

SŪRAH 29

Al-ʿAnkabūt

(The Spider)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation. Some reports suggest that the first 11 verses were revealed in Madinah, citing the fact that they mention *jihād* and hypocrites. However, we hold the view that it was all revealed in Makkah. It is suggested that the eighth verse was revealed in connection with the adoption of Islam by Saʿd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, as we will explain. There is no doubt that he adopted Islam in Makkah. Yet this verse is one of the 11 said to have been revealed in Madinah. As for mentioning *jihād*, this simply refers to striving against oppression. This is the type of *jihād* needed to ensure that we remain steadfast and do not allow oppression to force us to renounce our faith. This is clear in the context it occurs. As for hypocrisy, the *sūrah* simply describes a particular type of person.

The *sūrah* follows a single line from start to finish. It begins with three separate letters and follows these by speaking of belief and religious oppression. It also refers to the duties required by faith, which tests peoples' true metal. To believe is not a simple word that one says. Rather it means steadfastness in the face of adversity, and the fulfilment of one's duties.

Faith is, then, the *sūrah's* central theme. Shortly after its opening verses, it relates aspects about Noah, Abraham, Lot, Shuʿayb, the ʿĀd, the Thamūd, Qārūn, Pharaoh and Hāmān, in quick succession, describing some of the impediments and tests that confronted the call to faith over many centuries. The *sūrah* then comments on these stories and the forces that appear through them to be lined up against truth, faith and divine guidance. It shows that all such forces are of little consequence. Indeed, God destroyed them all at the appropriate time: "We took each one of them to task for their

sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown.” (Verse 40) The *sūrah* draws a comparison that shows the weakness and insignificance of such forces: *“Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider’s home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it.”* (Verse 41)

The *sūrah* then establishes a clear link between the truth contained in all the divine messages and that which is clearly seen in the creation of the heavens and the earth. It then asserts the unity between all these messages and that of Muhammad (peace be upon him). They were all given by God, and they all call on people in the same way, urging them to believe in God alone. The *sūrah* goes on to speak about the last revelations bestowed from on high and how the unbelievers received it, demanding miracles. They are not satisfied with this book, the Qur’ān, and all it contains of mercy and reminders to believers. Indeed, they hasten the coming of God’s punishment, paying little credence to the fact that hell will encompass them. Their logic in all this is contradictory: *“If you were to ask them: ‘Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?’ they will be sure to answer: ‘God.’”* (Verse 61); *“If you were to ask them: ‘Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?’ they will be sure to answer: ‘God.’”* (Verse 63), and *“When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone.”* (Verse 65) Despite all this, however, they continue to associate partners with God and to persecute the believers.

Within this context, the *sūrah* calls on believers to emigrate to some other place where they will enjoy security. They must not fear death, because: *“Every soul shall taste death.”* (Verse 57) Nor should they fear that sustenance will not be available to them: *“How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you.”* (Verse 60)

The *sūrah* concludes with praising those who strive for God’s cause, reassuring them of support and continued guidance: *“But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good.”* (Verse 69) Thus the end and the beginning are joined, both emphasizing the same point. The *sūrah*’s consistency demonstrates how all its sections serve the same idea. All is focused around one central theme, faith.

The *sūrah* can be divided into three parts, all of which stress one theme. The first speaks of the basic nature of faith, the test that people have to pass, the different destiny of believers, unbelievers and hypocrites, and the fact of individual responsibility, which means that no one is answerable for anyone else’s deeds or any part thereof: *“Most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions.”* (Verse 13) The second part includes the stories we have already

mentioned, and the obstacles placed in front of divine messages and their advocates. It portrays them as insignificant when compared with God's might. It speaks about the truth inherent in the messages delivered by all prophets. It is the same truth that is inherent in the creation of the heavens and the earth. It all comes from God. The final part begins with a clear order not to enter into any debate with followers of earlier religions, except in accordance with what is best. It speaks of the unity of the divine faith throughout all generations, and the unity between earlier messages and Islam which is denied by unbelievers. It concludes with encouragement to those who strive for God's cause, reassuring them of God's support: "*God is indeed with those who do good.*" (Verse 69)

From start to finish the *sūrah* strikes several strong notes on the meaning of faith and its nature, shaking people's hearts. In a most serious manner, it puts them face to face with the duties imposed by faith. The choice is either to fulfil these or to abandon them. The alternative is to be a hypocrite, which fact God will certainly unmask. The only way to describe these notes is to refer to the texts in which they occur. We will now discuss them fully at their relevant places in the *sūrah*.

1

The Inevitable Test

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

Do people think that once they say: 'We are believers', they will be left alone and will not be put to a test? (2)

We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars. (3)

Or do those who do evil deeds think that they can escape Us? How ill they judge! (4)

Whoever looks forward with hope to meeting God [let him be ready for it]; for the end set by God is bound to come. He alone hears all and knows all. (5)

Whoever strives hard [for God's cause] does so for his own good. For certain, God is in no need of anything in all the worlds. (6)

As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly erase their bad deeds, and shall most certainly reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did. (7)

الم ﴿١﴾

أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا
ءَامَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ ﴿٢﴾

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ ^ط فَلْيَعْلَمَنَّ اللَّهُ
الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا وَلْيَعْلَمَنَّ الْكٰذِبِينَ ﴿٣﴾

أَمْ حَسِبَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ السَّيِّئَاتِ أَنْ
يَسْبِقُونَا ^ع سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ ﴿٤﴾

مَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُوا لِقَاءَ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّ أَجَلَ اللَّهِ
لَآتٍ ^ج وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

وَمَنْ جَاهَدَ فَإِنَّمَا يُجَاهِدُ لِنَفْسِهِ ^ح إِنَّ
اللَّهَ لَغَنِيٌّ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
لَنُكَفِّرَنَّ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ
أَحْسَنَ الَّذِي كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾

We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them. It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. (8)

As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly admit them among the righteous. (9)

Among people, there are those who say: 'We believe in God,' yet when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause, he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment. However, should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: 'We have always been with you!' Is not God fully aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures? (10)

Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites. (11)

The unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves.' But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins. Liars indeed they are. (12)

Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions. (13)

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حُسْنًا وَإِنْ
جَاهَدَاكَ لِتُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ
عِلْمٌ فَلَا تُطِعْهُمَا ۖ إِلَيَّ مَرْجِعُكُمْ فَأُنَبِّئُكُمْ
بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨﴾

وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
لَنُدْخِلَنَّهُمْ فِي الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٩﴾

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَقُولُ ءَامَنَّا بِاللَّهِ فَإِذَا
أُودِيَ فِي اللَّهِ جَعَلَ فِتْنَةَ النَّاسِ كَعَذَابِ
اللَّهِ وَلَئِن جَاءَ نَصْرٌ مِّن رَّبِّكَ لَيَقُولَنَّ إِنَّا
كُنَّا مَعَكُمْ ۖ أَوَلَيْسَ اللَّهُ بِأَعْلَمَ بِمَا فِي
صُدُورِ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

وَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ
الْمُنَافِقِينَ ﴿١١﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا
اتَّبِعُوا سَبِيلَنَا وَلْنَحْمِلْ خَطَايَكُمْ وَمَا
هُمْ بِحَامِلِينَ مِنْ خَطَايَهُمْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ
إِنَّهُمْ لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

وَلَيَحْمِلُنَّ أَثْقَالَهُمْ وَأَثْقَالًا مَّعَ أَثْقَالِهِمْ
وَلَيَسْأَلُنَّ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عَمَّا كَانُوا
يَفْتَرُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Inevitable Tests

“Alif. Lām. Mīm.” These are three of the separate Arabic letters that occur at the beginning of some Qur’ānic *sūrahs*. In our view, they are meant to alert the audience to the fact that such letters are the material from which the divine book given to the Prophet, i.e. the Qur’ān, is made. They are familiar to the Arabs who use them to compose whatever ideas they wish to express. Yet they cannot compose anything like this divine book, because it is of no man’s composition; its author is God.

Sūrahs that start with such separate letters always speak about the Qur’ān, either immediately following these letters or later on, as is the case in the present *sūrah*. Hence, we read in its verses: *“Recite what has been revealed to you of the book.”* (Verse 45) *“Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you.”* (Verse 47) *“Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand.”* (Verse 48) *“Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them?”* (Verse 51) The fact that references to the Qur’ān and its inimitable style are invariably made in these *sūrahs* confirms our view concerning these separate letters.

Immediately after the opening, the *sūrah* begins speaking about faith and the hard test believers are subjected to in order to make their belief a reality. It mentions that it is through such testing that true believers are distinguished from liars: *“Do people think that once they say: ‘We are believers’, they will be left alone and will not be put to a test? We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars.”* (Verses 2-3)

This is the first strong note made in the *sūrah*, given in the form of a rhetorical question about people’s concept of faith. They often imagine that it is merely a word they utter: *“Do people think that once they say: ‘We are believers’, they will be left alone?”*

Belief is not a mere word we say; it is a reality that imposes duties, a trust that carries requirements and a struggle that demands patience and perseverance. It is not enough that people should claim to believe.

When they make this claim they are not left alone. They are subjected to tests so as to prove their sincerity and true metal, just as gold is tested with fire so as to separate it from any cheap elements. The Arabic word used here for test derives from the root *fitnah*, which imparts exactly this sense of being subjected to a test with all that this implies.

Such tests to prove people’s belief is a general and long established rule: *“We certainly tested those who lived before them; and so most certainly God knows those who speak the truth and most certainly He knows those who are liars.”* (Verse 3) God certainly knows what people harbour in their hearts before any test, but the test reveals, in

practice, what is known to God, yet hidden from human knowledge. He thus makes people accountable for what they actually do, not for what He knows of their reality. This is, in one sense, an act of grace, while in another, it is an act of justice. At the same time, it sets an edifying example for people so that they do not hold anyone accountable for anything other than what is clearly apparent of their deeds and what such deeds entail. They should remember that they cannot know what is in another's heart; only God knows that.

Let us now discuss the general rule that God has set in operation, one whereby believers are subjected to a test so as to distinguish those who are truthful from those who lie. Faith is the trust God has placed in this world of ours. It is borne only by those who are worthy of it, have the strength to bear it and are totally devoted to it. They must prefer it to their own comfort, safety, security, and all temptation. This trust entails being in charge of the earth, leading mankind along the way God has chosen for them, implementing His word in life. Hence, this trust is both noble and heavy. It is part of God's command, and as such, it needs a certain type of person to patiently endure adversity.

As part of the test, a believer is subjected to hardship by others. Believers often realize they have no one to support or defend them and that they lack the power with which to face tyranny. This is the immediate picture our minds see when tests are mentioned, but it is certainly not the hardest type of test. There are many different types of testing, some far more trying and difficult.

There is, for example, the test presented by family and loved ones. A believer may fear that the sacrifices he is called upon to make could put his family in a perilous situation, or that he cannot protect his loved ones. On their part, fearing for his life, his loved ones may call on him to compromise or to give up. They may appeal to him in the name of their close relation not to expose himself to destruction, or burden them with what they cannot bear. The *sūrah* refers to an aspect of such testing with parents, and this is very difficult to pass.

Another form of test is to see those who are deep in error and follow falsehood revelling in success, with the world at their feet, applauded by the masses, and with no obstacles in their way. Glory comes easy to them and everything in life is theirs to enjoy. Contrast this with the believer who finds himself ignored, unnoticed and undefended. Only a few people like him appreciate the value of the truth in which he believes, but none of these has any say in life.

Yet another form is to feel oneself alone in a strange environment. A believer looks around and finds everything and everyone swimming with the sweeping tide that runs contrary to the truth he knows, while he stands alone without support.

