

SŪRAH 24

Al-Nūr

(Light)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is named *al-Nūr*, meaning The Light, and light is identified as an essential attribute of God: “*God is the light of the heavens and the earth.*” (Verse 35) It is also mentioned in respect of its effects on people’s hearts and souls. Such effects are reflected in human morality and the manners of individuals, families and communities. They impart a brightness to human life that enlightens hearts and makes consciences transparent.

The *sūrah* begins with an emphatic declaration of the fact that it is bestowed from on high, and that it is decreed with all that it contains of directives, commandments and morality: “*A sūrah which We have bestowed from on high and which We have ordained; and in it have We revealed clear verses, so that you may keep them in mind.*” (Verse 1) This opening reflects the importance the Qur’ān attaches to the moral aspect of human life, and to its central position in the Islamic faith.

The central theme of the entire *sūrah* is the education of the Muslim community. At times, the methods employed by the *sūrah* increase in their stiffness so as to culminate in prescribing mandatory punishments. At other times the *sūrah* is softer and more gentle, filling our hearts with God’s light and inviting us to reflect on the numerous signs He has placed throughout the entire universe. The aim of such contrasting approaches is one and the same: to cultivate people’s consciences, enhance their sensitivity and refine their moral standards to the highest degree. The good manners of the individual, the family, the community and society’s leadership are all intertwined as they all stem from the same source, which is belief in God, and shine with the same light received from Him. In essence, these manners combine

light, transparency and brightness. Thus the education the *sūrah* aims to achieve derives all its aspects from the basic source of light in the heavens and earth; that is, God's light that dispels all darkness in the universe, as well as that in people's hearts and souls.

The *sūrah* may be divided into five parts, all tackling its basic theme. At the outset, the first delivers a decisive declaration outlining the status of this *sūrah*, followed by the details of the mandatory punishment for adultery. It denounces this crime in clear terms, making it clear that adulterers have no place in the Muslim community. It also explains the punishment for any false accusation of adultery, and the reasons for the severity of this mandatory punishment. Couples are exempted from this punishment when they take the prescribed oaths that end with their permanent separation. It then comments on the falsehood story. At the end it shows how men and women flock like with like: the good with the good and the evil with the evil.

The second part concerns itself with crime prevention, and the methods to reduce the temptation to sin. It begins with an outline of good manners when approaching others' homes and the need to seek permission before entry. It commands Muslims to lower their gaze and not to reveal women's charms and adornments to anyone other than their very close relatives whom they are not legally entitled to marry. There is also in this part a clear encouragement to facilitate the marriage of young women, and a stern warning against forcing slave girls into prostitution. All these are preventive measures that aim to promote purity and chastity in general. They aim to prevent what stirs up physical desire and to help people to maintain their chastity.

In the middle of this list of good manners as outlined in the *sūrah*, the third part provides a link between all such manners and God's light. Here the *sūrah* speaks of the people whose hearts are brightened with God's light and who always frequent mosques. By contrast, the unbelievers and their deeds are shown as though they are a mirage, or like layers of darkness. In this part we see different aspects of God's light throughout the universe: how all creatures glorify Him; how clouds are sent through the atmosphere; the succession of day and night; the creation of every walking creature out of water and how they acquire their different shapes, forms, types and roles. All these are there for people to look at and contemplate.

In the fourth part the hypocrites are seen to neglect the proper manners people should show when dealing with the Prophet. The most important of these are obedience to the Prophet and the implementation of any judgement he makes in disputes put to him for arbitration. By contrast, the believers are seen to maintain the appropriate standards in speaking to the Prophet and obeying him. In return, they are promised power, that they will establish and implement their faith and attain victory over the unbelievers.

The final part of the *sūrah* again examines the good manners of the Muslim community, highlighting the need to seek admission when visiting relatives and friends, of hospitality to guests, and the fine manners that make the whole Muslim community a single family, led by God's Messenger (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* concludes with a declaration of God's ownership of all that is in the heavens and earth, His knowledge of people and what they harbour in their breasts, and their ultimate return to Him. They will have to face His reckoning on the basis of His knowledge of their deeds. Needless to say, His knowledge encompasses everything.

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The Mandatory Punishment for Adultery

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

[This is] a sūrah which We have bestowed from on high and which We have ordained; and in it have We revealed clear verses, so that you may keep them in mind. (1)

As for the adulteress and the adulterer, flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion for them keep you from [carrying out] this law of God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let a number of believers witness their punishment. (2)

The adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer or an idolater. This is forbidden to the believers. (3)

As for those who accuse chaste women [of adultery], and cannot produce four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes; and do not accept their testimony ever after; for they are indeed transgressors. (4)

سُورَةٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهَا وَفَرَضْنَاهَا وَأَنْزَلْنَا فِيهَا
آيَاتٍ بَيِّنَاتٍ لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١﴾

الزَّانِيَةُ وَالزَّانِي فَاجْلِدُوا كُلَّ وَاحِدٍ مِّنْهُمَا
مِائَةَ جَلْدَةٍ وَلَا تَأْخُذْكُمْ بِهِمَا رَأْفَةٌ فِي
دِينِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ
الْآخِرِ وَلَيْشَهِدَ عَذَابُهُمَا طَآئِفَةٌ مِّنَ
الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٢﴾

الزَّانِي لَا يَنْكِحُ إِلَّا زَانِيَةً أَوْ مُشْرِكَةً
وَالزَّانِيَةُ لَا يَنْكِحُهَا إِلَّا زَانٍ أَوْ مُشْرِكٌ
وَحُرِّمَ ذَلِكَ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

وَالَّذِينَ يَرْمُونَ الْمُحْصَنَاتِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَأْتُوا
بِأَرْبَعَةِ شُهَدَاءَ فَاجْلِدُوهُمْ ثَمَانِينَ جَلْدَةً
وَلَا يَقْبَلُوا لَهُمْ شَهَادَةٌ أَبَدًا وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ
الْفَاسِقُونَ ﴿٤﴾

Excepted are those who afterwards repent and make amends; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (5)

And as for those who accuse their own wives [of adultery], but have no witnesses except themselves, let each of them call God four times to witness that he is indeed telling the truth; (6)

and the fifth time, that God's curse be upon him if he is telling a lie. (7)

However, punishment is averted from her if she calls God four times to witness that he is indeed telling a lie; (8)

and the fifth time, that God's wrath be upon her if he is telling the truth. (9)

Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...! (10)

Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you. Do not regard it as bad for you; indeed it is good for you. Each one of them shall bear what he has earned of sin; and awesome suffering awaits the one who took on himself the lead among them. (11)

When you heard it, why did not the believers, men and women, think the best of themselves, and say: 'This is a blatant falsehood.' (12)

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَأَصْلَحُوا
فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٥﴾

وَالَّذِينَ يَرْمُونَ أَزْوَاجَهُمْ وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُمْ
شُهَدَاءُ إِلَّا أَنْفُسُهُمْ فَشَهَدَةُ أَحَدِهِمْ
أَرْبَعٌ شَهَدَاتٍ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَمِنَ
الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿٦﴾

وَالْخَمِيسَةَ أَنْ لَعْنَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ
الْكَذِبِينَ ﴿٧﴾

وَيَدْرُؤُا عَنْهَا الْعَذَابَ أَنْ تَشْهَدَ أَرْبَعٌ
شَهَدَاتٍ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَمِنَ الْكَذِبِينَ ﴿٨﴾

وَالْخَمِيسَةَ أَنْ غَضَبَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهَا إِنْ كَانَ
مِنَ الصَّادِقِينَ ﴿٩﴾

وَلَوْ لَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ
تَوَّابٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ جَاءُوا بِالْإِفْكِ عُصْبَةٌ مِّنْكُمْ لَا
تَحْسَبُوهُ شَرًّا لَّكُمْ بَلْ هُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ لِكُلِّ
أَمْرٍ مِّنْهُمْ مَا اكْتَسَبَ مِنَ الْإِثْمِ وَالَّذِي
تَوَلَّى كِبْرَهُ مِنْهُمْ لَهُ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١١﴾

لَوْ لَا إِذْ سَمِعْتُمُوهُ ظَنَّ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ
وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَأَنْفُسِهِمْ خَيْرًا وَقَالُوا هَذَا

Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it? Since they have not produced witnesses, then in the sight of God, they are certainly liars. (13)

Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, in this world and in the life to come, awesome suffering would indeed have afflicted you on account of what you indulged in. (14)

You took it up with your tongues and uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge, thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed. (15)

If only when you heard it you said: 'It is not right for us to speak of this! All glory belongs to You. This is a monstrous slander.' (16)

God admonishes you lest you ever revert to the like of this, if you are truly believers. (17)

And God makes plain to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (18)

Those who love that gross indecency should spread among the believers shall be visited with grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. God knows, but you do not know. (19)

إِفْكٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿١٣﴾

لَوْلَا جَاءُوا عَلَيْهِ بِأَرْبَعَةِ شُهَدَاءَ ۚ فَإِذْ لَمْ يَأْتُوا بِالشُّهَدَاءِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ هُمُ

الْكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ لَمَسَّكُمْ فِي مَا أَفَضْتُمْ

فِيهِ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

إِذْ تَلَقَّوْنَهُ بِأَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَتَقُولُونَ بِأَفْوَاهِكُمْ مَا لَيْسَ لَكُمْ بِهِ عِلْمٌ وَتَحْسَبُونَهُ هَيِّنًا

وَهُوَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٦﴾

وَلَوْلَا إِذْ سَمِعْتُمُوهُ قُلْتُمْ مَا يَكُونُ لَنَا أَنْ نَتَكَلَّمَ بِهَذَا سُبْحَانَكَ هَذَا بُهْتَانٌ

عَظِيمٌ ﴿١٧﴾

يَعِظُكُمُ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَعُودُوا لِمِثْلِهِ أَبَدًا إِنْ

كُنْتُمْ مُّؤْمِنِينَ ﴿١٨﴾

وَيُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمُ الْآيَاتِ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ

﴿١٩﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُحِبُّونَ أَنْ تَشِيعَ الْفَاحِشَةُ فِي الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا

Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is Compassionate, Merciful ...! (20)

Believers! Do not follow Satan's footsteps, for he who follows Satan's footsteps will only enjoin what is shameful and wrong. Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, none of you would have ever been pure. It is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity. God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (21)

Let not those of you who have been graced with God's favour and ample means resolve by oath not to help those who are near of kin, the needy and those who have left their homes for the sake of God. But let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins? God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (22)

Those who accuse chaste women who may have been unthinkingly careless but remained true believers, shall be rejected by God in this world as well as in the life to come. They shall endure awesome suffering: (23)

on the day when their own tongues, hands and feet will testify to what they did. (24)

On that day God will pay them in full their just due, and they will come to know that God alone is the Ultimate Truth, absolutely manifest. (25)

تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ رءُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢١﴾

﴿ يَتَّبِعُهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَتَّبِعُوا خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ وَمَنْ يَتَّبِعْ خُطُوَاتِ الشَّيْطَانِ فَإِنَّهُ يَأْمُرُ بِالْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ مَا زَكَا مِنْكُمْ مِّنْ أَحَدٍ أَبَدًا وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يُزَكِّي مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَلَا يَأْتَلِ أُولُو الْفَضْلِ مِنْكُمْ وَالسَّعَةِ أَن يُؤْتُوا أُولِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلِيَعْفُوا وَلِيَصْفَحُوا ۗ أَلَا تُحِبُّونَ أَن يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَرْمُونَ الْمُحْصَنَاتِ الْغَافِلَاتِ الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ لُعِنُوا فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ وَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

يَوْمَ تَشْهَدُ عَلَيْهِمْ أَلْسِنَتُهُمْ وَأَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَرْجُلُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

يَوْمَ يَدْرَأُ يَوْمَ يَدْرَأُ يَوْمَ يَدْرَأُ اللَّهُ دِينَهُمُ الْحَقَّ وَيَعْلَمُونَ

Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men for corrupt women, just as good women are for good men, and good men for good women. These are innocent of all that people may impute to them. Forgiveness and excellent sustenance are in store for them. (26)

أَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ الْمُبِينُ ﴿٢٥﴾

الْحَيْثُ تُلْخِيثُ لِلْحَيْثُ وَالْحَيْثُ
 لِلْحَيْثُ وَالطَّيِّبُ لِلطَّيِّبِ وَالطَّيِّبُ
 لِلطَّيِّبِ أَوْلَتِكَ مُبْرَأُونَ مِمَّا
 يَقُولُونَ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةٌ وَرِزْقٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

An Unusual Beginning

This *sūrah* has a unique opening that is not repeated anywhere else in the Qur'ān. What is special is the use of the clause 'We have ordained'. We take this to imply an emphatic assertion that people must take everything that the *sūrah* includes in the same way. Social manners and morality are ordained in the same way as mandatory punishments. We need to remember here that such manners and morality are deeply rooted in human nature, but people tend to overlook them because of deviant social pressures and easy temptations. Hence, the divine revelations God has bestowed from on high place them back before people's eyes, explaining the clear logic of undistorted human nature.

This emphatic and clear opening is immediately followed with an explanation of the mandatory punishment for adultery, a ghastly crime that severs the ties between its perpetrator and the Muslim community.

As for the adulteress and the adulterer, flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion for them keep you from [carrying out] this law of God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let a number of believers witness their punishment. The adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer or an idolater. This is forbidden to the believers. (Verses 2-3)

In the early days of Islam, the punishment prescribed for adulterers was that outlined in *Sūrah 4, Women*, which says: "As for those of your women who are guilty of gross immoral conduct, call upon four from among you to bear witness against them. If they so testify, then confine the guilty women to their houses until death takes them or God opens another way for them." (4: 15) Thus the punishment for the guilty adulteress was confinement at home and verbal reprimand, while the adulterer was punished by verbal reprimand only. Sometime later, God revealed the new mandatory

punishment specified in this *sūrah*. This is then the 'way' opened by God to which *Sūrah* 4 alluded.

Flogging is the punishment of male and female adulterers who have not been empowered through marriage. This punishment is enforced on any Muslim who is sane, of age and a free person whose guilt is established. As for a person who has had sexual relations within a proper marriage and then commits adultery even though he is sane, of age and free, his punishment is stoning.¹⁶

Such stoning is confirmed in the *Sunnah*, while flogging is established clearly in the Qur'ān. Since the Qur'ānic statement is phrased in general terms, and the Prophet inflicted stoning on a married man and a married woman who committed adultery, it is clear that the punishment of flogging applies only to adulterers who are unmarried.

There are several juristic differences in this area. For example, combining the two punishments of flogging and stoning for a married adulterer. Most scholars, however, agree that no such combination applies. Other points of difference include sending unmarried adulterers into exile in addition to the flogging, and the punishment for a slave adulterer. These juristic differences are very detailed, but we do not propose to speak about these here. Readers who are interested may refer to books on *Fiqh*. We instead will confine ourselves here to a discussion of the wisdom of this piece of legislation.

The first point to note is the difference in the punishment incurred by adulterers, depending on their marital status. A Muslim who is of age, free and sane and who has already experienced sex within marriage is fully aware of the clean and proper way to satisfy sexual desires. To abandon this and resort to adultery betrays a deviant and corrupt nature. Hence, punishment is increased in this case. A virgin on the other hand may feel the temptation so strongly when he is inexperienced. There is also a difference in the nature of the act itself. A married person is able to enjoy sex in a much better and more refined way than a virgin. Hence, he deserves increased punishment.

As has already been mentioned, the *sūrah* speaks here of the mandatory punishment for the unmarried adulterer only. It emphasizes the requirement to put it into effect, with no compassion shown to the perpetrator: "*As for the adulteress and the adulterer, flog each of them with a hundred stripes, and let not compassion for them keep you*

¹⁶ One difference not mentioned by the author relates to whether stoning is mandatory or discretionary. The traditional view is that it is mandatory, but a number of eminent scholars have questioned this, classifying it as discretionary. A discretionary punishment is left to the judge looking into the case, or the ruler, to determine whether to apply it in full, reduce, or even withhold it. A mandatory punishment is stated by God and it must be applied as stated, when the offence is duly proven in accordance with the provision of Islamic law. — Editor's note.

from [carrying out] this law of God, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day; and let a number of believers witness their punishment.” (Verse 2) The Muslim community is required to implement this punishment showing no sympathy for the offenders. The punishment should be administered in public with a number of believers present. This makes it harder for the offenders and increases the deterrent effect for the beholders.

The crime is shown to be increasingly heinous. Hence, all ties between the perpetrators and the Muslim community are cut off: “*The adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer or an idolater. This is forbidden to the believers.*” (Verse 3)

This means that those who commit adultery do not do so while they are believers. They only commit it when they are in a state that is far removed from faith and the feelings it generates in people’s hearts. A believer is not comfortable to enter into marital relations with someone who has abandoned faith through such a terrible offence. Indeed Imām Aḥmad is of the view that marriage is forbidden between an adulterer and a chaste woman, or between a chaste man and an adulteress. A prerequisite for such a marriage to be valid is for such offenders to genuinely repent. At any rate, the Qur’ānic verse makes it clear that by nature believing men and women feel that to be married to someone who commits adultery is strongly repugnant. Thus, it is very unlikely to happen, and this improbability is described here as a prohibition. Thus, ties between the Muslim community and individuals who commit adultery are non-existent.

A report giving the reason for the revelation of the second of these two verses mentions that Marthad, a man from the *Anṣār*, used to go to Makkah to free those who were imprisoned because of their belief in Islam. He would take those whom he managed to free to Madīnah. Before becoming a Muslim, he used to have a friend in Makkah called `Anāq who was a prostitute. On one of his visits, he arranged to smuggle out a prisoner held in Makkah. He said: “I stopped by the outside wall of a garden on a clear night with moonlight. `Anāq soon came and noticed a black shade against the wall. When she drew near, she recognized me and mentioned my name. I confirmed that it was I. She welcomed me and invited me to her place to stay the night. I said: ‘`Anāq! God has forbidden adultery.’ She gave me away, shouting to the people that I was smuggling their prisoners out. As I tried to disappear, eight of them followed me. I went into the garden and walked until I entered a cave. They followed me in and stood by my head, while I remained motionless. Some of them urinated over my head, but God helped me and they did not notice me. When they left, I returned to my man and helped him. He was very heavy, but I carried him for a distance, and then I untied him. I carried him on, but he helped me until we safely reached Madīnah. I then went to the Prophet and asked him if it was all right for me

to marry `Anāq. I repeated my question twice, but he did not reply until this verse was revealed stating:

'The adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress; and with the adulteress couples none other than an adulterer or an idolater. This is forbidden to the believers.' The Prophet said to me: 'Marthad! An adulterer couples with none other than an adulteress or an idolatress. Do not marry her.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī]

This verse, then, implies that a believer is forbidden to marry an adulteress unless she genuinely repents. The same applies to a female believer and an adulterer. This is the view Imām Aḥmad took, but other scholars had a different view. As a point of difference, it may be studied in *Fiqh* books. At any rate, this type of action alienates the perpetrator from the Muslim community, which in itself is a severe social punishment that is no less painful than flogging.

Is Hard Punishment Justified?

When enacting such severe punishments for this abominable offence, Islam does not overlook the natural desire behind it. Islam knows that human beings cannot and should not suppress such a natural desire. Nor does Islam wish that people should fight the physiological functions God has given them as part of their nature and part of the laws of life, ensuring the continuity of mankind. Islam only shuns an animal approach to this desire that treats one body the same as another, and which has no intention of building a home, life partnership or family. Islam wants sexual relations between a man and a woman to be based on fine human feelings that involve their hearts and souls in their physical union, so as to make it a union between two human beings sharing their lives, pains, hopes, and futures. In this way, any children will be reared by both parents building a future together.

