

SŪRAH 21

Al-Anbiyā'

(The Prophets)

Prologue

Revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah*, as with all other parts of the Qur'ān revealed in that period, deals with the issue of faith. It does so under three main headings: namely, God's oneness, His message, and mankind's resurrection.

The flow of the *sūrah* deals with its subject matter, referring to a number of great universal phenomena and linking them with faith. The point of this is that faith is part of the universal structure, and the same phenomena apply to it. It illustrates the truth which is at the heart of the heavens and the earth and their constitution. It reflects the seriousness with which their affairs are conducted. It is neither a matter of play nor a question of falsehood, in the same way as the universe was not created for play, nor was any element of falsehood mixed with its creation: "*We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play.*" (Verse 16)

The *sūrah* concentrates people's eyes, hearts and minds on the universe and its great phenomena: the heavens and the earth, mountains and valleys, night and day, sun and moon. It draws their attention to the unity of the laws that govern all these and conduct their affairs, and how this unity provides powerful evidence of the unity of the Creator who owns this vast universe. No partner has He in His kingdom, in the same way as He has no partner in its creation: "*Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities other than God, both would surely have fallen into ruin!*" (Verse 22)

The *sūrah* also draws our attention to the unity of the phenomena which govern life on earth and the unity of the source of life: "*We have made out of water every living thing.*" (Verse 30) All living things will face the same end: "*Every soul shall taste*

death.” (Verse 35) They will then arrive at the same destiny: “To Us you all must return.” (Verse 35)

Faith is closely linked to these major universal phenomena. It is the same faith, even though many messengers have been sent to convey it to people: *“Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone.” (Verse 25)* It is God’s will that all messengers were human beings: *“Before your time, We never sent [as Our messengers] any but men whom We inspired.” (Verse 7)*

Just like faith is closely linked to major universal phenomena, the same applies to what the advocates of faith may encounter in this world. The rule that never fails is that the truth will ultimately triumph and falsehood will be wiped out, because the truth is a universal reality and its victory is a divine law: *“We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away.” (Verse 18)* By the same token, the wrongdoers who deny the truth are bound to be destroyed, but God will save His messengers and the believers: *“ We fulfilled Our promise to them, and We saved them and all whom We willed [to save], and We destroyed those who transgressed beyond bounds.” (Verse 9)* God’s devoted servants are the eventual heirs of the earth: *“We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder [given to Moses] that ‘the righteous among My servants shall inherit the earth.’” (Verse 105)*

The *sūrah* then presents a quick review of the single community that has followed God’s messengers. It pauses long to reflect on the stories of Abraham, David and Solomon, but makes only brief references to Noah, Moses, Aaron, Lot, Ishmael, Idrīs, Dhu’l-Kifl, Jonah, Zachariah, John and Jesus, (peace be upon them all). Some of the issues, already tackled in the *sūrah* as general rules and phenomena, are reflected again in this review in the form of practical events encountered by God’s messengers and their followers.

The flow of the *sūrah* also includes some scenes of the Day of Judgement in which we find the same meanings and concepts reflected again as part of the reality of that great day.

We see, then, how varying cadences employed in the *sūrah* serve the same purpose of alerting the human mind so that it recognizes the truth of the faith preached by the last of God’s messengers. For people cannot receive the message while indulging in play, turning away and paying little heed to it, as they are described in the opening verses: *“Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away. Whenever there comes to them any new reminder from their Lord, they listen to it but take it in jest; their hearts set on pleasure.” (Verses 1-3)*

This message of Islam is both true and serious, in the same way as this universe is true and serious. Therefore, there may be no jest and play in receiving God’s

message, as in making demands for miraculous evidence. Evidence of a miraculous nature is available everywhere in the universe and its operative phenomena. It all confirms that God is the only creator who has power over all things, and that the message comes from Him alone.

As for its mode of expression and its rhythm, the *sūrah* employs factual statements which best suit its subject matter and ambience. This is clearly apparent when we compare its style with that employed in the preceding two *sūrahs*, *Maryam* and *Ṭā Hā*. In both these, the rhythm is soft, and hence more suited to their overall atmosphere. Here the rhythm is stronger, to fit its message. This is even clearer when we look at the way the story of the Prophet Abraham is related in *Maryam* and in this *sūrah*. In the former, the episode is given in the form of an expansive dialogue between Abraham and his father, whereas here we see Abraham's destruction of the idols worshipped by his people, and his subsequently being thrown in the fire. Thus, the subject matter, the style and the cadence achieve complete harmony in both instances.

This *sūrah* flows in four distinctive rounds. The first starts with a powerful opening that creates strong beats to shake people's hearts and alert them to the danger they will shortly face, while they remain oblivious to it: "*Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away.*" (Verse 1) This is followed by a scene of the fate suffered by earlier communities for turning their backs on God's messages, leading a life of wrongdoing: "*How many a community that persisted in evil-doing have We dashed into fragments, and raised another people in their stead?*" (Verse 11) Both the message of Islam and the system that governs the universe are based on truth and seriousness, which are here linked to the faith based on God's oneness and to the phenomena operating in the universe. The *sūrah* also links all this with the unity of the Creator who is in control of all things, the unity of the divine message and faith, and the unity of the source of life, its end and destiny.

The second round examines the unbelievers who hurled ridicule at God's Messenger while the matter he spoke to them about was very serious. Everything around them calls for close attention and alertness. They call for their punishment to be hastened, when it is close at hand. At this point the *sūrah* portrays a scene of the Day of Judgement, drawing their attention to what befell those before them who ridiculed God's messengers and their messages. It tells them very clearly that they enjoy no protection against God's punishment. It calls on them to reflect on God's power as He shrinks the earth from its edges, reducing its area. Should they so reflect, they may wake up to what awaits them after having long been oblivious to it.

This round concludes with a directive to the Prophet to outline his task: "*Say: I do but warn you on the strength of divine revelation!*" (Verse 45) He also alerts them to the danger to which they expose themselves by being so oblivious: "*But the deaf cannot*

hear this call, however often they are warned." (Verse 45) The result is that they will continue to pay no attention to what is presented to them until they are called to account on the Day of Judgement.

The third round provides a review of the single community of believers who followed God's prophets. This review reflects the unity of the message and the faith. It also portrays the grace God bestows on His righteous servants and His punishment of those who deny the truth.

In the fourth and final round, everyone's eventual destiny is described in an eventful scene of the Day of Judgement. The *sūrah* closes with a strong beat, a clear warning before leaving the unbelievers to their inevitable doom.

1

Clear Solid Evidence

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away. (1)

Whenever there comes to them any new reminder from their Lord, they listen to it but take it in jest; (2)

their hearts set on pleasure. Yet, concealing their inner thoughts, the wrongdoers say to one another: 'Is this man anything but a human being like yourselves? Will you, then, follow his sorcery with your eyes open?' (3)

He says: 'My Lord knows whatever is spoken in heaven and earth. He is the One who hears all and knows all.' (4)

'Nay,' they say, 'it is but a medley of dreams!' – 'Nay, he has invented it himself!' – 'Nay, he is only a poet!' – 'Let him, then, bring us some sign, as the prophets of old were sent with.' (5)

Not one of the communities whom We destroyed in bygone days would ever believe. Will these, then, believe? (6)

أَقْتَرَبَ لِلنَّاسِ حِسَابُهُمْ وَهُمْ فِي غَفْلَةٍ
مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿١﴾

مَا يَأْتِيهِمْ مِّنْ ذِكْرٍ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ مُّحَدَّثٍ
إِلَّا اسْتَمَعُوهُ وَهُمْ يَلْعَبُونَ ﴿٢﴾

لَاهِيَةً قُلُوبُهُمْ ۗ وَأَسْرَأُ النَّجْوَى الَّذِينَ
ظَلَمُوا هَلْ هَذَا إِلَّا بَشْرٌ مِّثْلَكُم ۗ
أَفَتَأْتُونَ السِّحْرَ وَأَنْتُمْ تُبْصِرُونَ

﴿٣﴾

قَالَ رَبِّي يَعْلَمُ الْقَوْلَ فِي السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٤﴾

بَلْ قَالُوا أَضْغَثٌ أَحْلَمَ بَلِ افْتَرَاهُ بَلْ
هُوَ شَاعِرٌ فَلْيَأْتِنَا بِآيَةٍ كَمَا أُرْسِلَ
الْأَوَّلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

مَا ءَامَنَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ مِّن قَرْيَةٍ أَهْلَكْنَاهَا

Before your time, We never sent [as Our messengers] any but men whom We inspired. Hence, ask the followers of earlier revelations if you do not know this. (7)

Neither did We give them bodies that did not eat food, nor were they immortal. (8)

In the end, We fulfilled Our promise to them, and We saved them and all whom We willed [to save], and We destroyed those who transgressed beyond bounds. (9)

We have now revealed for you a book bringing you respect. Will you not, then, use your reason? (10)

How many a community that persisted in evil-doing have We dashed into fragments, and raised another people in their stead? (11)

And as soon as they began to feel Our might they took to their heels and fled. (12)

Do not run away. Return to all your comforts and to your dwellings, so that you might be called to account. (13)

They said: 'Woe betide us! We were indeed wrongdoers!' (14)

And that cry of theirs did not cease until We caused them to become like a field mown down,

أَفْهَمَ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٧﴾

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا قَبْلَكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوْحِي إِلَيْهِمْ
فَسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا
تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٨﴾

وَمَا جَعَلْنَاهُمْ جَسَدًا لَا يَأْكُلُونَ
الطَّعَامَ وَمَا كَانُوا خَالِدِينَ ﴿٩﴾

ثُمَّ صَدَقْنَاهُمُ الْوَعْدَ فَأَنْجَيْنَاهُمْ وَمَنْ
نَشَاءُ وَأَهْلَكْنَا الْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

لَقَدْ أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكُمْ كِتَابًا فِيهِ ذِكْرُكُمْ
أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١١﴾

وَكَمْ قَصَمْنَا مِنْ قَرْيَةٍ كَانَتْ ظَالِمَةً
وَأَنْشَأْنَا بَعْدَهَا قَوْمًا آخَرِينَ ﴿١٢﴾

فَلَمَّا أَحْسَوْا بِأَسْنَانَا إِذَا هُمْ مِنْهَا يَرْكُضُونَ
﴿١٣﴾

لَا تَرْكُضُوا وَارْجِعُوا إِلَىٰ مَا أُتْرِفْتُمْ فِيهِ
وَمَسْكِنِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَسْأَلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

قَالُوا يَنْوِيلُنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا ظَالِمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

فَمَا زَالَتْ تِلْكَ دَعْوَاهُمْ حَتَّىٰ جَعَلْنَاهُمْ

still and silent as ashes. (15)

*We have not created the heavens and the earth
and all that is between them in mere idle play.
(16)*

*Had We willed to indulge in a pastime, We
would indeed have found one near at hand; if ever
We were to do so! (17)*

*Nay, but We hurl the truth against falsehood,
and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers
away. But woe to you for all your false claims.
(18)*

*To Him belong all those who are in the heavens
and on earth. Those that are with Him are never
too proud to worship Him and never grow weary
of that. (19)*

*They extol His limitless glory by night and day,
tirelessly. (20)*

*Or have they taken for worship some earthly
deities who can restore the dead to life? (21)*

*Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities
other than God, both would surely have fallen
into ruin! But limitless in His glory is God, Lord
of the Throne, and exalted is He above all that
they attribute to Him! (22)*

He cannot be questioned about whatever He

حَصِيدًا خَلْمِدِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

وَمَا خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاءَ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا
لَعِبِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

لَوْ أَرَدْنَا أَنْ نَتَّخِذَ هَوًا لَآتَّخَذْتَهُ مِنْ
لَدُنَّا إِنْ كُنَّا فَاعِلِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

بَلْ نَقْذِفُ بِالْحَقِّ عَلَى الْبَاطِلِ فَيَدْمَغُهُ
فَإِذَا هُوَ زَاهِقٌ وَلَكُمْ الْوَيْلُ مِمَّا تَصِفُونَ
﴿١٨﴾

وَلَهُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَنْ
عِنْدَهُ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِهِ وَلَا
يَسْتَحْسِرُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

يُسَبِّحُونَ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ لَا يَفْتُرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

أَمْ اتَّخَذُوا ءِالِهَةً مِنَ الْأَرْضِ هُمْ يُنْشِرُونَ
الْمَيِّتِينَ ﴿٢١﴾

لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَا ءِالِهَةٌ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا
فَسُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصِفُونَ
﴿٢٢﴾

does, whereas they shall be questioned. (23)

Or have they taken for worship some deities besides Him? Say: 'Produce your convincing proof. This is the message of those who are with me and the message of those before me.' But nay, most of them do not know the truth, and so they stubbornly turn away. (24)

Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone. (25)

They say: 'The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!' Limitless is He in His glory! No; they are but His honoured servants. (26)

They do not speak until He has spoken, and they act at His behest. (27)

He knows all that lies before them and all behind them. They do not intercede for any but those whom He has already graced with His goodly acceptance, since they themselves stand in reverent awe of Him. (28)

If any of them were to say, 'I am a deity beside Him,' We shall requite him with hell. Thus do We reward the wrongdoers. (29)

Are the unbelievers unaware that the heaven and the earth were once one single entity, which We then parted asunder? We have made out of water every living thing. Will they not, then, believe? (30)

We have also set firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with them, and We have cut out there broad

لَا يُسْأَلُ عَمَّا يَفْعَلُ وَهُمْ يُسْأَلُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

أَمْ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ ءِالِهَةً قُلْ هَاتُوا بُرْهَانَكُمْ هَذَا ذِكْرٌ مِنْ مَعِيَ وَذِكْرٌ مِنْ قَبْلِي بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ الْحَقَّ فَهُمْ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا نُوحِي إِلَيْهِ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدُونِ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَقَالُوا اتَّخَذَ الرَّحْمَنُ وَلَدًا سُبْحٰنَهُ بَلْ عِبَادٌ مُكْرَمُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

لَا يَسْبِقُونَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ وَهُمْ بِأَمْرِهِ يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا يَشْفَعُونَ إِلَّا لِمَنْ ارْتَضَىٰ وَهُمْ مِنَ خَشِيَّتِهِ مُشْفِقُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

وَمَنْ يَقُلْ مِنْهُمْ إِنِّي إِلَهٌ مِنْ دُونِهِ فَذٰلِكَ نَجْزِيهِ جَهَنَّمَ كَذٰلِكَ نَجْزِي الظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

أَوَلَمْ يَرَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْأَرْضَ كَانَتَا رَتْقًا فَفَتَقْنَاهُمَا وَجَعَلْنَا مِنَ الْمَآءِ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ حَيٍّ أَفَلَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَجَعَلْنَا فِي الْأَرْضِ رَوَاسِيًا أَنْ تَمِيدَ بِهِمْ

paths, so that they might find their way, (31)

and We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy. Yet they stubbornly turn away from all its signs. (32)

It is He who has created the night and the day and the sun and the moon: each moves swiftly in its own orbit. (33)

Never have We granted life everlasting to any man before you. Should you yourself die, do they, perchance, hope to live forever? (34)

Every soul shall taste death. We test you all with evil and good by way of trial. To Us you all must return. (35)

وَجَعَلْنَا فِيهَا فِجَاجًا سُبُلًا لَّعَلَّهُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ

﴿٣١﴾

وَجَعَلْنَا السَّمَاءَ سَقْفًا مَّحْفُوظًا وَهُمْ عَنْ

ءَايَاتِهَا مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ وَالشَّمْسَ

وَالْقَمَرَ كُلٌّ فِي فَلَكٍ يَسْبَحُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

وَمَا جَعَلْنَا لِبَشَرٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ الْخُلْدَ أَفَإِن

مِتَّ فَهُمْ الْخَالِدُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ وَنَبْلُوكُم بِالشَّرِّ

وَالْخَيْرِ فِتْنَةً وَإِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

Reckoning Drawing Close

The *sūrah* is distinguished by a very powerful opening that shakes the careless who are preoccupied with the petty concerns of this world while the reckoning draws ever closer to them. Signs and indicators are given to them while they continue to turn their backs on divine guidance. The situation is grave, yet they remain totally unaware of its seriousness. Whenever they receive a new Qur'ānic warning, they respond with ridicule, persisting in their playful negligence. Their hearts can only attend to their own pleasure. It should be pointed out here that in Qur'ānic usage, the term, 'heart', is synonymous with mind as it refers to the faculty of contemplation, reflection and thought. "Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away. Whenever there comes to them any new reminder from their Lord, they listen to it but take it in jest; their hearts set on pleasure. Yet, concealing their inner thoughts, the wrongdoers say to one another: Is this man anything but a human being like yourselves? Will you, then, follow his sorcery with your eyes open?" (Verses 1-3)

This is a picture of hearts that know no seriousness, jesting when the situation is most serious, and trifling with what is sacred. The reminder given to them here originates with 'their Lord', yet they are playful as they listen to it, showing no

respect whatsoever. A soul that knows no seriousness, respect or sacredness ends up in a condition of barren triviality which makes it unsuitable for the fulfilment of any task of merit. Its life seems devoid of respect, cheap. A spirit which cares little or nothing for what is held as sacred is sick. Carelessness is the opposite of endurance. The latter is a serious effort indicating strength, while the former indicates insensitivity.

Such people responded inappropriately to Qur'ānic revelations that are meant to be a constitution regulating human life, and form a code for human dealings. They are hence warned of the imminent reckoning, but still they remain oblivious to it. Such people can be seen at all times. Whenever a person's spirit is devoid of seriousness and respect, it ends up in such a sick state that it makes of life a matter of jest, lacking real purpose.

