

SŪRAH 34

Saba'

(Sheba)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, a Makkan revelation, tackles the main themes of faith: belief in God's oneness, the revelation of the Qur'ān and the truth of resurrection. The *sūrah* also provides the correct view of a number of essential values related to these themes. It makes clear that faith and good action, rather than wealth and offspring, form the basis of the ultimate judgement by God. It clearly states that no power can protect anyone against God's punishment and no intercession is of any use unless He approves it.

The main emphasis in the *sūrah* is on the question of resurrection and reward, as well as God's limitless, comprehensive and accurate knowledge. These two closely intertwined topics are raised time after time, in a variety of styles and approaches, and are diffused through the *sūrah* from start to finish. Thus on resurrection we have: *"The unbelievers say: 'Never shall the Last Hour come upon us!' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you.'"* (Verse 3) And on reward the *sūrah* makes this early statement: *"He may reward those who believe and do righteous deeds. It is they who shall have forgiveness and generous provisions."* (Verse 4)

This same theme is raised again a little later on: *"The unbelievers say: Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that, when you have been utterly torn into pieces, you shall be restored to life in a new act of creation? Has he invented a lie about God, or is he a madman?" No! It is those who do not believe in the life to come who shall be suffering torment as they have gone far in error"* (Verses 7-8)

The *sūrah* also portrays a number of scenes from the Day of Judgement, showing how unbelievers are rebuked for their rejection of the truth as well as images of the

punishment they used to deny or express strong doubts about: *“If only you could see how the wrongdoers shall be made to stand before their Lord, hurling reproaches at one another. Those of them who were weak on earth will say to those who had deemed themselves mighty: ‘Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers.’ The ones who deemed themselves mighty will say to those who were weak: ‘Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you? No. It was you who were guilty’ Those who were weak will reply to those who deemed themselves mighty: No. It was your scheming, night and day, ordering us to disbelieve in God and to set up equals to Him.’ When they see the punishment awaiting them, they will all harbour utter and unmitigated remorse. We shall put chains round the necks of the unbelievers. Are they to be requited for anything other than what they did?”* (Verses 3 1-33)

Again such scenes are portrayed at various places in the *sūrah*, including its conclusion: *“If you could but see when they are seized by terror, with nowhere to escape; for they will have been seized from a place nearby. They will say: ‘We do believe in it,’ but how could they attain it from so far away, seeing that they had at first denied it all. They used to cast scorn from far away on what is imperceptible. A barrier will be set between them and all that they desire, just as was done with their kind before. They were lost in perplexing doubt.”* (Verses 51-54)

On the theme of God’s knowledge and its extent and fullness, we read at the outset: *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 2) And in a comment on those who deny the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* says: *“Say: ‘Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you. It is He who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Not an atom’s weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book.”* (Verse 3) This is further confirmed towards the *sūrah*’s end where it states: *“Say: My Lord hurls forth the truth. He has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people’s perception.”* (Verse 48)

On the theme of God’s oneness, the *sūrah* begins with praising God *“to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; and to Him will be due all praise in the life to come. He is truly wise, All-Aware.”* (Verse 1) The *sūrah* again challenges them with regard to the deities they allege to be God’s partners: *“Say: Call upon those whom you imagine to be partners with God. They do not have even an atom’s weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in either, nor does He have any helper from among them.”* (Verse 22)

In one of the scenes it portrays of the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* refers to their worship of angels and jinn: *“On the day He gathers them all together, He will say to the angels: ‘Was it you that these people worshipped?’ They will answer: ‘Limitless are You in Your glory! You alone are our patron, not they. In fact they worshipped the jinn and most of them believed in them.”* (Verses 40-41) It refutes their ideas about intercession by the

angels on their behalf: *“Before Him, intercession is of no avail, except by one to whom He may have granted permission. When the terror is lifted from their hearts, they will ask [one another]: ‘What has your Lord ordained?’ They will answer: ‘The truth. He is the Most High, the Supreme.”* (Verse 23) In connection with their worship of the *jinn* mention is made of Solomon and how the *jinn* were placed in his service. It highlights the fact that they were unable to realize that he was dead: *“When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff And when he fell to the ground, the jinn saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude.”* (Verse 14)

On the theme of the revelation of God’s message, the *sūrah* reports: *“The unbelievers say: We will never believe in this Qur’ān, nor in any earlier revelations.”* (Verse 31) *“When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, they say: ‘This is but a man who wants to turn you away from what your forefathers worshipped.’ They also say: ‘This is nothing but an invented falsehood’ Furthermore, when the truth comes to them, the unbelievers will say: ‘This is just plain sorcery.”* (Verse 43) The *sūrah* issues a decisive reply: *“Those who are endowed with knowledge are well aware that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is indeed the truth, and that it guides to the way that leads to the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due.”* (Verse 6) *“We have sent you to all mankind so that you bring them good news and give them warning; but most people do not understand”* (Verse 28)

On the question of the values to be applied, the *sūrah* proffers the following verses: *“Whenever We sent a warner to any community, those of them who lived in luxury said: ‘We do not believe in the message with which you have been sent.’ They also say: ‘Richer than you are we in wealth, and we have more children. We certainly are not going to be made to suffer.’ Say: My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills; but most people do not understand’ It is neither your riches nor your children that can bring you nearer to Us: only he who believes and does what is right [comes near to Us]. To these multiple reward will be given for all that they have done. They will dwell in safety in the mansions of paradise; whereas all who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, shall be given over to suffering.”* (Verses 34-38) The *sūrah* gives some historical examples, citing David and his household who demonstrated their gratitude for God’s favours and contrasting this with the people of Sheba who were totally ungrateful. What happened to both communities was well known, confirming God’s promises and warnings.

All Makkan *sūrahs* tackle these topics, but in each *sūrah* they are portrayed against a special cosmic background. Indeed, this theme is accompanied by diverse influences that we feel to be new each time. The background in the present *sūrah* is the wide space of the heaven and earth, the awesome, unfathomable realm that lies beyond the reach of our perception, the limitless plateau where the gathering takes

place on the Day of Judgement, the inner depths of the human soul, and a number of amazing historical scenes. Each has its clear message for our hearts, ensuring we remain alert. At the very beginning of the *sūrah* we are introduced to this broad universal expanse and God's limitless knowledge: *"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... The unbelievers say: Never shall the Last Hour come upon us!" Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you. It is He who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book.'* (Verses 2-3)

Those who deny resurrection and the hereafter are warned against great celestial catastrophes: *"Do they not consider how much of the sky and the earth lies open before them and how much lies hidden from them? If We so willed, We could cause the earth to swallow them, or cause fragments of the sky to fall upon them. In all this, there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance."* (Verse 9) On the other hand, those who worship angels or *jinn* are faced with an awesome scene: *"Before Him, intercession is of no avail, except by one to whom He may have granted permission. When the terror is lifted from their hearts, they will ask [one another]: 'What has your Lord ordained?' They will answer: 'The truth. He is the Most High, the Supreme.'"* (Verse 23) Alternatively, they are placed face to face with the angel on the Day of Resurrection when no argument or ambiguity is allowed: *"On the day He gathers them all together, He will say to the angels: Was it you that these people worshipped?"* (Verse 40)

Those who denied the Prophet Muḥammad, accusing him of fabricating lies or alleging that he was mad are put before their own nature when it is free of alien influences: *"Say: I counsel you one thing: stand before God, in pairs or singly, and think: there is no madness in your Companion [Muḥammad]. He is only a warner to you of awesome suffering to come."* (Verse 46)

Thus the *sūrah* takes our hearts to such horizons and brings into play some inspiring influences. Finally, it concludes with a powerful scene of the Day of Judgement.

Praise of God forms the beginning of the *sūrah*, identifying some of His attributes, such as having dominion in the heavens and earth, receiving praise in the hereafter, wisdom and full knowledge of all that takes place in the universe. It also mentions the unbelievers' denial of the Last Hour and God's emphatic reply that it will certainly come. Again the *sūrah* states that not an atom's weight in the whole universe escapes God's knowledge, which will ensure that God's requital of all, believers and unbelievers, will be based on accurate and full knowledge of all situations and circumstances. In this early part, the *sūrah* states that those who are endowed with wisdom confirm that what God has revealed to His Messenger is the truth. It states that the unbelievers find the idea of resurrection strange, refuting their

arguments and telling them that they suffer as a result of being far in error. It warns them that they could be swallowed up by the earth or that the skies could fall apart on them. On this note, the first part of the *sūrah* ends.

The second part highlights some aspects of the history of David and his household, who were all very grateful for God's favours. God placed at the command of David and Solomon numerous powers, and they acknowledged God's favours, taking no personal pride in them. One of these powers was the *Jinn* who are worshipped by some idolaters. They often consulted such *Jinn* over questions relating to the realm beyond our perception, but the *Jinn* know nothing of this realm. In Solomon's story, as related in this *sūrah*, the *Jinn* continued to do some hard and menial jobs for him even after his death, of which they continued to be unaware. Contrasted with this gratitude for God's favours, is that of total ingratitude as represented by the people of Sheba. Therefore, "*We caused them to become a tale, and scattered them throughout the land.*" (Verse 19) They deserved this end because they did Satan's bidding, even though he had no power over them. In other words, they willingly allowed him to lead them astray.

The third part challenges the idolaters to invoke their alleged deities, and tells them that these "*do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in either, nor does He have any helper from among them.*" (Verse 22) None of these false deities can intercede with God on anyone's behalf, not even if they were angels, for angels stand in awe of God, do His bidding and do not talk until they are reassured. As instructed, the Prophet asks them who provides their sustenance out of the heavens and the earth, when it is God who has dominion over both? He, and no one else, provides for them and for all other creatures. The Prophet then leaves the matter between himself and them to God for judgement. This part of the *sūrah* ends with a similar challenge to that with which it began: "*Say: Show me those whom you allege to be partners with Him. Nay! He alone is God, the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 27)

Together the fourth and fifth parts tackle the question of the revelation of God's message and the unbelievers' attitude towards it. They speak about how the affluent view every call to faith, and how they show pride in their wealth and children. These two parts establish the fact that faith and good actions are the basic criteria for reward. Several scenes are shown here of the different fates of the believers and unbelievers, in which we see the leaders disowning their followers and the angels disassociating themselves from those who worshipped them. In between these scenes, the *sūrah* calls on the unbelievers to resort to their own nature, seeking its answers free from all the fuss they create about God's Messenger. It reminds them that they have no evidence for the accusations they level at him, when he asks them for no reward and tells them no lie. Each of these two parts is concluded with a scene

from the Day of Resurrection. Then, finally, the *sūrah* ends with a run of short verses that are characterized by a powerful, fast rhythm: *“Say: My Lord hurls forth the truth. He has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people’s perception.’ Say: ‘The truth has now come. Falsehood neither creates anything new, nor restores anything.’ Say: ‘Were I to go astray, I would but go astray to the loss of myself But if I am on the right path, it is through what my Lord reveals to me. He is All-Hearing, ever-near’ If you could but see when they are seized by terror, with nowhere to escape; for they will have been seized from a place nearby.”* (Verses 48-51)

1

Infinite and Accurate Knowledge

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

All praise is due to God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; and to Him will be due all praise in the life to come. He is truly Wise, All-Aware. (1)

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 the Merciful, the truly Forgiving. (2)

The unbelievers say: 'Never shall the Last Hour come upon us!' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you. It is He who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book, (3)

so that He may reward those who believe and do righteous deeds. It is they who shall have forgiveness and generous provisions.' (4)

أَلْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَهُ أَلْحَمْدُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ وَهُوَ الْحَكِيمُ الْخَبِيرُ ﴿١﴾

