

SŪRAH 17

Al-Isrā'

(The Night Journey)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, *Al-Isrā'*, or The Night Journey, was revealed whilst the Prophet lived in Makkah. It begins with glorifying God and ends with praising Him. It includes a number of themes, most of which directly relate to the issue of faith, but some tackle certain aspects of individual and social behaviour and its moral basis of faith. It also includes stories about the Children of Israel relevant to the Aqṣā Mosque, the Prophet's terrestrial destination on his night journey, as well as some aspects of the story of Adam and Satan, and the honour God has granted to mankind.

However, the most prominent element in the *sūrah* and its central point is the Prophet himself (peace be upon him). It examines the attitude adopted by the people of Makkah to him, as well as the message he preached, embodied in the Qur'ān, and the guidance it provides and how the unbelievers received it. This leads to a discussion about the nature of the message and the role of God's messengers. It points to the distinction of the Prophet's message by virtue of it having no physical, preternatural phenomenon to support it. It has been God's will that when such a phenomenon, or miracle, was formerly given in support of a divine message, those who continued to deny the message were shortly destroyed in consequence. It also states the principle of individual responsibility in matters of faith, guidance and error, and collective responsibility in matters of social behaviour. However all such responsibility applies after God has made His message clear to mankind through prophets and messengers whose task is to advise, warn and give sound counsel, and also to make everything clear: "*Most clearly have We spelled out everything.*" (Verse 12)

The *sūrah* repeatedly praises God and glorifies Him and mentions the need to praise and thank Him for all the blessings He bestows on His servants. It begins with glorifying Him: *"Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem]..."* (Verse 1) Soon afterwards, the Children of Israel are commanded to believe in God's oneness and are reminded that they belong to the offspring of Noah who was *'a truly grateful servant of Ours.'* (Verse 3) When the unbelievers' claims about their false deities are mentioned, the *sūrah* comments: *"Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted is He above everything they may say [about Him]. The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving."* (Verses 43-44) The *sūrah* quotes some of the people of earlier divine religions who say when the Qur'ān is recited to them: *"Limitless in His glory is our Lord! Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled."* (Verse 108) The last verse in the *sūrah* states: *"And say, All praise is due to God who has never begotten a son; who has no partner in His dominion; who needs none to support Him against any difficulty.' And extol His greatness."* (Verse 111)

Thus the *sūrah* revolves around one axis although it tackles several subjects. Its first part mentions the night journey: *"Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem] – the environs of which We have blessed."* (Verse 1) It also specifies the purpose of this journey:

"so that We might show him some of Our signs." (Verse 1) In connection with the mosque in Jerusalem the *sūrah* mentions the hook revealed to Moses and what God determined in it for the Children of Israel, speaking about two episodes of destruction and diaspora because of their injustice and corruption. They are warned about a third and a fourth time if they revert to the same ways. It then states that this last divine revelation, the Qur'ān, guides to the path that is straightest, while man is often driven by uncontrollable reactions. It also states the rule of individual responsibility with regard to following divine guidance or straying away from it, and collective responsibility with regard to behaviour and practice.

The second part speaks about the truth of God's oneness, considering it the basis upon which the whole social set up should be built, including the values of work and behaviour. This central issue of faith should be the pivot around which all human life turns.

The third part speaks of pagan superstitions which attribute daughters and partners to God. It also mentions resurrection and how the unbelievers could never imagine it would take place. It shows how they received Qur'ānic revelations and the fabrications they reiterated about the Prophet (peace be upon him). It commands the

believers to say something better, unlike the falsehood of unbelievers.

In the fourth part the *sūrah* explains the reason for not giving the Prophet physical miracles or preternatural phenomena. When such miracles were given to earlier communities and they continued to deny the message of truth, the law God has set in such cases applied to them and they were destroyed. It refers to the unbelievers' attitude to the warnings based on the vision God showed to the Prophet, and their persistence in their erring ways. In this connection a part of the story of *Iblīs*, or Satan, is mentioned and his declaration that he would remain for ever man's determined foe. This part of the story appears to be an exposition of the reasons for the unbelievers going astray. It comments on this by warning mankind against incurring God's punishment, coupled with a reminder of God's grace and the honour He has given to mankind. It tells them about what awaits God's obedient servants, contrasting it with what awaits the disobedient on the day when every community is summoned by calling their leaders or guides. *"Those who are given their records in their right hands will read their records. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. But whoever is blind in this world will be even more blind in the life to come, and still further astray from the path of truth."* (Verses 71-72)

The final part of the *sūrah* speaks about the unbelievers' schemes against the Prophet (peace be upon him), and their attempts to lure him away from at least part of what was revealed to him. It mentions their attempt to expel him from Makkah. When he actually left, he did so carrying out God's orders. Had they forcibly expelled him, they would have been destroyed, as happened to communities which in former times expelled their prophets or killed them. God commands the Prophet in the *sūrah* to carry on with his mission, reciting the Qur'ān and attending to his prayers, appealing to God to enable him to enter and leave in a true and sincere manner, and to declare that the truth has come to light and falsehood is certain to wither away. The *sūrah* states that this Qur'ān is a source of cure and guidance to believers. Man's knowledge, however, remains inadequate. *"You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge."* (Verse 85)

The *sūrah* continues to speak about the Qur'ān and its challenge to all mankind. Yet the unbelievers required physical miracles, and asked for angels to be sent down in support of the Prophet's message. They suggested that the Prophet should have a house of adornments, or a garden with date and vine trees, through which rivers run, or that he should cause a spring of water to gush forth for them, or that he himself should climb up to heaven and bring them a written letter to read. All these demands were dictated by intransigence, not by the desire to have proof to ensure conviction. The *sūrah* replies that all this is beyond the limits of the role of God's Messenger and the nature of his message. It leaves matters in this regard to God. It derides such demands and those who make them, telling them that had they had control over the

treasures of God's grace, which is always abundant, never exhausted, they would still fear to give it away. It was sufficient for them to realize that everything in the universe glorifies God. They should have remembered that the miracles given to Moses did not lead the ones determined to oppose him to change their minds and follow him. Hence, God inflicted His punishment on them.

The *sūrah* concludes with a short discourse about the truth inherent in the Qur'ān. It was revealed in passages, so that the Prophet could read it to people over a long time, as would befit different occasions and circumstances. People would then be influenced by its practical approach to living conditions. It was received by people of sound knowledge with humility. They were so influenced by it to the extent that they wept and prostrated themselves to God. The *sūrah* then concludes with praising God who has never taken to Himself a son or a partner, just as it began with glorifying Him.

A Unique Experience

The story of the night journey by the Prophet from the Sacred Mosque in Makkah to the Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, and then his ascension from there to the highest heaven and the world of which we know nothing, is mentioned in several reports. It has been the subject of much controversy, which continues even today. There are various reports about the place from which the Prophet's night journey started. Some suggest that it was the mosque itself, which fits with the phraseology of the verse. One report quotes the Prophet as saying: "As I was in the mosque, at *Ĥijr Ismā'īl*, half asleep, Gabriel came to me with *al-Burāq*..." It is also reported that his journey began from the house of his cousin Umm Hānī. This report is acceptable on the basis that the term, 'the Sacred Mosque', includes the whole *Ĥaram* area, which surrounds the mosque. Ibn `Abbās is reported to have said, "The whole of the *Ĥaram* area is a mosque."

It is also reported that he was sleeping in Umm Hānī's house when he was taken on his journey and returned home before the night was over. He related the event to his cousin and told her: "I saw the prophets and led them in prayer." As he was about to leave to go to the mosque, she stopped him, saying: "I fear that people will not believe you if you tell them what you have just told me." The Prophet made clear his intention to tell them, 'even though they would not believe me.'

When the Prophet sat in the mosque, Abū Jahl, the arch-enemy of Islam, went to him and asked him whether he had any news. The Prophet told him of his night journey. Abū Jahl called on people to gather and listen to the strange news the Prophet had to tell them. As the Prophet did so, some of them started clapping as a gesture of rejecting what they heard while others put their hands on their heads in

disbelief. Some who had earlier accepted Islam now turned away declaring that they were no longer Muslims. Some went to Abū Bakr, the Prophet's closest Companion, to find out what his reaction would be. When they assured him that Muḥammad actually claimed to have made the return journey to Jerusalem overnight, Abū Bakr said: "If he has actually said this, he is telling the truth." When they expressed their amazement that he would believe such a singular story, Abū Bakr said: "What is so surprising? I do believe him when he says something even more incomprehensible. He says he receives revelations from on high and I believe him." Abū Bakr was then given the title *Ṣiddīq*, which denotes 'a true and firm believer'.

Some of them had been to Jerusalem and so asked the Prophet to describe it to them. Its picture was raised before his eyes and he described it to them in detail. They said that his description was accurate. They then asked him to tell them about their trade caravan and when it would arrive. He told them the number of its camels and its condition at the time. He further told them that it would arrive at sunrise on a particular day, headed by a white camel. On the day appointed by the Prophet, they went out to make sure the caravan arrived. When the sun began to rise, they said: Here is the sun rising. Then they looked and said: And here is the caravan headed by a white camel, just like Muḥammad said. Yet still they refused to believe.

On the same night, the Prophet ascended from Jerusalem to heaven. Disagreement among scholars touches on the point of whether or not the Prophet went on this night journey when he was awake or if it was a dream-like journey. It is reported that `Ā'ishah, his wife, said: "By God, the Prophet's body was never missing, but it was his soul which ascended." Al-Ḥasan is reported to have said that it was all in a dream he saw. Other reports make it clear that it was a journey he took, body and soul, and that his bed was still warm when he came back.

The weightier view, on the basis of all the reports we have, is that the Prophet left his bed in his cousin's home and went to the Ka`bah. When he was at Ḥijr Ismā`il, half awake, he was taken on his journey to Jerusalem and from there he ascended to heaven, before returning to his bed which was still warm.

Having clarified this, we do not see much point in the long arguments people have engaged in over the past, and still do, concerning the nature of this event which certainly took place. Whether it was a physical or spiritual trip, or a vision he saw while awake or asleep, does not make much difference. It does not alter much of the nature of this event to say that it was an act of unveiling that enabled the Prophet to see remote places and worlds in a brief moment. Those who understand even a little of the nature of God's power and the nature of prophethood will find nothing strange in this event. To God's power and ability, all matters, which appear easy or difficult by our human standards and according to what is familiar to us, are the same. What is familiar to us in our world is not to be taken as the criterion for

making a judgement in relation to God's ability. The nature of prophethood is a link with God, which may not be compared to anything familiar in human life. That a remote place or world be shown to the Prophet, or that the Prophet visited such a place by means that we know or do not know about, are no more strange or miraculous than for him to receive God's message. Indeed Abū Bakr put the matter in its proper perspective when he told the people of Makkah that he believed the Prophet in what was even more incomprehensible: the revelations he received from on high.

The Quraysh had ample hard evidence of the truth of this journey when they asked the Prophet to tell them about their trade caravan, and their subsequent verification of every point of detail he mentioned. But they were bound to meet his story with total disbelief at first. The point to be noted here is that the Prophet did not listen to his cousin, Umm Hānī, when she tried to persuade him not to tell them about his journey for fear of their reaction to what would sound totally impossible. The Prophet's trust in the truth of his message and the reality of his journey was such that he went out and told them, paying little heed to how they would receive his news. His mission was to convey to them his message complete, and he was not one to evade his duty. Some of those who had believed in the new faith turned back. Unbelievers found in his story material for ridicule and doubt about everything he said. But none of this made him hesitate to declare the truth as he saw and believed it. In this the Prophet teaches a lesson to the advocates of Islam across all generations: they must declare the truth plainly in all situations. They should not fear what reaction this brings about. They must not try to tailor their faith so as to fit in with what people like to hear.

We also note that the Prophet did not try to describe the event as a miracle or a supernatural happening that would make people believe in his message. In fact they were always asking him for a miracle to prove his claims. Now they had the miraculous event and they knew it to be true when they verified the details the Prophet identified. Islam does not rely on miraculous events to present itself to people. Instead it relies only on the nature of its message and its direct appeal to human nature when it is purged of all corrupting influences. When the Prophet spoke out about his journey, he did not seek to make it proof confirming the truth of his message. He only stated a true event, purely and simply because it was true.

1

God's Infinite Power

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqsā Mosque [in Jerusalem] — the environs of which We have blessed — so that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He alone is the One who hears all and sees all. (1)

We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: 'Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. (2)

You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours.' (3)

We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.' (4)

When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled.

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي أَسْرَى بِعَبْدِهِ لَيْلًا
مِّنَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ إِلَى الْمَسْجِدِ
الْأَقْصَا الَّذِي بَرَكْنَا حَوْلَهُ لِنُرِيَهُ مِنْ
آيَاتِنَا إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿١﴾

وَأَتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ هُدًى
لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَلَّا تَتَّخِذُوا مِنْ دُونِي
وَكِيلاً ﴿٢﴾

ذُرِّيَّةَ مَنْ حَمَلْنَا مَعَ نُوحٍ إِنَّهُ كَانَ
عَبْدًا شَكُورًا ﴿٣﴾

وَقَضَيْنَا إِلَى بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ فِي الْكِتَابِ
لَتُفْسِدُنَّ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَرَّتَيْنِ وَلَتَعْلُنَّ عُلُوًّا
كَبِيرًا ﴿٤﴾

فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ أُولَاهُمَا بَعَثْنَا عَلَيْكُمْ
عِبَادًا لَنَا أُولِي بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ فَجَاسُوا
خِلَالَ الدِّيَارِ وَكَانَ وَعْدًا مَّفْعُولًا ﴿٥﴾

(5)

Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous [than ever]. (6)

And We said:] 'If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves.' And when the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power. (7)

It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you; but if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]. Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers. (8)

Surely this Qur'an shows the way to that which is most upright. It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; (9)

and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous suffering for those who do not believe in the life to come. (10)

Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty. (11)

We have made the night and the day as two [of Our] signs. Then We have effaced the sign of the night while the sign of the day We have left enlightened, so that you may seek bounty from

ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَا لَكُمُ الْكَرَّةَ عَلَيْهِمْ
وَأَمَدَدْنَاكُمْ بِأَمْوَالٍ وَبَنِينَ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ
أَكْثَرَ نَفِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

إِنْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ لِأَنْفُسِكُمْ وَإِنْ
أَسَأْتُمْ فَلَهَا فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ الْآخِرَةِ
لِيَسْتَوْأُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَلِيَدْخُلُوا الْمَسْجِدَ
كَمَا دَخَلُوهُ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَلِيُتَبِّرُوا مَا عَلَوْا
تَتَبِيرًا ﴿٧﴾

عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَنْ يَرْحَمَكُمْ وَإِنْ عُدتُمْ عُدْنَا
وَجَعَلْنَا جَهَنَّمَ لِلْكَافِرِينَ حَصِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

إِنَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ يَهْدِي لِلَّتِي هِيَ أَقْوَمُ
وَيُبَشِّرُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ الَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ
الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٩﴾

وَأَنَّ الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ أَعْتَدْنَا
لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

وَيَدْعُ الْإِنْسَانُ بِالشَّرِّ دُعَاءَهُ بِالْخَيْرِ
وَكَانَ الْإِنْسَانُ عَجُولًا ﴿١١﴾

وَجَعَلْنَا اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ آيَاتَيْنِ فَمَحَوْنَا
آيَةَ اللَّيْلِ وَجَعَلْنَا آيَةَ النَّهَارِ مُبْصِرَةً
لِيَتَّبِعُوا فِضْلًا مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ

your Lord,

and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon. Most clearly have We spelled out everything. (12)

Every human being's action have We tied around his own neck. On the Day of Resurrection We shall produce for him a record which he will find wide open. (13)

[And We will say:] 'Read this your record! Sufficient it is for you today that your own soul should make out your account.' (14)

Whoever chooses to follow guidance does so for his own good, and whoever goes astray does so to his own loss. No soul shall be made to bear the burden of another. We would never inflict punishment [on anyone] until We have sent a Messenger [to give warning]. (15)

When it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our command to those of its people who live a life of affluence. If they persist in sin, judgement is irrevocably passed, and We utterly destroy them. (16)

Many generations have We destroyed since Noah's time. Suffice it that your Lord is well aware of His servants' sins, and observes them all. (17)

As for those who care only for [the pleasures of] this fleeting life, We readily grant of it whatever We may please to whomsoever We will. In the end We consign any such person to hell, where he will

وَلِتَعْلَمُوا عَدَدَ السِّنِينَ وَالْحِسَابَ
وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ فَصَّلْنَاهُ تَفْصِيلًا ﴿١٢﴾

وَكُلَّ إِنْسَانٍ أَلْزَمْنَاهُ طَلْعَهُ فِي عُنُقِهِ
وَنُخْرِجُ لَهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ كِتَابًا يَلْقَاهُ
مَنْشُورًا ﴿١٣﴾

أَقْرَأْ كِتَابَكَ كَفَىٰ بِنَفْسِكَ الْيَوْمَ عَلَيْكَ
حَسِيبًا ﴿١٤﴾

مَنْ أَهْتَدَىٰ فَأِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ
ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا وَلَا تَزِرُ وَازِرَةٌ
وِزْرَ أُخْرَىٰ وَمَا كُنَّا مُعَذِّبِينَ حَتَّىٰ نَبْعَثَ
رَسُولًا ﴿١٥﴾

وَإِذَا أَرَدْنَا أَنْ نُهْلِكَ قَرْيَةً أَمَرْنَا مُتْرَفِيهَا
فَفَسَقُوا فِيهَا فَحَقَّ عَلَيْهَا الْقَوْلُ فَدَمَّرْنَاهَا
تَدْمِيرًا ﴿١٦﴾

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِنَ الْقُرُونِ مِنْ بَعْدِ نُوحٍ
وَكَفَىٰ بِرَبِّكَ بِذُنُوبِ عِبَادِهِ خَبِيرًا
بَصِيرًا ﴿١٧﴾

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ الْعَاجِلَةَ عَجَلْنَا لَهُ فِيهَا
مَا نَشَاءُ لِمَنْ نُرِيدُ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَا لَهُ جَهَنَّمَ
يَصْلَاهَا مَذْمُومًا مَدْحُورًا ﴿١٨﴾

burn disgraced and rejected. (18)

But those who care only for the life to come, strive for it as it should be striven for, and are true believers, are indeed the ones who will have their endeavours well rewarded. (19)

On all — these as well as those — do We bestow the bounty of your Lord. Indeed your Lord's bounty is not denied [to anyone]. (20)

See how We have bestowed more bounty on some than on others. But the life to come will be higher in rank and greater in merit. (21)

وَمَنْ أَرَادَ الْآخِرَةَ وَسَعَىٰ لَهَا سَعْيَهَا وَهُوَ
مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ سَعْيُهُمْ مَّشْكُورًا



كُلًّا نُّمِدُّ هُنُوًا وَهُنُوًا مِنَّا مِن عَطَاءِ
رَبِّكَ ۚ وَمَا كَانَ عَطَاءُ رَبِّكَ مَحْظُورًا

أَنْظُرَ كَيْفَ فَضَّلْنَا بَعْضَهُم عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ
وَلِلْآخِرَةِ أَكْبَرُ دَرَجَاتٍ وَأَكْبَرُ تَفْضِيلًا

A Unique Journey

The *sūrah* begins with glorifying God, the most fitting action to confirm the bond between God and His servants in the atmosphere of compassion and friendliness imparted by the mention of the night journey:

Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque [in Makkah] to the Aqṣā Mosque [in Jerusalem] – the environs of which We have blessed – so that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He alone is the One who hears all and sees all. (Verse 1)

The *sūrah* emphasizes the position of man as God's servant: "He who transported His servant by night..." The emphasis here is needed in the context of the Prophet's ascension to heaven where no human being had gone before. It is important in this context that the status of man's servitude to God should always be remembered. There must be no confusion of status similar to that which happened in the case of Jesus on account of his birth, his being raised to heaven at the end of his life on earth, and the powers which were given to him during life. All these caused some people to confuse his status and to claim that he had a divine nature. In its simplicity and purity, Islam insists that no similarity could ever exist between God and any creature.

The Arabic text of this opening verse uses the verb, *asrā*, which denotes 'travelling

during the night'. It is sufficient then to use this verb to denote the time of the action. Yet the verse adds the phrase, *laylan*, or 'by night', to give an added sense of the still night and the ease of travel. The journey from the Sacred Mosque to the Aqṣā Mosque was one chosen by God, the Compassionate who knows everything. It provided a link between all monotheistic faiths from the time of Abraham and Ishmael to the time of the last Prophet, Muḥammad (peace be upon them all). It also established a link between the holy places in all these religions. It seems that this unusual journey served as an announcement that the last Messenger was the heir to the heritage of all former messengers. His message staked a claim to all these holy places. Thus it becomes a journey that goes beyond the scope of time and place.

The opening verse describes the Aqṣā Mosque as one with blessed environs. This description shows the blessings surrounding the mosque and flowing in abundance. This impression could not have been given with a direct description such as 'the mosque which we have blessed.' This is another example of the refined use of language characteristic of the Qur'ān.

The Prophet's night journey was a telling sign, and it was accompanied by others, as the opening verse says in stating its purpose, "so that We might show him some of Our signs." Covering the distance between the Sacred Mosque in Makkah and the Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, in a very short period that did not allow the Prophet's bed to become cold, is a sign of God's power, whatever the means used to accomplish it. It opens our minds to new horizons in the universe and reveals latent potentials within mankind. It shows that those human beings chosen by God to be the bearers of His message have the latent ability to receive whatever greater powers God wishes to give them. It is God who has honoured man, giving him a favoured position among His creation, and endowed him with such potentials. "He alone is the One who hears all and sees all." (Verse 1) He indeed hears and sees all that is beyond the reach of our hearing and seeing faculties.

It is especially impressive that the opening verse of this *sūrah* starts with glorifying God, "Limitless in His glory is He who transported His servant by night". After defining the purpose of this journey, it finishes with highlighting two of God's attributes, perfect hearing and seeing that encompass all things. This quick movement across purposes reflects the finest points of the expression used. The glorification is addressed to God Himself, and the statement about the purpose of the night journey comes from Him, while the description of God's powers is made in the form of an indisputable statement. All these forms are combined in one verse so as to give their different imports.