By contrast, the believers received this *sūrah* with a due seriousness that made them care little for this world. In his biographical notes on `Āmir ibn Rabī`ah, al-Āmidī says that he once received a bedouin guest and was typically very hospitable to him. Some time later, the Bedouin called on him after having acquired a plot of land. He said to him, 'The Prophet has given me a valley in a nearby place of the Arab land. I would like to give you a piece of it to be yours to bequeath to your heirs.' `Āmir said: "I have no need for your gift, because today a *sūrah* has been revealed which leaves us oblivious to all concerns of this life.

It is the *sūrah* that starts with, "*Closer to people draws their reckoning, yet they continue to blithely turn away.*" This is the marked difference between a living heart which interacts with what it receives and a dead one which covers its lifelessness in a shroud of jest and play. The latter type does not respond to reminders because it is devoid of the elements of life.

"*Yet, concealing their inner thoughts,*" they plot among themselves and encourage one another in adopting an attitude that denies God's message. In reference to God's Messenger (peace be upon him), "*the wrongdoers say to one another: 'Is this man anything but a human being like yourselves? Will you, then, follow his sorcery with your eyes open?'*" (Verse 3)

Dead as their hearts were, they could not but be shaken by the Qur'ān. Hence they try to resist its influence with false excuses. They whisper to one another that Muhammad is a man, and wonder how they could believe a message preached by a human being like themselves. They allege that what he says is plain magic, and ask how they could surrender themselves to sorcery when they have eyes with which to look.

The Prophet is instructed to leave the whole matter between him and the unbelievers to God, making it clear that He knows what they secretly say among

themselves. He also informs him of their scheming by which they tried to divert the effect of the Qur'ān on themselves and on other people.

"He says: My Lord knows whatever is spoken in heaven and earth. He is the One who hears all and knows all." (Verse 4) Whatever people may say in private is known to God, because He knows everything that takes place in heaven and earth. When they conspire and scheme, He is fully aware of their scheming. Nothing escapes His knowledge. They were at a loss as to how they should describe the Qur'ān in order to neutralize its appeal. Hence they variously alleged that it was sorcery, a series of confused dreams related by Muhammad, poetry, or mere fabrication. The Qur'ān reported their claims as they uttered them. They say: *"Nay, it is but a medley of dreams! - Nay, he has invented it himself - Nay, he is only a poet!"* (Verse 5) They could not agree on any one view or description to explain the magnetism the Qur'ān had on people. None of their allegations or justifications had any value. Hence, they roamed from one claim to another, betraying their puzzlement. Feeling themselves at a terrible loss, they decided to get around the whole question by demanding a miracle similar to those given to some early prophets: *"Let him, then, bring us some sign, as the prophets of old were sent with."* (Verse 5)

Miraculous signs and events were given in the past, but the communities to which they were shown did not believe as a result. Hence they were destroyed in accordance with God's law which seals the fate of any community which continues to reject the truth after having been given a miraculous sign of it. *"Not one of the communities whom We destroyed in bygone days would ever believe."* (Verse 6) When stubborn rejection of the truth reaches a point that it continues even after a tangible, physical, miraculous sign is given, then all excuses are invalid. People who continue with such rejection seal their own fate and they are destroyed as a result.

Miracles were given in plenty, but people still rejected the truth, and they were destroyed, one community after another. Is it likely then that those Arabs, similar as they were to earlier communities, would submit to miraculous evidence and accept the truth? *"Will these, then, believe?"* (Verse 6)

The Messengers God Sends

"Before your time, We never sent [as Our messengers] any but men whom We inspired. Hence, ask the followers of earlier revelations if you do not know this. Neither did We give them bodies that did not eat food, nor were they immortal." (Verses 7-8) In His infinite wisdom, God chose His messengers from among human beings. They received His revelations and called on people to believe in Him on the basis of such revelations. Those noble messengers of God were men with human bodies. God did not make them of a special type, so as not to eat food. Food is a basic necessity for human

survival, and God's messengers, who were human, were not immortal. Such is the law God has set, and if those Arabs were unaware of it, then they should ask the people who received earlier revelations, because they knew earlier prophets.

Moreover, God chose His messengers from among human beings because He wanted them to experience human life. Thus, their own practical lives would demonstrate the practicality of divine law, and their daily actions set the example of what they called for. When words are confirmed by practice, they are far more effective, because people see their effect as they are implemented. Had God's messengers been of a different species, needing no food to eat, no going about in the markets to obtain their needs, and no intimacy with women, and had they had no experience of human emotion, they would have had no empathy with other people, and no understanding of their feelings and motives. In which case, people would not find in them relevant examples to follow.

Any advocate of a cause who does not interact with the people he addresses, neither sharing their feelings, nor letting them share his, remains on the margin of their lives, experiencing no mutual sympathy with them. Regardless of what he says to them, he will not be able to motivate them because of their mutual isolation. Likewise, an advocate whose actions do not endorse his words will not be able to reach people's hearts, no matter how lucid and eloquent he may be. Indeed a simple word that is felt to be genuine and endorsed by action is the one that motivates people to act.

Those who in times past suggested that God's messenger should be an angel, like their successors who today suggest that such a messenger of God should be far above human earthly feelings, indulge in futile argument. Furthermore, they are all oblivious to the fundamental fact that angels do not, by their very nature, experience human life. They do not experience neither the physical needs and interactions of the human body, nor human feelings, emotions or concerns. A messenger from God must know all such feelings and motives, experiencing them in his own daily life so that he is able to provide practical guidance to those who respond to his message.

Furthermore, were the messenger to be an angel, people would have no motivation to follow his example in their life's details. They would feel that he belonged to a different race with a totally different nature. They will remain unable to follow his suit in their daily life. Needless to say, God's messengers have always provided their peoples with a good example to follow.

Furthermore, such a suggestion betrays ignorance of the honour God has bestowed on mankind. For He chose His messengers from among them, providing them with contact with the Supreme Society of heaven as they received instructions and revelations from Him.

For all these reasons, God, in His infinite wisdom, selected His messengers from among human beings, subjecting them to all that a human being experiences from the moment of birth to the moment of death, including emotions, reactions, hopes, pains, eating food, marriage, etc. It is God's wisdom that determined that the final and most perfect messenger to deliver His last and everlasting message should be the one who provided the most perfect example of human life on earth; a life full of motivation, experience, action and emotion.

Such has been God's law in selecting His messengers, and His law in saving them with their followers when He destroyed the wrongdoers who rejected the truth embodied in their messages: *"In the end, We fulfilled Our promise to them, and We saved them and all whom We willed [to save], and We destroyed those who transgressed beyond bounds."* (Verse 9)

This is, then, a law set in operation, like that of sending God's messengers. He promised to save them along with those who truly believed in them and gave credence to their faith by action. He fulfilled His promise to them and destroyed those who were oppressors, transgressing all the bounds He set.

The Book Giving Distinction to Arabs

God reminds the pagan Arabs who oppressed the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), denying his message and persecuting him and his followers, that they are subject to His law for their transgression. He also makes it clear to them that it is an aspect of the grace He bestows on them that He has not sent them any physical miracle, because that would have spelt their doom if they continued to reject the truth as older communities did. Instead, He sent them a book which imparts honour to them, since it is in their own language. This book sets their life on the right footing and makes of them a community entitled to lead mankind and be respected by them. Moreover, this book invites thinking people to reflect on it and elevate themselves by implementing it: *"We have now revealed for you a book bringing you respect. Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 10)

The miracle of the Qur'an is open to all generations. Thus, it is unlike the physical miracles given at a particular time and place. For the Arabs, the Qur'an brought respect, honour and glory as they delivered its message to all people. Prior to the Qur'an, the Arabs barely received mention in humanity's records. They had nothing to give humanity so as to ensure they were remembered. But as long as they upheld their book, they were honoured by the rest of mankind. Indeed, they assumed the leadership of humanity over many centuries, bringing happiness to themselves and to the rest of mankind. Then when they abandoned it, humanity left them aside, and they lost their position of respect. They were then at the tail end of humanity,

suffering aggression from different quarters, in stark contrast with their glorious past when they enjoyed security while others suffered fear and anxiety.

The Arabs have nothing of value and no sound idea to give to humanity other than this guidance and the ideas it contains. Therefore, when they present their book to the world, they are known by it and they are given the honour they deserve, because humanity knows that they have what is of benefit to it. But when they present themselves as mere Arabs, such questions as – who are Arabs? – are asked. And what is the value of their ancestry when they do not have their book? Mankind has never accorded the Arabs any position of respect except when they showed themselves to be advocates of a faith which they implemented and conducted their affairs by and according to its teachings. By contrast, their being merely Arabs had no value in human history and no entry in the records of civilization. They are known only by being the standard-bearers of Islamic values, ideals and civilization. In history, this certainly has great value.

It is to this fact that the Qur'ān refers when it says to the Arab idolaters who rejected every idea it put to them and denied its truth: *"We have now revealed for you a book bringing you respect. Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verse 10)

It was an act of divine grace that God revealed the Qur'ān to them, rather than giving them the miracle they demanded. Had such a miracle been sent to them and had they continued to deny the truth, a calamity like those that destroyed earlier unbelievers would have brought about their doom. At this point the *sūrah* portrays a scene of total destruction and annihilation:

How many a community that persisted in evil-doing have We dashed into fragments, and raised another people in their stead. And as soon as they began to feel Our might they took to their heels and fled. Do not run away. Return to all your comforts and to your dwellings, so that you might be called to account. They said: 'Woe betide us! We were indeed wrongdoers!' And that cry of theirs did not cease until We caused them to become like a field mown down, still and silent as ashes. (Verses 11-15)

The Arabic term *qaṣamnā*, rendered here as 'dashed into fragments', carries strong connotations of a strike that splits something into pieces. Moreover, its sound adds further connotations of complete destruction. Those communities persisted in their evil and met a sudden fate that left no trace of them. *"And [We] raised another people in their stead."* We note also that the Arabic text uses the word *qaryah* which means village or town with the verb denoting the breaking into fragments, but it uses *qawm*, or 'people', when it speaks of raising a new community, because it is such people who build a new civilization. In this way, the destruction is rendered more powerful, which is in line with the distinctive characteristics of the Qur'ānic style.

Still, Silent and Lifeless

Indeed, the words the Qur'ān uses here add, by their very sound, strong connotations of an overwhelming strike that leaves everything lifeless. We look and see how those communities ran around frantically as God's power struck their land. They appear like trapped mice jumping here and there before they fall motionless: *"As soon as they began to feel Our might they took to their heels and fled."* (Verse 12) They run so that they might leave a town which they felt was doomed. They run as though their very running will save them from God's power. It is not that they imagine that they are faster than God's strike; it is a thoughtless movement, like that of trapped mice.

They are then sarcastically told: *"Do not run away. Return to all your comforts and to your dwellings, so that you might be called to account."* (Verse 13) You do not need to run away from your homes. Go back to your luxuries and comforts. You may perchance be asked about all this luxury and how you have used it. But the time for questioning is already over, and the Qur'ān delivers this final cataclysm as bitter sarcasm.

This brings their situation clearly before their eyes, for there is no means of escape. They cannot run away from or flee God's punishment. Hence, they change tactic and admit their faults: *"They said: Woe betide us! We were indeed wrongdoers!"* (Verse 14) But the time for all this is over. They can say what they like, but it is all to no avail. They are left to their devices until they are lifeless: *"And that cry of theirs did not cease until We caused them to become like a field mown down, still and silent as ashes."* (Verse 15) But it is a field of humans, all of whom are motionless, lifeless; yet only a minute earlier, it was bustling, vibrant, full of life.

At this point the *sūrah* establishes a link between the faith already mentioned, its essential laws under which unbelievers are punished and the fundamental truth and seriousness which form the pivot around which the whole universe turns. If the unbelievers receive every new Qur'ānic revelation with jest and play, oblivious to its seriousness and the truth it outlines, heedless of the fast approaching Day of Reckoning and what awaits them on that day, then they should know that God's laws never fail. *"We have not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in mere idle play. Had We willed to indulge in a pastime, We would indeed have found one near at hand; if ever We were to do so! Nay, but We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away. But woe to you for all your false claims."* (Verses 16-18)

God has created the universe for a definite purpose, not to indulge in a pastime or idle play. He conducts its affairs in His infinite wisdom, and does not leave it to run aimlessly. One aspect of the seriousness involved in the creation of heaven and earth is that He has sent messengers, revealed books, and outlined for mankind their

duties and obligations. We see, then, how seriousness is inherent in the nature of this universe and its laws, and in the faith God wants people to embrace and implement, as well as in the way He holds people accountable after they die.

Had God wanted to indulge in a pastime, He would have chosen something for Himself alone; it would have nothing to do with His mortal creatures. But this is merely a theoretical assumption: *"Had We willed to indulge in a pastime, We would indeed have found one near at hand."* (Verse 17) The mode of expression here indicates that both parts of the conditional are negated. God has not willed to indulge in a pastime, and none has taken place. Besides, it never will, because God has not willed it in the first place: *"If ever We were to do so!"* (Verse 17)

Vanquishing Falsehood

It is all a theoretical argument given here in order to establish the basic truth that whatever relates to God is, like Him, ever-present and eternal. Hence, if God wants to enjoy some pastime, such pastime would not relate to anything that is created such as the heavens, the earth or anything in between. All these are new, in the sense that they are created at a certain point in time. What relates to God remains with Him, eternally, so as to fit in with His Majesty.

But the law that operates for all time is that there is no such thing as a pastime in respect of God. There are only seriousness and truth.

Thus, intrinsic truth will triumph over incidental falsehood: *"Nay, but We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away. But woe to you for all your false claims."* (Verse 18)

The Arabic particle *bal*, rendered here as 'nay', signifies turning away from whatever is at hand. Here it indicates putting aside this point about having a pastime to turn to a more serious point about the real world and the laws operating in it which ensure that falsehood is vanquished and the truth triumphant. The Qur'ānic verse paints this in a vivid picture, showing the truth as a missile hurled by God at falsehood, breaking its head and so utterly destroying it.

Such is the normal state of affairs: the truth is fundamental to the nature of the universe, deeply permeating its structure. Falsehood, on the other hand, is alien to it, lacking roots and power. God brands it as false and hurls the truth at it. When anything receives such a strike by God, it is bound to wither away and disappear.

People may sometimes feel that practical life goes on in a different direction to that stated by God, who knows all. This is particularly so when falsehood appears to be strong and overpowering, while the truth appears of small stature, shrinking in a corner, defeated. But this lasts only for a time, which God may extend as He pleases

to expose people to a trial. Ultimately the law God has set in operation, to allow the heavens and the earth to remain and His message to flourish, is bound to run its course.

Those who believe in God entertain no doubt that His promise will come true, or that the truth enjoys prime position in the structure of the universe and its system. They are also certain that victory will eventually belong to the truth. Hence, if God tests them by allowing falsehood a temporary triumph, they realize that this is merely a test God puts them through so as to eradicate their weakness or give them what they lack. He wants them to be fit to receive the victorious truth, and to make them the tool by which He accomplishes His purpose. Thus, He lets them go through the test, to equip them properly for their role. If they hasten to remedy their weakness and redress their drawbacks, God will shorten their period of test and accomplish through them whatever He wishes. The ultimate result is a foregone conclusion: *"We hurl the truth against falsehood, and it crushes the latter, and behold, it withers away."* (Verse 18) God accomplishes what He wills.

Thus the Qur'ān puts this fundamental fact before the unbelievers who are quick to hurl their false accusations at the Qur'ān and the Prophet (peace be upon him). They describe the Qur'ān as sorcery, poetry or mere fabrication, when it is the truth that smashes their falsehood and causes it to wither away. This is followed by a warning against the eventual outcome of their accusations: *"But woe to you for all your false claims."* (Verse 18)

The *sūrah* goes on to show them a model of obedience to God and worshipping Him, contrasted with their rejection and turning away. The model shows creatures that are closer to God than them, yet they continue to worship Him, obeying His every order without fail: *"To Him belong all those who are in the heavens and on earth. Those that are with Him are never too proud to worship Him and never grow weary of that. They extol His limitless glory by night and day, tirelessly."* (Verses 19-20)

'Those who are in the heavens and on earth' are known only to God who knows everything about them. Human knowledge is certain only of human existence, while believers are certain also of the existence of the angels and *the jinn* because both are mentioned in the Qur'ān. But we know of them only what God, their Creator, has told us. There may be other intelligent creatures on other planets, with forms and natures that are suited to those planets. But the knowledge of all this rests only with God.

Therefore when we read in the Qur'ān, *"To Him belong all those who are in the heavens and on earth,"* we know only of these whom we know, and we acknowledge that the Creator of the heavens and earth knows everyone else.

The phrase, *those that are with Him,*' appears initially to refer to the angels, but we

do not wish to attach particular meaning to this phrase, which is very general in its import, referring to the angels and other creatures. The expression here appears to mean those who are closer to God. When it applies to God, the phrase, 'with Him', does not signify a place or a description. The *sūrah* makes it clear that "*those that are with Him are never too proud to worship Him*", whilst the unbelievers demonstrate their arrogance by refusing to do so. Nor do they 'grow weary of' offering worship to Him. Indeed their lives are a continuous act of worship, as they ceaselessly glorify God.

Human beings are able to make their whole lives a continuous act of worship, without having to dedicate every minute to worship rituals and the glorification of God's name, as the angels do. Islam considers every move and every breath an act of worship if it is dedicated for God's sake, even when it involves partaking of the pleasures of this world.