يَعْلَمُ مَا يَلْجُ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَمَا تَخْرُجُ مِنْهَا وَمَا يَنْزِلُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ وَمَا يَعْرُجُ فِيهَا وَهُوَ الرَّحِيمُ الْغَفُورُ ﴿٢﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَا تَأْتِينَا السَّاعَةُ قُلْ بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّي لَتَأْتِيَنَّكُمْ عِلْمِ الْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْزُبُ عَنْهُ مِثْقَالُ ذَرَّةٍ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا أَصْغَرُ مِنْ ذَلِكَ وَلَا أَكْبَرُ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ ﴿٣﴾

لِيَجْزِيَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمْ مَغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٤﴾

As for those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, these shall have a most painful suffering. (5)

Those who are endowed with knowledge are well aware that what has been revealed to you by your Lord is indeed the truth, and that it guides to the way that leads to the Almighty, to whom all praise is due. (6)

The unbelievers say: 'Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that, when you have been utterly torn into pieces, you shall be restored to life in a new act of creation?' (7)

Has he invented a lie about God, or is he a madman? No! It is those who do not believe in the life to come who are suffering torment as they have gone far in error. (8)

Do they not consider how much of the sky and the earth lies open before them and how much lies hidden from them? If We so willed, We could cause the earth to swallow them, or cause fragments of the sky to fall upon them. In all this, there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance. (9)

وَالَّذِينَ سَعَوْا فِي آيَاتِنَا مُعَاجِزِينَ أُولَٰئِكَ
هُمَّ عَذَابٌ مِّن رَّجْزِ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٥﴾

وَيَرَى الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ
إِلَيْكَ مِن رَّبِّكَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَيَهْدِي إِلَى
صِرَاطِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ ﴿٦﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا هَلْ نَدُلُّكُمْ عَلَى رَجُلٍ
يُنَبِّئُكُمْ إِذَا مُزِقْتُمْ كُلَّ مَزْقٍ إِنَّكُمْ لَفِي
خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ ﴿٧﴾

أَفَتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَمْ بِهِ جِنَّةٌ بَلِ
الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ فِي الْعَذَابِ
وَالضَّلَالِ الْبَعِيدِ ﴿٨﴾

أَفَلَمْ يَرَوْا إِلَى مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ
مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِن نَّشَاءُ نَحْسِفُ
بِهِمُ الْأَرْضَ أَوْ نُسْقِطُ عَلَيْهِمْ كِسْفًا
مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ إِن فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَةٌ لِّكُلِّ
عَبْدٍ مَُّنِيبٍ ﴿٩﴾

Where Praise is Due

This *sūrah*, which speaks at length about the idolaters who associated partners with God, denied His Messenger, doubted the hereafter and dismissed the idea of resurrection, begins with praising God. All praise is due to Him for being God, even though no human being utters a word of praise addressed to Him. He is praised by the universe and all creation, even though some human beings take a different

attitude.

Coupled with this is God's attribute of being the Sovereign of the universe. No one has any portion of heaven or earth: He alone owns all there is. This is the central issue of faith: God's oneness.

"To Him will be due all praise in the life to come." (Verse 1) All the praise offered by all His servants, including those who disbelieved in Him in this life or associated partners with Him as a result of being led astray, will converge in the life to come and be addressed totally and purely to Him. *"He is truly Wise, All-Aware."* (Verse 1) Whatever He does is based on wisdom. Indeed, He conducts the affairs of this life and the Next, and the affairs of the entire universe in perfect wisdom. Moreover, He is aware of everything that takes place, and His knowledge is full, accurate and absolute.

The *sūrah* gives us a notion of God's knowledge, portrayed against the background of heaven and earth: *"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 2) This is a vast image drawn in a few simple words, painting an amazing multitude of things, motions, sizes, shapes, forms and meanings that go beyond any imagination. Should all the people on earth spend their entire lives monitoring and recording what takes place in just one moment of the things mentioned in the verse, they would not be able to do so. How many things go into the earth in such a moment? How many leave it? And how many come down from the sky or go up into it?

Consider what goes into the earth: the seeds that are buried in the ground, the worms, insects, crawling creatures, drops of rain, gases, electrical rays... all poured into every corner of this vast earth, yet God's eye watches them all. Then look at what comes out of it: plants shooting out, springs gushing forth, erupting volcanoes, emanating gases, crawlers and insects leaving their underground homes. How many countless things do we see and know about that come out of the earth and how many countless others we do not see or know about?

Reflect also on what comes down from the skies: drops of rain, comets, meteors, rays that burn or give light, divine orders, acts of grace that favour certain creatures while benefiting the whole universe, and also provisions God grants to His servants in plentiful or measured quantities. Then turn over in your mind what goes up into the sky: the breathing of humans, animals and plants, as well as other creatures only known to God, and supplications, uttered aloud or in secret, heard only by God. How many a soul of creatures known or unknown to us is gathered and rises to God; how many an angel ascends to carry out God's order; how many drops of seawater evaporate and rise into the atmosphere; how many molecules of gas emanate from all type of creatures?

How much of all this takes place in one moment? How much can human knowledge record of what happens of all this even should they devote all their lives to monitoring and recording it all? Yet God's knowledge reckons all this up, in all places and at all times, as well as all human thoughts, feelings, actions and movements. But God nevertheless gives us our privacy and forgives us our shortcomings: "*He is the Merciful, the truly Forgiving.*" (Verse 2) Just one Qur'ānic verse like the present one is sufficient to prove that this Qur'ān could not have been written by a human being. By nature, such descriptions do not occur to any person, nor does human nature contemplate matters in this way. That such a comprehensive vision is provided in one simple touch reflects the superiority of God's style.

The *sūrah* then mentions the unbelievers' denial of the inevitability of the Last Hour, even though they are totally unaware what tomorrow will bring. That it will come is certain; it is necessary so that both those who do good and those who do evil should receive their fair reward:

The unbelievers say: 'Never shall the Last Hour come upon us!' Say: 'Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you. It is He who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception. Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book, so that He may reward those who believe and do righteous deeds. It is they who shall have forgiveness and generous provisions.' As for those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, these shall have a most painful suffering. (Verses 3-5)

The unbelievers deny the life to come because they do not understand God's wisdom. In His infinite wisdom, He does not let people do what they please, whether good or evil, and then leave them at that, without giving reward to the doers of good and requiting those who do otherwise. He has informed us, through His messengers, that He leaves the reward in full or in part to the Day of Judgement. Therefore, all those who understand His wisdom with regard to His creation realize that the life to come is essential for the fulfilment of God's promise. The unbelievers, however, are oblivious of divine wisdom. Hence, they impolitely say: "*Never shall the Last Hour come upon us.*" (Verse 3) Hence the emphatic retort: "*Yes, by my Lord, it shall most certainly come to you.*" They have no knowledge of what is beyond their world, but they nevertheless are quick to assert something of which they have no knowledge. Yet the one confirming this is the One "*who knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception.*" (Verse 3) What He states is the truth. Furthermore, this truth is simple, complete and based on sound and true knowledge.

Once more God's knowledge is portrayed against a similarly universal background testifying once more to the Originator of the Qur'ān. Such thoughts simply do not occur to human minds: "*Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth*

escapes Him; nor is there anything smaller or larger but is recorded in a clear book." (Verse 3) Such images do not occur in ordinary prose or poetry. When people describe knowledge as complete, comprehensive and accurate, they do not paint such a captivating universal image, '*Not an atom's weight in the heavens or the earth escapes Him; nor- is there anything smaller or larger...*' I have never seen in human language any attempt to draw such a picture. This is a description by God of His own knowledge, using human language in a way humans do not use it. Thus the Muslims' own concept of God is set on a nobler level. The nearest meaning of the phrase, *recorded in a clear book,*' is that God's knowledge takes note of everything, including the tiniest of atoms and what is even smaller.

It is useful to reflect a little on the point raised by use of the wording: "*Not an atom's weight... nor is there anything smaller.*" Until recently, it was universally accepted that the atom is the smallest thing. Now that it has been possible to cause atomic diffusion, man has learnt that the atom is comprised of a number of other elements. All glory to God who teaches His human servants, at a time of His choosing, what He wishes them to learn of His inner attributes and the secrets of His creation.

Why a Judgement Day?

The inevitable arrival of the Last Hour and God's knowledge that does not exclude anything small or large have a definite purpose: "*so that He may reward those who believe and do righteous deeds. It is they who shall have forgiveness and generous provisions. As for those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, these shall have a most painful suffering.*" (Verses 4-5) Everything is based on God's wisdom who has created everything according to a set measure so as to administer the right reward or punishment for the believers or those who exert all efforts to turn people away from the truth. Those who give credence to their faith by good actions earn God's forgiveness of any errors they make or sins they commit. They also have '*generous provisions*' We note that the *sūrah* frequently mentions the provisions and sustenance God grants. Hence, it is fitting that the happiness they are assured to have in the life to come is described here as '*provisions*', which in fact it is. The others, who strive hard to turn people away from God and His message will receive some of the worst type of punishment which fits their wicked efforts. Thus is God's purpose fulfilled.

Within the overall context of God's knowledge and His purpose the next statement makes clear that those endowed with knowledge realize that what the Prophet Muḥammad receives from God is the truth, providing sound guidance: "*Those who are endowed with knowledge are well aware that what has been revealed to you*

by your Lord is indeed the truth, and that it guides to the way that leads to the Almighty, to whom all praise is due." (Verse 6)

Some reports suggest that the phrase, *those who are endowed with knowledge*, refers to the people of earlier revelations who are told in their scriptures about the Qur'ān and its provision of true guidance. However, the Qur'ānic verse has a wider scope. All those endowed with proper knowledge, at all times and wherever they happen to be, will realize this on the basis of their knowledge, if it is truly sound. The Qur'ān is open for all people throughout all generations. It includes enough truth to reveal itself to everyone who has sound knowledge. It also states the truth inherent in the very existence of the universe.

Moreover, the Qur'ān "*guides to the way that leads to the Almighty, to whom all praise is due."* (Verse 6) The way leading to the Almighty is the system He has placed in the universe and chosen for mankind so that their lives may be in harmony with the universe they live in. It is the law that applies to absolutely everything that takes place in the universe.

The Qur'ān provides such guidance through the concept it gives believers of the universe: its values, relations, man's place and role in it, the cooperation of all its parts in the fulfilment of God's will and purpose and the harmony common to them. It also provides a sound basis for human thinking so as to make it consistent with the interaction between human nature and the universe. This enables man to understand the nature of the universe and its laws so as to use these in a positive way. The Qur'ān also lays down a system of education for humanity, empowering the individual to interact harmoniously with the rest of mankind, and empowering mankind to do the same with the rest of God's creation in the universe, comfortably benefiting by its nature. The legislation it lays down is consistent with man's circumstances as well as with the universal laws that apply to all creation. Thus, man does not become the odd one out among the countless communities of creatures in the universe. It is the Qur'ān that leads to that way: it is the guide provided by the Creator of man and the system that suits him. Consider the traveller who is guided on his journey by the engineer who built the road he is travelling on: how fortunate he would feel for having such expertise! How, then, about a guide provided by the One who originated the way and the person travelling on it?

The *sūrah* again mentions their reception to news of a Day of Judgement, expressing their total amazement at such a subject. They, in fact, suggest that to claim that resurrection takes place on a day when all humanity will be individually judged by God can only be attributed to a madman or someone who invents lies and attributes them to God. "*The unbelievers say: Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that, when you have been utterly torn into pieces, you shall be restored to lift in a new act of creation? Has he invented a lie about God, or is he a madman?'* No! It is those who do not

believe in the life to come who are suffering torment as they have gone far in error.” (Verses 7-8)

Their amazement at the thought of resurrection is such that they invite people to join them in wondering at the condition of the person claiming it, using an especially derisive style: *“Shall we point out to you a man who will tell you that, when you have been utterly torn into pieces, you shall be restored to life in a new act of creation?”* (Verse 7) Do you want to see such a strange man uttering wild claims of a new creation after you have been long dead and your bodies have decomposed? Such derision then turns to defamation: *“Has he invented a lie about God, or is he a madman?”* According to them, such claims can only be made by a liar, by someone who fabricates ideas and claims that they are God’s, or by a madman affected by the *jinn* to such an extent that he says what is incomprehensible.