The Promise to the Israelites

The night journey is a remarkable sign which God wished to demonstrate. It is an amazing journey by human standards. The Aqṣā Mosque in Jerusalem, which was the destination of the first part of this journey, is at the heart of the Holy Land which God assigned to the Children of Israel before He caused them to be driven out of it. Thus it is appropriate to relate in the passage that follows the history of Moses and his people, the Israelites:

We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours. ' We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.' When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled. Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous [than ever. And We said:] 'If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves.' And when the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power. It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you; but if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]. Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers. (Verses 2-8)

This episode in the Children of Israel's history is mentioned only in this *sūrah* in the Qur'ān. It refers to the fate of the Jews which led to the collapse of their state. It reveals the direct relationship between the spread of corruption and loose morality in a nation and its decline and destruction. This comes in fulfilment of a law of nature God has set in operation, and which the *sūrah* refers to. The law states that the corruption and immorality of the affluent in any community is the cause of its destruction by God.

The story begins here by mentioning Moses' revealed book, the Torah, and the warnings it gives to the Israelites. It reminds them of their great ancestor, Noah, God's obedient and truly grateful servant, and also of their ancestors who were carried with him in the ark. It should be remembered that only the believers were allowed on the ark: "*We gave Moses the book and made it a [source of] guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me. You are the descendants of those whom We carried [in the ark] with Noah. He was a truly grateful servant of Ours.*" (Verses 2-3)

Both the warning and the reminder are confirmation of the promise that the *sūrah* soon mentions. The promise makes it clear that God will not inflict punishment on

any community unless He sends them first a messenger to warn and remind them. It makes clear the primary purpose of giving the book to Moses. It serves as a source of guidance and warns them: *"Do not take anyone for a guardian other than Me."* They must rely on none other than God and turn to Him only for guidance. This is the essence of faith. Anyone who seeks a guardian other than God is misguided and devoid of true faith.

The *sūrah* makes its address to them in the name of their ancestors who were carried in the ark with Noah. These were the best of mankind at the time of the first messenger on earth. Pointing out this relationship in this address serves to remind them of God's grace when He saved their forefathers with His truly grateful servant, Noah. Thus it establishes an age-long bond of faith. That Noah is described here as God's servant is intended to emphasize this point and also to highlight the essential quality of God's chosen messengers, which is their servitude to Him. In the first verse Muḥammad is described as 'God's servant'. This follows the Qur'ānic method of maintaining an air of harmony and coherence throughout each *sūrah*.

In the book which God gave Moses to serve as a source of guidance to the Israelites, He issued them with a warning that they would be doomed to destruction should they spread corruption on earth. The destruction was visited on them twice because its causes were repeated. This is followed by a warning of further episodes of destruction should they revert to their old ways of spreading corruption. This leads to the inevitable operation of God's laws of nature that never fail: *"We made it clear to the Children of Israel in the book: 'Twice will you spread corruption on earth and will indeed become grossly overbearing.'" (Verse 4)*

This judgement is merely information given to them by God, spelling out what they will do and what will happen to them as a result. It is based on God's knowledge of their fate. It is not an act of predestination that they cannot escape, or that forces their hands so as to behave in a certain way. God does not compel anyone to be corrupt or to spread corruption. *"Say: 'never does God enjoin what is indecent.'" (7: 28)* It is the nature of God's knowledge that makes Him aware of what will happen in the future in the same way as He is aware of what is happening now. What is yet to happen, and is totally unknown to all human beings, is, to God, the same as what has already happened.

Same Action, Same Penalty

In the book He gave to Moses, the Torah, God warned the Children of Israel that they would spread corruption on earth twice and that they would gain power and be the masters in the Holy Land. Every time they held power and used it corruptly or spread corruption, God sent some of His servants against them who overpowered

and destroyed them, abusing their rights: *"When the prediction of the first of these came true, We sent against you some of Our servants of great might who wrought havoc throughout the land. Thus [Our] warning came to be fulfilled."* (Verse 5)

This was the first time: they gained power in the Holy Land and they established their strong state. But then they resorted to tyranny and corruption. As a result, God brought them face to face with some of His servants who combined great might with strong determination. They overran those who had erred and spread corruption, completely subjugating them. Thus the warning came to pass, as is always the case with God's promises.

After the Children of Israel were vanquished and suffered humiliation, they turned back to their Lord, mended their ways and applied the lessons they had learnt. In the meantime, their conquerors were blinded by victory and travelled along the same road of tyranny and corruption. As a result, the tables were turned. The vanquished were victorious again: *"Then We let you prevail against them once more, and We gave you wealth and offspring, and made you more numerous than ever."* (Verse 6) History thus repeated itself.

Before the *sūrah* continues its account of the true prophesy and warning, it states a basic rule of action and reward: *"If you do good, you will be but doing good to yourselves; and if you do evil, it will be also against yourselves."* (Verse 7) This is a never changing rule with effects that transcend this life into the next. It makes everything a human being does, with all its results and consequences, totally his own. Thus, reward is the natural fruit of action. Hence it is determined by the nature of the action done. This is to say that a human being is responsible for himself. It is he who chooses to do good or evil, and he alone who will receive the reward or bear the consequences of what he does. He has only himself to blame when the result of his action leads him to suffer punishment.

Having established the rule, the *sūrah* goes on to complete the telling of true prophesy: *"When the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly, and to enter the Mosque just like [their predecessors] had entered it the first time, and to visit with destruction all that fell into their power."* (Verse 7)

The *sūrah* does not include in its text any account of how the Israelites spread corruption again after they regained power. Its mention of the first occasion is sufficient: *"Twice will you spread corruption on earth."* (Verse 4) But it tells us of what God inflicted on them the second time: *"When the second prediction came true, [We allowed your enemies] to disgrace you utterly."* (Verse 7) This is a vivid description of the widespread destruction that causes acute humiliation, visible even on their faces. Or the disgrace was physically painted on their faces, coupled with what they felt when they saw their sanctities desecrated. And they *"enter[ed] the Mosque just like [their*

predecessors] had entered it the first time." (Verse 7) They wrought total destruction, leaving nothing in place.

The warning was fulfilled. God sent enemies against the Jews who overpowered them, destroyed their kingdom and left them in their great diaspora. The Qur'ān does not specify the nationality of those God sent against the Jews, because such information adds nothing to the lesson to be drawn, or to the effect of the law God has made applicable to all communities.

The *sūrah* comments on this true warning and prophesy by saying that this destruction may be a way leading to God's mercy if the right lesson is drawn and acted upon: *"It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you."* (Verse 8) But if the Jews revert to spreading corruption on earth, then the law will inevitably operate and the punishment will again be inflicted: *"But if you revert [to your old ways], We shall revert [to punishing you]."* (Verse 8) They certainly did revert to their corrupt ways and God sent the Muslims against them who drove them out of Arabia. They did this again with the same results, until He caused them to be humiliated during the twentieth century. We see now how they have again reverted to tyranny and corruption in the state of Israel which uses very cruel tactics against the Arabs, the owners of the land. God is certain to send His servants against them who will make them suffer much for their corruption in fulfilment of His firm warning and in accordance with His law which never fails. We need only wait and see this take place.

The *sūrah* concludes this episode by defining the destiny the unbelievers will suffer in the hereafter. It is the same destiny as will be suffered by those who spread corruption: *"Indeed We have made hell a place of confinement for the unbelievers."* (Verse 8) They will be surrounded, unable to escape. Furthermore, it is large enough to contain them all.

Guidance in All Fields

The *sūrah* now speaks about the Qur'ān, making it clear that it is a book of true and full guidance:

Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright. It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous suffering for those who do not believe in the life to come. (Verses 9-10)

"Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright." This is a general statement applicable to all those who are guided by the Qur'ān and the goals to which it guides. Thus, the guidance is given to communities and generations that are

not restricted by time or place. And the superiority of its guidance applies to all that they may attain when they follow any method or approach. It is also superior to every good thing to which people may be guided at any time or place.

The Qur'ān guides to that which is 'most upright' in relation to man's inner feelings and thoughts, outlining a clear faith, free of complication and ambiguity. Its guidance frees the human spirit of the burden of myth and superstition, and releases human energy so that it is constructive, bringing benefit, providing a harmonious link between the laws that govern the universe and those governing human nature.

The Qur'ān also ensures harmony between man's outward and inward existence, feelings and behaviour, faith and action. In all this it shows the way to what is 'most upright', linking all these aspects to the true and unseverable bond that exists between man and God. This enables man to look up to a higher horizon while he is still on earth. Thus what man does in his daily life becomes an act of worship, provided that he does so seeking God's acceptance. This is true even when the action itself provides him with pure enjoyment of what is available in this life.

In the field of worship also, the Qur'ān establishes a perfect balance between duties and abilities. This ensures that duties are not seen as too hard so as to constitute a heavy burden, or induce despair of ever fulfilling one's obligations. Maintaining this balance ensures that a person neither takes matters too lightly or complacently on the one hand, nor exceeds the limits of what is reasonable and perfectly bearable on the other. Thus we can say without fear of contradiction that in worship, the Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright.

The same applies to human interaction whether between individuals and couples, governments and peoples, or states and races. Relations between all these groups are established on a firm basis, influenced neither by personal prejudice and interest, nor by feelings of love and hatred. This firm foundation in human relations is chosen by God, the Creator who knows His creation and what is certain to promote goodness in their lives. The Qur'ān shows the way which gives the best course of action in the fields of politics and finance, as well as in those of social and international relations.

The Qur'ān also endorses all divine religions, establishing a firm link between them, honouring all that is sacred in them, and protecting all that they hold in reverence. This ensures that humanity, with all its divine faiths live in peace. In this again the Qur'ān provides its perfect guidance. This is all summed up in the verse which says: "*Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright.*" (Verse 9)

"It gives the believers who do good deeds the happy news that theirs will be a rich reward; and [declares] that We have prepared a grievous suffering for those who do not believe in the life to come." (Verses 9-10) This is the basic rule laid down by the Qur'ān in respect of action and reward. The Islamic structure is built on the two pillars of faith and good

action. Faith that is not confirmed by action is hollow, unfulfilled, while action that is not based on faith lacks firm roots. It is when both are combined that life maintains its most upright course, and with them both together guidance shown in the Qur'ān takes its proper effect.

Man's Hasty Characteristic

Those who do not follow the guidance of the Qur'ān are left to their own devices. But man is hasty, unaware of what benefits him and what causes him harm, impulsive, unable to control his reactions even when they bring about evil consequences: *"Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty."* (Verse 11) He does not know the ultimate results. He may do something that is evil and precipitate its results unaware that these only bring about immense harm to himself; or he may be aware of such results but is unable to control himself. This is a long, long way away from the assured, calm and consistent guidance given in the Qur'ān. The two ways of Qur'ānic guidance and human desire are too widely divergent.

So far the *sūrah* has pointed to some of the signs God gave to His messengers, such as the Prophet's night journey, Noah's ark, Moses' book, and, above all, the Qur'ān. Now the *sūrah* mentions some of God's universal signs and relates these to people's actions, efforts and earnings on the one hand and their fruits and reward on the other. We thus see that the laws that govern action and reward are closely linked to the laws governing the whole universe. Both are based on perfect rules that never fail. They are as accurate as the system that ensures that day and night succeed each other. They are operated by the Creator who has made them two of His signs:

We have made the night and the day as two [of Our] signs. Then We have effaced the sign of the night while the sign of the day We have left enlightened, so that you may seek bounty from your Lord, and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon. Most clearly have We spelled out everything. (Verse 12)

The universal law that governs the succession of day and night is linked to numerous aspects of human life. It is linked with people's efforts in earning their living, and their knowledge of time and calculation. It also relates to the good and evil man may earn in life and what reward he may achieve in the end for either his good or bad actions. Indeed the consequences of following guidance or error relate to it, as is the individual nature of responsibility which means that no one will have to answer for anyone else. The same universal law is linked to God's promise that He will not inflict punishment on anyone until He has sent His messengers. This link further applies to the law which governs the destruction of communities only after

the affluent among them have been guilty of immense transgression. The law further relates to the diverse destinies of those who seek the pleasures of this world and those who prefer the good reward of the hereafter, and what God grants to both in this life and in the life to come. All these aspects follow a well set system and certain immutable laws besides. Nothing takes place haphazardly.

"We have made the night and the day as two [of Our] signs. Then We have effaced the sign of the night while the sign of the day We have left enlightened, so that you may seek bounty from your Lord, and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon. Most clearly have We spelled out everything." (Verse 12) The night and the day are two major universal signs which confirm the accuracy of the law governing the universe which operates all the time, suffering neither a failure nor a temporary need for repairs. So what is meant here by 'effacing the sign of the night', when we see that this sign remains operative as much as the sign of the day? It seems to me, and God knows best, that the reference here is to the darkness of the night which hides everything and during which movement slows down. The darkness gives the impression that the night is effaced when compared with the day, its light and the bustling activity that takes place under its light. It is as though the day is able to see things by its light and reveals everything for us to behold.

The effacing of the night and the full visibility of the day have a clearly specified purpose: *"so that you may seek bounty from your Lord, and you may learn to compute the years and be able to reckon."* This makes things very clear: the night is for rest and recuperation, and the day for work, earning one's living and activity. The succession of the day and night enables people to compute the years and determine the seasons and set times for different transactions. *"Most clearly have We spelled out everything."* There is nothing in the universe that has been left to chance. The accuracy that is manifested in the succession of day and night confirms the elaborate and faultless design of everything God has created.

Personal Responsibility

The law of action and reward is directly linked to the meticulous law of the universe:

Every human being's action have We tied around his own neck. On the Day of Resurrection We shall produce for him a record which he will find wide open. [And We will say:] 'Read this your record! Sufficient it is for you today that your own soul should make out your account.' (Verses 13-14)

The Arabic phraseology of this verse provides a highly graphic description which uses the word, 'bird', in place of 'action', as used in the translated text. Thus we have

here a metaphor referring to what flies of a person's actions and becomes tied around his neck, so that it never parts from him. Thus does the Qur'ān in graphically describing things in order to emphasize its point. A person's actions do not leave him, and he cannot disown them. The same applies to the wide open record of all his actions. Thus whatever he has done in life is laid bare. He cannot hide, ignore or disown it. Both descriptions, of the bird denoting action and the record thrown open, produce a very strong effect that adds to the fears experienced on that very difficult day when nothing remains hidden. Everyone is told to read their own records because, "*Sufficient it is for you today that your own soul should make out your account.*" (Verse 14)

Again the same accurate universal law is linked to the rules governing action and reward: "*Whoever chooses to follow guidance does so for his own good, and whoever goes astray does so to his own loss. No soul shall be made to bear the burden of another.*" (Verse 15) It is all individual responsibility. When one follows guidance, one reaps the fruits, and when one chooses error, one bears the consequences. None will bear or lighten the burden of another. Everyone will be questioned about their own actions and will have the reward for what they have done in this life. Close friends will be of no help to each other.

Yet as a sign of God's grace, He does not leave man's guidance dependent only on the signs that are available in the universe. Nor does He leave him to the covenant God has made with human nature before a person is born. He has sent messengers to warn and remind: "*We would never inflict punishment [on anyone] until We have sent a messenger [to give warning].*" (Verse 15) This is certainly an aspect of God's grace which gives everyone ample opportunity to follow His guidance. Only when they have been properly warned and still persist in error does He punish them, if He so wills.

Affluence Leading to Destruction

The same consistent and universal law that governs the succession of day and night also applies to the destruction of any community: "*When it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our command to those of its people who live a life of affluence. If they persist in sin, judgement is irrevocably passed, and We utterly destroy them.*" (Verse 16)

The affluent who enjoy wealth, servants, luxuries, comfort and power are prone to carelessness and decadence in their lives. They thus lead a life of corruption, transgress all limits, trample over values, desecrate sanctities and defile other people's honour. Unless they are taken to task for their misdeeds, they will spread corruption and indecency throughout their community. They will debase the sound

values and principles which every community needs to observe in order to survive. Thus their corruption will lead to the loss of strength, vigour and means of survival by the whole community. It then becomes lifeless, and is soon overtaken by destruction.

The verse here restates this law which God has set in operation. When God determines that a certain community is to be destroyed, this is only the natural outcome of its pursuit of ways and practices that lead to destruction. The affluent become too numerous and no one takes any action to curb their transgressions. They spread corruption, and bit by bit the whole community becomes corrupt. Consequently, it is liable to the effects of the law God has set in operation, condemning such communities to destruction. Indeed the community in question is responsible for the destruction it suffers, because it did not take the necessary action to stop such foul practices. Had it done so, it would have spared itself destruction. It would not have had corrupt people to lead it astray until it has faced the dire results.

God has willed that human life should run according to set laws which never fail or change. A cause has its effect, and the effect takes place as a result of the operation of God's will that has set this law in operation. God does not approve of indecency or transgression. However, the presence of those who are exceedingly rich in a community is indicative that its fabric has become loose and that it has set itself on the way to decline. This will seal its fate, because it has set itself open to the operation of this law when it allowed those who are excessively rich to lead their corrupt life.

The mention of God's will in the verse, *"When it is Our will to destroy a community, We convey Our command to those of its people who live a life of affluence,"* does not mean a commanding will which initiates the cause. It is a will that brings the effect when the cause takes place. Thus the effect becomes inevitable as a result of the operation of God's laws of nature. Similarly, the 'command' in the same statement does not refer to a directive requiring them to indulge in sin. It simply refers to the natural result which comes about in consequence of those people leading such a life. Hence, the verse states that: *"If they persist in sin, judgement is irrevocably passed, and We utterly destroy them."* (Verse 16)

This statement highlights the responsibility of every community, as it makes clear that this law has remained operative since Noah's time: *"Many generations have We destroyed since Noah's time. Suffice it that your Lord is well aware of His servants' sins, and observes them all."* (Verse 17)

Choices and Rewards

Someone who wishes to lead a life based solely on this world, looking up to nothing beyond this earth and its pleasures, will have whatever God has assigned to

him of these. In the life to come, hell will be waiting for him because he will have deserved it. This is because those who do not aspire to anything beyond this world are keen to immerse themselves in its carnal pleasures. This however inevitably leads them to hell: *"As for those who care only for [the pleasures of] this fleeting life, We readily grant of it whatever We may please to whomever We will. In the end We consign any such person to hell, where he will burn disgraced and rejected."* (Verse 18) He is disgraced by his actions, rejected, suffering severe punishment.

On the other side is a totally different picture: *"But those who care only for the life to come, strive for it as it should be striven for, and are true believers, are indeed the ones who will have their endeavours well rewarded."* (Verse 19) Someone who desires the rich reward of the life to come must pursue his goal diligently. He should fulfil the duties God requires of him. Moreover, he must have faith which serves as the basis of his pursuit for the life to come. Faith is not a matter that people attain through idle wishes, but it is rather an idea that is firmly held as a belief, and clearly endorsed by action. Pursuit of the hereafter does not deprive anyone of the wholesome pleasures of this life. It simply opens up wider horizons before us. Thus, enjoyment and pleasure are not the driving goal. There is no harm in seeking pleasure, provided however that one is not captivated or enslaved by it.

A life that seeks nothing more than the pleasures of this world is fitting only for worms, reptiles, insects, cattle and wild beasts. It is only the life that pursues the rewards of the hereafter that is fitting for man who has been the recipient of honour bestowed on him by God. It is God who has created man and fashioned him, planting in his soul a secret that motivates him to look up to higher horizons even when his feet are solidly planted on earth.

No Limits to God's Grace

Yet both groups receive God's bounty which is open to all and restricted to none. Both those who seek only this world's pleasures and enjoy them to the full and those who pursue the reward of the life to come partake of God's bounty which God grants to all: *"On all – these as well as those – do We bestow the bounty of your Lord. Indeed your Lord's bounty is not denied [to anyone]."* (Verse 20) This bounty bestowed by God differs widely, in accordance with people's means, aims and actions. They differ despite the fact that the scope on earth is very limited and its expanse so narrow. How then will they differ when they are in the other place, where the scope is limitless? How can we compare the expanses of the two worlds, when, in God's sight, this world and all that it contains counts for less than the span of a mosquito's wings, as stated by the Prophet?

"See how We have bestowed more bounty on some than on others. But the life to come will

be higher in rank and greater in merit." (Verse 21) If one seeks to have the higher prize and the greater grace, then one should aim for the hereafter. For there lies the limitless expanse and scope whose boundaries are known only to God. It is for this prize that people should compete, not for the petty comforts of this world.

2

A Code Based on Justice

Do not set up any deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself disgraced, forsaken. (22)

Your Lord has ordained that you shall worship none but Him, and that you must be kind to your parents. Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in your care, never say 'Ugh' to them or chide them, but always speak gently and kindly to them, (23)

and spread over them humbly the wings of your tenderness, and say, 'My Lord, bestow on them Your grace, even as they reared and nurtured me when I was a child.' (24)

Your Lord knows best what is in your hearts. If you are righteous, He is certainly most forgiving to those who turn repeatedly to Him [seeking His mercy]. (25)

Give to the near of kin their due, and also to the needy and the traveller in need. Do not squander your substance wastefully, (26)

for the wasteful squanderers are Satan's brothers, and Satan has always been ungrateful to his Lord. (27)

لَا تَجْعَلْ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا ءَاخَرَ فَتَقْعُدَ

مَذْمُومًا مَّخْذُولًا ﴿٢٢﴾

﴿٢٣﴾ وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ
وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا ۖ إِمَّا يَبُلُغَنَّ عِنْدَكَ
الْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَا أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُلْ
هُمَا أَفٍ وَلَا تَنْهَرَهُمَا وَقُلْ لَهُمَا قَوْلًا

كَرِيمًا ﴿٢٤﴾

وَأَخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ الذُّلِّ مِنَ الرَّحْمَةِ
وَقُلْ رَبِّ ارْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِي صَغِيرًا

﴿٢٥﴾

رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا فِي نُفُوسِكُمْ ۚ إِن تَكُونُوا
صَالِحِينَ فَإِنَّهُ كَانَ لِلأَوَّابِينَ

غَفُورًا ﴿٢٦﴾

وَأَاتِ ذَا الْقُرْبَىٰ حَقَّهُ وَالْمِسْكِينَ وَابْنَ

السَّبِيلِ وَلَا تُبْدِرْ تَبْدِيرًا ﴿٢٧﴾

ۗ إِنَّ الْمُبْدِرِينَ كَانُوا إِخْوَانَ الشَّيْطَانِ

But if you must turn aside from them in pursuit of an act of kindness you hope to receive from your Lord, then at least speak to them kindly. (28)

Do not be miserly, allowing your hand to remain shackled to your neck, nor stretch it out fully to the utmost limit, lest you find yourself being blamed or reduced to destitution. (29)

Your Lord gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills. He is indeed fully aware of all His servants, and sees them all. (30)

Do not kill your children for fear of want. It is We who shall provide for them and for you. To kill them is indeed a great sin. (31)

Do not come near adultery. It is indeed an abomination and an evil way. (32)

Do not kill anyone, for God has forbidden killing, except in [the pursuit of] justice. If anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority [to seek just retribution]. He [i.e. the heir] must not exceed the bounds of equity in [retributive] killing. He is given help. (33)

Do not come near the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except with the best of intentions. Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise.