This is the reason why Islam ordains such a severe punishment for adultery, considering it a setback that reduces man to an animal. It destroys all these fine feelings and goals. Adultery turns human beings into animal-like creatures that treat all men as males and all women as females, trying to satisfy a physical desire in a casual way. Its momentary ecstasy has neither a constructive aim nor a fine, durable love behind it. It is the continuity aspect that distinguishes such a fine feeling from a momentary and casual charge which many people describe as passion when it is in fact a physical desire momentarily taking the guise of fine feeling.

Islam neither suppresses natural feelings nor considers them dirty. It only regulates, purifies and elevates them above the physical level so that they become central to many psychological and social values. By contrast, adultery, and prostitution in particular, removes from such natural desires all the exquisite

feelings, attractions and values that have been refined over the long history of human life. It leaves such desires naked, dirty and coarser than in animals. In many animal and bird species, couples live together in a regulated life. They do not have the sort of sexual chaos that adultery spreads in some human communities, particularly where prostitution is rife.

In order to spare man this type of setback, Islam prescribes such punishment for adultery. Needless to say, this offence causes numerous social ills that people often mention when they speak about this crime. These include false parenthood, undermining family life and causing hatred and grudges. Each one of these social ills justifies a very hard punishment for the offence causing it. But the primary reason for it is preserving the humanity of man, protecting the moral standards that have come to be associated with clean sex, furthering the aims of marital life that is intended to last. This is, in my view, the reason that serves all others.

Islam, then, prescribes a very heavy penalty for adultery, but it does not legislate such a penalty without first putting in place sufficient legislation to protect people from falling into such sin. It also ensures that the punishment is not enforced except in cases where there is certainty about the offence and its perpetrators. Islam is a complete code of living that is not based on punishment. Its basis is to provide all that promotes a clean and pure life. If some individuals then abandon this clean and easy life in order to deliberately submerge themselves in filth, they incur such heavy penalties.

When a crime takes place in spite of all these measures, Islam prevents the infliction of the penalty wherever possible. The Prophet says: "Spare Muslims the infliction of mandatory punishments wherever possible.

If there is any way out for the accused, let him go unpunished. It is better that the ruler errs on the side of pardon, rather than punishment." [Related by al-Tirmidhī] In the case of adultery, Islam requires four witnesses to testify that they have seen the offence, or else, a clear and confirmed confession.

It may be suggested, then, that the punishment is unreal and unenforceable, which renders it ineffective as a deterrent. As we have said, punishment is not the basis of the Islamic approach; its basis is prevention, education and cultivating people's finer feelings and consciences so that they refrain from even contemplating an offence. It only punishes those who are intent on committing the crime, paying little regard to society, so as to be seen by four witnesses. It also inflicts the punishment on those who wish to purify themselves of the effects of the offence after having committed it. In other words, the punishment is applied to those who confess to their offence. This is what happened to Mā`iz and his Ghāmidī consort when they went to the Prophet requesting him to inflict the punishment so as to purify them of their sin. Both were

insistent, in spite of the Prophet turning away from them time after time. In fact, they confessed four times each, which left the Prophet no option but to inflict the punishment, for at this point the confession was no longer suspect. The Prophet said: “Spare yourselves mandatory punishments; for when I have established that a sin carrying such a punishment has been committed, the punishment must be done.” [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Thus, when certainty is established and the matter has been put to the ruler, or judge, the mandatory punishment must be applied, with no compassion shown to the offenders. Such compassion is misplaced, because it is in fact cruel to the community and human morality. God is much more compassionate to His creatures and He has chosen what He knows to serve their interests best. When God decides on a particular case, no believer, whether man or woman, can counter that choice. Nor is it right that anyone should speak out against such punishment, describing it as hard or savage. It is indeed much more compassionate than what awaits a community that allows adultery to spread.

Measures Against False Accusation

Prescribing a very hard punishment for adultery is not sufficient, on its own, to protect the Muslim community and ensure the purity of its atmosphere. Therefore, a supplementary order is given to isolate the adulterers from the rest of the Muslim community. Furthermore, heavy punishment is prescribed for those who accuse chaste women of adultery without providing firm evidence in support of their accusation:

As for those who accuse chaste women [of adultery], and cannot produce four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes; and do not accept their testimony ever after; for they are indeed transgressors. Excepted are those who afterwards repent and make amends; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (Verses 4-5)

Allowing people to accuse chaste women, whether married or not, without clear proof would mean that people could make such accusations without fear of repercussion. This in turn would stain the Muslim community’s reputation. Every individual would feel threatened with false accusations. Every man would suspect his wife, and every wife her husband, and people would begin to doubt their legitimacy. In such an intolerable state of doubt and suspicion, every family would be undermined. Moreover, when such accusations are frequently made, those who steer themselves away from adultery might begin to think that such crime was common in society. They might then begin to see it in a different light, as less ghastly, as a result of such frequent mention. Furthermore, those who would not even have

contemplated it at all might even begin to think of doing so, feeling that since many others do it, there is no harm in it.

Thus, in order to protect people's honour, and to prevent their suffering from suspicion as a result of uncorroborated accusations, the Qur'ān prescribes for false accusation a punishment that almost equals that of adultery. False accusers are to be flogged with 80 stripes each, and their future testimony in any case or situation rejected. Plus they are to be labelled as transgressors. The first part of this punishment is physical, while the second is moral. It is sufficient that the accuser is deprived of the right to testify, and considered an unreliable and unacceptable witness no matter what the case or situation. The third part is religious. The one guilty of false accusation follows a line that deviates from the straight path of faith. The only way out is that the accuser should provide four witnesses who have seen the offence being committed, or three alongside him if he himself has seen it. If the four give such testimony, the accusation is proved and the punishment for adultery is enforced on the perpetrator.

The point at issue here is that the Muslim community does not lose much by suppressing an accusation that cannot be proven. Conversely it loses much more by condoning accusations that cannot be proven. Indeed when such accusations become the subject of casual conversation, they serve to encourage people to do the same, while stopping any discussion of such matters, unless clearly proven, delivers a clear message that adultery, an abominable offence, is rare or even non-existent in society. Moreover, the false accusation of chaste women causes the latter much pain and mental suffering, in addition to its being a means of destroying families and relations.

The punishment meted out to the false accuser continues to hang over his head, even after its administration, unless he genuinely repents: *"Excepted are those who afterwards repent and make amends; for God is Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 5)

Scholars differ in their understanding of this exception: does it apply only to the last punishment, which means that the accuser is no longer considered a transgressor, but continues nevertheless to be unacceptable as a witness in any situation? Or would he be acceptable as a witness once he has declared his repentance? Mālik, Aḥmad and al-Shāfi`ī are of the view that once he has repented, he is no longer a transgressor. He is again acceptable as a witness. On the other hand, Abū Ḥanīfah maintains that repentance only stops him being considered a transgressor, but he remains unacceptable as a witness. Al-Sha`bī and al-Ḍahhāk, renowned scholars of the early Islamic period, say that despite his repentance, he is unacceptable as a witness unless he admits that his original accusation was false.

I personally prefer this last view, because it adds to the accuser's repentance a

clear declaration by him that the accused is innocent. In this way, all effects of the accusation are removed. No one can then say that the punishment was inflicted on the accuser because of lack of sufficient supporting evidence. No one who heard the accusation can continue to entertain any thought that its substance was correct, and that it could have been proven if more witnesses were ready to come forward. Thus, the innocent would have their innocence confirmed both socially and legally. This leaves no reason to continue to punish the accuser by refusing his testimony, after he has repented his original action and declared that the accusation he made was false.

When a Husband Accuses His Wife

All the foregoing applies to accusing women of adultery. An exception is made, however, in the case of a husband accusing his wife. To require him to produce four witnesses is unreasonable. In normal situations, a man does not accuse his wife falsely, because the very accusation carries a negative reflection on his own honour and against his own children. Hence, this type of accusation carries a totally different ruling:

And as for those who accuse their own wives [of adultery], but have no witnesses except themselves, let each of them call God four times to witness that he is indeed telling the truth; and the fifth time, that God's curse be upon him if he is telling a lie. However, punishment is averted from her if calls God four times to witness that he is indeed telling a lie; and the fifth time, that God's wrath be upon her if he is telling the truth. Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...! (Verses 6-10)

This ruling lightens the burden for married people in a way that takes their special circumstances into consideration. A man may find his wife in a compromising position but there be no one else as witness to the deed. In this case, he swears by God four times that he is telling the truth, and adds a fifth incurring God's curse on himself if he is telling a lie. These oaths are called testimonies, because he is the only witness. When he has done so, he pays her any portion of her dowry that may be outstanding, and she is immediately and finally divorced. She is also liable to the punishment for adultery. However, she can avert this punishment by swearing by God four times that her husband is telling lies, and adds a fifth incurring God's curse on herself if he is telling the truth. If she does, then no punishment is administered in this case, but the marriage is irrevocably terminated. If she is pregnant, the child is named after her, not after her husband. No one can attach any blame to the child. If anyone does make an accusation against the child, they are liable to punishment.

The *sūrah* comments on this delicate ruling by saying: "*Were it not- for God's favour*

upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...!" (Verse 10) It does not tell us what would have happened, had God not bestowed His favours and grace on us in this way, and extended His manifest grace by accepting our repentance. Instead, the statement leaves us with an impression that it is something very serious, and that people are much better off, avoiding it through God's grace.

Several reports explain the occasion when these verses were revealed. Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Ibn `Abbās: "When the verse stating, *As for those who accuse chaste women [of adultery], and cannot produce four witnesses, flog them with eighty stripes; and do not accept their testimony ever after,*' was revealed, Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the *Anṣār* said: 'Is that how it has been revealed, Messenger of God?' The Prophet said: 'People of the *Anṣār*! Do you hear what your chief is saying?' They said: 'Do not blame him, Messenger of God. He is a man with a keen sense of honour. He never married a woman unless she was a virgin. If he divorced a woman, none of us would dare to marry her, because we realize how he takes that.' Sa`d said: 'Messenger of God! I know it to be true and that it comes from God. I only wondered that if I would find a man on top of my wife, I could not disturb him until I have brought four witnesses. By the time I bring them, he would have finished his business.'

It was not long after that Hilāl ibn Umayyah went to the Prophet. He had been on his farm before going home at night. He found a man with his wife. He saw things with his own eyes, and he heard things with his ears. He did not fight with the man, but the next morning he said to the Prophet: 'Messenger of God! I went home last night and I found my wife with a man. I saw and heard things with my own eyes and ears.' The Prophet was very displeased when he heard this, and found it hard to deal with. The *Anṣār* said: 'What Sa`d ibn `Ubādah foretold has come to pass. The Prophet must now subject Hilāl ibn Umayyah to punishment by flogging and declare him unacceptable as a witness.'

Hilāl said to his people: 'By God, I certainly hope that He will provide a way out for me.' Addressing the Prophet, he said: 'Messenger of God! I see that my story has been very difficult for you; but God knows that I am telling the truth.'

The Prophet was about to give orders that punishment should be inflicted on Hilāl when revelations were bestowed on him from on high. Those who were around him recognized this fact by the change in his face. These verses dealing with the situation were revealed. The Prophet's face regained its colour, and he said: 'Hilāl! Rejoice, for God has given you a way out.' Hilāl replied: 'I certainly hoped that God would grant me that.' The Prophet gave orders for the woman to be brought to him. When she came, the Prophet recited these verses to them both, reminding them both that punishment in the hereafter is far more severe than any punishment in this life. Hilāl

said: 'Messenger of God! I have certainly said the truth when I accused her.' She said: 'He is lying.' The Prophet then said: 'Let them both say their oaths.'

Hilāl was first told to swear. He swore by God four times that what he said was the truth. Before saying his fifth oath, people said to him: Hilāl, fear God. This is the one that incurs punishment in the hereafter, while punishment in this world is that much less.' He said: 'By God! He will not punish me for this, just like He did not let me be flogged for it.' He made the fifth oath, invoking God's curse on himself if he were lying. The woman was then offered the chance to refute the charge. She swore by God four times that he was lying. When she was about to make her fifth oath, people said to her: 'Fear God, and remember that punishment in the hereafter is much more severe. This is the oath that incurs God's punishment for you.' She stopped for a while and thought about confessing. She then said: 'I will not bring a scandal on my people's heads.' She made her fifth oath, invoking God's curse on herself if her husband was telling the truth.

The Prophet ordered their marriage irrevocably terminated. He also judged that her child, should she be pregnant, would not be named after a father, and that the child would not be shamed. If anyone was to hurl an accusation at the child, then that person would be punished. His judgement also made it clear that she could not claim shelter in her husband's home, and she could not have any maintenance from him, as the marriage was dissolved without divorce or death. He also said: 'If her child, when born, has slightly reddish hair, a thin bottom and small legs, then he is Hilāl's child. If he is born dark, with strong features and curly hair, of large build, with large legs and a fat bottom, then he belongs to the man she has been accused of associating with.' When the child was born, he was of the second description. The Prophet said: 'If it was not for the oaths, I would have had something to sort out with her.'"

We see that this ruling was given to deal with a particular case that was not only hard for the husband concerned, but also the Muslim community and the Prophet. Indeed, the Prophet could not find a way out of it. According to al-Bukhārī's report, the Prophet said to Hilāl: 'You either bring the proof or lay your back for punishment.' Hilāl said to him: 'Messenger of God! If any of us finds a man on top of his wife, should he go and seek witnesses?'

Legislation is Given When Needed

As this case provides for a special situation which is exempted from the general rules of false accusation, it may be asked why God did not reveal this exception to the general rules in the first place? Why did God wait until a situation occurred, one which caused embarrassment and hardship?

God certainly knows all this, but in His infinite wisdom He bestowed from on high the revelation outlining the rules when the need for it was keenly felt. Thus, the rules were received with eagerness, and people immediately recognized the wisdom behind the legislation and the divine grace it ensured. Hence, the verses outlining the procedure conclude with the statement: *“Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, and that God is the One who accepts repentance, the Wise...”* (Verse 10)

Let us pause a little here to reflect on the Islamic method of moulding the new Muslim community and how the Prophet re-educated his Companions by means of the Qur’ān. We should remember here that he was dealing with Arabs who were characteristically and strongly impulsive, particularly in cases of personal honour. They would rarely pause to consider options before rushing into action. Thus, when legislation was established outlining the punishment for accusing chaste women of adultery without providing the required proof, people found it difficult. Sa’d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the *Anṣār*, went as far as asking: “Is that how it has been revealed, Messenger of God?” He puts forward his question, knowing for certain that the verses were revealed in that way. His question, however, reflected the difficulty he felt in complying with that ruling in a particular situation he imagined. Hence, he explained: “Messenger of God! I know it to be true and that it comes from God. I only wondered that if I found a man on top of my wife, I could not disturb him until I had brought four witnesses. By the time I brought them, he would have finished his business.”

Yet the situation that Sa’d found hard to imagine soon took place in reality. A man came forward, having found his wife with a stranger, seeing them with his own eyes, and hearing them with his own ears. Yet the Qur’ānic rules did not permit any measure to be taken against them. Therefore, he had to overcome his own feelings, traditions and the social environment that called for immediate action. Even harder than that, he had to restrain himself and wait for a ruling from God. Such restraint is especially difficult, but Islam re-moulded the Arabs to patiently bear such hardship so that there could be no rule other than God’s. Only His rulings apply in all life situations.

How could this happen? Simply, those people felt that God was with them, and that He took care of them, without requiring them to put up with things they could not bear. They realized that God would never abandon them in a situation that went beyond their abilities and would never deal unjustly with them. They felt that they lived under God’s care. Hence, they looked for His grace in the same way as children look to their parents’ care.

Hilāl ibn Umayyah had come home to find his wife with a man, seeing and hearing them both. As he was alone, he could only complain of this to the Prophet who, in turn, felt that he must apply the ruling concerning an accusation not

supported by four witnesses. Hence, he said to Hilāl: “You either bring the proof or lay your back for punishment.” Hilāl, however, believed that God would not let him suffer a punishment when he only stated the truth. He knew that what he said about his wife was right. At this moment, God revealed new verses outlining an exception in the case of husbands accusing their wives. The Prophet gave the good news to Hilāl, who confidently said: “I certainly hoped that God would grant me that.” He trusted to God’s mercy, justice and care. Furthermore, he trusted that God was looking after that community of believers. It was faith that re-moulded the Arabs and made them submit fully to God’s rulings, whatever they happened to be.

A False Accusation Against the Prophet’s Wife

Having outlined the rules applicable in cases of accusing women of adultery, the *sūrah* mentions a case of false accusation that reflects the repugnance of this crime. This involved the Prophet’s own household with its noble and chaste inhabitants. It reflected on the honour of the Prophet, the most beloved person by God, and the honour of his friend, Abu Bakr, the Prophet’s closest Companion. It also involved the honour of a man, Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, who enjoyed the Prophet’s own testimony that he never saw anything but good from him. It was a case that preoccupied the entire Muslim community in Madīnah for a whole month.

The Qur’ān refers to this whole episode, calling it The Falsehood, in a ten-verse passage that runs as follows:

Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you. Do not regard it as bad for you; indeed it is good for you. Each one of them shall bear what he has earned of sin; and awesome suffering awaits the one who took on himself the lead among them. When you heard it, why did not the believers, men and women, think the best of themselves, and say: ‘This is a blatant falsehood.’ Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it? Since they have not produced witnesses, then in the sight of God, they are certainly liars. Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, in this world and in the life to come, awesome suffering would indeed have afflicted you on account of what you indulged in. You took it up with your tongues and uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge, thinking it a light matter whereas in God’s sight it is grave indeed. If only when you heard it you said: ‘It is not right for us to speak of this! All glory belongs to You. This is a monstrous slander’ God admonishes you lest you ever revert to the like of this, if you are truly believers. And God makes plain to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. Those who love that gross indecency should spread among the believers shall be visited with grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. God knows, but you do not know. Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, and that God is Compassionate, Merciful...! (Verses 11-20)

This false story caused the purest soul in human history much suffering, and made the Muslim community go through one of the hardest experiences in its long history. It left the hearts of the Prophet, his wife `Ā'ishah, Abū Bakr and his wife, as well as Şafwān, for a whole month subject to doubt, worry and endless pain. Here are the details of the story as told by the pure and chaste lady at the centre of this painful episode.

Every time the Prophet went abroad he made a toss among his wives to decide which of them should accompany him. At the time of the al-Muṣṭalaq expedition, the toss favoured me and I travelled with him. At the time, women did not eat much, which meant that they were slim and light. When my transport was prepared for me, I would sit in my howdah which would then be lifted onto the camel's back. When they had secured it, the camel driver would march with it.

When the Prophet had completed his business on that expedition and was on his way back, he encamped one night at a spot not very far from Madīnah. He stayed there only part of the night before the call to march was again made. People started to get ready and in the meantime I went out to relieve myself. I was wearing a necklace, and I did not feel it drop off me before I returned. Back in the camp I felt for my necklace and, realizing that it was gone, I looked for it there, but could not find it. People were just about to move. I therefore went quickly back to that particular spot and searched for my necklace until I found it.

In the meantime, the people who prepared my camel finished their task and took up the howdah, thinking that I was inside, and lifted it onto the camel's back and secured it. It did not occur to them that I was not inside. They, therefore, led the camel away. When I came back to where we had encamped, there was no one to be seen. The army had marched. I, therefore, tied my dress round my body and lay down. I realized that when I was missed, someone would come back for me. I soon fell asleep.

Şafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal of the tribe of Sulaym was travelling behind the army. He was apparently delayed by some business and did not spend that night in the camp. When he noticed someone lying down, he came towards me. He recognized me since he used to see me before we were ordered to wear veils. He said: *Innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji`ūn*, "We all belong to God and to Him we shall return." I woke up when I heard him. I did not answer him when he asked me why I had been left behind. However, he made his camel sit down and asked me to ride it, which I did. He led the camel seeking to catch up with the army. Nobody missed me before they had stopped to rest. When

everybody had sat down to relax, Ṣafwān appeared, leading his camel, on which I was riding. This prompted those people to invent the story of falsehood. The whole army was troubled with it, but I heard nothing.

