

# SŪRAH 80

## `Abasa

(The Frowning)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

*He frowned and turned away (1)*

*when the blind man came to him. (2)*

*How could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. (3)*

*He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him. (4)*

*But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient (5)*

*you were all attention. (6)*

*Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. (7)*

*As to him who comes to you with zeal, (8)*

*and with a feeling of fear in his heart, (9)*

عَبَسَ وَتَوَلَّى ﴿١﴾

أَنْ جَاءَهُ الْأَعْمَى ﴿٢﴾

وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّهُ يَزَكَّى ﴿٣﴾

أَوْ يَذَّكَّرُ فَتَنْفَعَهُ الذِّكْرَى ﴿٤﴾

أَمَّا مَنْ أَسْتَغْنَى ﴿٥﴾

فَأَنْتَ لَهُ تَصَدَّى ﴿٦﴾

وَمَا عَلَيْكَ أَلَّا يَزَكَّى ﴿٧﴾

وَأَمَّا مَنْ جَاءَكَ يَسْعَى ﴿٨﴾

وَهُوَ يَخْشَى ﴿٩﴾

*him you ignore. (10)*

*No indeed! This is an admonition. (11)*

*Let him who will, bear it in mind. (12)*

*It is written on honoured pages, (13)*

*exalted, purified, (14)*

*by the hands of noble and devout scribes. (15-16)*

*Perish man! How ungrateful he is! (17)*

*Of what did God create him? (18)*

*Of a drop of sperm. He created him and proportioned him. (19)*

*He makes his path smooth for him. (20)*

*He then causes him to die and puts him in his grave. (21)*

*He will surely bring him back to life when He pleases. (22)*

*But by no means has man fulfilled His bidding. (23)*

فَأَنْتَ عَنْهُ تَلَهَّى ﴿١٠﴾

كَلَّا إِنَّهَا تَذِكِرَةٌ ﴿١١﴾

فَمَنْ شَاءَ ذَكَرْهُ ﴿١٢﴾

فِي صُحُفٍ مُّكْرَمَةٍ ﴿١٣﴾

مَّرْفُوعَةٍ مُّطَهَّرَةٍ ﴿١٤﴾

بِأَيْدِي سَفَرَةٍ ﴿١٥﴾

كِرَامٍ بَرَرَةٍ ﴿١٦﴾

قُتِلَ إِلَّا نَسْنُ مَا أَكْفَرَهُ ﴿١٧﴾ مِنْ

أَيِّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ ﴿١٨﴾

مِنْ نُّطْفَةٍ خَلَقَهُ فَقَدَرَهُ ﴿١٩﴾

ثُمَّ السَّبِيلَ يَسْرَهُ ﴿٢٠﴾

ثُمَّ أَمَاتَهُ فَأَقْبَرَهُ ﴿٢١﴾

ثُمَّ إِذَا شَاءَ أَنْشَرَهُ ﴿٢٢﴾

كَلَّا لَمَّا يَقْضِ مَا أَمَرَهُ ﴿٢٣﴾

*Let man reflect on the food he eats: (24)*

*how We pour down the rain in torrents, (25)*

*and cleave the earth in fissures; (26)*

*how We bring forth the corn, (27)*

*the grapes, and the fresh vegetation, (28)*

*the olive and the palm, (29)*

*the dense-treed gardens, (30)*

*the fruit-trees and the green pastures, (31)*

*for you and your cattle to delight in. (32)*

*But when the stunning blast is sounded, (33)*

*on that day everyone will forsake his brother, (34)*

*his mother and his father, (35)*

*his wife and his children: (36)*

*for each one of them will on that day have enough  
preoccupations of his own. (37)*

فَلْيَنْظُرِ الْإِنْسَانُ إِلَى طَعَامِهِ ۚ ﴿٢٤﴾

أَنَا صَبَبْنَا الْمَاءَ صَبًّا ﴿٢٥﴾

ثُمَّ شَقَقْنَا الْأَرْضَ شَقًّا ﴿٢٦﴾

فَأَنْبَتْنَا فِيهَا حَبًّا ﴿٢٧﴾

وَعِنَبًا وَقَضْبًا ﴿٢٨﴾

وَزَيْتُونًا وَخَلًّا ﴿٢٩﴾

وَحَدَاقٍ غُلْبًا ﴿٣٠﴾

وَفَيْكِهِةً وَأَبًّا ﴿٣١﴾

مَتَعًا لَكُمْ وَلِأَنْعَمِكُمْ ﴿٣٢﴾

فَإِذَا جَاءَتِ الصَّاحَّةُ ﴿٣٣﴾

يَوْمَ يَفِرُّ الْمَرْءُ مِنْ أَخِيهِ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَأُمِّهِ وَأَبِيهِ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَصَحْبَتِيهِ وَبَنِيهِ ﴿٣٦﴾

لِكُلِّ أَمْرٍ مِّنْهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ شَأْنٌ يُغْنِيهِ ﴿٣٧﴾

*Some faces on that day shall be beaming, (38)*

وُجُوهُ يَوْمَئِذٍ مُّسْفِرَةٌ ﴿٣٨﴾

*smiling and joyful. (39)*

ضَاحِكَةٌ مُّسْتَبْشِرَةٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

*Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, (40)*

وَوُجُوهُ يَوْمَئِذٍ عَلَيْهِمَا غَبْرَةٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

*veiled with darkness. (41)*

تَرَهَّقَهَا قَتْرَةٌ ﴿٤١﴾

*These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin. (42)*

أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرَةُ الْفَجْرَةُ ﴿٤٢﴾

## Overview

This *sūrah* discusses certain principles of grave importance. It is unique in its images and the impressions it leaves. Furthermore, it combines its marked spiritual effect with superb musical rhythm.