وَكَانَ الشَّيْطَانُ لِرَبِّهِ كَفُورًا ﴿٢٨﴾

وَأَمَّا تَعْرِضْنَ عَنْهُمْ أَبْتِغَاءَ رَحْمَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكَ
تَرْجُوهَا فَقُلْ لَهُمْ قَوْلًا مَّيْسُورًا ﴿٢٩﴾

وَلَا تَجْعَلْ يَدَكَ مَغْلُولَةً إِلَىٰ عُنُقِكَ وَلَا
تَبْسُطْهَا كُلَّ الْبَسِطِ فَتَقْعُدَ مَلُومًا
مَّحْسُورًا ﴿٣٠﴾

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ
إِنَّهُ كَانَ بِعِبَادِهِ خَبِيرًا بَصِيرًا ﴿٣١﴾

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا أَوْلَادَكُمْ خَشْيَةَ إِمْلَاقٍ نَّحْنُ
نَرْزُقُهُمْ وَإِيَّاكُمْ إِنَّ قَتْلَهُمْ كَانَ خِطْئًا
كَبِيرًا ﴿٣٢﴾

وَلَا تَقْرَبُوا الزَّوْجَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ فَحِشَةً وَسَاءَ
سَبِيلًا ﴿٣٣﴾

وَلَا تَقْتُلُوا النَّفْسَ الَّتِي حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ إِلَّا
بِالْحَقِّ وَمَن قُتِلَ مَظْلُومًا فَقَدْ جَعَلْنَا
لَوْلِيَّهِ سُلْطٰنًا فَلَا يُسْرِفُ فِي الْقَتْلِ
إِنَّهُ كَانَ مَنصُورًا ﴿٣٤﴾

وَلَا تَقْرَبُوا مَالَ الْيَتِيمِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ
أَحْسَنُ حَتَّىٰ يَبْلُغَ أَشُدَّهُ وَأَوْفُوا بِالْعَهْدِ

(34)

And give full measure whenever you measure, and weigh with accurate scales. That is fair, and best in the end. (35)

Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Man's ears, eyes and heart shall all be called to account. (36)

Do not walk on earth with an air of self-conceit; for you cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height. (37)

All this is evil; odious in your Lord's sight. (38)

These [injunctions] are but a part of the wisdom with which your Lord has inspired you. Do not set up any deity alongside God, lest you should be cast into hell, blamed and rejected. (39)

إِنَّ الْعَهْدَ كَانَ مَسْئُولًا ﴿٢٤﴾

وَأَوْفُوا الْكَيْلَ إِذَا كِلْتُمْ وَزِنُوا بِالْقِسْطَاسِ
الْمُسْتَقِيمِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

﴿٢٥﴾

وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ ۚ إِنَّ
السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ
عِنْدَهُ مَسْئُولًا ﴿٢٦﴾

وَلَا تَمْشِ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَرَحًا ۚ إِنَّكَ لَنْ
تَخْرِقَ الْأَرْضَ وَلَنْ تَبْلُغَ الْجِبَالَ طُولًا

﴿٢٧﴾

كُلُّ ذَٰلِكَ كَانَ سَيِّئُهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ مَكْرُوهًا

﴿٢٨﴾

ذَٰلِكَ مِمَّا أَوْحَىٰ إِلَيْكَ رَبُّكَ مِنَ الْحِكْمَةِ ۗ
وَلَا تَجْعَلْ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا ۚ آخَرَ فَتُلْقَىٰ فِي
جَهَنَّمَ مَلُومًا مَّدْحُورًا ﴿٢٩﴾

Overview

In the preceding passage, which comprises the first 21 verses of the *sūrah*, the rules of action and reward, guidance and error, earnings and reckoning are linked to the great universal law that governs the succession of night and day. In the current passage, the rules for behaviour, manners, individual and social duties are linked to belief in God's oneness. Indeed this belief provides the essential tie to which all other

ties are linked, within the family, community and humanity as a whole.

In the previous passage we learnt that the Qur'ān "*shows the way to that which is most upright.*" We have also been told that God has most clearly '*spelled out everything.*' In this new passage, the *sūrah* gives us an outline of the commandments and prohibitions which demarcate the way to the most upright standards. They spell out in detail some rules of behaviour, telling us of permissible or prohibited practices.

This new passage begins with a commandment that prohibits the association of partners with God. It declares God's clear order that worship must be addressed to Him alone. This is followed by an outline of duties and obligations, such as maintaining kindness to one's parents, being generous without extravagance to relatives, the needy and travellers in need. It also prohibits killing one's offspring, adultery and murder under any circumstances. Further commandments make it clear that believers must take good care of orphans, ensuring that whatever property they have is well looked after, and that they must fulfil their pledges and promises. They should also conduct their transactions in fairness, giving due weight and measure, and they must endeavour to establish and maintain the truth. They are commanded not to behave arrogantly in any situation. The passage concludes with a warning against associating partners with God. Thus all the commandments and prohibitions are given between the opening and ending of the passage, clearly attached to the basic belief in God's oneness which provides the firm foundation of human life as indeed all life.

Kindness to Parents

"Do not set up any deity side by side with God, lest you find yourself disgraced, forsaken." (Verse 22) This is a commandment forbidding the association of partners with God and a warning against the results it brings about. Although it is a general order, it is nonetheless addressed to each individual so that everyone feels it is personally issued to them. Believing is a personal matter for which every individual is responsible for themselves. The outcome that awaits anyone who deviates from the path of believing in God's oneness is such that they find themselves 'disgraced' by the foul deed, 'forsaken', without support. Whoever is deprived of God's support is forsaken, no matter how numerous his supporters are. The Arabic description, *fataq`uda madhmūman makhdhūlā*, is especially graphic: in place of *lest you find yourself*, read, 'lest you sit'. This aptly describes the person who finds such disgrace too shameful that it weighs heavily on him and he sits down forsaken, weak, unable to stand and powerless. The description also suggests that this state is permanent because 'sitting down in disgrace' suggests there is no action to change the situation.

"Your Lord has ordained that you shall worship none but Him." (Verse 23) This order to offer all worship to God alone follows the one prohibiting the association of partners with God. It takes the form of a decisive ruling to be implemented without fail, by all mankind. The term, *qadā*, used in the Arabic text and translated as 'ordained', signifies a final verdict imparting additional emphasis to an already emphatic order that also uses the construction of a negation and exception: *"You shall worship none but Him."* The mode is one of total emphasis and stress. When this basic ruling is well established, individual and community duties are outlined. These rely on a firm belief in the One God. Hence, motives and goals behind actions and practices work towards the same end.

The most important bond next to that of faith is the family. Hence the *sūrah* links kindness to parents with the worship of God, in order to emphasize its importance in God's sight:

And that you must be kind to your parents. Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in your care, never say 'Ugh' to them or chide them, but always speak gently and kindly to them, and spread over them humbly the wings of your tenderness, and say, My Lord, bestow on them Your grace, even as they reared and nurtured me when I was a child.' (Verses 23-24)

With inspirational expression that is full of tenderness the Qur'ān enhances our feelings of compassion towards our parents. As life goes on, its momentum carries the living and focuses our attention on what lies ahead, on our own children, the new generation. Rarely are we motivated to look back and attend to the former generation of parents, who represent a life that is already on the decline. Hence, as sons and daughters we need a strong charge of conscience so that we will look back and take care of our mothers and fathers.

Parents are naturally motivated to look after their children, sacrificing everything in the process, even when the sacrifice includes them personally. An early green shoot absorbs every particle of nutrition in its seed to leave it as dust, and a chick eats up everything in the egg, leaving only the shell. Similarly, children take up all their parents' vigour, health, effort and attention, leaving them in the weakness of old age, yet happy to have given their children everything they could give. But children soon forget all this and move ahead, caring more for their spouses and own offspring. This is the natural course of life.

Thus parents do not need any encouragement to be kind to their children. It is the children who need to be reminded of their duty towards the generation that has become dry, in need of tender care, after having spent most of its vitality in bringing up their young. Hence, the divine command to take good care of parents comes in

the form of a ruling from God, following immediately after the command to worship God alone.

The *sūrah* then imparts an air of tenderness to the whole atmosphere. It engenders memories of childhood, of compassion, love and tender care: *"Should one of them, or both, attain to old age in your care..."* (Verse 23) Old age commands veneration, and the weakness of the elderly imparts certain feelings. Use of the phrase, *'in your care'*, describes an elderly person weakened by advancing years needing shelter and care. Hence, sons and daughters are told: *"Never say 'Ugh' to them or chide them."* (Verse 23) This is the first step in taking care of one's parents and being kindly to them. Sons and daughters must never use words which suggest their being vexed or bothered by their parents, or say anything that betrays disrespect. On the contrary, they must *"always speak gently and kindly to them."* (Verse 23) This is a higher and more positive step. What sons and daughters say to their parents must always be coupled with genuine respect.

"And spread over them humbly the wings of your tenderness." (Verse 24) At this point the Qur'ān uses very tender words to touch our hearts and consciences. Mercy and compassion are so heightened that they border on humility, making the son and daughter too respectful to look their parents straight in the face, but willing to obey them. It is as if such tenderness spreads wings over one's parents. This is followed by a prayer: *"My Lord, bestow on them Your grace, even as they reared and nurtured me when I was a child."* (Verse 24)

The prayer recalls the care and love, exercised by parents for vulnerable children. Yet now it is the parents themselves who are similarly weak and in need of tender, loving care. Hence, the address to God to bestow His grace on them. Indeed His grace is far greater, and His care is much more wide-ranging. He is better able to reward them for their kindness, while their children can never repay them for it. A *ḥadīth* mentions that "a man was carrying his mother while he was doing the *ṭawāf* [i.e. the obligatory walk around the Ka'bah] during pilgrimage. He asked the Prophet whether he had discharged his duty towards her. The Prophet said, 'No, not even for a single deep sigh.'"

This *ḥadīth* speaks of a mother so weakened she was no longer able to walk in order to fulfil her religious duty of *ṭawāf*. Her son carried her so that she could fulfil that duty, just like a mother carries her child when it is very young. However, that is far from fulfilling a mother's claim against her children, which is constituted by the constant care she took of them, with every breath of her life.

Since all feelings, actions and reactions are related to faith in the context of the *sūrah*, it adds a final comment, referring all matters to God who knows people's intentions and what lies behind words and actions: *"Your Lord knows best what is in*

your hearts. If you are righteous, He is certainly Most Forgiving to those who turn repeatedly to Him [seeking His mercy]." (Verse 25)

Coming as it does immediately before a range of orders, duties and standards, this verse serves as a guideline for everything we say or do. It also leaves the door open for anyone who makes a mistake or falls short of expectations to declare his repentance and seek forgiveness. When a person's heart is set on the right track, the door to forgiveness remains open. The verse mentions in particular those who turn back to God every time they slip or make a mistake.

Kindness to All

The *sūrah* proceeds to include all relatives and the need to be kindly to them, adding also the needy and travellers who may find themselves in difficulty. It expands on family relations so as to include all human bonds in their broadest sense:

Give to the near of kin their due, and also to the needy and the traveller in need. Do not squander your substance wastefully, for the wasteful squanderers are Satan's brothers, and Satan has always been ungrateful to his Lord. But if you must turn aside from them in pursuit of an act of kindness you hope to receive from your Lord, then at least speak to them kindly. (Verses 26-28)

The Qur'ān makes it clear that the near of kin, the needy and stranded travellers have a right against us which may only be discharged by financial assistance. This does not come as a favour which one person does to another; it is rather a duty imposed by God and associated with worshipping Him alone. When we fulfil this duty we are only discharging our responsibility, and cultivating a close relationship between ourselves and those to whom we give. The giver has no favour against the recipient, because he is only fulfilling a duty towards God.

The Qur'ān speaks strongly against squandering, which is defined as spending one's money in the wrong way. Mujāhid says that if one spends all one's money for rightful purposes, one is not a squanderer, but if one spends a small amount in the wrong way, then one is. Thus, it is not the amount which one spends, but the purpose for which one spends it. Hence, squanderers are indeed Satan's brothers because they spend their money for evil purposes, and to finance their disobedience of God. This makes them Satan's cronies. It must be remembered that "*Satan has always been ungrateful to his Lord.*" (Verse 27) Both Satan and those who squander do not fulfil their duty of appreciating God's favours, which means that they should use it only in purposes that earn God's pleasure, doing His bidding and refraining from anything He has forbidden.

When a person does not have the means to do his duty by relatives, the needy and stranded travellers, and he finds it embarrassing to meet them face to face, he should turn to God praying to Him to give him good provisions and to provide for those in need. At the same time, he should promise the needy that he will give to them whenever his means improve. At the same time, he should speak to them kindly. He must not be bored with them, nor should he remain silent and so embarrass them. A kind word serves a good purpose and opens up hope: *"But if you must turn aside from them in pursuit of an act of kindness you hope to receive from your Lord, then at least speak to them kindly."* (Verse 28)

Within the context of prohibiting the squandering of money, the Qur'ān orders moderation in all spending: *"Do not be miserly, allowing your hand to remain shackled to your neck, nor stretch it out fully to the utmost limit, lest you find yourself being blamed or reduced to destitution."* (Verse 29) Striking a proper balance is the Islamic rule. To move to either extreme leads to imbalance. The verse employs subtle imagery to enhance the intended meaning. It paints miserliness as a hand tied up to one's neck, while a spendthrift is shown as one with hands stretched out completely, unable to hold on to anything. The end of miserliness and the end of squander is drawn as a person sitting down, facing blame, powerless. It implies a position of weakness like that which makes an animal refuse to move. This applies to the miserly person whose miserliness weakens him to the point of inaction, and to the spendthrift who finds himself deprived of all power. Both are blamed in the end, one for stinginess, the other for squandering. The best attitude is a middle of the road one, tilting neither towards a tight fist nor towards careless extravagance.

The order to seek a middle course is followed with a comment stating that the provider for all is God, and it is He who may give abundant provisions or may give only in a tight measure. Yet the One who gives to all is the One who orders a middle course: *"Your Lord gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills. He is indeed fully aware of all His servants, and sees them all."* (Verse 30) Whichever way He gives to any one of His servants is determined on the basis of His wisdom. He commands all to follow a course of moderation, prohibiting both extremes of miserliness and careless extravagance on the basis of His perfect knowledge of what is most suitable for all His servants at all times. It is He who has revealed the Qur'ān to always guide along the straight path.

Setting Values Right

As the Qur'ān makes this statement clear, it follows it with reference to the fact that some people in pre-Islamic days used to kill their daughters for fear of want and poverty. It then adds a clear order prohibiting the killing of children for any such

reason. Since God is the One who determines the means people have, there is no connection, then, between poverty and the number or sex of the children they have. The matter is fully in God's hands. When people purge their thoughts of the false notion of any direct relationship between poverty and having children, and when they adopt the correct concept in this regard, there is no reason for that ghastly crime which flies in the face of human nature and the right to life: *"Do not kill your children for fear of want. It is We who shall provide for them and for you. To kill them is indeed a great sin."* (Verse 31)

When people adopt false beliefs, these beliefs affect their everyday lives. The effect is not confined to the adoption of wrong notions or the offering of worship rituals. On the other hand, purging faith from any false notion does have a positive effect on feelings, behaviour and social life generally. The fact that people in pre-Islamic Arabia used to bury their daughters alive provides a clear case of how far religious beliefs can affect human life so as to establish such horrendous crime as an acceptable social norm. It testifies to the fact that life is affected by the sort of beliefs people adopt. Indeed faith cannot remain isolated from human life.

A word should be said here about the meticulous care the Qur'ānic style reflects in its usage. In this particular verse we note that the provision for offspring is mentioned before provision for parents. In *Sūrah 6, Cattle or al An`ām*, it is provision for parents which comes first: *"We provide for you and for them."* (6: 151) The usage in both cases is related to the different emphasis they have. Here the verse is translated as: *"Do not kill your children for fear of want. It is We who shall provide for them and for you. To kill them is indeed a great sin."* (Verse 31) The verse in *Sūrah 6* reads as follows: *"Do not kill your children because of your poverty: We provide for you and for them."* (6: 151) It is clear that this *sūrah* is referring to the killing of children from fear that their presence will lead to poverty. Hence, providing for children is mentioned first. In *Sūrah 6*, the children are killed because of their parents' actual poverty. Hence, the provision for parents is mentioned first. Thus every little Qur'ānic detail, even putting something first on one occasion and second on another is for a definite reason.

Adultery Outlawed

The prohibition of killing children is followed by a prohibition against adultery:³ *"Do not come near adultery. It is indeed an abomination and an evil way."* (Verse 32) There is a definite link between the killing of children and adultery. We find that the prohibition of adultery here intervenes between the prohibition of killing one's

³ The Arabic word *zinā*, translated here as 'adultery', refers to sexual intercourse outside wedlock, regardless of whether the man or the woman is married. Thus, it includes fornication. — Editor's note.

children and that of killing oneself. This takes into account the link to which we are here referring.

Adultery represents killing in various ways. It is a killing because it wastes life matter as it puts it in the wrong place. It is often followed by a desire to get rid of its natural consequences through abortion or infanticide. If the child is spared and allowed to live, it is abandoned to a life of misery and deprivation, which is a killing in a different form. Moreover, it is a killing of the community because family relations are thus lost, and blood ties are confused. People will have little trust that the children they bring up are their own. Thus community relations become weakened and the spirit of the community more or less dies.

Adultery may also be described as a killing of the community for a different reason. The ease which it provides for the fulfilment of sexual desires makes marriage a redundant institution, and the family an unnecessary responsibility. We must not forget that the family provides the proper home where the young should be reared, and where sound human nature is consolidated. It is the home where sound upbringing can be ensured for boys and girls alike.

Throughout history, every community that allowed immorality to spread saw its own decline brought about. Some people may feel that this is not true, looking at the fact that Europe and the United States continue to enjoy power despite the fact that immorality is widespread there. Yet the results of such loose morality are now apparent in older nations, such as France. As for new nations like the US, it may take some time yet before such effects are visible. The case is like that of a young man who gives rein to his desire. The effects may not manifest themselves when he is young, but as he grows older, his decline is rapid.

The Qur'ān even warns against 'coming near' to adultery, in order to give stronger emphasis that it is something to guard against. Since adultery is committed to satisfy a strong desire, steering away from it is safer. When adultery is made easy, resisting it becomes that much harder. Hence Islam takes appropriate preventive measures. It dislikes the mixing of the two sexes where it is unnecessary, forbids that a man stay with a woman in a closed place, and prohibits the indecent appearance of women when they go out or attend social functions. It encourages marriage and recommends fasting for those who cannot marry. It disapproves of all types of barriers that prevent people from getting married such as exorbitant dowries. It makes it clear that no one should ever fear poverty as a result of having children, and encourages its followers to provide help to those who wish to marry in order to preserve their chastity. It also prescribes very severe punishments for the crimes of adultery and false accusations of adultery against others, without providing proper evidence to support the same. Such measures are taken in order to prevent the Muslim community from throwing itself on the slippery road to decline.

A Peaceful Community

The *sūrah* follows this with a prohibition of killing anyone, except for a valid reason: *“Do not kill anyone, for God has forbidden killing, except in [the pursuit of] justice. If anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority [to seek just retribution]. He [i.e. the heir] must not exceed the bounds of equity in [retributive] killing. He is given help.”* (Verse 33)

Islam is a religion which preserves life and ensures peace. Hence it considers the killing of any human being to be a crime of the highest order, ranking next to associating partners with God. It is God who gives life. Hence, no one can take life away except by God’s permission and within the limits which He has allowed. Every human life has a sanctity which cannot be violated. The limits which God has allowed for the infliction of capital punishment are very clear. They are not subject to any influence by prejudice or personal view. A highly authentic *ḥadīth* related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim quotes the Prophet as saying: *“No Muslim person who bears witness that there is no deity other than God and that Muḥammad is God’s Messenger may be killed except for one of three reasons: a life for a life, a married adulterer and a rebel who renounces his faith and abandons his community.”*

The first of these three legitimate ways to inflict capital punishment ensures fair retribution. It allows the killing of one person in order to guarantee life for many others. God tells us that *“There is life for you, men of understanding, in this law of just retribution, so that you may remain God-fearing.”* (2: 179) Human life is thus preserved by stopping those who are intent on assaulting and killing others for no reason. When someone intent on killing another realizes that just retribution will make him pay for his ghastly crime with his own life, he will stop short of killing. Again there is life for the community as the law of just retribution stops the relatives of the victim from vengeance killing, which often goes beyond just killing the offender. When vengeance killing is allowed free reign it leads to the killing of innocent people as the family feud ensues. On the contrary, just retribution gives security to all, making sure that no one other than the offender is threatened. Thus, everyone goes about his life in peace and security.

The second reason for executing an offender is to prevent the spread of immorality which threatens the life of the community, as we have already explained.

The third justification seeks to repel spiritual corruption which leads to chaos within the Muslim community, threatens its peace and security and destroys the system God has chosen for it. The one who rebels, renouncing his faith and abandoning his community condemns himself by his own action. He adopted Islam by choice, under no compulsion, and became a member of the community, aware of its secrets. Hence, when he abandoned it, his action constituted a threat to it. Had he

remained a non-Muslim, no one would have compelled him to adopt Islam. Indeed Islam would have ensured that he remained safe and secure if he belonged to another divine religion, or that he was protected and given safe conduct to reach his own community if he was a pagan. This represents complete fairness with those who belong to any faith other than Islam.

"Do not kill anyone, for God has forbidden killing, except in [the pursuit of] justice." (Verse 33) These are the only three reasons which justify capital punishment in Islamic law. Otherwise any killing is considered wrongful, bringing other provisions of Islamic law into operation: *"If anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority [to seek just retribution]. He [i.e. the heir] must not exceed the bounds of equity in [retributive] killing. He is given help."* (Verse 33) Thus wrongful killing gives the victim's heir, or his next of kin, an authority to seek the implementation of the law of just retribution. It is up to the next of kin to demand that the killer pays with his life for his crime, or to spare his life in return for the payment of blood money, or to forgive the offender altogether, demanding no compensation. This authority over the killer is given to the victim's next of kin because he is in possession of the killer's blood, as it were.