We see nowadays a different type of test in the form of communities and states

where vice is widespread, yet they reflect a progressive society and civilized style of life. In such communities, people find good standards of care and protection. Moreover, despite their turning away from God's path, such people are both strong and affluent.

There is, however, one test that is harder than all the rest. This comes from within, where the lure of desire, enjoyment and pleasure becomes very strong, or at least comfort and security appear too tempting. This makes following the line of faith difficult and the difficulty may be compounded by other obstacles which a believer may have to contend with in his community.

If time marches on under such conditions and God's support seems slow in coming, the test becomes even more difficult and harder to endure. Only those strengthened by God will remain steadfast. These are the ones who prove the truth of faith and can be given the great trust that God in heaven wants to place on earth.

What we have to understand is that God has no desire to put believers to such hard tests or cause them much suffering. It is all part of their preparation to take up the trust and fulfil its requirements. They must go through special preparations that can only be achieved through enduring real difficulties, withstanding pain and overcoming desires while being truly certain of God's support or His reward, long as the hardship may continue and severe as the suffering may be.

The human soul is tested with difficulties and hardships. It is thus purged of any vile influence. All its latent powers are thus mobilized and it acquires further strength and solidity. This is the effect of hardship on communities. Only the strongest remain steadfast. These are the ones who maintain the closest relation with God, and remain absolutely confident that the path of faith will inevitably lead them to one of the two goodly eventualities: victory or reward. To these the banner is eventually entrusted, and they are certainly worthy of it.

The trust they receive is very dear to them, particularly because of the high price they have had to give for it, enduring pain and suffering, and sacrificing much in its service. A person who gives much of himself and his comforts, who endures hardship and adversity will definitely hold dear the trust for which he has withstood so much. He will not abandon it easily.

As for the eventual triumph of faith and truth, this is something God has promised. No believer entertains any doubt that what God promises will certainly come true. If it is felt to be slow in coming, this must be for a particular purpose which will most certainly benefit faith and the faithful. No one is keener than God to protect His faith and the people who adopt it sincerely. Those believers who endure hardship should always bear in mind that it is sufficient for them to be the ones God has chosen to be entrusted with the truth. Indeed, God confirms that they have

strong faith, for He has chosen them to be tested. An authentic *ḥadīth* states: “The most severely tested are prophets, then the most pious people, then the ones closest to these, one degree after another. A man will be tested in accordance with his strength of faith. If he proves himself strong, the severity of his test is increased.”

Those who subject the believers to hardship and act wickedly will not escape God’s punishment, even though they may appear strong and victorious. This is again a true promise made by God: “*Or do those who do evil deeds think that they can escape Us? How ill they judge!*” (Verse 4) No wicked or evil person should think that he can escape. If he does then his judgement is absolutely erroneous. God, who has made tests a general rule to distinguish true believers from false claimants, is the One who has also made punishment of the perpetrators of evil a general rule that never fails. This is the second strong note at the opening of the *sūrah*, one that balances the first.

Who Benefits by Striving

The third note the *sūrah* strikes is that of reassuring those who hope to meet with God and strengthening their bond with Him: “*Whoever looks forward with hope to meeting God [let him be ready for it]; for the end set by God is bound to come. He alone hears all and knows all.*” (Verse 5) Those who dearly hope to meet God should rest assured. They should wait confidently for the fulfilment of His promise. They can look forward to it provided they do so with certitude. This is an inspiring image: a person of faith cherishing hopes and looking forward to the fulfilment of God’s promise. His aspiration is answered with confirmation of its truth. This is followed by the reassurance that God is fully aware of all their hopes: “*He alone hears all and knows all.*” (Verse 5)

Then the *sūrah* states to those believers who strive to fulfil the duties of faith, enduring all manner of hardship, that they only strive for themselves and for their own good. By doing so they have set their affairs on the right course. As for God, He needs no one: “*Whoever strives hard [for God’s cause] does so for his own good. For certain, God is in no need of anything in all the worlds.*” (Verse 6)

It is true that God has tested the believers and required them to strive hard so that they could endure adversity with patience, but all this is for their own good. It has ensured their benefit both in this world and in the life to come. Striving, or *jihād*, reinforces a person’s good elements, expands his horizons, makes him ready to sacrifice his life and possessions, as also enhances his best qualities and abilities. It does all this for the individual who strives, before it brings further benefits to the community of believers, improving its situation, establishing the truth within it, and making goodness overcome evil in its ranks.

“*Whoever strives hard [for God’s cause] does so for his own good.*” Let no one, then, stop

midway through this process. Let no one stop to demand a price from God, holding what he did as a favour and feeling that his prize is overdue. God benefits nothing by anyone's striving. He is in no need of people's efforts. After all, human beings are weak, barely significant. *"God is in no need of anything in all the worlds."* (Verse 6) It is God who grants a favour to those who strive, helping them in their efforts and establishing them in a position of power on earth. Furthermore, He will reward them well in the life to come: *"As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly erase their bad deeds, and shall most certainly reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did."* (Verse 7)

Believers should remain reassured of their great reward. Let them, then, remain patient in adversity, fulfilling the requirements of their test, and persevering in their *jihād*. A great future and a goodly reward await them. This is sufficient for any believer, even though he may not enjoy justice in this present life.

Conflict with Parents

The *sūrah* then refers to a type of test which we have already mentioned: that of ties and bonds with family and loved ones. It gives clear and decisive guidance in such a difficult situation:

We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them. It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly admit them among the righteous. (Verses 8-9)

Parents are the closest of all relatives. They give much to their children. Hence, to be kind to one's parents is a duty required of everyone. Indeed parents must be treated with love, respect, and care. Yet when it comes to one's duty towards God, they cannot be obeyed in opposition to Him: *"We have enjoined upon man goodness towards his parents: yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them."* (Verse 8) The paramount bond is that with God. Hence, if one's parents are unbelievers, they should be treated with care and kindness, but must not be obeyed or followed. Once this present life is over, all return to God: *"It is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]."* (Verse 8)

When judgement is made between believers and unbelievers, the former find themselves to be a closely knit unit even though they may have no blood relationship: *"As for those who believe and do righteous deeds, We shall most certainly*

admit them among the righteous." (Verse 9) Thus, those who maintain their bond with God will be together in one community, as they are in reality. The bonds created by blood and marriage relations are no longer valid; they end when this present life comes to an end. Such bonds are accidental and carry no real substance because they are not linked to the strongest and unseverable bond, faith.

In explaining this verse, al-Tirmidhī reports that it was revealed in connection with Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ and his mother Ḥamnah bint Abī Sufyān. Sa`d was a very dutiful son. She asked him: 'What is this religion you have embraced? By God, I will not eat or drink until you revert to your original religion, or else I die. You will then be in disgrace for the rest of time as you will be identified as 'his mother's killer'.' She did not eat or drink anything for one whole day. Sa`d came to her and said: "Mother! If you had 100 souls and they die one by one, I will not abandon my religion. So you can eat or refuse to eat, as you please." When she despaired of his response, she resumed eating. God then revealed this verse, ordering Muslims to be kind to their parents and to treat them with respect but not to obey them in disbelief.

Thus faith overcame the test of close relations, but kindness and dutifulness remained intact. A believer may be subjected to such a test at any time. When and if this does occur, God's directive and Sa`d's action provide proper guidance.

Hard Tests and False Temptation

The *sūrah* then gives us an image of people who yield abjectly when they face oppression and injustice. Yet, when the going is easy, they make boastful claims:

Among people, there are those who say: 'We believe in God,' yet when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause, he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment. However, should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: 'We have always been with you!' Is not God filly aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures? Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites. (Verses 10-11)

Such people declare their belief when things look bright and the future rosy. They think that accepting God's faith is easy and that it does not constitute more than making the briefest of declarations. Yet, "when any of them is made to suffer in God's cause," on account of the declaration they made when everything seemed easy "he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment." Thus, they panic and their standards and values become confused. Their very faith is shaken. They imagine that nothing could be worse than the oppression they are suffering, not even God's punishment in the life to come. They wonder why they should endure such

endless suffering when God's punishment could not be any worse. Thus do they equate hardship caused by man with God's punishment; yet the latter is something which no one can estimate.

Such is the attitude of this type of person to the test when it takes the form of physical suffering. Nevertheless, when the situation alters somewhat in their favour, their fickleness is revealed for all to see: *"should help from your Lord be forthcoming, he is sure to say: We have always been with you!"* They claim to have always been with the believers despite their earlier desertion, cowardly betrayal and wrong judgement. When better prospects arrive, everyone can make such boastful claims. Yet they are only yesterday's cowards speaking about false heroics, saying to those who remained steadfast throughout: *"We have always been with you."*

"Is not God fully aware of what is in the hearts of all creatures?" He certainly knows what everyone harbours in their hearts and their innermost thoughts. He knows who is a true believer and who is a hypocrite. Who can deceive God or project a false image to Him? *"Most certainly God knows those who truly believe and most certainly He knows those who are hypocrites."* (Verse 11) He will certainly expose them. After all, the test aimed to separate true believers from hypocrites.

We need to reflect a little on the accurate Qur'ānic description of the error such people make. It says that: *"he thinks that oppression by man is as grievous as God's punishment."* (Verse 10) Such error is not that they weaken and find themselves unable to endure any more. True believers may indeed weaken at some point, because human endurance has its limits. They do not, however, lose sight of the great gulf that separates what their tormentors can inflict on them and God's grievous punishment. They never confuse this transitory world with that of immortality, not even when the torture and hardship visited upon them exceeds human endurance. A believer never loses the sense that God overpowers everything in the universe, not even when he is under the greatest pressure. This is the point that separates true believers from hypocrites.

The last image of such testing is that of temptation. This is presented alongside the unbelievers' false concept of responsibility and reward. The *sūrah* confirms that both responsibility and reward are personal and individual. This is a fundamental Islamic principle that ensures the best and clearest form of justice for all:

The unbelievers say to those who believe: 'Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves.' But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins. Liars indeed they are. Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions. (Verses 12-13)

The Arab unbelievers at the time of the Qur'ānic revelations used to say this. Furthermore, it accords with their own traditions under which a clan or tribe was held collectively responsible for the payment of blood money in cases of accidental killing, and collective responsibility was an established social value. Hence, they imagined that they could bear the responsibility for other people's disbelief, exempting them from God's punishment. On the other hand, they derided the concept of reward in the hereafter. Thus they said to the believers: *"Follow our way and we shall indeed take your sins upon ourselves."* (Verse 12)

The *sūrah*, however, gives a decisive reply, making it clear that all creatures return to their Lord as individuals. Everyone is accountable for their own deeds. No one bears responsibility for anyone else: *"But never will they take upon themselves any of their sins."* (Verse 12) The *sūrah* confronts them with the reality of their claims: *"Liars indeed they are."* (Verse 12)

Furthermore, not only will they be made to bear the burden of their own errors, disbelief and false claims; they will also bear the burden of causing others to go astray. The latter who were thus led astray, however, are not exempt from bearing the burden of their own error that led them into such disbelief: *"Yet most certainly will they bear their own burdens, and other burdens besides their own; and most certainly will they be called to account on the Day of Resurrection for all their false assertions."* (Verse 13)

Thus this aspect of the testing is closed as people are made to know that God will not hold them accountable as communities. Instead, He holds everyone to account as an individual. Everyone will be held in pledge for whatever they have earned.

2

Like a Spider's Web

We sent Noah to his people and he dwelt among them for a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing; (14)

but We saved him, together with all those who were in the ark, which We made as a sign for all people. (15)

And Abraham said to his people: 'Worship God, and fear Him. This is best for you, if you but knew it! (16)

You worship only idols instead of God, and thus you create falsehood. Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you. Seek, then, all sustenance from God, and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him. Indeed, to Him you shall return. (17)

If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not bound to do more than clearly deliver His message.