Proof Is Required

Thus, the *sūrah* paints a picture of creatures glorifying God and extolling His praises at all times. At the same time, the unbelievers' claims about their multiple deities are strongly criticized. The *sūrah* provides irrefutable evidence of God's oneness by virtue of what we see in the constant system that permeates the universe, testifying that it is all run by the will of God, the One who manages and conducts all affairs. It also provides evidence from earlier scriptures given to other communities.

Or have they taken for worship some earthly deities who can restore the dead to life? Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities other than God, both would surely have fallen into ruin! But limitless in His glory is God, Lord of the Throne, and exalted is He above all that they attribute to Him! He cannot be questioned about whatever He does, whereas they shall be questioned. Or have they taken for worship some deities besides Him? Say: 'Produce your convincing proof. This is the message of those who are with me and the message of those before me.' But nay, most of them do not know the truth, and so they stubbornly turn away. Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone. (Verses 21-25)

The question the *sūrah* poses about the unbelievers' worship of different deities is, in effect, a denunciation of what they do. Yet the description of such deities as ones restoring the dead to life contains a strong note of ridicule. Indeed, one of the first qualities of the true God is that He is able to restore the dead to life. Hence, it is pertinent to ask whether the deities they worship can also do this. The answer is too clear to need to be stated. Indeed, they themselves do not claim that their deities initiate or restore life. As such, they do not have the very first quality of the Divine

Being.

This is an argument based on the facts as we see them in our world. But there is another argument based on universal facts: *"Had there been in heaven or on earth any deities other than God, both would surely have fallen into ruin!"* (Verse 22)

The universe and its whole existence are based on a single system that brings all its parts together and ensures harmony between all those components. This system is devised by the single will of the One God. Had there been other entities, they would have had multiple wills and, consequently, multiple systems and laws. It goes without saying that a will is a manifestation of the entity that exercises it, and the system is a manifestation of the active will. Hence, had there been other deities, the unity which provides coherence in the whole machinery of the universe, consistency and direction in its system, would totally disappear. Chaos, corruption and ruin would ensue. There would be no way of maintaining the coherence and harmony acknowledged by even the most hardened of atheists.

As it receives a clear message of the system governing the whole universe, a straight, uncorrupted nature will instinctively testify to the unity of the system and the will that has initiated it. It will acknowledge the oneness of the Creator who conducts all affairs in this consistent and harmonious universe, which suffers from no inherent defect in formation or from any impediment to its progress. *"But limitless in His glory is God, Lord of the Throne, and exalted is He above all that they attribute to Him!"* (Verse 22)

They assign partners to Him when He is in control of all and in need of none. For, He is *"Lord of the Throne"*. A throne is a symbol of kingdom, real authority and exaltation. What they claim is absolutely false, and the universe, its system and freedom from corruptive elements, testifies to this.

"He cannot be questioned about whatever He does, whereas they shall be questioned." (Verse 23) Since when could the One who controls the whole universe be questioned, and who could question Him when He holds sway over all His servants? Indeed, His will is free, unlimited, beyond restraint, even by the system His will has chosen to govern the universe. Questioning and accountability are subject to certain established criteria and defined limits. It is the free will that defines such limits and establishes such criteria, but such free will cannot be subject to these limits and criteria, while creatures are subject to them. Hence, they will undoubtedly be held to account.

Sometimes arrogance takes its hold of people, so that they impudently ask why has God done all this? And, furthermore, what is the wisdom behind it? The way they put these questions suggests that they see no purpose or wisdom in all this. Thus they overstep the limits of proper behaviour towards God Almighty. They also overlook the limits of human understanding dictated by its position in the universe.

Needless to say, man remains ignorant of the reasons, causes, effects and objectives that apply to the universe.

It is the One who knows, manages and controls all that operates His will, conducts all matters and controls all things. It is He who *“cannot be questioned about whatever He does, whereas they shall be questioned.”* (Verse 23)

Having provided this irrefutable evidence based on the nature of the universe, the *sūrah* asks them whether they can support their claims about multiple deities with any evidence derived from their scriptures: *“Or have they taken for worship some deities besides Him? Say: Produce your convincing proof. This is the message of those who are with me and the message of those before me.’ But nay, most of them do not know the truth, and so they stubbornly turn away.”* (Verse 24)

Here is the Qur’ān which incorporates the message given to the Prophet’s contemporaries, and there are the scriptures containing the messages delivered by earlier messengers. In none of these is there any mention of partners with God. All divine faiths are based on the true concept of God’s oneness. Where, then, did those unbelievers get this false concept of multiple deities when it cannot be supported by logical or religious argument? *“But nay, most of them do not know the truth, and so they stubbornly turn away.”* (Verse 24)

Claiming a Son for God

The *sūrah* then states the nature of what was revealed to all messengers sent to different communities before the Prophet Muhammad’s time: *“Before your time We never sent a messenger without having revealed to him that there is no deity other than Me. Therefore, you shall worship Me alone.”* (Verse 25) God’s oneness is indeed the basic essential element in divine faith, ever since God sent His first messenger to mankind. Nothing has changed in that. God, the Creator who must be worshipped is One, without partners. The truth of Godhead and Lordship over the universe is a single issue that cannot be separated. God has no partners, whether in the sphere of Godhead or in that of worship. This fact ranks alongside the basic essential laws of the universe and is classified with them. Like them, its truth is unassailable.

The *sūrah* then picks up the claims of the unbelievers alleging that God has a son. This is one of the absurdities of ignorance:

They say: ‘The Most Merciful has taken to Himself a son!’ Limitless is He in His glory! No; they are but His honoured servants. They do not speak until He has spoken, and they act at His behest. He knows all that lies before them and all behind them. They do not intercede for any but those whom He has already graced with His goodly acceptance, since they themselves stand in reverent awe of Him. If any of them were to

say, I am a deity beside Him,' We shall requite him with hell. Thus do We reward the wrongdoers. (Verses 26-29)

The claim that God – limitless is He in His glory – has a son took several forms in the different communities that deviated from the path of truth. The pagan Arabs alleged that the angels were God's daughters, while unbeliever groups among the Jews alleged that Ezra was God's son. Similarly, deviant Christians alleged that Jesus Christ was God's son. All these are ignorant claims that deviate from the clear truth.

The *sūrah* is here especially concerned with the Arabs' claim that the angels were God's daughters. This claim is rebuffed by clarifying the nature of angels. They are not God's female offspring, rather, they are only His servants whom He has honoured. The angels do not suggest anything to God, because they know their limits and abide by them. They do what God bids them, without argument. God's knowledge encompasses all their affairs. They do not try to intercede on behalf of anyone other than those to whom He has gracefully granted His acceptance. Only on behalf of these does He accept intercession. By nature, the angels are in awe of God, revering Him, even though they are pure, honoured and obedient to Him. Needless to say, none of them ever makes a claim to Godhead. Had any of them, for argument's sake, made such a claim, they would have suffered the same fate as anyone else who makes such a claim. That fate is hell where goes everyone guilty of the worst type of wrongdoing, which is to make such a claim which runs against all right and is unjust to all creation.

The same applies to the unbelievers' false claims. They are hollow, absurd and irrational. Should anyone make such a claim, the same terrible fate will befall him.

The *sūrah* contrasts its image of the angels in obedience and awe of God with that of the unbelievers who make such absurd and impudent claims.

Universal Evidence of God's Oneness

The *sūrah* has so far given us several types of evidence drawn from the universe, all testifying to God's oneness, and stated a number of arguments denying any possibility of there being more than one God. It has also provided evidence that addresses people's hearts directly. Now the *sūrah* takes the human heart by the hand to contemplate some of the great phenomena in the universe, as it is wisely managed by God. Yet the unbelievers remain heedless of the clear signs revealed all about them. For those who look however, the universe reveals aspects of itself that leave our minds in total amazement when we contemplate them with an open heart and alert senses.

Are the unbelievers unaware that the heaven and the earth were once one single entity, which We then parted asunder? We have made out of water every living thing. Will they not, then, believe? (Verse 30)

The statement that the heavens and the earth were split apart after having been a single entity is worth careful consideration. The more advanced theories of astronomy seeking to explain universal phenomena always tend to support this truth stated in the Qur'ān over 1,400 years ago. The theory that wins most acceptance today is that which claims that star constellations, such as our solar system which includes the sun, its planets and moons including our planet earth and its moon, were originally nebula. The nebula was then rent asunder and its parts took their circular shapes. The earth was also a piece of the sun that separated from it and cooled down.

However, this is merely an astronomical theory which may be fashionable today, but could be proven false tomorrow, only to be replaced by yet another assumption to explain universal phenomena. It thus gives birth to a different theory.¹ We, as believers, do not try to interpret a Qur'ānic statement in terms of a theory which is far from certain. We take Qur'ānic statements as they are. Scientific theories are different from true scientific facts which can be tried and tested, such as the fact that metals stretch when heated, or that water evaporates or freezes in severely cold weather.

The Qur'ān is not a book of scientific theories. Its field is not applied science. It is a constitution that regulates man's whole life. Its method is to set the human mind on the right track, so that it can function and be free within the limits set for it. It also sets society on the right lines so that it allows the mind to work and be free, without labouring on purely scientific detail. This area is left for the human mind to work out after it has been set free.

The Qur'ān may refer to some universal facts, like the one stated here: "*The heaven and the earth were once one single entity, which We then parted asunder.*" (Verse 30) We accept this as an absolute certainty simply because it is stated in the Qur'ān. We certainly do not know how the heavens and the earth were parted, or ripped one from the other. We accept astronomical theories which are not in conflict with this general fact mentioned in the Qur'ān. What we will not do however is take up the Qur'ānic text and try to fit it to any astronomical theory. We do not seek an endorsement of the Qur'ān through human theories, because the Qur'ān states only

¹ Since the author wrote this new theories about the origins of the earth have been advanced, with one speaking about a Big Bang, and another about string and fusion. Any of these may eventually be proven correct or abandoned in favour of new theories. This confirms the wisdom of the author's approach. — Editor's note.

what is certain. The most we can say is that the astronomical theory accepted today is not in conflict with the general import of this Qur'ānic statement revealed many generations prior to it.

The next sentence of the verse states: *"We have made out of water every living thing."* (Verse 30) This short sentence states a great and crucial fact. Indeed, scientists shower praise on Darwin for having identified that water was the first environment where life began.

It is indeed a fact that should capture all our attentions. That it is mentioned in the Qur'ān neither fills us with wonder nor increases our belief in the truth of the Qur'ān. Our belief in the absolute truth of everything it states is based on our unshakeable belief that it is God's revelation, not on its being confirmed by scientific discoveries or theories. The most that can be said here is that on this particular point, Darwin's evolutionary theory is not in conflict with what the Qur'ān states.

For fourteen centuries, the Qur'ān has drawn the attention of unbelievers to the great marvels God has placed in the universe, wondering how they could deny what they see everywhere: *"Will they not, then, believe?"* (Verse 30) How could they persist in their disbelief when everything around them in this universe inevitably leads to faith in God, the Creator, the Wise who conducts all affairs?

The *sūrah* continues to point out awesome scenes of the universe: *"We have also set firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with them."* (Verse 31) The Qur'ān, then, states that the mountains, firm as they are, maintain the balance of the earth so that it does not sway or shake. This balance may be maintained in various forms, such as setting a balance between the external pressure on the face of the earth and the one inside it, i.e. internally. Or it may be that the height of a mountain in one place is counterbalanced by a deep valley in another. Whatever the case may be, this statement confirms that the mountains have a direct bearing on the balance and stability of the earth. It is the domain of scientific study to identify and prove how this stability and balance are achieved. But it is the Qur'ānic text that invites us to contemplate such facts.

Let us now follow the magnificent aspects of God's creation in the wide universe: *"We have cut out there broad paths, so that they might find their way."* (Verse 31) The pathways made in the mountains in the shape of depressions between its high peaks assist the traveller in finding his way yet there is also another subtle implication here that refers to faith. It may be that travellers will find their way to accepting the faith just as they find their way through the mountains along such paths.

"And We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy." (Verse 32) In Arabic, the sky refers to everything that is above us. We see above us something like a ceiling. The Qur'ān states that the sky is a well-secured canopy. It is secure from any defect or

contamination, since it symbolizes the height from which God's revelations are bestowed. But *"they stubbornly turn away from all its signs."* (Verse 32)

Finally a reference is made to time and place phenomena that are very close to man and his life on earth: *"It is He who has created the night and the day and the sun and the moon: each moves swiftly in its own orbit."* (Verse 33)

The night and day are two universal phenomena, while the sun and the moon are two great celestial bodies that are closely related to human life on earth. When we contemplate the succession of the day and night and the movement of the sun and the moon, we realize that they are so accurate as to admit no defect, and so consistent as to allow no failure. Such contemplation is sufficient to guide our hearts and minds to the fact that the system that applies to them is one, the will governing them is one and their great Maker is one.

The Inevitable End of All People

This first passage of the *sūrah* concludes with an outline that links the laws relevant to creation, formation and sustenance with those relevant to the nature and destiny of human life:

Never have We granted life everlasting to any man before you. Should you yourself die, do they, perchance, hope to live forever? Every soul shall taste death. We test you all with evil and good by way of trial. To Us you all must return. (Verses 34-35)

No human being has ever been granted immortality. Every creature is bound to die, and whatever has a beginning will certainly have an end. So if God's Messenger [peace be upon him] is also destined to die, why do they think they would be granted life everlasting? Since they cannot hope to live for ever, why do they not behave like ones who will inevitably taste death? Why do they not reflect and contemplate?

"Every soul shall taste death." (Verse 35) This is the law that governs life. It has no exceptions or exemptions. The living, then, must take this into account and prepare themselves for it. This short journey on earth is bound to come to an end, and its end is the death of every living thing. All shall return to God. But whatever happens to us during this trip through life, whether good or bad, is meant as a test: *"We test you all with evil and good by way of trial."* (Verse 35)

When we speak of being tested by something evil or hard, we can all easily understand this notion. It is a test to show the endurance and patience of the one who is being tested. It is the means to determine how unshakeable his trust in God, his Lord, is, and how much trust he places in God's mercy. But a test with good things needs to be explained.

To be tested with good things is more difficult than hardship, even though it may appear easier. For the fact is that many people can endure being tested by evil, but few can endure a test with the good. When the test takes the form of sickness and weakness, many are able to endure and withstand the hardship, but when its form is that of good health, strength and ability, then few are those who pass through successfully.

People may be able to withstand poverty and deprivation, maintaining their dignity in such situations, but few are those who succeed in a test with comfort and affluence. For the latter tempts us to satisfy all our desires.

Equally there are many who cannot be deterred by torture or physical harm. They are not overawed by such threats and actualities. By contrast, however, only a few can resist the temptations posited by wealth, position, comfort and desire.

It is not difficult to tolerate the hardships of struggle and the injuries that one sustains in such a struggle. But it is extremely hard to experience comfort and a carefree life without becoming so keen to maintain it even at the expense of one's dignity. Indeed such an experience could easily lead to accepting humiliation in order not to lose it.

A test with hardship may arouse within us a keen sense of dignity, encouraging us to resist. Thus, all our powers and faculties are directed at the hardship and enable us to pass through successfully. Affluence, on the other hand, has a calming effect which reduces our awareness of the test. Hence, many fail it. This applies to all human beings, except those that God helps and protects. They are the ones described by the Prophet as ending up with what is good in all situations: "Amazing is a believer's situation, because it all ends up in what is good. This applies to no one other than a believer. If he experiences what is good and pleasing, he will express his gratitude to God and this is good for him. On the other hand, if he experiences hardship, he will patiently persevere and this is good for him." [Related by Muslim] Hence to keep on the alert when being tested by affluence and comfort is more important than doing so when we go through a test with hardship. Maintaining a sound relation with God is the best guarantee in all situations.