In return for this authority, Islam prohibits the victim's relatives from going too far in exercising their authority. This may take the form of exceeding their limits, killing others in addition to the actual killer of their relative. This is the way vengeance killing works in non-Islamic communities where the killer's close relatives may be murdered in revenge. They may be free of all guilt, but they are killed simply because they are relatives of the first killer. Another aspect of exceeding one's limits is to disfigure the killer when his life is taken in just retribution. The victim's next of kin may insist on the killer being executed, but he has no justification to resort to disfigurement, which is totally prohibited in Islam.

"He [i.e. the heir] must not exceed the bounds of equity in [retributive] killing. He is given help." (Verse 33) That help is given in the fact that God's law judges in his favour and the ruling authorities ensure that justice is done. Hence, he is required to remain within the confines of justice so that he receives the help he needs in order to obtain what rightfully belongs to him.

Giving the next of kin of a murder victim authority to exact just retribution, and assuring him of the help of the law and the authorities, constitutes a fair response to the demands of human nature. Relatives may be highly agitated, and even blinded by their desire for revenge. In their anger they may lash out against the innocent. But when they realize that God has given them authority to exact just retribution, and that they may demand that the killer should pay with his life for his crime, and that the ruler is required to help them achieve justice, they may well be pacified. This makes it easier for them to stop at the proper legal limits in this case. They are

assured of justice.

It is inappropriate to require people to go beyond their nature so as to stifle their burning desire for revenge. Islam acknowledges this fact and meets the demands of human nature in a way which ensures safety for the individual and the community. It does not try to impose forgiveness and reconciliation by force. Indeed it urges such forgiveness and clearly makes it the better option, assigning rich reward for forgiveness but only after it states legal rights. Thus the relatives of a murdered person may seek punishment of the killer, or they may pardon him. That they have the option is more likely to encourage them to forgive. To try to force forgiveness could be counterproductive. It could even make them more violent in seeking retribution.

Perfect Honesty

Having completed its instructions concerning the sanctity of people's honour and life, the *sūrah* tackles the question of orphans' property and the requirement of fulfilling one's promises and pledges towards them:

Do not come near the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except with the best of intentions. Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise. (Verse 34)

Islam makes it clear that a Muslim's life, honour and property are to be protected and preserved. The Prophet says: "Everything that belongs to a Muslim is forbidden to be taken away by another: his blood, honour and property." [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Mālik and Abū Dāwūd and al-Tirmidhī] The *sūrah*, however, makes a special case concerning the property of an orphan, ensuring its full protection. It forbids the mere coming near it except for what is best for the orphan. That is because an orphan is too weak to manage his property or defend it against assault. Hence, the Muslim community is required to take proper care of the orphan and his property until he comes of age and is able to take care of his own affairs.

An important point to be noted in connection with all these instructions is that matters which an individual needs to implement in person, as an individual, are phrased in the singular form. By contrast, the instructions that are addressed to the Muslim community are given in the plural. Thus we see that orders to be kind to parents, to be charitable to relatives, the needy and stranded travellers, and to refrain from extravagance, maintain a middle way between being tight-fisted and spendthrift, to ascertain the truth in every situation and refrain from showing arrogance and conceit, are all given in the singular form. This is due to the fact that responsibility in these areas is shouldered by the individual. On the other hand, the

plural form is used to express the instructions prohibiting the killing of children, adultery, and homicide, and those concerning the protection of an orphan's property, honouring promises and pledges, and giving fair weight and measure, because these concern the community as a whole.

Here we see that the order not to come near the property of an orphan, except with the best of intentions, is given in the plural in order to make the whole community responsible for the protection of orphans and their property. It is then a collective responsibility.

Looking after an orphan's property is an act of trust which constitutes a pledge by the whole community. Hence, it is followed with an order to honour all promises and pledges: *"Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise."* (Verse 34) God will certainly question people about their promises and will hold to account anyone who is in breach of any trust or pledge. Islam attaches great importance to the fulfilment of promises and pledges and to being true to one's trust because this is the essence of honesty and integrity, both personal and social. In fact, fulfilment of promises and honouring trust is mentioned in various ways and forms in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, both with regard to pledges given to people or to God, by the individual, community or state, ruler or ruled. In practice, Islam has set an example for such fulfilment which humanity has never seen except under Islamic rule.

Just Weight and Measure

The code of conduct the *sūrah* outlines also speaks about fairness in commercial dealings:

And give full measure whenever you measure, and weigh with accurate scales. That is fair, and best in the end. (Verse 35)

The relevance of fulfilling promises and giving fair and full measure and weight is readily apparent, both in meaning and expression. This makes the progress from one to the other easy and smooth. To be fair in transactions and to give full weight and measure are actions which mark honest dealing and good faith. Thus internal dealings within the community are set on the right footing which promotes trust and honesty, and ensures blessings all round: *"That is fair, and best in the end."* (Verse 35) It is good in this life as it maintains fairness, and better in the hereafter as it ensures good reward.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Anyone who is able to secure unlawful gain yet abandons this for no reason other than fearing God will certainly receive

from God what is better than such gain here in this life, before they receive their reward in the life to come.”

Giving in to greed and stinginess in weight and measure betrays meanness and dishonesty which destroys trust within the community. It leads to poor trading, and a lack of blessings and trust in the community. This is bound to have repercussions on individuals who find themselves losers after they had thought to gain through selling people short. Whatever gain they may make is superficial and short-lived. Stagnation of trade, which is a by-product of such stinting, is certain to show its effects on individuals.

This is a fact, recognized by far-sighted business people. They maintain honesty as a business principle not because of any ethical, moral or religious motive, but because they see from practical experience that it delivers much better gain. Thus one person may be fair in business and give full weight and measure for practical and trade reasons while another does the same as part of implementing his religious convictions. The difference between the two is that the latter gets all the benefits received by the former in addition to maintaining a clear conscience and looking towards higher horizons. He benefits by a much broader vision of life. This clearly shows that Islam fulfils the objectives of practical life while building its wider concepts and happier environment.

Accountability for All Actions

A basic characteristic of the Islamic faith is that it is straightforward, clear and transparent. Nothing is permitted on the basis of suspicion, myth or unsubstantiated impression:

Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Man's ears, eyes and heart shall all be called to account. (Verse 36)

These few words establish a complete method for the human mind and heart, incorporating the scientific approach that humanity has begun to apply only recently. It adds, however, honesty and fear of God. This is an advantage Islam adds over cold rational approaches that are devoid of spirituality.

Making certain of every report, action or situation before passing a judgement concerning it is the essence of the Qur'anic approach. When hearts and minds faithfully follow this approach, there remains no room for superstition in matters of faith, or for suspicion in legal affairs. What is more is that there is no room for theoretical assumptions or superficial conclusions in science and research.

Scientific integrity which, in modern times, people unreservedly praise is no more

than the conscientious integrity which the Qur'ān establishes as a requirement to be accounted for. The Qur'ān makes everyone responsible and accountable for their hearing, seeing and feelings in front of God who has given them their ears, eyes and hearts. This is the integrity and honesty of senses, heart and mind. Man is accountable for all these and the organs themselves will be questioned about their actions on the Day of Judgement. When we consider the magnitude of this responsibility, we are overwhelmed because it applies to every word we say and every judgement we make.

"Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge." (Verse 36) Certain knowledge must be the only basis for judgement or conviction. Whatever is not certain must never constitute such a basis. In an authentic *ḥadīth*, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "Refrain from assumption, for assumption is the basis of the worst lies." Another *ḥadīth* related by Abū Dāwūd quotes the Prophet as saying: "It is indeed a bad practice for a man to always begin his statements with, 'it is claimed.'" In another *ḥadīth* the Prophet said: "The worst falsehood is that a man makes his eyes see what they have not seen."

Thus we see how Qur'ānic verses and *ahādīth* combine to establish such a complete and integrated system which requires the mind to make certain of its grounds for any judgement it makes. But Islam does not stop at this. It also requires the heart to make sure of its basis for whatever thoughts or feelings it entertains. Thus people must ascertain every detail, circumstance and factor before making any judgement or arriving at any conclusion. This is a practical fulfilment of the Qur'ānic statement made earlier in this *sūrah*: *"Surely this Qur'ān shows the way to that which is most upright."* (Verse 9)

These orders and instructions that are closely linked to the faith based on God's oneness are concluded with an order prohibiting conceit and arrogance: *"Do not walk on earth with an air of self-conceit; for you cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height."* (Verse 37) When man is devoid of belief in God, the Creator who has power over all creation, he may feel himself too powerful or admirable on account of his wealth, power or beauty. If only he remembers that whatever blessing he enjoys is granted to him by God and that he is powerless in front of God, he will see how misplaced his conceit is and so refrain from such arrogance.

The Qur'ān puts the conceited and arrogant face to face with their humbleness and powerlessness: *"You cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height."* (Verse 37) Physically man is small and insignificant, particularly when compared to giant creation. But he is strong when he relies on God's power, honourable with His honour, and noble with His spirit which God has breathed into him. God has given man all this so that he always remembers and remains conscious of Him.

Such humility which the Qur'ān calls upon people to adopt, decrying at the same time all types of conceit, is a mark of maintaining proper relations with God and one's fellow human beings, and a proper personal and social attitude. No one abandons such good manners except the petty and the conceited. Such people are disliked by God because they overlook His favours which they enjoy, and are hated by human beings for their arrogance. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Whoever maintains humility for God's sake, God will elevate him. Thus he looks humbly at himself but people look at him with respect. By contrast, God humiliates an arrogant person so as he rates himself highly while people look down upon him. Indeed he may be more disliked by people than a dog or a pig."⁴

As we have seen, these instructions are mainly concerned with prohibiting evil action and improper behaviour. Their outline concludes with declaring God's disapproval of them: "*All this is evil; odious in your Lord's sight.*" (Verse 38) This serves as a summary and reminder that commandments are issued by God alone. The reason for prohibition is God's dislike of such evil. No mention is made here of good matters which Islam orders to be practised or maintained. It is the prohibitions that are outlined in this code of conduct which the *sūrah* gives in detail.

This outline of the Islamic code of conduct is brought to an end by showing its details again linked to faith in God's oneness, which was also stated at the outset of this passage. This is coupled with a warning against associating partners with God. Furthermore, we are told that this code is only a part of the wisdom to which the Qur'ān guides people: "*These [injunctions] are but a part of the wisdom with which your Lord has inspired you. Do not set up any deity alongside God, lest you should be cast into hell, blamed and rejected.*" (Verse 39)

Thus the ending is akin to the opening, with both emphasizing the basis on which Islam builds its structure for human life, namely, the concept of God's oneness. For it is to God that all worship should be addressed.

⁴ This *ḥadīth* is cited by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur'ān.

God: The One and Glorious

Has your Lord distinguished you by [giving you] sons and taken for Himself daughters from among the angels? That which you utter is indeed an enormity. (40)

We have certainly explained things in various ways in this Qur'an, so that they may take it to heart, but it only increases their aversion. (41)

Say: 'If there were other deities alongside Him, as some people assert, they would have to seek a way to the Lord of the Throne.' (42)

Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted is He above everything they may say [about Him]. (43)

The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving. (44)

أَفَأَصْفَنكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ بِالْبَنِينَ وَاتَّخَذَ مِنَ
الْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنْتًا ۚ إِنَّكُمْ لَتَقُولُونَ قَوْلًا
عَظِيمًا ﴿٤٠﴾

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لِيَذَّكَّرُوا
وَمَا يَزِيدُهُمْ إِلَّا نُفُورًا ﴿٤١﴾

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ مَعَهُ ءِالِهَةٌ كَمَا يَقُولُونَ إِذَا
لَا بُتَغُوا إِلَىٰ ذِي الْعَرْشِ سَبِيلًا ﴿٤٢﴾

سُبْحٰنَهُ وَتَعَالَىٰ عَمَّا يُقُولُونَ عُلُوًّا كَبِيرًا
﴿٤٣﴾

تُسَبِّحُ لَهُ السَّمَوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ
فِيهِنَّ ۚ وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ
وَلَكِنْ لَا تَفْقَهُونَ تَسْبِيحَهُمْ ۗ إِنَّهُ كَانَ
حَلِيمًا غَفُورًا ﴿٤٤﴾

When you read the Qur'an, We place an invisible barrier between you and those who do not believe in the life to come. (45)

We cast a veil over their hearts which makes them unable to grasp its meaning, and their ears We make deaf. And so, when you mention your Lord in the Qur'an as the One and only God, they turn their backs in aversion. (46)

We are fully aware of what they are listening for when they listen to you, and what they say when they speak to each other in private. The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.' (47)

See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]. (48)

They say: 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' (49)

Say: 'Be you stones or iron, (50)

وَإِذَا قَرَأْتَ الْقُرْآنَ جَعَلْنَا بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَ
الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ حِجَابًا مَّسْتُورًا

٤٥

وَجَعَلْنَا عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ أَكِنَّةً أَنْ يَفْقَهُوهُ وَفِي
ءَاذَانِهِمْ وَقْرًا وَإِذَا ذَكَرْتَ رَبَّكَ فِي
الْقُرْآنِ وَحَدَّهُرَ وَلَوْ أَعْلَمَ عَلَىٰ أَدْبَارِهِمْ نُفُورًا

٤٦

نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَسْتَمِعُونَ بِهِ إِذْ
يَسْتَمِعُونَ إِلَيْكَ وَإِذْ هُمْ نَجْوَىٰ إِذْ يَقُولُ
الظَّالِمُونَ إِنْ تَتَّبِعُونَ إِلَّا رَجُلًا مَّسْحُورًا

٤٧

أَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ ضَرَبُوا لَكَ الْأَمْثَالَ فَضَلُّوا
فَلَا يَسْتَطِيعُونَ سَبِيلًا

٤٨

وَقَالُوا أَإِذَا كُنَّا عِظْمًا وَرُفْنًا أَءِنَّا
لَمَبْعُوثُونَ خَلْقًا جَدِيدًا

٤٩

or some other form of creation which, to your minds, appears even harder [to bring to life].’ They will say: ‘Who is it that will bring us back [to life]?’ Say: ‘He who created you the first time.’ Thereupon they shake their heads [in disbelief] and ask: ‘When will this be?’ Say: ‘It may very well be near at hand. (51)

On that day He will call you, and you will answer by praising Him, thinking that you stayed on earth but a very short while.’ (52)

Tell My servants that they should always say that which is best. Satan tries to sow discord between them. Satan is indeed man’s open foe. (53)

Your Lord is fully aware of what you are. If He so wills, He will bestow His grace on you; and if He so wills, He will inflict punishment on you. We have not sent you, Prophet, to be their guardian. (54)

Your Lord is fully aware of all beings that are in the heavens and earth. Indeed We have exalted some of the Prophets above others, just as We gave the Psalms to David. (55)

﴿قُلْ كُونُوا حِجَارَةً أَوْ حَدِيدًا﴾

أَوْ خَلْقًا مِّمَّا يَكْبُرُ فِي صُدُورِكُمْ
فَسَيَقُولُونَ مَنْ يُعِيدُنَا قُلِ الَّذِي فَطَرَكُمْ
أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ فَسَيُنْغِضُونَ إِلَيْكَ رُءُوسَهُمْ
وَيَقُولُونَ مَتَى هُوَ قُلْ عَسَى أَنْ
يَكُونَ قَرِيبًا ﴿٥١﴾

يَوْمَ يَدْعُوكُمْ فَتَسْتَجِيبُونَ بِحَمْدِهِ

﴿وَتُظَنُّونَ إِنْ لَبِثْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا﴾

﴿وَقُلْ لِعِبَادِي يَقُولُوا الَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ
إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ يَنْزِعُ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ

كَانَ لِلْإِنْسَانِ عَدُوًّا مُبِينًا﴾

رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِكُمْ ۗ إِنَّ يَشَاءُ يَرْحَمَكُمُ أَوْ إِنْ
يَشَاءُ يُعَذِّبِكُمْ ۗ وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ عَلَيْهِمْ

﴿وَكَيْلًا﴾

﴿وَرَبُّكَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَلَقَدْ فَضَّلْنَا بَعْضَ النَّبِيِّينَ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ

Say: 'Call on those whom you claim [to be gods] besides Him, but they have no power to remove any affliction from you, nor can they shift it.' (56)

Those whom they invoke strive to obtain their Lord's favour, vying with each other to be near Him. They hope for His grace and dread His punishment. Indeed your Lord's punishment is something to beware of. (57)

وَأَتَيْنَا دَاوُدَ زُبُورًا ﴿٥٦﴾

قُلِ ادْعُوا الَّذِينَ زَعَمْتُمْ مِّنْ دُونِهِ ۚ فَلَا
يَمْلِكُونَ كَشْفَ الضُّرِّ عَنْكُمْ وَلَا
تَحْوِيلًا ﴿٥٦﴾

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ يَبْتَغُونَ إِلَىٰ
رَبِّهِمُ الْوَسِيلَةَ أَيُّهُمْ أَقْرَبُ وَيَرْجُونَ
رَحْمَتَهُ وَيَخَافُونَ عَذَابَهُ ۚ إِنَّ عَذَابَ
رَبِّكَ كَانَ مَحْذُورًا ﴿٥٧﴾

Overview

The second passage of this *sūrah*, discussed in Chapter 2, starts and finishes with a strong emphasis on God's oneness and the prohibition of associating any partners with Him. Within its two ends, it contains a number of orders, prohibitions and values that are all based on the central principle of God's oneness. The present passage begins and ends with the denunciation of the very concept of assigning a son or a partner to God, explaining its absurdity. It states that the whole universe functions on the basis of believing in God as one, having no partners: "Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise." (Verse 44) It stresses the fact that all shall return to God in the life to come, and that God knows everything about all creatures in the heavens and earth.

He is the One who controls the destinies of all His creatures, and no one has any say about it: "If He so wills, He will bestow His grace on you; and if He so wills, He will inflict punishment on you." (Verse 54)

As the passage goes on, we see the fallacy of all beliefs based on associating partners with God, and we watch how they collapse. We also see that God is the One who controls everything in this universe, this life and the life to come, what is visible

to us and what we do not see. We realize that it all addresses its praises, sincere and devoted to God alone. In such praises all creatures and living things take part.

All Glorify Him

Has your Lord distinguished you by [giving you] sons and taken for Himself daughters from among the angels? That which you utter is indeed an enormity. (Verse 40)

This question implies a sarcastic response to what the unbelievers used to do, as they described the angels as God's daughters. God is indeed too exalted to take to Himself a son or a wife, and He is too sublime to have any partner or associate. The verse also ridicules the assigning of daughters to God, when the Arabs considered girls to be of lesser status than boys. They indeed killed their daughters for fear of poverty or shame. Nevertheless they considered angels to be female and made them God's daughters. When it is God who gives life and gives everyone their sons and daughters, how come He favours them with the better sons and takes to Himself the inferior daughters!

This is stated merely for argument's sake, so as to make apparent the hollowness and fallacy of their claims. The whole issue is too bizarre to merit any discussion: *"That which you utter is indeed an enormity."* (Verse 40) It is enormously odd, impudent, false and outlandish.

"We have certainly explained things in various ways in this Qur'ān, so that they may take it to heart, but it only increases their aversion." (Verse 41) The Qur'ān preaches the faith of God's oneness, presenting it in a variety of ways, styles and methods, so that people may 'take warning'. Indeed accepting the faith based on God's oneness does not require more than a reminder and a reference to uncorrupted human nature. It only needs to reflect on the various signs presented in the universe. But they only grow in their aversion to this faith whenever they listen to the Qur'ān. They show that they are averse to the faith the Qur'ān preaches, and averse to the Qur'ān itself, lest it clearly show the fallacy of their erroneous beliefs based on myth and superstition.

Here also the *sūrah* goes part of the way with them to make its argument about their alleged deities. It states that had such deities existed, they themselves would have tried to get closer to God and believe in Him: *"Say: If there were other deities alongside Him, as some people assert, they would have to seek a way to the Lord of the Throne."* (Verse 42) As linguists tell us, the construction of the sentence means that the whole supposition is false. There are no deities alongside God. What they claim to be their gods are no more than some of His creatures, be they stars, human beings,

animals, plants and trees or other inanimate objects. All these turn to God, submitting themselves to His will, in accordance with the law of nature. They find their way to God through their obedience to His will and His laws: *"They would have to seek a way to the Lord of the Throne."* (Verse 42)

Mention of the Throne here indicates God's clear exaltation above all creatures, including those they claim to be deities alongside Him. They are below His Throne, which means that they cannot be 'with Him'. This is followed by a clear statement glorifying God: *"Limitless is He in His glory and sublimely exalted is He above everything they may say [about Him]."* (Verse 43)

The *sūrah* then portrays the whole universe, with all creatures living in it, under God's Throne. They all turn to God glorifying Him: *"The seven heavens extol His limitless glory, as does the earth, and all who dwell in them. Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise, but you cannot understand their praises. He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving."* (Verse 44) Every single particle in this vast universe shares in this glorification. Indeed it comes alive as it praises God and glorifies Him. The scene shows the whole universe full of life and activity, sharing in a single action, addressing God in His exalted nature in a glorification that implies submission to His will and acknowledgement of His authority over everything.

Deaf Ears, Sealed Hearts

It is a powerful and majestic scene in which we see every stone, large and small, every seed and leaf, every flower and fruit, every little shoot and every tree, every insect and reptile, every animal and human being, every creature that walks the earth, swims in the water or floats in the air, in short, all creatures in the whole universe glorifying God and turning to Him in submission. We are filled with awe as we sense that everything that comes within our vision or stays beyond it comes alive. 'Whenever we stretch our hands out to touch something, and whenever we put our feet to step over something, we feel that it is alive, glorifying God.

"Indeed every single thing extols His glory and praise," in its own way and language. *"But you [human beings] cannot understand their praises."* (Verse 44) Human beings are limited by their own constitution which has a clay origin. This debars them from understanding the praises of other creatures. Had they listened with their hearts, directing them to appreciate the subtle laws that operate in the universe and make everything, large or small, turn to the Creator of all, they would have appreciated something of that praise. When human souls are purified and when they hearken to every animate and inanimate object as it addresses its glorification to God alone, they are better prepared to be in contact with the Supreme Society. They are better able to understand the secrets of the universe than those who limit themselves to the

material world.

