

SŪRAH 22

Al-Hajj

(The Pilgrimage)

Prologue

Parts of this *sūrah* were revealed in Makkah and other parts in Madīnah, as is evident from the topics addressed. We note in particular that verses 38-41, which give the Muslim community permission to fight, and verse 60, which speaks about meting out the same punishment that is inflicted on Muslims by others, were revealed in Madīnah. Muslims were only allowed to fight or to exact similar punishment after the Prophet's migration to Madīnah and the establishment of the Muslim state there. Prior to that, the Prophet stated that he had not received any directives allowing such action. He was replying to an offer made by the people of Madīnah who pledged their support to him. They stated that they were ready to kill all the unbelievers in Minā. In response, he said: "I have not been told to do such a thing." But when Madīnah became the land of the Muslim state, God permitted fighting to repel the unbelievers' aggression and to defend the freedom of belief and worship.

In its subject matter and its general ambiance, the *sūrah* appears closer to the Qur'ānic *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah. Issues like God's oneness, the warning to be watchful for the Last Hour, evidence for the inevitable resurrection of all mankind, the fallacy of pagan beliefs based on associating partners with God, the scenes of the Day of Judgement, and drawing attention to universal signs pointing to God's existence and power, are all very prominent in the *sūrah*. Yet equally prominent are the many issues normally addressed in *sūrahs* revealed in Madīnah. Apart from giving permission to the Muslim community to fight for God's cause, the *sūrah* addresses freedom of worship, the promises of God's support to those who fight to

repel aggression, and the order to fight for God's cause.

A Starting Jolt

The impressions the *sūrah* generates in its various scenes and cited examples are those of power, strength, toughness and awe. It delivers clear warnings and alerts our sense of God consciousness, of fearing Him and submitting to His will.

The scene of resurrection at the outset is one of power, striking fear in people's hearts: *"Mankind! Have fear of your Lord. The violent convulsion at the Last Hour will be awesome indeed. On the day when it comes, every suckling mother will utterly forget her nursling, and every woman heavy with child will cast her burden; and it will seem to you that all mankind are drunk, although they are not drunk. But severe indeed will be God's punishment."* (Verses 1-2)

The same may be said of the scene describing punishment in the hereafter: *"For the unbelievers garments of fire shall be cut out; and scalding water will be poured over their heads, melting all that is in their bellies and their skin. In addition, there will be grips of iron for them. Whenever, in their anguish, they try to get out, they are returned there, and will be told: 'Taste the torment of fire.'" (Verses 19-22)*

A very vivid image is drawn showing the status of one who associates partners with God: *"He who associates partners with God is like one who is hurling down from the skies; whereupon he is snatched by the birds, or blown away by the wind to a far-off place."* (Verse 31) Equally vivid is the description of the one who has lost hope of ever being granted God's support: *"If anyone thinks that God will not succour him in this world and in the life to come, let him stretch out a rope to the sky and then cut himself off and then let him see whether his scheme will remove that which has enraged him."* (Verse 15)

The scene depicting the townships destroyed on account of their wrongdoing also emits power: *"How many a township have We destroyed because it had been immersed in evildoing. Now they lie in desolate ruin. How many a well lies abandoned, and how many a proud palace lies empty."* (Verse 45)

Such images of power and awe are coupled with serious orders and assigned tasks in addition to the justification given for the use of power to repel aggression and the firm promise to grant victory and power. This is re-emphasized in reference to God's might and the weakness of His alleged partners. Belonging to the first group is the following example: *"Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God!' Were it not that God repels some people y means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques - all of which God's name is abundantly extolled - would surely have been destroyed. God will most certainly succour him who succours God's*

cause. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty. They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events.” (Verses 39-41)

An example of the second type is: *“Mankind! An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it. Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end. If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought! No true understanding of God have they. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty.” (Verses 73-74)*

Beyond all this we discern the repeated call to remain God-fearing and to stand in awe of God. The *sūrah* starts with this call in its first verse, and repeats it time and again: *“Mankind! Have fear of your Lord. The violent convulsion at the Last Hour will be awesome indeed.” (Verse 1) “Anyone who honours the symbols set up by God [shows evidence of] God-consciousness in people’s hearts.” (Verse 32) “Your God is the One and Only God. Hence, surrender yourselves to Him. Give good news to those who are humble, whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned.” (Verses 34-35) “Never does their meat or their blood reach God; it is your piety that reaches Him.” (Verse 37)*

The *sūrah* is also replete with scenes of the universe, the Day of Judgement, the fate of earlier communities, cited cases, images, reflections and lessons drawn. All aim to alert our feelings of faith, piety, and surrender to God. This is what characterizes the entire *sūrah* and gives it its distinctive mark.

When we read the *sūrah* in full, we find that it consists of four main parts. It begins with a general address to all mankind, calling on them to be God-fearing. They are warned against the violent convulsion which announces the arrival of the Day of Judgement. We also have a description of the horrific scenes accompanying it and a denunciation of disputing without knowledge about God and following every devil who inevitably leads his followers astray. It then highlights indications of the resurrection based on the stages of life a human embryo goes through, and the development of plant life, making a clear link between all types of life. These stages which follow well established and never failing laws God has set in operation are shown to be closely linked to a number of truisms: namely, that God is the truth; that He brings the dead to life; that He has power over all things; that the Last Hour will inevitably come, and that God will resurrect all those buried in their graves. All these are natural laws and facts closely related to the law that governs the life of the universe.

A second denunciation of ignorant disputes about God follows, since such disputes are devoid of guidance and follow no enlightening book or revelation. As this is made clear, a negative example is given showing the repugnant attitude of those who look at faith from a profit and loss point of view. When misfortune befalls

such people, they are quick to seek help from sources other than God, in effect despairing of His help. This part of the *sūrah* concludes with a definitive statement that guidance and error are achieved by God's will. He will certainly judge, on the Day of Reckoning, between the followers of different faiths. It finally paints a horrific scene of the punishment suffered by unbelievers, contrasted with the perfect bliss enjoyed by believers.

The second part is clearly related to the first as it opens with a comment on the unbelievers who turn people away from God's path and from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. Their action is strongly denounced since God has made the Sacred Mosque a place for all mankind, where those who live close by it and those who come from remote parts have the same rights and position. It then relates part of the history of building the Ka`bah, often referred to in the Qur`ān as the House, and the task assigned by God to Abraham to build it on the basis of His oneness, purifying it of all traces of idolatry. It goes on to mention some of the rituals of pilgrimage and how they strengthen people's piety, which is the aim of this great act of worship. This part of the *sūrah* concludes with giving permission to believers to fight in order to protect places and rites of worship against any aggression that seeks to turn them away from their belief in God alone

The third part provides examples of past communities' denials of faith, the destruction of hardened unbelievers, and images of cities destroyed over the heads of wrongdoers. The purpose here is to explain God's law with regard to the messages He sends to mankind, to comfort the Prophet who was facing a determined campaign of rejection and opposition, and to reassure the believers as to their inevitable destiny. This part also includes certain aspects of Satan's scheming against prophets and messengers, and how God reasserts His message, setting His revelations on a solid basis. Thus, believers are reassured and unbelievers, whether weaklings or the arrogant and powerful, turn away, having been misled by Satan.

The final part of the *sūrah* states God's promise of support to anyone who is oppressed as he tries to repel such aggression. This promise is followed by highlighting some aspects of God's infinite power. Next to it we have a miserable image of the helplessness of the deities worshipped by those who associate partners with God. The *sūrah* concludes with an address to the believers to worship their Lord and strive for His cause, and to hold fast to His rope as they fulfil the duties required by their faith which goes back to the time of Abraham (peace be upon him).

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The Pilgrimage

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Mankind! Have fear of your Lord. The violent convulsion at the Last Hour will be awesome indeed. (1)

On the day when it comes, every suckling mother will utterly forget her nursing, and every woman heavy with child will cast her burden; and it will seem to you that all mankind are drunk, although they are not drunk. But severe indeed will be God's punishment. (2)

Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, and follow every rebellious devil. (3)

It is decreed for whoever entrusts himself to any [such devil] that he will lead him astray and guide him towards the suffering of the blazing flame. (4)

Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete,⁵ then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you.

يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ إِنَّ زَلْزَلَةَ
السَّاعَةِ شَيْءٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

يَوْمَ تَرَوْنَهَا تَذْهَلُ كُلُّ مُرْضِعَةٍ عَمَّا
أَرْضَعَتْ وَتَضَعُ كُلُّ ذَاتِ حَمَلٍ حَمْلَهَا
وَتَرَى النَّاسَ سُكَرَىٰ وَمَا هُمْ بِسُكَرَىٰ
وَلَكِنَّ عَذَابَ اللَّهِ شَدِيدٌ ﴿٢﴾

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يُجَادِلُ فِي اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ
وَيَتَّبِعُ كُلَّ شَيْطَانٍ مَّرِيدٍ ﴿٣﴾

كُتِبَ عَلَيْهِ أَنَّهُ مَن تَوَلَّاهُ فَأَنَّهُ يُضِلُّهُ
وَيَهْدِيهِ إِلَىٰ عَذَابِ السَّعِيرِ ﴿٤﴾

يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّنَ
الْبَعْثِ فَإِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُم مِّن تَرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِّن
نُّطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِّن عِلْقَةٍ ثُمَّ مِّن مُّضْغَةٍ مُّخَلَّقَةٍ
وَغَيْرِ مُخَلَّقَةٍ لِّنَبِّئَنَّكُمْ ﴿٥﴾

⁵ For an explanation of the translation of this verse, please see the footnote on its commentary, p. 80.

We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom. (5)

That is because God alone is the Ultimate Truth; and He alone brings the dead to life; and He has the power to will anything. (6)

And that the Last Hour is certain to come, beyond any doubt; and that God will certainly resurrect all who are in their graves. (7)

Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations. (8)

They turn away in scorn so as to lead others astray from the path of God. Disgrace is in store for them in this world, and on the Day of Resurrection We shall make them taste suffering through fire. (9)

[They shall be told:] 'This is the outcome of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God

وَنُقِرُّ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ مَا نَشَاءُ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ثُمَّ نُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا ثُمَّ لِتَبْلُغُوا أَشُدَّكُمْ وَمِنْكُمْ مَّنْ يَمُوتُ وَمِنْكُمْ مَّنْ يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰ أَرْدَلِ الْعُمْرِ لِكَيْلَا يَعْلَمَ مِنْ بَعْدِ عِلْمٍ شَيْئًا وَتَرَى الْأَرْضَ هَامِدَةً فَإِذَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا الْمَاءَ اهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ وَأَنْبَتَتْ مِنْ كُلِّ زَوْجٍ بَهِيجٍ ﴿٥﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَأَنَّهُ يُخَيِّ الْمَوْتَىٰ وَأَنَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٦﴾

وَأَنَّ السَّاعَةَ آتِيَةٌ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهَا وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَبْعَثُ مَنْ فِي الْقُبُورِ ﴿٧﴾

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يُجَادِلُ فِي اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَلَا هُدًى وَلَا كِتَابٍ مُّنِيرٍ ﴿٨﴾

ثَانِي عَطْفِهِ لِيُضِلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ لَهُ فِي الدُّنْيَا خِزْيٌ وَنُذِيقُهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عَذَابَ الْحَرِيقِ ﴿٩﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا قَدَّمْتَ يَدَاكَ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ لَيْسَ بِظَلَمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿١٠﴾

do the least wrong to His creatures.’ (10)

Some people worship God on the border-line [of faith]. If good befalls such a person, he is content; but if a trial assails him, he turns away utterly; thus losing this world and the life to come. This is, indeed, a loss beyond compare. (11)

He invokes, instead of God, something that can neither harm nor benefit him. This is the utmost that one can go astray. (12)

Indeed he invokes one that is far more likely to cause harm than benefit. Vile indeed is such a patron, and vile the friend. (13)

God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow. God certainly does whatever He wills. (14)

If anyone thinks that God will not succour him in this world and in the life to come, let him stretch out a rope to the sky and then cut himself off; and then let him see whether his scheme will remove that which has enraged him. (15)

Thus have We bestowed from on high this

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَعْبُدُ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ حَرْفٍ
فَإِن أَصَابَهُ خَيْرٌ اطْمَأَنَّ بِهِ وَإِن
أَصَابَتْهُ فِتْنَةٌ أُنْقَلَبَ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِ خَسِرَ
الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةَ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْخُسْرَانُ
الْمُبِينُ ﴿١١﴾

يَدْعُوا مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَا يَضُرُّهُ وَمَا
لَا يَنْفَعُهُ ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الضَّلَالُ الْبَعِيدُ ﴿١٢﴾

يَدْعُوا لَمَن ضُرُّهُ أَقْرَبُ مِن نَّفْعِهِ
لِبُئْسَ الْمَوْلَىٰ وَلِبُئْسَ الْعَشِيرُ ﴿١٣﴾

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُدْخِلُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرَىٰ مِن تَحْتِهَا
الْأَنْهَارُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْعَلُ مَا يُرِيدُ ﴿١٤﴾

مَنْ كَانَ يَظُنُّ أَن لَّن يَنْصُرَهُ اللَّهُ فِي
الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ فَلْيَمْدُدْ بِسَبَبٍ إِلَى
السَّمَاءِ ثُمَّ لِيَقْطَعْ فَلْيَنْظُرْ هَلْ يُذْهِبَنَّ
كَيْدُهُ مَا يَغِيظُ ﴿١٥﴾

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ ءَايَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ
يَهْدِي مَن يُرِيدُ ﴿١٦﴾

[Qur'an] in clear verses. God guides him who wills [to be guided]. (16)

As for the believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and those who associate partners with God, God will decide between them on the Day of Judgement. God is witness to everything. (17)

Are you not aware that to God bow down in worship all those who are in the heavens and on earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and a great number of human beings? But a great number also will inevitably have to suffer punishment. He whom God shall disgrace will have none who could bestow honour on him. God certainly does what He wills. (18)

These two adversaries have become engrossed in contention about their Lord. For the unbelievers garments of fire shall be cut out; and scalding water will be poured over their heads, (19)

melting all that is in their bellies and their skin. (20)

In addition, there will be grips of iron for them. (21)

Whenever, in their anguish, they try to get out, they are returned there, and will be told: 'Taste the

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّٰدِقِينَ
وَالنَّصْرَىٰ وَالْمَجُوسَ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا
إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْصِلُ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ ۚ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿١٧﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَسْجُدُ لَهُ مَن فِي
السَّمٰوٰتِ وَمَن فِي الْأَرْضِ وَالشَّمْسُ
وَالْقَمَرُ وَالنُّجُومُ وَالْجِبَالُ وَالشَّجَرُ
وَالدَّوَابُّ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنَ النَّاسِ وَكَثِيرٌ حَقَّ
عَلَيْهِ الْعَذَابُ ۗ وَمَن يُهِنِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِن
مُّكْرَمٍ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَآءُ ﴿١٨﴾

﴿١٩﴾ هٰذَانِ خَصْمَانِ اخْتَصَمُوا فِي رَبِّهِمْ
فَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا قُطِّعَتْ لَهُمْ ثِيَابٌ مِّن
نَّارٍ يُصَبُّ مِن فَوْقِ رُءُوسِهِمُ الْحَمِيمُ ﴿٢٠﴾

يُصْهَرُ بِهِ مَا فِي بُطُونِهِمْ وَالْجُلُودُ ﴿٢١﴾

وَهُمْ مَّقْمَحٌ مِّنْ حَدِيدٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

كُلَّمَا أَرَادُوا أَن تَخْرُجُوا مِنْهَا مِنْ غَمٍّ
أُعِيدُوا فِيهَا وَذُوقُوا عَذَابَ الْحَرِيقِ ﴿٢٣﴾

torment of fire.' (22)

God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls, and where silk will be their raiment. (23)

For they were guided to the best of words; and so they were guided to the way that leads to the One to whom all praise is due. (24)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُدْخِلُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا
وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ
تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ يُحَلَّوْنَ فِيهَا مِنْ أَسَاوِرَ
مِنْ ذَهَبٍ وَلُؤْلُؤًا وَلِبَاسُهُمْ فِيهَا حَرِيرٌ



وَهُدُوا إِلَى الطَّيِّبِ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ وَهُدُوا
إِلَى صِرَاطِ الْحَمِيدِ



A Fear-Striking Opening

Mankind! Have fear of your Lord. The violent convulsion at the Last Hour will be awesome indeed. On the day when it comes, every suckling mother will utterly forget her nursling, and every woman heavy with child will cast her burden; and it will seem to you that all mankind are drunk, although they are not drunk. But severe indeed will be God's punishment. (Verses 1-2)

This is how the *sūrah* begins: an awesome opening that makes hearts tremble. It addresses all mankind, calling on them to fear their Lord and warning them against what may happen on the eventful and terrible Day of Judgement. There is a clear element of mystery about it, one that is frightening and cannot be expressed in words. Thus we are told of a 'violent convulsion' which is then described as 'awesome indeed', but we have no clear indication as to its nature or substance.

When the details are given, we find them even more frightening. We have a picture of every suckling mother completely unaware of the child she is nursing: she looks but does not see, moves but only aimlessly. Every pregnant female miscarries because of the great shock that engulfs her. All people look drunk, but they are not. They only seem to be as they look into a void and walk unsteadily in all directions. It is a very busy scene, with a huge moving crowd. We almost see it with our eyes as the verses are recited, and we paint it in our imagination. Yet we hardly get the full view, because of the horror it describes. It is a horror that cannot be measured by volume or extent, but rather by its effect on human beings. Its measure is the

suckling mother oblivious of the child on her breast. No mother can be so oblivious unless the horror she is encountering commands all her senses and faculties. It is also measured by the miscarrying pregnant women, and by the people behaving as if they are drunk yet who have not had a drink. All this is because God's punishment is severe indeed.

The Way Leading to Error

Despite this horror, we are told that some people dispute about God, having no fear of Him: *"Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, and follow every rebellious devil. It is decreed for whoever entrusts himself to any [such devil] that he will lead him astray and guide him towards the suffering of the blazing flame."* (Verses 3-4)

Whether the dispute is about God's existence, oneness, power, knowledge or any of His attributes, it sounds extremely singular. How can anyone realize the extent of the horror that awaits us all, and from which the only escape is through piety and earning God's pleasure, yet continue to dispute about God? How can anyone with a mind to think and a heart to feel indulge in anything other than trying to avoid this violent convulsion whose horror threatens us all?

Had it been a dispute based on true knowledge, something might be said for it, but it is a dispute without knowledge. It is immersed in arrogance that seeks no firm evidence, and error that is the result of following Satan's bidding. Such people dispute about God *"and follow every rebellious devil,"* who boasts about turning away from the truth. Hence, *"it is decreed for whoever entrusts himself to any [such devil] that he will lead him astray and guide him towards the suffering of the blazing flame."* (Verse 4) It is inevitable that such devils will lead their followers away from the truth in order to land them in hell. The *sūrah* sarcastically calls this 'guidance', which can only be the guidance of one who leads to destruction and doom.