What justifies their attitude? Is it simply because he says that they will be resurrected? Why is this so amazing when they have already gone through the process of being created? They do not even reflect on this amazing event, which they know to have taken place, i.e. their creation in the first instance. Had they reflected on this, they would not have marvelled at a second creation. They have already gone astray. Hence, the sūrah comments: *“No! It is those who do not believe in the life to come who are suffering torment as they have gone far in error.”* (Verse 8)

That they are in torment may refer to their punishment in the life to come. Since it will inevitably overtake them, then it is as if they are already in it, just like they have gone irremediably into error. But the statement may be understood in a different way, which suggests that those who do not believe in the life to come live in torment just as they live in error. This is a profound statement. A person who spends his life without belief in a second life suffers mental torment, as he lives without hope of justice, fair reward or compensation for what happens in his life. Indeed human life is full of situations and trials which man cannot face properly unless he looks up with hope for justice and reward for good action and punishment for those who do evil. There are things that one cannot do or bear without looking up to God, hoping to earn His pleasure in the life to come, when nothing large or small is overlooked. Whoever is deprived of this window of hope, which brings comfort and satisfaction, undoubtedly lives in torment as well as in error. Such a person suffers all this in the present life, before suffering punishment in the hereafter for his misdeeds which brought about his present life’s suffering.

Belief in the hereafter brings the grace and blessings God grants to whoever of His servants deserves them through his desire to be guided to the truth and his diligent pursuit of it. My own feeling is that this second meaning is the one the present verse implies, as it describes those who do not believe in the hereafter as suffering torment and as being in deep error.

These people, who disbelieve in the life to come, are jerked from their slumber and presented with a fearful scene which could happen to them, if God so wills. Should they continue to go far into error, they will face terrible consequences: *“Do they not consider how much of the sky and the earth lies open before them and how much lies hidden from them? If We so willed, We could cause the earth to swallow them, or cause fragments of the sky to fall upon them. In all this, there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance.”* (Verse 9) Here we have an image of terrible world events which they could see or perceive. Avalanches and landslides occur, and people see or hear of them, and fragments fall from the sky, such as meteors and thunderbolts. Again they have heard of such falls. The mention of such events here serves as a wake-up call to those who are heedless and those who discount the possibility of the arrival of the Last Hour. God’s punishment is closer to them than all this. It only requires that God wills to inflict it upon them in this life, before the Last Hour. It could come to them in the form of the earth or the sky which surrounds them from all directions. Both are around them, unlike the Last Hour which belongs to God’s own knowledge. Only the wrongdoers remain oblivious to what God may do.

What they see in the heavens and earth, and what may befall them at any time, should God wish it, present clear signs for anyone who reflects and turns to God with submission: *“there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance.”* (Verse 9)

2

Contrasting Attitudes

We graced David with Our favour. We said: "You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!" We caused iron to become soft for him, (10)

saying: "Make coats of mail and measure their links with care. Do good, all of you. I certainly see all that you do." (11)

To Solomon [We made subservient] the wind: its morning course [covered the distance of] a month's journey, and its evening course a month's journey. We caused a fountain of molten brass to flow for him, and some of the jinn worked under his control by permission of his Lord. Whoever of them deviated from Our command We shall make him taste suffering through a blazing flame. (12)

They made for him whatever he pleased: shrines and statues, basins as large as watering troughs, and firmly anchored cauldrons. We said: Work thankfully, family of David, for few of My servants are truly thankful.' (13)

When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff. And when he fell to the ground, the jinn saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude. (14)

﴿ وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا دَاوُدَ مِنَّا فَضْلًا يَجِبَالٌ ۖ
أَوْبَىٰ مَعَهُ وَالطَّيْرِ ۗ وَالنَّارَ لَهُ الْحَدِيدَ ﴿١٠﴾

﴿ أَنْ أَعْمَلَ سَبِغَتٍ وَقَدَّرَ فِي السَّرْدِ ۗ
وَأَعْمَلُوا صَٰلِحًا إِنِّي بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ۗ

﴿١١﴾

﴿ وَلَسَلِّمَنَّ الَّرِيحَ غُدُوهَا شَهْرٌ وَرَوَاحُهَا
شَهْرٌ ۗ وَأَسَلْنَا لَهُ عَيْنَ الْقِطْرِ وَمِنَ الْجِنِّ
مَنْ يَعْمَلُ بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِ ۗ وَمَنْ يَزِغْ
مِنْهُمْ عَنْ أَمْرِنَا نُنْذِقْهُ مِنْ عَذَابِ السَّعِيرِ

﴿١٢﴾

﴿ يَعْمَلُونَ لَهُ مَا يَشَاءُ مِنْ مَّحْرِبٍ
وَتَمَثِيلٍ وَجِفَانٍ كَالْجَوَابِ وَقُدُورٍ ۗ
رَأْسِيَتْ ۚ أَعْمَلُوا ءَالَ دَاوُدَ شُكْرًا

﴿ وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنْ عِبَادِيَ الشَّاكِرِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

﴿ فَلَمَّا قَضَيْنَا عَلَيْهِ الْمَوْتَ مَا دَهَمَ عَلَىٰ
مَوْتِهِ ۗ إِلَّا دَابَّةُ الْأَرْضِ تَأْكُلُ مِنسَأَتَهُ ۗ
فَلَمَّا حَرَ تَيَّنَّتِ الْجِنُّ أَنْ لَوْ كَانُوا
يَعْلَمُونَ الْغَيْبَ مَا لَبِثُوا فِي الْعَذَابِ

There was a sign for the people of Sheba in their dwelling place: two gardens, one to the right and one to the left: 'Eat of what your Lord has provided for you, and give thanks to Him: a land most goodly and a Lord Much-Forgiving.' (15)

But they paid no heed, and so We let loose upon them a raging torrent and replaced their two gardens with others yielding bitter fruit, tamarisks, and a few lote trees. (16)

Thus We requited them for their ingratitude: would We thus requite any but the totally ungrateful? (17)

We had placed between them and the cities which We had blessed towns within sight of one another so that they could travel in measured stages: 'Travel through them by night and day in safety.' (18)

But they said: 'Our Lord! Make our journeys longer.' They sinned against their souls; so We caused them to become a tale, and scattered them throughout the land. Surely, there are signs in all this for anyone who is patient in adversity, deeply grateful. (19)

Indeed Ibls proved that his opinion of them was right: they all followed him, except for a group of believers. (20)

Yet he had no power at all over them; it is only for the end that We might make a clear distinction between those who truly believe in the life to come and those who are in doubt about it. Your Lord watches over all things. (21)

الْمُهَيْنِ ﴿١٥﴾

لَقَدْ كَانَ لِسَبَإٍ فِي مَسْكِنِهِمْ آيَةٌ جَنَّاتٍ
عَنْ يَمِينٍ وَشِمَالٍ كُلُوا مِنْ رِزْقِ رَبِّكُمْ
وَأَشْكُرُوا لَهُ ۗ بَلَدَةٌ طَيِّبَةٌ وَرَبُّ غَفُورٌ ﴿١٥﴾

فَأَعْرَضُوا فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ سَيْلَ الْعَرِمِ
وَبَدَّلْنَاهُمْ بِجَنَّتَيْهِمْ جَنَّتَيْنِ ذَوَاتِ أُكُلٍ
خَمْطٍ وَأَثَلٍ وَشَيْءٍ مِّنْ سِدْرٍ قَلِيلٍ ﴿١٦﴾

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَيْنَاهُمْ بِمَا كَفَرُوا ۗ وَهَلْ نُجْزِي
إِلَّا الْكَافِرَ ﴿١٧﴾

وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُمْ وَبَيْنَ الْقُرَىٰ الَّتِي بَرَكْنَا
فِيهَا قُرَىٰ ظَهْرَةً وَقَدَّرْنَا فِيهَا السَّيْرَ
سَيْرُوا فِيهَا لِيَالِي وَأَيَّامًا ءَامِنِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

فَقَالُوا رَبَّنَا بَعْدَ بَيْنِ أَسْفَارِنَا وَظَلَمُوا
أَنْفُسَهُمْ فَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَحَادِيثَ وَمَزَقْنَاهُمْ
كُلَّ مُمَزَّقٍ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّكُلِّ
صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ ﴿١٩﴾

وَلَقَدْ صَدَّقَ عَلَيْهِمْ إِبْلِيسُ ظَنَّهُ فَاتَّبَعُوهُ
إِلَّا فَرِيقًا مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَمَا كَانَ لَهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ سُلْطَانٍ إِلَّا
لِنَعْلَمَ مَنْ يُّؤْمِنُ بِالْآخِرَةِ مِمَّنْ هُوَ مِنْهَا

Overview

This passage contains contrasting images of gratitude and a lack of it, as well as making some powers and creatures subservient, by God's will, to certain people even though they are not normally subordinate to any human being. God's will and power are not limited to what is normal or familiar to humans. Through these images we learn certain things about the *jinn* whom some idolaters worshipped. Others tried to learn through them news from the world beyond perception, but they themselves know nothing about that realm. We also have additional information about how Satan can prevail over man, despite the fact that Satan has no power over man except in as much as man gives him this by his own choice. Other clear elements within the passage concern the means by which God reveals some secret human actions so that they appear before us in real terms. He will then give those responsible for them reward in the life to come. This passage concludes, like the first one, with a reference to the life to come.

Special Favours for David

"We graced David with Our favour. We said: 'You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!' We caused iron to become soft for him, saying: Make coats of mail and measure their links with care. Do good, all of you. I certainly see all that you do." (Verses 10-11) David was the type of servant described at the end of the first part of the *sūrah*: *"In all this, there is a sign for every servant of God turning to Him in repentance."* (Verse 9) The *sūrah* follows this reference by recounting some of his history, preambled by details of the grace God bestowed on him: *"You mountains, sing with him God's praises! And likewise you birds!"* (Verse 10) Reports suggest that David had an unusually beautiful voice, and he used to sing his Psalms, which are praises of God mentioned in the Old Testament, but God knows which of them were truly David's. An authentic *ḥadīth* tells us that the Prophet overheard Abū Mūsā al-Ash`arī reciting the Qur`ān deep at night. He stopped to listen to him, and then commented: 'This man has been given one of David's Psalms.'

The Qur`ānic description shows that David (peace be upon him) attained such a sublime standard of devotion and transparency in his praises that barriers between

him and other creatures disappeared. Thus the truth between them became interrelated as they all praise God. Hence the mountains and the birds echoed his praises of God. When all of them had direct links with God, whatever separates species and creatures was removed. They felt that their bond with God overcame all barriers between them. Hence, they echoed one another in praising God, attaining an extraordinary level of transparency which can only be attained through God's grace.

When David raised his voice singing God's praises and glorifying Him, the mountains and the birds echoed him. The universe returned their songs as these were presented to God, the One. This is a remarkably splendid point in time which cannot be appreciated except by one who so experiences it, and even then only momentarily.

"We caused iron to become soft for him." (Verse 10) This is another aspect of the grace God bestowed on David. Within the context wherein it occurs, this seems to be a miracle going beyond what is familiar to us. The *sūrah* is not speaking here of heating iron until it becomes soft and moulding it into the required shape. Rather, it appears that the iron was softened in a different way from what normally occurs, yet God knows best. Although guiding man to the softening of iron by heating is in itself an aspect of God's grace, our assumption here rests on the fact that the overall atmosphere is one of miracles and unfamiliar phenomena.

"Make coats of mail and measure their links with care." (Verse 11) Reports suggest that prior to David's time, armour was plated, each coat being made up of one plate or sheet, which was very heavy for soldiers making them stiff and rigid. God instructed David in how to make armour from fine links which could be easily moulded so as to move in accordance with the body. David was also ordered to make these links narrow so that they could give complete protection against spears, preventing them from penetrating through. This is the reference in the verse to measuring the links with care. All this was taught to David through divine inspiration.