"He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving." (Verse 44) These attributes of God are mentioned here because of what seems clear of people's failing in their duties towards Him. Compared with this great show of submission to God in the whole universe, human beings seem to be in a singular position. Some associate partners with God, while others allege that He has daughters, and still others remain oblivious of their duty to praise and glorify Him. In fact human beings should have been the first among all creatures to acknowledge God, declare their submission to Him and extol His praises. Had it not been for God's forbearance and forgiveness, He would have hastened their punishment. But He allows them time, reminds and admonishes them because *'He is indeed Forbearing, Much Forgiving.'*

The leaders of the Quraysh, the Prophet's own tribesmen who rejected his call, tried hard to prevent their hearts and souls from responding positively to the truth of the Qur'ān. As a result, God raised an invisible curtain between them and the Prophet, and placed coverings on their hearts preventing them from understanding it. Their ears were in a state similar to deafness, which meant that they could not understand its message.

When you read the Qur'ān, We place an invisible barrier between you and those who do not believe in the life to come. We cast a veil over their hearts which makes them unable to grasp its meaning, and their ears We make deaf. And so, when you mention your Lord in the Qur'ān as the One and only God, they turn their backs in aversion. We are fully aware of what they are listening for when they listen to you, and what they say when they speak to each other in private. The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.' See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]. (Verses 45-48)

One report states that the elders of the Quraysh issued a general order telling everyone not to listen to the Qur'ān when they heard it being recited by Muslims. But the Qur'ān had its attraction even to the most outspoken enemies of Islam. Protected by the cover of darkness, three of those elders, Abū Jahl, Abū Sufyān and al-Akhnas ibn Shariq sat just outside the Prophet's house, listening to the Qur'ān being recited from inside. Every one of them was on his own, thinking that no one would know about his action. As the day began to break, each took his way home, so that no one would find out. Soon, the three of them met. There was only one reason for their presence there at that particular time. Therefore they counselled each other against such action: "Should some of your followers see you," one of them said, "you would stir doubts in their minds."

The following night they did the same, and once again they met at the break of day. Again they counselled each other against their 'irresponsible' action.

Nevertheless, the third night each of them went to sit outside the Prophet's home and listen to the Qur'ān. When they met in the morning, they were ashamed of themselves. One suggested that they should each give their word of honour not to return. This they did before going home.

Later that morning al-Akhnas ibn Sharīq went to see Abū Sufyān at his home. He asked him what he thought about what he had heard Muḥammad reciting. Abū Sufyān said: "I heard things which I know and recognize to be true, but I also heard things whose nature I cannot understand." Al-Akhnas said that he felt the same. He then left and went to Abū Jahl's home to put the same question to him. Abū Jahl's answer was totally different. For once, he was candid and honest with himself and his interlocutor: "I will tell you about what I heard! We have competed with the clan of `Abd Manāf for honours: they fed the poor, and we did the same; they provided generous support to those who needed it and we did the same. When we were together on the same level, like two racehorses running neck and neck, they said that one of their number was a Prophet receiving revelations from on high! When can we attain such an honour? By God, we shall never believe in him."

It is abundantly clear then that these three elders were touched by the Qur'ān, their souls attracted to its message, but they deliberately sealed their hearts to it. As a result, God placed between them and His Messenger a secret seal that could not be seen with the human eye, yet it is felt by the heart. Its effect was to ensure that they would not benefit by the presence of God's Messenger among them and would not be guided by the Qur'ān he recited. Thus, they would speak to each other about the beauty and the truth of the Qur'ān but would pledge not to listen to it again. They might feel its power again and go out to listen to it anew, but they would remain determined to oppose it, and pledge a word of honour to stop listening to the Qur'ān and its message that addresses both mind and heart. They felt that the message of God's oneness, which is the central message of the Qur'ān, threatened their interests, privileges and pride: "*And so, when you mention your Lord in the Qur'ān as the One and only God, they turn their backs in aversion.*" (Verse 46)

They were averse to the very principle of God's oneness because they felt that it threatened their social position based on the myths that prevailed in those dark ages. In fact, the elders of the Quraysh were too intelligent not to realize the hollow nature of their beliefs as compared with the profound faith of Islam. They could easily appreciate the superb nature of the Qur'ān. Indeed their very nature motivated them to listen to it, but their pride caused them to take a hostile attitude to it. Thus they even fabricated allegations against the Prophet to justify their opposition: "*The wrongdoers say: 'The man you follow is certainly bewitched.'*" (Verse 47)

Their very words carried an implicit recognition of the nature of the Qur'ān. They realized deep inside that the Qur'ān was far too superior to be the word of a human

being. They felt that its superiority transcended the realm of human beings. They also felt that it penetrated their own feelings. Hence, they alleged that it was the word of a sorcerer. Thus they claimed that Muḥammad was not speaking for himself, but by the power of magic. Had they been fair to him and to themselves, they would have acknowledged its divine nature. Indeed no human being and no other creature could have produced anything like the Qur'ān.

"See to what they liken you. They have certainly gone astray and are unable to find a way back [to the truth]." (Verse 48) They likened the Prophet to those who are bewitched when he was nothing like them. He was simply a Messenger chosen by God. As they made this analogy, they went astray. They could find no way ahead. They could not even justify their suspicions.

Bringing the Dead Back to Life

Such was what they said about the Qur'ān and the Messenger who recited it. They also denied resurrection and the life to come:

They say: 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' Say: 'Be you stones or iron, or some other form of creation which, to your minds, appears even harder [to bring to life]. 'They will say: 'Who is it that will bring us back [to life]?' Say: 'He who created you the first time.' Thereupon they shake their heads [in disbelief] and ask: 'When will this be?' Say: 'It may very well be near at hand. On that day He will call you, and you will answer by praising Him, thinking that you stayed on earth but a very short while.' (Verses 49-52)

The concept of resurrection was the subject of a long controversy between the Prophet and the unbelievers. The Qur'ān relates much of this argument. Yet the whole issue is very clear and simple for anyone who contemplates the nature of life and death, resurrection and the gathering of all creation. The Qur'ān explains it in full on various occasions. Yet people could not take it in its simple and clear nature. They could not imagine how a person could be brought back to life after the body had decomposed: *"They say: 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?'"* (Verse 49)

They simply did not reflect on the fact that there was a time when they were not alive, yet they were brought to life. Nor did they appreciate that the second origination is simpler than the first. They did not fully understand that, as far as God is concerned, nothing can be described as 'easier' or 'more difficult'. Nor did they appreciate that the method of creation is the same in all cases. It is just that God issues His command for any creature to 'Be', and it comes into existence immediately. It is immaterial whether people consider something to be easy or

difficult. When God wants it to happen, it will, without fail.

The reply comes in the form of an instruction to the Prophet to say to them: *"Be you stones or iron, or some other form of creation which, to your minds, appears even harder [to bring to life]."* (Verses 50-51) The bones and dust may still have some traces or memory of life, but iron and stones seem even further away from life. Hence they are told to be stones or iron or any other form that cannot ever be associated with life. Even if they are made of material that is least imagined to have life, God will bring them alive. They naturally cannot make themselves stones or iron or some other form of creation. This is given only by way of a challenge and reproach. Stones and iron have no feelings and cannot be inspired or influenced. This sounds as an implicit reference to their hardened nature.

"They will say: 'Who is it that will bring us back [to life]?" (Verse 51) Who is it that brings bones and dust, or even more lifeless objects, back to life? *'Say: 'He who created you the first time."* (Verse 51) The answer puts the whole question into its proper perspective, which is both simple and direct. The One who originated them the first time is able to bring them back to life. Yet this reply is ignored: *"Thereupon they shake their heads [in disbelief]."* (Verse 51) They simply shake their heads in disapproval, or even in ridicule. They try to make this sound too far fetched by asking: *"When will this be?"* (Verse 51) The Prophet is told to reply: *"It may very well be near at hand."* (Verse 51) The Prophet does not know its exact timing, but it may very well be nearer than they think. They should fear then lest it happen when they are engaged in such opposition and ridicule.

The *sūrah* then paints a speedy image of what happens when that event takes place, as it will indeed do: *"On that day He will call you, and you will answer by praising Him, thinking that you stayed on earth but a very short while."* (Verse 52) The image shows those people who were bent on denying the resurrection rising up to respond to the call that brings them back to life. As they do, they praise God in clear terms. They have nothing else to say apart from praising God. This is a strange response from those who were dogged in their denial of resurrection and the Day of Judgement altogether. They simply rise, saying nothing except: *"Praised be God, praised be God."* Thus this whole life is shown to be very brief, like a flickering light: *"You will answer by praising Him, thinking that you stayed on earth but a very short while."* (Verse 52)

Describing this life in this way is sure to belittle its importance in the minds of those to whom this address is made. It is a very short life. Nothing of its effects is of a lasting nature. It is no more than a brief moment that has passed, accompanied by a brief enjoyment.

Man's Open Enemy

After it has described their attitude of ridiculing God's promise and the Prophet's message, the *sūrah* turns away from those who deny the life to come and resurrection. It has something to say about the believers, instructing the Prophet to direct them to say only what is best. They should always be in the habit of saying a good word: *"Tell My servants that they should always say that which is best. Satan tries to sow discord between them. Satan is indeed man's open foe."* (Verse 53)

"Tell My servants that they should always say that which is best." It is a general order that applies in all situations and positions. They should choose the best to say. In this way they will be able to spoil Satan's attempts to undermine the bond of mutual love that exists between them. Indeed he always tries to sow the seeds of discord between them, helped by an impolite word said by one person, followed by a similarly rude answer by another. Thus the atmosphere of love and brotherhood is spoiled, only to be replaced by an air of alienation, estrangement and even hostility. A good word always helps to clear the air and heal grievances.

"Satan is indeed man's open foe." (Verse 53) He tries to build on every slip of a person's tongue to spread an air of alienation between brothers. Good words simply foil his attempts and protect the bond of brotherhood among all believers.

The *sūrah* then returns to those unbelievers who responded to the call to rise on the Day of Judgement. All destiny is in God's hands: He may forgive or punish. They will have to face God's judgement. The Prophet is no more than a Messenger. He is not their protector against God's will: *"Your Lord is fully aware of what you are. If He so wills, He will bestow His grace on you; and if so wills, He will inflict punishment on you. We have not sent you, Prophet, to be their guardian. Your Lord is fully aware of all beings that are in the heavens and earth."* (Verses 54-55) God's knowledge is absolute. Whatever He may determine of punishment or forgiveness is based on His knowledge. The Prophet's mission is completed when he has conveyed his message. God's knowledge encompasses all that is in heaven and earth, including the angels, prophets, human beings and *jinn*, as well as other creatures which are known only to God.

Competition to Be Closer to God

It is on the basis of this knowledge that He has exalted some prophets over others as He states here: *"Indeed We have exalted some of the prophets above others."* (Verse 55) God alone knows the reasons behind this preference. As for the practical aspects of such exaltation and preference, these were discussed in commenting on verse 253 of

Sūrah 2, which also mentions this exaltation.⁵

"Justus We gave the Psalms to David." (Verse 55) This is one example of what God may give to one of His prophets, and one of the aspects of exaltation. The fact is that revelation and scripture are more lasting than supernatural events that may be witnessed by only a handful of people.

This passage, which begins with a definitive negation of the concept of God having a son or partner before calling on people to turn to God alone in all situations, concludes with a challenge to those who associate partners with God. The challenge is simply that they should call on those partners to remove any harm that befalls them, should God decide to punish them, or that they should divert His punishment to others: *"Say: 'Call on those whom you claim (to be gods) besides Him, but they have no power to remove any affliction from you, nor can they shift it.'" (Verse 56)* No one can remove hardship or change its nature or recipient except God Himself. He alone is in control of the destinies of all creation.

The *sūrah* tells them that those whom they claim to be deities, be they angels, *jinn* or human, are no more than forms of God's creation. They all try to find their way to God's pleasure, competing in this pursuit, fearing His punishment, which truly deserves to be feared: *"Those whom they invoke strive to obtain their Lord's favour, vying with each other to be near Him. They hope for His grace and dread His punishment. Indeed your Lord's punishment is something to beware of"* (Verse 57)

Some of them claimed that Ezra was the son of God, while others attributed this position to Jesus Christ and worshipped him. Others claimed that the angels were God's daughters and worshipped them. Still others associated other creatures with God. To all of them the Qur'ān says: even the closest to God of all those you invoke try hard to approach their Lord, the One God, and worship Him alone hoping to receive His grace and fearing His punishment. Indeed His punishment is severe and it should be feared. Thus, it behoves you well to turn to God, as do those you claim to be deities.

The passage, then, ends on the same note on which it began, illustrating the hollow nature of polytheistic beliefs and showing clearly that God is the only Lord in the universe. Human beings should turn to Him alone with their appeals and worship.

⁵ Volume I, pp. 331-338.

4

Honour Granted to Mankind

There is no community but We shall destroy or severely punish before the Day of Resurrection. That is laid down in Our decree. (58)

وَإِنْ مِنْ قَرْيَةٍ إِلَّا نَحْنُ مُهْلِكُوهَا قَبْلَ
يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ أَوْ مُعَذِّبُوهَا عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا
كَانَ ذَلِكَ فِي الْكِتَابِ مَسْطُورًا ﴿٥٨﴾

Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false. To the Thamūd We gave the she-camel as a sign to open their eyes, but they did wrong in respect of her. We never send signs for any purpose other than to give warning. (59)

وَمَا مَنَعَنَا أَنْ نُرْسِلَ بِالْآيَاتِ إِلَّا أَنْ
كَذَّبَ بِهَا الْأَوَّلُونَ ۚ وَآتَيْنَا ثَمُودَ
النَّاقَةَ مُبْصِرَةً فَظَلَمُوا بِهَا ۚ وَمَا نُرْسِلُ
بِالْآيَاتِ إِلَّا تَخْوِيفًا ﴿٥٩﴾

We said to you that your Lord encompasses all mankind. We have made the vision which We have shown you, as also the tree cursed in this Qur'an, only a trial for people. We seek to put fear in their hearts, but it only increases their gross transgression. (60)

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لَكَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ أَحَاطَ بِالنَّاسِ
وَمَا جَعَلْنَا الرَّءْيَا الَّتِي أَرَيْنَاكَ إِلَّا فِتْنَةً
لِلنَّاسِ وَالشَّجَرَةَ الْمَلْعُونَةَ فِي الْقُرْآنِ
وَنُحُوفُهُمْ فَمَا يَزِيدُهُمْ إِلَّا طُغْيَانًا كَبِيرًا



When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; but not so Iblis. He said, 'Am I to bow down before one whom You have created out of clay?' (61)

And he added: 'You see this being whom You have exalted above me! Indeed, if You will give me respite until the Day of Resurrection, I shall bring his descendants, all but a few, under my sway.' (62)

[God] said: 'Begone! As for those of them who follow you, hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense. (63)

Entice with your voice such of them as you can. Muster against them all your cavalry and your infantry, and share with them wealth and offspring, and promise them [what you will] — indeed, whatever Satan promises them is nothing but a means of deception. (64)

But over My servants you shall have no power. Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian.' (65)

Your Lord is He who makes ships go smoothly through the sea, so that you may go about in quest of His bounty. He is indeed Most Merciful to you. (66)

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلٰٓئِكَةِ اسْجُدُوْا لِاٰدَمَ
فَسَجَدُوْا اِلَّاۤ اِبْلِيسَ قَالَ ءَاَسْجُدُ لِمَنْ
خَلَقْتَ طِيْنًا ﴿٦١﴾

قَالَ اَرَاۤءَيْتَكَ هٰذَا الَّذِي كَرَّمْتَ عَلٰٓى
لِيْنٍ اٰخَرْتَنِيْ اِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيٰمَةِ لَاحْتَنٰكَ بِ
ذُرِّيَّتِهِۦٓ اِلَّا قَلِيْلًا ﴿٦٢﴾

قَالَ اَذْهَبْ فَمَنْ تَبِعَكَ مِنْهُمْ فَاِنَّ
جَهَنَّمَ جَزَاؤُكُمْ جَزَاءً مَّوْفُوْرًا ﴿٦٣﴾

وَاسْتَفْرَزَ مَنْ اسْتَطَعَتْ مِنْهُمْ بِصَوْتِكَ
وَاَجْلَبَ عَلَيْهِمْ نَحْيِكَ وَرَجَلَكَ
وَشَارِكُهُمْ فِي الْاَمْوَالِ وَالْاَوْلَادِ وَعَدَّهُمْ
وَمَا يَعِدُهُمُ الشَّيْطٰنُ اِلَّا غُرُوْرًا ﴿٦٤﴾

اِنَّ عِبَادِيْ لَيْسَ لَكَ عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطٰنٌ
وَكَفٰى بِرَبِّكَ وَكِيلًا ﴿٦٥﴾

رَبُّكُمْ الَّذِي يُزِيْجِي لَكُمْ الْفَلَكَ فِي
الْبَحْرِ لِتَبْتَغُوْا مِنْ فَضْلِهٖۤ اِنَّهٗ كَانَ
بِكُمْ رَحِيْمًا ﴿٦٦﴾

And when you are in distress at sea, all those you may call upon to help you will forsake you, except Him. Yet when He has brought you safe to dry land, you turn away. Indeed, bereft of all gratitude is man! (67)

Can you feel so sure that He will not let a tract of the land cave in beneath you, or let loose against you a deadly stormwind? You will not find then anyone to protect you. (68)

Or can you feel so sure that He will not let you go back to sea again, and then let loose against you a violent tempest to drown you for your ingratitude? You shall not find then anyone to help you against Us. (69)

We have indeed honoured the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them far above many of Our creatures. (70)

One day We shall summon every community by their leaders. Those who are given their records in their right hands will read their records. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. (71)

وَإِذَا مَسَّكُمُ الضُّرُّ فِي الْبَحْرِ ضَلَّ مَنْ
تَدْعُونَ إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ ۗ فَلَمَّا نَجَّيْكُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ
أَعْرَضْتُمْ ۗ وَكَانَ الْإِنْسَانُ كَفُورًا ﴿٦٧﴾

أَفَأَمِنْتُمْ أَنْ تَخْسِفَ بِكُمْ جَانِبَ الْبَرِّ أَوْ
يُرْسِلَ عَلَيْكُمْ حَاصِبًا ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُوا
لَكُمْ وَاكِيلًا ﴿٦٨﴾

أَمْ أَمِنْتُمْ أَنْ يُعِيدَكُمْ فِيهِ تَارَةً أُخْرَى
فَيُرْسِلَ عَلَيْكُمْ قَاصِفًا مِّنَ الرِّيحِ
فَيَغْرِقَكُمْ بِمَا كَفَرْتُمْ ۗ ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُوا لَكُمْ
عَلَيْنَا بِهِ تَبِيعًا ﴿٦٩﴾

﴿٧٠﴾ وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ
وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِّنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ
وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا
تَفْضِيلًا ﴿٧١﴾

يَوْمَ نَدْعُوا كُلَّ أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَّتِهِمْ ۗ فَمَنْ
أُوتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ ۗ فَأُولَٰئِكَ
يَقْرَأُونَ كِتَابَهُمْ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا

﴿٧١﴾

But whoever is blind in this world will be even more blind in the life to come, and still further astray from the path of truth. (72)

وَمَنْ كَانَ فِي هَذِهِ أَعْمَىٰ فَهُوَ فِي
الْآخِرَةِ أَعْمَىٰ وَأَضَلُّ سَبِيلًا

Overview

The passage discussed in Chapter 3 concluded with a statement making clear that God alone is the One who determines the destiny of all His creatures. He bestows His grace on them or punishes them as He pleases. The deities they worship beside Him have no power to remove harm from them or to shift it to others. They are powerless.

The present passage speaks about the ultimate destiny of all mankind, as it is determined by God's justice. All cities and communities will suffer death before the Day of Judgement, although some may suffer a doom of some sort should they incur something that deserves God's punishment. Thus, every living creature will have come to its life's end, either by natural death or by destruction.

Within the context of the destruction suffered by some communities, the *sūrah* mentions the miracles accomplished at the hands of earlier messengers ahead of such destruction. This was the case prior to the message of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Such miracles and supernatural events were excluded with the advent of this final message. The law that applied to earlier communities meant that they suffered inevitable doom and destruction when they denied the truth after having received such miracles. But complete destruction was, by God's grace, not to be visited on the Muslim community. Therefore, the Prophet Muḥammad was not given any material miracle. Such miracles were given to strike the fear of God into the hearts of earlier communities.

God also held people's hands away from the Prophet, meaning that they could not kill him. He showed him some of His true signs on his night journey, which was a form of test for people. It was not meant as a supernatural event as those shown to earlier communities. All people are warned against being made to eat of the cursed tree, which the Prophet saw with his own eyes, coming out of the heart of hell, but such warnings only hardened them in their transgression. This demonstrates that had they been shown any miracles, these would only have further hardened their deviant stance.

At this point in the *sūrah* reference is made to the story of Adam and Satan, and God's permission to the latter to try to seduce human beings away from the right

path, except for the God-fearing among them. Thus the *sūrah* explains the true reasons which lead people away from the truth into unbelief. They are unwilling to reflect on the signs pointing to the truth. Our emotions are touched here however as the *sūrah* mentions God's blessings bestowed on people, while they continue to deny God and His grace except when they find themselves in desperate situations. When they are in heavy seas, they appeal to God to save them. When they are safe on land, they turn away. Yet God is able to smite them on land and sea alike. Indeed God has honoured human beings and favoured them with grace that He does not bestow on other creatures, but people neither reflect nor show gratitude.

The passage concludes with a scene from the Day of Judgement, when people will have the reward for their deeds. None will be saved unless his actions in this life ensure his safety.

Clear Warnings, Increased Transgression

There is no community but We shall destroy or severely punish before the Day of Resurrection. That is laid down in Our decree. (Verse 58)

God has determined that the Day of Judgement will take place when the face of the earth is devoid of all life. Every living thing will have died before that promised day falls due. God has also determined that some communities will be made to suffer punishment for the sins they commit. This is part of God's knowledge which admits no uncertainty. God knows the future in the same way as He knows the present. Indeed what has taken place in the past and what will take place in the future are equally known to God.