Or is it that people are in doubt about the resurrection, or about the violent convulsion that signals the arrival of the Day of Judgement? If they are doubtful about returning to life, then they should reflect on how life is initiated. They should look at themselves, and at the earth around them. There are numerous indications that tell them that the whole thing is very close to them, but they pay little heed to the significance of the indicators within themselves and on earth, let alone appreciate them.

The Stages of Man's Creation

Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an

organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom. (Verse 5)

Resurrection is a return to a life that has been in existence. Thus, by human standards, it is easier than the origination of life in the first place, although, by God's standards, the notion of easier or more difficult does not arise. To Him, initiating something out of nothing and restoring a life that had ended are the same. Both are the result of His will: "When He wills a thing to be, He only says to it, 'Be'— and it is." (36: 82) But the Qur'an addresses people according to their own standards, rational thinking and understanding. It directs their hearts to reflect on what they see happening at every moment in their lives. If only they would reflect on it carefully, they would realize that it is miraculous. But to appreciate it as such, they need to look at it with an open heart and a reflective mind. Alas! They rarely ever do so.

Let them ask themselves: what are these people all around them? What are they made of? Where have they come from? What were they before they took this shape and form? And what stages have they gone through?

"We have created you out of dust." Man is a son of the earth. He originated, took form and lived out of its dust. Not a single element does man have in his constitution but has its parallel in the elements present in mother earth. The only exception is that gentle secret God placed in him when He breathed of His soul into-man, thus bringing about the great difference between man and those elements constituting dust. The fact remains, however, that man is closely related to dust both in his constitution and his food. All tangible elements in man are from the dust of the earth.

Nevertheless, the gap is great between dust and man. The basic atoms that are present in dust are far removed from this highly complex creation that acts on his own behest and responds to others. The human creature is influenced by different factors in his surroundings and similarly influences others. His feet are placed on earth, but his soul and heart can fly to heaven. His mind floats to realms beyond that of the physical world that includes the dust from which he was first created.

It is a great divide separating the first status and the last. It points to the power that can bring about the resurrection, having brought about the initial creation.

Then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring

you forth as infants...⁶ (Verse 5)

Again the gulf between the primitive, idle elements found in dust and the gamete, a single living cell, is great indeed. It enfolds the great secret of life about which human beings know only a very little, despite the passage of millions of years in which countless numbers of idle elements have been transformed into living cells in a continuous process that never stops. It is a secret that we can only observe and record, without ever being able to initiate, no matter how ambitious we may be. And then there are other secrets, like that of the transformation of the gamete into a clinging cell mass, and the transformation of this cell mass into an embryo which is then transformed into a human being.

What is this gamete, then? It begins with man's semen, a single drop of which contains many thousands of sperms. Yet only one of these countless sperms, or gametes, is needed to fertilize the woman's egg, which is then implanted in the uterus. In this little fertilized egg, implanted in the uterus, are stored, by God's will and power, all the unique characteristics of the human being yet to be born: his physical appearance including his height, stature, beauty, strength and health status as well as his mental and psychological characteristics, including his tendencies,

⁶ In rendering the terms used in the Qur'ān to denote the different stages that follow the fertilization of the female egg up to the birth of a child, translators of the Qur'ān have used different terms, as they thought to fit the Arabic ones most appropriately. In most cases, *nutfah* is rendered as 'sperm, drop of sperm, living germ, a drop of seed, etc.' while *alaqah* is rendered as 'a clot of blood, a leech-like clot, a germ-cell, etc.' On the other hand, *mudghah* is given as 'a morsel or lump of flesh, embryonic lump, etc.' All these were the outcome of commendable endeavours to match the original usage. However, nowadays when it is possible to monitor the development of a human embryo from the moment of conception, we need to give the Qur'ānic terms more accurate renderings that match the stages to which reference is made.

Thus 'gamete' is preferred as an equivalent of *nutfah* because this Arabic term does not refer only to the male sperm. The Prophet uses it in clear reference to a 'man's *nutfah* and a woman's *nutfah*', and the union of both. A *ḥadīth* related by Imām Ahmad mentions that "a Jew came to the Prophet and said: 'Muhammad! From what is man created?' The Prophet said to him: 'Jewish man! From both he is created: from the man's *nutfah* and the woman's *nutfah*.' The Jew said: 'Thus said the one's [i.e. prophets] before you.'" The Oxford Dictionary defines gamete as "A mature haploid germ cell (male or female) which unites with another of the opposite sex in sexual reproduction to form a zygote." As the fertilized egg gets implanted in the wall of the uterus, it clings to it. This is the reason for the use of the term *alaqah* to denote the next stage. Hence, my rendering of the Arabic word as 'clinging cell mass'. Translators who use terms like 'clot' used a totally different sense of the Arabic word which also means 'leech', but it is clear now that there is no relation between this sense and the context in which the Qur'ānic term occurs. *Mudghah* is the next stage, which is indeed the embryo.

The Qur'ānic verse, however, speaks here of the embryo as having two distinct parts: one having the beginning of different organs while the other has nothing of the sort, *mukhallaqah wa ghayr mukhallaqah*. Again these two parts are rendered by Qur'ānic translators in a variety of ways. My consultation with specialized doctors who are also conversant with the Qur'ānic terms reached the conclusion that the closest rendering is the one used above, 'organized and non-organized embryo', stressing that the reference here is to the organs that start to take shape at this stage, with the 'organized' part referring to the embryo itself and the 'non-organized' one referring to the placenta. — Editor's note.

natural likes and dislikes, abilities and talents.

Who can imagine that all this is stored in this little speck clinging to the uterus which, in time, becomes such a complex being? Yet every individual in this race is extremely different from all other individuals, to the extent that no two individuals are ever identical over any period of time.

Then this clinging cell mass is transformed into an embryo which at first is without shape or distinction. Subsequently a transformation overtakes it to give it a form that begins with a skeleton that is later fleshed up. Alternatively, the uterus may reject it if God wills not to let it complete its cycle.⁷

“So that We might make things clear to you.” (Verse 5) This clause indicates that there is a pause between the embryonic stage and the child. This clause refers to the numerous signs of God’s limitless power, and the reference coincides with the appearance of organs in the embryo.

The verse moves on to refer to the next stage in the development of the foetus: *“We cause to rest in the [mothers] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term.”* (Verse 5) Whatever God wills to complete its cycle will rest in its mother’s womb until its time of birth. *“Then We bring you forth as infants.”* (Verse 5) Again we say, what a wide gulf separating the first stage and this final one!

In terms of time, it is normally nine months, but in terms of the difference between the nature of the gamete and the nature of the child, it is far greater than that. The gamete cannot be seen by the naked eye, while the child is a highly complex and sophisticated creation, with numerous organs and systems, features, qualities, talents, tendencies and desires. An intelligent mind can only appreciate this great divide after it has humbly reflected, time and again, on the great power behind creation.

The *sūrah* continues with a new cycle that starts with the newborn child, after it has left its hiding place where it went through a series of great miracles, away from all beholders. Then it is time for a new phase, so that *“you may grow up and attain your prime.”* (Verse 5) You will attain your full growth: physically, mentally and psychologically. The gulf between a newborn child and an adult, in their respective characteristics, is much wider than the time separating one from the other. This gulf, however, is bridged by God’s will who has given the little infant all the characteristics of a mature adult. What is more is that He has given this child a great

⁷ The author follows earlier commentators in explaining the two descriptions of the embryo, saying that it either takes shape and form or does not do so. In this latter case, it aborts. Our advanced knowledge of the development of the foetus suggests that the verse has a different meaning, referring to the two parts of the embryo: the one which develops the organs and becomes a human being, and the one without organs, which is the placenta. — Editor’s note.

variety of talents and potentialities that may rise to the surface at their appropriate times. It is the same divine will that gives the zygote, as it is implanted in the uterus, all the qualities of a human child. Yet that fertilized egg is the product of worthless fluid.

“Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more.” (Verse 5) The one who dies young meets at an early stage the end of every living thing. As for the ones who live to old age, they provide an important case for reflection. Although each one was a person of knowledge, maturity and wisdom, now they are again children in their feelings, reactions, awareness, knowledge, dealings and management. Like a child, one little thing may give them great pleasure, and another may cause them to cry. Their memory retains very little and retrieves very little. And like a child, they take events individually, unable to relate them to one another or to look ahead to the conclusion to which they lead. They simply forget the beginning before they reach the end. It is like God says: *“When all that they once knew they know no more.”* They lose the knowledge that once was a source of pride to them, leading them even to argue about God, His existence and His attributes. Now all such knowledge disappears from their minds and consciousness.

The verse then moves on to portray other scenes of creation and living creatures on earth and in the world of plants. *“You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom.”* (Verse 5) The state of being ‘dry and barren’, which is expressed in the Arabic text with one word, *hāmīdah*, is a state in between life and death. This is how the earth is when it is starved of water, the basic ingredient for life and the living. Thus, when rain water is poured over it, ‘it stirs and swells.’ This is a remarkable movement which the Qur’ān recorded many centuries before human science. When soil is very dry and then rain falls over it, it makes a movement like shaking or stirring. It absorbs the water and swells. It is then full of life, bringing forth blooming vegetation that radiates pleasure. Is there anything more pleasing to the eye than seeing life bloom in an area that has long remained barren?

Here we see how the Qur’ān speaks of a bond between all living creatures, citing them all as one of God’s numerous signs. This is a remarkable reference to the fact that the essence of life is one in all the living, and to the unity of the will that brings life into being on earth, as in plants, animals and man.

The Ultimate Truth

That is because God alone is the Ultimate Truth; and He alone brings the dead to life; and He has the power to will anything. And that the Last Hour is certain to come,

*beyond any doubt; and that God will certainly resurrect all who are in their graves.
(Verses 6-7)*

All that has been said about the origins of man and his creation out of dust, the various stages an embryo goes through, and the next cycle of a child and his life, and also about life blooming out of a dry and barren earth are closely related to the fact that God is the Ultimate Truth. All these aspects are constant laws initiated and operated by God, the Truth, whose laws will never fail. The progress of life in such a fashion, moving from one stage to another, is indicative of the great will that determines its moves and stages. The link is clear between the fact that God is the Ultimate Truth and this consistency of an unfailing cycle of life.

"He alone brings the dead to life." (Verse 6) Bringing the dead to life is to re-initiate life in what has been dead. The One who originated life in the first instance is the One who brings it back in the final stage. *"God will certainly resurrect all who are in their graves."* (Verse 7) They will then be given their reward for whatever they did in this first life. Such resurrection is dictated by the purpose of creation.

The cycles both embryo and child go through indicate that the wise will which has set them in motion will inevitably allow man to attain his ultimate perfection in a world of perfection. In this life on earth, perfection is unattainable because man's advancement stops at a certain point before he retreats so far as to reach a stage when *'all that he once knew, he knows no more.'* It is, then, absolutely necessary that a second life should take place to allow man to attain perfection.

Thus, these cycles, with all their stages, give a dual indication of the resurrection. They establish first that the Creator who initiates life is able to bring the dead back to life. They also show that the wise will that has set all this in operation will undoubtedly complete man's perfection in the life to come. Thus, the laws of creation and return, life and resurrection, as well as reckoning and reward, all unite to testify to the power of God, the Creator, who conducts and controls the entire universe. His existence and power admit no doubt whatsoever.

But despite all this evidence some people continue to dispute God's existence: *"Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light giving revelations. They turn away in scorn so as to lead others astray from the path of God. Disgrace is in store for them in this world, and on the Day of Resurrection We shall make them taste suffering through fire. [They shall be told]: This is the outcome of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God do the least wrong to His creatures."* (Verses 8-10)

Argument about God in the face of all this evidence is singularly stupid. How much more ridiculous is it then when such argument has no basis in knowledge, evidence, fact, or revelation to enlighten the heart and mind and give a clear account

of the truth?

The *sūrah* paints a picture of this type of conceited person who *'turns away in scorn'*. Such a person realizes that his attitude lacks sound knowledge and tries to compensate for it by becoming arrogant. His aim is *'to lead others astray from the path of God.'* He is not satisfied to be astray himself. He wants others to follow his suit.

Such deviant arrogance which leads people astray must be stopped and dealt with severely. Hence, *'disgrace is in store for them in this world.'* Such disgrace befalls them in contrast with their arrogance. God does not ignore such arrogant people who lead others astray but instead He smashes their arrogance and brings them low, even if this is not immediate. God may give them respite for a while so that their disgrace becomes that much more effective and their punishment in the hereafter that much more severe: *"On the Day of Resurrection We shall make them taste suffering through fire."* (Verse 9)

And in a brief moment, the threatened punishment becomes a reality we see with our own eyes. This is achieved by the change of style from a statement to an address: *"This is the outcome of what your own hands have wrought. Never does God do the least wrong to His creatures."* (Verse 10) We almost see them being severely rebuked as well as the punishment of fire that they must endure.

A Conditional Approach to Faith

The *sūrah* then paints a picture of another type of person. Although this type was definitely present in the early days of the Islamic message, it is also present in every generation. It is the type that weighs up faith against what profit or loss he is likely to achieve as a result. Thus, his approach to faith is the same as any business transaction he conducts.

Some people worship God on the border-line [of faith]. If good befalls such a person, he is content; but if a trial assails him, he turns away utterly; thus losing this world and the life to come. This is, indeed, a loss beyond compare. He invokes, instead of God, something that can neither harm nor benefit him. This is the utmost that one can go astray. Indeed he invokes one that is far more likely to cause harm than benefit. Vile indeed is such a patron, and vile the friend. (Verses 11-13)

Faith is the mainstay of a believer's life. The world may be swayed and shaken here or there, but the believer stays his ground supported by this mainstay. Events may pull him in this or that direction, but he remains firm in his resolve. Support may crumble all around him, but he is certain that faith gives him the kind of support that never fails. Such is the value of faith in the life of a believer. Hence, he or she must ensure that they have the right faith, trust to its unfailing support,

entertain no hesitation and wait for no immediate reward. Indeed, faith itself is a reward for believers, because it gives them all the support they need. It is indeed a reward for a heart that opens up to the light of faith and seeks guidance. Because of this, God grants them faith to provide them with all the reassurance they need. A believer realizes that faith is a reward and appreciates its value when he sees people all around him moving aimlessly, pulled here and there, worried, thrown off-course, while he himself is certain of his footsteps, calm, reassured by his strong bond with God.

Contrasted with this is the person who looks at faith as a commercial endeavour: *"If good befalls such a person, he is content."* He would say that faith is beneficial, bringing in material gains, allowing plants to grow, efforts to be fruitful, goods to sell well and transactions to be profitable. But if it turns out otherwise, then he takes a totally different stance: *"If a trial assails him, he turns away utterly; thus losing this world and the life to come."* (Verse 11) His loss in this life is reflected in the misfortune he cannot tolerate, and the calamity that did not bring him back to complete reliance on God. Hence he also loses the hereafter by turning away from faith, rejecting the guidance that was made available to him.

This is a very vivid picture. For such a person's worship of God is shown to be on the edge, or on the border line. Faith has not penetrated him; his worship is suspect. Hence, he moves unsteadily, liable to fall at the slightest push. Hence, when misfortune does befall him, it causes him to turn away completely. In fact, lack of surety shows him to be all too ready for such a roundabout turn.

A computation of profit and loss may be suitable for commercial dealings, but it is utterly unsuited to faith, because faith represents the truth and it is embraced for nothing other than its truth. It addresses the heart which receives light and guidance and inevitably reacts to them. Moreover, faith brings its own rewards in the form of satisfaction, pleasure and reassurance. It does not seek any reward other than itself.

A good believer worships God in gratitude to Him for having guided him, and for the reassurance he feels in being close to God. Should there be any further reward, it comes by the grace of God, and it is given for one's acceptance of the faith or for one's worship. Moreover, a believer does not put God to the test. On the contrary, he accepts everything that God determines for him, contented with whatever comes his way, be it pleasant or otherwise. There is no question of a market deal here between a buyer and a seller. All that takes place is submission to the Creator who initially gives people existence and who ultimately determines fates.

Undoubtedly, the person who turns away from faith once hardship befalls him exposes himself to utter loss: *"This is, indeed, a loss beyond compare."* (Verse 11) He is deprived of trust, reassurance and contentedness, in addition to his loss of wealth,

children, health or other losses with which God puts His servants to the test. For God requires His servants to demonstrate their trust in Him, to patiently persevere in the face of adversity, as well as to dedicate their lives to His cause and to His will. Moreover, he loses the life to come and all that it promises of bliss, happiness and being close to God. This is indeed a great loss.

So where does the person who worships God on the border line go when he strays from God? In simple terms, *“he invokes, instead of God, something that can neither harm nor benefit him.”* (Verse 12) He may invoke an idol or a statue in old fashioned ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, or he may invoke a person, or some authority, or interest, like the different forms of *jāhiliyyah* that exist at any time or place, whenever human beings abandon belief in God’s oneness and turn their backs on His guidance. But what does all this represent? It is all going astray from the only method in which invocation is of use: *“This is the utmost that one can go astray.”* (Verse 12) Indeed when anyone resorts to invoking such beings instead of God, he takes himself very far away from the truth and the right way leading to it.

“Indeed he invokes one that is far more likely to cause harm than benefit,” be that an idol, Satan, or a human being providing support or protection. None of these can cause the invoker either harm or benefit; indeed, they are more likely to bring him harm than benefit. This harm results, in the spiritual world, from overburdening one’s heart with myth and humiliation. As for the material world, its harm is self-evident. And above all, it brings about utter loss in the life to come. Hence, the *sūrah* states: *“Vile indeed is such a patron,”* which is powerless, able to cause neither harm nor benefit. *“And vile the friend,”* who brings on such utter loss. All this applies equally to whether the patron and the friend are idols and statues, or human beings raised to the status of deities or semi-deities.

Judgement Between All Creeds

As for those who truly believe in God’s oneness, God prepares for them what is much better than all the material comforts and benefits this life may provide: *“God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow. God certainly does whatever He wills.”* (Verse 14) Therefore, anyone who endures adversity or a test should remain steadfast and persevere. He must also continue to place his trust in God and His mercy and support, believing that only He can relieve his adversity and reward him for his perseverance.

A person who loses his trust in God’s help, both in this life and in the life to come, and despairs of God’s grace when he finds himself under severe pressure or adversity, may do with himself whatever he is able to do. But nothing he does will ever change his lot or relieve him of his problems: *“If anyone thinks that God will not*

succour him in this world and in the life to come, let him stretch out a rope to the sky and then cut himself off; and then let him see whether his scheme will remove that which has enraged him." (Verse 15)

This verse paints a moving scene of the rage such a person feels and the action that results from such rage. It magnifies this state when one is at breaking point. Needless to say, a person in adversity who despairs of God's grace loses every source of light and every comforting thought or hope. His worry increases manifold and his stress weighs heavily on his heart. Thus, his adversity is multiplied. Therefore, the verse tells anyone who thinks that God will not grant him His help, either in this world or in the life to come, to stretch a rope to the sky and to climb up holding to it, or to tie the rope round his neck and then cut the rope so that he falls, or cut his own breath so as to choke. Let him then look to see whether this removes his hardship or not.