David and his household were told: *"Do good, all of you. I certainly see all that you do."* (Verse 11) This does not apply to their making coats of mail. Instead it is clear that they must be on their guard in all that they do because God sees all and rewards everyone in accordance with what they deserve. Nothing escapes Him.

More Favours for Solomon

All this grace was given to David. Solomon was also given the ability to perform extraordinary feats, as a manifestation of God's grace: *"To Solomon [We made subservient] the wind: its morning course [covered the distance of] a month's journey, and its evening course a month's journey. We caused a fountain of molten brass to flow for him, and some of the jinn worked under his control by permission of his Lord. Whoever of them*

deviated from Our command We shall make him taste suffering through a blazing flame. They made for him whatever he pleased: shrines and statues, basins as large as watering troughs, and firmly anchored cauldrons. We said 'Work thankfully, family of David, for few of My servants are truly thankful.'" (Verses 12-13)

There are plenty of reports about the wind being subservient to Solomon, but many appear to have an Israelite origin even though the original Jewish texts do not mention anything about this. It is, therefore, much better to refrain from discussing these reports and to confine ourselves to the Qur'ānic text, going no further than its surface meaning. Thus we can say that God placed the wind at Solomon's command, making it travel forward to a specific place [which according to *Sūrah* 21, The Prophets, is the Holy Land] for a month, and then making its return journey over a period of a month. Certain objectives were achieved by these two journeys. These were known to Solomon and he accomplished them by God's command. We prefer not to say any more on this point so as not to indulge in unsubstantiated legends.

"We caused a fountain of molten brass to flow for him." (Verse 12) The general context of these verses again suggests that this was also a miracle, like the softening of iron for David. This might have taken place in the form of a volcanic fountain pouring forth brass that had been molten underground. Likewise, God might have instructed Solomon on how to get brass to become fluid and mould it into different shapes. Regardless of how all this took place, it was nonetheless an act of God's abundant grace.

"Some of the jinn worked under his control by permission of his Lord." (Verse 12) God also gave him *jinn* to work under His command. Linguistically speaking, the word *jinn* refers to anything that people cannot see. There is also a type of creature God gave the name *jinn* to and about whom we know nothing except what God states. He mentions here that He placed a group of them under Solomon's command. Whoever disobeys will be punished by God. *"Whoever of them deviated from Our command We shall make him taste suffering through a blazing flame."* (Verse 12) That this comment occurs here, before completing the aspects of their subservience to Solomon, highlights the fact that the *jinn* are also subject to God, even though some idolaters worshipped them. Like mankind, the *jinn* are liable to God's punishment should they deviate from His orders.

They were placed under Solomon's command: *"They made for him whatever he pleased: shrines and statues, basins as large as watering troughs, and firmly anchored cauldrons."* (Verse 13) All these articles are examples of what the *jinn* used to make, by God's leave, whenever Solomon bid them. Again all these are miraculous things, and we cannot imagine them to be anything but. This is the only interpretation we can give to this statement.

The verse concludes with an address to David's household: "*We said: 'Work thankfully, family of David.'*" (Verse 13) All this was given you by God's grace, through David and Solomon. You must not take false pride in it, but instead give proper thanks. Good action is an important form of thanksgiving.

However, "*few of My servants are truly thankful.*" (Verse 13) This comment also serves as a directive. It tells us on the one hand that the grace and favours God bestows on His servants are so great that few of them are able to express due thanks for them, and on the other that people often neglect their thanksgiving duty. In fact, however much people try to express their gratitude, they cannot give due thanks for what God bestows on them. What is their status, then, if they slacken and overlook this duty?

Yet the question is: how can a human being, with limited ability, be sufficiently grateful for God's unlimited favours? God tells us in the Qur'an: "*Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them.*" (14: 34) These blessings are constantly around man no matter where he looks. They are both within him and within his surroundings. Indeed, he himself is one major blessing in this world. For example, at one time we were a group of people chatting about a wide variety of subjects when our little cat came over and started walking around us as if looking for something. It was clear that the cat needed something in particular, but it could not tell us what it was, and we could not understand his purpose. Then it occurred to us that he might be looking for water, and we were right. When we put the water before him we realized that he was very thirsty but could not express himself. We realized then just how much God has favoured us with the gift of communication. We expressed our gratitude to God for this blessing, but what thanks, heartfelt as they may be, can be enough for such a blessing!

On a prolonged occasion we were deprived of sunshine. At times, however, a ray of sunlight as small as a little coin would creep in, and we would take turns to stand in it, moving ourselves so as to let it fall on our faces, hands, chests, backs, abdomens and legs. I cannot forget the time when all this was over and we were allowed out: one of us was beaming with delight as he said: 'Oh God! How lovely to see the sun again! It still rises every day! All praise to God for this blessing!'⁸

How much of this light, which is necessary for life, do we waste every day as we enjoy the sun and its warmth? Indeed we always bathe in this blessing granted to us freely by God. We neither pay for it, nor do we exert any effort to come by it.

When we reflect on God's blessings in this way, we can spend all our lives and

⁸ It is clear that both these situations refer to the author's time in prison. Some of us may wonder that cats are in prison, but accounts by different prisoners confirm that stray cats frequently came to them and they found them a source of solace. — Editor's note.

energy covering but a little. Therefore, we only make this brief reference, following the Qur'ānic method of giving a hint or a pointer. It is up to everyone to reflect on it and try to express gratitude to God as they can. Indeed to be thankful to God is itself a blessing enjoyed by those who are sincere in their devotion.

Let us move now to the last scene in the story which shows Solomon's death while *the Jinn* continue to work hard as he had bid them, unaware of the fact of his death, until a worm had gnawed at his staff sufficiently for him to fall down: *"When We decreed his death, nothing showed them that he was dead except an earthworm that gnawed away at his staff And when he fell to the ground, the jinn saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude."* (Verse 14)

It is reported that in the position he was in at the moment of his death, he was leaning over his stick and that he remained in that position while the *jinn* continued performing the task he assigned them. Then a worm that eats wood came upon his stick. This type of worm gnaws persistently at wood ruining roofs, doors and buildings foundations. In parts of Upper Egypt, some villages do not use a single piece of wood in their homes for fear of woodworm. When the woodworm had gnawed at Solomon's staff, it could no longer support him, and he fell down. Only then did the *jinn* realize that he was dead: *"the jinn saw clearly that, had they understood the reality which was beyond [their] perception, they would not have remained in humiliating servitude."* (Verse 14)

Such, then, are the *jinn* whom some people worship. We see them here subservient to one of God's servants. They are totally unable to fathom something which is hidden from them, yet is very close: how then can they gratify people's appeals to learn the secrets of what is beyond the reach of perception!

No Gratitude for God's Favours

David and his family were full of gratitude to God for all His blessings and used such favours for good purpose. The people of Sheba, however, are to be contrasted with such role models. In *Sūrah 27, The Ants*, we have a report of what took place between their queen and Solomon. Here, the story gives an account of what happened to them after Solomon, which suggests that the events included here date back to a period after the queen's exchanges with Solomon. What makes this more likely is that the story here speaks of Sheba's people becoming ungrateful for God's blessings, which were then withdrawn and the people scattered. Under the queen mentioned in *Sūrah 27*, they enjoyed a plentiful period and were very powerful. The first report received by Solomon about them was from a hoopoe who told him: *"I found there a woman ruling over them; and she has been given of all good things, and hers is*

a magnificent throne. I found her and her people prostrating themselves to the sun instead of God; and Satan has made their deeds seem goodly to them, thus turning them away from the path [of God], so that they cannot find the right way." (27: 23-24)

This was subsequently followed by the queen's submission to God, as she embraced the divine faith. The story here, then, is certainly of a subsequent period. It tells of what happened to them after they turned away from God and refused to thank Him for His favours.

The story opens with a description of the great blessings they enjoyed and the provisions they were granted, as well as the requirement that they should demonstrate their gratitude as they could: *"There was a sign for the people of Sheba in their dwelling place: two gardens, one to the right and one to the left: 'Eat of what your Lord has provided for you, and give thanks to Him: a land most goodly and a Lord Much-Forgiving.'" (Verse 15)*

Sheba is the name of a community living in southern Yemen, in a fertile land some of which remains so today. They were highly civilized and were able to make good use of their water resources, as they were blessed with much rainfall, occupying territory close to the sea in the south and east. They were thus able to build a natural dam between two mountains, erecting a great wall down the valley, with controlled openings. In this way they were able to retain water in great quantities which they used as they needed. This great darn was known as the Ma'rib Dam.

The gardens to the right and left symbolize the splendid fertility of their land which gave them beauty and affluence. Therefore, they were signs reminding them of God who gives every good thing. They were commanded to make full use of what was granted to them and to thank the Giver: *"Eat of what your Lord has provided for you, and give thanks to Him."* (Verse 15) They were also reminded of the nature of their blessings: the productive land and the forgiveness of their sins: *"a land most goodly and a Lord Much-Forgiving."* (Verse 15) When such priceless blessings are given in plenty, why were they unwilling to give thanks? *"But they paid no heed, and so We let loose upon them a raging torrent and replaced their two gardens with others yielding bitter fruit, tamarisks, and a few lote trees."* (Verse 16)

When they failed to show their gratitude to God and use what God favoured them with in a goodly and beneficial way, He took away their source of affluence and let loose raging, stone-carrying torrents which destroyed their dam and its water flooded the whole area. With the dam no longer functioning, the land dried up. Instead of beautiful gardens they now had only a desert in which only a few wild trees were to grow, bearing no good fruit. The verse says that their gardens were *"replaced ...with others yielding bitter fruit, tamarisks, and a few lote trees."* (Verse 16) This was the best that their land could subsequently produce and even then it was only in small quantities.

"Thus We requited them for their ingratitude: would We thus requite any but the totally ungrateful." (Verse 17) Until then they had remained in their villages and homes. God stinted their provisions and replaced their riches with austerity, but He had not yet scattered them over a wider area. They had easy contacts with the cities blessed by God: Makkah and Jerusalem. To the north of Sheba, Yemen was well inhabited and its land routes to other areas were safe and comfortable: *"We had placed between them and the cities which We had blessed towns within sight of one another so that they could travel in measured stages: 'Travel through them by night and day in safety.'" (Verse 18)* It is reported that a traveller would leave one township in the morning and arrive at the next before dark. This meant that journey times were short, making travel easy, safe and comfortable.

Yet Sheba's people paid no heed to the first warning. Nor did the change in their circumstances make them turn to God and appeal to Him to give back their comfortable lives. On the contrary, their prayer betrayed stupidity and ignorance: *"But they said: 'Our Lord! Make our journeys longer.'" (Verse 18)* They wanted long distance travel, which is undertaken only infrequently. In so doing, they demonstrated nothing but arrogance: *"They sinned against their souls."* Their prayer was answered, but only as such a prayer should be answered: *"So We caused them to become a tale, and scattered them throughout the land."* (Verse 19) They became like refugees scattered throughout Arabia. They also became the subject of discussions in others' gatherings. In other words, they were no longer a recognized community, but a tale people told. *"Surely, there are signs in all this for anyone who is patient in adversity, deeply grateful."* (Verse 19) We note that patience and steadfastness are mentioned alongside thanksgiving in times of plenty. The history of Sheba gives signs on both counts.

This is one way of understanding the last two verses. However, they may also be understood in a different way, which would then render the first statement as: *"We had placed between them and the cities which We had blessed towns that have dominance."* As these places had power and dominance, the people of Sheba became poor, living like desert dwellers, and having to travel time after time to find pasture and water. They could not withstand the test that this entailed. Therefore, they prayed to God, and in this case their supplication would be rendered as: *'Our Lord! Lengthen the time between our journeys,'* or make them less frequent, as travel has become too tiring for us. They did not couple this prayer with turning to God with repentance and seeking His forgiveness, so that He would grant them what they prayed for. Since they behaved arrogantly when they had God's blessings, and did not persevere when they faced adversity, God punished them by scattering them and so they disappeared, featuring only in people's tales. This makes the comment at the end of these verses fitting for their lack of gratitude for God's favour and lack of patience in adversity: *"Surely, there are signs in all this for anyone who is patient in adversity, deeply grateful."* (Verse 19) I feel this understanding of the verses to be also acceptable. God,

however, knows His own purpose best.