Miraculous events took place in the past in order to endorse the messages preached by God's messengers, and to warn people against rejecting them. Such rejection ensured that the whole community was punished. Yet only those whose hearts and minds were receptive to the message of the truth declared their belief. Those with hardened hearts denied God's messages and the miraculous events that took place during their time. Hence the final message was not accompanied by any such preternatural event: *"Nothing hinders Us from sending miraculous signs except that the people of former times treated them as false. To the Thamūd We gave the she-camel as a sign to open their eyes, but they did wrong in respect of her. We never send signs for any purpose other than to give warning."* (Verse 59)

Islam has one miracle to prove its truth. That is the Qur'ān. It is a book that maps a whole system of life, addressing both the mind and heart and meeting all the needs of human nature. It remains open to all generations to read and to believe in. It is valid for all time. A physical miracle is given to one generation, and its effects are

limited to those who witness it. Yet the majority of those who witnessed such physical miracles did not believe in them. The example given here is that of the Thamūd who were given the miracle they sought. It came in the shape of a she-camel. Yet they transgressed and slaughtered the she-camel. Hence, God's warning came to pass and they were destroyed as a result of their denials that continued even after this clear, miraculous sign had been given them. All such signs were given by way of warning. They heralded the inevitable punishment, a punishment that was bound to be inflicted should rejection of the message continue.

Past history being such, it was necessary that the final message should not be accompanied by any physical miracle. This message is not meant for one generation; it is addressed to all future generations. It is a message that addresses the human mind with all its receptive faculties. It respects man's intellect and power of understanding.

The preternatural events that took place at the time of the Prophet, or happened to him, such as that of his night journey, were not meant as proof of his message. These were given as a test for his people.

We said to you that your Lord encompasses all mankind. We have made the vision which We have shown you, as also the tree cursed in this Qur'ān, only a trial for people. We seek to put fear in their hearts, but it only increases their gross transgression. (Verse 60)

Some of those who believed in the message preached by the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) reverted to unbelief after he told them about his night journey. Others, however, became firmer than ever in their belief. Hence, it is true that what God showed His Messenger on that night was meant as 'a trial for men', so that they would reaffirm their faith. The Prophet is reminded that God encompasses all mankind. This was given to him as a promise from God, assuring him of ultimate victory. In the meantime, God would protect him against any evil scheme they might devise against him. He would come to no harm at their hands.

The Prophet told his people of God's promise and what he had seen in his true vision. This included the tree of *zaqqūm* which grows in hell. It is a tree which God cites as a warning to unbelievers. However, they continued to deny the message and whatever the Prophet said. Abū Jahl, the arch-enemy of Islam even ridiculed the tree, playing on the sense given by its name. He asked for dates and butter and mixed them together and ate them. He said to those around: "Come and eat. This is the only *zaqqūm* we know."

Of what use could any miraculous event be with such people, had it constituted proof of the Prophet's message, as was the case with some messengers before him?

The whole event of his night journey and the warning about the tree of hell only caused them to become more insolent and to transgress even further.

God had not pre-determined to destroy them. Hence, He did not give them a physical miracle. It was His will to destroy those who continued to reject the truth of His message after they had been given miraculous evidence confirming it. The Arabs of the Quraysh were given more time. They were not subjected to the same fate that befell the peoples of Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Lot and Shu`ayb. Some of those who rejected the message of the Qur`ān at first subsequently changed their mind, believed in Islam and were among its true servants. Others who died as unbelievers were the fathers of good believers. The Qur`ān – the miracle of Islam – continued to be a book open to future generations just like it was open to the generation of the Prophet's Companions. People who did not see the Prophet or his companions came to believe in it when they read it or heard it being read. It remains open to all future generations, a guide for many who are not yet born. Some future believers in the Qur`ān may be even stronger in faith and better servants of Islam than many in past generations.

An Ever-Raging Battle

The vision the Prophet was shown included a complete world that he had not known before. The verse that refers to this vision also mentions the accursed tree which provides the food eaten in hell by those who follow Satan. The *sūrah* follows this with an image in which we see the devil threatening to seduce human beings.

When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated themselves; but not so Iblīs. He said, Am I to bow down before one whom You have created out of clay?' And he added: 'You see this being whom You have exalted above me! Indeed, if You will give me respite until the Day of Resurrection, I shall bring his descendants, all but a few, under my sway' [God] said: Begone! As for those of them who follow you, hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense. Entice with your voice such of them as you can. Muster against them all your cavalry and your infantry, and share with them wealth and offspring, and promise them [what you will] – indeed, whatever Satan promises them is nothing but a means of deception. But over My servants you shall have no power. Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian.' (Verses 61-65)

Thus the real reason behind the attitude of those who go astray is revealed. This serves as a warning to mankind to be careful, lest they go astray. They see here *Iblīs*, their enemy and the enemy of Adam, the father of all mankind, threatening to tempt them away from the truth. It is a determined effort on his part to lead them astray: *"When We said to the angels, 'Prostrate yourselves before Adam,' they all prostrated*

themselves; but not so Iblīs. He said, Am I to bow down before one whom You have created out of clay?" (Verse 61)

Here we see the envy that eats at *Iblīs'* heart. He states that Adam was created of clay, but omits the fact that God breathed of His soul in that clay. *Iblīs* further speaks contemptuously of Adam's weakness and his susceptibility to err. He says to God in an arrogant manner, *"You see this being whom You have exalted above me!"* (Verse 62) You have given this weak creature a position of honour. Yet, *"if You will give me respite until the Day of Resurrection, I shall bring his descendants, all but a few, under my sway."* (Verse 62) I will have power over them, and I will be able to direct their course and subject them to my power.

Iblīs here overlooks the fact that man is equally susceptible to goodness and following divine guidance as he is to evil and error. He chooses not to see man when he is elevated by God's guidance, able to resist temptation and evil. He is unaware of this great, distinctive characteristic that places man above all creatures that follow a single route, having no element of choice. Indeed man's position of distinction lies in his free-will and the exercise of his power of choice.

It is God's will that the advocate of evil, Satan, should have his respite to try to tempt mankind away from divine guidance. Hence, God says to him: *"Begone! As for those of them who follow you, hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense."* (Verse 63) Go and do your utmost. If you try to tempt them, they have been given reason and will. They can follow you or reject your advances. Now anyone who follows you, preferring error to My guidance, ignoring the signs I have placed in the world around him, deserves the fate that he is bound to suffer in hell. Indeed, both Satan and his followers will have the same end: *"Hell will be the recompense of you all, a most ample recompense."* (Verse 63)

"Entice with your voice such of them as you can. Muster against them all your cavalry and your infantry." (Verse 64) This description seeks to magnify the means employed by Satan to encompass people and impose his power over their hearts and minds. We are looking here at a battle in which loud voices are heard, and horses and soldiers employed. A loud outcry irritates opponents and brings them out of their fortifications. They may thus fall into a trap, or find themselves facing a surprise attack.

"And share with them wealth and offspring." (Verse 64) This partnership is seen in certain false beliefs. The pagans used to assign a portion of their property to their false gods, or in effect to Satan himself, and they would also assign some of their offspring as a dedication to their deities. These were indeed dedicated to Satan by virtue of their being offered to idols. The same partnership is seen in every kind of illegitimate earning, and any money spent illegally, to buy what is forbidden. It is

also manifested in every child born in sin. The statement describes a partnership between Satan and his followers that includes wealth and offspring, the two main elements in this life.

Iblīs is given leave to employ all his devices, including tempting promises: “*And promise them [what you will] – indeed, whatever Satan promises them is nothing but a means of deception.*” (Verse 64) Such promises include Satan’s assertions to man that he will escape God’s punishment and the promise of acquiring wealth or power through easy or dirty means.

Perhaps the most tempting promise Satan makes is that of God’s forgiveness of sins. It is the point which Satan uses to attack those who will not respond to his temptation of open defiance of God’s orders. With such people he employs a softer attitude trying to paint sin as very tempting, and promising people that they will be forgiven by God whose mercy is greater than all sin.

While Satan has been given leave to try to seduce those who will listen to his promises, some people will not respond to him and he has no power over them. These have immunity against all his devices and can easily resist his power: “*But over My servants you shall have no power. Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian.*” (Verse 65) When man’s heart is kept alive by his bond with God, and when man addresses his worship purely to God, he maintains the bond that will never be severed. His soul is brightened with the sublime light of heaven. Over the hearts and souls of such people Satan has no power. “*Your Lord is sufficient as a Guardian.*” (Verse 65) He protects them and renders Satan’s scheming futile.

Ever since that day, Satan has been trying hard to make his word come true. He enslaves those who yield to his temptation, but those who address worship purely to God, the Most Merciful, are immune from his scheming.

Aspects of God’s Favours

Satan tries to inflict only evil on mankind, yet there are those who listen to his temptations and do his bidding, turning their backs on God’s guidance. God is always merciful to them, provides them with help, support and guidance, facilitates their living, saves them from harm, removes their distress and responds to them when they pray to Him to lift their suffering and hardship. Yet despite all this, they turn away, denying Him and the message He has sent them:

Your Lord is He who makes ships go smoothly through the sea, so that you may go about in quest of His bounty. He is indeed most merciful to you. And when you are in distress at sea, all those you may call upon to help you will forsake you, except Him. Yet when He has brought you safe to dry land, you turn away. Indeed, bereft of all

gratitude is man! (Verses 66-67)

The *sūrah* portrays this scene of distress at sea by way of an example of hard times. At sea, people realize much more quickly and keenly that they cannot do without God's help. Any boat or ship they use is no more than a little spot of wood or metal on the surface of an endless great sea. It is subject to the winds and currents that travel in different directions. They cling to life over this little spot, their vessel, which needs God's care more than anything else.

It is an inspiring image, the effects of which come more readily to anyone who has experienced it. People remember how, in their fear and apprehension, their hearts turn only to God, no matter how large their vessel is. At times when the wind is very strong and in high seas, even huge liners, designed to cross the oceans with ease and comfort, look vulnerable, like a feather blown away by the wind.

The Qur'ān touches people's hearts as it shows them that it is God's hand that allows their ships to travel smoothly over the sea, so that they may seek God's bounty. God is indeed Most Merciful to man. It is God's grace that man's heart seeks most in such a situation of helplessness. The *sūrah* then shows them the other extreme. After a smooth phase in their journey, they experience great turbulence in high seas. Enormous waves seem to carry their vessel and throw it around in every direction. They realize then that they have no real support and no saviour except God. They turn to Him in a sincere prayer, addressed to Him alone: "*And when you are in distress at sea, all those you may call upon to help you will forsake you, except Him.*" (Verse 67)

But man remains the same. When the hardship is over and he feels himself steady, moving easily on dry land, the experience he suffered disappears gradually from his mind, and as a result he forgets God. He then allows his desire to get the better of him and overshadow the beckoning of his uncorrupted nature: "*Yet when He has brought you safe to dry land, you turn away. Indeed, bereft of all gratitude is man!*" (Verse 67) This applies to all people except those who maintain their strong bond with God. Their hearts continue to have the light of right guidance.

At this point the *sūrah* makes a direct and emotional address to people's consciences, depicting the danger they left at sea as though it were chasing them on land, or engulfing them again when they return to sea. It wants them to feel that safety and security can only be ascertained with God's protection. It cannot be guaranteed at sea or on land, with easy waves and moderate wind, or with a comfortable home or fortified shelter:

Can you feel so sure that He will not let a tract of the land cave in beneath you, or let loose against you a deadly stormwind? You will not find then anyone to protect you.

Or can you feel so sure that He will not let you go back to sea again, and then let loose against you a violent tempest to drown you for your ingratitude? You shall not find then anyone to help you against Us. (Verses 68-69)

Human beings are subject to God's will at every place and time, on land and at sea. How can they feel secure against His will? How can they feel secure that they will not be overwhelmed by an earthquake or volcanic eruption, or by any other natural phenomenon? All such phenomena operate by God's will. He may send a volcanic explosion that overwhelms them with lava, rocks, mud and water. Thus they may be destroyed before they can receive any help from anyone. Or He may let them return to sea and then send a violent tempest or hurricane which overturns ships and destroys vessels. They will thus be drowned as a result of their rejection of the truth. There will be none to seek compensation for their drowning.

How can they feel secure against any such event? Yet people easily overlook the stark facts that look them in the face. They easily reject God and deny Him, and this gives them a false sense of security. Yet when they experience hardship, they turn to Him alone. When He has saved them and removed their hardship, they forget Him, as though it were the last hardship they will ever experience.

A Special Honour for Man

God has honoured mankind, favouring the human race over many of His creatures. He honoured man when He created him in this particular fashion, giving him a nature that combines the characteristics of clay, from which he was made, and the spirit that was breathed into him. Thus he combines elements of heaven and earth in his constitution. God has also honoured man by placing in Op his nature such faculties that make him able to take charge of the earth, able to be active and make changes in it. Thus human beings initiate and produce new things, combine things together and analyse complex matters in order to elevate life to the highest standard attainable.

God has also honoured man by making natural forces on earth subservient to his will and endeavour, and by making other natural forces operating in the universe helpful to him. A further aspect of the honour God has given man is seen in the reception given him when he was first created. It was a reception in which the angels prostrated themselves in a gesture of respect, because God Himself declared that man is to be honoured. Then there comes the additional honour when God states in His book, sent down from on high and which He guaranteed to remain intact for the rest of time, that man is given a position of honour.

We have indeed honoured the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea,

and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them far above many of Our creatures. (Verse 70)

"And borne them over land and sea." This is accomplished by making natural laws fit with human nature and its abilities. Had these laws been at odds with human nature, life would have been impossible to sustain on earth. Indeed man is weak when his strength is measured against the natural forces that operate on land and sea, but man is given the ability to live on earth and to make use of its resources and treasures. This is all an aspect of God's grace.

"And provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life." (Verse 70) Man tends to forget that whatever sustenance is given to him is indeed granted by God, because its different aspects become familiar to him. He only remembers the different forms of sustenance he is given when he loses access to them. It is then that he realizes the value of what he was given. But man's memory is short. He soon forgets again all God's blessings. He forgets what role the sun, air, and water play in sustaining human life. He forgets how important health is to him, and how he is given mobility, senses and reason, in addition to different types of food and drink. Indeed he is placed in charge of a complete world which includes countless blessings.

"And favoured them far above many of Our creatures." (Verse 70) Indeed God has favoured human beings by giving them mastery of this wide planet. Furthermore, He placed in their nature such abilities that make them unique among God's creatures.

One aspect of God's favour is to make human beings responsible for themselves, accountable for their actions. This is the first quality which distinguishes mankind and makes them worthy of their exalted position on earth: freedom of choice and individual responsibility. It is only fair that people should receive the results of their work and get their reward in the life to come, when everyone's record is considered:

One day We shall summon every community by their leaders. Those who are given their records in their right hands will read their records. None shall be wronged by as much as a hair's breadth. But whoever is blind in this world will be even more blind in the life to come, and still further astray from the path of truth. (Verses 71-72)

This is a scene showing all creatures gathered together. Every group is called by the doctrine it followed in this life, or the messenger in whom it believed, or the leader it followed in this first life. It is called to be handed the record of its actions and the result that determines its reward in the life to come. Whoever is given his record in his right hand will be full of joy, reading through his record and looking carefully at its details. Such people are given their reward in full. Nothing is denied

them, even though it may be no larger than a hair's breadth. On the other hand, a person who chooses in this life to remain blind to all indications of guidance will be also blind to the way of goodness in the life to come. They will be even far more astray. The outcome they will suffer is well known. However, the *sūrah* portrays them in this overcrowded scene as blind, moving aimlessly, lacking a guide to lead them. They are left like this without a final abode mentioned for them. This is because the blindness and strayness in that difficult situation is a destiny to be avoided at all costs.

5

Why People Reject the Divine Message

They endeavour to tempt you away from that which We have revealed to you, hoping that you would invent something else in Our name, in which case they would have made you their trusted friend. (73)

Indeed, had We not given you strength, you might have inclined to them a little. (74)

And in that case We would have made you taste a double punishment in life and a double punishment after death, and you would have none to support you against Us. (75)

And they endeavour to scare you off the land with a view to driving you away. But, then, after you have gone, they will not remain there except for a short while. (76)

Such was the way with all Our messengers whom We sent before you. No change shall you find in Our ways. (77)

وَإِنْ كَادُوا لَيَفْتِنُونَكَ عَنِ الَّذِي
أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ لِتَفْتَرِيَ عَلَيْنَا غَيْرَهُ وَإِذَا
لَا تَخَذُوكَ خَلِيلًا ﴿٧٣﴾

وَلَوْلَا أَنْ ثَبَّتْنَاكَ لَقَدْ كِدْتَ تَرْكَنُ
إِلَيْهِمْ شَيْئًا قَلِيلًا ﴿٧٤﴾

إِذَا لَأَذَقْنَاكَ ضِعْفَ الْحَيَاةِ وَضِعْفَ
الْمَمَاتِ ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُ لَكَ عَلَيْنَا نَصِيرًا
﴿٧٥﴾

وَإِنْ كَادُوا لَيَسْتَفِزُّونَكَ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ
لِيُخْرِجُوكَ مِنْهَا وَإِذَا لَا يَلْبَثُونَ
خَلْفَكَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿٧٦﴾

سُنَّةَ مَنْ قَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا قَبْلَكَ مِنْ رُسُلِنَا

Keep up prayer when the sun is on its decline, in the darkness of the night, and recite the Qur'an at dawn, for the recitation of the Qur'an at dawn is indeed witnessed. (78)

At night, rise from your sleep to recite it in prayer, as an additional offering from you. Your Lord may thus raise you to an honourable station. (79)

Say, My Lord, cause me to enter in a true and sincere manner and to leave in a true and sincere manner, and grant me, by Your grace, sustaining strength.' (80)

And say, 'The truth has now come about while falsehood has withered away. For falsehood is always bound to wither away.' (81)

We bestow of the Qur'an from on high what serves as a healing and a blessing to true believers, while it only adds to the ruin of the evildoers. (82)

Yet when We bestow Our blessings on man, he turns his back and draws arrogantly aside, and when he is afflicted by evil he gives himself up to despair. (83)

وَلَا تَجِدُ لِسُنَّتِنَا تَحْوِيلًا ﴿٧٧﴾

أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذُلُوكِ الشَّمْسِ إِلَى غَسَقِ
الَّيْلِ وَقُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ ۖ إِنَّ قُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ

كَانَ مَشْهُودًا ﴿٧٨﴾

وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَتَهَجَّدْ بِهِ ۗ نَافِلَةً لَّكَ عَسَىٰ

أَنْ يَبْعَثَكَ رَبُّكَ مَقَامًا مَّحْمُودًا ﴿٧٩﴾

وَقُلْ رَبِّ أَدْخِلْنِي مُدْخَلَ صِدْقٍ

وَأَخْرِجْنِي مَخْرَجَ صِدْقٍ وَأَجْعَلْ لِي مِنْ

لَدُنكَ سُلْطَانًا نَّصِيرًا ﴿٨٠﴾

وَقُلْ جَاءَ الْحَقُّ وَزَهَقَ الْبَاطِلُ ۗ إِنَّ

الْبَاطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقًا ﴿٨١﴾

وَنُنزِّلُ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ مَا هُوَ شِفَاءٌ وَرَحْمَةٌ

لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۗ وَلَا يَزِيدُ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا خَسَارًا

﴿٨٢﴾

وَإِذَا أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَى الْإِنْسَانِ أَعْرَضَ وَنَقَا

Say, 'Everyone acts according to his own disposition. Your Lord is fully aware as to who has chosen the best path.' (84)

They question you about the spirit. Say, 'The [knowledge of the nature of the] spirit belongs to my Lord alone. You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.' (85)

Had We so willed, We would have taken away that which We have revealed to you. In that case, you would not find anyone to plead with Us on your behalf, (86)

except through the grace of your Lord. His favour towards you has been great indeed. (87)

Say, 'If all mankind and the jinn were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'an, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.' (88)

Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'an, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept anything other than unbelief. (89)

بِجَانِبِهِ ۗ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ كَانَ يُوسَىٰ ﴿٨٤﴾

قُلْ كُلٌّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَىٰ شَاكِلَتِهِ ۗ فَرِيقُكُمْ

أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ هُوَ أَهْدَىٰ سَبِيلًا ﴿٨٥﴾

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ ۗ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ

أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

﴿٨٥﴾

وَلَيْنَ شِئْنَا لَنذَهِبَنَّهُ بِالدِّيَارِ أَوْ حِينَا إِلَيْكَ

ثُمَّ لَا تَجِدُ لَكَ بِهِ عَلَيْنَا وَكِيلًا ﴿٨٦﴾

إِلَّا رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۗ إِنَّ فَضْلَهُ كَانَ

عَلَيْكَ كَبِيرًا ﴿٨٧﴾

قُلْ لَئِنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَىٰ أَنْ

يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ

بِمِثْلِهِ ۗ وَلَوْ كَانَ بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا

﴿٨٨﴾

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ

They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, (90)

or you have a garden of date- palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, (91)

or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, (92)

or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.' (93)

Nothing has ever prevented people from believing, whenever guidance came to them except that they would say: 'Can it be that God has sent a human being as His messenger?' (94)

Say, 'Had there been angels walking about on earth as their natural abode, We would have sent them an angel messenger from heaven.' (95)

كُلِّ مَثَلٍ فَأَبَى أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ إِلَّا كُفُورًا

٨٩

وَقَالُوا لَنْ نُؤْمِنَ لَكَ حَتَّى تَفْجُرَ لَنَا

مِنَ الْأَرْضِ يَنْبُوعًا

أَوْ تَكُونَ لَكَ جَنَّةٌ مِّنْ حَيْلٍ وَعِنَبٍ

فَتَفْجِرَ الْأَنْهَارَ خَلَلَهَا تَفْجِيرًا

أَوْ تُسْقِطَ السَّمَاءَ كَمَا زَعَمْتَ عَلَيْنَا

كِسْفًا أَوْ تَأْتِيَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ قَبِيلًا

٩٢

أَوْ يَكُونَ لَكَ بَيْتٌ مِّنْ زُخْرَفٍ أَوْ تَرْقَى فِي

السَّمَاءِ وَلَنْ نُؤْمِنَ لِرُؤْيَاكَ حَتَّى تَنْزِلَ

عَلَيْنَا كِتَابًا نَقْرُؤُهُ ۗ قُلْ سُبْحَانَ رَبِّي هَلْ

كُنْتُ إِلَّا بَشَرًا رَسُولًا

٩٣

وَمَا مَنَعَ النَّاسَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا إِذْ جَاءَهُمْ

الْهُدَىٰ إِلَّا أَنْ قَالُوا أَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ بَشَرًا

رَسُولًا

٩٥

Say, 'Sufficient is God for a witness between me and you. He is indeed fully aware of His servants, and He sees all things.' (96)