The fact remains that the only way to endure hardship is to trust in God's help and hope for His grace. There is simply no way to rise above one's trials except by hard work, seeking God's support. No desperate measure can bring anything other than an increase in stress and adversity. Feelings of pressure and hardship may multiply leading to utter desperation. Therefore, anyone who is in such adversity should keep the window of hope and trust in God's help open, as only it brings comfort and mercy.

With such a clear exposition of examples of people who benefit by, and follow, divine guidance as well as those who go astray, God has sent this Qur'ān from on high. Thus, people who open their hearts to it will benefit by it and receive God's guidance: *"Thus have We bestowed from on high this [Qur'ān] in clear verses. God guides him who wills [to be guided]."* (Verse 16)

God has willed that guidance and error are to be granted. Therefore, whoever seeks guidance will have it in fulfilment of God's will and according to His law. The same applies to one who wishes to follow error and to stray from the truth. The *sūrah* here only mentions guidance because this is what fits with the context.

As for the different sects and their divergent beliefs, it is God who judges them all on the Day of Judgement. He is perfectly aware of whatever each of them incorporates of the truth and what falsehood they contain: *"As for the believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and those who associate partners with God, God will decide between them on the Day of Judgement. God is witness to everything."* (Verse 17)

Human beings determine the way they follow according to their ideas, tendencies and desires. By nature, the rest of the universe submits to its Creator, prostrating itself before Him:

Are you not aware that to God bow down in worship all those who are in the heavens and on earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountains, the trees and the beasts, and a great number of human beings? But a great number also will inevitably have to suffer punishment. He whom God shall disgrace will have none who could bestow honour on him. God certainly does what He wills. (Verse 18)

When we reflect on this verse we find countless creatures, some of which we know and some we do not; and we glance at an infinite number of worlds, many of which we do not begin to know; as also an endless variety of mountains, trees and beasts that live on earth, man's abode. All these, without exception, join a single procession that prostrates itself in humble submission to God, addressing its worship, in perfect harmony, to Him alone. And out of all these creatures, man alone has a special case, as people diverge: *"a great number of human beings [bow down in worship], but a great number also will inevitably have to suffer punishment,"* because of their rejection of the truth. Thus, man stands out on his own, unique in that great, harmonious procession.

The verse concludes with a statement making clear that whoever deserves punishment will inevitably be humbled and disgraced: *"He whom God shall disgrace will have none who could bestow honour on him."* (Verse 18) How could such a person be honoured when all honour and respect are granted by God. In other words, anyone who submits to any being other than God Almighty, to whom the entire universe willingly submits, will be disgraced.

Widely Divergent Ends

The next passage draws a scene of the Day of Judgement when the honour bestowed by God on His faithful servants and the humiliation suffered by the others are shown as though they are happening here and now.

These two adversaries have become engrossed in contention about their Lord. For the unbelievers garments of fire shall be cut out; and scalding water will be poured over their heads, melting all that is in their bellies and their skin. In addition, there will be grips of iron for them. Whenever, in their anguish, they try to get out, they are returned there, and will be told: 'Taste the torment of fire.' God will certainly admit those who believe and do righteous deeds into gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will be adorned with bracelets of gold and pearls, and where silk will be their raiment. (Verses 19-23)

It is a violent scene with loud noises and bustling movements. The descriptive style imparts a sense of long duration, with ever renewing action raised before our imagination. We see garments being cut out and tailored, and fiercely boiling water

being poured over people's heads. Its temperature is so high that the moment it touches the heads of those at the receiving end, whatever is in their bellies smelted, as does their skin. We also see whips made of red-hot iron to flog those condemned to such punishment. The suffering is intensified and becomes unbearable. The unbelievers make a sudden move to try to escape this torment, but they are fiercely returned into it. They are strongly rebuked and told: '*Taste the torment of fire.*'

Our imagination continues to repeat this scene from its first movement right up to the point where the unbelievers are repelled when they try to escape. It then starts all over again. The only way to turn away from this self-repeating scene is to look at the other destiny portrayed in the *sūrah*. The starting point is that there are two adversaries contending about their Lord. We have just seen the sad end of those who refuse to believe in Him. The believers, on the other hand, are in gardens through which running waters flow. Their clothes are unlike those of the first group: they are made of silk. On top of these they have adornments and jewellery made of gold and pearls. God also guides them to the best of words and to the way leading to the One worthy of all praise. Thus, they encounter no difficulty either in word or in direction. Such guidance is a great blessing, because it gives them a sense of ease, comfort and reassurance.

Such is the end of contention about God: people are ranked into two groups with two greatly different ends. Anyone who continues to argue about God, without knowledge, guidance or a light-giving divine book, unsatisfied with the clear evidence of the truth God has given us, should reflect before he faces this inevitable end.

The Ka`bah and Pilgrimage

The unbelievers who debar others from the path of God and the Sacred Mosque which We have set up for all people alike, both those who dwell there and those who come from abroad... Anyone who seeks to profane it by evildoing We shall cause to taste grievous suffering. (25)

When We assigned to Abraham the site of the [Sacred] House, [We said]: 'Do not associate anything as partner with Me. Purify My House for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer. (26)

Proclaim to all people the duty of pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of fast mount. They will come from every far-away quarter, (27)

so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them, and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate poor. (28)

Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows, and again walk around the Ancient House.' (29)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَيَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ
اللَّهِ وَالْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ الَّذِي جَعَلْنَاهُ
لِلنَّاسِ سَوَاءً أَلْعَكْفُ فِيهِ وَالْبَادِ وَمَن
يُرِدْ فِيهِ بِالْحَادِ بِظُلْمٍ نُّذِقْهُ مِن عَذَابِ
الْإِيمِ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَإِذْ بَوَّأْنَا لِإِبْرَاهِيمَ مَكَانَ الْبَيْتِ أَن لَّا
تُشْرِكْ بِي شَيْئًا وَطَهَّرَ بَيْتِي لِلطَّائِفِينَ
وَالْقَائِمِينَ وَالرُّكَّعِ السُّجُودِ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَأَذِّنْ فِي النَّاسِ بِالْحَجِّ يَأْتُوكَ رِجَالًا
وَعَلَى كُلِّ ضَامِرٍ يَأْتِينَ مِن كُلِّ فَجٍّ
عَمِيقٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

لِيَشْهَدُوا مَنَفِعَ لَهُمْ وَيَذْكُرُوا اسْمَ اللَّهِ
فِي أَيَّامٍ مَّعْلُومَاتٍ عَلَىٰ مَا رَزَقَهُم مِّن
بَهِيمَةٍ الْأَنْعَمِ فَكُلُوا مِنْهَا وَأَطِعمُوا
الْبَائِسَ الْفَقِيرَ ﴿٢٨﴾

ثُمَّ لِيَقْضُوا تَفَثَهُمْ وَلِيُوفُوا نُدُورَهُمْ

All this [is ordained by God]. Whoever honours God's sanctities, it will be better for him with his Lord. All kinds of cattle have been made lawful to you, except for what is specified to you [as forbidden]. Shun, then, the loathsome evil of idolatrous beliefs and practices; and shun every word that is untrue. (30)

Be true to God, turning away from all that is false, associating no partners with Him. For he who associates partners with God is like one who is hurling down from the skies; whereupon he is snatched by the birds, or blown away by the wind to a far-off place. (31)

This is [to be borne in mind]. Anyone who honours the symbols set up by God [shows evidence of] God-consciousness in people's hearts. (32)

You have benefit in them for a term appointed; and in the end their place of sacrifice is near the Ancient House. (33)

For every community We have appointed [sacrifice as] an act of worship, so that they might extol the name of God over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Your God is the One and Only God. Hence, surrender yourselves to Him. Give good news to those who are humble, (34)

whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned, and who patiently bear whatever befalls them, attend regularly to their prayer and spend in charity out of what We provide for them. (35)

وَلْيَطَّوَّفُوا بِالْبَيْتِ الْعَتِيقِ ﴿٣٠﴾

ذَٰلِكَ وَمَنْ يُعْظِمَ حُرْمَتِ اللَّهِ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ ۗ وَأُحِلَّتْ لَكُمْ الْآنَعَامُ إِلَّا مَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ ۗ فَاجْتَنِبُوا الرِّجْسَ مِنَ الْأَوْثَانِ وَاجْتَنِبُوا قَوْلَ الزُّورِ ﴿٣١﴾

حُنَفَاءَ لِلَّهِ غَيْرَ مُشْرِكِينَ بِهِ ۗ وَمَنْ يُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ فَكَأَنَّمَا خَرَّ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَتَخْطَفُهُ الطَّيْرُ أَوْ تَهْوَىٰ بِهِ الرِّيحُ فِي مَكَانٍ سَحِيقٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

ذَٰلِكَ وَمَنْ يُعْظِمَ شَعِيرَةَ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّهَا مِنْ تَقْوَى الْقُلُوبِ ﴿٣٣﴾

لَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ثُمَّ مَحِلُّهَا إِلَى الْبَيْتِ الْعَتِيقِ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ جَعَلْنَا مَنْسَكًا لِّيَذْكُرُوا اسْمَ اللَّهِ عَلَىٰ مَا رَزَقَهُمْ مِنْ بَهِيمَةِ الْأَنْعَامِ ۗ فَإِنَّهُمْ إِِلَهُهُ وَاحِدٌ فَلَهُ أَسْلَمُوا ۗ وَبَشِّرِ الْمُخْبِتِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

الَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرَ اللَّهُ وَجِلَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ

The sacrifice of camels We have ordained for you as one of the symbols set up by God, in which there is much good for you. Hence, extol the name of God over them when they are lined up [for sacrifice]; and after they have fallen lifeless to the ground, eat of their meat, and feed the poor who is contented with his lot, as well as the one who is forced to beg. It is to this end that We have made them subservient to your needs, so that you might have cause to be grateful. (36)

Never does their meat or their blood reach God; it is your piety that reaches Him. It is to this end that He has made them subservient to your needs, so that you might glorify God for all the guidance with which He has graced you. Give good news to those who do good. (37)

God will certainly defend those who believe. For certain, God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude. (38)

Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. (39)

These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God!' Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed. God will most certainly succour him who succours God's cause. God is certainly Most

وَالصَّابِرِينَ عَلَىٰ مَا أَصَابَهُمُ وَالْمُقِيمِي
الصَّلَاةِ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

وَالْبُدْنَ جَعَلْنَاهَا لَكُمْ مِّنْ شَعَائِرِ اللَّهِ
لَكُمْ فِيهَا خَيْرٌ فَاذْكُرُوا اسْمَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهَا
صَوَافٍ فَإِذَا وَجَبَتْ جُنُوبَهَا فَكُلُوا مِنْهَا
وَأَطْعِمُوا الْقَانِعَ وَالْمُعْتَرَّ ۚ كَذَلِكَ
سَخَّرْنَاهَا لَكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

لَنْ يَنَالَ اللَّهُ لُحُومَهَا وَلَا دِمَائُهَا وَلَكِنْ
يَنَالُهُ التَّقْوَىٰ مِنْكُمْ ۚ كَذَلِكَ سَخَّرَهَا
لَكُمْ لِتَكْبُرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَانَا ۗ وَبَشِّرِ
الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٣٨﴾

﴿٣٩﴾ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُدْفِعُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا ۗ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ خَوَّانٍ كَفُورٍ ﴿٣٩﴾

أَذِنَ لِلَّذِينَ يُقْتَلُونَ بِأَنَّهُمْ ظَلَمُوا ۖ وَإِنَّ
اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ نَصْرِهِمْ لَقَدِيرٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ إِلَّا
أَن يَقُولُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ۗ وَلَوْلَا دَفْعُ اللَّهِ
النَّاسَ بَعْضَهُمْ بِبَعْضٍ هَدَمَتْ صَوَامِعُ
وَبِيَعٌ وَصَلَوَاتٌ وَمَسَاجِدُ يُذْكَرُ فِيهَا

Powerful, Almighty. (40)

They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (41)

أَسْمُ اللَّهِ كَثِيرًا ۖ وَلَيَنْصُرَنَّ اللَّهُ مَن
يَنْصُرُهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

الَّذِينَ إِن مَّكَّنَّاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا
الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا
بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ
الْأَمْرُ ﴿٤١﴾

Overview

The first passage ended with a description of the inevitable destiny of those who engage in futile dispute about God, making it clear that such people will have no escape from the burning of hell. By contrast, the *sūrah* also describes the bliss to be enjoyed by the believers. This new passage is closely linked to the end of the first, as it speaks about the unbelievers who turn people away from God's path and from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. The reference here is to those who opposed the message of Islam when it started in Makkah, and who sought to turn people away from it. They also confronted the Prophet and his Muslim Companions seeking to debar their entry into the Sacred Mosque at the Ka`bah. It then speaks about the basis on which this mosque was founded when God assigned its building to Abraham (peace be upon him) and ordered him to call on all people to visit it for pilgrimage. Abraham's instructions were very clear: that this mosque must be established on the clear basis of God's oneness, so as to prevent any form of associating partners with God from being practised in or near it. It must be kept open to all people, whether they reside nearby or come from afar. None is to be denied entry, and none is to claim its ownership. The *sūrah* then outlines some of the rituals of pilgrimage and how they enhance people's consciousness and constant remembrance of God. It also stresses the need to protect the Sacred Mosque against any aggression by those who try to turn people away from it or change the basis on which it is founded. Those who fulfil their duties of protecting the purity of the faith are promised victory.

The First Sanctuary

The unbelievers who debar others from the path of God and the Sacred Mosque which We have set up for all people alike, both those who dwell there and those who come

from abroad... Anyone who seeks to profane it by evildoing We shall cause to taste grievous suffering. (Verse 25)

Such was the Quraysh's practice: they turned people away from the faith that God had established for mankind, providing a direct way to Him. They fought hard to prevent people from following the code He had chosen for human life. They also stopped Muslims from offering the pilgrimage and *umrah*, as was the case in the sixth year of the Islamic calendar when the events that started with such prevention led to the signing of a peace agreement at al-Ḥudaybiyyah. God made this mosque an area of peace and safety for all people, where they have no fear of anyone. This applied to everyone living in Makkah, and to all those who travelled from distant areas to visit the mosque. Thus, the Ka`bah and the mosque around it form a House of God where all people are equal. None can claim any right of ownership or any distinction whatsoever: *"The Sacred Mosque which We have set up for all people alike, both those who dwell there and those who come from abroad."* (Verse 25)

This law God established for His Sacred House preceded all attempts by human beings to establish a sanctuary where no arms are allowed, opponents are safe, bloodshed is ended and everyone enjoys peace and security. No one can claim any favour for observing these rules. They are a privilege equally extended to all people at all times.

Scholars have different views on the permissibility of ownership of houses in Makkah which are not used for personal living. Scholars who accept such ownership also differ on whether such houses may be let. Al-Shāfi`ī believes that such houses may be owned, inherited and let out. The basis of his view is the authentic report that `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb bought from Ṣafwān ibn Umayyah a house for 4,000 dirhams to make it a prison. Ishāq ibn Rāhawayh, on the other hand, says that such homes may neither be inherited nor let. He argues: "At the times when God's Messenger, Abū Bakr and `Umar died, dwellings in Makkah were known only as *sawā'ib* [which means 'left vacant']: whoever needed a place could live in any of them, and whoever had what was surplus to his own needs gave it to others." `Abdullāh ibn `Umar is quoted as saying: "It is not permissible to sell or let houses in Makkah." Ibn Jurayj mentions that `Aṭā', an early scholar, "used to warn against letting homes in the Ḥaram area. He further told me that `Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb used to order the people of Makkah not to have front doors for their homes, so that pilgrims might feel free to stop anywhere. The first person to put up a door to his home was Ṣuhayl ibn `Amr. `Umar sent to him for an explanation and he replied, saying: 'Let me explain: I am engaged in trade and I only wanted to have two doors so that my camels would stay within them.' `Umar accepted his explanation and allowed him these doors."

`Umar is further quoted as addressing the people of Makkah, saying: "Do not put

up front doors to your homes. Let the travelling pilgrims stop wherever they wish.” Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal takes a middle line that satisfies all reported statements. Thus, he says that homes in Makkah may be owned and inherited, but may not be let.

We see how Islam was far ahead of the rest of humanity, establishing an area of peace and security for all, as well as a home open to every human being. Indeed, the Qur’ān threatens with painful suffering anyone who tries to cause any deviation from this well-defined system: *“Anyone who seeks to profane it by evildoing We shall cause to taste grievous suffering.”* (Verse 25) What is, then, the punishment meted out to a person who does not stop at seeking to profane the Sacred Mosque, but goes on to actually do it? The Qur’ānic verse threatens with grievous suffering anyone who either seeks this, or has the intention of doing so. This makes the warning much more powerful and far-reaching.

Another aspect of the fine style of the Qur’ān is the omission of the predicate in the first sentence of the verse. Thus, the sentence states: *“The unbelievers who debar others from the path of God and the Sacred Mosque...”* (Verse 25) It does not say what happens to them, or what punishment they will receive. Thus, the verse suggests that their mere mention and description is more than enough to determine their fate.

Establishing the Sanctuary

The *sūrah* now refers to the establishment of this Sacred Mosque which the idolaters had usurped. They worshipped idols there and prevented believers in God’s oneness, who had purged themselves from idolatry, from entering it. Yet it was built by Abraham (peace be upon him) on God’s own instructions. The *sūrah* also mentions the fundamental basis of God’s oneness which served as the basis of the foundation of the Sacred Mosque. It also adds the purpose of its building as a place to worship God alone, a place where the dedicated could walk around it, and stand before it in submission to God:

When We assigned to Abraham the site of the [Sacred] House, [We said]: Do not associate anything as partner with Me. Purify My House for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer. Proclaim to all people the duty of pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of fast mount. They will come from every far-away quarter, so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them, and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate poor. Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows, and again walk around the Ancient House.’ (Verses 26-29)

It was for celebrating the glory of God alone that this House was built. God showed its place to Abraham, and gave him clear instructions so that he raised it on proper foundations: *“Do not associate anything as partner with Me.”* It belongs to God alone, without partners of any sort. Abraham was also required to purify the House for those who come to it to perform the pilgrimage and for those who stand up in prayer there. *“Purify My House for those who will walk around it, and those who will stand before it, and those who will bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer.”* (Verse 26) It is for those who worship God alone that this House was built. It has nothing to do with others who associate partners with Him or address their worship to anyone other than Him.