Its first part treats a certain incident which took place in the early days of Islam. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was busy with a few Quraysh dignitaries, explaining to them the Islamic message, when Ibn Umm Maktūm, a poor blind man, interrupted him. Unaware that the Prophet was busy, the blind man asked him repeatedly to teach him some verses from the Qur'ān. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was not very pleased at this interruption. He frowned and turned away from Ibn Umm Maktūm. This *sūrah* opens by criticizing the Prophet's behaviour in this incident. It lays down clearly the values and principles upon which Islamic society is founded and states the true nature of the message of Islam. "He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him. How could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him. But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient you were all attention. Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. As to him who comes to you with zeal, and with a feeling of fear in his heart, him you ignore. No indeed! This is an admonition. Let him who will, bear it in mind. It is written on honoured pages, exalted, purified, by the hands of noble and devout scribes." (Verses 1-16)

Man's ungrateful attitude towards God and his denial of Him come up for discussion in the second part. Here man is reminded of his origin; how his life is made easy; how God determines his death and resurrection; and how, after all this, he fails to carry out His orders: "Perish man! How ungrateful he is! Of what did God

*create him? Of a drop of sperm. He created him and proportioned him. He makes his path smooth for him. He then causes him to die and puts him in his grave. He will surely bring him to life when He pleases. But by no means has man fulfilled His bidding.”* (Verses 17-23)

The third part directs man to reflect upon things of immediate concern to him, namely, his food. Absolute perfection of creation is obvious in the provision of food for man as it is obvious in the creation, proportioning and development of man himself: *“Let man reflect on the food he eats: how We pour down the rain in torrents, and cleave the earth in fissures; how We bring forth the corn, the grapes, and the fresh vegetation, the olive and the palm, the dense-treed gardens, the fruit-trees and the green pastures, for you and your cattle to delight in.”* (Verses 24-32)

The final part touches upon “the stunning blast” and its fearful effects. The very sound of the words gives the impression of horror. It makes people unaware of anything around them. Their faces, however, provide a lucid account of what is happening to them. *“But when the stunning blast is sounded, on that day everyone will forsake his brother, his mother and his father, his wife and his children: for each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own. Some faces on that day shall be beaming, smiling and joyful. Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, veiled with darkness. These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin.”* (Verses 33-42)

A quick preview of the *sūrah* leaves a profound effect on the reader. Its message and its implications are so powerful that no human heart can avoid being deeply touched, even by a quick perusal of it. In the following pages we will attempt to illustrate some of the far-reaching effects certain parts of the *sūrah* have and which may not be immediately apparent.

### **The Basis of Social Values**

*He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him. How could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him. But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient you were all attention. Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. As to him who comes to you with zeal and with a feeling of fear in his heart, him you ignore. No indeed! This is an admonition. Let him who will, bear it in mind. It is written on honoured pages, exalted, purified, by the hands of noble and devout scribes.* (Verses 1-16)

The divine instructions which followed this incident are much more far reaching than appears at first sight. They are indeed a miracle. These instructions, the principles they seek to establish and the change they aim to accomplish in human

society are, perhaps, the most important miracle of Islam. But the instructions are made here as a direct comment on a single incident. It is part of the Qur'ānic method to make use of isolated incidents in order to lay down fundamental and permanent principles. The principles established here and their practical effects, as seen in the early Islamic society, are indeed the essence of Islam. They constitute the truth which Islam, and all divine religions that preceded it, seek to plant in human life.

The point at issue here is not merely how an individual or a class of people should be treated. This is indeed the significance of the Qur'ānic comment on the incident itself, taken in isolation. The heart of the matter is, however, something far more important. It is: how should people evaluate everything in their lives? From where should they derive the values and standards necessary for such an evaluation?

What the divine instructions contained in the opening part of the *sūrah* seek to establish is that people must base their values and standards on divine considerations, laid down by God. No social circumstances, traditions or practices, nor any concept of life derived from them should be allowed either to encumber or determine these values and standards. There is no denying the difficulties involved in conducting human life on the basis of values and standards laid down by the Divine Being, free from the pressure of all worldly considerations.

If we consider the pressure of society on the individual's feelings and attitudes, and the weight of considerations to be taken into account such as traditional values, family and social ties, as well as the values that prevail in one's own environment, we can appreciate the difficulty of carrying out these divine instructions. Our appreciation of such difficulty is even greater when we remember that in order to convey it to people, Muḥammad himself (peace be upon him) needed this special directive, or rather censure. Reference to this is sufficient to convey the gravity of the matter. For Muḥammad (peace be upon him) attained greater heights of sublimity and greatness than any man can aspire to. Yet the fact that special instructions were required for him to convey a certain principle makes that principle greater than greatness, subliminally unique.

This is, indeed, a true description of the principle established here, namely that mankind should derive their values and standards from the Divine Being, after they have freed themselves from the pressure of their social set-up with all its values and standards.

The basic standard God has, through His prophets, commanded mankind to adopt is: *"The noblest of you in God's sight is he who fears Him most."* (49: 13) This is the standard by which all values, traditions and practices should be evaluated. It establishes a purely divine criterion which has nothing to do with any worldly considerations. But people live on earth and establish a multitude of ties, each having

its own weight and gravity. They have considerations of family relations, power and wealth. The distribution or concentration of these creates certain practical and economic results which determine the position of every man, woman or class of people in relation to others. Thus some acquire a position superior to that of others, in worldly standards.