It is worth noting here that when `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy saw `Ā'ishah approaching, he enquired who she was. When he was told that it was `Ā'ishah, he said: "Your Prophet's wife has spent the whole night with a man, and now she turns up with him leading her camel!" This statement gave rise to the falsehood that was spread about `Ā'ishah. `Ā'ishah's narrative continues:

Shortly after our arrival in Madīnah, I felt very ill. Nobody told me anything about what was going on. The Prophet and my parents heard the story, but they did not mention anything to me. However, I felt that the Prophet was not as kind to me during this illness of mine as he used to be. When he came in, he would ask my mother who was nursing me: "How is that woman of yours?" He said nothing else. I was distressed and requested his permission to be nursed in my parents' home. He agreed. I went there and heard nothing. I was ill for 20-odd nights before I began to get better.

Unlike other people, we, the Arabs, did not have toilets in our homes. To us, they were disgusting. What we used to do was to go out at night, somewhere outside Madinah where we would relieve ourselves. Women went only at night. One night I went out with Umm Miṣṭah [Abū Bakr's cousin]. While we were walking, she was tripped by her own dress and fell down. As she did so, she said: "Confound Miṣṭah" to her own son.

I said: "Improper indeed is what you have said about a man of the Muhājirīn who fought at Badr." She asked me: "Have you not heard the story then?" When I asked her what story, she recounted to me what the people of falsehood said about me. I swear I could not relieve myself that night. I went back and cried bitterly until I felt that crying would break me down. I said to my mother: "May God forgive you. People said what they said about me, and you mentioned nothing to me."

My mother said: "Calm down, child. Any pretty woman married to a man who loves her will always be envied, especially if she shares him with other wives."

I said: "Glory be to God. That people should repeat this sort of thing!" I cried bitterly throughout that night till morning, without a moment's sleep.

The Prophet called `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Usāmah ibn Zayd to consult them about divorcing me. Usāmah, who felt that I was innocent, said: "Messenger of God, she is your wife and you have experienced nothing bad from her.

This story is a blatant lie.”

ʿAlī said: “Messenger of God, God imposed no restriction on you in matrimonial matters. There are many women besides her. If you would see fit to ask her maid, she would tell you the truth.” The Prophet called in my maid, Barīrah, and asked her whether she had seen anything suspicious. Barīrah said: “By Him who sent you with the message of truth, there is nothing I take against her other than, being so young, she would doze off and let the hens eat the dough I had prepared for baking.”

The Prophet addressed the Muslims in the mosque when I was still unaware of the whole matter. He said: “I have seen nothing evil from my wife. Those people are also involving a man from whom I have seen no evil. He never entered my wives’ rooms except in my presence.

Saʿd ibn Muʿādh, the Aws leader, said: “Messenger of God, if these men belong to the Aws, our tribe, we will spare you their trouble. If, on the other hand, they belong to our brethren the Khazraj, you have only to give us your command.”

Saʿd ibn ʿUbādah, the leader of the Khazraj, who enjoyed a good reputation, allowed his tribal feelings to get the better of him this time and said to Saʿd ibn Muʿādh: “By God, you shall not kill them. You are saying this only because you know that they are of the Khazraj.”

Usayd ibn Ḥudāyr, a cousin of Saʿd ibn Muʿādh, said to Saʿd ibn ʿUbādah: “You are no more than a hypocrite defending other hypocrites.” People who belonged to both tribes were very angry and were about to fight. The Prophet was still on the pulpit and he tried hard to cool them down, until finally he succeeded.

I continued to cry for the rest of the day. I could not sleep. Next morning both my parents were with me – I had spent two nights and a day crying hard. My tears never stopped. Both of them felt that my crying would break my heart. While we were in that condition, a woman from the Anṣār came to me and started to cry with me.

Shortly afterwards the Prophet came and sat down. He had not sat in my room ever since the rumour started. For a whole month he received no revelations concerning me. When he sat down, he praised and glorified God before going on to say: ʿĀʾishah. People have been talking, as you are now well aware. If you are innocent, God will make your innocence known. If, however, you have committed a sin, then you should seek God’s forgiveness and repent. If a servant of God admits her sin and repents, God will forgive her.”

When the Prophet finished, my tears dried up completely and I turned to my father and said: "Answer the Prophet." He said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

I then said to my mother: "Answer the Prophet." She said: "I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

I was still a young girl, and I did not read much of the Qur'ān. However, I said: 'I know that you all have heard this story repeated again and again until you now believe it. If I tell you that I am innocent, and God knows that I am, you will not believe me. If, on the other hand, I admit something when God knows that I am innocent of it, you will believe me. I know no comparable situation to yours except that of Joseph's father [I tried to remember Jacob's name but I could not] when he said: "*Sweet patience! It is to God alone that I turn for support in this misfortune that you have described.*" (12: 18) I then turned round and lay on my bed. I knew that I was innocent and that God would make my innocence known. It did not occur to me for a moment, however, that God would reveal a passage of the Qur'ān concerning me. I felt myself too humble for God to include my case in His revelations. All I hoped for was that the Prophet should see something in his dream to prove my innocence. Before the Prophet left us, however, and before anyone left the house, God's revelations started. The Prophet was covered with his own robe, and a pillow was placed under his head. When I saw that, I felt no worry or fear. I was certain of my innocence, and I knew that God, limitless as He is in His glory, would not be unjust to me. As for my parents - well, by Him who holds `Ā'ishah's soul in His hand, while they waited for the Prophet to come back to himself, they could have died for fear that divine revelations might confirm what people said. Then it was all over. The Prophet sat up, with his sweat looking like pearls on a wet day. As he wiped his forehead, he said: "`Ā'ishah, I have good news for you. God has declared your innocence." I said: "Praise be to God."

My mother said to me: 'Rise and go to God's Messenger, (peace be upon him).' I said: 'No. I am not rising, and I am not praising anyone other than God who has declared my innocence.' God revealed the passage starting with, *Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you,* in ten verses. When God thus declared my innocence, Abū Bakr, who used to support Miṣṭah ibn Athāthah, considering that he was a poor relation of his, said: 'By God, I will never again give Miṣṭah any assistance, after what he has said about `Ā'ishah.' But God then revealed the verse that says: '*Let not those of you who have been graced with God's favour and ample means resolve by oath not to help those who are near of kin, the needy and those who have left their homes for*

the sake of God. But let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins? God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.' (Verse 22) Abū Bakr said: 'Yes, indeed. I do hope that God will forgive me my sins.' He then resumed his support of Miṣṭah, saying: 'I will never stop my assistance to him.'

ʿĀ'ishah further mentions that the Prophet had asked another of his wives, Zaynab hint Jaḥsh, about her. She said: 'Messenger of God! I want to protect my hearing and sight. By God, I have seen from her nothing but good.' She was the one among the Prophet's wives who used to vie with me for a favourite position with the Prophet. God has thus protected her through her keen sense of piety. Her sister, Ḥamnah, however, continued to speak, as though to enhance her position. She was thus involved with those who circulated the false story. [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

As the Prophet Faces False Accusations

This account tells us how the Prophet and his household, Abu Bakr and his family, as well as Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, and the entire Muslim community lived in such a suffocating atmosphere, suffering much mental pain because of the false rumours circulating.

It is hard to imagine this particularly difficult period in the Prophet's life when his beloved wife, ʿĀ'ishah, young and sensitive as she was, endured such profound anguish. ʿĀ'ishah, pure, kind, innocent and entertaining only clear thoughts and with a clear conscience, faced an accusation about her most valued qualities. She, Abu Bakr's daughter who enjoyed the most noble and moral upbringing, was accused with regard to her honour; the wife of Muhammad ibn ʿAbdullāh, who belonged to the noble clan of Hāshim, faced an accusation concerning her honesty; the wife enjoying the great love of her husband was charged with being unfaithful; the girl brought up according to Islamic values from a very early age was accused of being false to her faith. And ʿĀ'ishah was none other than the wife of God's Messenger, (peace be upon him)!

Such accusations were levelled at her when she was innocent, unaware, taking no precaution as she expected no harm. Hence, she had nothing to prove her innocence except hope for help from God Almighty. Her dearest wish was that the Prophet should have a dream revealing her innocence. But revelations slackened for a whole month, and this is for a definite purpose known to God alone. Hence, she continued to suffer.

Can we imagine her, much weakened by illness, when she received the shocking news from Miṣṭah's mother? She suffered a recurrence of her fever. In her grief, she

said to her mother: 'Glory be to God. That people should repeat this sort of thing!' A different version of the story quotes her saying to her mother: 'Does my father know of this?' Her mother told her that he did, and she went on: 'And God's Messenger?' Again her mother confirmed this.

Great indeed was her pain when she heard the Prophet in whom she believed saying to her: "People have been talking as you are now well aware. If you are innocent, God will make your innocence known. If, however, you have committed a sin, then you should seek God's forgiveness and repent. If a servant of God admits her sin and repents, God will forgive her." Hearing these words, she realized that he was uncertain of her innocence, and that he could not make a judgement about the accusation levelled at her. God had not yet told him the fact of which she herself was certain but had no means of proving, i.e. that she was absolutely innocent. She was aware that although she enjoyed a favourite position in his great heart, she now stood uncertain.

Consider the position of Abū Bakr, a man endowed with great sensitivity and a noble heart, feeling the painful sting of an accusation levelled at his daughter, married to his most intimate friend who was none other than the Prophet in whom he unhesitatingly believed. Strong and pain-enduring as he was, he let out an expression of the writhing thoughts troubling him: "We were never accused of such a thing in the days of ignorance! Are we to accept such a charge under Islam?" His sick and much tormented daughter said to him: "Answer the Prophet!" Dejected and forlorn, he said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

His wife, Umm Rawmān, tried to put a strong face on in front of her daughter who was rending her heart apart with crying. She said to her: "Calm down, child. Any pretty woman married to a man who loves her will always be envied, especially if she shares him with other wives." But her fortitude collapsed when her daughter said to her: "Answer the Prophet." Like her husband before her, she said: "By God, I do not know what to say to God's Messenger, peace be upon him."

And then, Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, a good believer who laid down his life to fight for God's cause, was accused of being unfaithful to the Prophet. Thus, the accusation touched his honour, honesty and faith. A God-fearing Companion of the Prophet was falsely accused of being untrue to everything the Prophet's Companions held dear. Yet he was certain of his innocence. When faced with this false accusation, he said: "All praise be to God! By God I have never taken a dress off a female's shoulder." When he heard that Hassān ibn Thābit was one of those who repeated the accusation, he hit him on the head with his sword, almost killing him. He knew that it was forbidden for him to hit a fellow Muslim, but the pain of this false accusation was unbearable.

Far worse, it was Muhammad (peace be upon him), God's Messenger and the man at the pinnacle of the Hāshimite clan, the noblest in Arabia, who found himself subject to an accusation that involved none other than `Ā'ishah, the woman who occupied a special place in his heart as his most beloved wife. This accusation meant that the most private place in his home, which was a source of purity, was not pure. The Prophet, who was very keen to guard every sanctity in his community, was faced with an accusation that violated the sanctity of his own household. God's Messenger, who was protected against all harm, was shown through this accusation to have no protection from God!

With this accusation levelled at `Ā'ishah (may God be pleased with her), the Prophet encountered everything that ran against his personal honour and against everything that was held dear to an Arab, and to a Prophet. Yet the accusation had been made, and was the subject of conversation in Madīnah for a whole month, and he had no means to put an end to it. For a definite purpose of His own, God let this falsehood circulate for a whole month, revealing nothing to set the record straight and put the facts as they were. Meanwhile, Muhammad, the man, suffered all that a human being experiences in such a hard situation. Shame and heart-felt pain were part of what he endured. But he also suffered the absence of the light that always illuminated his way, i.e. revelation. Doubt crept into his heart, despite the numerous indications that confirmed his wife's innocence. Yet he lacked clear certainty as the rumours continued to circulate in Madīnah. His loving heart was tormented by doubt which he could not clear because he was, after all, a human being who experienced all human feelings. He was a man who could not entertain the thought that his bed could be stained. Once the seed of doubt creeps into a man's heart, it is difficult to remove without clear and decisive evidence.

Alone, he found this whole burden too heavy. Therefore, he sent for Usāmah ibn Zayd, a young man who held a position close to his heart [as Usāmah was the son of the man the Prophet had adopted as his own son in pre-Islamic days]. He also sent for `Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, his trusted cousin. He consulted them both about this very private matter. `Alī, the Prophet's close relative, was keenly aware of the difficulty of the situation and the pain, worry and doubt experienced by the Prophet, his cousin who had brought him up. Hence, he told him that God had not restricted him in matters of marriage. He also advised that the Prophet should ask the maid, so that he could get some reassurance. Usāmah, on the other hand, realized how compassionate the Prophet felt towards his wife, and how troubling to him was the thought of leaving her. He, therefore, stressed what he knew of her certain purity and the fact that those who circulated the rumour were indeed liars.

In his eagerness to establish the truth, and in his continued anxiety, Muhammad, the man, derived some support from Usāmah's statement and the maid's report. He

spoke to the people in the mosque, reproaching those who did not respect his honour, spoke ill of his wife and accused a man who was known to be virtuous and with no blemish on his character. This led to friction between the Aws and the Khazraj, culminating in mutual accusations and verbal abuse. All took place in the Prophet's presence, which gives us a picture of the atmosphere that prevailed in the Muslim community during that very strange period. It was a time when the sanctity of the Muslim leadership was breached. The Prophet was further hurt by the absence of the light which he always expected to illuminate his way. Therefore, he went to `Ā'ishah, telling her of people's talk and asking her for a clear statement that could bring him relief.

At this point when the Prophet's pain was at its most acute, his Lord turned to him with compassion. Revelations were bestowed from on high, making `Ā'ishah's innocence absolutely clear. Thus, the noble household of the Prophet was free of blame. The hypocrites who had circulated this falsehood were exposed. The proper way of dealing with such a serious matter was also outlined for the Muslim community.

Referring to this passage of the Qur'ān that was revealed to deal with her case, `Ā'ishah said: "I knew that I was innocent and that God would make my innocence known. It did not occur to me for a moment, however, that God would reveal a passage of the Qur'ān concerning me. I felt myself too humble for God to include my case in His revelations. All I hoped for was that the Prophet should see something in his dream to prove my innocence."

But the question was not merely that of `Ā'ishah and her personal status. It touched on the Prophet, his personality and his role in the Muslim community. It indeed touched on his relation with his Lord and his message. The falsehood story was not aimed at `Ā'ishah as a person. Rather, it aimed to undermine the entire faith of Islam, by casting doubts about the Prophet sent by God to deliver this message. For this reason, a whole passage of the Qur'ān was revealed to provide a final verdict about this invented falsehood. Thus, the Qur'ān directed the Muslim camp in the raging battle, revealing the divine wisdom behind all developments.

How the False Story Was Circulated

"Those who concocted the falsehood were a band from among you." (Verse 11) It was not merely one or a few individuals that circulated the story. On the contrary, they were a 'band' or a group working for a particular objective. `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy was not the only one who fabricated the story. Rather, he was the one who took the lead and played the larger part in the affair. He simply represented the band of Jews or hypocrites who felt unable to fight Islam in open engagement. Therefore, they sought

to hide behind the pretence that they were Muslims. They felt that this would enable them to scheme in secret against Islam. This false story was one of their worst schemes which was so successful that some Muslims were deceived and a few of them, like Ḥamnah bint Jahsh, Ḥassān ibn Thābit and Miṣṭah ibn Athāthah repeated the story. The real culprits, however, were the band headed by `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, a canny schemer who operated behind the scene, saying nothing in public that might have incriminated him. He simply whispered into the ears of those whom he trusted never to testify against him. The plan was so subtle that the false rumours continued to circulate for a whole month in Madīnah, the purest society on earth at that time.

The Qur'ānic passage opens with stating this fact so as to make clear the enormity of the event and the fact that it was perpetrated by a group of people intent on wicked scheming against Islam. The *sūrah*, however, quickly reassures the Muslim community that the eventual outcome of the event will not harm them: *"Do not regard it as bad for you; indeed it is good for you."* (Verse 11)

It was indeed good because it exposed those who schemed against Islam, targeting the Prophet and his family. It also showed the Muslim community the importance of prohibiting the accusation of adultery, and prescribing a severe punishment for such false accusations.' The event also clearly showed the dangers that threatened the Muslim community if people were to casually accuse chaste female believers who might behave unwittingly. For once this begins, it never stops. Indeed, it can increase at such a scale that it eventually touches the most noble of leadership. The result is that the Muslim community loses all values that provide protection against such a state of affairs. Moreover, it is good for the Muslim community that God outlines how best to deal with such an affair.

As for the pain suffered by the Prophet, his household and the Muslim community in general, it is all part of the test they had to go through in order to learn through experience.

Those who were involved in circulating and repeating the false story will bear their fair share of sin, according to what they did or said: *"Each one of them shall bear what he has earned of sin."* (Verse 11) Each will be taken to account by God for what they perpetrated. This is indeed vile because it is a sin that incurs punishment both in this world and in the life to come. Furthermore, *"awesome suffering awaits the one who took on himself the lead among them,"* to suite his role in this ghastly business.

The one 'who took the lead' and masterminded the whole affair was `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the chief of the hypocrites who was consistently the worst schemer against Islam. He knew how to choose his moment which could have had devastating effects, had not God foiled all his schemes. In His grace, God preserved His faith, protected His Messenger and looked after the Muslim community. One

report suggests that when Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, leading `Ā'ishah's howdah, passed by him and a group of his people, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy asked: 'Who was that?' People said: "Ā'ishah." He said: 'By God! She has not been safe from him, nor was he safe from her.' He further exclaimed: 'Your Prophet's wife has passed the night with a man until the morning, then he comes leading her!'

This was a wicked remark which he repeated in various ways, circulating it through his band of hypocrites. They employed such wicked means that Madīnah was full of this incredible story for a whole month, despite all indications and evidence that confirmed its falsehood. Yet many were the Muslims who spoke about it in a casual manner when it should have been dismissed right away.

Two Steps for Proof

How could all this have happened in that particular community? Even today, we are surprised that such a flimsy fabrication could have circulated in that Muslim community, producing far-reaching effects and causing much pain to the noblest people on earth.

The whole episode was a battle fought by God's Messenger (peace be upon him), the Muslim community and Islam. It perhaps was the greatest battle fought by the Prophet. He emerged from it victorious, having controlled his great anguish, maintained his dignity and endured it all patiently. Not a word did he utter to indicate weakness or impatience. Yet he was experiencing the worst pain he ever endured in his life. He further recognized that the risks to which Islam was exposed as a result of this falsehood were among the worst it had to face at any time.

Yet had the Muslims then searched in their own hearts, they would have found the right answer. Had they applied simple natural logic, they would have been rightly guided. The Qur'ān directs all Muslims to follow this proper approach when they face such difficulties. It is the first step in arriving at the right conclusion: "*When you heard it, why did not the believers, men and women, think the best of themselves, and say: This is a blatant falsehood.*" (Verse 12)

That would have been much better. Muslims should think well of themselves and realize that they are highly unlikely to sink so low. Their Prophet's pure wife and their brother who fought for Islam, laying down his life, belonged to them as a community. Hence, to think well of them was the better course of action. What is unbecoming of all Muslims is unbecoming of the Prophet's wife and of his Companion who was known as a good person. This is indeed what was done by Abū Ayyūb, Khālid ibn Zayd al-Anṣārī and his wife. According to Ibn Ishāq, Abū Ayyūb was asked by his wife: "Have you heard what people are saying about `Ā'ishah?" He replied: "Yes, I have, and it is all lies. Would you have done that, Umm Ayyūb?" She

said: “No, by God! I would not.” He said: “And by God, `Ā’ishah is better than you.” A different report is given by al-Zamakhsharī in his commentary on the Qur’ān, suggesting that it was Abū Ayyūb who asked his wife: “Have you heard what is being said?” In reply, she asked him: “Had you been in Ṣafwān’s place, would you have thought ill of the Prophet’s wife?” He said: “Certainly not.” She said: “And if I were in `Ā’ishah’s place, I would never be unfaithful to the Prophet. Yet `Ā’ishah is better than me, and Ṣafwān is better than you.”