A Warning Not to be Ignored

When the unbelievers see you, they make you the target of their mockery, saying [to one another], 'Is this the one who speaks against your gods?' Yet they are the ones who, at the mention of the Most Merciful, are quick to deny Him. (36)

Man is a creature of haste. I shall show you My signs: do not, then, ask Me to hurry them on. (37)

They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?' (38)

If only the unbelievers knew [that there will come] a time when they will not be able to shield their faces and their backs from the fire; a time when they will find no support. (39)

Indeed, it will come upon them of a sudden, and will stupefy them. They will be unable to avert it, nor will they be allowed any respite. (40)

Other messengers were derided before your time; but those who scoffed at them were [in the end] overwhelmed by the very thing that they derided. (41)

وَإِذَا رَأَى الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِنْ
يَتَّخِذُونَكَ إِلَّا هُزُوًا أَهَذَا الَّذِي
يَذْكُرُ ءِالِهَتَكُمْ وَهُمْ بِذِكْرِ الرَّحْمَنِ
هُمْ كَافِرُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

خُلِقَ الْإِنْسَانُ مِنْ عَجَلٍ ۗ سَأُورِيكُمْ
ءَايَاتِي فَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلُونِ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَى هَذَا الْوَعْدُ إِنْ
كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

لَوْ يَعْلَمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا حِينَ لَا يَكْفُونَ
عَنْ وُجُوهِهِمُ النَّارَ وَلَا عَنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ
وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

بَلْ تَأْتِيهِمْ بَغْتَةً فَتَبْهَتُهُمْ فَلَا
يَسْتَطِيعُونَ رَدَّهَا وَلَا هُمْ يُنظَرُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَسْتَهْزِئُ بِرُسُلٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ فَحَاقَ
بِالَّذِينَ سَخِرُوا مِنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ
يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

Say: 'Who could protect you, by night or by day, from the Most Merciful?' Yet, from the remembrance of their Lord do they stubbornly turn away. (42)

قُلْ مَنْ يَكْلُؤُكُمْ بِاللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ مِنَ الرَّحْمَنِ ۗ بَلْ هُمْ عَنْ ذِكْرِ رَبِّهِمْ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

Do they have gods other than Us to protect them? Those [alleged deities] are not even able to succour themselves, nor can they be given company by Us. (43)

أَمْ لَهُمْ ءِالِهَةٌ تَمْنَعُهُمْ مِنْ دُونِنَا لَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ نَصْرَ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ مِنَّا يُصْحَبُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

We have allowed these, and their fathers, to enjoy the good things of life for a great length of time. Can they not see that We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? Is it they, then, who will triumph? (44)

بَلْ مَتَّعْنَا هَؤُلَاءِ وَءَابَاءَهُمْ حَتَّى طَالَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْعُمُرُ ۗ أَفَلَا يَرَوْنَ أَنَّا نَأْتِي الْأَرْضَ نَنْقُصُهَا مِنْ أَطْرَافِهَا ۗ أَفَهُمُ الْغَالِبُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Say: 'I do but warn you on the strength of divine revelation.' But the deaf cannot hear this call, however often they are warned. (45)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أُنذِرُكُمْ بِالْوَحْيِ ۗ وَلَا يَسْمَعُ الصُّمُّ الدُّعَاءَ إِذَا مَا يُنذَرُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Yet, if but a breath of your Lord's punishment touches them, they are sure to cry, 'Oh, woe betide us! We were wrongdoers indeed.' (46)

وَلَيْنَ مَسَّتْهُمْ نَفْحَةٌ مِّنْ عَذَابِ رَبِّكَ لَيَقُولُنَّ يَنْوِيلُنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا ظَالِمِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We shall set up just scales on the Day of Resurrection, so that no human being shall be wronged in the least. If there be but the weight of a mustard seed, We shall bring it [to account]. Sufficient are We for reckoning. (47)

وَنَضَعُ الْمَوَازِينَ الْقِسْطَ لِيَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ فَلَا تُظْلَمُ نَفْسٌ شَيْئًا ۖ وَإِنْ كَانَ مِثْقَالَ حَبَّةٍ مِّنْ خَرْدَلٍ أَتَيْنَا بِهَا ۗ وَكَفَىٰ بِنَا حَاسِبِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

Overview

So far the *sūrah* has taken us on a long journey, showing us some of the laws of nature that operate in the universe, the rules that govern groups advocating God's message, people's fate, and the destruction of past communities. Now it picks up the point mentioned at the beginning of the *sūrah* about the way the unbelievers received God's Messenger and the revelations he was given, the mockery they hurled at him and their persistent disbelief.

The *sūrah* follows this by pointing out that, by nature, man is hasty. One manifestation of this haste is the unbelievers' attempts to hasten God's punishment. Hence, it warns them against such haste and makes it clear to them that they must refrain from mocking the Prophet if they wish to avoid the consequences of such unwarranted behaviour. It paints for them a picture of how those who wield power in this life find their authority dwindling, and in another scene demonstrates some aspects of the suffering in the hereafter meted out to persistent unbelievers.

This new passage concludes by emphasizing the accuracy of the reckoning in the hereafter and the suitability of the reward given on the Day of Judgement. Thus, the reckoning and the reward are linked to the rules operating in the universe, human nature and human life.

Protection to be Sought

When the unbelievers see you, they make you the target of their mockery, saying [to one another], 'Is this the one who speaks against your gods?' Yet they are the ones who, at the mention of the Most Merciful, are quick to deny Him. (Verse 36)

The unbelievers deny the very existence of God, the Most Merciful, who has created the universe and set the rules that operate in it and sustain its existence. They object to the fact that God's Messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him), speaks out against their deities, showing such inanimate idols to be useless. Yet they themselves rudely deny God, the Most Merciful. How singular!

They hurl abuse and mockery at God's Messenger, saying that it is unacceptable that he should criticize their idol worship. They say to one another: *"Is this the one who speaks against your gods?"* (Verse 36) Yet they, creatures of God as they are, find nothing wrong with the arrogance that leads them to deny God's existence and reject the Qur'ān He has revealed to them. The irony of their attitude exposes to the full the far-reaching corruption that affects their nature and impairs their judgement.

What is more, they try to hasten the punishment against which the Prophet warns

them. For, by nature, man is hasty: *"Man is a creature of haste. I shall show you My signs: do not, then, ask Me to hurry them on. They say: 'When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?'"* (Verses 37-38)

"Man is a creature of haste." Haste is present in man's very nature and constitution. He always stretches his eyes to what lies ahead, beyond the present moment, aiming to grasp it with his own hand. He wants to achieve, the moment it flashes in his mind, all that seems desirable. He wants to see all that is promised to him, even though it may be to his detriment. Such is man's nature, unless he establishes a firm relationship with God which gives him strength and reassurance. He will then trust to God's wisdom, leaving His will to run its course without hastening events. For faith combines trust with patience and reassurance.

Those unbelievers hastened God's punishment, wondering when the promise of punishment in the hereafter, as well as in this life, would be fulfilled. The Qur'an paints here for them a scene of the suffering in the hereafter, while also warning them against a similar punishment to that which befell earlier communities which rejected the faith: *"If only the unbelievers knew [that there will come] a time when they will not be able to shield their faces and their backs from the fire; a time when they will find no support. Indeed, it will come upon them of a sudden, and will stupefy them. They will be unable to avert it, nor will they be allowed any respite. Other messengers were derided before your time; but those who scoffed at them were [in the end] overwhelmed by the very thing that they derided."* (Verses 39-41)

If the unbelievers only knew what will happen, they would change their attitude completely. They would stop their mockery and hastening of what is bound to come. Let them, then, see what is bound to come. There they are surrounded by the fire on all sides. We visualize their frantic movements, described implicitly in the verse, to protect their faces and their backs against the fire, but their attempt is futile. It is as if the fire engulfs them on all sides. They can neither keep it away from themselves, nor retreat to seek protection. Nor is even a short respite from it possible.

That the punishment comes suddenly is only the response for their hastening it. They used to say time after time: *"When is this promise to be fulfilled, if what you say be true?"* (Verse 38) The answer is that it comes suddenly, perplexing their minds and paralyzing their will. Thus they are unable to think or act, let alone enjoy a period of grace to mend their ways.

This applies to the punishment in the hereafter. As for this world's punishment, it certainly befell communities before them which ridiculed God's messengers. Just like those communities were unable to ward off a punishment that wiped them out altogether, so these unbelievers are unable to avert their defeat and captivity. They are thus warned not to deride God's Messenger, so as to avoid the punishment that befalls those who ridicule prophets. Such fate and punishment is bound to come,

because it is part of God's law which will inevitably take effect, just as the destruction of earlier communities, guilty of the same offence, proves.

Or is it that they have someone other than God who protects them by night and day, ensuring that they will suffer no punishment either in this life or in the life to come? *"Say: 'Who could protect you, by night or by day, from the Most Merciful?' Yet, from the remembrance of their Lord do they stubbornly turn away. Do they have gods other than Us to protect them? Those [alleged deities] are not even able to succour themselves, nor can they be given company by Us."* (Verses 42-43)

It is God who watches over every soul by night and day. He is the Most Merciful. Indeed, infinite mercy is His great attribute. Other than Him there is no one to watch over or protect anyone. Do the unbelievers know anyone else who can protect them? It is a rhetorical question, one which rebukes them for their turning away from God when it is He who watches over them at all times: *"Yet, from the remembrance of their Lord do they stubbornly turn away."* (Verse 42)

The same question is put to them again in a different form: *"Do they have gods other than Us to protect them?"* (Verse 43) Could these gods be the ones who watch over, and protect, them? This cannot be, because such alleged deities *"are not even able to succour themselves,"* let alone support and protect anyone else. *"Nor can they be given company by Us,"* to derive strength from being on God Almighty's side. This is the sort of strength Moses and Aaron derived when their Lord said to them: *"Have no fear. I shall be with you: I hear all and see all."* (20: 46)

Such false deities do not have power of their own. They do not have access to God's power. As such, they are utterly helpless.

This sarcastic argument exposes the absurdity of the unbelievers' beliefs. Hence, the *sūrah* stops arguing with them, but adds a moving touch which they feel in their hearts. It directs them to reflect on God's might as He folds the earth underneath triumphant armies. Thus the earth shrinks so that they are confined to a limited space, after they have wielded much power and authority. *"We have allowed these, and their fathers, to enjoy the good things of life for a great length of time. Can they not see that We gradually reduce the land from its outlying borders? Is it they, then, who will triumph?"* (Verse 44)

What has corrupted their nature, then, is that long enjoyment of the good things of life. It is luxury which corrupts the heart and stifles the senses. It leads to a weakening in their awareness of God and an inability to contemplate the signs He has placed in the universe, pointing to Him. This is a different kind of test God sets for human beings, making affluence the very means of this test. If a person allows himself to drift away from God, and forgets that He is the source of all the blessings he enjoys, then he is bound to fail this test.

Thus, the *sūrah* works on their hearts as it shows them the imagery of what occurs every day somewhere on earth. States that have had power begin to lose their grip and weaken. Their land soon shrinks as they are split into small states where once they formed great empires. They were once strong and triumphant; now they are weak and defeated. They had great armies and vast resources; now their armies are weak and their resources meagre.

In its inimitable style, the Qur'ān shows God's hand as it folds up the once vast space, making borders cave in, and reducing huge distances, in a splendid scene that combines fine movement and awesome feelings. It then asks rhetorically: *"Is it they, then, who will triumph?"* (Verse 44) Is it that what happens to others does not then apply to them?

Unheeded Warnings

At the height of this awesome scene, which leaves hearts trembling, the Prophet is instructed to deliver the final warning: *"Say: I do but warn you on the strength of divine revelation!" But the deaf cannot hear this call, however often they are warned.*" (Verse 45) Let them, then, beware lest they should be the deaf who do not hear! It is the deaf who will suffer the fate of having the earth shrunk beneath them, and the hand of the Almighty smashing their power, doing away with them and their luxuries.

The *sūrah* continues its discourse making a profound effect on people's hearts. It describes those very unbelievers as they begin to suffer God's punishment: *"Yet, if but breath of your Lord's punishment touches them, they are sure to cry, 'Oh, woe betide us! We were wrongdoers indeed.'"* (Verse 46) In Arabic, the word, *naḥīyah*, used in this verse for 'breath' is normally associated with mercy and grace, but here it is used in the context of suffering so as to imply that even the slightest breath of God's punishment is sufficient to make them ready to confess. Alas, confession is of no use now. Earlier in the *sūrah* we were shown past communities smitten by God's might, crying out with the same appeals: *"They said: 'Woe betide us! We were indeed wrongdoers!' And that cry of theirs did not cease until We caused them to become like a field mown down, still and silent as ashes."* (Verses 14-15)

It is, then, a confession that comes too late. It is far better that they listen to the warnings contained in God's revelations when they still have time to act, before they are touched by such suffering.

Accurate Scales Ensuring Absolute Justice

The present passage concludes with a final scene from the Day of Reckoning: *"We shall set up just scales on the Day of Resurrection, so that no soul shall be wronged in the*

least. If there be but the weight of a mustard seed, We shall bring it [to account]. Sufficient are We for reckoning." (Verse 47) The mustard seed here represents the smallest and lightest thing our eyes can see. Yet not even a mustard seed is overlooked or ignored. The scales that are used are so accurate that a single mustard seed makes a difference.

Let people, then, reflect on what they put forward for that day. Let hearts be attentive to the warnings, and let those who turn their backs or indulge in ridicule be warned. They may be able to evade punishment in this life, but on Judgement Day the reckoning takes every little thing into account. The scales then are so accurate that even a tiny seed can make all the difference.

Thus the accurate scales of the hereafter, the unfailing laws of the universe, the rules applicable to advocates of the faith and the laws of human nature converge in perfect harmony, operated by the hand of the Almighty. This testifies to the truth of God's oneness, the theme that pervades this whole *sūrah*.

One Community of Believers

Indeed We vouchsafed to Moses and Aaron the standard by which to distinguish right from wrong, a guiding light and a reminder for the God-conscious (48)

who fear their Lord in their most secret thoughts, and are weary of the Last Hour. (49)

And this one, too, is a blessed reminder which We have bestowed from on high: will you, then, reject it? (50)

We formerly bestowed on Abraham his consciousness of what is right, and We were aware of him (51)

when he said to his father and his people, 'What are these images to which you are so devoted?' (52)

They answered: 'We found our forefathers worshipping them.' (53)

Said he: 'Indeed, you and your forefathers have

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ وَهَارُونَ الْفُرْقَانَ
وَضِيَاءً وَذِكْرًا لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٤٨﴾

الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِالْغَيْبِ وَهُمْ
مِّنَ السَّاعَةِ مُشْفِقُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

وَهَذَا ذِكْرٌ مُّبَارَكٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ ۗ أَفَأَنْتُمْ لَهُ
مُنْكَرُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

﴿٥١﴾ وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ رُشْدَهُ مِن قَبْلُ
وَكُنَّا بِهِ عَالِمِينَ ﴿٥١﴾

إِذْ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِ مَا هَذِهِ التَّمَاثِيلُ
الَّتِي أَنْتُمْ لَهَا عَاكِفُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

﴿٥٣﴾ قَالُوا وَجَدْنَا ءَابَاءَنَا لَهَا عَابِدِينَ ﴿٥٣﴾

قَالَ لَقَدْ كُنْتُمْ أَنْتُمْ وءَابَاؤُكُمْ فِي
ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

been in evident error.’ (54)

They asked: ‘Is it the truth you are preaching to us? Or are you one who jests?’ (55)

He replied: ‘Indeed, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He who has brought them into being. And I am a witness to this [truth].’ (56)

‘By God, I shall most certainly bring about the downfall of your idols when you have turned your backs and gone away!’ (57)

So he broke the idols to pieces, [all] except for the biggest of them, so that they might turn back to him. (58)

They said: ‘Who has done this to our gods? He is definitely one of the wrongdoers.’ (59)

They said: ‘We heard a youth speak of them; he is called Abraham.’ (60)

They said: ‘Then bring him here in sight of all people, so that they may bear witness.’ (61)

They said: ‘Abraham, was it you who did this to our gods?’ (62)

He answered: ‘Nay, it was this one, the biggest of

قَالُوا أَجِئْتَنَا بِالْحَقِّ أَمْ أَنْتَ مِنَ اللَّاعِبِينَ

٥٥

قَالَ بَلْ رَبُّكُمْ رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
الَّذِي فَطَرَهُنَّ وَأَنَا عَلَىٰ ذَٰلِكُمْ مِنَ
الشَّاهِدِينَ

٥٦

وَتَأْتِيهِ لَآكِدِينَ أَصْنَمَكُمْ بَعْدَ أَنْ
تَوَلَّوْا مُدْبِرِينَ

٥٧

فَجَعَلَهُمْ جُودًا إِلَّا كَبِيرًا لَهُمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ
إِلَيْهِ يَرْجِعُونَ

٥٨

قَالُوا مَنْ فَعَلَ هَٰذَا بِآلِهَتِنَا إِنَّهُ لَمِنَ
الظَّالِمِينَ

٥٩

قَالُوا سَمِعْنَا فَتًى يَذُكُرُهُمْ يُقَالُ لَهُ
إِبْرَاهِيمُ

٦٠

قَالُوا فَآتُوا بِهِ عَلَىٰ أَعْيُنِ النَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ
يَشْهَدُونَ

٦١

قَالُوا ءَأَنْتَ فَعَلْتَ هَٰذَا بِآلِهَتِنَا
يَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ

٦٢

قَالَ بَلْ فَعَلَهُ كَبِيرُهُمْ هَٰذَا فَسَأَلُوهُمْ
إِنْ كَانُوا يَنْطِقُونَ

٦٣

them, who did it. But ask them, if they can speak!' (63)

So they turned to themselves, saying, 'Surely, it is you who are doing wrong.' (64)

But then they relapsed into their old position and said, 'You know very well that these [idols] cannot speak!' (65)

Said [Abraham]: 'Do you then worship, instead of God, something that cannot benefit or harm you in any way?' (66)

Fie upon you and upon all that you worship instead of God! Will you not, then, use your reason?' (67)

They cried: 'Burn him, and succour your gods, if you are going to do [anything at all]!' (68)

But We said: 'Fire, be cool to Abraham, and a source of inner peace [for him].' (69)

They sought to lay a snare for him, but We caused them to be the absolute losers. (70)

We delivered him and Lot, [bringing them] to the land which We have blessed for all mankind. (71)

And We gave him Isaac and, as an additional

فَرَجَعُوا إِلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ فَقَالُوا إِنَّكُمْ أَنْتُمُ
الظَّالِمُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

ثُمَّ نَكَسُوا عَلَىٰ رُءُوسِهِمْ لَقَدْ عَلِمْتُمْ مَا
هَٰؤُلَاءِ يَنْطِقُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

قَالَ أَفَتَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا
يَنْفَعُكُمْ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَضُرُّكُمْ ﴿٦٦﴾

أَفِ لَكُمْ وَلِمَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ
أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

قَالُوا حَرِّقُوهُ وَانصُرُوا آلِهَتَكُمْ إِن
كُنْتُمْ فَاعِلِينَ ﴿٦٨﴾

قُلْنَا يَنَارُ كُونِي بَرْدًا وَسَلَامًا عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ
﴿٦٩﴾

وَأَرَادُوا بِهِ كَيْدًا فَجَعَلْنَاهُمُ
الْأَخْسَرِينَ ﴿٧٠﴾

وَنَجَّيْنَاهُ وَلُوطًا إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا
فِيهَا لِلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٧١﴾

