:

Bilāl, Abū Bakr's servant, was owned by some individual of the clan of Jumah as he was born a slave. He was, however, a genuine Muslim and clean-hearted. Umayyah ibn Khalaf, the Jumah master, used to take Bilāl out when it became unbearably hot and order him to be laid down on his back on the hot sand of Makkah and cause a massive rock to be placed on his chest. Then, he would say to Bilāl that he was to stay like that until he died or renounced Muḥammad and accepted as deities the idols called al-Lat and al-'Uzzā, the goddesses of the pagan Arabs. Under all such pressure, Bilāl would simply say, 'One, One,' meaning that there is only one God.

One day, Abū Bakr passed by and saw Bilāl in that condition. He said to Umayyah: 'Do you not fear God as you torture this helpless soul? How long can you go on doing this?' Umayyah replied, 'You spoiled him, so you save him.' Abū Bakr said, 'I will. I have a black boy who follows your religion but he is stronger and more vigorous than Bilāl. What do you say to an exchange deal?' Umayyah said, 'I accept.' Abū Bakr said, 'Then he is yours.' Then Abū Bakr took Bilāl and set him free.

While in Makkah, before the migration to Madinah, Abū Bakr freed a total of seven people: `Āmir ibn Fahīrah, who fought in the Battle of Badr and was killed in the Battle of Bi'r Ma`ūnah, was the only other man freed by Abū Bakr. The other five were women. The first two were Umm `Ubays and Zanīrah, who lost her eyesight when she was freed. Some of the Quraysh claimed that the two idols al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā caused the loss of her eyesight. Zanīrah said, 'What rubbish! Al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā are absolutely powerless.' God then willed that she should recover her sight.

Abū Bakr also freed a woman called al-Nahdiyyah and her daughter, who belonged to a woman of the clan of `Abd al-Dār. One day he passed by the two women as their mistress was sending them on an errand to prepare some flour. As she gave them her instructions, she declared: 'By God, I will never set you free.' Abū Bakr said to her, 'Release yourself of your oath.' She rejoined, 'It was you who spoilt them. Why don't you set them free?' He said, 'How much do you want for them?' She named her price. He said, 'It is a deal, and they are free.' He turned to the two women and told them to give the woman her flour back. They suggested that they should finish preparing it for her first and he agreed.

The fifth woman was a Muslim slave of the clan of Mu`ammal. She was being tortured by `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, who was then still an unbeliever. He beat her until he was tired and said to her, 'I apologize to you. I have only stopped

beating you because I am bored,' to which she replied, And so God shall thwart you.' Abū Bakr bought her and set her free.

Abū Quḥāfah, Abū Bakr's father, said to him, 'I see you, son, freeing some weak slaves. Why don't you free some strong men who can defend and protect you?' Abū Bakr replied, 'I am only doing this for the sake of God, father.' Thus Abū Bakr scaled the ascent by freeing those helpless souls, for the sake of God. The attendant circumstances in that particular society make such an action one of the most important steps towards scaling the ascent.²⁷

"Or the feeding, on a day of famine, of an orphaned near of kin, or a needy man in distress." (Verses 14-16) A time of famine and hunger, when food becomes scarce, is a time when the reality of faith is tested. For orphans in that greedy, miserly and ungracious society were oppressed and mistreated even by their relatives. The Qur'ān is full of verses which urge people to treat orphans well. This, in itself, is a measure of the cruelty of the orphans' surroundings. Good treatment for orphans is also urged in the *sūrahs* revealed in Madinah, as they outline the rules of inheritance, custody and marriage, especially in *Sūrahs* 2, The Cow, and 4, Women. The same can be said of feeding the needy on a day of famine, which is portrayed here as another step for scaling the ascent. For this is again a test which reveals the characteristics of the believer, such as mercy, sympathy, co-operation and lack of selfishness. It also reveals the extent of one's fear of God.

These two steps, freeing slaves and feeding the needy, are mentioned in the *sūrah* as necessary in the existing situation at the time of revelation. However, their implication is general, which accounts for their being mentioned first. They are followed by the widest and most important step of all: *"And to be of those who believe and enjoin on one another to be patient in adversity, and enjoin mercy on one another."* (Verse 17) The conjunction in the Arabic text is 'then', but it does not signify here any time ordering; it is used simply as an introduction to the statement about the most important and valuable step of all towards scaling the ascent. For what would be the value of freeing slaves or feeding the hungry without faith? It is faith which gives such actions their value and their weight in God's sight, because it relates them to a profound and consistent system. Thus good deeds are no longer the result of a momentary impulse. Their aim is not any social reputation or self-interest.

Patience in adversity is an important element in the general context of faith as well as in the particular context of attempting the ascent. That people should counsel each other to be patient in adversity is to attain a highest level than that of having such a quality themselves. It is a practical demonstration of the solidarity of the believers as they co-operate closely to carry out their duties as believers in God. The society

²⁷ Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*, Dār al-Qalam, Beirut, Vol. 1, n.d., pp. 339-41.

formed by the believers is an integrated structure whose elements share the same feelings and the same awareness about the need to exert themselves in establishing the divine system on earth and to carry out its duties fully. Hence, they counsel each other to persevere as they shoulder their common responsibilities. They rally to support one another in order to achieve their common objective. This is something more than perseverance by individuals, although it builds on it. For it indicates the individual's role in the believers' society, namely, that he must be an element of strength and a source of hope and comfort to the whole society.

The same applies to enjoining each other to be merciful, which is a grade higher than simply being merciful themselves. Thus the spirit of mercy spreads among the believers as they consider such mutual counselling an individual and communal duty in the fulfilment of which all co-operate. Hence, the idea of 'community' is evident in this injunction, as it is emphasized elsewhere in the Qur'ān and in the traditions of the Prophet. This idea is central to the concept of Islam which is a religion and a way of life. Nevertheless, the responsibility and accountability of the individual are clearly defined and strongly emphasized. Those who scale the ascent, as defined here in the Qur'ān, shall have their dwelling place on the right hand, which indicates that they will enjoy a happy recompense for what they do in this life.

"And those who deny Our revelations shall be on the left hand, with fire closing in upon them." (Verses 19-20) There is no need here to identify this group with more than *'those who deny Our revelations,'* as this is enough to settle the issue. Nothing can be good if coupled with unbelief. All evil is contained and encompassed by the denial of God. There is no point in saying that this group do not free slaves or give food to the needy, and, moreover, they deny Our revelations. For such a denial renders worthless any action they may do. They dwell on the left hand, which indicates their degradation and disgrace. These people cannot scale the ascent.

"With fire closing in upon them." (Verse 20) That is, they are encircled by it either in the sense that they are locked within it, or in the sense that it is their eternal abode. Its being close above them gives them no chance of breaking away from it. The two meanings are quite interesting.

These are then the fundamental facts concerning human life laid down from the point of view of faith, in a limited space but with great power and clarity. This remains the distinctive characteristic of Qur'ānic style.