Both reports suggest that some Muslims at least searched their own hearts and ruled out the possibility that the false story suggested. They dismissed any notion that `Ā’ishah or the Prophet’s Companion could have committed such a grave sin and been unfaithful to the Prophet, and recognized how utterly flimsy the basis of the whole accusation was. This is the first step in the approach the Qur’ān outlines for dealing with such matters; it seeks evidence from within people’s consciences. The second step is to produce material evidence: *“Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it? Since they have not produced witnesses, then in the sight of God, they were certainly liars.”* (Verse 13)

This blatant fabrication targeted the highest position in the Muslim community and the purest people. Hence, it should not have been allowed to circulate casually without supporting evidence. Hence the requirement: *“Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it?”* (Verse 13) They certainly did not produce any witnesses. Hence, they were, in God’s judgement, liars. God never alters His verdict or modifies His decision. Thus, this description of those people as liars remains always true of them, and they cannot escape it in any situation.

Thus we have two steps in the Islamic approach: searching in our own hearts and basing our decision on firm and clear evidence. But the Muslim community at the time overlooked both steps, allowing the liars to speak ill of the Prophet and his honour. This was serious indeed and it could have landed the Muslim community in serious trouble, had it not been for God’s grace. Hence, God warns the Muslims never to fall into such a trap again: *“Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, in this world and in the life to come, awesome suffering would indeed have afflicted you on account of what you indulged in.”* (Verse 14)

When Falsehood Circulates

God wanted this to be a very hard lesson for the fledgling Muslim community, but in His compassion He did not inflict any punishment on them. The offence itself merited stiff punishment because of the pain it caused the Prophet, his wife, close friend and his other Companion of whom he knew nothing but good. It also merited a punishment equal to the evil that circulated within the Muslim community,

violating all its sacred values, and equal to the hypocrites' wickedness whose scheme aimed to undermine Islam by raising doubts about God, the Prophet and the Muslim community itself. This continued for a whole month which was a time of doubt, worry and confusion. But God's grace was forthcoming, and He bestowed His mercy on those who were in error after having learnt their bitter lesson.

The *sūrah* gives us a picture of the period, when standards and values were placed on the wrong footing, and the community lost sight of its principles: *"You took it up with your tongues and uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge, thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed."* (Verse 15) The picture painted here is one of recklessness and irresponsibility, showing little care for even the most serious of matters.

"You took it up with your tongues." (Verse 15) One tongue picks it up from another paying little heed to what is being said. There was an utter lack of proper examination of the report, as though people repeated it without ever thinking of its significance. You *"uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge."* (Verse 15) It is just like that: a mouth utterance without thought or consideration. Mere idle talk uttered and circulated even before it is understood. They thought it a light matter, although it was an accusation against God's Messenger's personal honour, causing him, his wife and household great pain. It was an accusation against Abū Bakr's family which suffered no similar trouble even in pre-Islamic days when moral values were of little importance. This false story also accused another Companion of the Prophet who laid his life down for the defence of Islam. It further had negative implications concerning the care God took of His Messenger. Yet, still they circulated the false rumour *"thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed."* (Verse 15) Nothing could be described as grave in God's sight unless it is so serious that it shakes firm mountains and disturbs the heavens and earth.

A matter of such seriousness should have made people shudder just on hearing it. They should have been reluctant even to refer to it, and certainly been unwilling to accept it as a subject of conversation. They should have looked to God to protect His Messenger. Such falsehood should have been cast aside immediately: *"If only when you heard it you said: 'It is not right for us to speak of this. All glory belongs to You! This is a monstrous slander.'"* (Verse 16)

When the matter has thus been clarified, and those early Muslims were taken aback by the enormity of the affair and their role in it, they were given a very stern warning for the future: *"God admonishes you lest you ever revert to the like of this, if you are truly believers."* (Verse 17)

The warning comes in the form of an admonition so as to be educative, choosing the time when the Muslim community is at its most receptive. But the admonition

carries at the same time an implicit warning, and attaches their being believers to the heeding of this warning. Believers cannot retain their faith if they revert to the same type of action after they have been shown its enormity and after they have been given such a warning.

“And God makes plain to you His revelations.” (Verse 18) He has certainly shown the story to be plainly false, exposing the scheming behind it. He has also made plain the errors involved in this matter. *“God is All-Knowing, Wise.”* He knows motives, intentions, objectives, thoughts and feelings. His method of bringing out the best in people and providing proper restrictions and controls to set the community’s life right testifies to His wisdom.

Further Warnings, More Grace

The *sūrah* further elaborates its comments on this falsehood and its effects, repeating its warning against anything that may be of a similar nature. It reminds the Muslims of God’s grace and mercy, warning those who falsely accuse chaste women of committing indecency that they expose themselves to God’s punishment in the life to come. It also purges people’s hearts of the remaining effects of this confrontation, frees them of earthly restrictions and restores their purity. This is clearly reflected in Abū Bakr’s attitude to Miṣṭah ibn Athāthah, his relative who was involved in repeating the story.

“Those who love that gross indecency should spread among the believers shall be visited with grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. God knows, but you do not know.” (Verse 19) The ones who accused chaste women of adultery, particularly those who made their accusations against the Prophet’s own family, really aimed to undermine the values of goodness, chastity and fidelity, so as to make it easier for people to commit adultery by implying that it was common practice. When people begin to think of it in this light, it will be practised more frequently.

This is the reason for describing the false accusers of chaste women as people who love to spread indecency among the believers. Hence they are warned against a very severe suffering both in this life and in the life to come.

It is an aspect of the Qur’ānic method of educating the Muslim community and a measure of prevention based on perfect knowledge of how people react and formulate their attitudes, feelings and lines of action. Hence, the comment at the end of the verse asserts: *“God knows, but you do not know.”* Who knows the human heart better than the One who created it? Who can provide humanity with a better code of living than the One who originated it? Who sees what is concealed as well as what is left in the open, and whose knowledge encompasses all things and situations?

Once again the *sūrah* reminds the believers of the grace God bestows on them: *“Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, and that God is Compassionate, Merciful. ...!”* (Verse 20)

The mistake committed was grave indeed, and its evil was about to engulf the whole Muslim community, but God’s grace, mercy and care prevented this evil. Hence, God reminds them of this, time after time, as He aims this to be an edifying lesson. When they realized the extent of the matter that could have engulfed them all, had it not been for God’s grace and mercy, they were told that what they did was indeed following in Satan’s footsteps. They must not fall into this trap, since Satan is their avowed enemy, ever since the beginning of human life. Again they are warned against what this may entail in their life: *“Believers! Do not follow Satan’s footsteps, for he who follows Satan’s footsteps will only enjoin what is shameful and wrong. Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, none of you would have ever been pure. It is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity. God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.”* (Verse 21)

Nothing but a terrible fate awaits the believers if they take just one step with Satan. They should steer away from him altogether and follow a different way. The very thought of following Satan is repugnant to believers. Hence, drawing it in this way and holding it in front of them should make them always alert. *“He who follows Satan’s footsteps will only enjoin what is shameful and wrong.”* (Verse 21) This false story is a stark and gruesome example of how Satan leads believers to something evil.

Man is weak, susceptible to desires and whims which may leave him stained, unless he benefits by God’s grace when he turns to Him and follows His guidance: *“Were it not for God’s favour upon you and His grace, none of you would have ever been pure. It is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity.”* (Verse 21) When God’s light shines in a believer’s heart, it purifies it. It is only through God’s favours and grace that people grow in purity. Since God knows all and hears all, He certainly knows the ones who deserve to be purified and who are genuinely good. It is these that He helps to grow in purity.

Attaining the Sublime

Within the context of purity, the *sūrah* calls on believers to forgive one another as they love to be forgiven their sins: *“Let not those of you who have been graced with God’s favour and ample means resolve by oath not to help those who are near of kin, the needy and those who have left their homes for the sake of God. But let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins? God is indeed Much- Forgiving, Merciful.”* (Verse 22)

This verse was revealed in connection with Abū Bakr after the Qur’ān had cleared his daughter, `Ā’ishah the pure, of any misconduct. He realized that Miṣṭah ibn

Athāthah, his relative whom he supported because of his poverty, was among those involved in circulating the false rumour. Therefore, he vowed that he would never do Miṣṭah a good turn in the future. This verse, however, reminds Abū Bakr and the believers that they also commit mistakes and hope for God's forgiveness. Hence, they should forgive one another their mistakes. They must not deprive those who need the support of their generosity, even though the latter might have committed a grave error.

Now we see how one of the souls touched by God's light grows in purity attaining a truly sublime standard. Abū Bakr, who was so deeply hurt by the false rumours targeting his daughter and attempting to disgrace his family, responded to the Qur'ānic call on the believers to forgive those who hurt them. He reflected on the inspiring question, "Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins?" (Verse 22) And he rose above the pain and injury, and also above the logic that prevailed in his environment. He felt there could only be one answer to that question, and with certainty and contentment he said: "Yes, indeed. I love that God should forgive me." He reinstated the allowance he had been giving Miṣṭah, and vowed anew that he would never stop it in future. His vow replaced his earlier one that he would not give him anything. With such a sublime standard of generosity, Abū Bakr's heart was cleansed of any hard feeling and retained its purity.

The forgiveness of which God reminds the believers is granted only to those who repent of their errors, accusing chaste women of adultery and spreading corruption in the Muslim community. On the other hand, those who, like Ibn Ubayy, deliberately, and out of malice, make such accusations, will have no pardon or forgiveness. Even though they may escape punishment in this world, because no witnesses will testify against them, they will inevitably endure the punishment in the hereafter when no witnesses will be required.

Those who accuse chaste women who may have been unthinkingly careless but remained true believers, shall be rejected by God in this world as well as in the life to come. They shall endure awesome suffering; on the day when their own tongues, hands and feet will testify to what they did. On that day God will pay them in full their just due, and they will come to know that God alone is the Ultimate Truth, absolutely manifest. (Verses 23-25)

The *sūrah* paints their crime in stark colours so as to expose its odious nature. It is an accusation against chaste women believers who go about their lives, totally oblivious to any possibility of accusation. They behave naturally, not thinking that they will be accused of something, simply because they have done nothing wrong. To accuse them of immorality is thus seen to be very serious, betraying the contemptible and mean nature of their accusers. Hence, they are cursed now by God,

and expelled from among those who receive His grace in this present life and in the life to come. The *sūrah* then shows us a fascinating scene: *“On the day when their own tongues, hands and feet will testify to what they did.”* (Verse 24) Thus we see them accusing one another, just as they used to accuse chaste believing women. The contrast is very clear, as is always the case in the Qur’ān.

“On that day God will pay them in full their just due.” (Verse 25) Their deeds will be accurately reckoned and they will be given all that they really deserve. At that time they will be certain of what they used to be in doubt about. *“They will come to know that God alone is the Ultimate Truth, absolutely manifest.”* (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* concludes its comments on this whole story of falsehood by highlighting God’s justice in the way He has given man his nature so as to manifest itself in practice. This is why the corrupt will unite with their like and the good will associate with others of their type. This is how relations are consolidated between husband and wife. Hence, it is absolutely impossible that ʿĀ’ishah could be like what her accusers said of her, because she was destined to be the wife of the best person that ever lived.

“Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men for corrupt women, just as good women are for good men, and good men for good women. These are innocent of all that people may impute to them. Forgiveness and excellent sustenance are in store for them.” (Verse 26) The Prophet dearly loved ʿĀ’ishah. It was inconceivable that God should let His Prophet love her so much unless she was innocent of all guilt, pure and deserving of such a great love.

Good men and women are, by their very nature, *“innocent of all that people may impute to them.”* (Verse 26) False accusations cannot stick to them. *“Forgiveness and excellent sustenance are in store for them.”* (Verse 26) They will be forgiven any mistake they may commit, and they have their reward with God, clearly indicating their high position with Him.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes its comments on this serious trial for the Muslim community because it aimed at undermining their trust that the Prophet’s household was absolutely pure and that God would not allow anyone but the most pure to be a member of that household. God wanted this episode to be an edifying lesson for the Muslim community, elevating it to an even more sublime standard.

2

Measures to Preserve Decency

Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates. This is best for you, so that you may take heed. (27)

If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave; and if you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you. God has full knowledge of all that you do. (28)

You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal. (29)

Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do. (30)

And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof.

يَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتًا غَيْرَ
بُيُوتِكُمْ حَتَّىٰ تَسْتَأْذِنُوا وَتُسَلِّمُوا
عَلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

فَإِن لَّمْ تَجِدُوا فِيهَا أَحَدًا فَلَا تَدْخُلُوهَا
حَتَّىٰ يُؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ ۖ وَإِن قِيلَ لَكُمْ
أَرْجِعُوا فَارْجِعُوا ۚ هُوَ أَزْكَىٰ لَكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ
بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

لَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ جُنَاحٌ أَن تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتًا غَيْرَ
مَسْكُونَةٍ فِيهَا مَتَعٌ لَّكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا
تُبْدُونَ وَمَا تَكْتُمُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَرِهِمْ
وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ ۗ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَقُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَرِهِنَّ
وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ
إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا

Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms and not display their charms to any but their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are free of physical desire, or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms. Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success. (31)

Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. (32)

As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty. And if any of your slaves desire to obtain a deed of freedom, write it out for them if you are aware of any good in them; and give them something of the wealth God has given you. Do not force your maids to prostitution when they desire to preserve their chastity, in order to make some worldly gain. If anyone should force them, then after they have been compelled, God will be much forgiving, merciful [to them]. (33)

وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ خُمُرَهُنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِهِنَّ أَوْ أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوِ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولِي الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَىٰ عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا تَخْفِينَ مِنْ زِينَتِهِنَّ وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

وَأَنْكِحُوا الْأَيْمَىٰ مِنْكُمْ وَالصَّالِحِينَ مِنْ عِبَادِكُمْ وَإِمَائِكُمْ ۚ إِنْ يَكُونُوا فُقَرَاءَ يُغْنِهِمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَلَيْسَتَعَفِيفِ الَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ نِكَاحًا حَتَّىٰ يُغْنِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ وَالَّذِينَ يَبْتِغُونَ الْكِتَابَ مِمَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ فَكَاتِبُوهُمْ ۖ إِنْ عُلِّمْتُمْ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا ۚ وَءَاتُوهُمْ مِّن مَّالِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي ءَاتَاكُمْ ۚ وَلَا تُكْرَهُوا فَتِيَّتِكُمْ عَلَىٰ الْبِغَاءِ ۚ إِنْ أَرَدْنَ تَحَصُّنًا لِّتَبْتِغُوا عَرَضَ الْحَيَوةِ الدُّنْيَا ۚ وَمَنْ يُكْرِهَنَّ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ مِنْ بَعْدِ إِكْرَاهِهِنَّ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٣٣﴾

We have bestowed upon you from on high revelations clearly showing the truth, and lessons from [the stories of] those who have passed away before you, and admonition for the God-fearing.
(34)

وَلَقَدْ أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكُمْ آيَاتٍ مُبَيِّنَاتٍ وَمَثَلًا
مِّنَ الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِن قَبْلِكُمْ وَمَوْعِظَةً
لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

Overview

We mentioned previously that in the clean and healthy society it establishes, Islam does not rely on punishment; rather its main line of defence is prevention. It does not suppress natural desires. It regulates them within a clean atmosphere that is free of deliberate stimulation. The main element in the Islamic method of educating its followers is

I to reduce the chances of error, eliminate temptation, and remove all impediments that prevent the satisfaction of natural desires in a perfectly natural and clean way.

It is in this light that we should look at the way Islam accords a certain sanctity for homes. When they are at home, people should not be surprised by strangers coming in without first asking leave to enter. Otherwise, people's privacy would be invaded when they least expect it. In addition, Islam requires both men and women to lower their gaze and not expose what may arouse sexual desire.

From the same perspective, Islam facilitates marriage for poor men and women, because marriage is the best guarantee against adultery. It prohibits sending slaves into prostitution, because prostitution encourages people to indulge in prohibited sex. Let us now consider these points in more detail.

Before Entering a House

Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates. This is best for you, so that you may take heed. If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave; and if you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you. God has full knowledge of all that you do. You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal.
(Verses 27-29)

God has made homes places of comfort where people may relax and enjoy privacy and reassurance. At home, they do not feel the need to be cautious or on the alert. Thus, they may relax and take things easy. But homes cannot be so unless their

privacy is strictly respected. No one may enter a home without its occupier's knowledge and permission, at the time they choose, and in the manner they prefer.

Should we be able to go into other people's homes without first seeking permission, we may see them in situations they want to keep private, or we may see what arouses desire and opens the way to error. This could come about through a chance meeting, or a casual glance. When these are repeated, they become deliberate, motivated by the desires aroused by the casual glance in the first place. It may even develop into a sinful relation or cause a suppressed desire leading to a psychological problem.

In pre-Islamic days in Arabia, visitors used to enter a home and then announce themselves. It could be that inside a man may be with his wife in a position they did not want anyone to see; or that the man or woman were undressed. All this used to hurt people, and deprived them of a sense of security at home. Furthermore, when visitors saw charm and beauty, temptation might be strong or even irresistible.

For all such reasons, God laid down the requirement to observe fine manners, making it necessary for a Muslim to announce himself and greet the people inside before entering. This establishes a friendly atmosphere right from the first moment.

"Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates." (Verse 27) Seeking permission is expressed in the Arabic original in an unusual way, *tasta'nisū*, which implies friendliness. Thus we may say that we should not enter other people's houses until we have obtained friendly and cordial permission. This implies that the visitor should be gentle in his approach so as to be welcomed by the people inside. Such refinement is characteristic of Islamic manners.

When permission is sought, it follows that the house is either empty or people are inside. If there is no one in, then the caller cannot enter, because entry follows permission. *"If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave."* (Verse 28) But if there is someone in, seeking permission is not enough for entry. It is merely a request, and if the request is not granted, entry is prohibited. It is better to leave without delay: *"If you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you."* (Verse 28) The person who is told to go back should do so without feeling upset or offended. People have their secrets and they may have good reason for not receiving a visitor at a particular time. It is up to them to determine their own situation.

"God has full knowledge of all that you do." (Verse 28) He knows people's secrets and motives.

Visiting People When They Are Not Ready

Places that are more or less public, like hotels, guest houses and reception halls which are separate from the main house are treated differently. We may enter such places without first seeking permission, because the very reason for seeking permission before entry does not apply to them. Requiring permission first may be inconvenient in such places.

“You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal.” (Verse 29) The point here is that of God’s knowledge of all our situations and what we do in public or private. The feeling that God watches us in all situations should make people more obedient and willing to observe the refined manners which He has outlined in His book that lays down a code of living for all humanity.

As a complete code for human life, the Qur’ān emphasizes this point of detail in social life because it aims to regulate life in all its aspects, bringing its details in line with its fundamental issues. Thus, seeking permission before entering other people’s homes respects the sanctity which makes the home a place of relaxation. It spares its people the embarrassment of being taken by surprise, or being seen in a situation that they prefer not to be seen in. We are not talking here only about the parts of the human body which should be covered. At home people may be in a situation which they simply do not like others to see. It could relate to their personal appearance, the way they dress or lay their furniture, or anything else. It could also relate to feelings and emotions. Who of us would like to be seen in a situation of weakness, crying or angry or in pain or distress?