Announcing the Pilgrimage

When Abraham completed building the Ka`bah as instructed, he was ordered to declare the duty of pilgrimage as binding on all people, and to call on them to fulfil this duty. God also promised him that people would respond to his call, and that they would come from all corners of the globe, either on foot, or using every kind of fast mount that becomes thin as a result of a long journey: *“Proclaim to all people the duty of pilgrimage. They will come to you on foot and on every kind of fast mount. They will come from every far-away quarter.”* (Verse 27)

God’s promise to Abraham continues to be fulfilled, even today, and it is certain to continue well into the future. People’s hearts aspire to visiting the Ka`bah, passionately longing to see and walk around it. A person of good means will use some form of transport, while a poor person will still come, even though he may have to cover a long distance on foot. Tens of thousands flock to it from far away corners of the earth, every year, in response to Abraham’s proclamation of this duty made thousands of years ago.

The *sūrah* then mentions some aspects and objectives of the pilgrimage: *“so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them, and that they might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate poor: Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows, and again walk around the Ancient House.”* (Verses 28-29)

The benefits that pilgrims receive are manifold. The pilgrimage is a season of trade and worship, and a conference where people get to know each other and establish close cooperation. It is a religious duty in which objectives pertaining to this life converge with those that pertain to the life to come. Near and distant memories of true faith are also grouped together. Business people find pilgrimage to be a high season for their merchandise. Fruits of every type are brought to the sanctified city of

Makkah from all corners. Pilgrims come from every country and area of the world bringing with them their best goods that have different seasons. Thus, in Makkah all these are found in the same season, making of the pilgrimage an all-embracing exhibition and an annual international market place.

It is at the same time a season of worship, when souls feel their purity as they sense that they are close to God in His Sacred House. People's spirits roam around the House, recalling memories that are associated with it, and see near and distant images. The memory of Abraham as he abandons his small child, Ishmael, born to him in old age, yet whom he left alone with his mother. As he turned away to leave, he addressed a prayer to God, one which clearly reflected an issuing from an apprehensive heart: *"Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers. So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks."* (14: 37)

We remember Hagar as she tries to find water for herself and her young child in that exceedingly hot place where the Sacred House was yet to be built. We see her dashing to and fro between the two hills of al-Şafā and al-Marwah, feel her exceeding thirst, and watch her fear for her child as she's weighed down with the strenuous effort involved. She returns after covering the distance seven times, feeling something approaching despair, only to find water springing up between the blessed child's hands. That water was the Well of Zamzam, a spring of mercy in the middle of a barren desert

We recall the memory of Abraham and his vision: how he had no hesitation in offering his first son as a sacrifice. He carries a believer's submission to its highest standard: *"He said: Dear son! I have seen in a dream that I should sacrifice you. Consider, then, what would be your view."* (37: 102) And he is answered with equal obedience that demonstrates self-surrender to God in its clearest sense: *"He answered: Father! Do as you are bidden. You will find me, if God so wills, one who is patient in adversity."* (37: 102) But then God's grace is bestowed upon them and the son is released with a sacrifice sent by God: *"We called out to him: Abraham, you have already fulfilled that dream-vision! Thus indeed do We reward those who do good. All this was indeed a trial, clear in itself. And We ransomed him with a tremendous sacrifice."* (37: 104-107)

We also see the image of Abraham and Ishmael, many years later, as they raise the foundations of the House, praying to God with submission and humility: *"Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful."* (2: 127-128)

Such memories follow one upon the other until we see `Abd al-Muţţalib, the

Prophet's grandfather, pledging that, if God would give him ten sons, he would sacrifice one of them. As lots are drawn, the choice falls on `Abdullāh, his youngest son. We see `Abd al-Muṭṭalib keen to fulfil his pledge, and we see his people objecting, then suggesting a ransom sacrifice. He draws the lots again and again, increasing the ransom every time, but the draw continues to be against `Abdullāh, until the ransom reaches 100 camels, although only 10 were normally required. At this point, his offering is accepted and 100 camels are sacrificed to save `Abdullāh. But his salvation is short-lived. He lives only long enough to give his wife, Āminah, whom he has just wed, the pregnancy that leads to the birth of the most noble person in human history, the one loved most by God. `Abdullāh dies soon afterwards. It is as if God had saved him from being sacrificed only to accomplish the honourable task of being the father of Muhammad (peace be upon him).

Further images and memories come thick and fast. We see Muhammad, God's Messenger, in his childhood running near this House, and we see him a man close to maturity, lifting the black stone with his blessed hands to place it in its position, to prevent discord among the various tribes and clans. We see him praying at the Sacred Mosque, performing the *ṭawāf*, i.e., walking around the Ka`bah, delivering a speech or absorbed in his devotion. The steps he takes there are vividly painted before our eyes. Deep in their thoughts, pilgrims almost see these steps as though they were being taken by him now. We also see his Companions as they walk around the House, the Ka`bah, and we almost hear them as they talk.

The Pilgrimage Conference

But the pilgrimage is also a conference at which all Muslims gather. In it they find the beginning of their community, going back ages in time to none other than their first father, Abraham (peace be upon him): *"It is He who has chosen you, and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion; the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims, in bygone times and in this [book]."* (Verse 78) There at the pilgrimage, they find the force that brings them all together, their *qiblah* to which they all turn as they stand up in prayer. They also find the banner under which they unite, namely, the banner of faith under which all distinctions of race, colour or nationality are non-existent. They sense their power, of which they may often be oblivious; that is the power of their unity which is capable of sweeping everything before it, when they are united by faith alone.

The pilgrimage is a conference where Muslims have the opportunity to get to know one another, discuss their affairs, coordinate their plans, group their forces, exchange commodities, information, experiences and other benefits. They organize their single well-integrated Muslim world once every year, under God's banner,

close to His House, in the light of devotion to Him alone and the memories outlined, in the best place, time and atmosphere.

It is to this blessing that the verse refers: *“so that they might experience much that shall be of benefit to them.”* (Verse 28) This applies to every generation according to its prevailing circumstances, needs, experience, and requirements. This is part of what God wants the pilgrimage to be, ever since He made it a duty incumbent upon all Muslims, and ordered Abraham to proclaim this duty to mankind.

The *sūrah* refers to some of the rituals of the pilgrimage and their purpose: *“They might extol the name of God on the days appointed [for sacrifice], over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them.”* (Verse 28) This is a reference to the animal sacrifice that pilgrims offer on the four days of *ʿĪd*. The Qurʾānic verse refers first to the practice of extolling God’s name at the time of the slaughter, highlighting the fact that the whole atmosphere is one of worship, and the purpose of the sacrifice is to get closer to God. Hence, the *sūrah* stresses the mentioning of God’s name at the point of sacrifice, as though such mention is the aim of the whole sacrificial ritual.

The sacrifice itself commemorates the sacrifice that was given as a ransom for Ishmael. Thus, it commemorates a sign given by God, and the act of obedience by His two noble servants, Abraham and Ishmael, in addition to the element of charity involved as most of its meat is given to the poor. The ‘heads of cattle’ mentioned in the Qurʾānic verse refer to camels, cows, sheep and goats that are normally sacrificed. *“Eat, then, of such [sacrificed cattle] and feed the unfortunate poor.”* (Verse 28) The order to eat of one’s sacrifice is one of permissibility and recommendation, while the order to feed the poor is one of duty and obligation. Perhaps the order that one should eat of one’s own sacrifice is meant to show the poor that it is wholesome and of a quality that the person offering it does not disdain to eat from.

The sacrifice signals the end of the state of consecration, or *iḥrām*, which means that the pilgrim may now shave his head, or cut his hair. Other *iḥrām* restrictions, such as prohibiting the plucking of armpit hair and nail cutting, are also relaxed. All this is referred to in this Qurʾānic verse: *“Thereafter let them complete the rites prescribed for them, fulfil their vows...”* (Verse 29) These vows are concerned with whatever people might have pledged to God, other than the sacrifice that is part of the pilgrimage rituals. *“And again walk around the Ancient House.”* (Verse 29) This is a reference to the *ṭawāf* of *ifādah*, which falls due after attendance at *ʿArafāt*. This *ṭawāf* is also different from the *ṭawāf* of farewell which is offered shortly before departing from Makkah.

The Ancient House refers to the Sacred Mosque which God made immune from the power of all tyrants, and against collapse through the passage of time. It continues to be visited, ever since the time of Abraham, and will continue to be so for

as long as God wills.

Fall, Snatch and the Deep End

This is the story of how the Sacred House in Makkah was built and the basis on which it was founded. It was God who ordered His friend, Abraham (peace be upon him), to raise this House making belief in God's oneness its solid foundation. He further ordered Abraham to purify it of all idolatry, and to proclaim to mankind the duty of offering the pilgrimage to the House, where they mention God's name, not the names of false deities, over what they sacrifice of cattle He provides for them. They are to eat of it and to feed the needy and the poor in praise of God's name, not the name of anyone or anything else. This means that it is a sacred House where God's sanctities are respected. Paramount among these are the belief in God's oneness, the opening of the House to worshippers who walk around it, stand before it in prayer, and bow and prostrate themselves to God, in addition to the prevention of bloodshed, the honouring of covenants and treaties, and the maintenance of peace.

All this [is ordained by God]. Whoever honours God's sanctities, it will be better for him with his Lord. All kinds of cattle have been made lawful to you, except for what is specified to you [as forbidden]. Shun, then, the loathsome evil of idolatrous belief and practices; and shun every word that is untrue. Be true to God, turning away from all that is false, associating no partners with Him. For he who associates partners with God is like one who is hurling down from the skies; whereupon he is snatched by the birds, or blown away by the wind to a far-off place. (Verses 30-31)

Honouring God's sanctities instils a keen, watchful sense lest one should violate them. In God's measure, this is better for us. It is better in the realm of conscience and feeling, and better in this life generally. A watchful conscience is one which wants to remain pure, untainted. A community where God's sanctities are inviolable ensures a life of peace where people are secure, fearing no aggression or persecution, reassured of their comfort and safety.

The idolaters in Makkah used to consider as sacred certain animals, such as a slit-ear she-camel, a she-camel let loose for pasture, idol sacrifices for animal twin-births, and stallion-camel freed from work. They falsely attributed sanctity for such animals, while they violated God's clear sanctities. Therefore, the *sūrah* makes clear at this juncture that all cattle are lawful to eat, except for those specified as forbidden, such as carrion, blood, the flesh of swine and any animal at the slaughter of which any name other than God's is invoked: "All kinds of cattle have been made lawful to you, except for what is specified to you [as forbidden]." (Verse 30) This has been made clear so that none other than God's sanctities are acknowledged, none enacts any legislation

except God, and no one exercises judgement according to any law other than that of God.

While all cattle are made lawful, the *sūrah* gives an order to steer away from the abomination of venerating idols. The idolaters used to slaughter their animals before idols that personified evil. Associating partners with God is also an evil that contaminates people's hearts and consciences in the same way as an impurity contaminates a garment or a place. Since the association of partners with God is an act of fabricating falsehood against Him, the *sūrah* warns against saying anything untrue: "*Shun, then, the loathsome evil of idolatrous beliefs and practices; and shun every word that is untrue.*" (Verse 30)

The Qur'ānic statement magnifies the offence of fabricating falsehood, putting it on a par with associating partners with God. A *ḥadīth* related by Imām Aḥmad states: "One day, the Prophet offered dawn prayers. When he stood up to leave, he said: 'Perjury is equal to associating partners with God.' He then recited this verse."

What God wants of all people is that they should steer away from all types of associating partners with Him, as also steer away from saying anything untrue. They must maintain in absolute purity their belief in God's oneness: "*Be true to God, turning away from all that is false, associating no partners with Him.*" (Verse 31) The *sūrah* then paints a violent scene of a person who slips away from this pure concept of God's oneness, and who falls into the depths of associating partners with Him. He is totally lost, as though he has never come to life. "*For he who associates partners with God is like one who is hurling down from the skies; whereupon he is snatched by the birds, or blown away by the wind to a far-off place.*" (Verse 31)

In this scene we see a person falling from a great height, so as to be *hurling down from the skies.*' In no time, he breaks into pieces, and is *snatched by the birds.*' Alternatively, he may be blown away by the wind or thrown into a bottomless depth. We note here the rapid and violent movement, with scenes shown in quick succession and then disappearing completely.

It is a very true picture and an apt description of one who associates partners with God. He falls from the sublime height of faith to land where he is totally lost, as he deprives himself of the firm basis of belief in God's oneness. He is also deprived of the haven to which he could have returned safely. Hence, he is snatched away by his desires, like one who is snatched by birds of prey. False beliefs and myths throw him off course, just like storms might do. How could he avoid such a fate when he has abandoned the most firm bond and the solid foundation that provides him with a firm link with the world around him?

A Sacrifice of Distinction

Having mentioned those who honour God's sanctities and the need to preserve and protect such sanctities, the *sūrah* now speaks of honouring the symbols set up by God, which, in this instance, refers to the animals sacrificed as part of the pilgrimage rituals. This honour is manifested by choosing the best and most valuable animals for sacrifice:

This is [to be borne in mind]. Anyone who honours the symbols set up by God [shows evidence of] God-consciousness in people's hearts. You have benefit in them for a term appointed; and in the end their place of sacrifice is near the Ancient House. (Verses 32-33)

A link is established here between the sacrifice offered by pilgrims and the way hearts are made conscious of God. The whole purpose of all pilgrimage rituals is to enhance believers' God-fearing sense. All these rituals are symbols confirming submission to God, the Lord of the Ka`bah, the Sacred House, as also obeying Him in all situations. They may also involve reminders of old events, from the time of Abraham and later generations, but these are reminders of complete submission to God, obeying His rules and looking up to Him for guidance. Such is the mark of the Muslim community ever since its earliest days. Hence, these symbols are to be treated on an equal footing with prayer.

Animals marked for sacrifice on the day when pilgrims are due to release themselves from consecration may be used by their owners. The owner may ride such animals, if they are suitable for such purpose, or he may use their milk, until they reach the place of sacrifice, which is in the vicinity of the Ancient House. They are then sacrificed there, when the owners may partake of their meat, but they must give much of it to the poor.

At the Prophet's time, Muslims used to choose the best animals for sacrifice, paying the best prices for them, as a gesture of honouring the symbols set up by God. Their only motive was their God-fearing sense. `Abdullāh ibn `Umar reports that his father received a superb she-camel as a gift. He was offered 300 dinars for it, (which was a very high price). He reported this to the Prophet and asked whether he should sell it to buy instead several camels for sacrifice. The Prophet said: "No. Make this one your sacrifice."

We note here that `Umar did not wish to sell the camel in order to save part of its price. He simply wanted to buy instead several camels or cows and sacrifice them all, although he was aware that one camel or cow was sufficient to fulfil the sacrificial duty of seven pilgrims. The Prophet, however, advised him to sacrifice the precious animal itself, for the very reason that it was so precious. While the alternative suggested by `Umar could have provided much more meat to go round, the moral

aspect was intended here, because it is a demonstration of honouring the symbols set up by God. This is what the Prophet wished to highlight as he ordered `Umar to sacrifice that particular she-camel.

The Qur`ān mentions that such a sacrifice ritual was known in many communities. It was left to Islam, however, to put it on its right course, offered for God alone:

For every community We have appointed [sacrifice as] an act of worship, so that they might extol the name of God over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them. Your God is the One and Only God. Hence, surrender yourselves to Him. Give good news to those who are humble, whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned, and who patiently bear whatever befalls them, attend regularly to their prayer and spend in charity out of what We provide for them. (Verses 34-35)

Islam purifies feelings and intentions, setting them all for one goal. Thus, intentions, actions, worship and customs all serve a common purpose, setting life on the sound basis of pure faith.

This is the underlying reason for prohibiting eating any meat at the slaughter of which any name other than God's is invoked. Indeed it is essential to invoke God's name at the sacrifice, giving prominence to such invocation, as if the sacrifice is done merely to invoke His name: "*For every community We have appointed [sacrifice as] an act of worship, so that they might extol the name of God over whatever heads of cattle He may have provided for them.*" (Verse 34) This is followed by a clear statement of God's oneness: "*Your God is the One and Only God.*" (Verse 34) An order of submission to Him is the logical conclusion: "*Hence, surrender yourselves to Him.*" (Verse 34) Such surrender should be an act of choice, done with complete reassurance and without any compulsion: "*Give good news to those who are humble, whose hearts tremble with awe whenever God is mentioned.*" (Verses 34-35) The mere mention of God's name stirs in them a feeling of awe that manifests itself in their actions. "*Who patiently bear whatever befalls them.*" (Verse 35) They do not object to whatever happens to them by God's will. They also "*attend regularly to their prayer,*" showing thus that they worship God as He wishes to be worshipped. Moreover, they do not grudgingly hold on to what they have. Rather, they "*spend in charity out of what We provide for them.*" (Verse 35)

Thus a close link is established between faith and worship rituals. The latter derive from faith and are manifestations of it. Hence, they are described as symbols set up by God. What is important in all this is that life itself derives its colour from faith, ensuring unity between beliefs and actions.

The *sūrah* continues to emphasize the link between faith and worship rituals as it outlines some pilgrimage duties, speaking here of the sacrifice of cows and camels: "*The sacrifice of camels We have ordained for you as one of the symbols set up by God, in*

which there is much good for you.” (Verse 36)

Camels are mentioned here in particular because they are the largest and most valuable of sacrificial animals. The *sūrah* states that there is much good for mankind in camels: they serve as good mounts and provide plenty of milk. When they are sacrificed, they provide much meat to eat and give for charity. In return for all these benefits, people should invoke God’s name, making their purpose clear and their sacrifice purely for God’s sake. This should be clear in their minds as they bring the camels forward for sacrifice: *“Hence, extol the name of God over them when they are lined up.”* (Verse 36) Camels are slaughtered standing on three legs, while the fourth is tied. *“After they have fallen lifeless to the ground, eat of their meat, and feed the poor who is contented with his lot, as well as the one who is forced to beg.”* (Verse 36) The owners of the slaughtered sacrifice are recommended to partake of its meat, but they are required to give gifts to the poor who are contented and do not ask for charity, as well as those whose poverty makes them beg. It is because all these benefits are provided that people should give thanks to God: *“It is to this end that We have made them subservient to your needs, so that you might have cause to be grateful.”* (Verse 36)

As people are commanded to slaughter their sacrifice invoking God’s name, it is made clear to them that *“never does their meat or their blood reach God.”* (Verse 37) He has no need of them. What reaches Him, however, is people’s piety and consciousness of Him. It is the intention behind any action that gives it its worth. Compare this with the practice of the Quraysh idolaters who used to splatter the blood of their sacrifices over their idols. How crude and ugly!

It is to this end that He has made them subservient to your needs, so that you might glorify God for all the guidance with which He has graced you. (Verse 37)

It is He who has guided you to the proper and true faith of submission to Him alone. Thus, you have become aware of the proper relation between man and God and the true meaning of action undertaken purely for God’s sake. *“Give good news to those who do good,”* putting their beliefs, worship and life activities on a proper footing.