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ نَافِلَةً ۗ وَكُلًّا
جَعَلْنَا صَالِحِينَ ﴿٧٢﴾

gift, Jacob, and caused all of them to be righteous men, (72)

and We made them leaders to give guidance at Our behest. We inspired them to do good works, and to be constant in prayer, and to give regular charity. It is Us alone that they worshipped. (73)

And to Lot, too, We gave sound judgement and knowledge. We saved him from that community which was given to deeds of abomination. They were people lost in evil, depraved. (74)

Him We admitted to Our grace; for he was righteous. (75)

And long before that, Noah called out [to Us], and We responded to him and saved him with his household from the great calamity, (76)

and helped him against the people who had denied Our revelations. Lost in evil were they, and so We caused them all to drown. (77)

And remember David and Solomon, when both gave judgement concerning the field into which some people's sheep had strayed and grazed by

وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ أَيْمَةً يَهْتَدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا
وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ الْخَيْرَاتِ وَإِقَامَ
الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ وَكَانُوا لَنَا
عَبِيدِينَ ﴿٧٢﴾

وَلَوْ طَآءَآ تَيْنَهُ حُكْمًا وَعِلْمًا وَنَجَّيْنَاهُ
مِنَ الْقَرْيَةِ الَّتِي كَانَتْ تَعْمَلُ الْخَبِيثَاتِ
إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمَ سَوْءٍ فَسَقِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

وَأَدْخَلْنَاهُ فِي رَحْمَتِنَا إِنَّهُ مِنَ
الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٧٥﴾

وَنُوحًا إِذْ نَادَى مِن قَبْلُ فَاسْتَجَبْنَا لَهُ
فَنَجَّيْنَاهُ وَأَهْلَهُ مِنَ الْكَرْبِ الْعَظِيمِ
﴿٧٦﴾

وَنَصْرَنَاهُ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا
بِعَايِنَتْنَا إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا قَوْمَ سَوْءٍ
فَأَغْرَقْنَاهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴿٧٧﴾

وَدَاوُدَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ إِذْ تَحْكُمَانِ فِي الْحَرْثِ
إِذْ نَفَسَتْ فِيهِ غَنَمُ الْقَوْمِ وَكُنَّا
لِحُكْمِهِمْ شَاهِدِينَ ﴿٧٨﴾

night. We were witness to their judgement. (78)

We gave Solomon insight into the case. Yet We gave sound judgement and knowledge to both of them. And We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likenise the birds. We are indeed able to do [all things]. (79)

And We taught him how to make garments for you, so that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear. Will you, then, give thanks? (80)

To Solomon We subjected the stormy wind, so that it sped at his behest towards the land which We had blessed. It is We who have knowledge of everything. (81)

And of the evil ones, [We assigned him] some that dived for him into the sea and performed other works besides; but it was We who kept a watch over them. (82)

And remember Job, when he cried out to his Lord: Affliction has befallen me, but of all those who show mercy You are the Most Merciful.' (83)

We responded to him and relieved all the affliction he suffered. We restored to him his family and as many more with them, as an act of grace from Ourselves, and as a reminder to all who worship Us. (84)

And remember Ishmael, Idrīs and Dhu'l-Kifl: they all were men of constancy and patience. (85)

فَفَهَّمْنَاهَا سُلَيْمَانَ ۚ وَكُلًّا ءَاتَيْنَا حُكْمًا
وَعِلْمًا ۚ وَسَخَّرْنَا مَعَ دَاوُدَ الْجِبَالَ
يُسَبِّحْنَ وَالطَّيْرَ ۚ وَكُنَّا فَاعِلِينَ ﴿٧٩﴾

وَعَلَّمْنَاهُ صَنْعَةَ لَبُوسٍ لَّكُمْ لِيُحَصِّنْكُمْ
مِّنْ بِأَسْكُمْ ۖ فَهَلْ أَنتُمْ شَاكِرُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

وَلِسُلَيْمَانَ الرِّيحَ عَاصِفَةً تَجْرِي بِأَمْرِهِ
إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الَّتِي بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا ۚ وَكُنَّا بِكُلِّ
شَيْءٍ عَلِيمِينَ ﴿٨١﴾

وَمِنَ الشَّيَاطِينِ مَن يَغْوُصُونَ لَهُ
وَيَعْمَلُونَ عَمَلًا دُونَ ذَلِكَ ۚ وَكُنَّا
لَهُمْ حَافِظِينَ ﴿٨٢﴾

﴿٨٣﴾ وَأَيُّوبَ إِذْ نَادَىٰ رَبَّهُ أَنِّي مَسَّنِيَ الضُّرُّ
وَأَنْتَ أَرْحَمُ الرَّاحِمِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

فَأَسْتَجَبْنَا لَهُ ۖ فَكَشَفْنَا مَا بِهِ ۖ مِنْ ضُرِّ
وَأَتَيْنَاهُ أَهْلَهُ وَمِثْلَهُمْ مَعَهُمْ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ
عِنْدِنَا وَذِكْرَىٰ لِلْعَابِدِينَ ﴿٨٥﴾

وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِدْرِيسَ وَذَا الْكِفْلِ ۖ كُلٌّ
مِّنَ الصَّابِرِينَ ﴿٨٦﴾

وَأَدْخَلْنَاهُمْ فِي رَحْمَتِنَا ۖ إِنَّهُمْ مِّنَ
الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

We admitted them to Our grace, for they were among the righteous. (86)

And remember Dhu'l-Nūn, when he went away in anger, thinking that We would not force him into a tight situation! But then he cried out in the deep darkness: 'There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed!' (87)

So We responded to him and delivered him from his distress. Thus do We deliver those who have faith. (88)

And remember Zachariah when he cried out to his Lord: 'My Lord! Do not leave me alone, although You are the best of inheritors.' (89)

So We responded to him and gave him John, having cured his wife for him. These [three] would vie with one another in doing good works, and would call on Us in yearning and awe. They were always humble before Us. (90)

And remember her who guarded her chastity, whereupon We breathed into her of Our spirit and caused her, together with her son, to become a sign to all mankind. (91)

Surely, your community is but one community, and I am your only Lord. So, worship Me alone. (92)

وَدَا أَلْنُونِ إِذْ ذَهَبَ مُغْضِبًا فَظَنَّ أَنْ لَنْ نَقْدِرَ عَلَيْهِ فَنَادَى فِي الظُّلُمَاتِ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ سُبْحَانَكَ إِنِّي كُنْتُ مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

فَاسْتَجَبْنَا لَهُ وَخَجَّيْنَاهُ مِنَ الغَمِّ ۚ وَكَذَلِكَ نُجِي الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٨٨﴾

وَزَكَرِيَّا إِذْ نَادَى رَبَّهُ رَبِّ لَا تَذَرْنِي فَرْدًا وَأَنْتَ خَيْرُ الْوَارِثِينَ ﴿٨٩﴾

فَاسْتَجَبْنَا لَهُ وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ يَحْيَىٰ وَأَصْلَحْنَا لَهُ زَوْجَهُ ۚ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا يُسْرِعُونَ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَيَدْعُونَنَا رَغَبًا وَرَهَبًا وَكَانُوا لَنَا خَشِيعِينَ ﴿٩٠﴾

وَالَّتِي أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهَا مِنْ رُوحِنَا وَجَعَلْنَاهَا وَابْنَهَا آيَةً لِلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٩١﴾

إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ ﴿٩٢﴾

Overview

In this third passage the *sūrah* speaks about the communities that followed God's messengers, but it is not exhaustive in this respect. Some are not mentioned at all. Some are given only a brief mention, while others are referred to in some detail. We see in these references how God takes care of His messengers and bestows His grace on them. We also see the fate of those who continued to accuse their messengers of being liars, even though clear proof was given to them. We are further given an idea of how God tests His messengers, at times with delightful pleasures and at others with much affliction, and how they pass these tests.

The wisdom behind sending human messengers is also clear in this passage. The oneness of the faith and the way to be followed by all messengers, at all times, is also clearly apparent. We feel that they belong to a single community, despite the fact that they lived at different times and in different places. All this testifies to the oneness of the Maker, the will behind all events, and the consistency of the overall law that governs and unites the universe. It directs us all to one end: namely, to serve the One God worthy of worship: *"I am your only Lord. So, worship Me alone."* (Verse 92)

Guidance and Light for Moses

Indeed We vouchsafed to Moses and Aaron the standard by which to distinguish right from wrong, a guiding light and a reminder for the God-conscious who fear their Lord in their most secret thoughts, and are weary of the Last Hour. And this one, too, is a blessed reminder which We have bestowed from on high: will you, then, reject it? (Verses 48-50)

We saw earlier in the *sūrah* how the Arab unbelievers used to ridicule God's Messenger (peace be upon him) on account of his being human. They also denied God's revelations, describing them as sorcery, poetry or mere fabrication. Now the *sūrah* shows that sending human messengers is a consistent norm, and it proceeds to give examples of such. Furthermore, the fact that God bestows books on His messengers is not a strange occurrence. For Moses and Aaron were also given a book by Him. Their book is here called '*al-Furqān*', which is the same description given to the Qur'ān. Thus, unity can be seen even in the names of these revealed books. All such books are revealed by God so as to serve as a standard distinguishing right from wrong, truth from falsehood, guidance from deviation. They also make clear the difference between ways of life. As such, each is a criterion for judgement. This is the quality which applies to both the Torah and the Qur'ān.

The Torah is also described as a '*guiding light*' which dispels all the darkness that

may engulf the human mind, leading to errant beliefs. It also dispels the darkness that leads people astray and the darkness of falsehood. In such types of darkness both reason and conscience may find themselves at a loss. Indeed, the human heart remains in darkness until the light of faith is kindled within it. Faith thus sets it aglow, clearly setting its approach, guiding it to the path that should be followed, so that confusion does not arise from divergent values and concepts.

The Torah is further described as *'a reminder for the God-conscious'*, reminding people of their true Lord, ensuring that they gain esteem and that they are always remembered by other people. In this respect, one only needs to ask what the status of the Children of Israel was before the revelation of the Torah! In essence they endured much humiliation under Pharaoh who slaughtered their male offspring, spared their women, and put them to hard labour and torture.

From among these God-conscious people, however, a certain group is singled out. These are the ones *'who fear their Lord in their most secret thoughts'*. (Verse 49) This is because those who fear God in their hearts when they have not seen Him, those who *'are weary of the Last Hour'*, working hard to prepare themselves for its arrival, are indeed the ones who benefit by the light and follow its guidance. To them, God's book provides an important reminder. Hence, they always remember God, and they are often favourably mentioned by other people.

This is as far as Moses and Aaron are deliberated upon here. A brief reference to the Qur'ān follows: *"And this one, too, is a blessed reminder which We have bestowed from on high."* (Verse 50) It is not a new invention. It is nothing to wonder about since reminders were frequently revealed from on high. They are then asked rhetorically: *"Will you, then, reject it?"* (Verse 50) How could you, and on what basis, since earlier messages were vouchsafed to God's messengers in the past?

Having made this very brief reference to the two prophets, Moses and Aaron, as well as the book revealed to them, the *sūrah* now provides a detailed episode from the life of Abraham, the first grandfather of the Arabs. It was Abraham who built the Ka`bah in which the unbelievers now placed their idols and worshipped them. In fact he was the one who destroyed the idols worshipped by his own people. Hence, the *sūrah* portrays him standing up to idolatry and destroying its very symbols.

Questioning People's Beliefs

The episode narrated here is that of Abraham's message, given in a sequence of scenes that leave short gaps in between. It starts by mentioning that Abraham was initially given a sense of what is right, which here means God's oneness. In fact, it is the most important aspect of guidance which is clearly understood here as the referent of the phrase, *'what is right'*: *"We formerly bestowed on Abraham his*

consciousness of what is right, and *We were aware of him when he said to his father and his people, 'What are these images to which you are so devoted?'*" (Verses 51-52) This means that God gave Abraham his sense of what is right, knowing his aptitude to bear the trust given to His messengers.

"He said to his father and his people, 'What are these images to which you are so devoted?'" (Verse 52) The way he put this question is indicative of his sharp sense of what is right. He gave those stones and wooden shapes their true names, 'images'. He did not call them 'deities'. Indeed, he stated his disapproval of their worship of those images by using the word 'devoted', which indicates a permanent action. Needless to say, those people did not devote all their time to worshipping such idols, but they nonetheless attached great respect to them. This is, then, devotion in an abstract sense. The way Abraham put the question, describing them as permanent devotees to such idols, indicates that he considered their action absolutely absurd.

They defended their action by saying: *"We found our forefathers worshipping them."* (Verse 53) Their answer indicates that they were in a stone-like inflexible state of mind that chained them to absurd traditions. They were far removed from freedom of thought, reflection and the proper evaluation of things and situations which belief in God generates as it breaks the chains of imaginary, baseless and traditional sanctities.

"Said he: Indeed, you and your forefathers have been in evident error." (Verse 54) That such images were worshipped by their fathers could not impart to such objects any value which they did not have. Nor could it have given them any undeserved sanctity. Nor is real value derived from giving forefathers an elevated status and following in their footsteps. It is rather the result of proper, free and objective judgement.

When Abraham confronted them with such objectivity they asked: *"Is it the truth you are preaching to us? Or are you one who jests?"* (Verse 55) It is the kind of question asked only by someone who is unsure of his own beliefs, because he never questioned them to make sure they were right. Both his thinking and his soul are impaired by the myths and traditions he has thoughtlessly accepted. As such, he is uncertain about anything. Worship conversely must rely only on certainty, not on unsubstantiated myths. This is the state of loss that engulfs those who do not believe in a faith based on the clear truth of God's oneness that brings mind and conscience into perfect harmony.

Abraham, on the other hand, enjoys a state of complete certainty. He knows his Lord. His thoughts are full of the truth of His oneness. Hence, he says with absolute clarity: *"Indeed, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, He who has brought them into being. And I am a witness to this [truth]."* (Verse 56) He is the Lord of man, the

heavens and earth: a single Lord who is the Creator of all. Indeed, creation and Lordship are two qualities that go hand in hand. Such is the straight and clear faith. It is totally different from what unbelievers think when they claim that there are several deities, whilst at the same time conceding that none of them creates except God, the only Creator. Yet still they worship such deities knowing they are powerless to create.

Abraham reiterates his certainty like a witness testifying to a situation over which he has no doubt whatsoever: *"I am a witness to this truth."* Abraham did not witness the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor did he witness his own creation, or that of his people. But the matter is so clear that true believers testify to it with absolute certainty. Everything in the universe confirms the oneness of the Creator who controls all. Moreover, every particle in man's constitution appeals to him to acknowledge this truth, as well as the unity of the law that governs the whole universe and conducts its affairs.

Abraham follows this with a declaration to his people that he is intent on doing something to their deities: *"By God, I shall most certainly bring about the downfall of your idols when you have turned your backs and gone away!"* (Verse 57) But he leaves his intent unclear. The *sūrah* does not mention the reply his people gave, because they relied on their feeling that a man like Abraham could not harm their deities. Hence, they left him and went away.

Abraham, however, went ahead with what he intended: *"So he broke the idols to pieces, [all] except for the biggest of them, so that they might turn back to him."* (Verse 58) Thus, the idols which were the subject of worship were turned into small, broken pieces of stone and wood. But Abraham left the largest one untouched to see his people's reaction when they discovered what had happened. They might, for example, have wanted to ask the idol how all this happened and why it did not rise to their defence. They might even have reconsidered the whole issue and realized the absurdity of their beliefs and so begun to think properly.

A Debate to Open People's Eyes

Abraham's people returned to find the utter destruction of their idols except this largest one. But they did not question that idol or even ask themselves how their deities could suffer such a fate without defending themselves. Nor did they ask why the large idol did not take it upon itself to defend them all. They could not ask such questions, because the myths in which they believed rendered their minds useless, chaining their power of thought. Essentially, they could not consider the matter objectively, and were unable to ask the most logical question. They were only furious with the one who had brought all this upon their idols. *"They said: Who has done this to*

our gods? He is definitely one of the wrongdoers." (Verse 59) Then, those who had heard Abraham both object to his father's and peers' idol worship and threaten to destroy the same found their answer: *"They said: We heard a youth speak of them; he is called Abraham."* (Verse 60)

It appears that Abraham (peace be upon him) was still a young man when God bestowed on him the gift of knowing what is right. Hence, he objected to the worship of idols and destroyed them when the chance presented itself. The question arises, however, as to whether he had already been given his message, or whether he acted on an inspiration that led him to the truth before he had received his message. In this latter case, his denunciation of idol worship and his call upon his father to follow his path were the result of that inspiration. This was most probably the case.

On the other hand, it is possible that Abraham's people's reference to him as 'a youth' was meant merely as a slight. This is supported by their words referring to him in the passive voice, *'he is called Abraham'*.

They implied that he was unknown, and represented no threat. This is possible, but we think the first explanation to be more probable, viz. that he was only a young man at the time.