The Qur’ānic code of manners attends to all these details through the requirement of seeking permission before entering someone else’s home. It also seeks to reduce chances of casual meetings or sightings that could arouse desire and develop into unacceptable relations that Satan may stealthily encourage. The first Muslim community to be addressed by the Qur’ān clearly understood such directives and their purpose. The Prophet himself was the first to implement them.

The Prophet visited Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the *Anṣār*, at home and sought permission, saying: *“Assalāmu `alaykum wa raḥmatullāh”*, meaning, peace and God’s mercy be bestowed on you. Sa`d replied in a low voice. His son, Qays, asked him: *“Are you not letting God’s Messenger in?”* Sa`d said: *“Let him wish us peace more.”* Again the Prophet repeated his greeting and Sa`d replied in a low voice twice more. Therefore, the Prophet departed, but Sa`d ran after him and explained what happened, saying: *“Messenger of God, I certainly heard your greetings and replied quietly hoping that you would wish us peace more and more.”* The Prophet went in with him. Sa`d ordered water to be brought for the Prophet to wash. Then he gave him a small blanket dyed with saffron to cover himself. The Prophet then raised his hands, praying: *“My Lord, shower Your blessings and grace on Sa`d ibn `Ubādah’s*

family.” [Related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā’ī]

The Prophet taught his Companions how to approach someone else’s home, saying: “If you come towards a home, do not face the door straight, but stand to the right or to the left, and say: *Assalāmu alaykum! Assalāmu ‘alaykum!*” At that time, there were no screens on doors. [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Sa’d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ came to the Prophet and stood facing the door, seeking permission. The Prophet said to him: “Move this way or that way, because permission is sought before a person looks in.” [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

An authentic *ḥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: “If a person overlooks you without having obtained permission, and you hit him with a small stone, and cause him a severe injury in his eye, you have nothing to answer for.” [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Rib’ī, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: “A man from the `Āmir clan sought permission to enter the Prophet’s home, saying: ‘Can I enter?’ The Prophet said to his servant: ‘Go to this man and teach him how to seek permission. Tell him to say: ‘*Assalāmu `alaykum*. May I come in?’ The man overheard the Prophet and said exactly that. The Prophet gave him permission and he entered.” [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

`Abdullāh ibn `Umar was walking, troubled by the heat, and he urgently needed to relieve himself. He approached a Qurayshi woman’s place, and said: “*Assalāmu `alaykum*. May I come in?” She said: “Enter with peace.” He repeated what he said, and she repeated her reply. He was unable to stand still. He told her to say: “Come in”, if she wanted to give him permission and she did so. He then entered.

`Aṭṭā’ ibn Rabāḥ, a scholar who studied under `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, the Prophet’s cousin whose scholarly knowledge was recognized as highly authoritative, reported: “I asked Ibn `Abbās: ‘Should I seek permission before entering when only my orphan sisters are at home considering that I look after them and they live with me in the same home?’ He said: ‘Yes.’ I asked him again so that he might give me a concession, but he refused. Instead, he asked me: ‘Do you like to see your sister undressed?’ I answered in the negative. He said: ‘Then seek permission before entry.’ I repeated the question once more, but he asked me: ‘Do you love to obey God?’ I said: ‘Yes.’ He said: ‘Then seek permission.’”

An authentic *ḥadīth* makes it clear that the Prophet prohibited a man from entering his own home unannounced so surprising his wife. In another version the prohibition is attached to such a surprise being made at night, implying that his family might be doing something unacceptable.

Another *ḥadīth* mentions that the Prophet arrived with his Companions at Madīnah during the day. So, he encamped at the outskirts, explaining his purpose:

“Wait until the end of the day, so that a woman has a chance to attend to her uncombed hair, or remove unwanted hair on her body.”

Good Manners and High Morals

Such refined manners were characteristic of the Prophet and his Companions after God had taught them the Islamic way. Today, however, we find that such fine considerations are largely meaningless despite our being Muslims. A man may just turn up at his brother’s door at any time of the day or night, knocking hard and caring little for disturbing the people inside, until the door is opened. The people may have a telephone which provides an excellent way of seeking permission to visit before starting out.¹⁷ He could thus easily find out a time suitable to his hosts. Nevertheless, people simply do not take such steps. A man may arrive at someone’s home without a prior appointment or permission. What is worse, our social tradition makes it imperative that a visitor who has come unannounced be received, even though his visit might be extremely inconvenient.

We are certainly Muslims, but we surprise our friends at any moment, even at meal times. If we are not invited to a meal, we may feel aggrieved. We may even surprise them late at night, and if they do not invite us to stay the night, we are offended. We allow our hosts no excuses either way.

All this takes place simply because we neglect Islamic manners. We do not bring our own preferences in line with what has been taught by God’s Messenger. We insist on following a mistaken social tradition that has no divine authority.

We look at other, non-Muslim communities and find that their social traditions are closer to the values and manners Islam wants us to adopt. Sometimes we admire these, but at other times we may even ridicule them, without even trying to look into what Islam wants us to do.

Proper Control of a Natural Desire

Having dealt with the proper manners of entering homes after taking permission, the *sūrah* moves on to prevent desire from running loose. It simply prevents looking at what is bound to excite desire, and it prohibits action that encourages sin.

Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do. And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their

¹⁷ At the time this was written telephones were largely uncommon in people’s houses in Egypt. – Editor’s note.

charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof. Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms and not display their charms to any but their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are free of physical desire, or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms. Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success. (Verses 30-31)

Islam wants to establish a clean society where desire is not aroused at every moment, and erotic scenes are not displayed everywhere. Continual excitement of the sexual urge leads to an insatiable desire that may become unstoppable. A stealthy look, a seductive move, flagrant make-up and thinly-dressed bodies are meant only to add to such insatiable and uncontrolled excitement. Thus, prudence and self control are heavily taxed. Hence, there remains one of two alternatives: either total permissiveness that disregards all checks and values, or psychological problems and disorders that result from having to suppress a desire that has been strongly aroused. This borders on unmitigated torture.

One way Islam uses for achieving its goal of establishing a clean human society is to prevent such uncontrollable excitement of the sexual urge. It wants the natural sexual urge, of both men and women, to remain healthy, maintaining its natural strength and to satisfy it in the proper, clean manner.

At some point in time, the idea was promoted that easy mixing between the two sexes, playful conversation and revealing physical attractions help to provide a relaxed social atmosphere, with no rigid inhibitions. It was said that this is necessary as a preventive measure against arbitrary suppression of natural desires and psychological complexes and disorders. It reduces the pressure of the sexual urge and prevents an uncontrollable explosion, etc.

Such ideas were promoted as a result of the advancement of theories that aimed to deprive man of his distinctive characteristics that separate the human race from animals, and which put man at the same level as animals. The most important of these theories was Freud's. But all this was no more than theoretical assumptions. I have seen with my own eyes, in a permissive society that abandoned all social, moral and religious restrictions, solid evidence to undermine its very foundation.¹⁸ I have seen in a country that does not place a single restriction on exposing the human body or on sexual relations, in all forms and types, that such freedom in no way refines or controls the sexual urge. On the contrary, it led to an insatiable quest for sexual pleasure. I also saw much of the psychological problems and disorders which were

¹⁸ The author is referring here to his stay in the USA in 1949-1951. — Editor's note.

claimed to be triggered only by deprivation and isolation from the other sex. They were on the increase, as were all types of sexual perversion. And all this was a direct result of free, unrestrained mixing between the two sexes, total permissiveness, exposure of much of the human body in the street, seductive gestures, suggestive glances, etc. This is not the place for recording such scenes in detail, but I only have to say that all this indicates the need to revise those theories, which are contradicted by what prevails in society.

Attraction to the other sex is both natural and profound, because God has made it the means by which human life continues and by which man can fulfil his task on earth. It is a permanent attraction that subsides for a while and then regains strength. To stir it at all times will undoubtedly keep it on the boil. Thus, it requires physical satisfaction. If this does not take place, tension will rise and man finds himself in a sort of permanent torture. Excitement takes place through a look, a move, a smile, a joke and even the tone in one's speech. The best safeguard is to reduce such excitement so that the mutual attraction between man and woman remains within its natural limits, and finds its satisfaction in the proper and natural way. This is the line Islam prefers.

The two verses we are now discussing give us some examples of how Islam helps to reduce the chances of excitement and sin: *"Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do."* (Verse 30)

Lowering their gaze is an act of refining men's manners. It represents an attempt to rise above the desire to look at women's physical charms. As such, it is a practical step to ensure that the first window of temptation is shut. Minding their chastity is the natural result of lowering their gaze. It is indeed the second step that comes after strengthening one's will and rising above the natural urge right at the beginning. Hence, the two are stated in the same verse as a cause and effect, or as two consecutive steps both in personal conscience and in reality.

"This is most conducive to their purity." (Verse 30) It ensures that their feelings remain pure, unaffected by licentious desire and promiscuous action. Thus, feelings retain their noble human standards, and do not sink to animal levels. This protects honour, integrity and sanctities within the community. Besides, it is God who lays down such preventive measures, fully aware as He certainly is of people's psychology, natural instincts thoughts and motives: *"God is certainly aware of all that they do."*

"And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity." (Verse 31) They must not cast hungry or seductive looks at men to arouse their desire. Nor are they permitted any sexual behaviour other than what is lawful and clean. Thus,

children that are born as a result will have nothing to be ashamed of when they have to face society and play their roles in it.

“And not to display their charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof” (Verse 31) The Arabic term *zīnah*, translated here as ‘charms’, has wider connotations than natural beauty. It includes adornments women add to look more attractive. Such adornments are lawful for women to use, because they satisfy a natural female tendency that makes women always want to look beautiful and attractive. Such adornments differ from one time to another, but whatever form they take, they are meant to satisfy the same natural motive of appearing more beautiful and displaying charms before men.

Since this is a natural tendency, Islam does not suppress it; it brings it under control so that a woman displays her charms before one man, who is her spouse who sees her as no one else does. In addition, her close relatives who may not be married to her may see some of her charms as well, because their desires are not excited as a result, considering their close relation. However, the charms or adornments that appear on a woman’s face and hands are permissible to see. The Prophet said to Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr, his sister-in-law: *“Asmā’! When a woman attains puberty, nothing should be seen of her except this [and he pointed to face and hands].”* [Related by Abū Dāwūd]¹⁹

Prompt Compliance with Divine Orders

A further instruction is given to women with regard to their public appearance: *“Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms.”* (Verse 31) We have a translation problem here because the Qur’ānic verse uses the term *jayb*, which does not mean ‘bosom’. *Jayb* instead means the top opening of a dress which is bound to reveal a part of a woman’s bosom. Hence, women are ordered to bring their head coverings down so as to cover this opening, thus covering their heads, necks and chests. In this way, they cover their charms so as not to be displayed before hungry eyes, not even in a sudden encounter between man and woman. A God-fearing man will always try not to make such a look last long, or repeat it. Yet, it may have a lasting effect if charms and adornments are seen suddenly. Hence, the instruction to keep them covered. What is important to realize here is that God wants to spare people this type of test.

Despite their natural desire to want to appear beautiful, the Muslim women who received this instruction did not slacken to put it into effect because their hearts were resplendent with God’s light. In pre- Islamic ignorant days, women used to go out in

¹⁹ This *ḥadīth* is classified as *mursal*, which means that it is poor in authenticity.

public revealing their bosoms, just like women do today in non-Islamic societies. Yet when the order was revealed requiring women to cover themselves and reveal only what appears naturally of their charms, their response was as `Ā'ishah describes: "May God bestow His grace on the early Muslim women: when God revealed His order, 'Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms,' they tore their dresses and used them to cover their heads." [Related by al-Bukhārī]

Şafiyah bint Shaybah reports: "We were at `Ā'ishah's place when some women spoke about Qurayshi women and their virtues. `Ā'ishah said: There is no doubt that Qurayshi women have their virtues, but I have seen none like the Anşār women in their ardent belief in God's book and undoubted faith in divine revelations. When the verse was revealed in *Sūrah al-Nūr* stating, 'Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms,' their men went home and read to them what God had revealed. A man would read this to his wife, daughter, sister and other relatives. Every single woman of them took out her printed dress and wrapped it over her head, in obedience to what God had revealed in confirmation of its application to them. In the morning they prayed behind God's Messenger, wearing their head coverings as though they were carrying crows on their heads." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Islam has refined the tastes of Islamic society and its sense of beauty for it no longer seeks the lewd and licentious. Exposing bodily charms attracts a man's physical instinct. Modesty, on the other hand, shows a clean type of beauty that refines man's sense. It is the type of beauty worthy of man, because it imparts a sense of purity and chastity.

Today, Islam produces the same effect among women believers, despite the fact that the general taste in society has sunk so low as to encourage the revealing of physical charms and the exposure of other parts of the human body. Nevertheless, women believers voluntarily cover themselves as God requires them to do, while other women around them try to attract men by their physical presence.

Maintaining such modesty in appearance is another preventive measure Islam puts in place to protect both the individual and society. Hence, it is not required in situations where temptation is inconceivable. Thus, close relatives who are barred from inter-marriage are excluded. Normally there is no sexual attraction between such relatives who include fathers, sons, fathers-in-law, stepsons, brothers and nephews. Also excepted are Muslim women, as the verse makes clear: "*or their womenfolk.*" Women generally are not included in this exception, because they may describe Muslim women and their charms to their husbands, brothers and other men. An authentic *ḥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: "No woman should describe another woman to her husband as though he is seeing her." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim] Muslim women, on the other hand, are reliable. Their faith prevents them from describing the physical charms of a Muslim woman to their husbands.

Another exception applies to slaves: *“or those whom they rightfully possess.”* Some scholars say that this applies to women slaves only, while others include male slaves too because a slave does not look up to his mistress in a carnal way. But the first view is more logical because a slave is a man with all the desire any other man has, even though he is placed in a special or unfavourable situation. Also excepted are *“such male attendants as are free of physical desire,”* who may not be attracted to women for one reason or another, such as being impotent or feeble minded. In this case, a woman’s physical beauty causes no temptation. Similarly excepted are *“children that are as yet unaware of women’s nakedness.”* These are children who do not yet feel any sexual desire because they are too young. When they are older and become sexually aware and attracted to women, even though they might not have attained their puberty, nonetheless the original rules apply to them.

All these – with the exception of husbands – may see a woman uncovered, except for the area between her waistline and knees, because the cause that prevents such looks does not apply in their case. A husband, on the other hand, may see his wife without restriction.

Since this is a preventive measure, the Qur’ānic verse goes on to prohibit the movements a woman may make in order to attract attention to her adornments or charms that are not readily visible. Such movements may be exciting even though the adornments themselves may remain invisible.

“Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms.” (Verse 31) This order results from profound knowledge of human psychology. Sometimes, the human imagination may be a more powerful trigger for desire. Many are the men who, on seeing a woman’s shoes, dress or jewellery, are more excited than by seeing her body. Many are the ones that are sexually excited by the mental image they draw of a woman than by seeing her in person. Psychiatrists have identified such cases which may need treatment. The tinkle of jewellery or the smell of perfume may excite some people and kindle their sexual desire. With some, this could become irresistible. The Qur’ān takes effective and appropriate action against all this, because its message is sent by God the Creator who knows His creation and who is kind to, and fully aware of, them all.

The verse concludes with turning people’s hearts to God, opening the door of repentance and forgiveness for all that was done before its revelation. *“Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success.”* (Verse 31) Thus, it enhances their feelings that God watches over them, and that He is kind to them, taking care of them. He helps them overcome their weakness in respect of sexual desire. Yet nothing can bring this under proper control more effectively than faith and fearing God.

Promoting Easy Marriage

Up to this point, the measures the Qur'ān speaks about are preventive. Yet sexual attraction is very real and needs practical steps to ensure its proper control. The most important solution is marriage and the taking of positive steps to encourage it, together with making other ways of sexual response far more difficult or even totally unavailable.

Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty. And if any of your slaves desire to obtain a deed of freedom, write it out for them if you are aware of any good in them; and give them something of the wealth God has given you. Do not force your maids to prostitution when they desire to preserve their chastity, in order to make some worldly gain. If anyone should force them, then after they have been compelled, God will be much forgiving, merciful [to them]. (Verses 32-33)

Marriage is the proper way to satisfy natural sexual desires. Hence, all impediments that make marriage difficult should be removed so that human life can progress in this natural and simple way. Money is the primary impediment facing those who wish to establish families and protect themselves against sin. Hence, Islam puts in place an integrated system that does not make a requirement without providing its tools or the conditions that are conducive to its fulfilment. As it requires people to maintain their chastity, it makes marriage easy for all people. Hence only the one who deliberately turns away from the clean and pure way indulges in sin. Therefore, Islam requires the Muslim community to provide financial assistance for those who lack the wherewithal to get married: *“Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty.”* (Verse 32)

The order includes all those who are single, men and women, although only free people are meant here initially. Those who are in bondage are specifically mentioned later: *“as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous.”* They all need money for this purpose, as it is clearly understood from the rest of the verse: *“If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty.”*

This order is given to the Muslim community to enable single people to marry. The majority of scholars are of the view that this order is meant as a recommendation because there were single people during the time of the Prophet and they were not made to marry. Had this order been meant as an obligation, the Prophet would have ensured they all married. In our view, this order states an obligation, but it does not mean that a Muslim ruler is required to compel those who are single to get married.

What it means instead is that the Muslim community must help single people who wish to get married, thus enabling them to guard their chastity. Islam considers this to be a practical measure of protection so that the Muslim community remains free of adultery, as it is duty bound to remain so. Providing the means to fulfil an obligation is also obligatory.

We should remember though that Islam is a fully integrated system. Hence, it provides adequate measures to set the economy of the Muslim community on the right footing. Thus, it provides good job opportunities for those who are able to work, so that they do not need assistance from the treasury. However, in exceptional situations, the public treasury is required to provide such assistance. This means that in the Islamic economic system, everyone has an income to meet their needs. The provision of jobs giving adequate income is a duty of the Muslim state and a right owing to individual citizens. Giving financial assistance by the public treasury is the exception, not the rule.

Financial Help for Marriage

When, despite all this, there remain in the community single men and women who are poor, unable to meet the expenses of marriage, the Muslim community must help them marry. The same applies to slaves, of both sexes. However, this duty applies in the first place to their masters, if they can meet such expenses. Poverty should never be an impediment preventing marriage when single men or women are suitable for marriage and are willing. It is God who provides for all. He has made it clear that He will give them enough when they choose the clean and healthy way, guarding their chastity through marriage. *"If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty."* (Verse 32) The Prophet says: "Three categories of people have the right to help provided by God: a person striving for God's cause, and a slave who has arranged to buy his own freedom and wants to fulfil his commitment, and one who wants to marry in order to guard his own chastity." [Related by al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī]

Until the Muslim community provides the necessary help to enable them to get married, single people are instructed to guard their chastity. *"As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty."* (Verse 33) This He certainly does, because *"God is Munificent, All-Knowing."* (Verse 33) He does not stint the means of a person who wants to stick to the way of purity and chastity as He is fully aware of people's intentions.

We see how Islam provides a practical solution to a real problem. Every individual who is fit to marry should be able to do so, even though he or she may lack the necessary financial ability. In most cases, money, or the lack of it, is the most difficult

barrier that prevents people from getting married.