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ فَلَبِثَ فِيهِمْ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ إِلَّا خَمْسِينَ عَامًا فَأَخَذَهُمُ الطُّوفَانُ وَهُمْ ظَالِمُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

فَأَنْجَيْنَاهُ وَأَصْحَابَ السَّفِينَةِ وَجَعَلْنَاهَا آيَةً لِلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٥﴾

وَإِبْرَاهِيمَ إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِ أَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاتَّقُوهُ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

إِنَّمَا تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ أَوْثَانًا وَتَخْلُقُونَ إِفْكًا إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ لَا يَمْلِكُونَ لَكُمْ رِزْقًا فَابْتَغُوا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الرِّزْقَ وَاعْبُدُوهُ وَاشْكُرُوا لَهُ ۗ إِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

وَإِن تَكْفُرُوا فَقَدْ كَذَّبْتُمْ أُمَّةً مِّن قَبْلِكُمْ وَمَا عَلَى الرَّسُولِ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿١٨﴾

(18)

Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God.

(19)

Say: 'Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things. (20)

He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. (21)

And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.' (22)

Those who deny God's signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits. (23)

[Abraham's] people's only answer was: 'Kill him, or burn him!' But God saved him from the fire. In this there are signs

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا كَيْفَ يُبْدِئُ اللَّهُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ ۚ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ﴿١٨﴾

قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ بَدَأَ الْخَلْقَ ۚ ثُمَّ اللَّهُ يُنشِئُ النَّشْأَةَ الْآخِرَةَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿١٩﴾

يُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَاءُ وَيَرْحَمُ مَن يَشَاءُ ۗ وَإِلَيْهِ تُقَلَّبُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَمَا أَنْتُمْ بِمُعْجِزِينَ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي السَّمَاءِ ۗ وَمَا لَكُمْ مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ مِن وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٢١﴾

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَلِقَائِهِ ۖ أُولَٰئِكَ يَسُؤُونَ مِّن رَّحْمَتِي وَأُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوْمِهِ ۖ إِلَّا أَن قَالُوا اقْتُلُوهُ أَوْ حَرِّقُوهُ فَأَنجَاهُ اللَّهُ مِنَ النَّارِ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ

for people who believe. (24)

And he said: 'You have taken for worship idols instead of God for no reason other than to have a bond of love between yourselves, in the life of this world. But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another; and your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you.' (25)

Lot believed in him. He said: 'I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord. He alone is Almighty, Wise.' (26)

We gave him Isaac and Jacob, and caused prophethood and revelation to continue among his offspring. We granted him his reward in this world; and, in the life to come, he will certainly be among the righteous. (27)

And Lot said to his people: 'You certainly commit abominations such as none in all the worlds has ever committed before you. (28)

Will you approach men [with lust], assault people on the highway, and commit shameful acts in your meeting places?' But his people's only response was to say: 'Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth.' (29)

He said: 'My Lord! Support You me



وَقَالَ إِنَّمَا اتَّخَذْتُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ أَوْثَانًا
مَّوَدَّةَ بَيْنِكُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا ثُمَّ يَوْمَ
الْقِيَامَةِ يَكْفُرُ بَعْضُكُم بِبَعْضٍ
وَيَلْعَنُ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا وَمَأْوَأَكُمُ
النَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن نَّصِيرِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

﴿٢٦﴾ فَمَا مَن لَّهُ لُوطٌ وَقَالَ إِنِّي مُهَاجِرٌ إِلَىٰ
رَبِّي إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِي
ذُرِّيَّتِهِ النُّبُوَّةَ وَالْكِتَابَ وَأَتَيْنَاهُ أَجْرَهُ فِي
الدُّنْيَا وَإِنَّهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ لَمِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

وَلُوطًا إِذْ قَالَ لِقَوْمِهِ إِنَّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ
الْفَحِشَةَ مَا سَبَقَكُمْ بِهَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ
مِّنَ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢٨﴾

أَيُّكُمْ لَتَأْتُونَ الرِّجَالَ وَتَقَاطِعُونَ
السَّبِيلَ وَتَأْتُونَ فِي نَادِيكُمُ الْمُنْكَرَ
فَمَا كَانَ جَوَابَ قَوْمِهِ إِلَّا أَنْ قَالُوا
أَتَيْنَا بِعَذَابِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتَ مِنَ
الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

against these people who spread corruption.' (30)

When Our [angel] messengers came to Abraham with happy news, they [also] said: 'We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers.' (31)

He said: 'But Lot lives there!' They answered: 'We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household, except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind.' (32)

Then when Our messengers arrived at Lot's, he was terribly grieved on their account and felt powerless to protect them; but they said: 'Have no fear, and do not grieve. We shall certainly deliver you and your household, except your wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind.' (33)

We shall certainly bring down upon the people of this town a horror from heaven in requital of all their wicked deeds.' (34)

We made of it a clear sign for people who use their reason. (35)

And to the people of Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb, who said: 'My people, worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day, and do not act wickedly to spread corruption on earth.' (36)

But they accused him of lying. Thereupon an earthquake overtook them

قَالَ رَبِّ أَنْصُرْنِي عَلَى الْقَوْمِ
الْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَلَمَّا جَاءَتْ رُسُلُنَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ بِالْبُشْرَى
قَالُوا إِنَّا مُهْلِكُوا أَهْلَ هَذِهِ الْقَرْيَةِ إِنَّ
أَهْلَهَا كَانُوا ظَالِمِينَ ﴿٣١﴾

قَالَ إِنِّ فِيهَا لُوطًا قَالُوا نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَنْ فِيهَا لَنَنْجِيَنَّهُ وَأَهْلَهُ إِلَّا أُمَّرَأَتَهُ
كَانَتْ مِنَ الْغَابِرِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَلَمَّا أَنْ جَاءَتْ رُسُلُنَا لُوطًا سِيءَ بِهِمْ
وَضَاقَ بِهِمْ ذَرْعًا وَقَالُوا لَا تَخَفْ وَلَا
تَحْزَنْ إِنَّا مُنْجُوكَ وَأَهْلَكَ إِلَّا أُمَّرَأَتَكَ
كَانَتْ مِنَ الْغَابِرِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

إِنَّا مُنْزِلُونَ عَلَى أَهْلِ هَذِهِ الْقَرْيَةِ
رِجْزًا مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ بِمَا كَانُوا
يَفْسُقُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَلَقَدْ تَرَكْنَا مِنْهَا آيَةً بَيِّنَةً لِّقَوْمٍ
يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَإِلَى مَدْيَنَ أَخَاهُمْ شُعَيْبًا فَقَالَ يٰقَوْمِ
اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَارْجُوا الْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَلَا
تَعْتَوْا فِي الْأَرْضِ مُفْسِدِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes. (37)

And the `Ad and Thamūd [We also destroyed]. This has been evident to you from their dwellings. Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth. (38)

And Qārūn [i.e. Korah], Pharaoh and Hāmān! Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth. Indeed, they could not escape. (39)

We took each one of them to task for their sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. (40)

Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it. (41)

God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him. He alone is Almighty, Wise. (42)

Such are the comparisons We draw for

فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ الرَّجْفَةُ فَأَصْبَحُوا
فِي دَارِهِمْ جَنَّمِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَعَادًا وَثَمُودًا وَقَدْ تَبَيَّنَ لَكُمْ مِّنْ
مَّسْكِنِهِمْ^ط وَزَيْنَ لَهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ
أَعْمَاهُمْ فَصَدَّهُمْ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ وَكَانُوا
مُستَبْصِرِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

وَقَارُونَ وَفِرْعَوْنَ وَهَامَانَ وَلَقَدْ
جَاءَهُمْ مُوسَىٰ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَاسْتَكْبَرُوا فِي
الْأَرْضِ وَمَا كَانُوا سَابِقِينَ ﴿٣٩﴾

فَكُلًّا أَخَذْنَا بِذُنُوبِهِ^ط فَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ أَرْسَلْنَا
عَلَيْهِ حَاصِبًا وَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ أَخَذَتْهُ الصَّيْحَةُ
وَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ خَسَفْنَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ
وَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ أَغْرَقْنَا^ط وَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ
لِيُظْلِمَهُمْ وَلَكِن كَانُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ
يُظْلِمُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ
أَوْلِيَاءَ كَمَثَلِ الْعَنْكَبُوتِ اتَّخَذَتْ بَيْتًا
وَإِنَّ أَوْهَنَ الْبُيُوتِ لَبَيْتُ الْعَنْكَبُوتِ
لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ مِنْ
شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٤٢﴾

people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge. (43)

God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe. (44)

Recite what has been revealed to you of the book, and attend regularly to your prayer; for prayer restrains people from loathsome deeds and from all that is evil. To remember God is greater still. God knows all that you do. (45)

وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَلُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ وَمَا يَعْقِلُهَا إِلَّا الْعَالِمُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

خَلَقَ اللَّهُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِالْحَقِّ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٤﴾

أَتْلُ مَا أُوحِيَ إِلَيْكَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ ۚ إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ ۗ وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَصْنَعُونَ ﴿٤٥﴾

Overview

The first passage concluded with reference to the general rule that those who profess to believe are subjected to a test, the purpose of which is to separate those who truly believe from those who are liars. The passage also referred to different types of testing, such as physical suffering, pressure exerted by relatives and loved ones, and the lure of temptation.

In this passage we have examples of the kind of tests advocates of faith went through, starting with Noah (peace be upon him). Such examples are drawn from what God's messengers endured from the early days of history. Some details are given about Abraham and Lot, but only very brief references are made in all other cases.

In Noah's story we see very great efforts yielding scanty results. He stayed among his people for 950 years but only a few believers accepted his call. Therefore, "the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing." (Verse 14) In the case of Abraham and his people we see a very clear example of foul reward and the tyranny of falsehood. He tried his best to steer his people to follow divine guidance, using sound, logical argument, but "their only answer was: 'Kill him or burn him'." (Verse 24)

In the case of Lot's people we see how lust comes out into the open, with no consideration for decency or moral scruple. Here is the vilest human degeneration and perversion, one which pays little heed to sincere warnings: "But his people's only response was to say: Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks

the truth.” (Verse 29)

With Shuʿayb and the people of Madyan we see blatant corruption and wilful disregard for right and justice, in addition to denial of God’s message: *“An earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes.”* (Verse 37) The references to the ʿĀd and Thamūd peoples remind us of unbelievers thinking too arrogantly of their own power and immunity, showing no gratitude for God’s favours and blessings. Likewise, the reference to Qārūn, Pharaoh and Hāmān reminds us of the tyranny of wealth, dictatorship, and hypocrisy.

These historical references are followed by a demonstration of the flimsiness of forces standing in the way of the divine message, powerful as they may seem: *“Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider’s home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it.”* (Verse 41) The passage then concludes with an address to the Prophet directing him to recite God’s book, attend regularly to prayers, and to leave matters to Him: *“God knows all that you do.”* (Verse 45)

Extremely Long Life

We sent Noah to his people and he dwelt among them for a thousand years bar fifty; and then the floods overwhelmed them as they were deep in wrongdoing; but We saved him, together with all those who were in the ark, which We made as a sign for all people. (Verses 14-15)

The weightier view is that the duration of Noah’s message was 950 years, preceded by an undefined period before he received his revelations and followed by an unspecified period after he and the believers were saved from the floods. This is certainly a very long life that seems to us, nowadays, to be unnatural and unknown in humanity. Yet we have this information from the most truthful source, God Almighty. This is more than sufficient for it to be accepted as true. If we want some sort of explanation for it, we could say that the human population of the earth at that time was small. It is possible, therefore, that God gave those early generations longer lives so that life on earth could progress. When human numbers increased, there was no longer any need for such long lives. This reflects a phenomenon applicable to some species. For example, certain types of eagle, vulture and turtle can live for centuries. Contrast this with flies, which breed in their millions, and which have a life span as short as two weeks, or less. All wisdom belongs to God, and everything He does is according to a careful measure. Furthermore, despite the near millennium of Noah’s advocacy of the divine message there were still only a small number of believers. The floods swept away the overwhelming majority because of their

continued opposition to the divine message. Only the small number of believers were saved in the ark. This story of the floods and the ark was to become 'a sign for all people', telling us about the end of unbelief and injustice.