Thus Muslims turn to God with every move they make, at any time of the day or night, conscious of His majesty, seeking His pleasure. With this attitude, life becomes a series of acts of worship, fulfilling God’s purpose of creation. Life on earth is set on its proper basis, with a solid link between this world and the next.

Permission to Fight

It is imperative that such worship rituals be conducted safely away from those

who turn people from God's path. No aggression against the freedom of belief and worship or the sanctity of mosques and places of worship can be tolerated. Believers should have the freedom to implement the divine code of living, based on faith, and aiming to achieve every benefit for man. Therefore, when the early Muslims settled in Madīnah after enduring persecution in Makkah for years, God permitted them to fight the idolaters so as to repel any aggression against themselves and their faith.

Given at a time when such aggression had reached its peak, the permission to fight also aimed to ensure freedom of belief and worship for themselves and for all other people. God promised the believers that they would achieve victory and establish their authority, provided that they fulfilled their duties, required by their faith, as detailed in the following verses:

God will certainly defend those who believe. For certain, God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude. Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory. These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God!' Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed. God will most certainly succour him who succours God's cause. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty. They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (Verses 38-41)

Forces of evil are active in this world. The fight between goodness, divine guidance and forces of faith on the one hand and evil, falsehood and tyrannical forces on the other has raged since man's creation. What is more is that evil and falsehood command great firepower. They have no hesitation in using their arsenal and weaponry to achieve their aims. With such power and false temptation, they strive hard to turn people away from the true faith. Hence, it is imperative that faith, goodness and truth should have enough power to repel aggression and to make all wicked schemes futile.

It has not been God's will to leave unarmed the advocates of faith, truth and goodness so that they face the forces of evil and falsehood relying only on the power of their faith, or on the depth of goodness in their hearts. The material power of evil can be very strong, able to shake people and blind their eyes. Besides, people can only endure hardships and trials up to a certain point. God knows all this and the limits of people's ability. Hence, He wanted the believers to endure the hardship only for a short period during which they would acquire the means to resist and to defend themselves. When they achieved this, they were given permission to fight

aggression.

Before stating this permission for self defence, God also tells them that it is He who will defend them: *"God will certainly defend those who believe."* (Verse 38) He also tells them that He dislikes their enemies because of their treachery and ingratitude. *"For certain, God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude."* (Verse 38) He has judged their position to be fully justified, because they are the ones who have endured injustice and persecution. They do not resort to aggression against others: *"Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged."* (Verse 39) Because they are the ones at the receiving end of wrongful aggression, they are reassured that God will grant them His support and protection: *"Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory."* (Verse 39)

Furthermore, they have all the justification for going to war. They have been chosen to undertake a great humanitarian task, the benefits of which will not be theirs alone. Indeed these benefits will accrue to all believers. Their fight will ensure that people shall enjoy the freedom of belief and worship. Besides, they are the ones who have been wronged, the ones driven out of their homes without valid justification: *"These are the ones who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than their saying, 'Our Lord is God.'"* (Verse 40)

It is the most truthful word any person can say, and the word everyone should say. Yet, it is because of their saying this that they have been driven out of their homes. Hence why such injustice does not carry any semblance of right action. The Qur'anic statement makes it clear that these victims of aggression have no personal objective to fight for; instead, they fight only for their faith. They seek no worldly gain. Personal and national interests that give rise to conflicts, alliances and wars are of no appeal to them.

Beyond that, we have the general rule that makes it clear that faith needs to be defended: *"Were it not that God repels some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques – in all of which God's name is abundantly extolled – would surely have been destroyed."* (Verse 40)

We note here that the verse mentions monasteries where priests devote all their time to worship, as well as places of public worship for Christians, Jews and Muslims. They are all vulnerable and can be destroyed, despite their sanctity and dedication for worship. Evil will not respect the fact that these places are made for extolling God's name. They are protected only through people's efforts, with the advocates of faith standing up to repel falsehood's aggression. Indeed, falsehood and evil will not stop their aggression unless they realize that the truth has enough power to counter their own. Truth may be valued by people, but such value is not enough to provide it with protection against aggression in man's world. It requires the

appropriate means of self defence.

In Defence of the Believers

We need to reflect a little on these short statements that provide profound insight into human nature. The first thing to note is that the permission to fight back is granted by God to those against whom the idolaters had waged a wrongful aggression. This permission starts with a statement that God defends the believers and dislikes aggressors: *“God will certainly defend those who believe. For certain, God does not love anyone who betrays his trust and is bereft of gratitude.”* (Verse 38)

This is a guarantee given by God to the believers that He is the one to defend them, and whoever is defended by God will certainly come to no harm at the hands of his enemies. He will certainly be victorious. Why do they, then, need permission to fight? Why are they required to go to war, suffer casualties, endure hardship and make sacrifices of themselves, when the result is a forgone conclusion and God is able to ensure it without any effort on their part?

The answer is that God’s wisdom is absolutely perfect. We as human beings may discern certain aspects of it. Thus, on the basis of our experience and perception we may say that part of God’s wisdom may be that He does not want the advocates of His cause to be a group of idle and lazy people who sit relaxing, waiting for victory to be granted them without effort. They do not deserve victory merely because they attend to their prayers, recite the Qur’ān and appeal to God for help and support whenever they suffer hardship or aggression.

It is true that believers should always attend to their prayers, read the Qur’ān and turn to God for help in situations of ease and hardship alike. However, such worship, on its own, does not qualify them as advocates and defenders of God’s cause. This worship is merely part of the equipment they need in their fight against the forces of evil. It is their unfailing ammunition in their hard battle. They must face evil with weapons like the ones it uses against them, but they need to add the most effective weaponry of faith, a God-fearing sense, and a solid bond with God.

God has willed that His defence of the believers be through them, so that as they go through battle, they achieve maturity. Nothing brings about latent human resources better than danger. It is only when people realize that they are being attacked that they muster all their resources. Thus, every cell comes forward to play its role, joining ranks with all other cells, each doing its utmost to attain the highest level it can achieve in this life. A community entrusted with God’s cause needs to have all its cells ready, its resources brought to the fore, and all its forces mobilized so that it attains its full maturity and is able to discharge its great trust.

A speedy victory gratuitously given to people who make little effort will not tap such latent resources and abilities. There is simply no incentive for them to bring such resources into play. Furthermore, victory achieved easily is lost easily. To start with, it comes cheap, requiring no real sacrifice. Moreover, those who achieve it do not have the necessary training to maintain it. Since they did not have to mobilize their resources to win it, they are not mobilized to defend it.

Moreover, when the Muslim community has to go to war and utilize its resources in attack and defence, feeling its weakness at times and strength at others, retreating one day and moving forward the next, it gains valuable experience. It will experience contrasting feelings such as hope and pain, joy and sorrow, anxiety and reassurance, weakness and strength. It will also experience unity in faith, a readiness to sacrifice all, as well as the bringing together of all elements before, during and after the battle. It will learn what points of strength it has so as to enhance them, and what areas of weakness it has and how to redress them. All these are needed for a community entrusted with the divine faith and its advocacy.

For all this and other reasons known to God, He does not make of victory a free gift granted to believers in a package that falls to them from the sky. Indeed, God accomplishes His defence of the believers through their own efforts.⁸

Assured Victory

Yet victory may be slow in coming to those who are driven out of their homes against all right and for no reason other than their declaration of their belief in God as the only Lord in the universe. If it is slow in coming, then there must be a reason for this.

Victory may be slow in coming because the Muslim community has not as yet attained full maturity. It may not have mobilized all its resources or tapped its potentials. Should victory be given to it then, it would not be able to protect it for long, and so would soon lose it. Victory may also be delayed until the community of believers has given its all, sacrificing every cherished thing, demonstrating that it

⁸ We need to add here that Islam does not consider fighting an end or an objective in itself. It permits fighting for a goal that is greater than achieving a state of *modus vivendi*. As stated in many other Qur'anic verses, peace is the goal Islam wants to achieve. But peace must be free of aggression, injustice and oppression. When oppression or injustice is perpetrated against any aspect of human dignity, such as the freedom of belief and worship, justice, fair distribution of benefits, responsibilities, rights and duties, and conscientious observance of divine rules by individuals and the community alike, then Islam adopts a different attitude. Whether such aggression and injustice are perpetrated by an individual, a group or a state, and the victim of such aggression is similarly an individual, a group or a state, Islam will not countenance any peace that sanctions such aggression. Peace, according to Islam, does not mean the absence of war; it means complete justice, according to the code God has chosen for human life.

holds nothing too dear.

It may happen that victory is not granted until the community of believers has tried all its efforts and realized that such efforts, on their own, cannot guarantee victory unless they are supported by God.

Victory is granted by God only when believers have done their best, placing all their trust in Him alone. Likewise, victory may be delayed so that the community of believers strengthens its bonds with God. It will suffer and render sacrifices, realizing that it cannot turn for support to anyone other than God. It is such a bond with God that guarantees that it will continue to follow the right path after victory. This is a crucial objective. The Muslim community must never swerve from the path of truth and justice through which its victory is achieved.

Victory may also be slow in coming if the community of believers does not dedicate all its struggle and sacrifices to God alone. It may be fighting for something it wants to gain, or for national interests, or to demonstrate its bravery. But God wants its struggle to be purely for Him, untinged by any other feeling or objective. The Prophet was once asked about a person fighting to support his community, one fighting out of bravery, and one fighting to be seen in battle: "Which of them is for God's sake?" He replied: "Only he who fights so that God's word becomes supreme fights for God's cause." [Related by al- Bukhārī and Muslim]

Victory may be delayed because the evil the believers are fighting may still be mingled with a residue of goodness. God may determine that such a residue should be finally separated so that the evil becomes pure, without any trace of goodness, when it is finally defeated.

Furthermore, victory may be delayed because the falsehood that the believers fight is not seen in its true reality by all people. If it is defeated at such a juncture, it could still find support by those who continue to be deceived by it, unconvinced that it is absolutely false. In this situation, God may determine that falsehood remains until its reality is seen by all, so that no one feels sorry for it when it ultimately collapses.

Victory may also be slow in coming because the general environment is not yet ready to receive the truth and justice that the community of believers represents. If the believers are granted victory in such circumstances, they will have to face resistance by the environment they work in. Therefore, the struggle continues until such time as the whole area is ready to receive the truth triumphant.

For all these reasons, and others known to God alone, victory may be slow in coming. This means in effect more sacrifices and more suffering by the believers. Nevertheless, God will continue to defend them and grant them victory in the end.

When Victory is Granted

When granted by God, victory brings about new duties and responsibilities:

God will most certainly succour him who succours God's cause. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty. They are those who, if We firmly establish them on earth, attend regularly to their prayers, give in charity, enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (Verses 40-41)

God's true promise which will never fail is that He supports those who support Him. The question that arises here is who are these people that support God and thus deserve His support which means certain victory? Their qualities are outlined in this verse. They are those who, when given victory by God and are established in a position of authority, "*attend regularly to their prayers.*" They worship God alone, submitting themselves to Him willingly and strengthening their bonds with Him. They "*give in charity*", thus they meet the liability imposed on their property. By so doing, they demonstrate their ability to overcome greed and self interest, and they help their community to provide help to the poor and needy. They thus demonstrate a practical example of the Prophet's description of the Muslim community: "In their mutual love, sympathy and compassion, the believers are like one body: when any organ is in complaint, the rest of the body shares its complaint with symptoms of sleeplessness and fever." The third quality is that they "*enjoin the doing of what is right.*" They advocate every good thing and encourage people to practise it. By contrast, they also "*forbid the doing of what is wrong.*" They resist evil and corruption. In this way, they demonstrate a very important characteristic of the Muslim community which does not tolerate any wrong if it can change it, and does not hesitate to do any right thing if it is within its ability.

These are the people who give succour to God, as they implement the way of life He has chosen for mankind. They rely on God alone, to the exclusion of any other power. It is such people that God promises victory, and His promise is most assured. It will never fail.

Here we see again that the victory granted to the Muslim community relies on the fulfilment of its conditions and the discharge of certain responsibilities. All matters rest with God who determines what course events should take. He may change a defeat into victory or a victory into defeat when the foundation is not solid or responsibilities are ignored: "*With God rests the final outcome of all events.*" (Verse 41)

The victory granted by God is one that leads to the establishment of His code in human life. It is a code that ensures that truth, justice and freedom are fulfilled so that they can bring goodness into human life. No individual self-aggrandizement is

allowed; no personal greed or desire tolerated. Such a victory has well-defined conditions, duties and a price. It is not granted as a personal favour to anyone. Nor does it continue when its objectives and duties are not fulfilled.

The Sights, Blind Hearts

If they accuse you of falsehood, before their time, the people of Noah, the `Ad and Thamūd similarly accused [their prophets] of falsehood, (42)

as did the people of Abraham and the people of Lot, (43)

and the dwellers of Madyan; and so too was Moses accused of falsehood. [In every case] I gave rein, for a while, to the unbelievers, but then I took them to task. How awesome was the way I rejected them. (44)

How many a township have We destroyed because it had been immersed in evildoing. Now they lie in desolate ruin. How many a well lies abandoned, and how many a proud palace lies empty. (45)

Have they never journeyed through the lands, letting their hearts gain wisdom, and their ears hear? It is not eyes that go blind; but blind indeed become the hearts that are in people's breasts. (46)

They challenge you to hasten the coming upon them of God's punishment; but God never fails to fulfil His promise. Well, in your Lord's sight a

وَإِنْ يُكَذِّبُوكَ فَقَدْ كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ
قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَعَادٌ وَثَمُودٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَقَوْمُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَقَوْمُ لُوطٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

وَأَصْحَابُ مَدْيَنَ ۖ وَكُذِّبَ مُوسَىٰ
فَأَمَلَيْتُ لِلْكَافِرِينَ ثُمَّ أَخَذْتُهُمْ ۖ فَكَيْفَ

كَانَ نَكِيرٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

فَكَأَيِّنْ مِنْ قَرْيَةٍ أَهْلَكْنَاهَا وَهِيَ ظَالِمَةٌ
فَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَىٰ عُرُوشِهَا وَبِئْرٍ مُعَطَّلَةٍ

وَقَصْرِ مَشِيدٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونَ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ
يَعْقِلُونَ ۖ بَلْ أَوَّأْدَانُ يَسْمَعُونَ ۚ بَلْ أَلَمِنَّا

لَا تَعْمَى الْأَبْصَارُ وَلَكِنْ تَعْمَى الْقُلُوبُ
الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَيَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِالْعَذَابِ وَلَنْ يُخْلِفَ اللَّهُ
وَعْدَهُ ۚ وَإِنَّ يَوْمًا عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ كَأَلْفِ

سَنَةٍ مِمَّا تَعُدُّونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

day is like a thousand years of your reckoning.
(47)

To how many a township that was immersed in
evildoing have I given rein for a while! But then I
took it to task. With Me is the end of all
journeys. (48)

Say: Mankind, I am but a plain warner, sent to
you!' (49)

Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall be
granted forgiveness of sins and a most excellent
sustenance; (50)

whereas those who strive against Our revelations,
seeking to defeat their purpose, are destined for the
blazing fire. (51)

Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet
before you, and he was hoping for something,
Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes.
But God renders null and void whatever
aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His
messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-
Knowing, Wise. (52)

He may cause whatever aspersion Satan may cast
to become a trial for all in whose hearts is disease
and all whose hearts are hardened. Indeed, all
who are thus sinning are most deeply in the
wrong. (53)

And those who are endowed with knowledge may
realize that this [Qur'an] is the truth from your
Lord, and thus they may believe in it, and their
hearts may humbly submit to Him. God will

وَكَايْنٍ مِّن قَرِيَةٍ أَمَلَتْ لَهَا وَهِيَ
ظَالِمَةٌ ثُمَّ أَخَذْتُهَا وَإِلَى الْمَصِيرِ ﴿٤٨﴾

قُلْ يَتَّيِبُهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّمَا أَنَا لَكُمْ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ
﴿٤٩﴾

فَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
هُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

وَالَّذِينَ سَعَوْا فِي ءَايَاتِنَا مُعْجِرِينَ أُولَٰئِكَ
أَصْحَابُ الْجَحِيمِ ﴿٥١﴾

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِن قَبْلِكَ مِن رَّسُولٍ وَلَا نَبِيٍّ
إِلَّا إِذَا تَمَنَّى الْشَّيْطَانُ فِي أُمْنِيَّتِهِ
فَيَنْسَخُ اللَّهُ مَا يُلْقِي الشَّيْطَانُ ثُمَّ يُحْكِمُ
اللَّهُ ءَايَاتِهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

لِيَجْعَلَ مَا يُلْقِي الشَّيْطَانُ فِتْنَةً لِّلَّذِينَ
فِي قُلُوبِهِم مَّرَضٌ وَالْقَاسِيَةِ قُلُوبُهُمْ
وَإِنَّ الظَّالِمِينَ لَفِي شِقَاقٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٥٣﴾

وَلِيَعْلَمَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ
مِن رَّبِّكَ فَيُؤْمِنُوا بِهِ فَتُخْبِتَ لَهُ
قُلُوبُهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَهَادِ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِلَىٰ
صِرَاطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٤﴾

surely guide those who believe to a straight path.
(54)

Yet the unbelievers will not cease to be in doubt about Him until the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, or suffering befalls them on a day with no more [days] to follow. (55)

On that day, all dominion shall belong to God. He shall judge between them. Thus, all who believe and do righteous deeds shall find themselves in gardens of bliss, (56)

whereas for the unbelievers who have denied Our revelations there shall be shameful suffering in store. (57)

وَلَا يَزَالُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فِي مَرِيَةٍ مِّنْهُ
حَتَّىٰ تَأْتِيَهُمُ السَّاعَةُ بَغْتَةً أَوْ يَأْتِيَهُمْ
عَذَابٌ يَوْمٍ عَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٥﴾

الْمَلِكُ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِلَّهِ تَحَكُّمٌ بَيْنَهُمْ
فَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ فِي
جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٥٦﴾

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَكَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا
فَأُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ ﴿٥٧﴾

Overview

The previous passage finished with permission granted to fight unbelievers in order to protect and preserve faith and worship, coupled with God's promise to grant victory to those who fulfil their responsibilities towards faith and implement the divine law in life. Now that the task entrusted to the community of believers has been clearly spelt out, the *sūrah* reassures the Prophet that God's power will intervene to provide him with the help he needs ensuring the failure of his enemies. The same power intervened in the past to support earlier prophets and messengers, and to punish those who denied and opposed them. The unbelievers are directed to reflect on the doom suffered by earlier communities; even though such reflection benefits only hearts and minds that are open and receptive. It is not only eyes that can be blind, for real blindness is that of the heart.

The Prophet is also reassured on another count, namely that God protects His messengers from Satan's wicked scheming, just like He protects them from their opponents' plots. He renders all Satan's attempts futile, keeps His revelations pure and clear, so that people with sound mind reflect on them. Those that are sick at heart and those who deny the true faith will continue to be in doubt, and their doubts will lead them to the worst destiny anyone can ever have. Thus, this new

passage is a study of how God's power plays a vital role in the fortunes of the advocates of His message.