When Islam declares, *"The noblest of you in God's sight is he who fears Him most,"* it simply indicates that all these values and considerations are void, however important they seem to us. It substitutes for them a single value derived directly from God. Moreover, it is the only value acceptable to Him. The incident depicted here serves to establish this value in an actual situation. Thus the essential principle is established: the scales recognized are those of God; the supreme value which should govern human life is the divine one. Hence, the Muslim community must abandon all human values, standards, traditions and concepts.

### **Who Takes Priority?**

Let us now consider the incident itself. Ibn Umm Maktūm, a poor blind man, comes to the Prophet (peace be upon him) at a time when he is busy with a group of the most powerful and influential personalities in Makkah, including ʿUtbah and Shaybah, sons of Rabīʿah, Abū Jahl, ʿAmr ibn Hishām, Umayyah ibn Khalaf, al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah. Also present is al-ʿAbbās ibn ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet's uncle. It is a crucial meeting. The Prophet explains the message of Islam to them and hopes for a favourable response. He feels that the cause of Islam stands to gain much by such a response. Islam is facing a hard time in Makkah. Those very people have been using all their wealth, power and influence to check its advancement, and stop people from accepting it. They have managed to freeze Islam in Makkah and hinder its progress elsewhere. Outside Makkah, the other tribes have adopted an attitude of wait and see. For they feel this to be their best stand in a society which gives paramount importance to the tribe's attitude. They are aware that against Muḥammad, the Prophet of Islam, stand his own kinsmen, who, theoretically speaking, should be his most ardent supporters.

It must be emphasized that when we say that the Prophet is busy with these people, he has no personal interest in them. He is simply working for Islam. Acceptance of Islam by these influential and powerful people means the removal of all impediments from the path of Islam in Makkah. It also ensures for Islam the freedom to progress in the rest of Arabia.

While this crucial meeting is in progress, a poor man comes and interrupts the Prophet (peace be upon him) saying: 'Messenger of God! Teach me some verses of what God has taught you.' Although he could sense that the Prophet is busy, he

repeats his request several times. The Prophet dislikes this interruption. His face, which remains unseen by the blind man, expresses his aversion. He frowns and looks away from the poor man. Indeed, the Prophet's motive has been his great enthusiasm to win badly needed support for Islam.

Here, heaven intervenes to say the final word in this matter and to put landmarks along the whole length of the road the Islamic message should take. Thus we are given the scales by which to weigh our values regardless of all other considerations, including those which may appear to serve the interests of Islam, as seen by human beings, including Muḥammad, the greatest of all mankind. This is why the Prophet who has been described elsewhere in the Qur'ān as having "*great and sublime nature*", (68: 4) is strongly censured by God, the Most High. It is the only point in the Qur'ān where the Prophet, who is very dear to God, is addressed by the term *kallā*, [inadequately translated as "no indeed"]. *Kallā* is a term of censure and an order to desist. This is because the contravened principle is central to this religion.

The reproof is made in a unique style, which defies translation into ordinary language. Written language has to apply certain rules and observe some well defined norms. These would dampen the effects of the very vivid style which is characterized in this instance by its rapid touches and short phrases which are more like reflex actions and instant pictures.

*"He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him."* (Verses 1-2) The use of the third person here is significant. It suggests that the subject matter is so distasteful to God that He does not like to confront His beloved Messenger with it. This in itself is a gesture of mercy and kindness to the Prophet. Thus, the action which necessitated the reproof has been disguised with great subtlety. The reproof then takes the form of direct address, starting somewhat mildly: *"How could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him."* (Verses 3-4) How could you tell but that a great gain might have been made? That is to say that the poor, blind man who came to you seeking light might have profited by God's reminder and set about purifying himself. His heart might have been brightened by God's light and he might have become like a lighthouse, guiding people to safety. This is exactly what happens every time a human being genuinely accepts the faith. It is, indeed, what carries real weight on God's scales.

The reproof then takes a stronger tone. It wonders at the action in question: *"But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient you were all attention. Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. As to him who comes to you with zeal and with a feeling of fear in his heart, him you ignore."* (Verses 5-10) The one who pretends that he can do without you and your religion, light, goodness and purity is the one who receives your attention! You go to him yourself when he turns away, and you are at pains to

try to persuade him to accept the faith. *"Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed."* (Verse 7) What is it to you if he chooses to remain in filth? You are not answerable for his sins. He will not secure your victory. *"As to him who comes to you with zeal,"* out of his own free will, *"and with a feeling of fear in his heart,"* groping his way with outstretched hands, fearful of pitfalls, *"him you ignore."* What a strong description of not paying due attention to the man who came to seek right guidance.

The tone becomes even stronger and the reproof then takes the form of outright censure: *kallā* or "no indeed", this must never be the case.

Then follows a statement affirming that Islam is an honourable and noble call. It has no need for anybody's support. It cares only for the one who accepts it on its merits, regardless of his position in human society! *"This is an admonition. Let him who will, bear it in mind. It is written on honoured pages, exalted, purified, by the hands of noble and devout scribes."* (Verses 11-16) It is a noble and honoured message in every respect. Its pages are purified and exalted, entrusted to 'noble and devout' angel ambassadors who convey it to those human beings selected to convey it to their people. It is also dignified. No one who pretends that he is self-sufficient need be approached about accepting this message of Islam. It is only for those who know its value and seek to be purified by it.

So this is the divine standard by which all values and considerations should be evaluated, and all people should be judged. This is also God's word, which is the final judgement in all situations.

But where and when was this laid down? The answer is in Makkah when the Muslims were few in number, and Islam was the weaker side in an unequal battle. The attempt to win a group of powerful and influential men was not motivated by any personal interest. Ignoring the poor blind man was not occasioned by any personal consideration. All was for the sake of the new message. But the message itself calls for the adoption and application of this very standard and these very values. For Islam can never acquire any real power or achieve any true victory except through the establishment of these values and standards.