"They said: Then bring him here in sight of all people, so that they may bear witness." (Verse 61) They wanted to denounce him in public so that people should know of his deeds and their consequences. And when he was brought before them, they said: *"Abraham, was it you who did this to our gods?"* (Verse 62) They continued to describe their idols as gods even when they had been smashed into pieces and formed little more than a heap of rubble. Abraham derided their thinking, and even though he faced them alone, mocked their stupidity. He was looking at the whole thing with an open mind and a clear heart. Hence, he gave them this mocking answer that fits their lowly level of thinking: *"He answered: Nay, it was this one, the biggest of them, who did it. But ask them, if they can speak!"* (Verse 63)

Derision is very clear in his answer. Hence there is no need to describe it as a lie and to try to find some justification for it, as commentators on the Qur'ān have done. The whole thing is much simpler than that. Abraham simply wanted to say to his people: these figures do not know who smashed them to pieces, nor whether it was me or this large idol which is as motionless as they were. All of them are inanimate and have no faculty of recognition. You are also deprived of your faculties, which accounts for your inability to distinguish between what is possible and what is impossible. You cannot even tell whether it was me who broke them or this big one. Hence, *'ask them, if they can speak!'*

It seems that his sarcasm shook them into some sort of reflection. *"So they turned to themselves, saying, 'Surely, it is you who are doing wrong.'" (Verse 64)* This was a good

sign: not only were they aware of the absurdity of their stance but also how wrong it was to worship such statues. For once it seemed possible that they would open their eyes and see how untenable their position was.

Sadly, it was just a bright flash followed by utter darkness. Their minds seemed to see the light, but they soon sank back into lifelessness: *"But then they relapsed into their old position and said, 'You know very well that these (idols) cannot speak!"* (Verse 65)

Their first reaction was one of returning to their senses, but their second was a relapse, a tumbling over their heads, as the Qur'ān describes. Initially, something had stirred them to reflect, but soon thereafter they had again lost their senses, lacking clear thought, and logical argument. Had there been any logic, their last statement gives Abraham a forceful argument against them. What more could he argue than the fact that those statues and deities were dumb, unable to speak? Hence, Abraham confronts them with impatience, which incidentally was very uncharacteristic of him. Basically, their absurdity was intolerable even for the most forbearing person: *"Said [Abraham]: Do you then worship, instead of God, something that cannot benefit or harm you in any way? Fie upon you and upon all that you worship instead of God! Will you not, then, use your reason?"* (Verses 66-67) Here we see Abraham's patience exhausted, as he expresses his amazement at their absurdity.

At this point, they resorted to tyranny which always prevails when tyrants are left speechless, unable to produce a coherent counter-argument. They resorted to brute force, rushing to inflict on him a painful suffering: *"They cried: Burn him, and succour your gods, if you are going to do [anything at all]."* (Verse 68)

Yet what sort of deities are these which need the support of their servants, while they avail themselves of nothing? They are powerless, helpless.

When the Fire Was Made Cool

So, the unbelievers cried, *'burn him!'* A different word, however, was also said at this point to render everything they said meaningless, and to reduce their schemes to nothingness. This was the supreme word that can never be countered: *"But We said: Fire, be cool to Abraham, and a source of inner peace [for him]."* (Verse 69) And thus the fire was cool and a source of inner peace for Abraham to enjoy and relax in.

How is this possible? Yet why do we even ask about this when it is only the word, 'be', that needs to be said for worlds and universes to come into existence and for universal rules to be set in operation: *"When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it, 'Be'- and it is."* (36: 82) We do not need to ask how the fire soothed rather than burnt Abraham when it is a well known phenomenon that fire burns all living tissues. For it was the One who said to the fire in the first place, 'burn' who also said to it in this

instance, 'be cool and a source of inner peace'. It is the same word that initiates its object at the moment it is said, whatever that object may be, whether it is familiar to us or not.

Those who compare God's actions to those of human beings are the ones who ask how this could happen. On the other hand, those of us who understand that the two are widely different in both their nature and the means they employ neither ask such questions, nor do we try to find explanations, scientific or otherwise. The question is not one for analyses and explanations by human standards. Any method that tries to explain such miracles except by reference to God's absolute power suffers a basic defect. God's actions cannot be subjected to human standards or explained within the confines of man's limited knowledge.

All we need to do is to believe that this actually took place, because the One who did it is able to make it happen. What He did to the fire to make it cool so that it gave Abraham inner peace, and what He did to Abraham so that the fire did not burn him are points the Qur'ān does not explain because our limited minds fall short of understanding them. On the other hand, we have no source of evidence other than the Qur'ānic text.

Transforming the fire so as to give Abraham coolness and inner peace is only one example of God's infinite ability, even though they may not be totally contrary to what we are familiar with, as this one. There are countless other difficulties and circumstances that beset individuals and communities which, if allowed to run their course, would cause their total ruin. But then God administers just a small touch to bring about life instead of death, happiness instead of misery, and endless goodness instead of unmitigated evil. Thus we see how the command that made the fire cool, bringing peace to Abraham is frequently repeated in the life of individuals, groups and communities, as well as in the life of ideas and beliefs. This command is only a manifestation of the word which renders any scheme, effort or design futile, because it is the final say by the highest power.

"They sought to lay a snare for him, but We caused them to be the absolute losers." (Verse 70) It is reported that the king who was Abraham's contemporary was the Nimrod, the Aramaic king of Iraq. He and his supporters were destroyed by some punishment inflicted by God. The reports we have differ as to the details of this punishment. We have no way of verifying them. However, all that we need to know is that God saved Abraham from the torture prepared for him while his opponents who schemed against him were the ones to suffer utter loss. They are described in the Qur'ān as the '*absolute losers*'.

"We delivered him and Lot, [bringing them] to the land which We have blessed for all mankind." (Verse 71) It was to the land of Palestine that he and his nephew, Lot,

emigrated. This was the land to receive revelations from on high for a very long time and the area where prophets and messengers of Abraham's descent were raised. This area incorporates the holy land where the second house of worship was built. It is a fertile land with rich tillage. All these blessings were added to that of the generations of prophets living there.

And We gave him Isaac and, as an additional gift, Jacob, and caused all of them to be righteous men, and We made them leaders to give guidance at Our behest. We inspired them to do good works, and to be constant in prayer, and to give regular charity. It is Us alone that they worshipped. (Verses 72-73)

Abraham left his home country where his family and community lived. So God compensated him with this blessed land as a better country to live in. He also gave him his son Isaac and grandson Jacob to be a better family than the one he had earlier. He also gave him a better community than his old one and raised from his offspring leaders to give mankind guidance. He inspired them to do all sorts of good works, to attend to their prayers and to give regular charity, or *zakāt*. They were obedient worshippers of God. All this was Abraham's blessed compensation given by God for his perseverance when he was tested. It was a goodly compensation to fit his endurance in adversity.

Endowed with Knowledge and Wisdom

And to Lot, too, We gave sound judgement and knowledge. We saved him from that community which was given to deeds of abomination. They were people lost in evil, depraved. Him We admitted to Our grace; for he was righteous. (Verses 74-75)

The story of Lot is related in full detail elsewhere in the Qur'ān. Here we have only a brief reference to it, as he emigrated from Iraq with his uncle, Abraham. Lot stayed in the township of Sodom, where the people resorted to repugnant practices. They were guilty of abominable, perverted sexual indecency, men with men, openly, without any sense of shame or guilt. Hence, God poured His punishment on the township and its people, as "*they were people lost in evil*". (Verse 74) God saved Lot and his household with the exception of his wife. "*Him We admitted to Our grace; for he was righteous.*" (Verse 75) The way this verse is phrased suggests that God's grace is a place of refuge into which God admits whomever He wills so that they find peace, comfort and blessings.

This is followed by a similarly short reference to Noah and his saviour: "*And long before that, Noah called out [to Us], and We responded to him and saved him with his household from the great calamity, and helped him against the people who had denied Our*

revelations. Lost in evil were they, and so We caused them all to drown.” (Verses 76-77)

Again the reference here does not provide details. It is simply to confirm God’s response to Noah when he appealed to Him. Noah lived at an earlier time than Lot, hence the reference, *long before that*’. In Noah’s case as well, he and his household were saved with the exception of his wife. As for his people, they were destroyed by the flood, which is described here as *‘the great calamity’*. It is described in detail in *Sūrah 11, Hūd*.

Then follows a fairly detailed account of an episode in the story of David and Solomon:

And remember David and Solomon, when both gave judgement concerning the field into which some people’s sheep had strayed and grazed by night. We were witness to their judgement. We gave Solomon insight into the case. Yet We gave sound judgement and knowledge to both of them. And We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds. We are indeed able to do [all things]. And We taught him how to make garments for you, so that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear. Will you, then, give thanks? To Solomon We subjected the stormy wind, so that it sped at his behest towards the land which We had blessed. It is We who have knowledge of everything. And of the evil ones, [We assigned him] some that dived for him into the sea and performed other works besides; but it was We who kept a watch over them. (Verses 78-82)

The story of the field over which David and Solomon gave judgement is detailed in some reports as stating that two men came to David. One of them had a field, or a vineyard according to some reports, while the other had a flock of sheep. The field’s owner said: ‘This man’s sheep traversed my field at night, leaving it devastated.’ David ruled that the owner of the field should take the sheep in compensation for his wasted crops. The sheep’s owner then passed by Solomon and told him of David’s judgement. Solomon went to his father and said: “Prophet of God, you should have judged differently.” David asked: “How should I judge?” Solomon replied: “Give the sheep to the field’s owner to benefit by them and give the field to the sheep’s owner to tend until it is returned to its original state. Then each man returns to the other his property. Thus, the field’s owner will get his field and the sheep’s owner his sheep.” David confirmed that that was the right judgement, and he ordered it to be carried out.

Both David and Solomon judged according to their own discretion, but God was observing their judgement. He inspired Solomon to give the verdict that was fairer. David’s judgement aimed to compensate the field’s owner for the damage done to him, which establishes justice. But Solomon’s judgement added to justice a constructive dimension. Thus, justice became a motive to initiate constructive effort.

This is a higher level of justice, one which was given by God's inspiration.

Both David and Solomon were given wisdom and knowledge: *"Yet We gave sound judgement and knowledge to both of them."* (Verse 79) There was nothing wrong with David's judgement, but that of Solomon's went a step further because it was inspired.

The *sūrah* moves on to show what was given specifically to each of these prophets, starting with the father: *"And We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds. We are indeed able to do [all things]. And We taught him how to make garments for you, so that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear. Will you, then, give thanks?"* (Verses 79-80)

A Special Gift to a Special Man

David was famous for his Psalms, which were hymns that he chanted in his melodious voice. They were echoed by his surroundings, including the mountains and birds. When a human being feels his bond with God alive in his heart, he feels that the entire universe responds to him. All impediments and barriers separating different kinds of creatures are thus removed, so that they join together in one great, universal entity. In such moments of clarity, man's soul is united with all about it. It is no longer distinct from its surroundings. Indeed it is one with all that is around it.

As we read these verses we can imagine David chanting his Psalms, oblivious to his own separate entity, letting his soul move freely in the universe, looking at God's animate and inanimate creation. He feels that they echo his chanting and in this way respond to him. The entire universe thus becomes an orchestra singing a marvellous tune of God's praise and glorification. *"The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises."* (17: 44) The one who understands such praises is a person who sheds all barriers and separations. He is one who turns to God.

"We caused the mountains to join David in extolling Our limitless glory, and likewise the birds. We are indeed able to do [all things]." (Verse 79) There is nothing difficult for God when He wills to have it done or put in place, regardless of whether it is familiar or not to mankind.

"And We taught him how to make garments for you, so that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear. Will you, then, give thanks?" (Verse 80) That was how God taught him to make shields using interconnected rings. Shields were previously made of long plates. Small, interconnected rings can make a shield that is easier to use and more flexible. It seems that it was David who invented this, as God

instructed him to do. God reminds people of His favour in teaching David this art so as to protect them in wartime: *"So that they may fortify you against all that which may cause you fear."* The verse ends with a question that encourages them to do the right thing: *"Will you, then, give thanks?"*

Human civilization has moved step by step in its discoveries, because the task that man was given to build life on earth allowed him to move one step at a time, to reorganize his life after each advance. Reorganizing life according to a new system is not easy for the human soul, because it shakes its foundations and alters its habits. A period of readjustment is thus needed until man settles into his new system. God in His wisdom has willed to allow a period of resettlement, long or short as it may be, after each leap forward.

In our own times, however, an important cause of anxiety that is characteristic is the rapidity of scientific and social changes which do not allow humanity a period of resettlement. Man is not given the chance to adapt to new conditions or recognize their merits.

The case of Solomon was even greater: *"To Solomon We subjected the stormy wind, so that it sped at his behest towards the land which We had blessed. It is We who have knowledge of everything. And of the evil ones, [We assigned him] some that dived for him into the sea and performed other works besides; but it was We who kept a watch over them."* (Verses 81-82) Reports of all types are given about Solomon, most derived from Israelite sources and interwoven with unfounded myth. We will not go into this maze, but will rather confine our discussion to what is stated in the Qur'ān. Nothing else about Solomon is certain.

The Qur'ānic text here states that winds, in their stormy conditions, were made subservient to Solomon, moving at his bidding to the blessed land, which was most probably Palestine, given it was earlier described as such in Abraham's story. The question asked here though is how all this was done.

There is the story of the magic carpet which is said to have carried Solomon and his courtiers to Palestine and back in a very short period, while camel caravans took a month to cover the same distance. This report relies on what is mentioned in another *sūrah*: *"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."* (34: 12) The Qur'ān though does not mention anything about a magic carpet, nor do we find it in any authentic report. Thus we cannot say anything further about it.

It is safer to explain this statement about the wind by saying that it was directed, by God's will, to the blessed land in a cycle lasting one month each way. How? As we have said, we cannot ask such a question about the operation of God's will, which is free and unrestrained. It is God's will that creates the laws of nature and sets them

in operation. What we know of the laws operating in the universe is very little. There is nothing to preclude that other laws, about which we know nothing, are in operation, but their effects may surface only when God wills: *"It is We who have knowledge of everything."* (Verse 81) Unlike human knowledge, God's knowledge is complete and perfect.

The same applies to making the *jinn* subservient to Solomon such that they dive into the depths of the sea, or deep into the earth, to bring him some of its hidden riches or to perform other works. The word *jinn* includes in its meaning everything that is concealed, hidden or unknown. Qur'ānic texts mention a type of creature unknown to us, called the Jinn. It was from among these that God assigned some to Solomon to dive in the sea and do his bidding. Furthermore, God kept watch over them so that they did not escape or rebel. It is He who holds sway over all His creatures, putting them to whatever purpose He chooses in any way He likes.

God tested David and Solomon with what pleases people. David was tested in connection with the administration of justice, while Solomon's test involved nobly bred, swift-footed steeds, as is detailed in *Sūrah* 38. So we will leave that for now. Both David and Solomon persevered, sought God's forgiveness and passed their tests. They remained grateful to God for His favours.

A Test of Hardship for a Prophet

The *sūrah* also provides us with the example of Job, the Prophet, (peace be upon him), being tested with hardship:

And remember Job, when he cried out to his Lord. Affliction has befallen me, but of all those who show mercy You are the most merciful.' We responded to him and removed all the affliction he suffered. We restored to him his family and as many more with them, as an act of grace from Ourselves, and as a reminder to all who worship Us. (Verses 83-84)

Job's story is one of the finest that centres on a test. Qur'ānic texts mentioning Job only speak in general terms, giving few details. In this particular instance, the *sūrah* mentions Job's supplication and God's response, because the overall atmosphere of the *sūrah* is one of grace bestowed from on high on His prophets and the care He takes of them when He tests them. This applies in all test situations, including rejection by their peoples, as with Abraham, Lot and Noah; power and wealth as with David and Solomon; or hardship with Job.

Job's prayer, as mentioned here, does not go beyond describing his condition and emphasizing God's attributes: *"And remember job, when he cried out to his Lord:*

Affliction has befallen me, but of all those who show mercy You are the most merciful." (Verse 83) He does not appeal for his condition to be changed, because he wants to remain patient in adversity. Nor does he suggest anything to his Lord. His is an attitude of perfect humility before Him. Thus, he is God's model servant: neither panicking in a situation of adversity nor expressing frustration at the hardship he endures. Indeed, his is considered a test of the highest severity.² He is reluctant even to pray to God to lift his hardship. Therefore, he leaves the matter entirely to God, knowing that He knows his situation and does not need his prayer.

At the moment Job addressed his Lord with such confidence and humility, his prayer was answered and God's grace was bestowed on him in abundance. His test was over: *"We responded to him and relieved all the affliction he suffered. We restored to him his family and as many more with them."* (Verse 84) His personal affliction was removed, and his health was restored. This indicates complete recovery, leaving no trace of illness. The affliction which concerned his family was also lifted. God compensated him for the one he had lost by giving him twice as many. It is said that he had lost his children, and God gave him twice their number, or He might have given him new children and grandchildren.

All this was as *"an act of grace from Ourselves,"* because every blessing is an act of God's grace. It was also *"a reminder to all who worship Us."* It reminds them of God and the tests He may put us through, and of His grace that will not fail to follow the hardship. The test to which Job was put provides an example for all mankind, and his patient endurance sets a model for all to follow.

The reference to those *"who worship Us"* within the context of hard tests is especially significant. Such worshippers may be subjected to tests and hardship. To endure with patience is a requirement of faith and worship. The whole matter is very serious. Faith is a trust which is given only to those who are able to shoulder its responsibility and endure its hardship. It is not mere words, carelessly uttered by anyone.

The *sūrah* then refers very briefly to three other prophets: *"And remember Ishmael, Idrīs and Dhu'l-Kifl: they all were men of constancy and patience. We admitted them to Our grace, for they were among the righteous."* (Verses 85-86) Again with all three the quality of patience in adversity is highlighted. Ishmael showed his patience when he was required to submit himself for sacrifice, and he duly did so, saying to his father, Abraham: *"Father, do as you are bidden. You will find me, if God so wills, among those who*

² There are numerous reports about what happened to Job, some of which are clearly exaggerated. Some suggest that he suffered an illness that made people turn away from him, unable to look at him. Thus was he left outside the city. We have no reliable evidence to support this. It is indeed contrary to what a messenger of God is like. What Qur'ānic texts suggest however is that he suffered hardship within himself and within his family. That is more than enough as a test for anyone. — Author's note.

are patient in adversity." (37: 102)

As for Idrīs, as we noted earlier, we know nothing about his time or where he lived. Some people suggest that he was Osiris, whom the Egyptians worshipped after his death and invented some legends concerning him. He is said to have been the first teacher of mankind, from whom farming and industry were learned. But we have no evidence to support this. We need only know that he was patient in some good way that merits a record in God's book.