Past Communities Punished

If they accuse you of falsehood, before their time, the people of Noah, the `Ād and Thamūd similarly accused [their prophets] of falsehood, as did the people of Abraham and the people of Lot, and the dwellers of Madyan; and so too was Moses accused of falsehood. [In every case] I gave rein, for a while, to the unbelievers, but then I took them to task. How awesome was the way I rejected them. (Verses 42-44)

It is the same pattern seen over and over again, in all past messages up to the final one. Messengers are given signs and revelations, and there will always be those who deny the truth. Thus, when the idolaters in Makkah denied the message of the Prophet Muhammad, it was by no means a new trend nor did the Prophet experience an unknown pattern of hostility. However, the outcome is well known, and what happened with earlier communities is bound to happen again: *"The people of Noah, the `Ād and Thamūd similarly accused [their prophets] of falsehood, as did the people of Abraham and the people of Lot, and the dwellers of Madyan."* (Verses 42-44)

Moses, however, is mentioned on his own as though the reference to him constitutes a special paragraph: *"And so too was Moses accused of falsehood."* (Verse 44) Unlike other messengers, Moses was not accused of falsehood by his own people. It was Pharaoh and his chiefs that opposed Moses, levelling all sorts of accusations on him. Moreover, Moses was given very clear and numerous signs. Nevertheless, in all these cases, God granted the unbelievers respite for a while, in the same way as He now gave the Quraysh, the Prophet's own people who fiercely opposed him, time to reflect. He then punished all those past communities very severely.

This is followed by a rhetorical question that stresses the frightening effect of God's punishment: *"How awesome was the way I rejected them?"* (Verse 44) The Arabic word, *nakīr*, used here for 'rejection', carries added connotations of violent change. The question needs no answer, as it is well known: it was a rejection demonstrated through great floods, destruction, earthquakes, fearful hurricanes, and the like.

Having made this very quick reference to the fate suffered by those communities, the *sūrah* adds a general reference to past communities which suffered because of their attitude to the divine message: *"How many a township have We destroyed because it had been immersed in evildoing. Now they lie in desolate ruin. How many a well lies abandoned, and how many a proud palace lies empty."* (Verse 45) Numerous indeed were those towns and cities which suffered their inevitable doom as a result of their evildoing. Their fate is shown here most effectively: *"Now they lie in desolate ruin."*

Roofs are caved in as walls are made to collapse, leaving a depressing sight of total, lifeless ruin. The scene invites contemplation, because ruins have a very strong effect on people, causing them to reflect.

Next to these desolate remains of destroyed cities lie abandoned wells, reminding visitors of past days when people gathered around them for fresh water. And next to these are deserted palaces that once stood proudly in the past, but which now lie empty, evoking only images and memories of a glorious past.

As the *sūrah* portrays these scenes, it adds another rhetorical question about their effects on unbelievers:

Have they never journeyed through the lands, letting their hearts gain wisdom, and their ears hear? It is not eyes that go blind; but blind indeed become the hearts that are in people's breasts. (Verse 46)

Emphasis is here placed on the location of hearts in people's bodies, which serves to amplify the blindness of those hearts in particular. Had those hearts been able to reflect on the scenes portrayed, they would have remembered and people's eyes would have been tearful. They would have moved towards faith, at least as a result of fearing an end like the ones that befell other communities.

But the Quraysh unbelievers did not wish to reflect on such scenes demonstrating God's punishment. Instead they tried to hasten their own punishment which God had delayed until a particular point in time known only to Him:

They challenge you to hasten the coming upon them of God's punishment; but God never fails to fulfil His promise. Well, in your Lord's sight a day is like a thousand years of your reckoning. (Verse 47)

It is the same story with the unbelievers in all generations. They see with their eyes the ruins of cities destroyed for their wrongdoing, and they hear their histories, but they, nevertheless, follow in their footsteps overlooking their fate. If they are reminded of what happened to earlier communities, they nonetheless consider it unlikely that they will suffer the same fate. But if God grants them respite to test them further, they grow arrogant and heedless. They even ridicule anyone reminding them that they could suffer as people before them suffered. What is more they add to such ridicule a request for their punishment to be hastened. Here they are told that '*God never fails to fulfil His promise.*' Such a promise or warning will inevitably come to pass at the time God, in His infinite wisdom, determines. If people hasten its fulfilment, it will not be made to come before its appointed time, because its delay is for a purpose known to God, and that purpose will not fail so as to grant

human beings their ignorant wishes. Moreover, time is calculated differently by God: *"In your Lord's sight a day is like a thousand years of your reckoning."* (Verse 47)

He gave respite to many past communities, but such respite did not save them from punishment when they persisted in their wrongdoing. This is a rule which God has set in operation and it cannot fail: *"To how many a township that was immersed in evildoing have I given rein for a while! But then I took it to task. With Me is the end of all journeys."* (Verse 48) Why would the Arab unbelievers, then, hasten their own punishment and deride God's warning when it is only a temporary respite that God grants such people?

A Parting of the Ways

At this point in the narrative describing the fate of past communities, and outlining the rule concerning those who persist in denying God's messages, the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet instructing him to warn people and explain the inevitable outcome:

Say: Mankind, I am but a plain warner, sent to you! Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall be granted forgiveness of sins and a most excellent sustenance; whereas those who strive against Our revelations, seeking to defeat their purpose, are destined for the blazing fire. (Verses 49-51)

We note that in this context, the Prophet's task is clearly stated as one of giving people a clear and plain warning, that leaves no room for ambiguity. This fits the immediate situation of stubborn rejection of God's message that makes people hasten their own doom.

The final destiny is clearly stated. Those who believe and put their faith into practice, so as to 'do righteous deeds' will have their reward which consists of forgiveness by their Lord of all sins that they may have committed or duties they may have omitted to do. Such forgiveness is coupled with 'a most excellent sustenance' that they receive with dignity.

Those who endeavour to stop God's revelations from addressing people's hearts, and God's laws from being implemented in their life, will be the ones to suffer in the blazing fire. The expression the *sūrah* uses makes them the owners of this fire, which is in stark contrast with the excellent sustenance the believers receive.

God always protects His message from the wicked designs of unbelievers who try to prevent its implementation. Similarly, He protects it from Satan's scheming and his attempts to manoeuvre his way into the hopes entertained by God's messengers who are, after all, human. Although God's messengers are given immunity from

Satan, their human nature makes them hope that their efforts in advocating divine faith will be enough to remove all impediments and ensure a speedy victory. Satan tries to exploit these hopes in order to force the message out of its fundamental principles and proper methods. But God renders all Satan's schemes futile, preserves His message, making its principles and values clear, perfects His revelations and removes all doubt that may surround its values and method of action.

Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-Knowing, Wise. He may cause whatever aspersion Satan may cast to become a trial for all in whose hearts is disease and all whose hearts are hardened. Indeed, all who are thus sinning are most deeply in the wrong. And those who are endowed with knowledge may realize that this [Qur'ān] is the truth from your Lord, and thus they may believe in it, and their hearts may humbly submit to Him. God will surely guide those who believe to a straight path. (Verses 52-54)

There are many reports about the events leading to the revelation of these verses, but Ibn Kathīr describes all these reports as lacking in authenticity. The most detailed of these reports is attributed to al-Zuhri, a leading *Ḥadīth* scholar of the generation that followed the Prophet's Companions. It mentions that *Sūrah* 53, *The Star*, was revealed at a time when some idolaters said to one another that they would leave Muhammad and his Companions alone if only he would say a good word about the idols they worshipped. The report goes as follows:

They felt that the Prophet did not criticize the Jews and Christians who opposed him in the same way as he denounced the practices of the idolaters. The Prophet was very grieved by their continued denial of his message and the persecution they inflicted on his Companions. He still hoped that they would be able to recognize divine guidance. God then revealed the *sūrah*, *The Star*, including the following verses: *'Have you ever considered al-Lāt and al-`Uzzā, as well as Manāt, the third and last [of this triad]? Why [would you choose] for yourselves only male offspring, whereas to Him [you assign] females?'* (53: 19-21) At this mention of the Quraysh's worshipped idols, Satan added the words, *'these are the sublime birds, whose intercession is to be hoped for.'* These were nothing but the rhyming words of Satan's invention, but they touched the hearts of all idolaters in Makkah who kept repeating them and expressing their delight to one another, claiming that Muhammad had returned to his old religion, practised by his people.

When the Prophet completed the recitation of the *sūrah*, he prostrated himself, and all those present, Muslims and idolaters alike, also prostrated themselves. The only exception was al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah, an old man, who took a handful of dust

and placed his forehead over it. Both parties were amazed at this common prostration when the Prophet prostrated himself. Muslims were amazed that the idolaters should prostrate themselves when they did not believe in God, particularly because they were unaware of what Satan made the idolaters hear. The idolaters, on the other hand, were reassured by what Satan had introduced through the Prophet's hopes and implied to them that the Prophet read those words as he recited the *sūrah*. Hence, they prostrated themselves because their idols were praised.

All this was soon widely known, and Satan helped to circulate it. Before long, the news travelled to Abyssinia, where some Muslims had sought refuge, including `Uthmān ibn Maẓ`ūn. They were told that the people of Makkah had embraced Islam and prayed with the Prophet. They also came to know of al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah's gesture of prostration on a handful of dust he raised to his forehead. They felt that Muslims were now safe in Makkah, which prompted some of them to speedily return. But then God nullified Satan's aspersion and made His revelation clear and perfect, preserving it from Satanic fabrication. It was as God said: *Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves. God is All-Knowing, Wise. He may cause whatever aspersion Satan may cast to become a trial for all in whose hearts is disease and all whose hearts are hardened. Indeed, all who are thus sinning are most deeply in the wrong.*" (Verses 52-53) When God made His judgement clear and purged from it the Satanic rhyme, the idolaters of the Quraysh increased their persecution of the Muslims.

Foiling Satan's Efforts

In his commentary on the Qur'ān, Ibn Kathīr says that al-Baghawī includes several versions consolidated from reports by Ibn `Abbās, Muhammad ibn Ka`b and others, giving similar accounts. He then asks: "How could this take place, given that God guaranteed the Prophet's infallibility in conveying His message?" He then quotes answers to this question by different people. One of the most interesting is that Satan could only delude the idolaters into thinking that they heard these words from the Prophet when it was not so in reality. It was all Satan's work, not the words of God's Messenger.

Al-Bukhārī reports Ibn `Abbās's explanation, making the Arabic word, *umniyyatih*, rendered in translation as 'on his wishes', as meaning 'his discourse'. Thus the verse means that when the Prophet spoke, Satan added something into his speech, but God causes Satan's efforts to be futile and makes His own message clear. Mujāhid, on the other hand, explains the reference to any of God's messengers 'hoping for something' as meaning his speech, or his recitation. Al-Baghawī says that most commentators

say that it means his reading of God's revelations. It is in his recitation that Satan may add something. Ibn Jarīr describes this explanation as an exercise in giving special meaning to words.

This is a summary of this story which is known as 'The story of the birds, or *gharānīq*.' From the point of view of its transmission, the story is very flimsy. *Ḥadīth* scholars maintain that it was not reported by anyone who may be graded as an accurate reporter; nor was it ever related with an uninterrupted chain of reliable transmitters. Al-Bazzār says: "We do not know that this *Ḥadīth* was ever reported with a chain of transmitters worth mentioning, and leading to the Prophet. From the viewpoint of its subject matter, it is in conflict with a fundamental principle of faith, which is the infallibility of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the impossibility of Satan being able to introduce anything into the delivery of his message."

Orientalists and opponents of Islam⁹ have taken up this report, circulated it and decorated it with much importance. The fact is that it is a false report that cannot hold its own in discussion. Indeed, it is unworthy of even being a subject of debate.

The Qur'ānic text itself contains what refutes the claim, namely that such a single event was the reason for the revelation of these verses, which clarify a rule applicable to all divine messages and all God's messengers: "*Whenever We sent forth a messenger or a prophet before you, and he was hoping for something, Satan would throw some aspersion on his wishes. But God renders null and void whatever aspersion Satan may cast; and God makes His messages clear in and by themselves.*" (Verse 52) This statement refers to a general rule indicating a characteristic common to all messengers who are, after all, human beings. This rule is not, for certain, contrary to the principle of the messengers' infallibility.

When God's messengers are entrusted with delivering His message to mankind, they love nothing better than to see people flock to them and realize that all the goodness they advocate comes from God, so that they accept it. But there are numerous impediments that stand in their way. God's messengers are human beings, with a limited lifespan. They know this fact well. Hence, they hope to persuade people to accept their message without delay. They may wish to give people a period of grace in respect of habits and traditions that are close to their hearts. They may think that if they can attract people to accept divine guidance while giving them this period of grace, they will then be able to wean them off such useless rituals, habits and traditions. They may also wish to compromise with them over a small portion of their desires so as to attract them to the faith, and hope to subsequently eliminate such lingering desires through education.

⁹ The most recent opponent of Islam to make a fuss of this absurd story was Salman Rushdie in his infamous work *Satanic Verses*. – Editor's note.

They may entertain other wishes concerning the spread of their message and its gaining supremacy. But God wants His message to follow its own principles and to be guided by its own values. People can choose to believe or not. According to divine standards, which are not subject to human weaknesses and mistakes, the divine message makes its true gains by following its own principles and values, even though it may lose individuals at the start. Strict adherence to principles and values inevitably wins over those people, or others better than them. What is more is that the message remains pure, intact and flawless.

Satan may find in such hopes and wishes, as well as their expressions, a chance to plot against the message and force it out of its tried and tested method. He endeavours to raise doubts in people's minds about its integrity. But God makes all Satan's endeavours come to nothing. He spells out the final ruling on people's words and actions, instructing His messengers to make His verdict clear to people, including what the messengers themselves might have done by mistake. This was the case with regard to some actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which were subject to clear verdicts in the Qur'ān.

Thus does God foil Satan's scheming and make His revelations clear so that the right course to be followed is clearly mapped. *"God is All-Knowing, Wise."* Those with sickness and disbelief in their hearts and minds find in such situations fertile ground for controversy: *"All who are thus sinning are most deeply in the wrong."* (Verse 53) At the opposite end, people endowed with true knowledge and wisdom are reassured by God's clear verdict: *"And those who are endowed with knowledge may realize that this [Qur'ān] is the truth from your Lord, and thus they may believe in it, and their hearts may humbly submit to Him. God will surely guide those who believe to a straight path."* (Verse 54)

Messengers' Great Hopes

We find some examples during the Prophet's life and in Islamic history to confirm this. Thus there is no need for the sort of unsupported interpretation reported by some scholars.

One such example is that of the incident involving Ibn Umm Maktūm, a poor and blind Companion of the Prophet. He once went to the Prophet and asked him repeatedly to teach him something of what he had been taught by God. The Prophet was very busy speaking to al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīrah and a number of Quraysh notables, entertaining hopes that they might accept Islam. Ibn Umm Maktūm did not know that the Prophet was busy, but the Prophet was unhappy about his repeated request, and this was clear on his face. This was the subject of a strong reproach of the Prophet by God: *"He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him. How*

could you tell? He might have sought to purify himself. He might have been reminded and the reminder might have profited him. But to the one who considered himself self-sufficient you were all attention. Yet the fault would not be yours if he remained uncleansed. As to him who comes to you with zeal, and with a feeling of fear in his heart, him you ignore. No indeed! This is an admonition. Let him who will, bear it in mind.” (80: 1-12)

Thus, God set the message back on its right course, holding on to its proper standard and appropriate values. The Prophet’s behaviour in this incident was also corrected. His motive was his desire to see those Quraysh notables become Muslims, because that would have ensured that large numbers of their followers would do likewise. But God explained to the Prophet that maintaining the proper Islamic values in addressing the message to people is far more important than gaining a few notables to the cause. Satan’s attempts to divert the advocacy of the message through the Prophet’s hopes was thus rendered futile. God made His message clear, and the believers were reassured.

Subsequently, the Prophet treated Ibn Umm Maktūm very kindly, welcomed him whenever he saw him, saying: “Welcome to the man on whose account God reproached me.” The Prophet would ask him if he could help him in any way. Furthermore, the Prophet chose Ibn Umm Maktūm to deputize for him in Madīnah more than once when he was away on a journey or expedition.¹⁰

Another incident is related by Muslim in his collection of authentic *aḥādīth*. “Sa`d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ reports: Six of us were with the Prophet when some unbelievers asked him to turn us away so that they could have his full attention. With me was `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd, a man from the Hudhayl tribe, Bilāl and two other men whose names I have forgotten. The Prophet felt whatever he might have felt, and thoughts occurred to him. But God revealed to him the verse that says: “Do not drive away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking only to win His pleasure.” (6: 52)

Again in this incident, God sets the message back on its proper course, rendering futile Satan’s attempts to divert it by agreeing to the wishes of the Quraysh elders. They wanted to retain their position of distinction and not mix with the poor and weak. To maintain proper Islamic values is far more important than those notables, even though they might have accepted Islam, together with thousands others of their followers. God knows best the source of strength for His message. Such strength is derived from maintaining proper values that brook no compromise based on personal preference or social tradition.

A third example may be seen in the case of Zaynab bint Jaḥsh, the Prophet’s

¹⁰ This story is explained in detail in the commentary on *Sūrah* 80, with comments on its practical effects on Muslim society: Vol. XVIII, pp. 37-48. — Editor’s note.

cousin whom he married to Zayd ibn Ḥārithah. Prior to Islam, Zayd was the Prophet's adopted son. But God wanted to stop adoption altogether, giving Qur'ānic orders that forbade calling someone the son or daughter of anyone other than their own parents: *"He never made your adopted sons truly your sons ... Call them by their real fathers' names: this is more equitable in God's sight."* (33: 4-5) Zayd was very dear to the Prophet. This is why he chose his own cousin to be Zayd's wife, but their life together was not smooth.

Prior to Islam, the Arabs did not approve of a man marrying the divorcee of his adopted son. But God wanted to put an end to this, as He stopped calling a son or daughter after anyone other than their real fathers. He told His Messenger to marry Zaynab after Zayd had divorced her, so that his marriage might be the practical action that put an end to the effects of adoption. But the Prophet concealed this when Zayd complained to him that his life with Zaynab could not go on. He told him to hold on to his wife, thinking of what people would say when he married her after Zayd had divorced her. He continued to keep this whole thing to himself, until Zayd actually divorced his wife. God then revealed in the Qur'ān what thoughts were in the Prophet's mind, making clear the rules He wished to put in place on this whole issue: *"You said to the one to whom God had shown favour and to whom you had shown favour, 'Hold on to your wife, and remain God-fearing!' Thus would you hide within yourself something that God was about to bring to light – for you feared [what] people [might think], whereas it was God alone of whom you should stand in awe! Then, when Zayd had come to the end of his union with her, We gave her to you in marriage, so that no blame should attach to the believers for [marrying] the spouses of their adopted children when the latter have come to the end of their union with them. Thus, God's will was done."* (33: 37)

ʿĀ'ishah was right when she said: *"Had Muhammad concealed anything God revealed to him in His book, he would have suppressed the statement: 'Thus would you hide within yourself something that God was about to bring to light – for you feared [what] people [might think], whereas it was God alone of whom you should stand in awe'"*¹¹ (33: 37)

Thus God made His law very clear, exposing the thoughts entertained by His own Messenger, concerning people's dislike of his marriage to the divorcee of his former adopted son. But Satan's attempts to achieve gain in this way were brought to nothing. Yet those with sick or hardened hearts will continue to exploit this event in their attempts to show Islam in a bad light.