It is recognized that the presence of slaves within the community allows moral standards to fall, encouraging loose moral attitudes because, generally speaking, slaves have a weaker sense of human dignity. At the same time slavery was inevitable at the advent of Islam, considering the need to apply the same rules to captives of war taken by Muslims as Muslim captives received at the hands of their non-Muslim captors. Yet Islam took a unilateral initiative to free slaves whenever possible, until a new world order allowed for the total abolition of slavery. It is in this vein that Islam required that a slave who wished to buy his own freedom should be freed in return for an agreed sum of money which he paid to his master. *“And if any of your slaves desire to obtain a deed of freedom, write it out for them if you are aware of any good in them.”* (Verse 33)

Scholars have different views on whether this is obligatory, but we believe it to be so because it fits well with the line Islam adopts on freedom and human dignity. When a slave signs a deed of freedom, the money he earns through his own work belongs to him so that he can fulfil his commitment under the deed of freedom. What is more is that he can rightfully claim to be helped from *zakāt* funds: *“And give them something of the wealth God has given you.”* (Verse 33) The only condition that applies in such situations is that the master should be aware that the slave is a good person. The goodness that the verse refers to is that the slave should be a Muslim in the first place, and that he or she should be able to earn their living through their work. A freed slave should not become a liability to society, or forced to resort to degrading practices in order to survive. Islam lays down a system of social security which is very practical. It does not raise empty slogans nor does it try to meet them without looking at the realities that follow. It does not merely seek to free slaves without giving that freedom real meaning. Slaves will not achieve a real standard of freedom unless they are able to earn their living so that they neither beg nor resort to some dirty practices to survive. Some such practices are far worse than slavery.

Islam frees slaves in order to cleanse society, and so avoid it becoming more contaminated with vice.

By the grace of God, slavery has been abolished after the signing of international treaties and conventions that prohibit the enslavement of captives of war. Under Islam, slavery was allowed only provisionally, on the basis of measure-for-measure in the treatment of enemy captives of war.

Fair Treatment for the Least Privileged

What is worse than the presence of slaves in the community is that some slaves might be put to prostitution. In pre-Islamic days, a master might make his female

slaves prostitutes, taking some or all of their wages. This form of prostitution continues to be practised today. As Islam wants the Islamic social environment to be pure, it forbids all adultery, particularly this form of prostitution. *“Do not force your maids to prostitution when they desire to preserve their chastity, in order to make some worldly gain. If anyone should force them, then after they have been compelled, God will be much forgiving, merciful [to them].”* (Verse 33) This verse warns those who force their maids into prostitution, and rebukes them for seeking to enrich themselves in this highly immoral way. It also promises those who are forced to it forgiveness and mercy.

Al-Suddī mentions that this verse points directly to `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, the chief hypocrite in Madīnah. He had a slave maid named Mu`ādhah. When he received a guest, he would give him this maid to sleep with, hoping to gain financial reward or some other favour from him. The maid complained of this to Abū Bakr, and Abū Bakr reported it to the Prophet who ordered `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy to refrain from such deeds. `Abdullāh complained: *“Who will restore justice to us against Muhammad? He interferes on behalf of our maid!”* This verse was then revealed.

The prohibition of compelling girls, who wish to maintain their chastity, into prostitution for financial gain was part of the Qur`ānic method of cleansing the Islamic social environment and of blocking all dirty methods of satisfying sexual desires. When prostitution is condoned in society, it tempts many people because it is so easy. When such avenues are not available, people have to seek the clean way of marriage to satisfy their natural desires.

There is no validity in the argument that prostitution works as a safety device to protect families, or that it is the only way to satisfy a natural need when marriage is difficult, or that unless such an easy way is found, people assault honourable women. This is indeed a twisted argument that confuses causes and results. Sexual desire must remain clean, pure and directed to serve the purpose of procreation, so that new generations can grow up in a clean environment. Communities must reform their economic systems so that everyone can have a reasonable standard of living which enables him or her to marry. Should there remain exceptional cases, these would be properly considered and appropriate treatment found for them. This leaves no need for prostitution, or filthy brothels where those who want to ease the pressure of their natural sexual desire can throw aside their burden, in the same way as garbage is publicly thrown over a dunghill. It is the economic system that should be reformed so as to prevent such filth from existing. The inadequacy of economic systems should never be the basis of an argument for brothels where humanity is exceedingly humiliated.

This is exactly the method Islam adopts, providing an integrated system that maintains purity and helps people preserve their chastity. It is a system that provides

a bridge linking this world with heaven, and elevates humanity to a sublime level that is enlightened with God's guidance.

The whole passage concludes with a verse that provides suitable comments on its subject matter: *"We have bestowed upon you from on high revelations clearly showing the truth, and lessons from [the stories of] those who have passed away before you, and admonition for the God-fearing."* (Verse 34) Its verses are clear. They show the truth, leaving no room for ambiguity or distortion. It portrays the fate of earlier communities that deviated from the divine method and the punishment meted out to them. The Qur'an also provides an admonition for the God-fearing who realize that God watches all that we do. Thus, they stand in awe of God and they follow the right path. All the rules and the rulings outlined in this passage fit well with this comment which emphasizes the bond between people's hearts with God Almighty who bestowed this Qur'an from on high.

The Light of Heaven and Earth

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche containing a lamp; the lamp within a glass, the glass like a radiant star; lit from a blessed tree – an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west. Its very oil would almost give light even though no fire had touched it. Light upon light! God guides to His light him that wills [to be guided]. God propounds parables for all people, since God alone has full knowledge of all things. (35)

In houses which God has sanctioned to be raised so that His name be remembered in them, there are [such as] extol His limitless glory, morning and evening (36)

– people whom neither commerce nor profit can divert from the remembrance of God, and from attending regularly to prayer, and from charity; who are filled with fear of the day when all hearts and eyes will be convulsed; (37)

who [only hope] that God may reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did, and lavish His grace upon them. God gives to whom He wills beyond all reckoning. (38)

﴿٣٥﴾ اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ كَمِشْكَاةٍ فِيهَا مِصْبَاحٌ الْمِصْبَاحُ فِي زُجَاجَةٍ الزُّجَاجَةُ كَأَنَّهَا كَوْكَبٌ دُرِّيٌّ يُوقَدُ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ مُبْرَكَةٍ زَيْتُونَةٍ لَا شَرْقِيَّةٍ وَلَا غَرْبِيَّةٍ يَكَادُ زَيْتُهَا يُضِيءُ وَلَوْ لَمْ تَمْسَسْهُ نَارٌ نُورٌ عَلَى نُورٍ يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَلَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

﴿٣٦﴾ فِي بُيُوتٍ أُذِنَ لِلَّهِ أَنْ تَرْفَعَ وَيُذَكَرَ فِيهَا أَسْمُهُ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ فِيهَا بِالْغُدُوِّ وَالْآصَالِ ﴿٣٦﴾

﴿٣٧﴾ رِجَالٌ لَا تُلْهِيهِمْ تِجَارَةٌ وَلَا بَيْعٌ عَنْ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَإِقَامِ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءِ الزَّكَاةِ يَخَافُونَ يَوْمًا تَتَقَلَّبُ فِيهِ الْقُلُوبُ وَالْأَبْصَارُ ﴿٣٧﴾

﴿٣٨﴾ لِيَجْزِيَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنَ مَا عَمِلُوا وَيَزِيدَهُم مِّن فَضْلِهِ وَاللَّهُ يَرْزُقُ مَن يَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ

حِسَابٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

As for the unbelievers, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty traveller supposes to be water, but when he comes near to it, he finds that it is nothing. But he finds that God [has always been present] with him, and that He will pay him his account in full; for God is swift in reckoning. (39)

Or else, like the depths of darkness in a vast deep ocean, covered by waves above which are waves, with clouds above it all: depths of darkness, layer upon layer, [so that] when one holds up his hand, he can hardly see it. Indeed the one from whom God withholds light shall find no light at all. (40)

Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him; and God has full knowledge of all that they do. (41)

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and to God shall all return. (42)

Are you not aware that it is God who causes the clouds to move onwards, then joins them together, then piles them up in masses, until you can see rain come forth from their midst. He it is who sends down from the skies mountainous masses charged with hail, striking with it whom He wills and averting it from whom He wills. The flash of His lightning well-nigh deprives people of their

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَعْمَلُهُمْ كَسَرَابٍ بَقِيَعَةٍ
تَحْسَبُهُ الظَّمْثَانُ مَاءً حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَهُ لَمْ
يَجِدْهُ شَيْئًا وَوَجَدَ اللَّهَ عِنْدَهُ فَوَفَّاهُ
حِسَابَهُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ ﴿٣٩﴾

أَوْ كَظُلُمَاتٍ فِي بَحْرٍ لُّجِّيٍّ يَغْشَاهُ مَوْجٌ مِّنْ
فَوْقِهِ مَوْجٌ مِّنْ فَوْقِهِ سَحَابٌ ۗ ظُلُمَاتٌ
بَعْضُهَا فَوْقَ بَعْضٍ إِذَا أَخْرَجَ يَدَهُ لَمْ
يَكْذِبْ يَرَاهَا وَمَنْ لَّمْ تَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا
فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ نُّورٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ مَن فِي السَّمَوَاتِ
وَالْأَرْضِ وَالطَّيْرُ صَافَّتِ كُلُّ قَدِّ عِلْمٍ
صَلَاتَهُ وَتَسْبِيحَهُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِمَا
يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ
الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٤٢﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُزِجِي سَحَابًا ثُمَّ يُؤَلِّفُ
بَيْنَهُ ثُمَّ يَجْعَلُهُ رُكَامًا فَتَرَى الْوَدْقَ
تَخْرُجُ مِنْ خِلَالِهِ وَيُنزِلُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ
جِبَالٍ فِيهَا مِنْ بَرَدٍ فَيُصِيبُ بِهِ مَن يَشَاءُ
وَيَصْرِفُهُ عَنِ مَن يَشَاءُ ۗ يَكَادُ سَنَا بَرْقِهِ
يَذْهَبُ بِالْأَبْصَارِ ﴿٤٣﴾

sight. (43)

*It is God who causes night and day to alternate.
In this too there is surely a lesson for all who have
eyes to see. (44)*

*God has created every animal from water; and
among them are such as creep on their bellies, and
such as walk on two legs, and others yet on four.
God creates what He wills. Surely God has
power over all things. (45)*

يُقَلِّبُ اللَّهُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ
لَعِبْرَةً لِّأُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ ﴿٤٤﴾

وَاللَّهُ خَلَقَ كُلَّ دَابَّةٍ مِّن مَّاءٍ ۚ فَمِنْهُمْ مَّن
يَمْشِي عَلَىٰ بَطْنِهِ ۚ وَمِنْهُمْ مَّن يَمْشِي عَلَىٰ
رِجْلَيْنِ وَمِنْهُمْ مَّن يَمْشِي عَلَىٰ أَرْبَعٍ ۚ تَخْلُقُ
اللَّهُ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ
قَدِيرٌ ﴿٤٥﴾

Overview

So far the *sūrah* has dealt with the most crude aspects of the human constitution in order to purify and refine them. It has dealt with sexual desire, including its different appeals, as well as the inclination to spread rumours and level accusations at people causing anger and distress. It has also dealt with indecency fermenting within people's hearts, finding verbal expression and then spreading into actual life itself. In all these it laid down very stern punishments for adultery and for false accusation of committing it. It portrayed a horrid example of false accusations levelled at chaste women who are unaware of what is being said about them. It also provided prevention measures, such as seeking permission before entering other people's homes, lowering one's gaze when meeting others, and covering personal charms and adornments. It further warned against unnecessary sexual excitement, encouraged marriage and the freedom of slaves and prohibited prostitution. All these measures, varied as they are, help to control the physical impulse and strengthen the motives to maintain one's chastity and aspire to higher standards of purity.

At the conclusion of its comments on the false story about `Ā'ishah the *sūrah* dealt with the lingering effects of that incident: in particular the distress, anger, distortion of values and anxiety. Thus we find the Prophet (peace be upon him) calm and reassured, `Ā'ishah herself well satisfied and happy, her father Abū Bakr kind and forgiving, and Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal pleased with God's declaration of his innocence, and the whole Muslim community turning back to God after realizing how they were lost in confusion. Now they are back on track, recognizing God's favours and grace, and following His guidance.

With such directives, education and refinement the *sūrah* now deals with the human soul, how it suddenly lights up, aspiring to the great light that fills the heavens and earth. Muslims are now ready to receive the enlightenment that they need in a world full of light.

God's Radiant Light

"God is the light of the heavens and the earth." (Verse 35) No sooner does this remarkable statement impart its meaning than a bright light spreads over the whole universe and lightens up feelings and emotions, filling hearts and minds. The entire universe swims in a radiant light. Screens and curtains are removed, hearts radiate, spirits fly high, and everything is purified in a sea of light. All shed their burdens and join together in an atmosphere of pure happiness and delight. Indeed, the universe and all it contains break their fetters so as to let the heavens and earth meet, the distant and the near come together, as do the animate and the inanimate. What is hidden joins with what is apparent, as do people's hearts and senses.

"God is the light of the heavens and the earth." He is the light from which they derive their essence as well as their perfect system. He is the One who gives them their existence and the law that governs such existence. Man has recently been able to discover, through scientific achievements, a part of this great truth when what they used to call 'matter' was transformed, through nuclear fusion, into radiation that has no form or substance other than light. Thus, man discovered that an atom contains electrons that produce radiation. By contrast, the human heart was able to comprehend this great truth many centuries before science made its discoveries. Every time the human heart attained a high level of purity, aspiring to the sublime light, it was able to understand this truth. It was fully comprehended by Muhammad, God's Messenger, as he started his journey back from Ṭā'if, when he gave up on people and sought refuge with his Lord. Appealing to God Almighty, he said: "I seek refuge in the light of Your face by which all darkness is dispelled and both this life and the life to come are put on their right courses." His heart shined with this sublime light on his night journey which took him from Makkah to Jerusalem and then to heaven. When later `Ā'ishah, his wife, asked him whether he saw his Lord, he answered: "It is all light. How could I see Him?"

An Example Portraying God's Light

The human heart cannot take such abundant light for long; nor can it aspire to that great horizon for long. Hence, after this statement that opens up this endless scope, the *sūrah* begins to bring it closer so as to make it better understood. The example is at once tangible and practical:

His light may be compared to a niche containing a lamp; the lamp within a glass, the glass like a radiant star; lit from a blessed tree – an olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west. Its very oil would almost give light even though no fire had touched it. Light upon light! (Verse 35)

This comparison seeks to put the infinite right before a mind that has finite ability. It simply portrays a miniscule picture to present it to man who cannot contemplate its great reality. It seeks to show the nature of light when the human imagination cannot entertain its endless spread.

The verse begins by stating the fact that *“God is the light of the heavens and the earth,”* but then it brings us fast from this great expanse to a niche, a small artificial wall recess in which a lamp is placed so as to focus its light and make it shine. *“His light may be compared to a niche containing a lamp.”* It adds one element of strength and concentration after another: *“The lamp within a glass,”* which protects it from the wind and purifies its light to make it stronger and more radiant: *“The glass like a radiant star.”* We see the glass painted here as bright, transparent, almost shining. At this point the verse links the example and the reality, the likeness and the original, the small glass and the radiant star. Thus we do not concentrate our reflection on the miniscule picture which is presented only to help us understand the great reality.

The *sūrah* immediately reverts to the small example of the lamp, which is *“lit from a blessed tree – an olive tree...”* The purest light known to the first people addressed by the Qur’ān was that of olive oil. But this is not the only reason for choosing this example. It is an example that has connotations of sacredness associated with the blessed tree. These connotations recall the image of the sacred valley, the nearest place to Arabia in which olive trees grow in abundance. The Qur’ān refers to this tree and gives it special significance: *“We bring forth... a tree that grows on Mount Sinai yielding oil and relish for all to eat.”* (23: 19-20) It is a tree that lives for ages, and it brings endless benefits to man through its oil, wood, leaves and fruit. Once again the text turns from the little example to remind us of the great reality. This tree is not a particular one, and it does not belong to a particular place or direction. It is merely an example given to make the reality easier to understand. Hence, it is described as *“neither of the east nor of the west.”* Moreover, its oil is not the one we see and know. It is different and far more remarkable: *“Its very oil would almost give light even though no fire had touched it.”* It is so transparent and bright that it almost gives light without burning. The example concludes with another remarkable statement: *“Light upon light.”* Thus, we are back with the original light that bears no comparison.

It is God’s light that dispels all darkness in the heavens and the earth. It is a light whose nature and scope are beyond our comprehension. The aim here is to make our hearts aspire to see this light: *“God guides to His light him that wills [to be guided].”*

(Verse 35) Those who open their hearts to the light will see it because it spreads far and wide in the heavens and the earth. It is permanent, unending, unscreened, and it never fades. Whenever the human heart looks for it, it is sure to find it. In the midst of his confusion, man can always find it providing guidance and establishing a bond between him and his Lord.

This comparison is given by God so as to make our minds able to comprehend the nature of His light. He alone knows the full extent of our ability: *“God propounds parables for all people, since God alone has full knowledge of all things.”* (Verse 35)

This light which spreads in abundance in the heavens and earth is best seen in perfect clarity in the houses of God where people’s hearts look up to Him, remember Him, stand in awe of Him and dedicate themselves to Him in preference to all else:

In houses which God has sanctioned to be raised so that His name be remembered in them, there are [such as] extol His limitless glory, morning and evening – people whom neither commerce nor profit can divert from the remembrance of God, and from attending regularly to prayer, and from charity; who are filled with fear of the day when all hearts and eyes will be convulsed; who [only hope] that God may reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did, and lavish His grace upon them. God gives to whom He wills beyond all reckoning. (Verses 36-38)

There is a close affinity between the scene of the niche in the first verse and the following scene of God’s houses. This is perfectly in line with the Qur’ānic method of putting together images that have close parallels. Likewise, there is close affinity between the lamp shining with light in the niche and hearts shining with the light of glorifying God in His houses.

When God sanctions something, it takes place just as He has approved. Since He has sanctioned the raising of these houses, they are there, functioning, purified and respected. The view showing them standing tall is in harmony with God’s light that radiates throughout the heavens and the earth. These houses are naturally noble which again fits perfectly with the brilliant light described earlier. Their special, venerated position makes them fit for the remembrance of God’s name: *“In houses which God has sanctioned to be raised so that His name be remembered in them.”* (Verse 36) They are also in harmony with the radiant hearts of the believers who stand up in prayer, glorify God and extol His praises. They are *“people whom neither commerce nor profit can divert from the remembrance of God, and from attending regularly to prayer, and from charity.”* (Verse 37) Needless to say, trade and commerce aim to make a profit. Yet although these believers are engaged in such enterprises, they are not diverted from their obligation towards God or their fellow human beings. Hence they attend regularly and properly to their prayers and pay their *zakāt* and charity. These people *“are filled with fear of the day when all hearts and eyes will be convulsed.”* (Verse 37) On

that day, people's hearts and eyes will be in turmoil, unsteady. It is a day of utter fear and distress. Hence, they fear what may happen to them then. In order to spare themselves, they are never diverted by their immediate concerns of business and profit from attending to their duties towards their Lord.

Yet despite their fear, they have high hopes *"that God may reward them in accordance with the best that they ever did, and lavish His grace upon them."* (Verse 38) Their hopes will never be frustrated; for, *"God gives to whom He wills beyond all reckoning."* (Verse 38) There are no limits to God's favours and no restrictions on what He may wish to bestow on His devoted servants.

Deeds That Come to Nothing

In contrast to this radiant light that shines throughout the heavens and the earth, focusing on the houses dedicated to God and enlightening the hearts of the faithful, the *sūrah* shows a different situation where no light can penetrate and no one is safe; a situation devoid of all goodness. That is the situation in which the unbelievers find themselves:

As for the unbelievers, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty traveller supposes to be water, but when he comes near to it, he finds that it is nothing. But he finds that God [has always been present] with him, and that He will pay him his account in full; for God is swift in reckoning. (Verse 39)

This is the first of two remarkable scenes the *sūrah* paints of the unbelievers and their destiny. Both are full of life and movement. In this scene their actions are shown like a mirage in an open space. It gives a false shine which attracts the thirsty traveller who moves towards it. He is totally unaware of what he might find there, other than the prospect of quenching his thirst. Suddenly, the whole scene moves swiftly, and we see the thirsty traveller arriving at this place but finding no water to drink. Instead, he is in for a great surprise, one which he could never have imagined. It is awesome, striking fear into his heart and leaving him utterly bewildered. What he finds is the realization that God has always been present with him. He had denied God's existence, turned his back on Him and adopted a hostile attitude to faith. In his state of total oblivion to anything other than the water he needs, should he find there a human adversary, he would be startled and confused. But he finds no human opponent. He finds God Almighty who takes him to account.