Issues Clarified

The *sūrah* moves on several centuries bringing into focus the divine message as preached by Abraham:

And Abraham said to his people: 'Worship God, and fear Him. This is best for you, if you but knew it! You worship only idols instead of God, and thus you create falsehood. Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you. Seek, then, all sustenance from God, and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him. Indeed, to Him you shall return. If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not hound to do more than clearly deliver His message. (Verses 16-18)

Abraham's call to his people was clear, unambiguous and very well structured. It served as a good model for all advocates of the divine faith. He started by telling them of the true nature of his message: "Worship God, and fear Him." (Verse 16) Furthermore, he made this appealing to them, stating that it contained much goodness for them, if they would only know it: "This is best for you, if you but knew it!" (Verse 16) In other words, if they were not ignorant, they would choose what was good for them. This is a simple and real truth which needs no fiery speeches to impart its essence.

Then Abraham explains how flawed their religion is, especially their worship of wooden statues. What an absurd substitute for worshipping the Almighty. Secondly, evidence to support their beliefs was completely lacking; they only invented what was false. Furthermore, such statues and idols are of no benefit, as they cannot provide people with anything: "Those that you worship instead of God do not have it in their power to provide sustenance for you." (Verse 17)

Then Abraham directs people to seek their provisions from God. On Him alone should they rely for what is most important in their lives: "Seek, then, all sustenance from God." (Verse 17) Provisions and sustenance are people's first preoccupation, particularly those who have not experienced the meaning of faith. Yet to seek sustenance from God alone is the most obvious thing to do.

Finally, Abraham calls on them to address their worship and thanks to God who grants sustenance and bestows blessings on all creatures: "and worship Him alone and be grateful to Him." (Verse 17) He also tells them that their return to God is inevitable.

It is better for them, then, that they should turn to Him now as believers and address their worship and gratitude to Him alone: *"Indeed, to Him you shall return."* (Verse 17)

If they continue to disbelieve, however, it is of no consequence. They will not affect God in the least. Nor will His Messenger lose anything. Many were the communities that denied God's message in the past. God's messengers' only task is to deliver His message with the utmost clarity: *"If you disbelieve, other communities also disbelieved before your time. A messenger of God is not bound to do more than clearly deliver His message."* (Verse 18)

Thus, Abraham shows them the way to belief one step at a time, addressing their hearts with the utmost precision. It is useful for advocates of the divine message to reflect on and emulate Abraham's method.

Reflection on God's Creation

Thereafter, the *sūrah* takes a brief pause to address all who deny faith, the inevitable return of all mankind to God, and the resurrection and reckoning:

Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God. Say: 'Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things. He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support.' Those who deny God's signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits. (Verses 19-23)

This is addressed to everyone who denies God and their meeting with Him. It uses the universe as evidence confirming its truth. The Qur'ān frequently presents the universe as an open book for hearts and minds to ponder on, searching for God's signs, and finding indications of His oneness and the truth of His promises and warnings. Universal phenomena are always present for people to see and contemplate, but they lose their inspiration as a result of long familiarity. Therefore, the Qur'ān directs people's attention to these magnificent scenes, bringing them alive before their eyes and renewing their effects. It does not resort to argument and cold, lifeless logic. Such logic, is, in any case, alien to Islamic thought. Instead, the Qur'ān gives examples, sets the method and outlines the way.

"Are they not aware how God creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew? This is indeed easy for God." (Verse 19) They see with their own eyes how God

originates creation: they see it in the shooting plant, the egg and the foetus, and in everything that comes into being, having had no prior existence. They see it in everything that humans, individually and collectively, cannot bring about themselves. Indeed the secret of life is unfathomable: it was so in the past and it remains so today. We do not know how life originated and where from, let alone that anyone should claim to have brought it about. Life, thus, cannot have any explanation other than that it is of God's own making. It is He who originates creation at every moment before our very eyes. We all see it and cannot deny it.

Moreover, the One who originates life is certainly able to bring people back after death: *"This is indeed easy for God."* Nothing is difficult for God, but He gives the argument by human standards. For us, doing something for the second time is easier than the first; but to God both are equally easy. It needs nothing more than for God to will something and say, 'Be', and it happens.

The *sūrah* then calls on people to travel in all directions and contemplate God's work and signs that appear in all creation, animate and inanimate alike. When they do, they will realize that the One who originates life can bring it back without difficulty: *"Say: Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance; and then He will certainly bring about the second life. Most certainly, God has the power over all things."* (Verse 20)

Travelling opens people's hearts to new and unfamiliar vistas. It awakens their senses and minds. By contrast, the place where one lives very often holds no attraction or excitement because of over-familiarity. Yet to return home after a period away often rekindles passion and enthusiasm for what once seemed dull and unremarkable. This, thus, leads to new interaction and appreciation of one's immediate environs. All glory is to God, who has bestowed the Qur'ān from on high and who has full knowledge of how people's hearts and minds function and interact with their surroundings.

"Say: Go all over the earth and see how God has originated His creation in the first instance." (Verse 20) In the Arabic text the order to travel is followed with a sentence that uses the simple past tense referring to the start of creation. This is significant, for we see today certain things that are indicative of the beginning of life and how the earth came to be populated with different species. Scientific excavations have formed some idea about how life started, spread and progressed, but they have not arrived at anything definite about the secret of life. They do not know how it came to be on earth, nor when the first living creature was placed on it. The order given by God, then, is to search for the beginning of life and to use acquired knowledge to learn about resurrection and the life to come.

We should also note here that the people first addressed by the Qur'ān were not

qualified to undertake such scientific research; it is a much more recent development in the search for knowledge. Hence, they could not arrive at the relevant facts, if this was really intended. Nor could they use such facts to draw a mental picture of how a second life would begin. Therefore, the verse required them to look at the way life starts in plants, animals and man everywhere on earth. With this in mind, travelling served to alert their minds and feelings as they pondered that which was unfamiliar. They could then reflect on the manifestations of God's power, on how easy it is for Him to initiate life at every moment of the night and day.

More importantly, the Qur'ān gives its directives to suit all generations of human life, with their different levels of progress, circumstances and the means available to them. Every generation will take up this order and benefit by it in accordance with what abilities it commands. The order remains applicable to later generations as life develops and progresses, giving fresh incentive and impetus.

"Most certainly, God has the power over all things." (Verse 20) He initiates life and brings it back. He is not restricted by what people imagine to be feasible or unfeasible, possible or impossible.

Part of God's power over all things is that He punishes whomever He wills and bestows His grace upon whomever He wills. To Him all mankind return; none escapes Him and none can evade His will: *"He punishes whom He will, and bestows His mercy on whom He will. To Him you shall be made to return. And never can you elude him, neither on earth nor in the skies. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support."* (Verses 21-22)

Punishment and mercy are subject to God's will in the sense that He has given clear guidance and made the way of error clear for all. He has given man the propensity to follow either. The choice belongs entirely to man. However, when man chooses to believe in God and shows a willingness to follow His guidance, God will help him as He has committed Himself to do so. On the other hand, when he turns away from divine guidance he becomes isolated and lives in error. The two ways then lead to either God's mercy in the first case or to His punishment in the latter.

"To Him you shall be made to return." (Verse 21) In this instance, the *sūrah* uses the word *tuqlabūn*, which carries connotations of violent return, to suit what follows: *"And never can you elude Him, neither on earth nor in the skies."* (Verse 22) You have no power to save yourselves from a return to God. Neither your own power that you have on earth nor that of those whom you sometimes worship, such as the angels or *jinn*, thinking that they have power in the skies, have any effect: *"You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support."* (Verse 22) How can there be any protection or support against God? Who could give it: man, angel, or *jinn*? They are all God's creatures and servants. They cannot cause benefit or harm even to

themselves, let alone anyone else.

“Those who deny God’s signs and the meeting with Him are indeed the ones who abandon all hope of My mercy. It is for these that grievous suffering awaits.” (Verse 23) Man does not despair of God’s mercy except when he totally disbelieves, severing all relations with his Lord. Again man does not disbelieve except when he despairs of establishing a relation between himself and God, abandoning all hope of God’s grace. The end then is well known: *“It is for these that grievous suffering awaits.”* (Verse 23)

Abandoning Home for God

After this intervening address aimed at everyone who denies faith generally, and at Abraham’s people by implication, the *sūrah* reports his people’s reply to his call. It is a very strange and singular reply, one which shows the arrogance of disbelief and oppression that relies on force and authority: *“[Abraham’s.] people’s only answer was: Kill him, or burn him.’ But God saved him from the fire. In this there are signs for people who believe.”* (Verse 24) To kill or burn a man is their only response to a simple, clear and logical call with which he addressed their hearts and minds.

How could Abraham alone and deprived of all power stand up to such arrogant brutality? Therefore, God intervened in a direct and open manner, with a miracle no human could have expected: *“God saved him from the fire.”* Indeed his saving in this miraculous way should have been seen as clear evidence confirming his message, but only a person whose heart is ready to embrace faith looks at it in this light. Abraham’s people, however, did not believe despite this miracle. This shows, then, that miracles do not give guidance. Instead, it is necessary to have an open mind, one willing to accept the truth and divine guidance: *“In this there are signs for people who believe.”* (Verse 24)

The first of these signs was Abraham’s saving from the fire. The second was the impotence of tyranny to harm just one man standing alone, when God wanted him saved. The fact that miracles do not ensure acceptance of God’s guidance by hardened hearts was the third sign. In confirmation of this fact one only needs to look at the history of divine messages, and reflect on the way people’s hearts change, and also on the factors that enable people to accept guidance as well as those that leave them astray.

Thereafter, Abraham despairs of those who saw the great miracle with their own eyes for they will never believe in God’s oneness. He tells them, in plain terms, the truth of their situation before abandoning them:

And he said: You have taken for worship idols instead of God for no reason other than

to have a bond of love between yourselves, in the life of this world. But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another; and your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you. (Verse 25)

Abraham tells them that they worshipped idols without actually being convinced that such worship was right. They only did this out of courtesy for one another so that they could be together. Even though they may be aware of the truth, people generally follow what their friends worship only to keep their friendship. Thus friendship is given priority over the truth and true faith. This happens in communities that do not take religion seriously. To them, avoiding disagreement with a friend is more important than religion. They do not realize that it is faith that must be taken very seriously, and that there can be no complacency or compromise in matters of faith.

The *sūrah* then shows them their position in the life to come. They are surprised that such friendships on the Day of Judgement are nothing more than mutual hostility. Where once they thought others important, now they curse each other: *"But, then, on Resurrection Day, you shall disown one another and curse one another."* (Verse 25) On that day masters will disown their servants, friends will denounce friends, mutual accusations will fly about, and every erring person will accuse others of leading him astray. Yet none of all this will be of any avail when the suffering engulfs them all: *"And your abode shall be the fire, and you will have none to support you."* (Verse 25) They wanted to burn Abraham in the fire, but God saved him. Now when they are in the fire of hell, they will find none to save or protect them.