Such is the meaning we feel these verses convey. It is God who gives guidance and shows the right way.

¹¹ These verses and the events to which they refer will be discussed more fully in the commentary on *Sūrah* 33, in Vol. XIV. – Editor's note.

Hasty Hopes

Enthusiasm may also be an important factor with advocates of the divine message, in all generations. Their long cherished desire to see the message spread and triumph may encourage them to try to win over certain individuals or influential people, even if this requires them to initially overlook some requirements that they may think to be of no great importance. They may even try to accommodate some of these practices so that people do not adopt a hostile attitude to the divine message.

In their keenness to achieve success for their cause, they may go even further and adopt means and methods that are inconsistent with the strict standards of Islam or with its line of action. They link their haste with what they consider to be the interests of Islam. But these are truly served only by strict adherence to the approach and method of action adopted by Islam. Future results are known only to God. Hence, the advocates of Islam must not concern themselves with such results, as they are not accountable for them. Their duty is to follow the proper Islamic approach and clear line of action. They must leave the results to be determined by God, knowing that they can only be good and serve the interests of His cause.

These Qur'ānic verses provide a warning for the advocates of Islam, making it clear that Satan will try to exploit their hasty hopes to undermine their very cause. God has protected His messengers and prophets, bringing to nothing all Satan's schemes to exploit their natural human keenness. Others, however, who are not similarly infallible, must take extra care so that they leave no room for Satan to exploit their sincere desires to ensure success for God's message, or what they may term 'the interests of the cause'. This phrase must be removed from their lexicon, because it is a trap which Satan sets for them when he is unable to deceive them through their personal interests. Indeed, in some situations, 'the interests of the cause' may become an idol worshipped by its advocates who tend then to forget the proper Islamic method of operation. The advocates of Islam must always follow its own method, regardless of what such adherence brings about of results that may seem to involve risks for them and what they advocate. The only danger they must try hard to avoid is that of deviation from the Islamic method of action, even a minor one, for whatever reason. God knows best what serves the interests of His cause. They are not required to look after such interests. What they are required to ensure is that they do not deviate from the method and line of action shown to them by God's Messenger.

The *sūrah* adds a comment on the fact that God protects His message against Satan's scheming, emphasizing that those who reject it will be vanquished, and that humiliating torture awaits them.

Yet the unbelievers will not cease to be in doubt about Him until the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, or suffering befalls them on a day with no more [days] to follow. On that day, all dominion shall belong to God. He shall judge between them. Thus, all who believe and do righteous deeds shall find themselves in gardens of bliss, whereas for the unbelievers who have denied Our revelations there shall be shameful suffering in store. (Verses 55-57)

Such is the unbelievers' attitude to the Qur'ān in general. It is mentioned here as it closely relates to their attitude to whatever aspersion Satan may try to cast in the hopes of God's prophets and messengers, i.e., the two situations are inter-linked. They continue to have doubts about the Qur'ān because their hearts have not felt the sort of pleasure and happiness it imparts so that they appreciate the truth it advocates. They continue to be in such state of doubt "*until the Last Hour comes suddenly upon them, or suffering befalls them on a day with no more [days] to follow.*" (Verse 55) Such suffering befalls them on the Day of Judgement, which is described in the Qur'ānic text as *`aqīm*, or sterile, in the sense that it is not followed by any other day.

On that day, no one other than God will have any dominion, not even the superficial type that people in this world tend to cherish. Judgement on that day is also exercised by God alone, who gives every party its just deserts: "*Thus, all who believe and do righteous deeds shall find themselves in gardens of bliss, whereas for the unbelievers who have denied Our revelations there shall be shameful suffering in store.*" (Verses 56-57) Such suffering is the right recompense for their scheming against the divine faith, denying God's clear revelations, and for their wilful refusal to obey Him.

4

Abraham's Choice of Name

As for those who leave their homes to serve God's cause, and are then slain or die, God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision. God is indeed the most munificent provider. (58)

He will most certainly admit them to a place with which they shall be well pleased. God is surely All-Knowing, Most Forbearing. (59)

Thus shall it be. If one retaliates only to the extent of the injury he has received, and then is wronged again, God will certainly succour him. God is certainly the One who absolves sin, who is Much-Forgiving. (60)

Thus it is, because God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and because God hears all and sees all. (61)

Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood,(62)

Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, whereupon the earth becomes green. God is unfathomable in His wisdom, All Aware. (63)

وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ قُتِلُوا
أَوْ مَاتُوا لَيَرْزُقَنَّهُمُ اللَّهُ رِزْقًا حَسَنًا
وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَهُوَ خَيْرُ الرَّازِقِينَ ﴿٥٨﴾

لَيُدْخِلَنَّهُم مُّدْخَلًا يَرْضَوْنَهُ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ
لَعَلِيمٌ حَلِيمٌ ﴿٥٩﴾

﴿ ذٰلِكَ وَمَنْ عَاقَبَ بِمِثْلِ مَا عُوِّقَ
بِهِ ثُمَّ بُغِيَ عَلَيْهِ لَيَنْصُرَنَّهُ اللَّهُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
لَعَفُوٌّ غَفُورٌ ﴾ ﴿٦٠﴾

ذٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يُوَلِّجُ اللَّيْلَ فِي النَّهَارِ
وَيُوَلِّجُ النَّهَارَ فِي اللَّيْلِ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ
بَصِيرٌ ﴿٦١﴾

ذٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَأَنَّ مَا
يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِهِ هُوَ الْبَاطِلُ وَأَنَّ
اللَّهَ هُوَ الْعَلِيُّ الْكَبِيرُ ﴿٦٢﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ أَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً
فَتُصْبِحُ الْأَرْضُ مُخْضَرَّةً إِنَّ اللَّهَ
لَطِيفٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿٦٣﴾

To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. God alone is indeed free of all want, worthy of all praise. (64)

Do you not see that God has made subservient to you all that is on earth, and the ships that sail the sea at His bidding? He it is who holds the celestial bodies, so that they may not fall upon the earth except by His leave. Most compassionate is God, and merciful to mankind. (65)

It is He who gave you life, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you back to life. Bereft of all gratitude is man. (66)

To every community We have appointed ways of worship, which they should observe. Let them not draw you into disputes on this score, but call [them all] to your Lord. You are indeed on the right way. (67)

Should they argue with you, say: 'God knows best what you are doing.' (68)

God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all on which you dispute. (69)

Do you not know that God knows all that occurs in heaven as well as on earth? Indeed it is all in a record. All this is easy for God. (70)

لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ
وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَهُوَ الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ ﴿٦٤﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مَّا فِي الْأَرْضِ
وَأَلْفَلَاكَ تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِأَمْرِهِ ۗ وَيُمْسِكُ
السَّمَاءَ أَنْ تَقَعَ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ ۗ
إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِالنَّاسِ لَرَءُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٦٥﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَحْيَاكُمْ ثُمَّ يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ
يُحْيِيكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَكَفُورٌ ﴿٦٦﴾

لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ جَعَلْنَا مَنْسَكًا هُمْ نَاسِكُوهُ
فَلَا يَنْزِعُ عَنْكَ فِي الْأَمْرِ ۚ وَادْعُ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ
إِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ هُدًى مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٦٧﴾

وَإِنْ جَادَلُوكَ فَقُلِ اللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ
﴿٦٨﴾

اللَّهُ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فِيمَا
كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاءِ
وَالْأَرْضِ ۗ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ فِي كِتَابٍ ۗ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ
عَلَىٰ اللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ ﴿٧٠﴾

And yet they worship beside God something for which He has never bestowed any warrant from on high, and of which they cannot have any knowledge. The wrongdoers shall have none to help them. (71)

As it is, whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, you can perceive utter repugnance in the faces of unbelievers. They would almost assault those who recite Our revelations to them. Say: 'Shall I tell you of something worse than that? It is the fire which God has promised to those who deny Him. How vile an end!' (72)

Mankind! An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it. Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end. If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought! (73)

No true understanding of God have they. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty. (74)

God chooses message bearers from among the angels and from among men. God hears all and sees all. (75)

He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them. To God all things shall

وَيَعْبُدُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ مَا لَمْ يُنَزَّلْ
بِهِ سُلْطَانًا وَمَا لَيْسَ لَهُمْ بِهِ عِلْمٌ وَمَا
لِلظَّالِمِينَ مِن نَّصِيرٍ ﴿٧١﴾

وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُنَا بَيِّنَاتٍ تَعْرِفُ فِي
وُجُوهِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا الْمُنْكَرَ
يَكَادُونَ يَسْطُونَ بِالَّذِينَ
يَتْلُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِنَا قُلْ أَفَأُنذِرِكُمْ
بَشَرٍ مِّن ذَلِكُمْ النَّارُ وَعَدَهَا اللَّهُ
الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَبئسَ الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٧٢﴾

يَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ ضُرْبٌ مِّثْلُ مَا سَمِعُوا لَهُ
إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ
لَن يَخْلُقُوا ذُبَابًا وَلَوْ اجْتَمَعُوا لَهُ
وَأَن يَسْلُبَهُمُ الذُّبَابُ شَيْئًا لَا يَسْتَنْقِذُوهُ مِنْهُ
ضَعْفَ الطَّالِبِ وَالْمَطْلُوبِ ﴿٧٣﴾

مَا قَدَرُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدْرِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٧٤﴾

اللَّهُ يَصْطَفِي مِنَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ رُسُلًا
وَمِنَ النَّاسِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ بَصِيرٌ
﴿٧٥﴾

يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ
وَإِلَى اللَّهِ تُرْجَعُ الْأُمُورُ ﴿٧٦﴾

return. (76)

Believers! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord alone, and do good, so that you might be successful. (77)

And strive hard in God's cause as you ought to strive. It is He who has chosen you, and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion; the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims, in bygone times and in this [book], so that the Messenger might bear witness for you, and that you might bear witness for all mankind. Thus, attend regularly to your prayer, and pay out your zakaat, and hold fast to God. He is your Guardian: the best of guardians and the best to give support. (78)

يَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا أَرْكَعُوا
وَأَسْجُدُوا وَأَعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمْ وَافْعَلُوا الْخَيْرَ
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَفْلِحُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

وَجَاهِدُوا فِي اللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ ۗ هُوَ
أَجْتَبَكُمْ وَمَا جَعَلَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ مِنْ
حَرَجٍ ۗ مِلَّةَ أَبِيكُمْ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ۗ هُوَ سَمَّنُكُمْ
الْمُسْلِمِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَفِي هَذَا لِيَكُونَ
الرَّسُولُ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْكُمْ وَتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ
عَلَى النَّاسِ ۗ فَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا
الزَّكَاةَ وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِاللَّهِ هُوَ مَوْلَانَكُمْ
فَنِعْمَ الْمَوْلَىٰ وَنِعْمَ النَّصِيرُ ﴿٧٨﴾

Overview

The previous passage ended with an outline of the opposite destinies of the believers and those who deny God's message. On the day when all dominion belongs to God alone, they end up in contrasting positions. All this is given within the context of God's support of His messengers, protection of His message and the reward He has in store for those who believe and those who refuse to believe.

This passage begins with a reference to those who migrate for God's cause. They have already been permitted to fight in defence of their faith and to defend themselves against injustice. They have been driven out of their homes against all right, for no reason other than their declaration that they believed in God alone. The passage also clarifies that God will compensate them for the property they left behind when they migrated.

A general verdict follows which applies to those who find themselves unjustly attacked and who try to repel aggression, but are then subjected to further tyranny and hostility. They are given a clear and assured promise of support. This firm

promise is followed by listing some indicators of God's power which ensures that His promises will always come true. These indicators are seen in the universe around us. It thus suggests that God's help to those who suffer injustice, despite their attempts to repel aggression, is a certainty in the same vein as other universal laws.

At this point in the passage, the Prophet receives a direct address that each community is shown a course of action, suitable for its own circumstances. Therefore, he should not be preoccupied with arguments with unbelievers. He must not allow them a chance to dispute his method. Should they seek to argue with him, he should leave them to God who judges between them on the Day of Judgement over everything which they differed. He is the One who knows the truth of what they follow, as He knows everything in the heavens and on earth.

The *sūrah* also refers to their worship of deities that have no sanction from God, as well as their worship of beings they do not know. They are criticized for being hard hearted and for their dislike of hearing the truth. In fact they would not shrink from attacking those who recite God's revelations to them. They are threatened with the fire which will be their ultimate abode. This is a promise that will never fail.

This is followed by an announcement to all mankind, making it clear that those whom they worship instead of God are devoid of power. Their weakness is shown in a humble image that carries no exaggeration, but the way it is presented brings their shameful weakness into sharp relief. They are shown as incapable of contending with flies, or of retrieving what a fly takes from them. Yet, unbelievers claim that such beings are deities.

The passage and the *sūrah* end with an address to the community of believers requiring them to fulfil their duties as leaders of humanity. They should prepare themselves for their task with prayer, worship and good action, seeking God's help and protection.

A Fitting Reward

As for those who leave their homes to serve God's cause, and are then slain or die, God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision. God is indeed the most munificent provider. He will most certainly admit them to a place with which they shall be well pleased. God is surely All-Knowing, Most Forbearing. (Verses 58-59)

Migration, or leaving one's home, to serve God's cause represents a desertion of every comfort whether it be family, community and childhood memories, or property and material comforts. When one puts one's faith ahead of all this for no other reason than to earn God's pleasure, one demonstrates that such a prize is more valuable than all material goods. Migration was possible before Makkah fell to Islam

and the Islamic state was established. After that, migration was invalid. The requirement now is to strive in serving God's cause. Whoever strives thus for God's cause and dedicates himself to its service receives a similar reward to that of migration.

"As for those who leave their homes to serve God's cause, and are then slain or die, God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision." (Verse 58) This applies whether they die in battle, earning martyrdom, or die normally in their homes. They left their homes and property ready to face any eventuality only to serve Him. They sought martyrdom in any way it might come, sacrificing every worldly comfort. Therefore, God compensates them richly for what they abandoned on His account: *"God will most certainly grant them a goodly provision. God is indeed the most munificent provider."* (Verse 58) Such provisions are better than everything they leave behind.

"He will most certainly admit them to a place with which they shall be well pleased." (Verse 59) They departed in a way that pleased God, and in return He promises that they will be well pleased with the position into which He will admit them. It is indeed a clear aspect of the honour God grants them when He makes sure of answering their wishes and ensuring that they are pleased with what they receive from Him. *"God is surely All-Knowing, Most Forbearing."* (Verse 59) He is well aware of what they have suffered of injustice and what makes them feel well compensated. He is also forbearing, giving the unbelievers respite in order that they realize that they are in the wrong. He eventually gives fitting reward to those who suffer injustice and fitting punishment to those who inflict injustice.

Those who are targets of human aggression may not be able to tolerate such treatment or bear it with patience. They would rather respond in kind, measure for measure. If aggressors persist, and continue with their oppression, God is certain to support the oppressed and help them against those who are unjust: *"Thus shall it be. If one retaliates only to the extent of the injury he has received, and then is wronged again, God will certainly succour him. God is certainly the One who absolves sin, who is Much-Forgiving."* (Verse 60) The condition that must be fulfilled for God's help to be forthcoming is that the action must be one of retaliation, seeking to repel aggression. Such help is not forthcoming for aggression of any sort. Moreover, retaliation must not be excessive; rather it must be limited in scale, replying, measure for measure, to the original aggression.

The comment made in the verse on the nature of this retaliation is that *"God is certainly the One who absolves sin, who is Much-Forgiving."* It is He who forgives and absolves. Human beings have no say in this. Indeed they may prefer to retaliate and to repel aggression. Given their nature, they are allowed to pursue such retaliatory action. God will help them to achieve victory.

God's promise of help to victims of aggression is linked to universal laws that

testify to His power. These laws operate most accurately, without fail, which, in turn, suggests that God's help to those at the receiving end of aggression is one of the unfailing universal laws He has set in operation. *"Thus it is, because God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night; and because God hears all and sees all."* (Verse 61)

This refers to a natural phenomenon which people observe morning and evening, day and night, winter and summer. The night passes into the day at sunset, and the day passes into the night at sunrise. And the night takes more of the day as we go into the winter, while the day takes up more of the night as summer approaches. People see both phenomena of the two parts of the daily cycle passing into each other, but long familiarity makes them oblivious to their accuracy and unfailing regularity. Nevertheless, these phenomena are witnesses to God's power which controls the universe and all its events.

The *sūrah* wants people to open their eyes and hearts to these often overlooked phenomena that are indicative of God's superior power that controls the movement and length of both day and night, with absolute accuracy. The same may be said about God's help to those who suffer aggression and try to repel it. It is as accurate and regular as the passing of the day into the night and the passing of the night into the day. God always smites the power of tyrant oppressors and allows justice to triumph. Again, people tend to be oblivious of this phenomenon, just as they overlook signs and pointers indicating God's power and control of the universe.

Absolute Truth

All this relates to the essential fact that God is the ultimate and absolute truth. His is the truth that controls the universe and operates its systems. Everything else is false, irregular, and cannot be maintained: *"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great."* (Verse 62)

This is an adequate explanation and a guarantee that truth and justice will inevitably triumph, while falsehood and aggression are certain to be defeated. It is the same guarantee that the laws of the universe will operate without fail. One of these laws and phenomena is that the truth will be victorious and falsehood will suffer a humiliating defeat. God is certainly far superior to any absolute ruler who seeks to demonstrate his power over the weak. The verse concludes with this comment: *"God alone is Most High, Great."* Hence, He will not allow aggression to swell, or injustice to be everlasting.

Further natural phenomena are shown as permanent indicators of God's power: *"Are you not aware that God sends down water from the skies, whereupon the earth becomes*

green. *God is unfathomable in His wisdom, All Aware.*" (Verse 63) We see this happening all the time: rain pours down from the skies and the earth becomes green within a very short period, but again long familiarity makes us oblivious to this. However, to people with open minds the scene arouses a host of feelings. At times, you look at a green shoot poking out through the black earth and you feel its freshness. It reminds you of young children smiling happily to the world around them, and who almost fly with delight when they see the spreading light.