As stated earlier, the essential principle involved is far greater and wider in scope than this single incident. It is that humanity should derive its values and standards from God, not from any worldly source. *"The noblest of you in God's sight is he who fears Him most."* (49: 13) Indeed, the one whom God considers noble is the one who deserves to be attended to and looked after, even if he is completely lacking in family relations, power and wealth, assets highly valued by worldly standards. These and all other worldly values are worthless when they part ways with faith and fear of God. This is the great issue which divine instruction in this *sūrah* seeks to settle.

## **A Reproach and a Principle**

The Prophet was deeply touched by these divine instructions and by God's reproof. Throughout his life, he worked tirelessly for the establishment of this great principle in Islamic society.

The first action he took was to announce these instructions and the reproof in public. This in itself is something very great. Taken from any point of view, no person other than a messenger from God would have announced in public that he had been censured so strongly for his slip. It would have been enough for any other great man to recognize his mistake and to avoid any repetition in the future. With God's Messenger however, things acquire different proportions. No person other than God's Messenger could have had the courage, in such circumstances as Islam was facing, to make this declaration, challenging with it the masters of the Quraysh, who were very proud of their lineage, power and wealth.

These were, at the time, the only considerations of any importance in Makkan society, where people wondered: "*Why was this Qur'ān not revealed to some great man from the two towns?*" (43: 31) They were, of course, aware of Muḥammad's lineage, and that he was a descendant of the noblest family in Arabia. His ancestors were masters of Makkah. They nonetheless asked the question because Muḥammad himself did not occupy a position of power in Makkah before his prophethood.

In such a society, at that particular time, such a great principle could never have been the product of any earthly factor, or factors. It could only have had one source: God. No power could have ensured it other than divine will. Islamic society received it directly from the Prophet. Thereafter it became well established acquiring depth and momentum, which helped it to continue its operation in the Islamic community over the centuries.

The establishment of this principle was, indeed, a rebirth of humanity. It was greater in importance than the birth of the first man. Man was able to free himself from all worldly bonds and standards, and substitute for them a set of heavenly values independent of all earthly considerations. These new values were soon understood and accepted by everybody. Soon the grave matter which had required a special directive to be issued to Muḥammad, God's Messenger, and an order to him to deliver it in detail, became the operative principle of the Islamic conscience and the basic code of Islamic society. It remained so for a very long time.

Perhaps we cannot fully appreciate the true nature of this rebirth of humanity, because we cannot conceive the practical significance of our release from the pressures of social environment, values, standards, traditions and practices. In order to appreciate the magnitude of these pressures we have only to remember that advocates of a materialistic view of history consider that the economic condition of a

certain society determines its beliefs, arts, literature, laws and customs, as well as its view of life and its destiny. What a narrow and mistaken view of man's true nature! It was with this basic principle that Islam accomplished the miracle of the rebirth of man.

### **Instilling a New Value**

Since then the values attached to this great principle have become supreme. Their ascendancy, however, was by no means easy, neither in the Arabian society, nor in the minds of the Muslims themselves. Through his actions and directives, coloured by the profound effect the divine instructions in this *sūrah* left on him, the Prophet was able to implant this basic Islamic principle into his Companions' consciences and into the life of the Islamic society he had established. He looked after his new plant with unfailing care until it had established deep roots and spread its branches wide. Hence why this principle remained for centuries the guiding principle of the Muslim community.

After this incident the Prophet always welcomed Ibn Umm Maktūm warmly. Whenever he met him, he said: "Welcome to the man for whose sake my Lord reproved me." Twice, he appointed him as his deputy governor in Madinah when he himself had to be away.

The Prophet married his own cousin Zaynab bint Jaḥsh of the Asad clan to his former slave Zayd ibn Ḥārithah. Marriage has always been a very delicate issue, and it was particularly so in the Arabian Peninsula at that time. The Prophet's motive was to deal a deadly blow to all the social values and standards based on worldly considerations.

Soon after the Makkan Muslims settled in Madinah the Prophet established a bond of brotherhood between every two Muslims. He made his own uncle, Ḥamzah, a brother to his former slave, Zayd; and Khālid ibn Ruwayḥah of the Khatham tribe and Bilāl, the former slave, were made brothers.

He appointed Zayd as Commander-in-Chief of the Muslim army which fought the Battle of Mu'tah. Zayd's first deputy was the Prophet's own cousin Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib. The second deputy was ʿAbdullāh ibn Rawāḥah of the *Anṣār*. A number of well-known personalities from Makkah and Madinah were in that army of three thousand men, including the most famous Muslim commander of all time, Khālid ibn al-Walīd. The Prophet himself went out to bid them farewell. It is also worth mentioning that Zayd and his two deputies were killed during that battle.

The Prophet's last action was to appoint Usāmah ibn Zayd, a young man, as commander of an army he had raised to fight the Byzantines. A large number of

early Muslims, from both the *Muhājirīn* (Makkans) and the *Anṣār* (Madinans), including his two most distinguished Companions and immediate successors, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, as well as his own relative Saʿd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, one of the very earliest people to embrace Islam, were in that army. Some people, however, grumbled about the fact that Usāmah had been made commander, young as he was. ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿUmar takes up the story: “When some people complained about giving the army command to Usāmah, the Prophet said: ‘You are deprecating his appointment as commander in the same way as you previously deprecated his father’s appointment. By God, his father was a worthy commander, and one of the dearest people to me. Usāmah is also one of the dearest people to me.’” [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

Some people spoke in derogatory terms about the Prophet’s Companion, Salmān, the Persian. They took a narrow nationalistic view and spoke of the inferiority of the Persians in relation to the Arabs. The Prophet took a decisive step to eradicate such narrow tendencies. He declared: “Salmān belongs to the Prophet’s family.” [Related by al-Ṭabarānī and al-Ḥākim.] This statement transcends all lineage, tribal and national considerations, which carried immense weight in Arabia.