Abraham's advocacy of his message among his own people and the undoubted miracle they saw culminated in the adoption of the faith by just one man other than his wife, and this man was Lot, Abraham's nephew. Lot emigrated with him from their city, Ur of the Chaldees, in Iraq to settle west of the River Jordan: *"Lot believed in him. He said: I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 26)

Note Lot's statement: *"I shall emigrate for the sake of my Lord,"* and the purpose of his emigration. He did not emigrate to save his skin, or to do business or earn his living. He simply emigrated for God's sake, seeking His support. He migrated for his faith, and his purpose was to be able to worship God alone, in complete devotion in a new place, away from a land where there was no hope of people ever changing their erring ways.

God compensated Abraham for having to abandon his hometown and people by giving him offspring who would be chosen to deliver His message to mankind, until the end of human life. All prophets and messages that were sent later were through his descendents. This was, indeed, a great compensation:

We gave him Isaac and Jacob, and caused prophethood and revelation to continue among his offspring. We granted him his reward in this world; and, in the life to come, he will certainly be among the righteous. (Verse 27)

This is certainly a rich reward and a manifestation of God's pleasure with the man who personified total devotion.

Sexual Perversion in Public

Lot's story is mentioned next, after he had emigrated with Abraham and settled in the Jordan Valley. Lot then lived on his own with a tribe close to the Dead Sea, which was later called Lake Lot. The township where the tribe lived was known as Sodom. Lot married one of their women and lived among them.

A certain type of perversion had spread among those people, and the Qur'ān mentions that this was the first time ever in human history that such homosexuality had occurred. In the natural state of things a man is attracted to a woman so that the two form a natural productive unit which ensures the continuity of life through procreation, which is common to all living species. It is God who has created them all in pairs made of males and females. Thus, Lot's people were the first ever to yield to such perversion:

And Lot said to his people: 'You certainly commit abominations such as none in all the worlds has ever committed before you. Will you approach men [with lust], assault people on the highway, and commit shameful acts in your meeting places?' But his people's only response was to say: 'Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth.' He said: My Lord! Support You me against these people who spread corruption.' (Verses 28-30)

Although it is clear from Lot's address to his people that other types of corruption had spread among them, their main abomination was that they engaged in sex with other men. When a man goes beyond natural limits with a woman, his action is a gross crime but it remains within the overall framework of natural desire. Homosexual perversion reaches beyond the natural instinct common to all living species, and indicates a psychological and physical malfunction. God has made the pleasure of sexual interaction between married couples move in harmony with the great line of life and its continuity through offspring. Both man and woman are able to enjoy through it psychological and physical pleasure. Homosexual practices, on the other hand, have no such objective and, as such, cannot give natural pleasure. When anyone finds pleasure in such a perverted practice, it means he has totally broken away from all that is natural and progressive in life.

Lot's people assaulted travellers on the highways, looting their property. They also raped men, which is an even worse act than their other perversion. Furthermore, they spread corruption in the land, and committed shameful acts in their meeting places. When a community find it acceptable to boast of what is indecent, its moral degeneration has become grave indeed. Thus, there was no hope that they would reform themselves.

The story is given here in a concise manner. It appears that Lot first counselled them gently, telling them to stop their immoral practices, but they were persistent. He then warned them of God's punishment and spoke clearly about the abomination of what they did.

"But his people's only response was to say: Bring down upon us God's punishment, if you truly are one who speaks the truth." (Verse 29) Their replies to his warnings were boastful and challenging. With such blunt denial of the truth, there was no hope of their mending their ways. Thus, the messenger sent to them gave them all that he could of advice for their welfare, but in the end he could only seek God's support: *"He said: My Lord! Support You me against these people who spread corruption." (Verse 30)*

At this point the curtains fall. When they rise again, the scene depicts God's response. The angels charged with carrying out God's order visited Abraham, giving him the happy news of a child to be born to him by his wife who up to that point had been barren:

When Our [angel] messengers came to Abraham with happy news, they [also] said: 'We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers. 'He said: 'But Lot lives there!' They answered: 'We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household, except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind.' (Verses 31-32)

This exchange between Abraham and the angels is given in summary form in this instance, because it is not the main point here. It has already been mentioned in Abraham's own story that God gave him Isaac and Jacob, and since the birth of Isaac is the subject of the happy news given to him, it is not given in detail here. Instead, the point is to continue with Lot's story. Therefore, it is only briefly stated that the angels dropped in on Abraham to give him the happy news, and then told him about their main mission: *"They said: We are about to destroy the people of this town, for its people are truly wrongdoers." (Verse 31)*

Abraham was compassionate and kind hearted. He reminded the angels that Lot lived there, that he was a good man, and not a wrongdoer. The angels reassured him that Lot would not be harmed. They explained that they knew their task well: *"They answered: We know fully well who is there. We shall certainly deliver him and his household,*

except his wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind." (Verse 32) Lot's wife was inclined towards her people, approving of their crimes and perversions, hence she would not be spared.

The *sūrah* moves to a third scene in which we see Lot as he received the angels who took the guise of handsome young men. Aware of his people's perversion, he feared for his guests knowing that he could not be of much help to them. He was distressed at their presence at such a difficult time: *"Then when Our messengers arrived at Lot's, he was terribly grieved on their account and felt powerless to protect them."* (Verse 33) As told in this *sūrah*, the story does not mention how Lot's people tried to abuse his guests, his remonstrations with them and their paying no heed. It moves straight on to the final outcome with the angels telling him in his overwhelming distress who they were and what their mission was:

But they said: Have no fear, and do not grieve. We shall certainly deliver you and your household, except your wife. She will indeed be among those who stay behind. We shall certainly bring down upon the people of this town a horror from heaven in requital of all their wicked deeds. (Verses 33-34)

This last verse draws an image of the total destruction which was visited on the town and its population, with the exception of Lot and the believers in his household. This destruction was visited upon by means of rain and stones covered with mud. Most probably this was a volcanic eruption that turned the town upside down, sinking it into the ground. It followed this with a rain that accompanies volcanic eruptions.

The remains of this destruction were left for all to see, telling of God's signs and serving as a reminder to anyone who has reason to think and reflect: *"We made of it a clear sign for people who use their reason."* (Verse 35) This was the natural fate of this evil shoot that had rotted and moulded so badly that it could no longer yield any fruit. The only thing to do with it was fell it.

Different Types of Punishment

The *sūrah* then gives brief references to different communities of unbelievers and the ends they suffered, starting with Shu`ayb's people:

And to the people of Madyan We sent their brother Shu`ayb, who said: 'My people, worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day, and do not act wickedly to spread corruption on earth.' But they accused him of lying. Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very

homes. (Verses 36-37)

In this reference to the Prophet Shuʿayb we see the unity of the divine message and the essence of faith: *“Worship God alone, and look forward to the Last Day.”* (Verse 36) Worshipping God alone is the basic rule of faith. Looking forward to the Day of Judgement would ensure that they stopped their evil ways. For example, they deliberately defrauded people when they measured or weighed for them in business. They also looted from those who passed through their lands, deprived them of what they had, and generally spread corruption, behaving arrogantly.

Furthermore, they took a stand against their prophet, accusing him of lying; therefore, God destroyed them. He brought into force His law of punishing unbelievers who deny their messengers: *“Thereupon an earthquake overtook them and the morning found them lying lifeless on the ground in their very homes.”* (Verse 37) We mentioned previously the earthquake that shook their land after a great blast left them stunned in their homes, unable to stir. Thus they were left lifeless in fitting requital for their repeated terrorization of others.

Next the *sūrah* refers very briefly to the punishment inflicted on the ʿĀd and Thamūd:

And the ʿĀd and Thamūd [We also destroyed]. This has been evident to you from their dwellings. Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth. (Verse 38)

The ʿĀd lived at al-Aḥqāf in southern Arabia, close to Ḥadramaut, while the Thamūd lived in al-Ḥijr in northern Arabia, close to al-Qurā Valley. The ʿĀd were destroyed by devastating winds, while the Thamūd were destroyed by a stunning blast. Their dwellings, however, still stood and the Arabs of Makkah passed by them on their traditional winter and summer trade trips, thus seeing for themselves the destruction heaped upon these formerly powerful communities.

This brief reference to these two communities reveals the same cause of their going astray as indeed that of other communities: *“Satan had made their evil deeds seem goodly to them, and thus had turned them away from the path [of God] despite their having had the ability to perceive the truth.”* (Verse 38) They had minds and could see the pointers to divine guidance, but Satan tempted them away, making their deeds seem fair to them. Satan frequently plays on such people’s arrogance and false self-esteem. The result being that such communities often succumb to delusions of power and wealth. Thus, Satan turns them away from the only path of true guidance that leads to faith. He thus loses them the chance to save themselves, despite their having the

ability to perceive the truth.

Another very brief reference is made to earlier unbelievers: “Qārūn [i.e. Korah], Pharaoh and Hāmān! Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth. Indeed, they could not escape.” (Verse 39) Qārūn as we learned in the previous *sūrah* was one of Moses’ people. He behaved wrongfully towards them, using his wealth and knowledge in oppressive ways. He did not listen to the advice of honest and sincere people who counselled him to follow the path of moderation, humility and justice. Pharaoh was a terrible despot who committed ghastly and horrible crimes, enslaving people and sowing discord between them. In brutal defiance of all justice, he killed the male offspring of the Children of Israel but spared their females. Hāmān was his minister who managed his schemes, assisting him in his tyrannical rule. “Moses had come to them with all evidence of the truth, but they behaved with arrogance on earth.” (Verse 39) Their wealth, power and cunning could not protect them from God’s punishment. They could not escape it. It engulfed them all. “Indeed, they could not escape.” (Verse 39)

Those who possessed power, wealth, the means to overpower others as well as the means to ensure their own survival have all gone. God destroyed them all after they had long oppressed and persecuted others:

We took each one of them to task for their sins: upon some of them We let loose a deadly storm wind; and some were overtaken by a blast; and some We caused to be swallowed by the earth; and some We caused to drown. It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. (Verse 40)

The ʿĀd were smitten by a windstorm. This lifted small stones which hit and killed people. The Thamūd were destroyed by a stunning blast, Qārūn was swallowed by the earth, whilst Pharaoh and Hāmān were drowned. All were punished on account of their wrongdoing: “It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves.” (Verse 40)

The Frailty of the Powerful

Now that the destruction of despotic, wrongdoing and wicked unbelievers has been outlined, and bearing in mind what was said at the beginning of the *sūrah* about tests and temptation, the relative power of competing forces is described in a clear simile. There is only one true power and this belongs to God. Every other power is frail and flimsy. Whoever seeks support or protection from other than God is like a spider which clings to a frail home woven of silk that lacks strength. Both the spider and its web, or home, are without real support:

Those who take anyone other than God for their protectors may be compared to the spider which makes for itself a home. Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it. God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him. He alone is Almighty, Wise. Such are the comparisons We draw for people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge. (Verses 41-43)

This is an amazing but true picture of the powers operating in the universe. People sometimes overlook this truth and hence their values fall by the wayside. Indeed their concept of human relations grows corrupt and all their criteria become ill-balanced. They do not know which way to go, what to take up and what to leave. In this situation, the power of government deceives them. They feel it to be too strong, address their wishes and complaints to it, fear it and try to appease it so that they remain safe from its strong-handed measures. Similarly, they are deceived by other powers, such as that of wealth which they imagine to control people's lives. They, thus, try to obtain wealth so that they can exercise power over others. The power of knowledge also deceives them as they consider it a source of strength, wealth and all other elements that give people power. Hence, they approach it with humility, just like a worshipper engaged in devotion. Whether controlled by individuals, communities or states, apparent power deceives them. They are pulled towards it like moths are attracted to light or swarm towards a fire.

People are thus oblivious of the one power which creates all the little powers, owns, gives, directs and uses them as it pleases. They forget that seeking support and protection from these little powers is just like a spider taking refuge in its web. It remains a small powerless insect that has no power within itself or its flimsy web.