He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided; whereas for those whom He leaves to go astray you cannot find anyone to protect them from Him. On the Day of Resurrection We shall gather them together, prone upon their faces, blind, dumb and deaf. Hell shall be their abode. Every time it abates We will increase for them its blazing flame. (97)

That is their reward for having disbelieved in Our revelations and said, 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' (98)

Do they not see that God, who has created the heavens and the earth, has power to create their like? He has beyond any doubt set a term for their resurrection. But the evildoers refuse to accept anything other than disbelief. (99)

Say, 'Had you possessed the treasures of my Lord's mercy, you would have been tight-fisted for fear of spending them. For man has always been niggardly.' (100)

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَتْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَلَائِكَةٌ
يَمْشُونَ مُطْمَئِنِّينَ لَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْهِم مِّنَ
السَّمَاوَاتِ مَلَكًا رَسُولًا ﴿٩٥﴾

قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ
إِنَّهُ كَانَ بِعِبَادِهِ خَبِيرًا بَصِيرًا ﴿٩٦﴾

وَمَنْ يَهْدِ اللَّهُ فَهُوَ الْمُهْتَدِ ۖ وَمَنْ يُضِلِلْ
فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُم أَوْلِيَاءَ مِن دُونِهِ ۗ وَنَحْشُرُهُمْ
يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عَلَىٰ وُجُوهِهِمْ عُمِيَآ وَنُكَمَا
وَصُمًّا ۗ مَا أُولَٰئِكَ إِلَّا جَاهِلُونَ كَلِمَاتِ
رَبِّهِمْ سَعِيرًا ﴿٩٧﴾

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَاءُ هُم بِأَنَّهُمْ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِنَا
وَقَالُوا أَإِذَا كُنَّا عِظْمًا وَرُفَاتًا أَإِنَّا
لَمَبْعُوثُونَ خَلْقًا جَدِيدًا ﴿٩٨﴾

﴿٩٩﴾ أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ
وَالْأَرْضَ قَادِرٌ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَخْلُقَ مِثْلَهُمْ
وَجَعَلَ لَهُمْ أَجَلًا لَّا رَيْبَ فِيهِ فَاٰبِ
الظَّالِمُونَ إِلَّا كُفُورًا ﴿١٠٠﴾

To Moses We gave nine clear signs. Ask the Children of Israel [about what happened]. When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him, 'Indeed, Moses, I think that you are bewitched.' (101)

[Moses] said, 'You know full well that none other than the Lord of the heavens and the earth has revealed these eye-opening signs. Indeed, Pharaoh, I think that you are utterly lost.' (102)

So he resolved to wipe them off the face of the earth, but We caused him and all those who were with him to drown. (103)

Then We said to the Children of Israel, 'Dwell in the land. When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together.' (104)

We have bestowed [this Qur'an] from on high in truth, and in truth has it come down. We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. (105)

We have divided the Qur'an into parts so that you may recite it to people with deliberation. We have indeed bestowed it from on high step by step. (106)

قُلْ لَوْ أَنْتُمْ تَمْلِكُونَ خَزَائِنَ رَحْمَةِ رَبِّي إِذًا لَأَمْسَكْتُمْ خَشْيَةَ الْإِنْفَاقِ ۗ وَكَانَ

الْإِنْسَانُ قَتُورًا ﴿١٠١﴾

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ تِسْعَ ءَايَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ ۖ فَسَخَّلَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِذْ جَاءَهُمْ فَقَالَ لَهُ فِرْعَوْنُ إِنِّي لَأَظُنُّكَ يَمُوسَىٰ مَسْحُورًا

﴿١٠٢﴾

قَالَ لَقَدْ عَلِمْتَ مَا أَنزَلَ هُنَالًا إِلَّا رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ بِصَآئِرٍ وَإِنِّي لَأَظُنُّكَ

يَفْرِعَوْنُ مُشْبُورًا ﴿١٠٣﴾

فَأَرَادَ أَن يَسْتَفِزَّهُم مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ فَأَغْرَقْنَاهُ

وَمَن مَّعَهُ جَمِيعًا ﴿١٠٤﴾

وَقُلْنَا مَن بَعْدِهِ لِبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَسْكُنُوا الْأَرْضَ فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ الْآخِرَةِ جِئْنَا بِكُمْ

لَفِيفًا ﴿١٠٥﴾

وَبِالْحَقِّ أَنزَلْنَاهُ وَبِالْحَقِّ نَزَّلَهُ ۗ وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ

Say, 'You may believe in it or you may not.' Those who were given knowledge before it was revealed fall down on their faces in humble prostration when it is recited to them, (107)

and say, 'Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled.' (108)

And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and it increases their humility. (109)

Say, 'Call upon God or call upon the Most Merciful. By whichever name you invoke Him, His are the most gracious names.' Do not raise your voice too loud in prayer, nor say it in too low a voice, but follow a middle course in between. (110)

And say, 'All praise is due to God who has never begotten a son; who has no partner in His dominion; who needs none to support Him against any difficulty.' And extol His greatness. (111)

إِلَّا مُبَشِّرًا وَنَذِيرًا ﴿١٠٥﴾

وَقُرَّاءَنَا فَرَاقْنَهُ لَتَقْرَأَهُ عَلَى النَّاسِ عَلَى

مُكْثٍ وَنَزَّلْنَاهُ تَنْزِيلًا ﴿١٠٦﴾

قُلْ ءَامِنُوا بِهِ أَوْ لَا تُؤْمِنُوا ۚ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ

أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ إِذَا يُتْلَى عَلَيْهِمْ

تَخْرُونَ لِلْأَذْقَانِ سُجَّدًا ﴿١٠٧﴾

وَيَقُولُونَ سُبْحَانَ رَبِّنَا إِنْ كَانَ وَعْدُ رَبِّنَا

لَمَفْعُولًا ﴿١٠٨﴾

وَتَخْرُونَ لِلْأَذْقَانِ يَبْكُونَ وَيَزِيدُهُمْ

خُشُوعًا ﴿١٠٩﴾

قُلِ ادْعُوا اللَّهَ أَوْ ادْعُوا الرَّحْمَنَ أَيًّا مَا

تَدْعُوا فَلَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ وَلَا تَجْهَرْ

بِصَلَاتِكَ وَلَا تُخَافِتْ بِهَا وَابْتَغِ بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ

سَبِيلًا ﴿١١٠﴾

وَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي لَمْ يَتَّخِذْ وَلَدًا وَلَمْ

يَكُنْ لَهُ شَرِيكٌ فِي الْمُلْكِ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ
وَلِيٌّ مِنَ الذُّلِّ وَكَبْرُهُ تَكْبِيرًا ﴿١١٠﴾

Overview

This final passage of the *sūrah* centres around its main theme, the personality of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the attitude of his community to him after he was given his message. It also speaks about the Qur'ān and its distinctive characteristics. It begins with a reference to the attempts by the unbelievers to turn the Prophet away from some of the revelations God sent down to him. It mentions their effort to banish him from Makkah and the protection he was given by God so that he would not yield to their temptation or respond to their provocation. God guaranteed his protection because He had already decided that the people of Makkah would not be annihilated like earlier communities who rejected His messengers. He chose instead to give them respite and allowed them to have their term in this world. Had they ousted the Prophet from their community and banished him from their city, severe punishment would have been inflicted on them, in accordance with God's law that inflicts immediate punishment on any community that ousts the messenger sent to them.

The Prophet is commanded to stick to his way, offering his prayers to God alone, reciting the Qur'ān revealed to him and supplicating that God may help him to be true and sincere in all situations and events, and give him clear support. He is also commanded to declare that the truth has come to be established and that falsehood is certain to be vanquished. It is this support granted by God that serves as his best equipment. It protects him against all designs and ensures his ultimate victory.

This is followed by a clear statement on the effect of the Qur'ān: it is a cure and an aspect of grace for those who believe in it, and a means of punishment and suffering for those who deny it. They suffer on its account in this life and they suffer punishment in the life to come because of denying its truth.

Within the context of grace and punishment, the *sūrah* describes man's reaction to both. When he is enjoying God's blessings and grace, man is arrogant, turning away from God's guidance. When he is afflicted with suffering, he is in utter despair. This is followed with an implicit threat, requiring every human being to work in accordance with their own nature until they receive their fair reward in the life to come.

The *sūrah* also makes it clear that human knowledge is scanty. This comes in connection with the question the unbelievers put about the spirit, all knowledge of which God has chosen to keep to Himself. It is not for any human being to get to know it. Sure knowledge is that which God has given to His Messenger as part of His grace. If God so wills, He is able to withdraw that grace and no one will ever be able to bring it back to mankind. However, He bestows His grace on His Messenger as He is Merciful, Compassionate.

The *sūrah* mentions that the Qur'ān, which is a miraculous book, the like of which cannot be produced by human beings or *jinn*, even though they may mobilize all their resources in a single effort, was not sufficient for the unbelievers in Makkah as evidence of God's message. Although God included in it a whole variety of evidence to the truth of its message and made this suitable for human reason and hearts, with all their different leanings, still the unbelievers saw it as inadequate. They naïvely demanded material evidence of a miraculous nature, such as springs gushing from the earth, or a richly decorated home for the Prophet. Their arrogance went even further, demanding things that are beyond the ability of human beings, such as that God's Messenger should rise up into the sky in front of their eyes and bring them a book to read, or that he should cause some matter to fall from the sky and destroy them. They even demanded that God should come to them in person, accompanied by a delegation of angels!

At this point the *sūrah* portrays a scene showing the fate that awaits them in the life to come. This is certain to be their lot as a result of their arrogance and denial of the truth of the Day of Judgement when people will be resurrected after they have become bones and dust.

The *sūrah* ridicules their arrogant demands. Had they been the guardians of God's grace, they would have succumbed to the miserly characteristics of human beings. They would have been in fear lest God's grace should be exhausted, when God's treasures of mercy are indeed inexhaustible. Yet they stop at nothing in their demands.

In connection with their demands for material miracles, the *sūrah* reminds them of the miracles which were given to Moses, yet Pharaoh and his people denied those which God gave them. As a result, God destroyed them according to His law of destroying those who persist in their denial of the truth after clear evidence has been given to them.

The Qur'ān remains as the true miracle that shines for all time. It was revealed in parts and portions, in accordance with the needs of the community it was educating and equipping for its great task. Those who believe in the truth among earlier communities recognize the truth contained in the Qur'ān and submit to it. They

believe in it and submit to its authority.

The *sūrah* concludes with a directive to the Prophet (peace be upon him) to worship none but God, and to glorify and praise Him alone. Thus the *sūrah* ends as it began, calling on believers to glorify God, the only deity in the universe.

Vain Endeavours

They endeavour to tempt you away from that which We have revealed to you, hoping that you would invent something else in Our name, in which case they would have made you their trusted friend. Indeed, had We not given you strength, you might have inclined to them a little. And in that case We would have made you taste a double punishment in life and a double punishment after death, and you would have none to support you against Us. And they endeavour to scare you off the land with a view to driving you away. But, then, after you have gone, they will not remain there except for a short while. Such was the way with all Our messengers whom We sent before you. No change you shall find in Our ways. (Verses 73-77)

The *sūrah* refers to the unbelievers' attempts to dissuade the Prophet from fulfilling the task entrusted to him. Firstly, they tried to make him turn his back on what God revealed to him so as to invent some other matter and attribute it falsely to God. They did this even though he was known for his honesty and truthfulness. They also offered to worship God in return for a compromise that ensured that the Prophet would stop denouncing their deities as false. Some of them tried to persuade him to make their land as sacred as the Ka'bah which God had sanctified. Their nobility also tried to get him to allocate a special meeting place, to which no poor person would be admitted.

Reference to these attempts is made in general terms so that it leads to a reminder of the grace God bestowed on His Messenger as He strengthened him in his faith and protected him from the unbelievers' temptations. Without God's support, he might have responded to them, and they would have made of him an intimate friend. But then he would have left himself open to God's severe punishment. Indeed his would be a double punishment in this life and in the life to come, without any to support him against God.

Such efforts are always made by people in power in dealing with the advocates of God's message. They always tempt them into deviation even if just a little, from the clear and solid line of the message, seeking to persuade them to accept compromise in return for seeming substantial gain. Some may fall for such temptation, because they do not realize the seriousness of the matter. After all, they are not being asked to abandon their call altogether, only to make some minor amendments in order to arrive at a compromise. Satan always endeavours to persuade the advocates of God's

message in this way, arguing that it is better for the achievement of their goals to make such compromises so that the rulers are won over to the faith.

However, a small deviation at the beginning leads to a total turning away at the end. An advocate of God's message who agrees to abandon even a small part of it at the outset cannot maintain his ground and refuse to abandon more. Indeed his willingness to retreat further is greater with every backward step he takes, losing more and more ground.

The point at issue here is the principle of faith, and belief in the whole message. A person who gives up even a minute part of it cannot be a true believer in the message itself. To a true believer, every aspect of the message, and every small detail is true like the rest. We cannot judge between its parts, dividing them into essential and optional. There is nothing in God's message that can be left out or suspended. It is a complete and whole entity, which loses all its characteristics when any of its parts are lost, in the same way as a chemical compound loses all its qualities when any of its components is missing.

People in power always try to ensnare advocates of the divine message. Should the latter give up a small part, they lose their dignity and high standing. Their adversaries also realize that more bargaining and a higher price will induce them to give up the whole message.

Indeed seeking a compromise, by making even small concessions, to win over people in power represents a spiritual defeat for advocates of the divine message. This is so because they now rely on rulers and people in power for support when they should rely on God alone. When defeat creeps into people's minds, it can never turn into victory.

Bearing this in mind, we can appreciate the fact that God directs His Messenger to the fact that He has granted him a great favour by strengthening his resolve to stick to what He has revealed to him and protected him from the unbelievers' temptations. God also favoured him with protection against inclining to the unbelievers even in a small way. For had he so inclined, God would have inflicted on him a double punishment both in this life and in the life to come, and would have left him without help and support.

When the unbelievers of the Quraysh found it impossible to persuade the Prophet to compromise, they tried to turn him out of their land, i.e. Makkah. But God directed him to leave of his own accord and migrate to Madinah. God always knew that He would not exterminate the Quraysh. Yet had they driven the Prophet out of their city by force, that would have been their fate: *"And they endeavour to scare you off the land with a view to driving you away. But, then, after you have gone, they will not remain there except for a short while."* (Verse 76) This is the way God has set to operate

in this life: “Such was the way with all Our messengers whom We sent before you. No change shall you find in Our ways.” (Verse 77)

God has made this way a law which does not fail. Driving a messenger of God out of his land is a great offence which incurs severe punishment. God operates certain laws in this universe, which are not altered for individual cases. This universe is not subject to coincidences that influence its existence; it is subject to constant laws. Since God, in His infinite wisdom, chose not to exterminate the Quraysh, as He did with earlier communities, He did not give His Messenger, the Prophet Muḥammad, miraculous proofs, and did not allow that he be driven away. Instead, He inspired him to leave voluntarily. God’s laws remained in operation, without alteration or modification.

The Truth Will Triumph

At this point in the *sūrah*, the Prophet is directed to remain in contact with his Lord, seeking His support and following His directives, proclaiming the fact that the truth is certain to triumph, while falsehood will inevitably wither away.

Keep up prayer when the sun is on its decline, in the darkness of the night, and recite the Qur’ān at dawn, for the recitation of the Qur’ān at dawn is indeed witnessed. At night, rise from your sleep to recite it in prayer, as an additional offering from you. Your Lord may thus raise you to an honourable station. Say, My Lord, cause me to enter in a true and sincere manner and to leave in a true and sincere manner, and grant me, by Your grace, sustaining strength.’ And say, The truth has now come about while falsehood has withered away. For falsehood is always bound to wither away. We bestow of the Qur’ān from on high what serves as a healing and a blessing to true believers, while it only adds to the ruin of the evildoers. (Verses 78-82)

This directive applies to the Prophet in particular. It does not relate to the obligatory prayers which have their own timings, outlined in several authentic *aḥādīth* and numerous reports of the Prophet’s practical *Sunnah*. Some scholars suggest that the reference here to the sun’s decline means its beginning to move down from its zenith, while they take the reference to the ‘darkness of the night’ to mean the beginning of the night, and the ‘recitation at dawn’ to mean the obligatory prayer at dawn. They thus suggest that the Qur’ānic statement here groups together the times of all five obligatory prayers, *Zuhr*, *ʿAṣr*, *Maḡhrib* and *ʿIshāʿ*, [when the sun is on its decline to the darkness of the night], and then *Fajr* at dawn. They consider that only recitation of the Qur’ān in prayer at night is obligatory on the Prophet as a bonus. For our part, we feel that the first view is more accurate, considering all else that these two verses mention as being applicable to the Prophet only. As for the

timing of daily prayers, these are properly outlined in the *Sunnah*, both verbally and practically.

"Keep up prayer when the sun is on its decline, in the darkness of the night." (Verse 78) This is an instruction to the Prophet to offer prayer at the time between the sun starting to set and the night creeping in to spread its darkness. He is also ordered to *"recite the Qur'ān at dawn, for the recitation of the Qur'ān at dawn is indeed witnessed."* (Verse 78) These two periods when the day and night succeed each other in a continuous cycle have their special significance. Both times mark a change as the light dwindles to give way to the enveloping darkness, and then as the darkness is removed to allow the light to spread. Both times have their effect, softening hearts and inviting people to contemplate how the laws of nature operate without fail. Needless to say, the Qur'ān and prayer also have their effects on people's hearts, particularly at dawn with its calm serenity, and approaching light, leading to another lively day.

"At night, rise from your sleep to recite it in prayer, as an additional offering from you." (Verse 79) The instruction here is to the Prophet to rise after having had some sleep in the early part of the night. The Qur'ān is recited in night worship because it is the hard core of prayer and its most important part. *"Your Lord may thus raise you to an honourable station."* (Verse 79) This is achieved through a constant link with God, manifested by prayer and recitation of the Qur'ān in night worship. Such a position is only achievable in this way. If God's Messenger (peace be upon him), in his particular status, is instructed to maintain prayer and rise from his sleep at night to worship and recite the Qur'ān, so that he attains the honourable station that is allowed him, certainly other people need to follow suit so that they also may attain the good positions to which they aspire. This is the only way for them to travel. The equipment they need as they go along is thus outlined for them.

"Say: 'My Lord, cause me to enter in a true and sincere manner and to leave in a true and sincere manner, and grant me, by Your grace, sustaining strength.'" (Verse 80) This is a supplication that God has taught to His Messenger so that his followers learn how to pray to God. It is a supplication for true and sincere entrance and exit. This implies a true and sincere journey, from start to finish and along the way. Truth and sincerity have their own connotations here in reference to the attempts made by the unbelievers to persuade the Prophet to invent something different from the Qur'ān. Moreover, truth and sincerity add an air of steadfastness, reassurance and total dedication. "And grant me, by Your grace, sustaining power." (Verse 80) This is a supplication for strength that would enable the Prophet to look down on all earthly powers and all that the unbelievers could muster. The expression, 'by Your grace,' implies closeness to God and contact with Him, as well as seeking His help and support.

A true advocate of faith derives strength only from God, and acquires a position commanding respect only through God's power. Such an advocate seeks no shelter or support from a ruler or a person of influence unless he first turns to God for help and protection. The divine message may touch the hearts of people in power, or those occupying positions of influence, and they then become its soldiers and servants. This ensures success for them in this life and in the life to come. But the message itself will not prosper if it ranks itself among the servants and soldiers of rulers. It is God's message and, as such, it commands a position higher than that of any ruler.

"And say, 'The truth has now come about while falsehood has withered away. For falsehood is always bound to wither away.'" (Verse 81) With irrefutable authority derived from God Himself it is proclaimed that truth has come to be established with its overpowering might, while falsehood is totally defeated. For it is in the nature of truth to triumph and establish itself with vigour, while it is in the nature of falsehood to wither away and be vanquished.

"For falsehood is always bound to wither away." (Verse 81) This is a basic truth that is stated here with emphasis. It may appear sometimes that falsehood is equipped with power and influence, but this is all hollow. Falsehood will always try to assume an air of strength, because it has no real strength at its command. It knows that it has to visually deceive, giving the appearance of large size and physical power. But in reality, it is fragile, easy to destroy. It is no more than the flames of dried straw that float into the air only to subside in no time at all. By contrast, live coal burns slowly and steadily to give sustained warmth and long lasting heat. Falsehood is like the scum that floats at the surface. It soon disappears while the real water stays.

Indeed falsehood ends in utter loss because it does not carry within itself the elements necessary for survival. It derives its life, which, by nature, is of short duration, from external elements and unnatural support. Should such elements and support weaken or become loose, it will collapse. Truth, by contrast, derives its power of survival from within itself. It may have to face determined opposition, particularly by those in ruling positions, but its inherent strength and reassurance guarantee its eventual triumph. How could it be otherwise when truth comes from the Eternal One who has made truth an attribute of His own?

"For falsehood is always bound to wither away." (Verse 81) Falsehood may have all the might of Satan and those tyrannical forces which command power behind it, but God's promise will definitely come true and His power is far superior. Every believer who is firm of faith is certain to experience the truth of this promise. *"Who is more true to his promise than God?" (9: 111) "Whose word could be truer than God's?" (4: 87)*

The Qur'ānic Cure

"We bestow of the Qur'ān do from on high what serves as a healing and a blessing to true believers." (Verse 82) There is certainly a cure and a blessing for those whose hearts are full of faith. Such hearts brighten up and become ready to receive what the Qur'ān imparts of grace, reassurance and security. There is in the Qur'ān a healing power that cures obsession, anxiety and hesitation. It establishes a bond between the believer's heart and God. This bond imparts inner peace to the believer as he experiences a feeling of security in God's protection. He is happy and satisfied with what he receives from God and contented with his lot in life. Anxiety, hesitation and obsession are all terrible to experience. As the Qur'ān dispels all these, it is indeed a blessing for true believers.

In the Qur'ān we have a cure from carnal desires, greed, envy and evil thoughts. All these cause sickness of the heart and mind, leading to debility and utter ruin. As the Qur'ān cures these, it is a tool of grace bestowed by God on those who truly believe in Him.

The Qur'ān also provides a cure from deviant thoughts and feelings. It protects the mind from going far astray, while allowing it complete freedom within its fruitful pursuits. It stops the mind from wasting its energy over what is devoid of use. It lays down for it a sound approach that ensures good and useful results. The same principle applies to the human body, ensuring that its resources are utilized for what is useful and fruitful, steering human beings away from the suppression of natural desires or indulgence without restraint. Thus it ensures a healthy body. In this again we see that the Qur'ān is a means of God's grace that is bestowed on believers.