Furthermore a disagreement occurred between Abū Dharr and Bilāl, two of the Prophet’s highly esteemed Companions. In a fit of temper, Abū Dharr called Bilāl “the son of a black woman”. The Prophet was extremely upset at this. He rebuked Abū Dharr saying: “That is too much, Abū Dharr. He who has a white mother has no advantage which makes him better than the son of a black mother.” [Related by Ibn al-Mubārak with slightly different wording.] Thus the Prophet put the dispute into its proper perspective. What distinguishes people is their faith, not their colour. This is the Islamic criterion, which is so unlike the worldly criteria of *jāhiliyyah* societies. The Prophet’s rebuke had a profound effect on Abū Dharr, who was very sensitive. He wanted to atone for his mistake, so he put his head on the ground swearing that he would not raise it until Bilāl had put his foot over it.

Bilāl achieved a position of great distinction in Islamic society. What made his achievement possible was the application of heaven’s values. Abū Hurayrah related that the Prophet once said to Bilāl: “Tell me, which of your actions do you hope to be the most rewarding for you, for last night I heard your footsteps as you drew near to me in heaven?” Bill answered: “I do not think that since becoming a Muslim I have ever done anything which I hope to be more rewarding than that every time I perform ablution at any time of the day or night I pray whatever I can.” [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

Once ʿAmmār ibn Yāsir asked for permission to see the Prophet. The Prophet said: “Let him come in. Welcome to the cleansed, good man.” [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] He also said of him: “Ammār is full of faith to the top of his head.” [Related by al-

Nasāʾī.] Ḥudhayfah related that the Prophet said: “I do not know how long I shall be with you, so accept the leadership of the two who will follow me [and he pointed to Abū Bakr and ʿUmar], and follow ʿAmmār’s guidance. Believe whatever Ibn Masʿūd tells you.” [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]

Ibn Masʿūd was so close to the Prophet that any stranger in Madinah would have thought him a member of the Prophet’s household. Abū Mūsā said: “I came to Madinah from the Yemen with my brother. For quite some time we were under the impression that Ibn Masʿūd and his mother belonged to the Prophet’s household, an impression we had formed because of the frequency of their comings and goings from the Prophet’s homes, and their long companionship with him.” [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim and al-Tirmidhī.]

The Prophet himself sought the hand of an *Anṣārī* woman in marriage for Julaybib, a former slave. “Her parents were reluctant to sanction such a marriage. She, however, said to them: ‘Do you mean to reject the Prophet’s suit? If the Prophet thinks that this man is suitable for us, then let this marriage go through.’ So they gave their consent.” [Related by Aḥmad.]

Soon after his marriage, Julaybib took part in an armed expedition. After the battle, which resulted in a victory for the Muslims, the Prophet asked his Companions: “Is anybody missing?” They named a few people. He repeated the question and they named a few others. He asked the same question for the third time and they answered in the negative. He said: “I think Julaybib is missing.” They looked for him and found his body next to seven enemy soldiers whom he had killed. The Prophet went over, stood near him, and said: “He killed seven before he himself was slain. This man belongs to me and I belong to him.” He lifted him into his arms until a grave had been dug. He then put him in his grave. The tradition does not say whether Julaybib was given a death wash or not. [Related by Muslim.]

### **The Principle in Practice**

With this divine instruction and the Prophet’s guidance, the rebirth of humanity was accomplished in a unique manner. Thus a new society came into existence, which imported its values and standards from heaven, and lived on earth, unhampered by earthly restrictions. This is the greatest miracle of Islam; a miracle which could not have happened except by God’s will, and through the Prophet’s actions. This miracle is, in itself, proof that Islam is a religion revealed by God, and that the man who conveyed it to us was His Messenger.

It was divine will that leadership of the Islamic society, after the Prophet’s death, should be assigned successively to Abū Bakr and ʿUmar, the two who were most keenly aware of the true nature of Islam and most vividly impressed by the Prophet’s

guidance. Indeed, Abū Bakr and ʿUmar surpassed everyone else in their love for the Prophet and determination to follow very closely in his footsteps.

Abū Bakr was well aware of the Prophet's object in assigning the army's command to Usāmah. His first action after he became Caliph was to send the army raised by the Prophet and commanded by Usāmah on its original mission. Abū Bakr, the Caliph, went along with the army to the outskirts of Madinah to bid it farewell. It was a strange scene: ʿUsāmah on his horse while Abū Bakr walked. Usāmah, the young commander, felt embarrassed that he should ride while the Caliph, an old man, should walk. He begged Abū Bakr to ride, or else he would walk alongside him. Abū Bakr refused, saying: "You shall not walk and I shall not ride. It will do me no harm to walk for an hour if my walking is for God's cause."

Abū Bakr felt that he needed ʿUmar to help him shoulder the responsibilities of government. ʿUmar, however, was a soldier in Usāmah's army, so he had to ask Usāmah's permission to discharge him. Hence, the Caliph, the Head of State, said to his army commander: "If you think you can spare ʿUmar to help me, then please do so!" What a request! It is the height of magnanimity, attainable only with God's will, by individuals well taught by God's Messenger.

A few years later ʿUmar assumed the leadership of the Muslim community, as its second Caliph. One of his actions was to appoint Ammār ibn Yāsir, who formerly belonged to the lower classes of Makkah, as governor of the Kufah region in Iraq.