Dhu'l-Kifl is also unknown: we cannot determine when or where he lived. Perhaps he was one of the Israelite prophets, or among their most pious and God-fearing people. It is also said that before one of their prophets died, he guaranteed that he would take care of the Children of Israel, giving a warrant that he would spend the night in worship, fast during the day and not allow anger to take hold of him when he ruled in a dispute. He honoured all his commitments. It is said that he was called Dhu'l-Kifl because of this, since his name refers to such practices.³ But none of these details is supported by evidence. The Qur'ānic text here is sufficient to credit him with being patient in adversity, a highly rewarding quality.

"We admitted them to Our grace, for they were among the righteous." (Verse 86) This is why they are mentioned in this *sūrah*.

Swallowed by the Whale

We then have a brief outline of Jonah's story to fit with the approach followed in this *sūrah*. It is however given in more detail in *Sūrah 37, al-Ṣāffāt*

And remember Dhu'l-Nūn, when he went away in anger, thinking that We would not force him into a tight situation! But then he cried out in the deep darkness: 'There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed!' So We responded to him and delivered him from his distress. Thus do We deliver those who have faith. (Verses 87-88)

Jonah is here called Dhu'l-Nūn, which means 'man of the whale' because he was swallowed by the whale and then thrown out. He was sent to a particular city, and he called on its people to believe in God, but they rejected both him and his message. By way of response to their stubbornness, he left in anger. He showed little inclination to persevere with them on account of their rejection. He thought that God would not restrict him to a particular place, given there were many cities and communities, and that he would thus be directed to go somewhere else. This is what is meant by the expression rendered here as *"thinking that We would not force him into*

³ The name Dhu'l-Kifl means 'the one giving a guarantee'. – Editor's note.

a tight situation!"

Angry and frustrated, he walked away, and found himself sometime later by the sea, where he saw a laden boat. He boarded it. When the boat was in the middle of the sea, it was apparent that its load was too heavy. The shipmaster said that one passenger must be thrown overboard in order to give the rest a chance to survive. They all drew lots and the draw fell to Jonah. The other passengers threw him into the sea, or he might have jumped overboard. It was then that the whale swallowed him and he found himself in a most tight situation. He felt shrouded by several layers of darkness: the darkness of the whale's belly, the darkness of the deep blue sea and the darkness of the night. At this moment, he cried out: *"There is no deity other than You! Limitless are You in Your glory! I have done wrong indeed."* (Verse 87) God answered his prayer and saved him from the distress he was suffering. The whale thus threw him out near the shore. The remainder of his story is taken up in *Sūrah 37, al-Şāffāt*.

There are in Jonah's story some significant points we need to reflect upon. First, Jonah did not initially show enough patience and willingness to endure the difficulties of delivering God's message. He quickly became fed up, abandoned his people and moved on, angry and frustrated. He felt his situation to be very tight. But God exposed him to a much tighter and harder distress as compared with the opposition of unbelievers. Had Jonah not turned to his Lord in repentance and admitted that he had wronged himself by leaving his position of duty, he would not have been relieved of his distress. It was God's care that saved him.

The advocates of a message must be ready to bear the burden involved in such advocacy, remain patient in the face of rejection and vicious opposition. When a person is certain of the truth of the message he advocates, he finds the opposition of people who accuse him of false inventions and deliberate lying difficult to handle. Yet to remain patient in the face of such adversity is only part of the duties of such advocacy. Those who are entrusted with delivering a message and advocate the truth must remain patient, face the difficulties and persevere with their advocacy. They must continue to present their message to people and call on them to believe in it, time after time.

Such advocates cannot give in to despair. They cannot give up on people, believing that they will never respond to the truth, no matter how much opposition they face, and how often they are rejected and accused of falsehood. If their hundred attempts to touch people's hearts meet with failure, their next attempt may have a positive result. Indeed, such a result may come only after one thousand and one attempts. Hence, if they have already tried a thousand times and failed, they should try once more in the hope that, with God's grace, their next attempt will be more successful.

The way a message must follow in order to touch people's hearts is neither easy nor comfortable. Positive responses may not be forthcoming. A great heap of false beliefs, erring practices, customs, traditions and situations weigh heavily on people's hearts and minds. This heap must be removed, and hearts must be revived in every possible way. A touch on every sensitive receptor must be made to try to find the effective nerve. With determination and diligence the right touch will inevitably be made, and a complete transformation of the addressee is achieved. We are often surprised that a thousand attempts may be made with one particular person, but without success. Then a casual gesture, coming at the right time, touches the right cord, and the person concerned goes through a complete transformation without any difficulty.

A comparison may be made with trying to find a particular radio station. We turn the tuning key to and fro, but we miss it despite taking full care to find it. Then suddenly a casual touch may hit upon it and we enjoy a good reception. The human heart is akin to a radio receiver. Advocates of the divine message must try hard to find the right spot that enables every heart to receive that message. When one thousand attempts have failed, the next one may succeed.

It is easy for an advocate of the divine message to be angry when people turn away from him. To give up and quit is always easy. It may enable us to cool down. But of what service is that to the message itself? It is the message that is most important, not its advocate. If we are angry, we should remain patient. It is infinitely better for us not to lose heart and not to give up.

An advocate is merely a tool in God's hand, and God preserves His message better than us. We must discharge our duty however hard the opposition we may face. We then leave the matter to God, and He gives guidance to whomever He pleases. In the story of Jonah we thus have a good example to reflect upon. His return to his Lord and acknowledgement of his error provide a good lesson. Furthermore, in the grace God showed him, answering the prayer he addressed through the compounded darkness, gives us great hope: *"Thus do We deliver those who have faith."* (Verse 88)

One Community Throughout History

Along the same lines of its brief accounts of different prophets, the *sūrah* gives a quick reference to Zachariah and his son John, highlighting how God responded to Zachariah and answered his prayers:

And remember Zachariah when he cried out to his Lord: My Lord! Do not leave me alone, although You are the best of inheritors.' So We responded to him and gave him John, having cured his wife for him. They all would vie with one another in doing

good works, and would call on Us in yearning and awe. They were always humble before Us. (Verses 89-90)

The story of John's birth is given in detail in *Sūrahs* 19 and 3, *Maryam* and the *House of `Imrān*. Here it is given very briefly to fit with the rest of the *sūrah*. It begins with Zachariah's prayer, 'My Lord, do not leave me alone,' without a successor to take care of the temple. Zachariah was in charge of the temple where the Israelites offered their worship, before the birth of Jesus. However, Zachariah does not forget that the ultimate custodian of faith and property is God Himself: "You are the best of inheritors." He only needs a successor who will attend well to the faith and to his family. People are the medium to fulfil God's will on earth.

The answer to this prayer was swift and direct at the same time. "So We responded to him and gave him John, having cured his wife for him." (Verse 90) She was barren, unable to bear children. The *sūrah* overlooks all details to give us the ultimate result of God's response to Zachariah's prayer. "They all would vie with one another in doing good works." Hence, God gave an immediate response to that prayer. They "would call on Us in yearning and awe." They yearned to earn God's pleasure and were in awe of incurring His displeasure. Their hearts were alive, always hopeful. "They were always humble before Us," showing no arrogance.

It was Zachariah's and his wife's good characteristics that deserved that God should bless them with a goodly son, John. Thus, the whole family was blessed, fully deserving of God's grace.

Finally, Mary is mentioned along with her son: "And remember her who guarded her chastity, whereupon We breathed into her of Our spirit and caused her, together with her son, to become a sign to all mankind." (Verse 91)

We note that Mary is not mentioned here by name, because the main reference in the chain of prophets is to her son, while she is second to him in this account. Reference is made to her main quality that is related to her son.⁴ Thus she is the one "who guarded her chastity," keeping herself pure of all sexual contact. Normally, this expression of guarding one's chastity is used to refer to marriage, because it protects against sin. Here it refers to its primary meaning, which is purity of all contact, whether legitimate or not. Thus, Mary is held innocent of all accusations levelled by the Jews against her and against Joseph the carpenter, who was with her in the service of the temple. The Gospels now in circulation claim that he married her but did not consummate the marriage and she remained a virgin.

⁴ A number of eminent scholars, notably Ibn Ḥazm, rank Mary among prophets, citing in evidence her mention in this *sūrah*, as well as her listing in *Sūrah* 19, *Maryam*, with a number of prophets and then referring to them all in Verse 58 as prophets. — Editor's note.

So, Mary guarded her chastity, and God breathed into her of His spirit. The breathing is left general here, unlike *Sūrah* 66, The Prohibition, where its location is mentioned. We discussed this in our commentary on *Sūrah* 19, *Maryam*. In order to stick to the general atmosphere generated by the text of this *sūrah*, we prefer not to add any details here, confining ourselves only to what is directly mentioned.

We “caused her, together with her son, to become a sign to all mankind.” (Verse 91) Indeed she was a unique sign, without similar example, whether in the past or in the future, a single such case in the history of mankind. Such a special case is worthy of our contemplation, for by doing so we recognize God’s power, unrestricted as it is by anything whatsoever. It is the power that designs natural laws and sets them in operation, but which is not subservient to them. It remains free of all restrictions.

At the end of this fast moving round, referring to different messengers, types of tests, and forms of God’s grace and mercy, the *sūrah* gives a final comment: “Surely, your community is but one community, and I am your only Lord. So, worship Me alone.” (Verse 92)

This is the community of prophets: a single community, sharing the same faith, following the same course, and turning to God alone. Thus we have a single community on earth, and a single Lord in heaven. He has no partners. No one can be worshipped but Him. This whole community follows the same line, acknowledging a single will in heaven and on earth. Thus, this whole round dovetails with the central theme of the *sūrah*, emphasizing the right faith based on the concept of God’s oneness, which is confirmed by all universal laws.

A Mercy for Mankind

*But people have divided themselves into factions.
Yet to Us shall they all return. (93)*

وَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ - كُلُّ إِلَيْنَا
رَاجِعُونَ ﴿٩٣﴾

*Whoever does righteous deeds and is a believer
withal, his endeavour shall not be lost: We shall
record it in his favour. (94)*

فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ وَهُوَ
مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَا كُفْرَانَ لِسَعِيهِ - وَإِنَّا لَهُ
كَاتِبُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾

*It is forbidden that any community We have ever
destroyed should not return [to Us]. (95)*

وَحَرَامٌ عَلَى قَرْيَةٍ أَهْلَكْنَاهَا أَنَّهُمْ لَا
يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾

*When Gog and Magog are let loose and swarm
down from every corner, (96)*

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا فُتِحَتْ يَأْجُوجُ وَمَأْجُوجُ
وَهُمْ مِّنْ كُلِّ حَدَبٍ يَنْسِلُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾

*when the true promise draws close [to its
fulfilment], staring in horror shall be the eyes of
the unbelievers, [and they will exclaim:] 'Oh, woe
to us! Of this we were indeed heedless. We have
assuredly done wrong.' (97)*

وَأَقْتَرَبَ الْوَعْدُ الْحَقُّ فَإِذَا هِيَ
شَخِصَةٌ أَبْصَرُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يَتَّوِيلُنَا قَدْ
كُنَّا فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَذَا بَلْ كُنَّا
ظَالِمِينَ ﴿٩٧﴾

*You and all that you were wont to worship
instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is
what you are destined for. (98)*

إِنَّكُمْ وَمَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ
حَصَبُ جَهَنَّمَ أَنتُمْ لَهَا وَرِدُونَ ﴿٩٨﴾

*If those [objects of your worship] had truly been
divine, they would not have been destined for it.
But there all shall abide. (99)*

لَوْ كَانَ هَتُولَاءِ ءَالِهَةً مَا وَرَدُوهَا ۗ

There they will be groaning with anguish, and bereft of hearing. (100)

But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell, (101)

hearing none of its hissing sound. They will abide in all that their souls have ever desired. (102)

The Supreme Terror will cause them no grief, since the angels will receive them with the greeting, 'This is your day which you were promised.' (103)

On that day We shall roll up the heavens like a scroll of parchment. As We brought into being the first creation, so We shall bring it forth anew. That is a promise We willed upon Ourselves. We are indeed able to do all things. (104)

We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder [given to Moses] that 'the righteous among My servants shall inherit the earth.' (105)

In this, there is a message for people who worship God. (106)

We have sent you as a [manifestation of Our]

وَكُلٌّ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾

لَهُمْ فِيهَا زَفِيرٌ وَهُمْ فِيهَا لَا يَسْمَعُونَ

﴿١٠١﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ سَبَقَتْ لَهُمْ مِنَّا الْحُسْنَىٰ

أُولَٰئِكَ عِنَّا مُبْعَدُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

لَا يَسْمَعُونَ حَسِيسَهَا وَهُمْ فِي مَا

أَشْتَهَتْ أَنفُسُهُمْ خَالِدُونَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

لَا تَحْزَنُهُمُ الْفَزَعُ الْأَكْبَرُ وَتَتَلَقَّيْنَهُمْ

الْمَلَائِكَةُ هَذَا يَوْمُكُمْ الَّذِي كُنْتُمْ

تُوعَدُونَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

يَوْمَ نَطْوِي السَّمَاءَ كَطَيِّ السِّجِلِّ

لِلْكِتَابِ كَمَا بَدَأْنَا أَوَّلَ خَلْقٍ نُعِيدُهُ

وَعَدًّا عَلَيْنَا إِنَّا كُنَّا فَاعِلِينَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

وَلَقَدْ كَتَبْنَا فِي الزَّبُورِ مِن بَعْدِ الذِّكْرِ

أَنَّ الْأَرْضَ يَرثُهَا عِبَادِيَ

الصَّالِحُونَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

إِنَّ فِي هَذَا لَبَلَاغًا لِّقَوْمٍ عَابِدِينَ

﴿١٠٦﴾

grace towards all the worlds. (107)

Say: 'It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God: will you, then, surrender yourselves to Him?' (108)

If they turn away, say: 'I have proclaimed this in equity to all of you alike; but I do not know whether that which you are promised is imminent or far off. (109)

He certainly knows all that is said openly, just as He knows all that you would conceal. (110)

For all I know, this may be but a trial for you, and a short reprieve.' (111)

Say: 'My Lord, judge You in truth!' and [say]: 'Our Lord is the Most Merciful whose help is ever to be sought against all [the blasphemies] you utter.' (112)

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٠٧﴾

قُلْ إِنَّمَا يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ إِلَهُهُ
وَاحِدٌ فَهَلْ أَنْتُمْ مُّسْلِمُونَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

فَإِن تَوَلَّوْاْ فَقُلْ ءَاذَنْتُكُمْ عَلَىٰ سَوَاءٍ
وَإِن أَدْرِي أَقْرِبُ أَمْ بَعِيدُ مَا
تُوعَدُونَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

إِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ الْجَهْرَ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا
تَكْتُمُونَ ﴿١١٠﴾

وَإِن أَدْرِي لَعَلَّهُ فِتْنَةٌ لَّكُمْ وَمَتَّعٌ إِلَيَّ
حِينَ ﴿١١١﴾

قُلْ رَبِّ أَحْكُم بِالْحَقِّ ۗ وَرَبُّنَا الرَّحْمَنُ
الْمُسْتَعَانُ عَلَىٰ مَا تَصِفُونَ ﴿١١٢﴾

Overview

This is the last passage of this *sūrah* which showed us first a number of God's universal laws that testify to the oneness of the Creator. It then showed us God's law in sending messengers to advocate a message testifying to the unity of the community of believers and their single faith. Now the *sūrah* gives us a scene of the Last Hour and its signs. We see here the destiny of those who associate partners with God as well as the destiny of those alleged partners. God is seen as the Lord of all who conducts the affairs of the entire universe. Following this, we have two statements: the first establishes the rule that governs who inherits the earth, while the second shows God's grace bestowed on all worlds in the form of sending His final Messenger, Muhammad (peace be upon him).

At this point, the Prophet is ordered to leave the unbelievers alone to face their destiny which will be determined by God. The Prophet seeks God's help to face their opposition and ridicule, as well as their indulgence in idle pleasures when the Day of Reckoning is so near.

Rules That Never Fail

The followers of all God's messengers belong to one community, sharing the same faith and the same beliefs. The basis on which this community is built is the belief in God's oneness, which is testified to by universal laws. It is the central, unchanged belief advocated by all messengers, right from the very beginning to the last and final message. As new messages were given, certain details were added to the code of living that should be established on the basis of this central belief. These additions suited the abilities and development of each community and each new generation. They responded to the increased richness of human experience which makes new generations able to fulfil new types of legislation, meeting their increased needs and responding to their social and material advancement.

Despite the fact that the followers of all messengers constitute a single community, and despite the fact that all divine messages share the same basis, those followers divided themselves into factions. Each group took a portion and went away, allowing controversy to stir between them, and thus leading to division and hostility. Indeed this happened among the followers of a single messenger, with some eager to kill others in the name of the faith, which they all shared.

They have divided themselves into factions in this life, but they will all return to God in the life to come: *"Yet to Us shall they all return."* (Verse 93) The end is with Him, when they will face the reckoning and He requites them for what they do in this present life.