As the story concludes, the *ninth* mentions the overall divine planning and the rules God operates in life generally. It tells us what lessons we should draw from this and what lies behind it: *"Indeed Iblīs proved that his opinion of them was right: they all followed him, except for a group of believers. Yet he had no power at all over them; it is only for the end that We might make a clear distinction between those who truly believe in the life to come and those who are in doubt about it. Your Lord watches over all things."* (Verses 20-21)

The people of Sheba went the way that leads to a miserable end: *Iblīs* felt that he could lead them astray, and they let him do so. Thus, except for a group of believers, they all followed him. This is what normally happens in all communities. It is rare that a community is totally bereft of believers who will not give in to Satan and his machinations. They thus prove that the truth remains, even in the worst of conditions, available to everyone who seeks it and wants to hold to it. *Iblīs* never had an overpowering authority over them from which they could not be free. He can only approach them in order that they be tested, and everyone who wishes to stick to the truth could do so, while everyone else will go astray. Thus, in life, a type of person emerges who *'truly believe in the life to come'*, and thus his beliefs keep him on the right path. This type are distinct from the other *'who are in doubt'* about the life to come. It is the latter who succumb to *Iblīs's* temptations, heedless of the Day of Judgement. God certainly knows what happens before it actually takes place. However, He makes His reward dependent upon the thing actually taking place.

When we look at the story of Sheba's people from a broader angle, we see that its moral can apply to all communities at all times. The story can then be seen as demonstrating what happens when communities follow divine guidance or stray away from it. It also shows the reasons that make people take the direction they do. *"Your Lord watches over all things."* (Verse 21) Nothing is lost or overlooked.

Thus the second passage of the *sūrah* concludes, speaking of the life to come, just as did the first passage. It also emphasizes the limitless nature of God's knowledge and His awareness of all things. Both subjects are given much emphasis in this *sūrah*.

3

Distinct Ways, Different Ends

Say: 'Call upon those whom you imagine to be partners with God. They do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in either, nor does He have any helper from among them. (22)

Before Him, intercession is of no avail, except by one to whom He may have granted permission. When the terror is lifted from their hearts, they will ask [one another]: 'What has your Lord ordained?' They will answer: 'The truth. He is the Most High, the Supreme.' (23)

Say: 'Who is it that gives you sustenance out of the heavens and the earth?' Say: 'It is God; and either we or you are on the right path or have clearly gone astray!' (24)

Say: 'Neither shall you be called to account for whatever we have become guilty of nor shall we be called to account for whatever you are doing.' (25)

Say: 'Our Lord will bring us all together, and then He will lay open the truth between us, in justice. He alone is the One who opens all truth, the All-Knowing.' (26)

قُلْ أَدْعُوا الَّذِينَ زَعَمْتُمْ مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَا يَمْلِكُونَ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَمَا هُمْ فِيهَا مِنْ شَرِكٍ وَمَا لَهُ مِنْهُمْ مِّنْ ظَهِيرٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَلَا تَنْفَعُ الشَّفَعَةُ عِنْدَهُ إِلَّا لِمَنْ أَذِنَ لَهُ ۗ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا فُزِعَ عَن قُلُوبِهِمْ قَالُوا مَاذَا قَالَ رَبُّكُمْ قَالُوا الْحَقُّ وَهُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ ﴿٢٣﴾

﴿٢٤﴾ قُلْ مَن يَرْزُقُكُم مِّنَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ قُلِ اللَّهُ وَإِنَّا أَوْ إِيَّاكُمْ لَعَلَىٰ هُدًىٰ أَوْ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

قُلْ لَا تُسْأَلُونَ عَمَّا أَجْرَمْنَا وَلَا نُسْأَلُ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

قُلْ يَجْمَعُ بَيْنَنَا رَبُّنَا ثُمَّ يَفْتَحُ بَيْنَنَا بِالْحَقِّ وَهُوَ الْفَتَّاحُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٢٦﴾

Say: 'Show me those whom you allege to be partners with Him. Nay! He alone is God, the Almighty, the Wise.' (27)

قُلْ أَرُونِي الَّذِينَ أَهَقْتُمْ بِهِ
شُرَكَاءَ كَلَّا بَلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ الْعَزِيزُ
الْحَكِيمُ

Overview

This short passage tackles the issue of God's oneness in contrast to attributing partners to Him. Yet it takes us on a round of the universe, with both its apparent realm and that which is hidden from us, its present and past, heavens and earth, this life and the life to come. Our hearts shudder with awe at the mere mention of some of these majestic aspects. The passage also refers to man's sustenance, actions and reward. It looks at how people are grouped together and then separated into two distinct parties. All this is delivered in a quick rhythm with strong accompanying beats. The word, *say,*' is repeatedly used for added emphasis. After each such usage, a new proof is given which is both irrefutable and overpowering.

The Truth Will Out

"Say: 'Call upon those whom you imagine to be partners with God. They do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth, nor have they any share in either, nor does He have any helper from among them.'" (Verse 22) The verse begins with a challenge that applies to the entire universe, without exception: "Say: 'Call upon those whom you imagine to be partners with God.'" Call on them to come and stand before all the world. Let them then say, or you can say yourselves, if they own anything in the heavens or on earth, large or small. "They do not have even an atom's weight of authority either in the heavens or the earth." (Verse 22) They cannot even claim to own anything in the heavens or the earth. An owner of something has full authority over it: he can do or dispense with it as he likes. What, then, do those alleged deities own in this vast universe?

They do not own an atom's weight either as their own private property or as something in which they have a share: "nor have they any share in either." (Verse 22) Moreover, God does not seek their help in anything. He is in no need of help: "nor does He have any helper from among them." (Verse 22)

The verse appears to refer to a particular type of alleged partner with God. These are the angels whom the Arabs claimed to be God's daughters, alleging that they could intercede with God on people's behalf. Perhaps they were among those partners about whom the Arabs said: "We worship them for no reason other than that

they would bring us nearer to God." (39: 3) Therefore, in the next verse the *sūrah* denies that they have any means of intercession while drawing a scene that fills hearts with fear: *"Before Him, intercession is of no avail, except by one to whom He may have granted permission."* (Verse 23) Intercession, then, is dependent on God's permission. Needless to say, God will not permit intercession on behalf of people who do not believe in Him and deserve His grace. Those who associate partners with Him do not deserve that He grant permission to angels or anyone else to intercede on their behalf.

The *sūrah* then describes the fearful scene when intercession is needed: *"When the terror is lifted from their hearts, they will ask [one another]: 'What has your Lord ordained?' They will answer: 'The truth. He is the Most High, the Supreme.'"* (Verse 23) The day is exceedingly hard: people stand awaiting developments, and those who can intercede and the ones who hope for intercession in their favour wait for a signal from the Almighty permitting such intercession. The wait continues, faces look down, sounds die out and hearts go quiet as all await a signal from the Lord, full of majesty and glory.

The word of permission is then given and all prospective intercessors and the ones they are interceding for are overwhelmed with awe. They are unable to comprehend. Then, *"when the terror is lifted from their hearts,"* and they recover their senses and faculties, they begin to ask one another: *"What has your Lord ordained?"* They wonder whether they have understood what God said. The answer is given in one word: *The truth.* It may be that the angels of the highest order are the ones who give this perfect answer. Your Lord has stated the truth, complete and perfect; the truth that comes from Him who is truth absolute. For whatever God says is absolutely true. *"He is the Most High, the Supreme."* (Verse 23) It is a most fitting description.

This short answer, in one word, imparts the awesomeness of the situation when intercession is permitted. It describes how the angels stand before their Lord. Can anyone who looks at it pretend to be a partner with God, interceding in favour of those who attribute partners to Him?

Either One or the Other

That was the first note of this splendid and awe-inspiring scene. The second note refers to the provisions granted to them. Although they are oblivious to the source that gives them their provisions, the fact that they have them proves His oneness and that no one else has any control over what He decides to give or deny. *"Say: 'Who is it that gives you sustenance out of the heavens and the earth?' Say: it is God; and either we or you are on the right path or have clearly gone astray!"* (Verse 24) Providing sustenance is something people know about as it happens in their lives. It comes from heaven in

the form of rain, heat and light, which were known to the people addressed first by the Qur'ān, but also in other forms and shapes which man discovers at one time or another. Other sustenance comes from the earth in the form of plants, animals, water, oils, metals and treasure. Much of these were known to the people of olden days and much is discovered as time passes on.

The question is: *"Who is it that gives you sustenance out of the heavens and the earth?"* The answer is not awaited. In fact, the Prophet is told to say: *"It is God."* They cannot argue about this or make any contrary claim. What the Prophet is also instructed to do is to leave matters entirely to God concerning the fates of both parties. One party is inevitably right and the other wrong; one is guided aright and the other is in error. The two cannot be together either on the track of proper guidance or of going astray: *"Either we or you are on the right path or have clearly gone astray!"* (Verse 24)

This is the ultimate in fairness and politeness when arguing one's case. For God's Messenger to say to the idolaters that either party could be following right guidance leaves the question open as to who is on which side: this, thus, calls for cool reflection and reasonable deliberation. There is no room for futile argument or an illogical hardening of attitude. The Prophet is given instructions to say this to them as his role is that of a guide and a teacher hoping that they will see the truth of the guidance he brings them. He is not out to score a point or win an argument.

Arguments made in such a polite and inspiring manner are more likely to have a positive effect on those whose position in society prompts them to take a hard line to the message of truth. They may even show a willingness to consider and reflect at ease. It is exactly the approach that should be adopted by advocates of Islam everywhere.

The third note puts everyone before their actions and responsibilities, but again using the most polite and fair approach: *"Say: Neither shall you be called to account for whatever we have become guilty of nor shall we be called to account for whatever you are doing."* (Verse 25)

This might have been in answer to the repeated accusations of the idolaters branding the Prophet and his Companions as guilty and in the wrong. They had in this respect berated them for renouncing their forefathers' religion. This happens all the time, when the followers of falsehood accuse the followers of truth of being in error. Hence, the Prophet is instructed to tell them in exemplary politeness that everyone is responsible for his or her own deeds: *"Say: Neither shall you be called to account for whatever we have become guilty of, nor shall we be called to account for whatever you are doing."* (Verse 25) Everyone must reflect and determine whether their attitude will lead them to success or bring about their ruin. This is the first step towards recognizing the truth before attaining conviction.

The fourth note is given in the verse that says: *"Say: Our Lord will bring us all together, and then He will lay open the truth between us, in justice. He alone is the One who opens all truth, the All-Knowing."* (26) At first, God gathers both the followers of truth and those who follow falsehood together, so that both truth and falsehood meet face to face. Then, the advocates of truth will call on others to join them. At this stage, issues become confused, and a battle ensues between truth and falsehood. Doubts may blur evidence, and falsehood may appear to gain the upper hand, but all this will be for a limited duration. Then, God will judge between the two parties in fairness and state the truth clearly, without any ambiguity or confusion. *"He alone is the One who opens all truth, the All-Knowing."* (Verse 26)

This gives reassurance since God is certain to make His judgement clear, laying the truth open before all. He does not allow matters to remain confused except for a limited period. He does not put the advocates of truth together with those who follow falsehood except to give the former a chance to carry on with their advocacy, exerting their best efforts. Then God will issue His verdict on both sides. It is He who knows best when the appropriate time for judgement comes. No one else should decide its timing, or hasten it. It is all left to Him.