If we have such feelings, we can properly understand the comment at the end of the verse: *"God is unfathomable in His wisdom, All Aware."* It is as profound a comment as our feelings when we look at this delightful scene and contemplate its nature. It is part of God's unfathomable wisdom to initiate such subtle movements within the depths of the earth, bringing forth a green shoot, fresh but weak and slim. With God's power, it stretches out into the air, moving against the law of gravity. It is God's knowledge that determines the amount of rain that falls from the sky and its timing, so that water mixes with the earth and allows vegetation to grow.

Water falls from God's sky to His earth to initiate life and provide nutrition and wealth. But then God owns both the heavens and earth and all that they contain, yet He needs nothing of them. He gives provisions to all living things, through water and plants. But He is free of all need. *"To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. God alone is indeed free of all want, worthy of all praise."* (Verse 64) He is in need of nothing of what lives in the heavens and earth. Indeed all praise is due to Him for the favours He bestows on all His creatures.

Mercy Without Limit

Once more the *sūrah* points out some of the aspects of God's power as seen in nature: *"Do you not see that God has made subservient to you all that is on earth, and the ships that sail the sea at His bidding? He it is who holds the celestial bodies, so that they may not fall upon the earth except by His leave. Most compassionate is God, and merciful to mankind."* (Verse 65) This draws people's attention to the earth they live on, which contains a wide variety of powers and wealth which God has made subservient to man. Yet man remains oblivious of God's favours which he enjoys night and day.

God has placed everything on earth at man's disposal, by making the laws of nature affecting the earth compatible with man's nature and abilities. Had these been at variance with the natural laws of the earth, human life would not have been possible on this planet, and man would not have been able to utilize its resources to his benefit. Had he been physically different from the condition which allows him to tolerate the earth's atmosphere, breathe its air, eat its food and drink its water, man could not have survived on earth for even a very brief time. Had the density of the

earth or the human constitution been different, man would not have been able to walk or stand upright on earth; he would either fly in the air or sink into the earth. Had the earth been without an atmosphere, or had the air been heavier or lighter than its present condition, man would have suffocated or been unable to breathe. Thus, it is the compatibility of all these natural elements with human nature that makes man able to live on earth and benefit by its resources. This is only feasible through God's will.

Moreover, God made the earth subservient to man through the powers and abilities He gave man. Without these man would not have been able to tap the resources of the earth to his benefit. As it is, man discovers these resources one by one. Whenever he needs something new for his life, he uncovers new treasures; and whenever he feels that the earth's reserves of an essential material are running short, he finds new ones or alternative materials. Today, although there remain plenty of oil supplies and other minerals, yet the vast potential of nuclear energy has become available.¹² But man is still like a child who plays with fire, and can easily burn himself and those around him. Hence, he needs to abide by the code of living God has laid down so that he can make full use of the earth's resources to build a better human life and fulfil his mission.

"Do you not see that God has made subservient to you all that is on earth, and the ships that sail the sea at His bidding?" (Verse 65) It is God who created the laws that allow ships to sail through the sea, and who gave man the necessary means to discover these laws and utilize them to his benefit. Had the nature of the sea, or the ships, or man's powers of understanding and learning been different, none of this could have happened.

"He it is who holds the celestial bodies, so that they may not fall upon the earth except by His leave. Most compassionate is God, and merciful to mankind." (Verse 65) It is He who created the universe and chose its appropriate system. It is He who has made its laws which ensure that celestial bodies remain far apart from each other.

Every theory explaining this universal system is no more than an attempt to understand the laws that ensure the maintenance of the balance that God has placed in the universe. Yet some people overlook this essential fact. They think that if they learn how the universe works, then they are negating God's role and His power which operates it. This is a particularly singular way of thinking. To explain how a certain law of nature works does not negate that it has been devised by the One who set it in operation in the first place, or that He continues to ensure that such a law remains in operation. Besides, all that man has come up with is a host of

¹² Nuclear energy is cited in this case as an example of alternatives CO coal and oil. The important point is that God has placed in man's world different means and resources to support life, growth and development. — Editor's note.

theories that attempt to explain natural phenomena. They may be right, and may equally be wrong.

God Almighty *holds the celestial bodies so that they may not fall upon the earth* through the system He has devised for the universe. He keeps them from falling *'except by His leave.'* This is a reference to a time when He may decide to stop this system for a purpose He, in His infinite wisdom, wishes to happen.

The *sūrah* completes its reference to aspects of God's power and the perfection of natural laws by speaking of the human soul. It talks of human existence, life and death: *"It is He who gave you life, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you back to life. Bereft of all gratitude is man."* (Verse 66) The first life is a miracle renewed with every child born at every moment of the night and day. Its secret continues to fill man's mind with wonder and to leave a vast area for us to contemplate. Death is also a secret that man cannot fathom. It occurs within a brief moment, yet the gulf between the nature of life and that of death is vast indeed, leaving a similarly vast area for contemplation. Life after death is something that lies beyond our faculties of perception, but our present life provides ample evidence for it. This is a further area for contemplation.

Yet man seldom reflects or contemplates, because man is *'bereft of all gratitude.'* The *sūrah* shows all these aspects and draws our attention to them within the context of assuring victims of oppression that they will have God's support as they try to repel such hostility. Such is the Qur'ānic method in using universal scenes to arouse human feelings, and in linking the laws of justice to the laws governing universal existence.

No Room for Argument

At this point the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet (peace be upon him) instructing him to follow his own way, paying no attention to the unbelievers and their futile arguments. He must not allow them to divert him from the method God chose for him, as He assigned him the task of delivering His message to mankind.

To every community We have appointed ways of worship, which they should observe. Let them not draw you into disputes on this score, but call [them all] to your Lord. You are indeed on the right way. Should they argue with you, say: 'God knows best what you are doing.' God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all on which you dispute. Do you not know that God knows all that occurs in heaven as well as on earth? Indeed it is all in a record. All this is easy for God. (Verses 67-70)

Every community has its own way of life, thought, behaviour and beliefs, and these are subject to the consistent and accurate laws God has set to regulate people's nature, thinking, feelings and reactions to outside influences. A community that

opens its hearts to the pointers to divine guidance and responds to relevant pointers in the universe and within the human soul finds its way to God. In this, it will benefit by the numerous signs pointing to His oneness and encouraging compliance with His orders. By contrast, a community that shuts its mind to all this is in the wrong, sinking deeper into error.

Since God has appointed a certain way for each community, then the Prophet need not trouble himself with arguments he may put to the unbelievers when they turn away from the path of divine guidance and persist in following error. God instructs him not to allow the unbelievers any chance to dispute with him over his mission, or the way of life he advocates. He must continue to implement it, paying no heed to anyone who wants to engage in argument and dispute. His is a straightforward way, as God Himself testifies: *"You are indeed on the right way."* (Verse 67) This gives him all the reassurance he needs to follow divine guidance.

If unbelievers try to dispute with him, he should cut short such arguments. It is no use wasting time and effort: *"Should they argue with you, say: 'God knows best what you are doing.'"* (Verse 68) Argument can be useful with people whose hearts and minds are open to receive guidance, seeking knowledge and seriously searching for the right evidence. But argument is futile with those who persist in their erring ways, turning a blind eye to all the indicators and pointers they see in the universe and within themselves. The Prophet is told to leave these people to God who will judge between all creeds and ways of life and their followers: *"God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection with regard to all on which you dispute."* (Verse 69) He is the judge to whom no one can object, because on that day all argument is abandoned. Nor can there be any argument about the final judgement.

God makes His judgement on the basis of His perfect knowledge. He does not lose sight of any circumstances, and no motive or feeling is withheld from Him. He knows everything in the heavens and the earth, including people's intentions, motives, actions and reactions: *"Do you not know that God knows all that occurs in heaven as well as on earth? Indeed it is all in a record. All this is easy for God."* (Verse 70)

God's knowledge is not subject to any of the influences that erase things from memory or cause forgetfulness. His record is complete and perfect.

The human mind becomes overwhelmed when it merely contemplates some of what we see in the heavens and the earth, and tries to imagine how God knows all these perfectly, down to the most minute details of people, their thoughts, intentions and actions. But all this is very little compared to God's full knowledge and power. Hence the verse concludes with the statement: *"All this is easy for God."* (Verse 70) Having made it clear to the Prophet that he must not allow the unbelievers a chance to dispute with him over his right way, the *sūrah* shows how flawed and flimsy the

way followed by the unbelievers is. It betrays total ignorance of the truth. They are deprived of God's help, and as such they have none to help them:

And yet they worship beside God something for which He has never bestowed any warrant from on high, and of which they cannot have any knowledge. The wrongdoers shall have none to help them. (Verse 71)

No situation or system can have any real power except for what is granted by God. What lacks the source of power given by God remains weak and unsupportable. Such unbelievers worship different deities, some of which are idols and statues, and some are human; or they may even worship Satan. All these are devoid of God's power; hence they are weak. Besides, they do not worship these deities on the basis of any solid and convincing evidence. Their basis is myth and superstition. Having been denied God's help, they will not receive any from any other source.

The most singular thing is that while they worship false deities of which they have no knowledge, they refuse to listen to the voice of truth. They are hardened in their attitude, threatening to strike at those who recite God's revelations to them:

As it is, whenever Our revelations are recited to them in all their clarity, you can perceive utter repugnance in the faces of unbelievers. They would almost assault those who recite Our revelations to them. (Verse 72)

They cannot answer an argument with an equally valid counter argument, or reply to evidence with anything that is similarly powerful. Instead, they resort to heavy-handed tactics, violence and oppression, realizing that they have no leg to stand on. This is always the case with tyrants who think only of suppressing the truth, knowing that they have no other way to answer it.

Hence, the Qur'an delivers a clear warning, pointing to the inevitable outcome: "Say: Shall I tell you of something worse than that?" (Verse 72) What is worse than the evil they harbour within themselves, and the oppression they embark upon? "It is the fire which God has promised to those who deny Him." (Verse 72) This is the right reply for the oppression they engage in. And the final comment is: "How vile an end." (Verse 72)

Powerless Man

The *sūrah* now makes a powerful, universal declaration that all deities people associate with God, including the ones to which the wrongdoers appeal for help, are weak and powerless. Their weakness is shown in a bustling and captivating scene:

Mankind. An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it. Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end. If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him! Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought! (Verse 73)

The address is universal, it includes everyone anywhere in the world, and the declaration is loud and clear: "Mankind!" When people have been gathered to listen, they are told that they are about to be given a statement of a general principle, not a particular case applicable on a certain occasion. "*An aphorism is set forth; hearken, then, to it.*" It is a statement of fact that applies in all situations: "*Those beings whom you invoke instead of God cannot create a fly, even though they were to join all their forces to that end.*" All false deities, whether they be idols and statues, human beings, traditions and values, to whom you appeal for support and with whom you seek to achieve victory and high esteem, are incapable of creating a fly, even if they muster all their forces, utilize all their knowledge and channel all their resources into one supreme effort. Indeed, the creation of a mere fly, that small and abject creature, defies all the harnessed powers of such false gods.

Creating a fly is just as impossible, for anyone or thing other than God, as creating a camel or an elephant, because the fly also demonstrates the great secret of life. Hence, it is placed on the same level as camels and elephants, with regard to its miraculous creation. The Qur'ānic aphorism, however, cites the case of a little, insignificant fly in order to generate a more profound feeling of powerlessness, without compromising the underlying principle.

The *sūrah* adds another dimension in describing their powerlessness: "*If a fly robs them of anything, they cannot rescue it from him!*" (Verse 73) False deities, be they idols or humans, cannot retrieve anything from a fly when it robs them of it. Flies can rob people of that which is precious indeed. At the same time, a fly carries agents of some very serious diseases, such as tuberculosis, typhoid, dysentery and conjunctivitis. It can deprive a person of his eyes or other organs, or indeed deprive him of his life. A weak and contemptible fly can rob a human being of what he can never retrieve.

Here again we note how the Qur'ānic style uses facts in the most effective way. Had the text referred to lions and similar wild animals adding that men cannot rescue anything such animals rob them of, it would have generated an air of strength and force, rather than weakness. Besides, the most powerful animals cannot rob man of anything greater than what a fly can rob him of.

This powerful image stating a clear aphorism concludes with a simple comment: "*Weak indeed is the seeker, and weak the sought!*" (Verse 73) This comment further emphasizes the effects generated by the verse as a whole.

At this moment when we realize how weak and contemptible these false deities are, the *sūrah* denounces the unbelievers for their faulty concept of God, clearly stating God's power: *"No true understanding of God have they. God is certainly Most Powerful, Almighty."* (Verse 74) How could they understand Him as He really is when they associate with Him such powerless deities that cannot even create a fly? What understanding of God have they, when they see His highly sophisticated creation and yet they consider as equal to Him beings that cannot create even a little fly? They even invoke such powerless creatures which cannot retrieve anything flies take away from them, instead of invoking God. So, how can it be claimed that they have a proper concept of God? This is a damning comment at a point which should arouse feelings of submission to God alone.

The *sūrah* then mentions that God Almighty chooses His angel messengers to deliver His revelations to prophets, and chooses His human messengers to address mankind. All this is done on the basis of immaculate knowledge and total ability:

God chooses message bearers from among the angels and from among men. God hears all and sees all. He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them. To God all things shall return. (Verses 75-76)

The choice of both angel and human messenger is made by the Almighty, and it was from the Almighty that Muhammad received the message of Islam. It was God who chose Muhammad to be His Messenger to mankind. How could he be compared to those who rely on deities that are both weak and contemptible?

"God hears all and sees all," and as such *"He knows all that lies open before them and all that is hidden from them."* His knowledge is perfect, immaculate, complete. Nothing present or absent, near or distant escapes God's knowledge.

"To God all things shall return." (Verse 76) He is the ultimate arbiter, who has power over all things.

Striving for the Right Cause

Having exposed the absurdity of the idolaters' beliefs and the ignorance their worship rituals reflect, the *sūrah* makes a final address to the Muslim community, urging it to be true to its beliefs and to stick to the right way of life.

Believers! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord alone, and do good, so that you might be successful. And strive hard in God's cause as you ought to strive. It is He who has chosen you, and has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion; the creed of your forefather Abraham. It is He who has named you Muslims, in bygone times and in this [book], so that the Messenger might bear witness for you, and that you might bear witness for all mankind. Thus, attend

regularly to your prayer, and pay out your zakāt, and hold fast to God. He is your Guardian: the best of guardians and the best to give support. (Verses 77-78)

Indeed these two verses sum up the code of living God has laid down for the Muslim community and the duties He has assigned to it. They define its role and mark out its course of action, past, present and future, provided that it follows His guidance.

The first instruction given here requires the believers to pray, highlighting two distinctive actions of Islamic prayer, namely bowing down and prostrating before God. Thus, prayer is given a real image and a noteworthy movement so that we see it clearly before our eyes. In this way, the mode of expression is that much more effective.

Next we have a general instruction to worship God. This is far more comprehensive than prayer, because worship includes all duties and adds every action, thought or feeling that is addressed to God alone. Indeed every human activity becomes part of worship when it is intended for God's sake. This even includes pleasure and personal enjoyment which become part of worship earning reward from God. All it needs is that we should remember God who has granted us these pleasures and who intends them as means to strengthen our resolve to follow the way He has chosen for us. Nothing of the nature of such pleasures and enjoyments changes, but their purpose is changed, and thus they become part of worship.

The last instruction in the first of these two verses is that believers must do every good thing, particularly in their dealings with fellow human beings, just as they do good in their relations with God, offering prayer and worship. All these instructions are given to the Muslim community so that it can be successful, because these are the means to success. Worship maintains its relation with God so that life is established on the right footing, and follows the way leading to the ultimate goal. Doing good means that the life of the community is firmly established on the basis of right belief.

When the Muslim community has such a proper relation with God and an appropriate lifestyle, it can discharge its awesome responsibility: *"And strive hard in God's cause as you ought to strive."* This is a veracious and comprehensive description, indicating a massive responsibility that requires adequate preparation and the mustering of equipment and resources.

"And strive hard in God's cause as you ought to strive." (Verse 78) This includes striving against one's enemies, laziness, evil and corruption. All these must be equally resisted. It is God who has assigned to you this massive responsibility and chosen you to fulfil it: *"It is He who has chosen you."* This choice adds to the seriousness of the responsibility, which means that it cannot be shrugged off or

abandoned. Indeed it is an honour God has bestowed on the Muslim community for which it should be infinitely grateful.

Moreover, the assigned task is entwined with God's grace: He *"has laid no hardship on you in [anything that pertains to] religion."* Indeed, the religion of Islam, with all its duties, worship and laws always observes man's nature and abilities. It aims to satisfy human nature and release man's abilities so that they are used constructively. Human nature must neither be suppressed nor left without control.

Moreover, the Islamic way of life has a long history in human life, linking the past with the present. It is *"the creed of your forefather Abraham."* It is the system that has continued on earth since the time of Abraham, without any long gap that allows the divine faith to be totally distorted, as happened in some periods prior to Abraham's time.

God has given the name 'Muslim' to the community that believes in His oneness, and this name remained the same whether in olden days or in the Qur'an: *"It is He who has named you Muslims, in bygone times and in this [book]."*

Islam means surrendering oneself totally to God, attributing no share of Godhead to anyone else. Thus, the Muslim community has enjoyed the same system across successive generations, and with successive messages and messengers, up to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It was then that the divine message was entrusted to the Muslim community. Thus, the past, present and future are interlinked as God wants. Thus, *"the Messenger might bear witness for you and that you might bear witness for all mankind."* The Prophet is, thus, a witness defining the way the Muslim community should follow, pointing out right and wrong, and the Muslim community fulfils the same task with regard to humanity at large. It occupies the position of trustee by virtue of the standards established by its laws, education and concepts relating to life and to the universe. Needless to say, the Muslim community cannot fulfil this role unless it implements God's message fully in life. When the Muslim community abandoned this role and deviated from the divine code of living, God removed it from this leadership, leaving it trailing well behind. It will continue to be in this humiliating position until it resumes its role chosen for it by God.

To ensure such a return, it must be fully prepared for it. Hence the order: *"Attend regularly to your prayer, and pay out your zakāt, and hold fast to God. He is your Guardian: the best of guardians and the best to give support."* (Verse 78) Prayer provides a link between the weak and mortal individual and the source of power, while *zakāt* provides a strong link between members of the community, ensuring security for all. Holding fast to God is the strong tie that is never severed.

With such resources, the Muslim community can resume the role of human

leadership for which God has chosen it. It will also be able to utilize the material resources people consider to be sources of strength. The Qur'ān does not overlook these; on the contrary, it wants the Muslim community to be equipped with them, alongside the resources that are available only to believers who strive to enrich life with all that is good and right.

The great advantage of the divine way of life is that it takes humanity by the hand along the way that raises it to the highest position of perfection achievable in this life. It is far removed from systems that care only for worldly pleasures and the satisfaction of carnal desires.

Sublime human values aim to satisfy the needs of material life, but do not stop there. This is what Islam wants for humanity, under the wise trusteeship of the community that implements the divine message.