And then what happens? *"God will pay him his account in full."* All this occurs very quickly, in line with the initial and sudden shock. The final comment on this scene is *"God is swift in reckoning."* Again the comment perfectly suits the rapidity of the scene.

In the second scene layers of darkness gather on top of each other, to contrast with the false brightness of the mirage. Great fear is transmitted by the bottomless ocean engulfed in darkness, and waves upon waves moving in a never-ending motion. Above all this, dark clouds gather. Thus, layers of darkness amass, to the extent that if someone were to hold out their hand, they would fail to see it in the engulfing darkness. Hence it is a darkness that spreads an air of fear and panic.

This is all a description of unbelief, which is shown as darkness totally isolated from the divine light that radiates throughout the universe. It is a deep error which prevents people from seeing even the nearest sign of guidance, a fear that leaves no trace of security. For, *“indeed the one from whom God withholds light shall find no light at all.”* (Verse 40) God’s light is guidance planted in people’s hearts, giving them an informed insight, and a bond between human nature and the laws that operate in the universe at large. It is the only true enlightenment. A person who is cut off from this light remains in a darkness that cannot be removed, in a fear without security, and in error without return. At the end he finds all his actions to be a mirage leading him to ruin. No action is valid unless it is based on faith. There is no guidance without faith, and no light unless it is God’s light.

All Glorify God

This is an extraordinary scene of unbelief, error and darkness in human life. Yet it is followed by one of faith, guidance and light in the great universe. This is a scene showing the entire universe with all that lives in it, human and *jinn*, planets and stars, and all beings, whether animate or inanimate, sharing in God’s glorification. We feel how awesome the scene is as we hear the glorification echoed everywhere in the heavens and the earth:

Are you not aware that it is God whose limitless glory all creatures that are in the heavens and earth extol, even the birds as they spread out their wings? Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him; and God has full knowledge of all that they do. (Verse 41)

Man does not live alone in this universe. All around him, to his right and to his left, above him and beneath him, and in the expanse beyond, whether reached by his imagination or not, there are beings God has created with different natures, forms and shapes. All share in their belief in God, turn to Him and extol His praises. He *“has full knowledge of all that they do.”*

The Qur’ān directs man to look around him: all is of God’s making and all living things everywhere in the heavens and the earth are His creatures, glorifying Him and singing His praises. The Qur’ān also directs our full attention to something we

see every day without stirring any feeling in us because of its familiarity: it is the scene of birds lifting up their legs and spreading out their wings as they fly. They also glorify God. *"Each of them knows how to pray to Him and to glorify Him."* (Verse 41) Only man neglects to glorify his Lord when he is the one who should be most aware of the importance of believing in God and glorifying Him.

In this scene, the whole universe appears full of humility as it turns to its Creator, singing His praises, addressing its prayers to Him. This it does by nature. Its obedience to God is represented in its laws which operate by God's will. When man refines his senses, he sees this scene as reality, as though he hears the rhythm of God's glorification echoed throughout the universe. He shares with all creatures their prayers and appeals to God. Such was Muhammad, God's Messenger, (peace be upon him). When he walked, he heard the gravel under his feet singing God's praises. Such was David too for when he chanted his Psalms, the mountains and birds chanted with him.

"To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth, and to God shall all return." (Verse 42) No one should turn anywhere other than to Him, and no refuge is to be sought except with Him. Meeting Him is inevitable. His punishment, if deserved, cannot be averted except through His grace. To Him all shall return.

Snatching Eyesight

Next the *sūrah* portrays yet another scene which people pass by paying little attention to it. It is very pleasant to the eye, carrying a message to the heart and inviting the mind to reflect on God's creation as well as the pointers to faith available everywhere in the universe. It provides an area to contemplate the only source of real light, right guidance and true faith.

Are you not aware that it is God who causes the clouds to move onwards, then joins them together, then piles them up in masses, until you can see rain come forth from their midst. He it is who sends down from the skies mountainous masses charged with hail, striking with it whom He wills and averting it from whom He wills. The flash of His lightning well-nigh deprives people of their sight. (Verse 43)

The scene is portrayed at leisure, slowly, with its component parts being raised up for reflection before they combine panoramically. All this is done deliberately, so that the very sight of these details touches people's hearts and awakens their minds to reflection on God's perfect design.

It is God's design that drives the clouds from one place to another, before allowing these clouds to come together and pile up into a great mass. When this becomes

heavy, it bears water that begins to ooze out and then pour down in heavy rain. When piled up, the clouds look like great mountains, producing small pieces of hail. No one sees the clouds look like mountains better than a passenger in a plane that flies higher than the clouds, or moves through them. The scene at this elevation shows the clouds just like mountains, their huge sizes, steep cliffs, as well as high and low peaks. It is a scene that shows a reality people could not have seen before they were able to fly.

These mountains are subservient to God's orders, functioning in accordance with His law that governs the universe. It is in accordance with this law that God lets rain drop over any community He wants and diverts it from others as He wills. The scene is completed with this final statement: *"The flash of His lightning well-nigh deprives people of their sight."* (Verse 43) It thus provides an element of harmony with the great light that fills the whole universe.

And yet there is another universal scene, showing the night and day: *"It is God who causes night and day to alternate. In this too there is surely a lesson for all who have eyes to see."* (Verse 44)

When we reflect on the alternation of the night and day, in a perfect system that never fails or slackens, our senses are sharpened and we can better appreciate the perfection of God's work and His law that governs the universe. The Qur'ān alerts our hearts to such scenes which we normally overlook because of their familiarity. Yet they contain a clear message. Hence the Qur'ān helps our hearts to always face the universe with sharpened sensitivity and fresh reaction. Many a heart has wondered at the alternation of night and day. Yet it is always the same, losing nothing of its striking beauty. It is only our hearts that have lost their interaction with this great phenomenon. Much indeed do we lose of the beauty of this universe when we look at such phenomena paying little attention to them only because they have become familiar.

The Qur'ān reinvigorates our blunted sensitivity, touches our cold hearts and awakens our tired minds so that we can look at the universe as though we see it for the first time. We thus stop at every phenomenon reflecting on how it works and enquiring about its secrets. We see God's hand doing its work in everything around us, and we reflect on His wisdom and the signs pointing to Him.

Limitless is God in His glory. He wants to give us more of His favours. He wants to gift us the whole universe every time we contemplate one of its phenomena in a way that we appreciate it as though we are seeing it for the first time. Thus, we are alert to the universe and its message a countless number of times. We then enjoy it anew every time we look at it.

This universe is beautiful, awesome and has a nature that is harmonious with our

own nature. Both are derived from the same source, subject to the same law. Thus when we relate to the universe we feel greater reassurance, and we experience the sort of happiness that we feel when we meet someone dear who has been absent for a long time. Besides, in the universe we see God's light, for "*God is the light of the heavens and the earth.*" (Verse 35) We experience this light in the great expanse of the universe, as well as within ourselves, at the same moment at which we look at the universe with an open heart that wants to understand the secret of God's elaborate planning.

Therefore, the Qur'ān reawakens us time and again, drawing our hearts and souls to a variety of great universal scenes, so that we do not pass by them with closed eyes and sealed hearts. If we do, we end our life journey with very little gain to show for our efforts.

The *sūrah* continues to portray scenes of the universe arousing our interest in them. It shows how all life, with its rich variety, originates from the same source, and has the same nature: "*God has created every animal from water; and among them are such as creep on their bellies, and such as walk on two legs, and others yet on four. God creates what He wills. Surely God has power over all things.*" (Verse 45)

Here the Qur'ān states in a very simple way a great fact that confirms that the origin of all creatures is water. This could mean that water is the basic component of all living species. It could also mean what contemporary scientists have been trying to prove, namely that life started in the sea, making water its first origin. Later, numerous species came into existence.

We, however, do not like to link any fact stated in the Qur'ān with scientific theory, because such theories admit change, modification, or abrogation. Hence, we take this statement at its face value, confirming its truth which makes clear that God has created all living things from water. This means that having the same origin, they present, as we clearly see with our eyes, a wide and rich variety: crawlers creep on their bellies, while man and birds walk on two legs, but most animals use all four limbs when they walk. All this takes place in accordance with the laws of nature God has set in operation. Nothing occurs by chance or coincidence. "*God creates what He wills,*" unrestricted by form or shape. The laws that operate in the universe have been established by God's will: "*Surely God has power over all things.*" (Verse 45)

With the great variety that we see in all creatures, an almost endless range of shapes, sizes, colours and characteristics is set before us. Yet they all originate from the same source. This suggests that it is all intended as such, reflecting the elaborate planning in the universe at large. It portrays as false the notion that life started by mere coincidence. What coincidence could give birth to such planning or such great variety? It is all the work of God who, in His wisdom, has given every living soul its shape and form and guided it to what suits it best in

this life.

4

Guidance to the Straight Path

We have sent down revelations that make things manifest; and God guides onto a straight way him who wills [to be guided]. (46)

They say: 'We believe in God and in the Messenger, and we obey.' But then some of them turn away after this [assertion]. Surely these are not believers. (47)

Whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he might judge between them, some of them turn away; (48)

but if the right is on their side, they come to him with all submission. (49)

Is there disease in their hearts? Or are they full of doubt? Or do they fear that God and His Messenger might deal unjustly with them? Nay, it is they who are the wrongdoers. (50)

The response of believers, whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he may judge between them, is none other than, 'We have heard, and we obey.' It is they that shall be successful. (51)

لَقَدْ أَنْزَلْنَا آيَاتٍ مُبَيِّنَاتٍ وَاللَّهُ يَهْدِي
مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَيَقُولُونَ ءَامَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَبِالرَّسُولِ
وَإِطَعْنَا ثُمَّ يَتَوَلَّى فَرِيقٌ مِنْهُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ
ذَلِكَ وَمَا أُوتِيتُكَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

وَإِذَا دُعُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ لِيَحْكُمَ
بَيْنَهُمْ إِذَا فَرِيقٌ مِنْهُمْ مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

وَإِنْ يَكُنْ لَهُمُ الْحَقُّ يَأْتُوا إِلَيْهِ مُذْعِنِينَ
﴿٤٩﴾

أَفِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ أَمْ ارْتَابُوا أَمْ يَخَافُونَ
أَنْ يَحْجِفَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَرَسُولُهُ ۗ بَلْ أُولَئِكَ
هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ ﴿٥٠﴾

إِنَّمَا كَانَ قَوْلَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذَا دُعُوا إِلَى
اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَهُمْ أَنْ يَقُولُوا
سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا ۗ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

Those who obey God and His Messenger, stand in awe of God and remain truly God-fearing are the ones who shall certainly triumph. (52)

They swear their most solemn oaths by God that if you [God's Messenger] should ever bid them to do so, they would most certainly march forth. Say: 'Do not swear. Your [sort of] obedience is well known. God is certainly well aware of all that you do.' (53)

Say: 'Obey God, and obey the Messenger.' But if you turn away, he will have to answer only for whatever he has been charged with, and you, for what you have been charged with. If you obey him, you shall be rightly guided. The Messenger is not bound to do more than clearly deliver his message. (54)

God has promised those of you who believe and do good deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, in the same way as He caused those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has chosen for them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a state of security. They will thus worship Me alone and associate with Me no partners whatsoever. Those who, after this, choose to disbelieve are indeed nicked. (55)

Attend regularly to your prayers and pay your *zakaat*, and obey the Messenger, so that you might be graced with God's mercy. (56)

Do not think that the unbelievers can frustrate [God's plan] on earth. The fire is their abode, and vile indeed is such a journey's end. (57)

52

وَمَنْ يُطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَخَشِيَ اللَّهَ وَيَتَّقِهِ
فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَائِزُونَ ﴿٥٢﴾

وَأَقْسَمُوا بِاللَّهِ جَهْدَ أَيْمَانِهِمْ لَئِنْ
أَمَرَهُمْ لَيَخْرُجْنَ قُلْ لَا تُقْسِمُوا طَاعَةً
مَعْرُوفَةً إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

قُلْ أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ فَإِن
تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْهِ مَا حُمِّلَ وَعَلَيْكُمْ مَا
حُمِّلْتُمْ وَإِن تُطِيعُوهُ تَهْتَدُوا وَمَا عَلَى
الرَّسُولِ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ ﴿٥٤﴾

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مِنكُمْ وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ لَيَسْتَخْلِفَنَّهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ
كََمَا أَسْتَخْلَفَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ
وَلَيُمَكِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ دِينَهُمُ الَّذِي ارْتَضَى لَهُمْ
وَلَيُبَدِّلَنَّهُم مِّن بَعْدِ خَوْفِهِمْ أَمْنًا
يَعْبُدُونَنِي لَا يُشْرِكُونَ بِي شَيْئًا وَمَن
كَفَرَ بَعْدَ ذَلِكَ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ
الْفَاسِقُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَءَاتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِيعُوا
الرَّسُولَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

لَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مُعْجِزِينَ فِي
الْأَرْضِ وَمَا لَهُمْ مِنَ النَّارِ وَلَبِئْسَ الْمَصِيرُ



Overview

Having thus taken us on a broad round of inspiring universal scenes, the *sūrah* brings us back to its main theme, namely good manners and moral values the Qur'ān aims to establish in the Muslim community. Once more we see that the Qur'ān wants hearts to be purified so as to be bright, reflecting the great light God has placed in the heavens and the earth.

Earlier in the *sūrah* mention was made of people who are not distracted by their business or commercial dealings from their duties of remembering God, attending regularly to prayers and paying their *zakāt*. It also highlighted the situation of the unbelievers, their deeds, the layers of darkness in which they live and their eventual destiny. Now the *sūrah* speaks of the hypocrites who benefit nothing by the clear signs God has placed all around them, or by His revelations that set all things most clearly. These turn their backs on divine guidance. Even though they profess to be believers, their attitude is markedly different from that of believers who obey God's Messenger and are happy with his judgement in their affairs and disputes. In marked contrast to their arrogance, the believers' behaviour confirms what they profess. And it is the believers that God has promised to establish in the land where they will be able to practise their faith and conduct their lives in line with His teachings. This is their reward for adopting the right attitude towards God and His Messenger, obeying them in all situations, despite the fact that the unbelievers stand in opposition to them for so doing. The *sūrah* confirms once again that the unbelievers cannot defy God. They will receive their fair punishment in hell, the worst abode for anyone.

Contrasting Attitudes

"We have sent down revelations that make things manifest; and God guides onto a straight way him who wills [to be guided]." (Verse 46) God's revelations provide clarity, allowing God's resplendent light to be seen. They point to the sources of His guidance, making clear what is good and what is evil. They set out the Islamic way of life without ambiguity or equivocation. They define the divine rules which must be implemented in human life on earth. When people implement them in their lives and

resort to them for judgement in their disputes, they implement a code that is clearly set out, providing all guarantees that ensure equity and justice for all, and which allow no confusion between true and false or permissible and forbidden.

“God guides onto a straight way him who wills [to be guided].” (Verse 46) The Arabic statement could also be read as *“God guides whom He wills onto a straight way.”* This is indeed the translation adopted by most translators. If we read it in this way then the statement makes clear that God’s will is free from all restriction. However, God has established a way to ensure guidance. Any human being who moves towards that way will definitely receive God’s light and guidance. By God’s will, their path will be made smooth until they reach their destination. Those who turn away from it will lose their guiding light and become hardened in error. Such is God’s will with regard to providing guidance to mankind.

The *sūrah* points out that despite the revelations and the signs God had placed in the universe, there is a special type of people who are hypocrites, claiming to be Muslims, but showing no respect for Islamic values:

They say: ‘We believe in God and in the Messenger, and we obey. ‘But then some of them turn away after this [assertion]. Surely these are not believers. Whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he might judge between them, some of them turn away; but if the right is on their side, they come to him with all submission. Is there disease in their hearts? Or are they full of doubt? Or do they fear that God and His Messenger might deal unjustly with them? Nay, it is they who are the wrongdoers. (Verses 47-50)

When faith is genuinely established in a person’s heart, it is reflected in that person’s behaviour. Islam is a proactive faith that cannot remain idle. When it is genuinely accepted as a personal belief, it moves on to show its influence in practice. It must be translated into action. The Islamic method of educating its followers always seeks to transform the mental acceptance of faith into a practical approach that soon becomes a habit or a rule. At the same time, it seeks to provide the mental motivation to make belief and action mutually complementary.

The hypocrites used to claim that they believed in God and His Messenger and that they were keen to obey them, but theirs was a hollow, verbal claim that lacked practical credence. They simply turned away, making their actions belie their claims. *“Surely these are not believers,”* because believers confirm with their actions what they claim to be their faith. Faith is not a toy which a person uses for amusement before discarding it. It is something that settles in a person’s heart, reshaping his feelings and influencing his actions. Moreover, when it is firmly established in someone’s mind and heart, there is no going back on it.

Those who claimed to be believers did not hesitate to contradict that claim when they were summoned to put their disputes to God's Messenger for judgement on the basis of His law: *"Whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he might judge between them, some of them turn away; but if the right is on their side, they come to him with all submission."* (Verses 48-49) They were well aware that a judgement made by God and His Messenger could only seek to establish what is right and ensure justice. It would never be influenced by personal likings. But such hypocrites did not care for justice and right. Hence, they were not prepared to seek the Prophet's judgement. Indeed, they refused to put their disputes to him, except when they were sure that justice was on their side. In such a situation, they did not hesitate to go to him, declaring their prior acceptance of his judgement, because they were certain that it would be in their favour. It would be a judgement on the basis of God's law that gave everyone their due.

Such people provide a typical example of hypocrites at all times: they dare not declare their disbelief; so they pretend to be Muslim. Yet they do not submit to God's law. When they are called upon to put their cases to God and His Messenger for judgement they refuse, seeking any excuse. They are described as unbelievers, because a genuine believer will never reject God's judgement. To accept such judgement is the practical evidence of belief. It is the attitude that confirms strong belief and due respect to God and His Messenger. Only a person whose heart has not been enlightened by faith and who has not adopted Islamic manners rejects God's Messenger's judgement.

Hence, their attitude is the subject of questions that confirm the fact that their hearts are diseased and wonders at their doubts: *"Is there disease in their hearts? Or are they full of doubt? Or do they fear that God and His Messenger might deal unjustly with them?"* (Verse 50)

The first question requires no confirmation, for heart disease is sure to bring about such an effect. No one with a sound human nature could deviate so badly from the truth. It is heart disease, a disease that makes someone imbalanced, unable to appreciate true faith and its moral code.

The second question wonders at them doubting God's judgement when they claim to believe in Him. Do they doubt that it comes from God, or that it is the judgement that administers justice? Whatever the case, their attitude differs from that of believers.

The third question combines wonder with denunciation. Do they fear that God and His Messenger might be unfair to them? It is most singular for anyone to entertain such a fear. God is the Creator of all people: it is inconceivable that He would favour some of His creatures at the expense of others. *"Nay, it is they who are*

the wrongdoers.” (Verse 50)

God’s judgement is the only judgement that is free of all prejudice, because God is fair to all and does not deal unjustly with anyone. All of His creation are to Him in the same position. Hence, He does not favour any of them at the expense of another. Any judgement other than God’s may be susceptible to unfairness. When people legislate, they cannot entirely free themselves of leaning towards what serves their interests. This applies to all human beings; be they individuals, a class or government.