The only real support and protection for man is with God. This is the main truth which the Qur'an takes special care to instil in the minds of believers. It makes their community stronger than all the powers that try to obstruct it. Over the centuries it enabled the community of believers to place the arrogance of tyrants under its feet and to overcome tyranny in its strongest forts and seemingly impregnable lines. This great truth is established in every believer's mind, it has filled every heart and become part of their very being. It is no longer a word we utter, or a subject for debate. It is the main idea in our lives, minds and senses.

All power belongs to God. The only protection to be sought is from God. Everything else is weak, flimsy and powerless, however much it tries to inflict punishment, be tyrannical and overpowering. They are simply spiders, and what power has a spider other than the silk with which it weaves its web?: *"Indeed the spider's home is the frailest of all homes, if they but knew it."* (Verse 41)

Advocates of the divine message who are often subjected to oppression and

hardship, and also to temptation and deceit, should reflect on this great truth and keep it before their eyes. They must not allow themselves to forget this even for a moment as they face different forces, some trying to inflict harm on them or even crush them, and some trying to lure them to their own line, or to buy them out. But all these forces are no more than the threads of a spider's web. This is their real estimation in God's measure. It is also the measure when compared with true faith when people have the right concept of it.

"God certainly knows the nature of whatever people invoke instead of Him." (Verse 42) They seek the protection of patrons to whom they ascribe a share of divinity. God knows the reality of these patrons: they are no more than a spider seeking refuge in its frail web. *"He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 42) He alone has power over all things, and in His wisdom, He conducts the affairs of the universe.

"Such are the comparisons We draw for people's benefit, but none will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge." (Verse 43) Devoid of knowledge and clear reasoning, some unbelievers took such comparisons as material for ridicule. They said that Muhammad's God speaks about spiders and flies. They were uninspired by this remarkable description because they did not use their reason, while their knowledge too remained scanty: *"None will grasp their meaning except the people of knowledge."* (Verse 43)

The Clear Path

This great truth, stated in full clarity, is then linked to the main truth apparent in the design of the universe. This follows the Qur'ānic method of linking all facts to that main truth: *"God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe."* (Verse 44) In perfect harmony with the rest of the *sūrah*, this verse enhances the real link between different realities and the main truth that lies behind the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is this truth that maintains the universe according to a fine and accurate system which never fails or allows inner conflict.

"Indeed, in this there is a sign for people who believe." (Verse 44) These are the believers whose hearts respond to the signs God has placed in all aspects of creation. These are clearly seen in the harmony apparent in the universe. All is part of a consistent system despite its seeming diversity. It is only believers who perceive these signs and appreciate them, because their eyes and hearts remain open.

At the end of this passage, the *sūrah* links the book revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him), his advocacy of the divine message, prayers and remembrance of God with the truth reflected in the heavens and the earth, and with the advocacy of the divine message ever since Noah's time:

Recite what has been revealed to you of the book, and attend regularly to your prayer; for prayer restrains people from loathsome deeds and from all that is evil. To remember God is greater still. God knows all that you do. (Verse 45)

The Prophet is told to recite the book that has been revealed to him because it is his means of advocating God's message. It is a divine sign, one unseverable from the great truth reflected in the creation of the heavens and the earth. He is also told to attend regularly to prayer, because when it is repeatedly offered in the proper manner it becomes a bond with God. Prayer is an act of purification and dedication which cannot fit with the filth of evil and loathsome deeds. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "Whoever offers a prayer and it does not prevent him from loathsome and evil deeds will only take himself further away from God." [Related by al-Ṭabarī.] This refers to the person who has not attended properly to his prayer; he has rather offered it mechanically. When prayer is properly attended to, it is a form of remembrance of God: "*To remember God is greater still.*" It is greater than all. Greater than any motivation, inclination, or other form of devotion.

"God knows all that you do." Nothing escapes Him, and nothing blurs His eye. All mankind will return to Him when He will requite all in accordance with their deeds.

Confused Concepts

Do not argue with the people of earlier revelations in other than the most kindly manner, except for those of them who are intent on wrongdoing; and say: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves.' (46)

Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you. Those to whom We have given the Book believe in it, and also among these are some who believe in it. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers. (47)

Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand; or else those who cling to falsehood would have had cause to doubt. (48)

Nay, but this [Qur'an] consists of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers. (49)

وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ وَقُولُوا ءَامَنَّا بِالَّذِي أُنزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَأُنزِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَإِلَهُنَا وَإِلَهُكُمْ وَاحِدٌ وَخُنُ لَهُد مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَكَذَلِكَ أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ فَالَّذِينَ ءَاتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَمِنْ هَؤُلَاءِ مَنْ يُؤْمِنُ بِهِ وَمَا تَجْحَدُ بِعَايَتِنَا إِلَّا الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

وَمَا كُنْتَ تَتْلُو مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ بِيَمِينِكَ إِذًا لِأَنَّكَ لَأَنْتَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

بَلْ هُوَ ءَايَاتٌ بَيِّنَاتٌ فِي صُدُورِ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ وَمَا تَجْحَدُ بِعَايَتِنَا إِلَّا الظَّالِمُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

They say: 'Why have no miraculous signs ever been bestowed upon him from on high by his Lord?' Say: 'Signs are in the power of God alone; I am only a plain warner.' (50)

Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them? Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe. (51)

Say: 'God is sufficient as a witness between me and you! He knows all that is in the heavens and the earth; and they who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers. (52)

They challenge you to hasten their punishment. Indeed, had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them. Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares. (53)

They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is bound to encompass the unbelievers. (54)

[That will be] on the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above and from beneath their feet. He will then say: 'Taste now [the result of] your own doings.' (55)

You servants of Mine who have believed! Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone, then. (56)

وَقَالُوا لَوْلَا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْهِ آيَاتٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِ
قُلْ إِنَّمَا الْآيَاتُ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ وَإِنَّمَا أَنَا نَذِيرٌ

مُبِينٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِهِمْ أَنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ
يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَرَحْمَةً
وَذِكْرَىٰ لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ شَهِيدًا
يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا بِالْبَاطِلِ وَكَفَرُوا
بِاللَّهِ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

وَيَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِالْعَذَابِ وَلَوْلَا أَجَلٌ
مُّسَمًّى لَّجَاءَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ وَلَيَأْتِيَنَّهُمْ بَغْتَةً
وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

يَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِالْعَذَابِ وَإِنَّ جَهَنَّمَ
لَمُحِيطَةٌ بِالْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٥٤﴾

يَوْمَ يَغْشَاهُمْ الْعَذَابُ مِنْ فَوْقِهِمْ وَمِنْ
تَحْتِ أَرْجُلِهِمْ وَيَقُولُ ذُوقُوا مَا كُنتُمْ
تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

يَعِبَادِي الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِنَّ أَرْضِي وَاسِعَةٌ
فَإِيَّايَ فَاعْبُدُونِ ﴿٥٦﴾

Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return. (57)

Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Excellent is the reward of those who strive, (58)

those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust. (59)

How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you. He alone hears all and knows all. (60)

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' How perverted, then, are their minds! (61)

It is indeed God who grants sustenance in abundance, or gives it in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. God has full knowledge of everything. (62)

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَنُبَوِّئَنَّهُم مِّنَ الْجَنَّةِ غُرَفًا تَجْرَى مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا نِعَمَ أَجْرِ الْعَامِلِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

وَكَأَيِّن مِّن دَابَّةٍ لَّا تَحْمِلُ رِزْقَهَا اللَّهُ يَرْزُقُهَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ ۗ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٦٠﴾

وَلِئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّن خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَسَخَّرَ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ لَيَقُولَنَّ اللَّهُ فَنِي يُؤْفِكُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

اللَّهُ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ ۗ وَيَقْدِرُ لَهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

وَلِئِن سَأَلْتَهُم مَّن نَزَّلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَوْتِهَا لَيَقُولَنَّ اللَّهُ ۗ قُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ۗ بَلْ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٣﴾

of them are without reason. (63)

The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it. (64)

When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him, (65)

and thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the truth]. (66)

Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings? (67)

Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers? (68)

But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good. (69)

وَمَا هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا لَهُوٌّ وَلَعِبٌ
وَإِنَّ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ لَهِيَ الْحَيَوَانُ لَوْ
كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦٤﴾

فَإِذَا رَكِبُوا فِي الْفَلَكِ دَعَوْا اللَّهَ
مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّيْنَاهُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ إِذَا
هُمْ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٦٥﴾

لِيَكْفُرُوا بِمَا آتَيْنَاهُمْ وَلِيَتَمَتَّعُوا فَسَوْفَ
يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٦٦﴾

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّا جَعَلْنَا حَرَمًا ءَامِنًا
وَيَتَخَطَفُ النَّاسُ مِنْ حَوْلِهِمْ أَفَبِالْبَاطِلِ
يُؤْمِنُونَ وَبِنِعْمَةِ اللَّهِ يَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا
أَوْ كَذَّبَ بِالْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَاءَهُ ؕ أَلَيْسَ فِي
جَهَنَّمَ مَثْوًى لِّلْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٦٨﴾

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِيْنَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا
وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Overview

As we have already explained, the central theme of the *sūrah* is the test and hardship often encountered by people of faith. The purpose is to distinguish believers from hypocrites through a test that can only be endured by those with firm belief. This is coupled with showing the earthly forces that oppose faith and believers and which place all types of difficulty in their way. These are seen to be weak and flimsy. It confirms that God will destroy the wicked and give support to those who show perseverance and steadfastness in the face of adversity. This is consistent with all past messages since Noah's time. It will certainly remain true, as it is linked to the great truth reflected in the nature of the universe and in the unity of the divine message.

The previous passage of the *sūrah* ended with an instruction to the Prophet and the believers to recite the book that was revealed to him. They were further instructed to attend regularly to prayer as a method of God's remembrance and to watch God who knows all that they do.

This final passage continues its discussion of this book, as also its link with books revealed in the past, with an instruction to the believers not to enter into debates with the people of earlier revelations except in accordance with what is best. The only exception made here refers to the wrongdoers among them who had altered their scriptures and leaned towards idolatry, which is flagrant wrongdoing. Believers are further instructed to declare their belief in all past messages and divine books, as they are true and confirm what was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* then speaks about some of the followers of earlier revelations who believed in this final divine book, while the Arab idolaters who received it through the Prophet sent to them denied it. They were totally heedless of the great blessing God granted them by His choosing a final Messenger from among them. The Prophet speaks to them with God's words while previously he could neither read nor write. This, in itself, should remove any doubt that he was its author.

The unbelievers are warned against hastening God's punishment which could take them by surprise. The *sūrah* describes how close it is to them and how hell will engulf them, from above and from under their feet. It then turns to the believers who were subjected to much oppression in Makkah, urging them to emigrate so that they could live elsewhere and worship God alone. The style employed by the Qur'ān here is remarkable. It addresses every thought that occurs to them and every obstacle that could hamper their progress. Their hearts are within God's grasp at all times. All this is painted in colours that testify to the fact that it is God who has created those hearts. No one other than God could know such inner feelings and awaken them in such a way.

The *sūrah* then wonders at the idolaters and their confused concepts. They admit that it is God who has created the heavens and the earth, made the sun and the moon subservient to His laws and who causes rain to fall so as to quicken the earth after it has been dead. When they travel by sea they call on God alone for help, and then they are sincere in their submission to Him. Yet, after all this, they associate partners with God, deny His book, oppose His Messenger, and persecute those who believe in Him. The *sūrah* also reminds the idolaters of the great favour God has granted them by giving them a secure sanctuary, i.e. the Sacred Mosque, in whose neighbourhood they live, while people all around them live in fear. Yet they fabricate lies against God and associate false deities with Him. He threatens them with punishment, an abode in hell.