The final note in this passage sounds similar to the first one, throwing out a challenge to those who associated partners with him: *"Say: Show me those whom you allege to be partners with Him. Nay! He alone is God, the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 27) The very request is sarcastic: demanding that they reveal the subject of their claims: who are they; what is their status, position and role; how did they merit such a position? All these questions betray an element of derision. This is followed by strong censure: *"Nay!"* They are not, and cannot be, God's partners. *"He alone is God, the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 27) The One who has such attributes has no partners of any sort.

4

Futile Argument

We have sent you to all mankind so that you bring them good news and give them warning; but most people do not understand. (28)

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا كَافَّةً لِّلنَّاسِ بَشِيرًا
وَنَذِيرًا وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا
يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

They ask: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (29)

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَى هَذَا الْوَعْدُ إِن
كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

Say: 'There has been appointed for you a day which you can neither delay nor advance by a single moment.' (30)

قُلْ لَكُمْ مِيعَادُ يَوْمٍ لَا تَسْتَخِرُونَ عَنْهُ
سَاعَةً وَلَا تَسْتَقْدِمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

The unbelievers say: 'We will never believe in this Qur'an, nor in any earlier revelations.' If only you could see how the wrongdoers shall be made to stand before their Lord, hurling reproaches at one another. Those of them who were weak on earth will say to those who had deemed themselves mighty: 'Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers.' (31)

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَنْ نُؤْمِنَ بِهَذَا
الْقُرْآنِ وَلَا بِالَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَلَوْ تَرَى
إِذِ الظَّالِمُونَ مَوْقُوفُونَ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ
يَرْجِعُ بَعْضُهُمْ إِلَى بَعْضٍ الْقَوْلَ يَقُولُ
الَّذِينَ اسْتُضْعِفُوا لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا
لَوْلَا أَنْتُمْ لَكُنَّا مُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

The ones who deemed themselves mighty will say to those who were weak: 'Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you? Certainly not! It was you who were guilty.' (32)

قَالَ الَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ اسْتُضْعِفُوا
أَخْنُ صَدَدْتُمْ عَنِ الْهُدَى بَعْدَ إِذْ
جَاءَكُمْ بَلْ كُنْتُمْ مُجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

Those who were weak will reply to those who deemed themselves mighty: 'Not so! It was your scheming, night and day, ordering us to disbelieve in God and to set up equals to Him.' When they see the punishment awaiting them, they will all harbour utter and unmitigated remorse. We shall put chains round the necks of the unbelievers. Are they to be requited for anything other than what they did? (33)

Whenever We sent a warner to any community, those of them who lived in luxury said: 'We do not believe in the message with which you have been sent.' (34)

They also say: 'Richer than you are we in wealth, and we have more children. We certainly are not going to be made to suffer.' (35)

Say: 'My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills; but most people do not understand.' (36)

It is neither your riches nor your children that can bring you nearer to Us: only he who believes and does what is right [comes near to Us]. To these multiple reward will be given for all that they have done. They will dwell in safety in the mansions of paradise; (37)

whereas all who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, shall be given over to suffering. (38)

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ اسْتَضَعُوا لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا
بَلْ مَكْرُ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ إِذْ تَأْمُرُونَنَا أَنْ
نَكْفُرَ بِاللَّهِ وَنَجْعَلَ لَهُ أَنْدَادًا وَأَسْرُوا
النَّدَامَةَ لَمَّا رَأَوُا الْعَذَابَ وَجَعَلْنَا
الْأَغْلَلَ فِي آعْنَاقِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا هَلْ
يُحْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِّنْ نَّذِيرٍ إِلَّا قَالَ
مُتْرَفُوهَا إِنَّا بِمَا أُرْسِلْتُمْ بِهِءٍ كَافِرُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَقَالُوا لَنَحْنُ أَكْثَرُ أَمْوَالًا وَأَوْلَادًا وَمَا
نَحْنُ بِمُعَذَّبِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

قُلْ إِنَّ رَبِّي يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ
وَيَقْدِرُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

وَمَا أَمْوَالُكُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُكُمْ بِالَّتِي تُقَرِّبُكُمْ
عِندَنَا زُلْفَىٰ إِلَّا مَنْ ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا
فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمْ جَزَاءُ الضَّعْفِ بِمَا عَمِلُوا
وَهُمْ فِي الْعُرْفَتِ ءَامِنُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَالَّذِينَ يَسْعَوْنَ فِي ءَايَاتِنَا مُعْجِزِينَ
أُولَٰئِكَ فِي الْعَذَابِ مُحْضَرُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

Say: My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills of His servants; whatever you give for His sake He will replace it for you, for He is the best of providers.' (39)

On the day He gathers them all together, He will say to the angels: 'Was it you that these people worshipped?' (40)

They will answer: 'Limitless are You in Your glory! You alone are our patron, not they. In fact they worshipped the jinn and most of them believed in them.' (41)

Today none of you has any power to benefit or harm another. We will say to the wrongdoers: 'Taste now the suffering through fire which you persistently denied.' (42)

قُلْ إِنَّ رَبِّي يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ وَيَقْدِرُ لَهُ ۖ وَمَا أَنْفَقْتُمْ مِّن شَيْءٍ فَهُوَ يُخْلِفُهُ ۖ وَهُوَ خَيْرُ الرَّازِقِينَ

٣٩

وَيَوْمَ نَحْشُرُهُمْ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ يَقُولُ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ أَهْتُولَاءِ ۚ وَإِنَّمَا كَانُوا يَعْبُدُونَ

قَالُوا سُبْحٰنَكَ أَنْتَ وَلِيِّنَا مِنْ دُونِهِمْ بَلْ كَانُوا يَعْبُدُونَ الْجِنَّ أَكْثَرُهُمْ بِهِمْ

مُؤْمِنُونَ

فَالْيَوْمَ لَا يَمْلِكُ بَعْضُكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ نَفْعًا وَلَا ضَرًّا وَنَقُولُ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا ذُوقُوا عَذَابَ النَّارِ الَّتِي كُنْتُمْ بِهَا تُكَذِّبُونَ

٤٢

Overview

This passage tackles the unbelievers' attitude of the Prophet Muhammad's message. Indeed their attitude echoes that of the affluent to every divine message. Such people are normally deluded by their riches and their offspring, and the fact that they command much of what this life can offer, thinking that this indicates they are favoured by God, and that such favours will ensure they do not suffer punishment in the hereafter. Therefore, the *sūrah* shows them their situation in the life to come, as though it is happening now before their very eyes. This so that they will know whether anything of what they have can benefit or protect them on the Day of Judgement. These scenes show clearly that neither the angels nor the *jinn* they worshipped in this life, and from whom they sought help, can give them anything whatsoever in the life to come. As the argument progresses the *sūrah* explains what

carries real weight in God's measure. Thus the false values they have in this world are seen for what they are. It becomes clear that granting wealth in abundance or otherwise in this present life depends on God's will. It should not be taken as evidence of anyone's position with Him. It is all a means of testing people.

The Prophet's Responsibility

We have sent you to all mankind so that you bring them good news and give them warning; but most people do not understand. They ask: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' Say: 'There has been appointed for you a day which you can neither delay nor advance by a single moment.' (Verses 28-30)

This clarifies what was stated in the previous passage about each individual's accountability to God, and that the role of the advocates of truth does not go beyond delivering God's message and presenting it clearly before the rest of mankind. The current passage starts with explaining the mission assigned to the Prophet. It is clear that they are unaware of its nature. Hence they try to hasten what he promises or threatens them with. It makes clear that this comes at the time God has determined for it, which is unknown to anyone other than Him: *"We have sent you to all mankind so that you bring them good news and give them warning."* (Verse 28) Such is the remit of the message addressed to all mankind: to bring good news and to give warning. When this is done, the messenger's role has ended. As for the fulfilment of promise and warning, this is all left to God to determine: *"but most people do not understand."* (Verse 28)

"They ask: When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?" (Verse 29) The very question implies that they do not understand the messenger's role or the limits of the message. The Qur'an wants the question of God's oneness to be absolutely clear: Muhammad is His Messenger with a clearly defined remit. He fulfils his task but does not go beyond this. All authority belongs to God: it is He who has given him the message to deliver, clearly defining his role. It is not part of his role to decide, or even to know, when the promise and the warning are to be fulfilled. This all belongs to God. The Prophet knows his limits. Therefore, he does not even question anything God has not chosen to inform him of, or has not assigned to him. Here, God instructs him to give them this particular reply: *"Say: There has been appointed for you a day which you can neither delay nor advance by a single moment."* (Verse 30)

Everything occurs at its particular time which God has determined. It is neither hastened nor delayed for anyone. Nothing occurs by coincidence. On the contrary, everything is created according to a particular plan, in which things are interrelated.

God's will determines events and timings according to His own wisdom, of which we only understand what God chooses to impart to us. When people try to hasten His promise or warning, they betray their ignorance of this fundamental fact. Hence, since most people do not understand, this leads them to questioning and hastening things.

Stubborn to the Hilt

The next verse speaks about a determined attitude to reject all divine guidance: *"The unbelievers say: We will never believe in this Qur'ān, nor in any earlier revelations."* (Verse 31) They make it clear that they will never believe, neither in the Qur'ān nor in any divine book that preceded the Qur'ān, which in fact confirms its truth. They are not prepared to believe in any of this at any time in the future either. They are determined to disbelieve, deliberately refusing even to consider anything that points to faith. It is all, then, a well considered stance. Therefore, the *sūrah* puts before their eyes what happens to them on the Day of Judgement as a result of their stubborn rejection:

If only you could see how the wrongdoers shall be made to stand before their Lord, hurling reproaches at one another. Those of them who were weak on earth will say to those who had deemed themselves mighty: Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers.' The ones who deemed themselves mighty will say to those who were weak: 'Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you? Certainly not! It was you who were guilty.' Those who were weak will reply to those who deemed themselves mighty: Not so! It was your scheming, night and day, ordering us to disbelieve in God and to set up equals to Him.' When they see the punishment awaiting them, they will all harbour utter and unmitigated remorse. We shall put chains round the necks of the unbelievers. Are they to be requited for anything other than what they did? (Verses 31-33)

Their assertion that they will never believe in any revealed book is made in this life. So, what will they say in a totally different situation? If only we could see these wrongdoers when they are 'made to stand', i.e. forced into it against their will or better judgement. They are guilty, made to stand and await a decision by their Lord, in whose words and scriptures they profess they will never believe. Yet now they stand before Him. If you could watch them, you would see how they reproach one another, exchanging accusations and trying to blame each other. So, what is it that they say?

"Those of them who were weak on earth will say to those who had deemed themselves mighty: Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers." (Verse 31) They blame their leaders, accusing them of being responsible for this humiliation and what

will come next of great suffering. They state this now but were totally unable to confront them in this way during their life on earth, prevented as they were by their weakness and submission. They had sold out the freedom and dignity God had granted them, as well as the reasoning He had blessed them with. Now that all false values have been discarded, and they are put face to face with a long-lasting suffering, they can express themselves without fear: *"Had it not been for you, we would certainly have been believers."* (Verse 31)

Those who used to think much of their power base are fed up with those whom they treated with humiliation. Both face the same punishment, but the weaker elements want them to bear responsibility for leading them astray, which is what has brought them to this suffering. Therefore, their reply is haughty, disowning any responsibility. They also tell them rudely what they think of them: *"The ones who deemed themselves mighty will say to those who were weak: Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you? Certainly not! It was you who were guilty."* (Verse 32)

It is not only that they deny responsibility for others, but they acknowledge that the message they received was one of guidance. In their first life, they paid little heed to the weak or their views. In fact, they treated them as if they did not exist, accepting neither argument nor opposition from them. Now that they are facing the punishment of the hereafter, they reproachfully ask them: *"Was it we who prevented you from following right guidance after it had been given you?"* (Verse 32) With this denial comes an accusation: *"It was you who were guilty."* (Verse 32) You refused the guidance that was given you because you yourselves were guilty.