"Whoever does righteous deeds and is a believer withal, his endeavour shall not be lost: We shall record it in his favour." (Verse 94) This is the law of action and reward. No one shall suffer any loss of any good deed based on faith. All such deeds are recorded with God who never loses sight of anything.

It is essential that good action should be based on true faith in order to have its true value and to flourish. Moreover, good action is necessary so that faith can yield its fruits and prove its existence.

Faith is the central basis of life, because it provides true and real contact between man and the universe. Indeed faith is the bond that ties the universe and all living creatures to their only Creator. It outlines the single law that operates in the universe by God's will. No structure can be raised without a basis or a foundation. When we

say that good action is the edifice, it has to stand upon a firm foundation, which is faith. Otherwise, it collapses.

Good action is the fruit of faith which proves its active presence in man's conscience. Islam in particular is an active faith: once it establishes its roots in man's conscience, it manifests itself in good action. It is like a ripe fruit pointing to the roots stretching below the surface.

Hence, the Qur'ān always associates faith with good deeds, whenever it mentions deeds and their reward. There is no reward for a belief that remains idle, motivating no good action. Nor is there any reward for action that is cut off from its roots of faith. A good action that is not based on faith is a mere coincidence, because it is not related to a well defined system or a consistent law. It is merely a whim that does not stem from the right motivation. The right motivation is faith in God who is pleased with good action, because it provides the means to build a sound structure in this universe and the means to achieve the excellence that God wants for this present life. Thus, good action is seen to be a movement towards an objective that is linked to the ultimate goal of life. It is never a fleeting whim or an aimless coincidence.

Reward for good action is given in the life to come, even though parts of it may be advanced in this present life. Those cities which suffered total destruction will inevitably return to receive their ultimate requital. It is not possible that they will not be returned: *"It is forbidden that any community We have ever destroyed should not return [to Us]."* (Verse 95)

The *sūrah* mentions these cities in particular, after the statement, *"Yet to Us shall they all return,"* because it may occur to us that their destruction in this life was their final reckoning and punishment. Hence the *sūrah* emphatically asserts that they will return. The assertion is given in a prohibited form whereby non-return is impossible. It is for sure a rather peculiar mode of expression. Therefore, some commentators and translators have interpreted it as a negation of a return of those communities to this present life after they were destroyed, or a negation of their turning back from their erring ways. Neither interpretation is necessary. It is better to take the text as it is, because its meaning is quite clear.

One Destiny for Idol and Worshipper

We are then presented with a scene of the Day of Resurrection, starting with a sign that signals its approach. This sign is the opening of the gates for Gog and Magog:

When Gog and Magog are let loose and swarm down from every corner, when the true promise draws close [to its fulfilment], staring in horror shall be the eyes of the unbelievers, [and they will exclaim:] 'Oh, woe to us! Of this we were indeed heedless.

We have assuredly done wrong.' (Verses 96-97)

When we discussed the account given in *Sūrah* 18, The Cave, of Dhu'l-Qarnayn and its reference to Gog and Magog, we said that the true promise of the hereafter may have already drawn close to its fulfilment when the Tartars swarmed eastwards to destroy states and empires. Indeed at the time of the Prophet himself, the Qur'ān states clearly: *"The Last Hour has drawn close."* (54: 1) Nevertheless, its drawing close does not specify a particular time when it will actually take place. To God, time is totally different from our own calculation of days, months and years.

What is intended here is to describe what happens on that day when it actually arrives, and to introduce it with a miniature scene of what is familiar to human beings. This is the scene of Gog and Magog being let loose, and their swarming down from every corner in a fast moving image. The Qur'ān often uses notions that are familiar to man and elevates these to draw scenes of the hereafter.

The scene portrayed here stresses the element of surprise that takes the onlookers: Thus, *"staring in horror shall be the eyes of the unbelievers."* (Verse 97) They shall not wink because of the great horror that has taken them by surprise. The text uses inversion here to bring forward the actual stirring in order to provide added emphasis.

The *sūrah* does not go on to describe their condition further. Instead, it shows them speaking to give more life to the scene: *"Oh, woe to us! Of this we were indeed heedless. We have assuredly done wrong."* (Verse 97) This is the cry of one in utter distress. He is at a total loss, his eyes are stirring and he invokes a curse upon himself, acknowledging his past errors, and repents when repentance is no longer of any use.

When this confession is made in such shock, the final verdict is announced. It cannot be changed: *"You and all that you were wont to worship instead of God are but the fuel of hell: that is what you are destined for."* (Verse 98)

The style employed here shows them as if they are now facing the ultimate reckoning, being taken to hell together with their worshipped idols. They are practically thrown in it mercilessly, as though they are small pebbles and hell is being stoned with them. At this moment, they are shown the falsity of their claims that these were deities. The proof is seen in that very scene: *"If those [objects of your worship] had truly been divine, they would not have been destined for it."* (Verse 99) This is logical proof taken from a scene showing them, while they are still in this life, something that takes place in the hereafter. The *sūrah* then goes on to show them actually in hell, describing their abode and conditions in it. They are in a state that deprives them of their receptive faculties: *"But there all shall abide. There they will be groaning with anguish, and bereft of hearing."* (Verses 99-100)

Believers, on the other hand, are spared all this hardship, because they have been promised a goodly life in the hereafter: *"But those for whom [the decree of] ultimate good has already gone forth from Us will be kept far away from that hell, hearing none of its hissing sound. They will abide in all that their souls have ever desired."* (Verses 101-102)

The phrase, 'its hissing sound', or its one word equivalent in Arabic used here, *hasīṣahā*, belongs to a number of Qur'ānic terms with sounds that impart meaning. It describes the sound of the fire as it rages and burns. It is an extremely frightening sound. Hence, those given the promise of a good destiny are spared that sound, let alone suffering it. They are saved from the terror that leaves the unbelievers in a state of utter loss. Instead they enjoy whatever they desire, in complete security and bliss. They are warmly received by the angels, who give them comforting company, when the general atmosphere is one of horror: *"The Supreme Terror will cause them no grief since the angels will receive them with the greeting, 'This is your day which you were promised.'"* (Verse 103)

The scene is now drawn to its close, showing the ultimate state of the universe, which contributes to the great terror that overwhelms all on that day: *"On that day We shall roll up the heavens like a scroll of parchment."* (Verse 104) Thus, the heavens are folded up since all matters have been settled, the reckoning is over, and the universe known to man has no further function to perform. A new world is born in a new universe: *"As We brought into being the first creation, so We shall bring it forth anew. That is a promise We willed upon Ourselves. We are indeed able to do all things."* (Verse 104)

Who Inherits the World

Having drawn a strong image showing the end of the universe and all living creatures, the *sūrah* now makes clear the divine law that determines who inherits the earth. In the end it is God's righteous servants who will be the masters of the earth. The two scenes are interlinked: *"We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder [given to Moses] that 'the righteous among My servants shall inherit the earth.'"* (Verse 105)

As it is given in Arabic, this verse may be read in two ways. The first considers the Psalms as certain scriptures given in particular to the Prophet David (peace be upon him). In this case, the reminder' is a reference to the Torah which was revealed earlier than the Psalms. The other reading makes of the term *zabūr* a description of every revealed book, which is a portion of the original book recorded in the guarded Tablet, which in this case would be what the word 'reminder' refers to. This Tablet, thus, represents the complete version and the final authority to which all divine laws refer.

Be that as it may, the statement, *'We wrote in the Psalms, after the Reminder,'* is made here to explain the established rule God has put into operation concerning the

succession to the earth. This means that *'the righteous among My servants shall inherit the earth.'* But what does this inheritance entail, and who are the righteous among God's servants?

God gave the earth to Adam so that he could fulfil his charge of building the earth, setting it on its right course so it could develop. This included utilization of its resources and treasures, and the exploitation of its apparent and concealed potentials so as to attain the highest possible standard that could be reached.

God set out a complete code or way of life for mankind to implement in their life on earth. This is based on faith and good action. God's final message includes a detailed account of this way of life, together with laws that ensure its freedom from distortion and which provide balance and harmony in its every step.

This code does not make the development of the earth and the use of its resources and utilization of potentials an aim in itself. It should rather be coupled with taking good care of man's conscience, so that man attains the highest standard he is capable of achieving. It protects man from sinking to the level of animals in the midst of a blooming material civilization. There must be no drop in the human side of man's life while great strides are made in the exploitation of apparent and latent resources.

On the way to achieving such balance and harmony the scales may tilt one way at one time and the other on a different occasion. It may happen that tyranny prevails, or that power may be concentrated in the hands of some unbelievers who are able to materially exploit the resources and wealth of the earth. All these will remain experiences that mankind has to go through at one stage or another, but the ultimate inheritance will fall to God's righteous servants who combine faith with good action. These two elements go hand in hand in their lives.

Whenever faith in the heart combines with the will to work in any community, it inherits the land. But when these two elements separate, then the scales tilt the other way, and tyranny or exploitation ensue. Power may fall to those who are keen to utilize all material resources, if those who claim to be believers neglect their utilization. This happens when believers are devoid of the true and genuine type of faith that provides the motivation to do good and build a proper human life on earth. It should be remembered that it is through such good work that man discharges the task assigned to him by God.

All the believers need do is bring into practice the full meaning of their belief, which is good action and the fulfilment of their duty, in order that God's promise of inheriting the earth is fulfilled. It is active and conscientious workers among believers that are described as God's righteous servants.

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, its rhythm takes on a similar note to that of its opening: *"In this, there is a message for people who worship God. We have sent you as a*

[manifestation of Our] grace towards all the worlds." (Verses 106-107) This Qur'ān, and the laws it reveals of nature, the universe, human destiny both in this present life and in the life to come, and the rules that govern action and reward, provide a clear message. This message is appreciated by those who are ready to receive God's guidance. These are the ones who are described here as *'people who worship God.'* For, a true worshipper is the one who has a soft heart, ready to receive a message, ponder over it and make use of it in his life.

A Manifestation of Grace

God has sent His last Messenger as a manifestation of His grace to all mankind. He takes them by the hand to show them divine guidance. It is only those who are ready to receive such guidance that benefit by it, but God's grace is bestowed on believers and unbelievers alike.

The code of living given to us through the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is one that ensures the happiness of all mankind, and which will lead to the highest level of perfection humanity can attain. Muhammad's message was given to mankind at a time when it attained its full mental maturity. Hence, it is a book open to all minds across all generations. It includes the unchangeable fundamentals of human life, and it is ready to meet changing needs that are known only to the One who created man, and who knows His creation well. He is most kind and aware of all things.

This book sets out the principles and the framework of a permanent code for an ever-renewing human life, leaving to human beings the task of deducing detailed rules necessary for organizing their relations as life progresses. It is also up to human beings to determine the methods and the means of implementation, according to their different situations and circumstances, without conflict with the principles of the permanent code.

Having guaranteed the right to freedom of thought and established the society that allows the human mind to think, this book also allows the human mind the freedom to determine what actions need to be taken. Thus, under Islam and within its fundamental principles, man is free to develop and progress towards the highest attainable standard of human life.

All human experience, up to the present moment, confirms that the Islamic system, in general, remains ahead of man's progress, able to provide the environment that ensures steady human progress in all directions. It will always be ahead of human life, providing the lead, and never restraining its march. In meeting human desire for development and progress, Islam never suppresses any human potential whether of individuals or the community. Nor does it deprive them of their

ability to enjoy the fruits of their efforts or the pleasures of life.

The most important aspect of this code of living is that it is both balanced and coherent. It neither advocates physical torment in order to elevate man's spirit, nor does it neglect the spiritual dimension in order to indulge in physical pleasures. It neither imposes restrictions on the individual and his healthy, natural desires in order to serve the interests of the community or the state, nor does it give rein to the individual's deviant desires at the expense of the safety of the community.

It is clear that all the tasks the Islamic code of living assigns to man are within his ability and serve his interests. Moreover, he has been given the means and faculties that help him fulfil these tasks, looking at them as desirable, even though he may at times have to contend with difficulties and hardships in order to achieve them.

The message of Muhammad (peace be upon him) was a manifestation of grace to his own people and to humanity at large. The principles he laid down sounded strange at first because humanity was then far removed from a truly sound practical and spiritual life. After the revelation of the message of Islam, humanity drew gradually closer to these principles, which then started to sound familiar, acceptable and easy to implement.

Islam calls for a humanity in which there is no room for ethnic or geographical distinction, united by its single faith and social system. To the human mind and in the prevailing conditions at the time, this sounded very strange. Noble classes then were accustomed to thinking of themselves as having a different make up to that of ordinary human beings. Yet humanity has been trying for nearly fourteen centuries to follow the lead of Islam, but it stumbles along the way because it does not benefit by the full light of Islam. It achieves only limited standards of the Islamic code, at least in what it professes to advocate. Still we find European and American countries holding on to disgraceful racial values which Islam removed at its very outset.

Islam advocated full equality between all people under the law. It did this at a time when all humanity used to divide people into classes with a different law for each class. In fact a master's will was the law in the age of slavery and feudalism. At that time it was very strange for humanity to hear a voice advocating the principle of full and universal equality under the law. Yet gradually humanity continues to try to achieve, at least theoretically, a measure of what Islam put in practice nearly 1,400 years ago.

Numerous other aspects confirm that Muhammad's message was a manifestation of divine grace for all humanity, and that Muhammad (peace be upon him) was certainly sent to bring mercy and grace to mankind, including those who did not believe in him. All humanity has been influenced, willingly or unwillingly/, knowingly or unknowingly, by the code of living he outlined. This grace continues to

be available in plenty for anyone who wishes to benefit by it. Its implementation enables humanity to enjoy the lovely breeze of heaven to dispel the burning heat of the earth, especially these days.

Today, humanity most urgently needs a fresh taste of this grace. Yet it persists in confusion as it gropes along in the maze of materialism, in the endless wars, and in the spiritual void in which it finds itself.

An Appeal for Judgement

Having highlighted this aspect of grace, the *sūrah* states an order given by God to His Messenger. He is to confront those who deny the truth and ridicule his efforts. He is to identify the essence of his message as one which brings grace and mercy to all mankind: *"Say: It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God: will you, then, surrender yourselves to Him?"* (Verse 108)

This is the most essential element of grace in the message of Islam. It is the belief in God's absolute oneness that saves humanity from the burdens of ignorant myth, senseless idolatry and from the pressures of superstition. It establishes life on a firm basis, bonding it with universal existence, according to clear and consistent laws, leaving no room for whim or fleeting desire. It ensures that every human being is able to stand up with heads held high. Heads bow only to God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.

This is the path of grace: *"will you, then, surrender yourselves to Him?"* This is the only question God's Messenger is directed to ask those who deny his message and indulge in ridicule.

"If they turn away, say: 'I have proclaimed this in equity to all of you alike.'" (Verse 109) I have given you all that I have, and now both you and I have the same knowledge. A proclamation of the sort this verse hints at is one that takes place at a time of war so as to indicate the end of peace. This *sūrah*, however, was revealed in Makkah, before war was made permissible in Islam. This means that the Prophet is commanded to declare to the unbelievers that he has given up on them, leaving them aware of their destiny, and of which he has warned them. Thus, they have no excuse. They will have to taste the bitter fruits of their actions, knowing full well what awaits them.

"But I do not know whether that which you are promised is imminent or far off" (Verse 109) I have made my declaration to you in all equity, and I have no idea when what you are warned will befall you. It is part of what belongs to what God has kept to Himself. He alone knows its timing, and knows when He will inflict His punishment, whether in this life or in the life to come. He further knows what people say in private as well as what they say in public. Nothing is kept outside God's knowledge:

"He certainly knows all that is said openly, just as He knows all that you would conceal."
(Verse 110)

Your situation is completely open. If He inflicts punishment on you, He does so on the basis of His perfect knowledge of all your affairs, public and private, overt or covert. On the other hand, when He delays punishment, He does so for a definite purpose. *"For all I know, this may be but a trial for you, and a short reprieve."* (Verse 111) I have no knowledge of what God's intention is behind this delay. He may wish to put you to a certain trial, allowing you some reprieve until a certain date He might have determined. When that time comes, He may inflict on you very severe punishment.

With the issue left shrouded in mystery, the *sūrah* jolts their hearts, and leaves them with the realization that all possibilities remain open. They thus remain apprehensive of the great surprise they may be in for. Their minds are alert, realizing that the pleasures that they have been allowed to indulge in may be a prelude to a trial that brings trouble and hardship. When people expect that punishment may be inflicted at any time, they remain edgy, looking for reassurance while anticipating that the curtains may rise at any time to reveal what has thus far been kept hidden from them.

It is only human to overlook what may come at any time. Comforts and pleasures can be very deceptive, allowing people to forget that their knowledge is limited and that they do not know what God's will may bring about at any time. Hence, this warning is meant to encourage people to keep their hearts and minds alert. They have thus been warned, and they have no excuse if they fail to heed the warning.

Having discharged his trust, delivered his message, made his declaration in all fairness and warned people against forthcoming trials, the Prophet makes an appeal to his Lord. He requests God, the Most Merciful, to judge in fairness and in truth between him and those who ridicule his message. He seeks His help against their scheming, accusations and rejection, for help may be sought only from God: *"Say: My Lord, judge You in truth!"* and [say]: *'Our Lord is the Most Merciful whose help is ever to be sought against all that you claim.'*" (112)

The emphasis placed here on God's abundant grace is significant. It is God, the Most Gracious and Merciful, who sent His Messenger and made this an act of His mercy. But he was met with rejection and ridicule by hardened unbelievers. It is He who can bestow His grace on His Messenger and give him support against their blasphemies.

Thus the *sūrah* ends on a powerful note, just as it opened with a powerful statement. The beginning and ending thus provide a profound and effective address.