One day a number of dignitaries from the Quraysh, including Şuhayl ibn ʿAmr and Abū Sufyān, sought to see ʿUmar. He let them wait and admitted first Şuhayb and Bilāl, two former slaves, on the grounds of their early acceptance of Islam and their taking part at the Battle of Badr. Abū Sufyān was angry and said: "I have never seen a day like this. These slaves are admitted and we are kept waiting!" Şuhayl, who was more keenly aware of the true nature of Islam, said: "Gentlemen! I see in your faces an expression of what you feel, but I say to you that if you are angry you should be angry with yourselves. Both they and you were called upon to accept Islam at the same time. They were quick to respond but you were slow. What will you do if on the Day of Judgement you find that they are included among the chosen and you are left behind?"

ʿUmar allotted Usāmah ibn Zayd a larger share of the spoils of war than he allotted his own son Abdullāh. When ʿAbdullāh queried his father's decision ʿUmar said: "Son, the Prophet used to love Zayd more than he loved your father, and he loved Usāmah more than he loved you. What I did was simply to attach to the Prophet's love higher value than I attached to my own love." As he said this ʿUmar was, of course, fully aware that the Prophet measured his love by divine standards.

ʿUmar sent Ammār to question Khālid ibn al-Walīd, the victorious commander of the Muslim army who belonged to a noble family, about certain charges. ʿAmmār tied Khālid’s robes round his neck. Some reports add that he tied Khālid’s hands throughout the interrogation with his own turban. When the investigation proved Khālid’s innocence, ʿAmmār untied him and put Khālid’s turban back on his head with his own hands. Khālid did not object to this treatment. He knew that ʿAmmār was one of the Prophet’s early Companions. Khālid also knew what the Prophet used to say about ʿAmmār, which we have already quoted.

It was ʿUmar himself who used to say about Abū Bakr and Bilāl: “Abū Bakr is our master and he freed our master.” This refers to the days when Bilāl was Umayyah ibn Khalaf’s slave, who tortured him mercilessly in order to turn him away from Islam. Abū Bakr bought Bilāl from Umayyah and set him free. This former slave, Bilāl, is described by ʿUmar, the Caliph, as “our master”.

ʿUmar was the one who said, “Had Sālim, the former slave of Abū Ḥudhayfah, been alive I would have nominated him to succeed me.” This statement must be taken against the background that ʿUmar did not nominate anyone to succeed him, not even ʿUthmān, ʿAlī, Ṭalhah or al-Zubayr. He only appointed a consultative committee of six, so that the next Caliph should be chosen from among them.

ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib sent ʿAmmār and al-Ḥasan, his own son, to Kūfah to seek its people’s support against ʿĀʾishah [may God be pleased with her]. His message said, “I know that she is your Prophet’s wife in this life and in the life to come. You are, however, faced with a test which will prove whether you follow your Prophet or his wife.” [Related by al-Bukhārī.] The people of Kūfah accepted his case against ʿĀʾishah, mother of the believers and Abū Bakr’s daughter, [may God be pleased with them all].

Bilāl was asked by his brother in Islam, Abū Ruwayḥah of Khatham, to speak on his behalf to the family of a Yemeni woman he wished to marry. Bilāl did so, saying: “I am Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ and this is my brother, Abū Ruwayḥah. He lacks good manners and firm belief. You may please yourselves whether you give him your daughter in marriage or not.” He did not deceive them by hiding the truth, nor did he behave as a mediator, unmindful of his accountability to God. The family concerned were pleased with such honesty. They married their daughter to Abū Ruwayḥah, the noble Arab whose advocate was Bilāl, a former slave from Abyssinia.

This fundamental principle remained firmly entrenched throughout Islamic society for centuries, despite the various factors working for a setback. ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿAbbās was always remembered with his slave ʿIkrimah, while ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿUmar was remembered with his slave Nāfi`. Anas ibn Mālik was always associated with his slave Ibn Sīrīn, as was Abū Hurayrah with his slave ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn

Hurmuz.<sup>2</sup> In the generation that followed, the most distinguished men of learning were al-Ḥasan in Baṣrah, Mujāhid ibn Jabr, ʿAṭāʾ ibn Rabāḥ and Ṭāwūs ibn Kaysān. In Egypt, Yazīd ibn Abī Ḥabīb, a black slave from Dengla, was the grand Mufti [holder of the highest position of religious authority] during the reign of ʿUmar ibn ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz.<sup>3</sup>

This divine standard continued to win great respect for the pious and God-fearing, even when they were deprived of all things to which worldly considerations attached great value. It is only in comparatively recent times that this divine standard has ceased to operate. For now the whole world is overwhelmed by a tide of *jāhiliyyah*, wherein there is a total disregard for divine values. In the United States, the leading Western country, a man is valued according to the size of his bank balance. In the Soviet Union,<sup>4</sup> where Communism, the ruling philosophy, looks at life as no more than matter, and a man is worth less than a machine. The land of Islam, on the other hand, has sunk back *into jāhiliyyah*. The creeds of *jāhiliyyah*, which Islam had rooted out, have now been revived. The divine standard has been abandoned in favour of materialistic values which are completely alien to Islam.

The only hope that remains is that the Islamic revivalist movement will rescue mankind once again from the clutches of *jāhiliyyah* and bring about humanity's second rebirth, similar to the one announced by the decisive verses at the opening of this *sūrah*.