The *sūrah* then concludes with a firm promise by God to guide those who strive for His cause. They need to dedicate themselves to Him, overcome the obstacles in their way and persevere in spite of all oppression and hardship.

According to What is Best

Do not argue with the people of earlier revelations in other than the most kindly manner, except for those of them who are intent on wrongdoing, and say: 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves.' (Verse 46)

The divine message preached by Noah and subsequent messengers until the last Prophet, Muhammad, (peace be upon them all), is one and the same message. It was given by one God for one purpose, which is to guide mankind, who have gone astray, back to their Lord and to re-educate them in accordance with the way of life He has laid down. Believers in any of these messages are brethren to the believers in all messages. They are all one community worshipping the One God. Mankind, throughout all generations, has been divided into two groups: the believers, who are God's party, and the rejecters, who are Satan's party. This division transcends time and place. Every generation of believers is merely one ring in a long chain stretching over many centuries.

This is the great, noble truth that forms the basis of Islam. It is laid down in this verse which puts human relations at a level much higher than that of blood, race, nationality, or commercial exchange. It gives these relations an additional dimension: that of a link with God based on a single faith that transcends race, colour, nationality, time and place. This leaves only the strongest tie, that of faith.

Thus, Muslims are instructed not to argue with the people of earlier revelations except in accordance with what is best: which means explaining the purpose behind

the new message and outlining the links between it and all earlier divine messages. It also stresses the importance of accepting the final form of the divine message which is in full agreement with all previous messages, complementing them in accordance with God's knowledge of what suits people and their needs. There is, however, one exception to be singled out *"those of them who are intent on wrongdoing."* (Verse 46) These have deviated from the basic belief in God's oneness, associated partners with Him and violated the principles of His way of life. With these no argument is of use. Indeed, there is no need to maintain the same code with them. These are the ones Islam fought when it established its state in Madinah.

Some people fabricate falsehood against the Prophet claiming that he extended good treatment to the people of earlier revelations when he was in Makkah and facing hardship and opposition from the idolaters. Then when he established a state in Madinah he adopted a different policy, waging war against them, and going against everything he had earlier said about them when in Makkah. All such claims are false as is clearly apparent from this Makkan verse. Arguing with the people of earlier revelations in accordance with what is best is limited only to those of them who are not intent on wrongdoing and who have not deviated from the divine faith based on God's absolute oneness.

"And say: We believe in that which has been revealed to us, as well as that which has been revealed to you, for our God and your God is one. It is to Him that we submit ourselves." (Verse 46) There is no need for conflict, argument or dispute, as they all believe in one God, and Muslims believe in what was revealed to the prophets before them. It is all essentially the same. Indeed, the divine way of life follows a smooth way of progress.

Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you. Those to whom We have given the Book believe in it, and also among these are some who believe in it. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers. (Verse 47)

This verse begins with *'thus it is'*, indicating that the revelation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) followed the same rule and method of revelation to earlier prophets and messengers. *"Thus it is that We have revealed this book to you."* (Verse 47) In their attitude towards it, people divided into two groups: the first, composed of some of those who followed earlier revelations and some Arabs of the Quraysh, accepted it as true and believed in it; the second rejected it despite the testimony given by people of earlier divine religions that it was true and confirmed their own revelations: *"None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the unbelievers."* (Verse 47) These new revelations are so clear and straightforward that they will not be denied except by those who deliberately shut their minds and spirits

to them, refusing to reflect on them. The Arabic word *kufr* and its derivative *kāfirūn*, which respectively mean 'unbelief' and 'unbelievers', denote in their original linguistic 'cover, screen, etc.' Hence, the use of the word unbelievers in this instance stresses such connotations.

Never have you been able to read a book before this, nor have you ever been able to transcribe one with your right hand; or else those who cling to falsehood would have had cause to doubt. (Verse 48)

Thus the Qur'ān replies to even their most naïve and jejune of queries. The Prophet had lived among them all his life and could neither read nor write. Then, he gave them this remarkable book, which was unlike anything produced by even the most talented of literary figures. They might have had a reasonable suspicion, had the Prophet been a man of literary talent. What doubt though could they reasonably entertain when they were fully aware of his past among them? Furthermore, even if the Prophet could read and write they should not have entertained any doubt about it. The Qur'ān is its own best witness that it has no human author. It is far greater than man's ability, knowledge and world. Whenever one reflects on its statements one cannot escape the feelings that it is too powerful and too authoritative to be of human composition.

Nay, but this [Qur'ān] consists of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers. (Verse 49)

It gives clear unambiguous indications to those who have been granted sound knowledge, leaving no room for doubt or suspicion. They feel these signs within their own hearts and they are thus reassured. They do not require any further proof. Knowledge that deserves to be described as true is that which is felt to be certain at heart, illuminating a person's way and leading him to what is best. "None knowingly rejects Our revelations other than the wrongdoers." (Verse 49) These are the ones who are unfair in their evaluation of things and who stray a long way from the truth and the right path.

What Need for Miracles?

They say: 'Why have no miraculous signs ever been bestowed upon him from on high by his Lord?' Say: 'Signs are in the power of God alone; I am only a plain warner.' (Verse 50)

What they want are miracles like those which earlier messengers were given when humanity was still in its infancy. These serve as final evidence only to the generation and community which sees them. This final message, however, provides such evidence to everyone who receives its call until the end of human life. Therefore, its miracle is given in the form of verses of the Qur'ān, a miraculous book which is full of wonders. It opens its treasures to all generations. It is made up of verses that are clear to the hearts of those gifted with real knowledge. As they reflect on its verses they realize that they are in fact miraculous signs and they recognize the source from which they derive their power.

"Say: Signs are in the power of God alone." (Verse 50) He produces them when there is need according to His own plans. It is not for the Prophet or anyone else to make suggestions to God concerning the provision of any sign. The Prophet tells them this, explaining that it is alien to his manners and nature that he should make such a suggestion. *"I am only a plain warner."* (Verse 50) I explain things, deliver my message and warn people. When I have done that, the task assigned to me has been fulfilled. It is up to God to decide what to do next. Thus the faith is presented purely, free of any confusion and suspicion. The limits of God's Messenger's task are defined so that people do not become confused with God's attributes. No ambiguity is allowed to blur his message. Such ambiguity occurred with earlier messages when the miracles shown to people became confused with myth and legend, leading to deviation from the path of truth.

Those people who demand physical miracles do not truly appreciate the great favour God has granted them with the Qur'ān. He bestowed this from on high so as to guide them:

Is it not enough for them that We have revealed to you this book which is being read out to them? Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe. (Verse 51)

Their demands reflect an attitude of discontent with God's great favour when, in fact, no amount of thanks and gratitude is adequate. Is it not enough for them that they actually live with this Qur'ān as it is revealed from on high. It tells them about what they feel within themselves, explains what takes place around them and makes them feel that God is watching over them, taking care of them, relating historical accounts that should educate them? What is man but a little creature, lost in God's great universe? Indeed, mankind, the earth they live on and the sun around which it moves are no more than little particles in this great expanse. They are held in place only by God's power. Yet He honours them, bestowing His revelations so that they are recited to them, and they are neither thankful nor satisfied.

“Indeed there is in it much grace and a reminder to people who will believe.” (Verse 51) It is only believers who feel this grace. They appreciate His blessings as He invites them to come to Him when He is the Most High, the Supreme. Such people benefit by the Qur’ān, because it lives in their hearts, opens its treasures to them and enlightens their souls with true knowledge and supreme light.

Those who do not feel any of this are the ones who demand a physical miracle so that they can accept this Qur’ān as true. These are blind people whose hearts do not open up to light. There is no use trying to argue with such people. Hence, the Prophet is instructed to leave a decision about them to God Almighty:

Say: God is sufficient as a witness between me and you! He knows all that is in the heavens and the earth; and they who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers. (Verse 52)

A witness who knows all that takes place in the heavens and earth gives the best and greatest testimony. It is He who knows that their situation is false: *“They who believe in falsehood and disbelieve in God will certainly be the losers.”* (Verse 52) They are the absolute losers; they are the ones who forego everything. They lose both this world and the life to come, as also themselves, divine guidance, righteousness, reassurance, truth and light.

To believe in God is, in itself a great gain, and to be rewarded for it is by God’s grace. Belief provides reassurance and a steady footing along the way, steadfastness in the face of adversity, trust in God’s help and protection, and confidence as to the eventual outcome. This is indeed a great gain, and it is what the unbelievers lose.

Hastening God’s Punishment

The *sūrah* continues its discussion of what the unbelievers do. It refers to their precipitation of God’s punishment, when hell draws close to them:

They challenge you to hasten their punishment. Indeed, had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them. Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares. They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is bound to encompass the unbelievers. [That will be] on the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above them and from beneath their feet. He will then say: ‘Taste now [the result of] your own doings.’ (Verses 53-55)

The unbelievers heard the warnings but could not understand God’s wisdom in

allowing them time to consider their positions. Hence, they challenged the Prophet to hasten their punishment. God often allows people time so that the wrongdoers continue their wicked and arrogant ways. He also tests the believers so that they grow stronger in faith and perseverance. Moreover, those who cannot remain steadfast when exposed to a test abandon the believers' ranks. He also allows them time so that those of them whom He knows to have goodness in their hearts recognize the truth, mend their ways and accept His guidance; or else, their own offspring may grow up as believers worshipping Him alone even though their fathers were errant and misguided. Or He may leave them a while for some other purpose of His.

The Arab idolaters, however, could not understand God's purpose and wise planning. Hence their challenge hastening their own punishment: "*Had not a term been set for it, that punishment would have already come upon them.*" (Verse 53) At this point God threatens them with the punishment which will come upon them, at its set time, but when they least expect it. Thus, it will take them by surprise and they will not be able to escape it: "*Still, it will most certainly come upon them of a sudden, and they will be taken unawares.*" (Verse 53)

Such punishment overwhelmed them later, at the Battle of Badr, confirming the truth of God's warning. They saw with their own eyes how God's warning and promise took effect. Yet God did not destroy them totally, as He did with earlier communities. Nor did He respond to their demands to see a physical miracle, so that they could avoid the punishment that comes to any community which continues to deny His message, persisting in disbelief, after it has been given a physical miracle. In fact many of them later accepted the faith and some even joined the ranks of the best advocates of Islam. God also produced from among their offspring many who raised the banner of Islam high, over many generations. All of this was part of God's design and purpose, known only to Himself.

The warning of sudden punishment in this life which occurs when least expected is followed by another censure for their continued hastening of punishment: "*They challenge you to hasten the punishment; but indeed hell is encompassing the unbelievers.*" (Verse 54) Following the Qur'ānic method of presenting the future as though it is taking place now, the *sūrah* describes hell as encompassing the unbelievers. To them, this is hidden behind the curtains of the future, but to God, it is a visible reality. Describing its hidden reality fills one with awe and makes their hastening of punishment increasingly singular. How could anyone hasten his own punishment when hell engulfs him while he remains heedless, deluded.

The *sūrah* then draws an image of them as they are engulfed by hell, yet hastening their punishment: "*On the day when suffering will overwhelm them from above and from beneath their feet. He will then say: 'Taste now [the result of] your own doings.'*" (Verse 55)

This is a fearful scene, coupled with a humiliating rebuke and painful censure: “*Taste now [the result of] your own doings.*” (Verse 55). Such is the end of paying no heed to the warnings and of hastening the punishment.