There is also in the Qur'ān a cure for social ailments that weaken the structure of society and destroy its peace and security. Under the social system established by the Qur'ān society enjoys perfect justice in peace and security. This is again a further aspect of grace bestowed through the Qur'ān.

However, the Qur'ān *"only adds to the ruin of the evildoers."* (Verse 82) They make no use of the cure it provides or the blessings it brings about. They look with dismay at the believers as they feel proud to be among the followers of the Qur'ān. In their stubborn arrogance, the evildoers persist with their corrupt and unjust methods. Yet in this life, they are defeated by the followers of the Qur'ān, which makes them losers. In the life to come, they suffer for their arrogant disbelief and tyranny, and thus they lose again. Hence the Qur'ān adds to their ruin.

When man is left to his own devices, without the cure and blessing of the Qur'ān, and without consistent restraint of his whims and desires, he moves between two extremes: when he enjoys good fortune, he is arrogant and ungrateful, and when he experiences hardship he is given to despair. *"Yet when We bestow Our blessings on*

man, he turns his back and draws arrogantly aside, and when he is afflicted by evil he gives himself up to despair.” (Verse 83)

Blessings and good fortune lead to arrogance unless one remembers where they come from and give thanks to God who bestowed them. On the other hand, when someone is afflicted by difficulty and hardship, he is easily lost in despair unless he trusts to God and hopes to receive His grace. It is when one truly relies on God that one feels that hardship will give way to what is better. This makes it clear that faith ensures God’s grace in situations of ease and difficulty alike.

The *sūrah* then states that everyone and every camp acts according to the path it follows. The final verdict on methods and actions is left to God alone: *“Say: Everyone acts according to his own disposition. Your Lord is fully aware as to who has chosen the best path.”* (Verse 84) In this statement we have an implicit warning as to the results of approaches and deeds. Hence, everyone needs to heed the warnings and strive to follow the path of divine guidance which is available to all.

Man’s Scanty Knowledge

At this point the *sūrah* mentions how some unbelievers questioned the Prophet about the spirit and its nature. The consistent approach of the Qur’ān, which is indeed the best approach, is to answer people when they ask about matters that they need to know about and to give them answers that their faculties can understand and learn. It does not waste the intellectual faculties God has given them in pursuits that are of no use to them. Nor does it carry them over domains which they cannot comprehend. Hence, when they asked about the spirit and its nature, the Prophet was instructed to tell them that such knowledge belonged to God alone. None other than Him has such knowledge. *“They question you about the spirit. Say, ‘The [knowledge of the nature of the] spirit belongs to my Lord alone. You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge.’”* (Verse 85)

Such an answer does not present a barrier preventing the proper working of the human intellect. It simply directs such intellect to concentrate its efforts within the limits of its power and the domain where it can profitably function. It is worthless to roam endlessly in a maze. Similarly, it is pointless to spend one’s mental energies pursuing what we are not equipped to comprehend. The spirit is one such pursuit. It belongs to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. It is a secret God has kept to Himself. He has breathed spirit into man and some other creatures whose nature is unknown to us. Compared to God’s absolute knowledge, human knowledge is limited. The secrets of existence are too great to be understood by man’s finite reason. It is not man’s role to manage all the affairs of the universe, and as such, his powers are not limitless. Instead he has been given such powers as are

sufficient for him to control his own world and to fulfil his mission of building the earth and bringing it to the best standard possible within the limits of his faculties and knowledge.

Man has been able to achieve high standards with his inventive powers. However, he looks helplessly at the spirit, unable to fathom its secrets, or to comprehend its nature. He does not know how the spirit comes to us and how it departs, where it comes from and to where it eventually goes. He knows nothing of the spirit except the information God has given us in the revelations He has bestowed from on high. This information provides knowledge that is certain, beyond doubt. It comes from the One who knows everything. Had it been His will, He would have deprived mankind of such knowledge, taking away what He revealed to His Messenger. But He does not do so as an act of grace: *"Had We so willed, We would have taken away that which We have revealed to you. In that case, you would not find anyone to plead with Us on your behalf except through the grace of your Lord. His favour towards you has been great indeed."* (Verses 86-87)

God reminds His Messenger of this act of grace. It is undeniable grace that God has chosen to bestow revelations on His Messenger, and to keep them intact. This is a great favour granted to mankind, since the Qur'ān gives them guidance and blessings, one generation after another.

Just as the spirit is one of the secrets that God keeps to Himself, the Qur'ān is God's book that human beings cannot emulate. Indeed, neither human beings nor *jinn*, representing the visible and invisible types of creation, can produce anything similar to the Qur'ān, even if they were to muster all their powers in a single effort to achieve this task: *"Say: 'If all mankind and the jinn were to gather together for the purpose of producing the like of this Qur'ān, they would not produce anything like it, even though they helped one another as best they could.'"* (Verse 88)

The Qur'ān is not mere words and expressions that humans and *jinn* may try to emulate. It is but one of God's works, the like of which no creature can produce. It is just like the spirit whose nature is known only to God. Creatures cannot fathom its complete secret, even though they may understand some of its aspects, features and merits.

The Qur'ān is indeed a complete and perfect way of life. It provides a method that takes into account all the laws of nature that affect the human soul in all its situations, as well as those affecting human communities in all conditions and stages of development. It provides solutions that apply to a single human being, and others for a closely knit community, providing legislation and rules that suit human nature and its complex bonds, feelings and directions. Its solutions are perfectly coherent and fully consistent. They lose sight of nothing that is relevant, or any possible

option. Nor do they ignore any of the conflicting circumstances that may affect the life of the individual or the community. This is only possible because these laws and legislation are made by God who is fully aware of human nature in all its conditions and its complexities.

Man-made systems, on the other hand, betray man's limitations and reflect his circumstances. They cannot allow for all eventualities at the same time. They may treat an individual or social aspect with something that could easily lead to a situation requiring some other treatment. The miracle of the Qur'ān is far greater than its superb construction and infallible meanings. Indeed the inability of all human beings and *jinn* to produce anything similar to it includes also their inability to produce any system that encompasses all the areas it tackles.

Only a Man and a Messenger

Indeed We have explained to mankind, in this Qur'ān, every kind of lesson. Yet most people refuse to accept anything other than disbelief They say: 'We shall not believe in you till you cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth, or you have a garden of date palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it, or you cause the sky to fall upon us in pieces, as you have threatened, or you bring God and the angels face to face before us, or you have a house of gold, or you ascend to heaven. Indeed we shall not believe in your ascent to heaven until you bring us a book for us to read.' Say, 'Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger.' (Verses 89-93)

Their limited perception has failed to appreciate the inimitability of the Qur'ān. Therefore they started asking for material miracles, enlisting absurd requests that only betrayed their childish thinking. Or they spoke with impudence about God Himself. They did not benefit by the expounding of cases and examples in the Qur'ān, nor were they satisfied with the wide variety of styles and approaches the Qur'ān employed in explaining its concepts, so as to be understood by people of different standards and faculties. Hence, "*most people refuse to accept anything other than unbelief*" (Verse 89) They started to place conditions which they required to be met so that they might believe in the Prophet's message. Such conditions required him to "*cause a spring to gush forth for us from the earth.*" (Verse 90)

Alternatively, they told him that they would not believe in him until "*you have a garden of date-palms and vines, and you cause rivers to flow through it.*" (Verse 91)

Their conditions were so irresponsible that they even demanded that the Prophet inflict on them some punishment from the sky above, mockingly stating that the sky itself should fall upon them in pieces, just as he had warned would happen on the Day of Judgement. A similarly absurd condition was that he should bring God and

the angels before them, so that they could support him and defend his case, like they themselves used to do in tribal arguments. Absurdity knows no limit, for they even asked him to take for himself a house of gold and similarly precious metals. They further suggested to him that he should ascend to heaven as a proof of his special position. But even if he had done so, this too would not have been enough. For he was to bring back a book with him for them to read.

The childish absurdity of all these requests and conditions is clearly apparent. They are all arbitrary suggestions and widely different in scope and nature that they cannot be placed on the same level. How could residence in a luxurious house be considered of similar value to a person's ascension to heaven? And how can the digging up of a water spring he treated as equivalent to bringing God and the angels marching in ranks before them? However, to them these are all miraculous matters, so they can be grouped together. Should Muḥammad accomplish any of these miraculous events, they would consider believing in him and his message.

They overlooked the permanent miracle of the Qur'ān when they were totally unable to produce anything similar to it in style, imagery, meaning and philosophy. Such a miracle is not physical, defying the senses. Hence they demanded to have before them a clearly physical miracle.

But producing a miracle was something that the Prophet could not accomplish. Miracles are only determined by God in His wisdom. It is not appropriate for the Prophet to request such a miracle, unless God wishes to give it to him. The Prophet's understanding and appreciation of God's wisdom prevented him from requesting such a miracle. Hence, he is commanded to say in reply to them: *"Limitless in His glory is my Lord. Surely I am only a man and a Messenger."* (Verse 93) He confines himself to the limits of his human status and he works according to the duties outlined for him in his message. He does not suggest to God anything beyond this.

Before the Prophet Muḥammad was sent as God's Messenger and even after he began to preach his message, people wallowed under the misconception that a human being could be God's messenger. Hence they rejected God's messengers and the messages He revealed to them: *"Nothing has ever prevented people from believing, whenever guidance came to them except that they would say: 'Can it be that God has sent a human being as His messenger?'"* (Verse 94). In this way they turned away from divine guidance.

This misconception results from people's low rating of their own value and the honourable position God has given them. They thought it totally unlikely that a human being could be chosen by God to be His messenger. This betrayed a lack of understanding of the nature of the universe, the angels, and how, in their angelic form, they are unsuited to life on earth. In order for angels to live on earth, their

nature must be modified which would then make it impossible for human beings to recognize them as angels.

"Say, Had there been angels walking about on earth as their natural abode, We would have sent them an angel messenger from heaven." (Verse 95) Had God willed that angels should inhabit the earth, He would have made them in the form of human beings, because it is the form that suits the laws of nature affecting the earth. He says in another verse, *"Even if We had appointed an angel as Our messenger, We would certainly have made him [appear as] a man."* (6: 9) God is certainly able to accomplish any purpose He may have. However, He has willed to set in operation laws of nature and He has made His creatures fit for life under the influence of such laws of nature which He, by His own power and choice, has made permanent and unalterable. Through the operation of His laws of nature, His purpose of creation is thus fulfilled. Yet the unbelievers understand nothing of this.

Since this is the pattern God has chosen for His creation, He instructs His Messenger to end all argument with them and leave the dispute between the two parties to God. He calls on God to be his witness, leaving them entirely to God to do with whatever He pleases. He is the One who knows everything about everyone. *"Say: 'Sufficient is God for a witness between me and you. He is indeed fully aware of His servants, and He sees all things.'"* (Verse 96) This statement carries an implicit warning. The results, however, are painted in a frightening scene of what will happen on the Day of Judgement.

Devoid of all faculties

He whom God guides is indeed rightly guided; whereas for those whom He leaves to go astray you cannot find anyone to protect them from Him. On the Day of Resurrection We shall gather them together, prone upon their faces, blind, dumb and deaf. Hell shall be their abode. Every time it abates We will increase for them its blazing flame. That is their reward for having disbelieved in Our revelations and said, 'When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?' Do they not see that God, who has created the heavens and the earth, has power to create their like? He has beyond any doubt set a term for their resurrection. But the evildoers refuse to accept anything other than unbelief (Verses 97-99)

God has operated certain laws concerning His guidance and people's choice of error in preference to that guidance. He has allowed people to conduct their lives as they wish, but they remain subject to these laws and they will have to face the outcome. One of these laws is that human beings either follow God's guidance or turn away from it into error. The choice is made by man himself. Whoever deserves, on the basis of his efforts and actions, to receive God's guidance will definitely be

guided aright. He is the one who will be truly guided as a result of his choice.

In the other camp we find those who deserve to be left in error because they turn away from God's revelations and blind themselves to all signs pointing the way to His guidance. Such people will have no one to protect them against God's punishment: *"You cannot find anyone to protect them from Him."* (Verse 97) On the Day of Judgement they shall suffer humiliation and will be resurrected in a terrible situation, *'prone upon their faces'*, lost as they will be *'blind, dumb and deaf'* (Verse 97) They are thus deprived of their senses by which they might have been able to find their way through the great multitude. It is a fitting result, because it was they who chose not to use their senses in life to follow the signs of divine guidance. The final outcome is that *"Hell shall be their abode."* It will be made to continue to burn fiercely: *"Every time it abates We will increase for them its blazing fire."* (Verse 97)

It is certainly a horrifying end, but they have earned it through their disbelief in God's signs and revelations, and also through their denial of resurrection, the reckoning and reward: *"That is their reward, for having disbelieved in Our revelations and said, When we are bones and dust, shall we be raised to life again as a new creation?"* (Verse 98)

The *sūrah* portrays the scene as though it is taking place now. It shows this life as having already come to an end and become a distant past. This follows the usual Qur'ānic method of portraying scenes of the hereafter as if they were taking place now in order to enhance their effect, so that people may take heed.

This is followed by a new argument based on what they see in real life but tend to ignore: *"Do they not see that God, who has created the heavens and the earth, has power to create their like?"* (Verse 99) Why should the concept of resurrection be difficult to accept when simple logic confirms that God who has created this majestic universe is able to create a similar one? If He is thus able to create, He is also able to bring creatures back to life after they have died. *"He has beyond any doubt set a term for their resurrection."* (Verse 99) He has allowed them a term of life and set a time for their resurrection. However, *"The evildoers refuse to accept anything other than disbelief"* (Verse 99) Hence their punishment will be fair, as they have had all signs, pointers and evidence to show them the path of guidance, but they refused to follow anything except error and unbelief.

A Threat to Exterminate the Believers

Yet those who made such suggestions and demands as related in the *sūrah* were themselves misers. Had they been in charge of God's grace, they would have held on to it, fearing to expend it. *"Say: Had you possessed the treasures of my Lord's mercy, you would have been tight-fisted for fear of spending them. For man has always been niggardly."*

(Verse 100) This is an image of utter stinginess, because God's grace encompasses everything. It will never be exhausted or diminished. Yet in their miserly attitude, they would have withheld God's grace from His creation, had they been placed in charge of administering it.

Miracles do not initiate faith in hardened hearts. Moses, for example, was given nine such clear signs, but Pharaoh and his people denied them until they suffered God's punishment. *"To Moses We gave nine clear signs. Ask the Children of Israel [about what happened]. When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him, 'Indeed, Moses, I think that you are bewitched. [Moses] said, 'You know full well that none other than the Lord of the heavens and the earth has revealed these eye-opening signs. Indeed, Pharaoh, I think that you are utterly lost.' So he resolved to wipe them off the face of the earth, but We caused him and all those who were with him to drown. Then We said to the Children of Israel, Dwell in the land. When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together."* (Verses 101-104) This part of the history of Moses and the Children of Israel is mentioned here because it fits with the context of the *sūrah*. It started by mentioning the Aqṣā mosque in Jerusalem, and it then related a part of the history of the Israelites with Moses. This is followed by mentioning the hereafter when Pharaoh and his people will be brought forward. This also fits with the scene of the hereafter and the one showing the end of those who deny resurrection, mentioned a little earlier in the *sūrah*.

Moses' nine clear signs to which the *sūrah* refers were his hand turning white, his staff, and the tests to which Pharaoh's people were subjected, such as drought, shortage of fruit, floods, locusts, ants, frogs and blood. *"Ask the Children of Israel' about what happened. They were witnesses to what took place between Moses and Pharaoh: "When he came to them, Pharaoh said to him: Indeed, Moses, I think that you are bewitched."* (Verse 101) Thus the word of truth assigning divinity to God alone, and the call to abandon all injustice and tyranny cannot be uttered, according to the tyrant, except by someone bewitched, unable to realize the meaning of what he says. Indeed tyrants like Pharaoh cannot imagine that anyone in his right senses could ever adopt such an attitude or give expression to such demands.

Moses, on the other hand, realizes that his strength is based in the truth he preaches. His message stands out as a source of light. He is certain of God's support and that He will inevitably punish the tyrants: *"Moses said: 'You know full well that none other than the Lord of the heavens and the earth has revealed these eye-opening signs. Indeed, Pharaoh, I think that you are utterly lost."* (Verse 102) Moses makes it clear to Pharaoh that his denial of the truth when he is fully aware that none other than God could have accomplished such clear signs will earn him a terrible punishment. These signs were clear for anyone who cared to look. They show the truth in full light, clear as the bright day. Yet Pharaoh chose to deny them all and deny God. Hence, divine

justice will inflict on him a punishment that leaves him utterly ruined.

At this point, the tyrannical Pharaoh resorts to his own material force, threatening to wipe Moses and his followers off the face of the earth. Such is the method to which all tyrants resort when they are faced with the truth. But God's will is triumphant. His law of punishing the oppressors and supporting the oppressed comes into force: *"So he resolved to wipe them off the face of the earth, but We caused him and all those who were with him to drown. Then We said to the Children of Israel, Dwell in the land. When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together."* (Verses 103-104)

Thus was the end of those who denied the clear signs which were shown to them as evidence of the truth. God gave the land to the oppressed to rule. When they are in charge, their actions will be the basis of the judgement they have to face. At the beginning of the *sūrah* we were given a clear idea of their end. Here we are only told that both they and their enemies will be gathered together on the Day of Judgement: *"When the promise of the Last Day shall come to pass, We will bring you all together."* (Verse 104)

Method of Qur'ānic Revelations

Pharaoh's destruction by drowning was one example of material miracles worked out in past generations. The *sūrah* tells us how such miracles were received by people bent on denying the truth and how, as a result, they were doomed to suffer God's punishment. The Qur'ān, God's last message, was revealed with the truth so that it could serve as a permanent sign and basis of guidance. It was bestowed from on high in parts, so that it may be read and reflected upon at length: *"We have bestowed [this Qur'ān] from on high in truth, and in truth has it come down. We have sent you only as a herald of good news and a warner. We have divided the Qur'ān into parts so that you may recite it to people with deliberation. We have indeed bestowed it from on high step by step."* (Verses 105-106)

The Qur'ān was revealed in order to educate a community and establish for it a system and code of life. This community would then carry it to all the corners of the earth in order to educate humanity on the basis of this perfect system. Hence the Qur'ān was revealed one part at a time, according to the practical needs of that community and the circumstances attending its first formative period. Education and the moulding of a nation and a community require time as well as practical experience. Thus the Qur'ān was not revealed as a theoretical doctrine or an abstract vision to be used for academic study and polemical argument. It was revealed part by part instead so that it could be implemented gradually during this formative period. This is indeed the reason for its gradual revelation, one part or passage at a

time, not a whole scripture or code given at the outset.

The first generation of believers received it in this light. They approached it as directives to be implemented in practice, be they prohibitions, recommendations or obligations. They never approached it as something for moral or intellectual debate like poetry and literature, or for amusement like legends and stories. They allowed it to influence their daily lives to the full, bringing their feelings, perceptions and behaviour in line with it, and moulding their way of life in accordance with its teachings. They discarded whatever was in conflict with it of their values, norms and practices.

ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd, a learned Companion of the Prophet says: “When any of us learnt ten verses of the Qurʾān, one would not try to learn more until we had fully learnt their meaning and how to put them into practice.”

God revealed the Qurʾān based on the truth: “We have bestowed [this Qurʾān] from on high in truth.” (Verse 105) And its purpose is to establish the truth on earth: “And in truth has it come down.” (Verse 105) Thus the truth is its fabric and ultimate aim, its substance and whole concern. This is the truth as it is ingrained in the constitution of the universe, and forming the foundation of the existence of the heavens and the earth. The Qurʾān is closely linked to the constitution of the universe, always pointing to it. Indeed the truth is the ultimate goal of the Qurʾān. The Prophet gives warnings and promises of happiness on the basis of the truth which the Qurʾān expounds.

To Believe or Not to Believe

At this point the Prophet is commanded to explain the truth plainly to his people, leaving them free to make their choice to either believe in the Qurʾān or to reject it. They will have to bear the consequences of their choice. He puts in front of their eyes an example of its reception by Jewish and Christian people who were given sound knowledge before its revelation. They may feel that they will do well to follow in the footsteps of such learned people when they themselves have not been granted such knowledge:

Say, ‘You may believe in it or you may not.’ Those who were given knowledge before it was revealed fall down on their faces in humble prostration when it is recited to them, and say, ‘Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled.’ And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and it increases their humility. (Verses 107-109)

This is an inspiring image showing people endowed with knowledge listening to

the Qur'ān, touched by its truth and falling down on their faces in humble prostration. They cannot restrain themselves. They do not merely prostrate themselves, but fall down on their faces in complete humility. They give expression to what they feel in their hearts of God's greatness and the fulfilment of His promise: *"Limitless in His glory is our Lord. Truly has the promise of our Lord been fulfilled."* (Verse 108) But then their feelings are further enhanced and they are deeply touched so that words are insufficient to express their feelings. Tears pour down from their eyes telling of their profound emotion: *"And upon their faces they fall down, weeping, and it increases their humility."* (Verse 109) It is a scene of profound feelings demonstrated by people receiving the Qur'ān with open hearts, having learnt from their earlier scriptures of the truth it explains.

This inspiring scene is painted after the *sūrah* has given the Arabs the choice of believing in the Qur'ān or rejecting it. It is followed with a statement leaving it up to them to call on God with whatever names they choose. In their days of ignorance they declined to call God as *Raḥmān*, which means, 'Most Merciful'. Hence they are told that they may call on God with whichever one of His names they choose: *"Say: Call upon God or call upon the Most Merciful. By whichever name you invoke Him, His are the most gracious names."* (Verse 110) Their prejudices concerning His names have no basis other than myth that they used to believe in their ignorance. They have no sound basis.

The Prophet is then instructed to recite his prayers in a middle voice. This is because the unbelievers used to ridicule him whenever they saw him praying. It is also true to say that a voice pitched in the middle is the most suited to prayer: *"Do not raise your voice too loud in prayer, nor say it in too low a voice, but follow a middle course in between."* (Verse 110)

The *sūrah* closes in the same way as it opened, praising God and asserting His oneness, and reiterating the facts that He has neither son nor partner and is in need of no help or support from anyone. This is indeed the pivot round which the *sūrah* turns: *"And say: All praise is due to God who has never begotten a son; who has no partner in His dominion; who needs none to support Him against any difficulty.' And extol His greatness."* (Verse 111)