### **Man's Arrogant Attitude**

The second part of the *sūrah* wonders at man's conceit as he turns his back on the true faith. It wonders at how man forgets his humble origins, and how he remains totally oblivious of the care God has taken of him and His complete power over every stage of his existence, both in this life and in the hereafter. In his ingratitude man fulfils nothing of his duties towards his Lord, who has created and sustained him and who will hold him to account for his actions: "*Perish man! How ungrateful he is! Of what did God create him? Of a drop of sperm. He created him and proportioned him. He makes his path smooth for him. He then causes him to die and puts him in his grave. He will surely bring him back to life when He pleases. But by no means has man fulfilled His bidding.*" (Verses 17-23)

"*Perish man!*" He deserves to die. The mode of expression employed also adds to

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<sup>2</sup> All these were scholars of the highest calibre, with the four mentioned first being Companions of the Prophet. The others passed on their scholarship to the succeeding generations. — Editor's note.

<sup>3</sup> These details are based on information given by A.H. al-Guindi in his book *Abū Ḥanīfah*, Cairo.

<sup>4</sup> The author is referring here to the former Soviet Union, which was one of the two superpowers in his own time. — Editor's note.

the sense of horror excited by this abominable attitude. *"How ungrateful he is!"* He strongly denies the claims of his creation. Had he been mindful of these claims he would have been humbly grateful to his Lord who created him. He would not have shown such conceit and he would have remembered the end he is certain to meet.

Indeed, how can man be so arrogant and conceited? What are his origins: *"Of what did God create him?"* (Verse 18) His is a very humble origin, worthless indeed except for God's grace. *"Of a drop of sperm. He created him and proportioned him."* (Verse 19) A drop of sperm of no significance; that is man's beginning. God, the Creator, then proportioned him. The Arabic verb used here *qaddara* denotes precise and meticulous proportioning. It also denotes bestowing weight and value. This is how man has been created, honoured and raised from his humble origins to a high position in which the whole world has been put at his disposal.

*"He makes his path smooth for him."* (Verse 20) The path of life has been smoothed for him. He has also been given the ability to recognize and follow the right path.

When the journey of life is over, when every living being meets its inevitable end, *"He then causes him to die and puts him in his grave."* (Verse 21) So in the end the case is just the same as in the beginning: man submits to his Lord who brings him to life when He wills and ends his life when He wills. He honours him by making the earth his last abode, rather than leaving him as food for wild animals. He has made it part of human nature to bury the dead. When the time He has appointed arrives, He brings him back to life for the reckoning: *"He will surely bring him back to life when He pleases."* (Verse 22) So man will not be left without reward or retribution.

But has man prepared himself for this reckoning? It would seem that *"by no means has man fulfilled His bidding."* (Verse 23) Mankind as a whole, from the very first to the very last, will not have fulfilled God's bidding. This is the inference of the Arabic expression used here, *lammā Yaqḍī mā amarah*. Man will always remain negligent of his duties. He will never remember his origins and creation as he should, nor will he thank and praise his Creator who has guided and looked after him as He should be thanked and praised. Man does not prepare himself in this life for the day of reward and retribution. This applies to humanity as a whole. In addition, the great majority of people arrogantly turn their backs on divine guidance.

### **Useful Reflection**

Next, the *sūrah* invites man to reflect upon his food and that of his cattle, which is one of the great many things God has provided for him: *"Let man reflect on the food he eats: how We pour down the rain in torrents, and cleave the earth in fissures; how We bring forth the corn, the grapes, and the fresh vegetation, the olive and the palm, the dense-treed gardens, the fruit trees and the green pastures, for you and your cattle to delight in."* (Verses

24-32)

This is the full story of man's food, related here stage by stage. Let man reflect: does he play any significant role in it? Can he determine or change its course? Indeed, the same hand which has brought him to life has brought forth the food which sustains him.

*"Let man reflect on the food he eats."* (Verse 24) Food, the first necessity of human life, deserves a few thoughts. It is made readily available day after day. But behind all this is a simple and wonderful story. Yet such simplicity makes man forget its wonder. Nevertheless, it is as miraculous as man's own creation. Every step is determined by the Supreme Will that creates man.

*"How we pour down the rain in torrents."* (Verse 25) The pouring rain is a fact known to every human being, wherever he lives, regardless of his level of experience or knowledge. It is, therefore, taken up in this address to all human beings. As man's knowledge has increased, he is now able to appreciate the meaning of this verse more fully. He knows that something happened a long time before the daily phenomenon of rain came to be established. Perhaps the theory closest to the truth concerning the formation of the oceans, whose water evaporates and then returns is rain, claims that they were formed somewhere above the earth and were then poured down in torrents. A contemporary scientist says on this subject:

If it is true that the temperature of the earth at the time of its separation from the sun was about 12,000 degrees, or that of the surface of the sun, then all the elements were free and, therefore, no chemical combination of importance could exist. Gradually, as the earth, or the earth-forming fragments, cooled, combinations would take place and a nucleus of the world as we know it is formed. Oxygen and hydrogen could not combine until the temperature was reduced to 4,000 degrees Fahrenheit. At this point these elements would rush together and form water. What we know as the atmosphere must have been enormous at that time. All the oceans were in the sky and all those elements not combined were in the air as gases. Water, having formed in the outer atmosphere, fell towards the earth but could not reach it, as the temperature near the earth was higher than it was thousands of miles out. Of course, the time came when the deluge would reach the earth only to fly up again as steam. With whole oceans in the air, floods that would result as cooling progressed are beyond calculation.<sup>5</sup>

Although we do not claim any definite link between this theory and this particular Qur'anic statement, we acknowledge that the theory gives us a better understanding

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<sup>5</sup> A. Cressy Morrison, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, London, 1962, pp. 25-26.

of what it means and the period of history it refers to, i.e., the period of water pouring down in torrents. The theory may be proved right. On the other hand, other theories may be put forward to explain the origins of water. The Qurʾānic statement, however, remains valid for all ages and societies.