Inevitable Death

The *sūrah* leaves careless unbelievers in this scene of suffering, one which engulfs them from above and from under their feet. It moves on to address the believers who suffer persecution at the hands of the unbelievers, who aim to prevent them from worshipping God. It tells them to try to flee from persecution so that they can truly practise their faith. This is given in the form of a loving address that touches one’s heart:

You servants of Mine who have believed! Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone, then. Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return. Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide. Excellent is the reward of those who strive, those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust. How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you. He alone hears all and knows all. (Verses 56-60)

The Creator of these hearts who knows all their feelings, fleeting thoughts, perceptions and ideas addresses them with love, inviting them to emigrate for the sake of their faith: “*You servants of mine who have believed.*” These words, right from the outset give them a feeling of their true status, linking them to their Lord: *Servants of Mine!*’

This is the first caring touch, while the second is felt in what comes next: “*Spacious is My earth.*” You are My servants, and this is My earth, which is spacious and can comfortably accommodate you. What keeps you, then, in a hostile place where you are oppressed and persecuted on account of your faith, and where you cannot worship God in freedom? Leave this narrow and restricted place and find somewhere else in My spacious earth, to enjoy freedom of worship: “*Spacious is My earth: worship Me alone.*” (Verse 56)

Sorrow at leaving one’s own homeland is the first feeling which stirs in the mind of one who is invited to leave his home. Hence, these words stress closeness to God and the earth’s spaciousness. Since it is all God’s earth, then the place to be loved most is that where one enjoys freedom to worship God alone.

The *sūrah* continues to address people’s thoughts, and hence how we know the fear involved in emigration. The early Muslims in Makkah felt that they ran the risk

of death if they tried to leave. The unbelievers were not averse to stopping them from emigrating because they felt that such emigration represented a threat to their own security. There were also the dangers that they could encounter on the way, should they even manage to leave Makkah. Therefore, the next verse addresses such concerns: *“Every soul shall taste death. Then to Us you all must return.”* (Verse 57)

Death is inevitable wherever one happens to be. Therefore, it should not be considered when we do not know its causes. It is to God that everyone will return. They should now emigrate to some place of safety in His spacious earth, for they will inevitably return to Him at the end of their term. They are His servants whom He looks after in this world and in the life to come. Why should any of them entertain any fear or worry now that God speaks to them with such care?

God does not, however, leave it at that. He tells them about what He has prepared for them in their future abode. If they leave their own homeland, there are other places on earth that will welcome them; and if they desert their homes, they will be compensated with much better dwellings in heaven: *“Those who believe and do righteous deeds We shall certainly lodge in lofty mansions in paradise through which running waters flow, therein to abide.”* (Verse 58) At this point God urges them to do what is good, remain patient in all situations and place their trust in Him: *“Excellent is the reward of those who strive, those who are patient in adversity and in their Lord place their trust.”* (Verses 58-59) This should give them all the encouragement to remain steadfast when worry and fear are keenly felt and encouragement is badly needed.

When people are forced to leave their homeland another worry they entertain is that of livelihood. After all they are abandoning their homes and property, where they are familiar with what is needed and with the available opportunities. Therefore, the *sūrah* also reassures them on this count: *“How many a living creature is there that does not bear its sustenance! It is God who provides for them and for you.”* (Verse 60) It places before their eyes the realities they see around them. Countless are the living creatures that do not know how to gather, carry, care for their sustenance or know what they need for their own survival. They do not know how to provide or store it. Nevertheless, God provides for them all, preserving them from death by starvation. He provides for people in the same way. They may think that they produce their means of sustenance, but the fact is that God grants them the ways and means to obtain what they need for their living, and this, in itself, is a favour given to them by God. They could not have obtained such ways and means without God’s grace. Therefore, they should not worry about their sustenance when they emigrate. They are God’s servants, travelling on God’s earth, and God will provide for them wherever they are, just as He provides for every living creature.

These caring touches conclude by emphasizing the bond with God. This so that believers are fully aware of the care He takes of them. He listens to them, knows their

situation and does not abandon them: “*He alone hears all and knows all.*” (Verse 60) Thus ends this short round which delivers caring touches to every heart and responds to every thought, replacing every sort of worry, fear and weariness with reassurance, confidence and comfort. Believers now feel that they will never be abandoned by God, the Most Merciful. Only the Creator understands the worries that overwhelm people’s minds, and none cures their hearts except the One who knows all that hearts contain.

Contradictions Galore

Having completed a short round with the believers, the *sūrah* then picks up again the clear contradiction in the unbelievers’ position and concepts. They acknowledge that it is God who has created the heavens and the earth, made the sun and the moon subservient, causes rain and quickens the earth after it has been dead. They know what all this involves in providing sustenance for them, either in abundance or small measure. They turn to God alone for help when they are in a situation of fear. Yet in spite of all this, they associate partners with God, persecute those who worship Him alone and try to turn them away from their straightforward faith. They are oblivious to God’s grace. It is He who has given them a life of security in the neighbourhood of His Sacred Mosque where they themselves are guilty of religious oppression.

If you were to ask them: ‘Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth, and made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws]?’ they will be sure to answer: ‘God.’ How perverted, then, are their minds! It is indeed God who grants sustenance in abundance, or gives it in small measure, to whom He wills of His servants. God has full knowledge of everything. If you were to ask them: ‘Who is it that sends water from the skies, thus giving life to the earth after it had been lifeless?’ they will be sure to answer: ‘God.’ Say: All praise is due to God alone!’ Yet most of them are without reason. The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it. When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him, and thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the truth]. Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God’s blessings? Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers? (Verses 61-68)

These verses give us a clear idea of the beliefs of the Arabs at the time the Qur’ān

was revealed. It shows how such belief was originally based on God's oneness, but subsequently suffered distortion. There is no wonder to this, for the Arabs were the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham's son (peace be upon them both). In fact, the Arabs believed that they followed Abraham's religion, taking pride in it on this basis. They did not care much for Judaism or Christianity, even though both were known and practised in Arabia. They were, in a sense, oblivious to the great confusion that had crept into their faith.

Whenever they were asked about the Creator of the heavens and the earth, who controlled the sun and the moon, and brought rain to give life to the earth, they acknowledged that it was all done by God. Yet at the same time, they worshipped their idols, or *jinn*, or the angels, making these God's partners in the worship they offered, even though such beings had no share in creation. God highlights such ridiculous contradictions as follows: "*How perverted, then, are their minds.*" (Verse 61) How can they turn a blind eye to the truth and accept instead this muddled concept? "*Yet most of them are without reason.*" (Verse 63) Certainly anyone who accepts such contradictions has no reason.

In between these questions about the great universal phenomena, the *sūrah* states that God gives provisions in plenty or in small measure to whomever He wills of His servants. Thus, it links the provision of sustenance with the creation of the universe and all other aspects of God's limitless power. It is all done in accordance with God's knowledge: "*God has full knowledge of everything.*" (Verse 62)

There is an obvious link between people's provision and sustenance on the one hand and the universal cycles of stars and planets, particularly in relation to water, plants and life on the other. To give sustenance in plenty or small measure is something that God controls, in accordance with the phenomena mentioned in the *sūrah*. Sources of sustenance, including rain, rivers, plants, animals, minerals, marine life, game animals and other sources, are all directly subject to the general laws that operate in the universe bringing the sun and the moon into subservience. Should these laws suffer a change, even a slight one, the effect will be clearly apparent in all aspects of life on earth, as also in underground natural resources. Indeed, underground resources are formed and stored in quantities and qualities that differ from one place to another for reasons that are directly related to the earth, its composition and how it is affected by the sun and the moon.¹³

The Qur'ān uses the great open universe as its telling and convincing proof. The universe as a whole provides the setting for the truth it presents. We stand to reflect on the wonders of the universe, feeling that they are brought about by the One

¹³ Further discussion of this aspect is made in commenting on the verse that says: "*It is He who has created all things and ordained them in due proportions.*" (25: 2) in Vol. XII, pp. 393-295.

Creator. We do not need advanced science or profound knowledge to appreciate such great wonders as the universe exhibits. All we need is an alert mind and a feeling heart. As we see God's wonders we can only praise and glorify Him, feel close to Him.

Against this backdrop of life on earth and our means of sustenance, whether plentiful or stinted, an accurate standard is provided against which to measure all values. Thus, we see that this world, with all that it provides of sustenance, comfort and pleasure, is trivial when compared with the life to come: *"The life of this world is but amusement and play. It is the life to come that is the only true life, if they but knew it."* (Verse 64) When it is not viewed as a means to ensure happiness in the life to come, but felt to be, of itself, the ultimate objective and its pleasures coveted, this present life, with all that it can give, is no more than trifling play. It is the life to come that is the one that is full of life and fulfilment.

In saying so, the Qur'ān does not advocate a life of austerity that discards comfort and pleasure. This is contrary to what Islam encourages. What it means is that we should look to the hereafter when enjoying life's pleasures, limiting ourselves to what God permits. Moreover, we should look at life's comforts and pleasures as something dispensable, so as not to make of them the goal we seek at any price. What we need is a good sense of proportion so as to give everything its correct value. We must have a true measure showing the value of the present life *vis-a-vis* the hereafter. Thus we will be able to enjoy life's pleasures as we please, knowing how to look at them: this present life is amusement and play, while the hereafter is the true life.

The *sūrah* continues its outline of the unbelievers' contradictions: *"When they embark on a ship, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him."* (Verse 65) When they are on board a ship, moving across the sea, feeling their boat to be little more than a toy pushed about by the waves, they remember none other than God. It is to Him alone that they turn for support, and only in His power do they feel that their safety can be guaranteed. Thus, their feelings and speech confirm His oneness. They recognize this as coming from the depths of their nature. However, *"as soon as He has brought them safe ashore, they begin to associate partners with Him."* (Verse 65) They forget their nature, and their prayers, reverting to their association of partners with God.

Such deviation means they are ungrateful for the blessings God grants them, and that they ignore the upright nature and clear proofs He has given them. They will, then, enjoy their worldly life for the limited duration of their time on earth, taking little heed of the inevitable result: *"Thus they show their ingratitude for what We have given them, and go on enjoying their worldly life. Before long they will come to know [the*

truth]." (Verse 66) This is a subtle warning that what they will come to know will certainly not please them.

The *sūrah* then reminds them of God's favour. It is He who has placed them close to a secure sanctuary where they live in complete security. Yet they neither remember such blessing, nor offer thanks for it by worshipping God alone. On the contrary, they try to scare the believers who live close to it: *"Are they, then, not aware that We have set up a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away from all around them? Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings?"* (Verse 67)

Those living in the vicinity of the Ka`bah enjoyed a life of security: they were honoured by other people for the sake of God's House. All around them, Arabian tribes continuously feuded with each other, creating an atmosphere of fear. They only felt secure when they were in the vicinity of the Sacred House. It was amazing, therefore, that they made that very House a place where they put their idols and worshipped other beings. Hence, the rhetorical question: *"Will they, then, continue to believe in what is false and to deny God's blessings?"* (Verse 67)

"Who could be more wicked than one who invents lies against God, or denies the truth when it reaches him? Is not hell the proper abode for the unbelievers?" (Verse 68) They certainly invented lies against God, attributing partners to Him. They also denied the truth they were given, describing it as lies. Hence, hell is the right abode for such unbelievers.

The *sūrah* concludes with an image of the other party who strive hard so that they earn God's pleasure and establish a relation with Him. They endure whatever hardship they are called upon to endure, allowing no feelings of despair to creep into their minds. They withstand every hardship and pass every test, fulfilling their duties and marching along the long, hard road to their well-defined goal. Such people will not be left alone. God will never suffer their belief and struggle to be wasted. He looks at them from on high, and He is pleased with them. He will then provide them with guidance, helping them along the road, and give them ample reward for their perseverance and good works: *"But as for those who strive hard in Our cause, We shall most certainly guide them to paths that lead unto Us. God is indeed with those who do good."* (Verse 69)