Had this exchange taken place in this life, the weak would have sat quietly, unable to utter a word. But on the Day of Judgement, when false airs are seen for what they are, and when the facts that were hidden are brought into the open, the weak do not accept this accusation. Instead, they speak out telling the others that it was they who consistently schemed to turn them away from God's guidance, it was they who established false beliefs, created confusion around the truth, and who used power and influence to keep people astray: *"Those who were weak will reply to those who deemed themselves mighty: Not so! It was your scheming, night and day, ordering us to disbelieve in God and to set up equals to Him."* (Verse 33)

Both groups will then realize that such a depressing dialogue benefits neither. It will not spare either the punishment they deserve. Each party is guilty of their own sins: the ones who claimed power have to account for their own sins, as well as for leading others astray; and similarly the weak are responsible for their own sins and for following tyrants. They cannot be exempt on account of the fact that they were weak. God favoured them with reason and freedom, but they chose not to use their reason and sold their freedom, accepting humiliation and servility. Thus, they all

deserve to be punished. When they see the suffering they have to endure, they are in deep sorrow, regretting all that they have done: *"When they see the punishment awaiting them, they will all harbour utter and unmitigated remorse."* (Verse 33) This is a description of a state of total regret that leaves the person unable to utter a word. Hearts are buried and lips are sealed.

They are then taken to where their punishment, hard and painful, is meted out: *"We shall put chains round the necks of the unbelievers."* (Verse 32) As they are being so driven, the *sūrah* addresses the onlookers, saying: *"Are they to be requited for anything other than what they did?"* (Verse 33)

The curtains are drawn leaving behind both those who enjoyed power and those who were servile. Both are wrongdoers. One group does wrong by tyrannizing, distorting the truth and exceeding their limits, while the other does wrong by surrendering their human dignity, reason and freedom, and accepting tyranny. Both groups are equally punished; both are requited only for what they did.

The scene shows the wrongdoers what they will face, bringing it alive before their very eyes. They see themselves in the hereafter while they are still in this life. Not only so, but others also see their end. All this is done when there is still time for all to make amends and correct their attitudes.

An Ever Repeated Story

The wealthy Qurayshi people behaved in exactly the same way as others of affluence when they received a divine message: *"Whenever We sent a warner to any community, those of them who lived in luxury said: 'We do not believe in the message with which you have been sent.'"* (Verse 34) Thus, it is the same story repeated again and again throughout the generations. Luxurious life hardens hearts, blunts sensitivity, and corrupts nature so that it no longer sees the pointers divine guidance provides. It thus lures people into arrogance, darkness and falsehood.

People who live in luxury are often deceived by false values and transient affluence. They are deluded by the power and wealth they enjoy, thinking that it will spare them God's punishment or that it is evidence of God's being pleased with them, or that in their position they are above accountability for their deeds: *"They also say: Richer than you are we in wealth, and we have more children. We certainly are not going to be made to suffer."* (Verse 35)

The Qur'ān puts in front of them the standard of values God wants. It explains to them that whether God grants provisions in plenty or makes them scanty is no indication of God's being pleased or displeased with a person. It has nothing to do with the correct standard of values; it neither prevents punishment nor induces it. It

is totally separate from the question of accountability, reckoning, requital and God's pleasure. It is subject to a totally different divine rule: *"Say: My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills; but most people do not understand."* (Verse 36)

This question of wealth and property, and how much someone has of the means of luxury and pleasure, is one that makes many people wonder.

They are troubled when they see that the wicked, the corrupt and the perpetrators of evil have whatever they wish for of wealth and power, while those who are virtuous, good and honest are deprived of it all. Some tend to think that God only gives in abundance to someone who enjoys a privileged position with Him. Others may even doubt whether goodness, honesty and virtue have any real value, since they often go hand in hand with poverty and deprivation. Therefore, the Qur'ān separates the riches and luxuries of this world from the values which God approves of. It states that God grants sustenance in abundance or scant measure to whomever He wills, and this has nothing to do with Him being pleased or displeased with anyone. God may indeed give riches in abundance to someone with whom He is displeased as well as to one who has earned His pleasure. Likewise, He may stint the provisions of anyone, good or evil. Most certainly the actions they do will not lead to the same result.

God may give in plenty to the perpetrators of evil, giving them the chance to delve further into evil, compound their corruption and increase their record of sin and crime. He will then punish them for their evil in this life or in the life to come as He, in His infinite wisdom, may determine. On the other hand, He may give them sustenance in a tight and scanty measure, and as a result they may go further on the loose, adding to their crimes and sins, despairing of ever receiving God's grace. Again their record of sin and evil will mount.

By contrast, God may bestow His favours in abundance on good and virtuous people so as to enable them to do many more good things that they would not have been able to do without having plentiful provisions. Thus, they will show their gratitude to Him by feeling, word and action. Their record of good things will then grow in accordance with their actions and with the goodness of their hearts, which is known to God. Alternatively, He may grant them sustenance only in small measure to test their perseverance, trust in their Lord, reassurance and acceptance of whatever lot is assigned to them. Again, if they prove themselves, there will be a manifold increase in their record of goodness.

Whatever the reasons for giving people in plenty or in limited measure are, the whole question is entirely separate from people's respective positions with God. A person's wealth, position or offspring in this life bear no indication of that person's

standing with God. Such standing is determined on the basis of how people behave. If God grants someone wealth and children, and he uses both in a good way, God may give him double reward for this good action in connection with the blessings received from Him. It is their conduct that gives them double reward, not the wealth, power or offspring.

It is neither your riches nor your children that can bring you nearer to Us: only he who believes and does what is right [comes near to Us]. To these multiple reward will be given for all that they have done. They will dwell in safety in the mansions of paradise; whereas all who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, shall be given over to suffering. (Verses 37-38)

The rule concerning people's provisions and whether they are given in abundance or small measure is restated, making it clear that it is subject to God's wisdom. It tells us that whatever of our provision is spent for God's sake is the portion that remains and grows. We need to keep this fact clear in our minds:

Say: My Lord gives in abundance, or gives in scant measure, to whomever He wills of His servants; whatever you give for His sake He will replace it for you, for He is the best of providers. (Verse 39)

Who Benefits Whom

The passage concludes with a scene from the Day of Judgement, where we see them gathered, and God confronts them with the angels they used to worship instead of Him. It ends with them suffering the torment they used to hasten, as the *sūrah* has already mentioned:

On the day He gathers them all together, He will say to the angels: 'Was it you that these people worshipped?' They will answer: Limitless are You in Your glory! You alone are our patron, not they. In fact they worshipped the jinn and most of them believed in them.' Today none of you has any power to benefit or harm another. We will say to the wrongdoers: 'Taste now the suffering through fire which you persistently denied.' (Verses 40-42)

These are the angels they used to worship, or hope would intercede for them with God: they are brought face to face with them, but the angels glorify God, stating that He is exalted above all that these people allege. They disassociate themselves from such false worship, as though it had not taken place. They are indeed in Satan's service, either worshipping him and appealing to him for help, or obeying him by associating partners with God. In fact, when they worshipped angels, they were

actually worshipping Satan. Indeed worship of the *jinn* was practised by some Arabs. Some of them actually addressed their worship to the *jinn*, while others sought their help. Hence, the *sūrah* says: *“They worshipped the jinn and most of them believed in them.”* (Verse 41) This explains the relevance of Solomon’s story with the *jinn* to the major issues discussed in this *sūrah*.

As this scene concludes, the mode of expression changes from narrative to address. The blame is squarely put on them, and they are severely reproached: *“Today none of you has any power to benefit or harm another.”* (Verse 42) Neither can the angels benefit people, nor can those unbelievers benefit one another. The fire the wrongdoers used to deny is now in front of them. It is an undoubted reality: *“We will say to the wrongdoers: ‘Taste now the suffering through fire which you persistently denied.’* (Verse 42)

Like all previous passages, this one concludes with further emphasis on the question of resurrection, accountability, reckoning and reward.

Final Warning

When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, they say: 'This is but a man who wants to turn you away from what your forefathers worshipped.' They also say: 'This is nothing but an invented falsehood.' Furthermore, when the truth comes to them, the unbelievers will say: 'This is just plain sorcery.' (43)

Yet never have We given them any books to study, nor have We sent them any warner before you. (44)

Those who have gone before them likewise denied the truth. These people have not attained even one tenth of what We gave their predecessors, yet when they denied My messengers, how terrible was My condemnation. (45)

Say: 'I counsel you one thing: stand before God, in pairs or singly, and think: there is no madness in your Companion [Muhammad]. He is only a warner to you of awesome suffering to come.' (46)

Say: 'If I have ever asked you for any reward, you can keep it. My reward rests with none other than God. He is witness to everything.' (47)

وَإِذَا تُلِيٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَايَاتُنَا بَيِّنَاتٍ قَالُوا مَا هَٰذَا إِلَّا رَجُلٌ يُرِيدُ أَنْ يَصُدَّكُمْ عَمَّا كَانَ يَعْبُدُ ءَابَاؤُكُمْ وَقَالُوا مَا هَٰذَا إِلَّا إِفْكٌ مُّفْتَرَىٰ ۚ وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ إِنَّ هَٰذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٤٣﴾

وَمَا ءَاتَيْنَهُمْ مِّنْ كِتَابٍ يَدْرُسُونَهَا وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ قَبْلَكَ مِنْ نَّذِيرٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

وَكَذَّبَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ وَمَا بَلَّغُوا مِعْشَارَ مَا ءَاتَيْنَهُمْ فَكَذَّبُوا رُسُلِي فَكَيْفَ كَانَ نَكِيرِ ﴿٤٥﴾

﴿٤٦﴾ قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَعِظُكُمْ بِوَاحِدَةٍ أَنْ تَقُومُوا لِلَّهِ مَثْنَىٰ وَفُرَادَىٰ ثُمَّ تَتَفَكَّرُوا ۚ مَا بِصَاحِبِكُمْ مِّنْ جِنَّةٍ ۚ إِن هُوَ إِلَّا نَذِيرٌ لَّكُمْ بَيْنَ يَدَيْ عَذَابٍ شَدِيدٍ ﴿٤٦﴾

قُلْ مَا سَأَلْتُكُمْ مِّنْ أَجْرٍ فَهُوَ لَكُمْ ۚ إِنِ اجْتَبَىٰ إِلَّآ عَلَى اللَّهِ ۚ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٤٧﴾

Say: 'My Lord hurls forth the truth. He has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people's perception.' (48)

Say: 'The truth has now come. Falsehood neither creates anything new, nor restores anything.' (49)

Say: 'Were I to go astray, I would but go astray to the loss of myself. But if I am on the right path, it is through what my Lord reveals to me. He is All-Hearing, ever-near.' (50)

if you could but see when they are seized by terror, with nowhere to escape; for they will have been seized from a place nearby. (51)

They will say: 'We do believe in it,' but how could they attain it from so far away, (52)

seeing that they had at first denied it all. They used to cast scorn from far away on what is imperceptible. (53)

A barrier will be set between them and all that they desire, just as was done with their kind before. They were lost in perplexing doubt. (54)

قُلْ إِنَّ رَبِّي يَقْدِفُ بِالْحَقِّ عِلْمَ الْغُيُوبِ

﴿٤٨﴾

قُلْ جَاءَ الْحَقُّ وَمَا يُبَدِيهِ إِلَّا الْبَطْلُ وَمَا

يُعِيدُ

قُلْ إِنْ ضَلَلْتُ فَإِنَّمَا أَضِلُّ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِي
وَإِنْ أَهْتَدَيْتُ فَبِمَا يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ رَبِّي إِنَّهُ

سَمِيعٌ قَرِيبٌ

وَلَوْ تَرَىٰ إِذْ فَرَعُوا فَلَا فَوْتَ وَأُخِذُوا

مِنْ مَّكَانٍ قَرِيبٍ

وَقَالُوا ءَأَمْنَا بِهِ ءِ وَأَنَّى لَهُمُ التَّنَاقُشُ مِنْ

مَّكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ

وَقَدْ كَفَرُوا بِهِ ءِ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَيَقْدِفُونَ

بِالْغَيْبِ مِنْ مَّكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ

وَحِيلَ بَيْنَهُمْ وَبَيْنَ مَا يَشْتَهُونَ كَمَا فُعِلَ
بِأَشْيَاعِهِمْ مِّن قَبْلُ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا فِي شَكٍّ

مُرِيبٍ

Overview

This last passage in the *sūrah* speaks about the idolaters and what they said against the Prophet and the Qur'ān that was revealed to him. It reminds them of

what happened to others like them who denied God's revelations and how His punishment overwhelmed them even though they were stronger, wealthier and more knowledgeable than the Arab unbelievers.