This is how the production of food starts: *"We pour down the rain in torrents."* (Verse 25) No one can claim either to have produced water, at any stage of its formation, or to have caused it to be poured, so that the process of food production could be set in motion.

*"And cleave the earth in fissures."* (Verse 26) Primitive man sees the rain falling and realizes that he has no power over it. He sees the water splitting the earth and penetrating the soil. He also sees the plants cleaving the earth with the Creator's will and growing over its surface. He notices that the plants are thin and the earth heavy yet the Creator's hand enables the plants to split the earth and move through it. Anyone who contemplates how plants grow can recognize the miracle involved here.

As human knowledge expands, a new understanding of this statement may be developed. The cleaving of the earth so that it became suitable for vegetation may have taken place a long time ago. The Qurʾānic statement may refer to the multiple break up of the earth's surface rocks caused by the great floods and by the various climatic factors which, according to modern scientists, contributed to the formation of a soil layer where vegetation could grow. This interpretation fits more closely with the sequence of events as it is reported here.

In either case, the third stage is that of the growth of all kinds of vegetation. The kind mentioned here is the best known to the people immediately addressed by the Qurʾān. *"How We bring forth the corn."* (Verse 27) *'The corn'* refers to all cereals and grains used for human or animal food. *"The grapes, and the fresh vegetation."* (Verse 28) The reference here is to the well-known vine fruits and to all vegetables which can be eaten raw and picked time after time. *"The olive and the palm, the dense-treed gardens, the fruit trees and the green pastures."* (Verses 29-31) The olive and the palm fruits are well-known to all Arabs. *'The gardens'* refer to the fenced fields of fruit trees. They are described here as being dense with trees. The Arabic term *'abb'*, translated here as green pastures, refers in all probability to the herbage used for cattle. As mentioned in the commentary on the preceding *sūrah*, ʿUmar asked what *'abb'* meant and then blamed himself for asking. So we follow ʿUmar's suit and add nothing to what has already been mentioned.

This is the story of food, the provision of which is carefully planned by the hand which created man. Man plays no role in any of its stages. Even the seeds and grains he casts on the earth are not of his making. The miraculous aspect here lies in the original production of these seeds and grains, which is beyond man's

comprehension. Various seeds may be planted on the same piece of land, irrigated by one kind of water; yet each produces its own fruit. It is the hand of the Creator which makes this infinite collection of plants and their fruits, and preserves in the little seed the characteristics of its mother plant so that they may reappear in the plant which issues from it. Man remains ignorant of the secrets of this process. He has no power over it. It is God's own production: "*For you and your cattle to delight in.*" (Verse 32) This delight is, however, for a limited period. There follows something totally different which needs to be carefully considered by man before it actually arrives.

### **A Signal for Resurrection**

*But when the stunning blast is sounded, on that day everyone will forsake his brother, his mother and his father, his wife and his children: for each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own. Some faces on that day shall be beaming, smiling and joyful. Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, veiled with darkness. These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin. (Verses 33-42)*

This is the end of all delight and enjoyment. It fits perfectly with the planning and designing which included every stage of man's development. The end portrayed here fits perfectly with the scene at the beginning of the *sūrah* which shows someone coming forward with zeal and with a feeling of fear in his heart, and another considers himself self-sufficient and turns away from divine guidance. Here we have an exposition of their standing in God's view.

'*The stunning blast*' is the nearest translation of an Arabic term, *al-ṣākhkhah*, which carries a very sharp tone; it almost pierces the ears. This effect simply prepares us for the following scene in which we see "*everyone will forsake his brother, his mother and his father, his wife and his children.*" (Verses 34-36) Such ties between a person and his nearest relations cannot be severed in the normal course of events. Yet *the stunning blast* destroys these very links and throws them up into the air.

The fearfulness depicted in this scene is purely psychological. It strikes the soul, isolates it and holds it in its grip. The result is that each of us will think only of ourselves. None shall have any time or power to think of others: "*For each one of them will on that day have enough preoccupations of his own.*" (Verse 37) The description is vivid; yet there can be no shorter and yet more comprehensive statement to describe the general condition of worried minds and souls.

When the *stunning blast* takes place the condition is universal. Then follows a description of the conditions of the believers and the unbelievers after the two groups have been assigned their values by divine standards and given their

respective positions: *“Some faces on that day shall be beaming, smiling and joyful.”* (Verses 38-39) These faces beam with a happiness overflowing with delight. They are hopeful and reassured because they feel that their Lord is pleased with them. These people are spared the terror of *the stunning blast*, so they can afford to smile and demonstrate their joy. Or probably the smiles and manifestations of happiness are seen after these people have realized the good end awaiting them.

*“Some other faces on that day shall be covered with dust, veiled with darkness. These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin.”* (Verses 40-42) Such faces are covered with the dust of sadness and misery, darkened with humiliation and depression. They know what they have done in this life and they await their inevitable punishment. *“These shall be the faces of the unbelievers, the hardened in sin.”* (Verse 42) These people are devoid of faith. They do not believe in God or in the divine message. Moreover, they are hardened in their erring and sinful ways. They persistently violate divine commandments.

The destiny of each group is portrayed in their faces. It is a vivid portrait drawn with words and expressions – a fact which testifies to the immense power characteristic of the Qur’ānic style. The opening and the close of the *sūrah* are in perfect harmony. The opening lays down a fundamental principle and a general standard, and the close shows us the results of applying this standard. The *sūrah* is a short one; yet it states a number of major facts and principles, portraying a large number of scenes, utilizing different rhythms. Furthermore the style brings out these images in full relief.