This is followed by several hard notes, each resounding like a hammer. The first one calls on them to stand before God after shedding all influences that prevent them from objectively assessing the call that is addressed to them. The second note invites them to reflect on the real motives of God's Messenger when he repeatedly calls on them to accept God's message and believe in Him, when he has nothing to gain from this. Since he does not ask them for any wages in return, why should they doubt his sincerity and turn away? Further notes follow, each violently shaking people's hearts.

The *sūrah* concludes with a scene from the Day of Judgement that is full of violent movement and which fits perfectly with the preceding strong tones.

A Man Like You

When Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, they say: 'This is but a man who wants to turn you away from what your forefathers worshipped.' They also say: 'This is nothing but an invented falsehood.' Furthermore, when the truth comes to them, the unbelievers will say: 'This is just plain sorcery' Yet never have We given them any books to study, nor have We sent them any warner before you. Those who have gone before them likewise denied the truth. These people have not attained even one tenth of what We gave their predecessors, yet when they denied My messengers, how terrible was My condemnation. (Verses 43-45)

They met the clear truth the Prophet recited to them with a confused legacy of past traditions that had neither a clear basis nor solid foundation. They realized that the simple, clear and consistent truth that was the Qur'ān represented a serious threat to their confused medley of inherited beliefs and traditions. Hence they claimed: "*This is but a man who wants to turn you away from what your forefathers worshipped.*" (Verse 43) They realized, however, that this was not enough. That it contradicted their forefathers' beliefs was not enough to convince everyone. Hence, they also questioned the honesty of the Messenger who delivered God's message: "*They also say: This is nothing but an invented falsehood.*" (Verse 43) Needless to say, what is 'false' must be fabricated, but they wanted to give it stronger emphasis by saying "*This is nothing but an invented falsehood.*" (Verse 43) In other words, they sought to undermine it, raising doubts about its divine source.

Then they moved on to describe the Qur'ān itself: "*When the truth comes to them, the unbelievers will say: 'This is just plain sorcery.'*" (Verse 43) They realized that the Qur'ān is powerful and shakes people's hearts.

Hence, it was not enough to say that it was fabricated. They had to explain its power and so alleged that it was 'plain sorcery.'

With such allegations, one following the other, they sought to divert people's attention from the clear and powerful verses of the Qur'ān. They knew they could not back up their claims, and indeed many of those who made such allegations, i.e. tribal chiefs and those who were influential in society, were certain that the Qur'ān was God's revelation as no human being could have produced anything like it. References have been made earlier in this book to what some of the elders of the Quraysh said in private conversations about Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and the Qur'ān, and what they schemed in order to turn people away from listening to the Qur'ān which captivates people's hearts.

The Qur'ān exposes them as it states that they were not given books in the past so as to evaluate new ones and judge revelations. How can they, then, say that what they now received was neither revelation nor a divine book? How can they say that it was not from God, when they did not have any messengers in the past? Their claims are devoid of substance: *"Yet never have We given them any books to study, nor have We sent them any warner before you."* (Verse 44)

The *sūrah* then touches their hearts by reminding them of the destruction of earlier communities. Those Arabs had not been given one tenth of what those earlier people had of knowledge, wealth and power. When they denied God's messengers, punishment overwhelmed them: *"Those who have gone before them likewise denied the truth. These people have not attained even one tenth of what We gave their predecessors, yet when they denied My messengers, how terrible was My condemnation."* (Verse 45) This condemnation destroyed them all. The Quraysh knew of some of these old communities who suffered God's punishment. Therefore, this brief reminder is sufficient. It comes in the form of a sarcastic question: *'how terrible was My condemnation.'* It is a question put to those who knew the extent of that condemnation.

A Search for the Truth

At this point the Prophet is instructed to call on them in all sincerity to search for the truth, to distinguish between what is false and what is true, and to assess the situation they are in, free of distortion and fabrication:

Say: I counsel you one thing: stand before God, in pairs or singly, and think: there is no madness in your Companion [Muḥammad]. He is only a warner to you of awesome suffering to come. (Verse 46)

This is an invitation to stand before God, in all sincerity, removing from one's mind all personal prejudices, interests, motivations, desires, environmental and social influences. It is an invitation to look at the facts, plain and simple. This invitation seeks to put before their eyes the plain argument of human nature, away from everything that blurs or obscures what is clear and simple. At the same time, it is a simple means to search for truth, discarding all outside influences and being mindful only of God.

There is only *'one thing'*, that ensures that the way is the right one and the method sound. This is to stand before God in all sincerity, looking to satisfy no prejudice, or ensure any personal gain or interest; and to be free of all influences and pressures; and then to think and reflect in complete sincerity. What, then, is this one thing? *"Stand before God, in pairs or singly:"* *'in pairs'* so that one can speak frankly to another and argue with him, without being influenced by the masses and their spontaneous reactions, and *'singly'* so that you can face the facts in a cool and reflective way.

"And think: there is no madness in your Companion [Muhammad]." (Verse 46) You have known him for a long time, and everything you have seen from him points to his wisdom and logic. He does not say anything that could cause anyone to suspect the soundness of his mind. He only says powerful words of wisdom that are plainly stated.

"He is only a warner to you of awesome suffering to come." (Verse 46) This statement shows the suffering to be close at hand, and the warning precedes it by only by one step, hoping to save anyone who listens. It is like an alarm warning of a fire that threatens lives. It urges immediate action to escape inevitable suffering.

Quoting one of the Prophet's Companions, Imam Aḥmad relates the following *ḥadīth*: "The Prophet came out one day and called us three times, then said: 'Do you realize what my position is in relation to you?' People said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' He rejoined: 'My position in relation to you is like that of a community who feared that an enemy might be heading towards them, so they sent one of them to gather intelligence. As he went about his mission, he saw the enemy drawing near, and he moved fast to warn his people. However, he feared that he might be caught by the enemy before he could warn his people. So he waved his robe and shouted: the enemy is nigh; the enemy is nigh.'" In another *ḥadīth*, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "I was sent with my message at the approach of the Last Hour: it could have almost been ahead of me."

That was the first note: powerful and inspiring. It is closely followed by another note: *"Say: If I have ever asked you for any reward, you can keep it. My reward rests with none other than God. He is witness to everything."* (Verse 47) At first the *sūrah* called on them to think carefully about the man delivering the message and the fact that he is

of sound mind, without the faintest trace of madness. Now they are asked to think about the reasons that motivate him to warn them against the painful suffering that may befall them: what is his interest in all this? How can he benefit by it? The Qur'ān orders the Prophet to put this to them in a way that fits with their logic and touches their consciences: *"If I have ever asked you for any reward, you can keep it."* Take it all! Whatever I asked you, you keep for yourselves. This combines sarcasm with guidance and instruction: *"My reward rests with none other than God."* (Verse 47) It is He who has charged me with this message and He gives me my reward for it. It is to Him alone that I look for reward. If a person expects to be rewarded by God, all that others can offer is trifling. *"He is witness to everything."* (Verse 47) He sees and knows everything. Nothing is hidden from Him. He is my witness in whatever I intend, say or do.

The third note is stronger and faster: *"Say: My Lord hurls forth the truth. He has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people's perception."* (Verse 48) What I have given you is the truth, which is powerful in its own right. However, it is God who hurls it forth: who can stand up to His truth? It is like a missile whose trajectory penetrates what otherwise would not be possible to penetrate. The one who hurls it is God, who *'has full knowledge of all that is beyond the reach of people's perception.'* When He hurls it, He is fully aware of what takes place. No goal is hidden from Him and no shield or fortification can stop what He hurls.

The fourth note is just as fast and strong: *"Say: The truth has now come. Falsehood neither creates anything new, nor restores anything."* (Verse 49) This truth has now come, in one of its forms, in the message embodied in the Qur'ān and its straight path. The Prophet is ordered here to declare the coming of the truth, strong, overpowering, rising high and imposing its authority: *"Falsehood neither creates anything new, nor restores anything."* (Verse 49) Falsehood is done for: it has no life of its own and nowhere to function. It is destined for a miserable end. As we listen, we feel as if the end has already been sealed.

This is indeed the case. Ever since the Qur'ān was revealed, the truth has been established on solid foundations. Compared with its clarity and power, falsehood is nothing more than a futile argument which is known to be so. Falsehood may appear to triumph in certain situations, but this is not a victory over the truth, but rather over the people who claim loyalty to it; it's a triumph of people, not principles. Such a victory is temporary, not permanent. The truth remains the same: clear and simple.

The final note says: *"Say: Were I to go astray, I would but go astray to the loss of myself. But if I am on the right path, it is through what my Lord reveals to me. He is All-Hearing, ever-near."* (Verse 50) You will lose nothing if I go astray, because I will be the one accountable for it. If I am following guidance, it is because God has guided me aright when He gave me His revelation. I can produce nothing of that. I only remain subject

to God's will, receiving His bounty.

"He is All-Hearing, ever-near." (Verse 50) This is how those who responded to the Prophet's call and believed in his message felt God's presence. They felt His interaction with them. They felt Him near to them, listening to what they said, taking direct care of their affairs. Their complaints and appeals went directly to Him, and He did not overlook them or give them to someone else to deal with. This made them aware that they lived under God's supervision, close to Him and receiving His care and kindness. This they felt in reality, not as an abstract notion or a representation of an idea. It was real fact: *"He is All-Hearing ever-near."* (Verse 50)

The Final Scene

The *sūrah* concludes with a fast and powerful scene from the Day of Judgement, full of strong movement that goes to and fro between this life and the life to come, as if both are within the same domain:

If you could but see when they are seized by terror, with nowhere to escape; for they will have been seized from a place nearby. They will say: 'We do believe in it,' but how could they attain it from so far away, seeing that they had at first denied it all. They used to cast scorn from far away on what is imperceptible. A barrier will be set between them and all that they desire, just as was done with their kind before. They were lost in perplexing doubt. (Verses 51-54)

"If you could but see." The scene is there to look at. *"When they are seized by terror"* because of the terrible situation they find themselves in. It appears they may try to find a way out, but there is *"nowhere to escape."* They have nowhere to turn: *"they will have been seized from a place nearby."* They could not go far with their miserable attempt.

"They will say: We do believe in it," but it is now too late. For, *"how could they attain it from so far away?"* How can they regain it in their new position when the place to believe is now so far away? It was available to them in their life in this world, but they let the chance go unheeded.

"They had at first denied it all." The matter is over and they cannot try again. *"They used to cast scorn from far away on what is imperceptible."* They did this when the Day of Judgement was beyond their perception. They denied it without a shred of evidence to support their denial. They did so from afar but are now trying to attain faith from a distant place.

"A barrier will be set between them and all that they desire." This is a reference to the faith they wish to have now when it is too late. It cannot spare them the punishment

or save them from the danger they see looming. They are in the same position as earlier communities: *“just as was done with their kind before.”* Those earlier communities also tried to escape God’s punishment when no escape was possible. *“They were lost in perplexing doubt.”* Now they see it for certain after they had been in doubt of it ever happening.

The *sūrah* concludes on this fast, powerful note, with a scene from the Day of Judgement confirming the main issue. This issue is stated at the outset and re-stated here at the end.