When an individual legislates, he is bound to look for what ensures his own protection and serves his own interests. The same applies when a class, country or a block of countries legislates for another. But when God legislates, no personal security, protection or interest comes into play. His legislation aims to ensure absolute justice which cannot be achieved under any law other than divine law. Hence, those who reject God’s judgement, and that of His Messenger, are indeed unjust and wrongdoers. They do not want justice to be administered or right to be supreme. In fact, deep at heart they know that they do not doubt that God’s judgement only seeks to ensure justice. The point is that *“it is they who are the wrongdoers.” (Verse 50)*

The Road to True Success

True believers have a different attitude that reflects their complete respect for God’s judgement. When they are summoned so that God’s Messenger can arbitrate in their disputes, their reaction reflects the profound enlightenment of their hearts: *“The response of believers, whenever they are summoned to God and His Messenger in order that he may judge between them, is none other than, ‘We have heard, and we obey.’ It is they that shall be successful.” (Verse 51)*

This is an attitude of complete obedience. There is no hesitation, argument or dispute, because it is an obedience based on complete trust that God’s judgement is right and just, and whatever differs with it is based on personal prejudice. Such obedience testifies to complete submission to God, who gives life and conducts it as He wills. It demonstrates full trust that what God chooses for people is infinitely better than what they choose for themselves. God, the Creator, knows His creation better than they know themselves.

“It is they that shall be successful.” (Verse 51) Since God conducts their affairs, organizes their relations and judges between them on the basis of His knowledge and justice, they must be in a far better position than those who rely, in all such matters, on other human beings who are similarly short of knowledge. Besides, the believers are successful because they follow a single straight path that allows no deviation.

They are confident of the soundness of their code of living, follow it without hesitation, which means that their energy, talents and skills work in coherence. They suffer no internal division based on conflicting desires. They follow their own path, charted for them by God.

“Those who obey God and His Messenger, stand in awe of God and remain truly God-fearing are the ones who shall certainly triumph.” (Verse 52) The previous verse spoke of obedience and submission when judgement is made. This verse speaks of complete obedience in all matters, implementing every order or prohibition. Such obedience must be coupled with God consciousness and standing in awe of Him. The latter is more pervasive because it entails watching God and feeling His presence at every turn. This makes a person very uneasy about committing anything that God has forbidden, for they are ashamed and fear His punishment.

“Those who obey God and His Messenger, stand in awe of God and remain truly God-fearing are the ones who shall certainly triumph.” (Verse 52) They save themselves in this life and in the life to come. This is what God has promised, and God is always true to His promise. They deserve to triumph, as they have practically taken the necessary measures to ensure such a triumph. Obedience to God and His Messenger requires diligent following of the right way God in His wisdom has defined for mankind. Following this way automatically ensures success in this life and in the life to come. Moreover, standing in awe of God and fearing Him ensure continuity in one’s conduct, helping one to ignore all temptations that lure believers away from their straight path.

Obedying God and His Messenger, coupled with fearing God, provide a high standard of propriety that reflects a person’s enlightenment and strong bond with God. It also reflects the dignity of believers. Obedience to anyone or any authority means humiliation unless it is based on obeying God and His Messenger. No honourable believer will accept such humiliation, for a true believer will never bow his head before anyone other than God Almighty.

Having so contrasted the attitudes of believers and hypocrites, the *sūrah* now resumes its discussion of the latter’s behaviour, making it clear that only one sort of attitude can be adopted by believers. It then moves on to outline God’s promise to the believers.

They swear their most solemn oaths by God that if you [God’s Messenger] should ever bid them to do so, they would most certainly march forth. Say: ‘Do not swear. Your [sort of] obedience is well known. God is certainly well aware of all that you do. ‘Say: ‘Obey God, and obey the Messenger.’ But if you turn away, he will have to answer only for whatever he has been charged with, and you, for what you have been charged with. If you obey him, you shall be rightly guided. The Messenger is not bound to do

more than clearly deliver his message. (Verses 53-54)

The hypocrites used to solemnly swear in front of the Prophet that he needed only to give them his orders and they would readily join him on any expedition against his enemies. They would not hesitate to fight for Islam under his banner. But God was fully aware that they were lying. Hence, He decries their assertions and looks at their oaths with sarcasm: *“Do not swear. Your obedience is well known.”* (Verse 53) This means that there is no need for their oaths, because their obedience is too well known to need any assertion or oath. It is as if we say to a person whom we know to be a habitual liar that he need not assert to us that he is saying the truth, because we know him to be always truthful.

This sarcastic reply is followed by the assertion: *“God is certainly well aware of all that you do.”* (Verse 53) He is certainly in no need of their oaths. He knows that they would not obey any order to go to war, and that they would not join the Prophet when he went on such an expedition. Therefore, a fresh order is given to them to show true obedience to God and His Messenger, not the sort they are known to show, because that is false. *“Say: Obey God, and obey the Messenger.”* (Verse 54)

“But if you turn away,” resorting to your habitual hypocrisy, then *“he will have to answer only for whatever he has been charged with.”* (Verse 54) His only task for which he is answerable is to deliver God’s message, as he has surely done. *“And you, for what you have been charged with.”* (Verse 54) Your task is to obey him most sincerely. But so far, you have not done so. However, *“if you obey him, you shall be rightly guided.”* (Verse 54) You will be following the right path that leads you to success in both this life and the life to come. *“The Messenger is not bound to do more than clearly deliver his message.”* (Verse 54) He is not responsible for your acceptance or rejection of the faith. If you turn away, he will not be deemed to have fallen short of fulfilling his task. You are the ones who will have to account for that, and you are the ones who run the risk of being punished for your disobedience of the orders given to you by God and His Messenger.

God’s True Promise

Once the attitude of the hypocrites has been discussed and settled, the *sūrah* leaves them aside and speaks about obedient believers. It outlines the reward of sincere obedience and proactive faith. The first instalment of such reward is given in this life, before human beings are held to account on the Day of Resurrection.

God has promised those of you who believe and do good deeds that, of a certainty, He will cause them to accede to power on earth, in the same way as He caused those who lived before them to accede to it; and that, of a certainty, He will firmly establish for

them the religion which He has chosen for them; and that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a state of security. They will thus worship Me alone and associate with Me no partners whatsoever. Those who, after this, choose to disbelieve are indeed wicked. (Verse 55)

Such is God's promise to the believers who do good deeds and follow the Prophet Muhammad's guidance. They will be given power and will be established on earth. Their state of fear will be replaced by a state of reassurance and security. God's promise will always come true. It is, then, pertinent to ask about the nature of faith and the practical fulfilment of this promise by God.

True faith, which ensures that God's promise comes true, is great indeed. It influences all human activity and defines its direction. Once faith is well established in a person's heart, it begins to manifest itself in the form of positive and constructive action undertaken for God's sake and addressed to Him. It means full compliance with His orders in all matters, major and minor. It transforms a believer's desires and inclinations so as to make them all in line with the Prophet's guidance, because such guidance has been given to him by God.

It is the sort of faith that fills people's whole entity, their feelings, aspirations, natural inclinations, actions, movements, as well as their behaviour at home, in society and with their Lord. All these must be addressed or dedicated to God alone. This is specifically mentioned in the *sūrah* as justification for giving believers power and establishing them on earth: "*They will thus worship Me alone and associate no partners with Me whatsoever.*" (Verse 55) Idolatry can take different shapes and forms, and can creep into a person's mind through a variety of ways and means. The *sūrah* makes it clear however that to address any action or feeling to anyone other than God is a manifestation of idolatry.

Belief in God is a complete way of life. It incorporates all divine orders including the provision of all means, taking all precautions and ensuring all that is necessary to fulfil the great trust of being in charge of the earth and building human life on it. So what does this involve in reality?

It does not just entail being in power and forming a government. Rather it involves all this with the proviso that it is used for promoting sound human life and the implementation of the way of life God has chosen for mankind. It is only through such implementation that humanity can achieve the level of perfection that befits the species God has honoured.

The trust given to man on earth is an ability to build and promote goodness, not to corrupt and destroy. It involves ensuring justice and happiness for all, not injustice or suppression. It leads to the elevation of humanity and human life, and not letting them sink to the level of animals.

It is such power and such trust that God has promised the believers who do good deeds. He promised to give them power on earth, just as He gave it to earlier communities of believers, so that they would put into practice the constitution He chose for mankind, establish justice and enable humanity to attain sublimity. People who spread corruption and injustice, and promote carnal desires are not in the position of trustees. They are subjected to a test or are the means to test others. All this is done to fulfil God's purpose.

To further demonstrate this aspect of giving power to the believers is the fact that this promise is followed in the same verse by a further one: *"of a certainty, He will firmly establish for them the religion which He has chosen for them."* (Verse 55) The firm establishment of His religion means that this will take a firm hold on people's hearts on the one hand, and form the basis on which all life affairs are conducted on the other. God has promised the believers who do righteous deeds to grant them power on earth and to make their faith govern human life. Their faith bids them to do well, establish justice, shun worldly desires, and build a happy human life making good use of all the resources God has placed on earth. It also bids the believers to dedicate all this to God alone.

Furthermore, God's promise to the believers stipulates *"that, of a certainty, He will cause their erstwhile state of fear to be replaced by a state of security."* The Prophet's Companions were for a long period of time in a state of fear. They could not put down their arms, even after the Prophet and his Companions had migrated to Madīnah, the city that served as the first base for Islam in history.

Al-Rabi` ibn Anas quotes Abū al-`Āliyah's comments on this verse:

"The Prophet and his Companions remained in Makkah for around ten years calling on people to believe in God and to worship Him alone, associating no partners with Him. But they did so in secret, as they were in a state of fear and were prevented from fighting. When they later migrated to Madīnah, God bid them to fight for their cause. This meant that they were again in a state of fear, wearing their body armour day and night. They persevered for as long as God willed. One of his Companions asked the Prophet: Are we to remain in fear for the rest of time? Will there come a time when we can put our armaments aside?' The Prophet said: 'It will not be long before any one of you can sit among a huge crowd without anyone carrying arms.' Soon afterwards, God revealed this verse. The Prophet was able to establish his authority over the whole of Arabia and his followers were in a state of security. They put down their arms. Sometime later, the Prophet passed away, and the Muslims remained in security during the reigns of Abū Bakr, `Umar and `Uthmān. Then friction occurred between them and God allowed fear to creep into their midst. They had to employ guards. When they changed their overall stance, their conditions also changed."

Not Included in God's Promise

"Those who, after this, choose to disbelieve are indeed wicked." (Verse 55) They are the ones who do not meet God's conditions, and, therefore, God's promise does not apply to them.

God's promise was fulfilled once, and remained effective for as long as the Muslims continued to meet His conditions: *"They will thus worship Me alone and associate with Me no partners whatsoever."* (Verse 55) This includes any partners, whether in the form of deities to which worship is addressed or desires and ambitions. They must believe and do righteous deeds. God's promise applies to anyone who meets these conditions, and it remains in force till the end of human life. However, victory, power and security may be slow in coming, but this will only be the result of a failure by the believers to meet some aspects of the conditions outlined, or their failure to attend to a particular duty involved. But when the Muslim community has benefited by the trials they have to endure and passed the test God sets for them; when they have endured fear and sought security; when they yearn for dignity after having suffered humiliation; when they aspire to having power after being weak; God's promise will be fulfilled to them in spite of any opposing power. One proviso applies, however: in their perseverance through tests and trials, and in their aspiration to the fulfilment of God's promise, the believers must always resort to the means God has outlined and fulfil the conditions He has made clear.

Therefore, the promise is followed with an order to attend to Islamic duties, such as prayer, *zakāt* and obeying the Prophet. Moreover, the Prophet and his followers must never give any weight to the power of unbelievers who fight them on account of their faith.

Attend regularly to your prayers and pay your zakāt, and obey the Messenger, so that you might be graced with God's mercy. Do not think that the unbelievers can frustrate [God's plan] on earth. The fire is their abode, and vile indeed is such a journey's end. (Verses 56-57)

Believers must maintain their bond with God, keep their minds and hearts on the right path through prayer, resist stinginess, purify themselves as individuals and as a community through the payment of *zakāt*, obey the Prophet and accept his judgement, implement God's law in all matters, great or small, so as to set human life on the path He has chosen. Believers must do all this so that they *"might be graced with God's mercy."* (Verse 56) In this life, God's mercy removes corruption, fear, worry and error, and in the hereafter, it removes His punishment.

Addressing them directly, God says to the believers: if you remain steadfast,

following My path, then you need not worry about the might of the unbelievers. They cannot frustrate God's purpose on earth. The power they apparently wield will not stand in your way. You are far stronger when equipped with your faith, implement your system and raise whatever power you can muster. In material power, you may not be a match for them, but believers who strive for the truth can work miracles.

Islam is a great truth which must be carefully examined by anyone who wishes to see the fulfilment of God's promise outlined in the above verses. Such a person must also look at how it came true in human history, understand the true meaning of its conditions before entertaining any doubt about it or worry about the slowness of its fulfilment.

Never did the Muslim community follow God's way, implementing the constitution He has laid down, allowing it to operate in all spheres of life, without reaping the reward of God's promise to grant it power and security. Whenever it abandoned this course, it went to the end of the line, suffered humiliation, lived in fear and misery and saw its faith retreat from guiding human life.

Nevertheless, God's promise remains in force, and His conditions are well defined. Whoever wants to see the promise fulfilled, must do their task and fulfil its conditions. No one is ever more true to his promises than God.

Perfect Manners

Believers! Let those whom you rightfully possess, and those of you who have not yet attained to puberty, ask leave of you at three times of day: before the prayer of daybreak, and whenever you lay aside your garments in the middle of the day, and after the prayer of nightfall. These are three occasions on which you may happen to be undressed. Beyond these occasions, neither you nor they will incur any sin if they move freely about you, attending to one another. Thus God makes clear to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (58)

Yet when your children attain to puberty, let them ask leave of you, as do those senior to them [in age]. Thus does God make revelations clear to you. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (59)

Such elderly women as are past the prospect of marriage incur no sin if they lay aside their [outer] garments, provided they do not make a showy display of their charms. But it is better for them to be modest. God hears all and knows all. (60)

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لِيَسْتَعِذْنَ بِكُمْ
الَّذِينَ مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ لَمْ يَبْلُغُوا
الْحُلُمَ مِنْكُمْ ثَلَاثَ مَرَّاتٍ مِّن قَبْلِ صَلَاةِ
الْفَجْرِ وَحِينَ تَضَعُونَ ثِيَابَكُمْ مِّن
الظَّهِيرَةِ وَمِن بَعْدِ صَلَاةِ الْعِشَاءِ ثَلَاثُ
عَوْرَاتٍ لَّكُمْ لَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَلَا عَلَيْهِمْ
جُنَاحٌ بَعْدَهُنَّ طَوَّافُونَ عَلَيْكُمْ
بَعْضُكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ
لَكُمْ الْآيَاتِ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

وَإِذَا بَلَغَ الْأَطْفَالُ مِنْكُمْ الْحُلُمَ
فَلْيَسْتَعِذُوا كَمَا اسْتَعِذَ الَّذِينَ
مِن قَبْلِهِمْ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ
ءَايَاتِهِ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥٩﴾

وَالْقَوَاعِدُ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ الَّتِي لَا يَرْجُونَ
نِكَاحًا فَلَيْسَ عَلَيْهِنَّ جُنَاحٌ أَنْ
يَضَعْنَ ثِيَابَهُنَّ غَيْرَ مُتَبَرِّجَاتٍ بِزِينَةٍ
وَأَنْ يَسْتَغْفِرْنَ خَيْرٌ لَّهُنَّ وَاللَّهُ
سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٠﴾

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick; and neither to yourselves for eating from your houses, or your fathers' houses, or your mothers' houses, or your brothers' houses, or your sisters' houses, or your paternal uncles' houses, or your paternal aunts' houses, or your maternal uncles' houses, or your maternal aunts' houses, or in houses of which the keys are in your possession, or in the houses of your friends. You will incur no sin by eating in company or separately. But when you enter houses, greet one another with a blessed, goodly greeting, as enjoined by God. Thus does God make His revelations clear to you, so that you may use your reason. (61)

They only are true believers who believe in God and His Messenger, and who, whenever they are with him upon a matter requiring collective action, do not depart unless they have obtained his leave. Those who ask leave of you are indeed the ones who believe in God and His Messenger. Hence, when they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose, and pray to God to forgive them. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. (62)

لَيْسَ عَلَى الْأَعْمَى حَرْجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْأَعْرَجِ حَرْجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْمَرِيضِ حَرْجٌ وَلَا عَلَى أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَنْ تَأْكُلُوا مِنْ بُيُوتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ آبَائِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ إِخْوَانِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَخَوَاتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ أَعْمَامِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ عَمَّاتِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ إِخْوَالِكُمْ أَوْ بُيُوتِ خَالَاتِكُمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتُمْ مَفَاحِيَهُ أَوْ صَدِيقِكُمْ ۗ لَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ جُنَاحٌ أَنْ تَأْكُلُوا جَمِيعًا أَوْ أَشْتَاتًا ۚ فَإِذَا دَخَلْتُمْ بُيُوتًا فَسَلِّمُوا عَلَى أَنْفُسِكُمْ تَحِيَّةً مِّنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ مُبْرَكَةٌ طَيِّبَةٌ ۚ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ۚ وَإِذَا كَانُوا مَعَهُ عَلَىٰ أَمْرٍ جَامِعٍ لَّمْ يَذْهَبُوا حَتَّىٰ يَسْتَأْذِنُوهُ ۚ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَأْذِنُونَكَ أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ ۚ فَإِذَا أَسْتَأْذَنُوكَ لِبَعْضِ شَأْنِهِمْ فَأَذِّنْ لِمَن شِئْتَ مِنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمُ اللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٦٢﴾

Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another. God certainly knows those of you who would slip away surreptitiously. So, let those who would go against His bidding beware, lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them. (63)

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Well does He know what you are intent upon. One day, all will be brought back to Him, and then He will tell them all that they have done. God has full knowledge of everything. (64)

لَا تَجْعَلُوا دُعَاءَ الرَّسُولِ بَيْنَكُمْ كَدُعَاءِ
بَعْضِكُمْ بَعْضًا ۚ قَدْ يَعْلَمُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ
يَتَسَلَّلُونَ مِنْكُمْ لِوَاذًا ۚ فَلْيَحْذَرِ الَّذِينَ
تُخَالِفُونَ عَنْ أَمْرِهِ أَنْ تُصِيبَهُمْ فِتْنَةٌ أَوْ
يُصِيبَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٣﴾

أَلَا إِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
قَدْ يَعْلَمُ مَا أَنْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ وَيَوْمَ يُرْجَعُونَ
إِلَيْهِ فَيَنْبِئُهُمْ بِمَا عَمِلُوا ۗ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ
عَلِيمٌ ﴿٦٤﴾

Overview

Islam is a complete way of life, setting a code that organizes human life in all situations. It lays down values that govern all human relations and social actions. Islam establishes values that are relevant to points of detail in daily situations and behaviour, in the same way as it lays down values and principles that govern serious and momentous matters. It ensures harmony between the two and makes acceptance by God and earning His pleasure the goal of all human activities.

The present *sūrah* provides an example of such harmony. It specifies certain mandatory punishments for serious offences, and it speaks of seeking permission before entering others' homes. Alongside the two it portrays spectacular scenes from the universe. The *sūrah* then speaks of the Muslims' proper attitude as they submit to the rule of God and His Messenger, contrasting this with the hypocrites' insolence. Alongside this comes God's true promise to the believers that they will be established on earth and live in peace and security. In this last passage, the *sūrah* again speaks of proper manners within the home, and when inmates need to seek permission before entering rooms, so as not to intrude on others' privacy. It also makes clear the requirement of seeking permission before leaving the Prophet. It also outlines the proper manner of visiting relatives and friends where one may partake of food. Alongside this, it outlines the proper way of addressing the Prophet. All these form part of the Islamic manners that every Muslim community should adopt, realizing that the Qur'ān provides guidance in all life situations, even though they

may not be of a serious nature.

Good Manners at Home

Believers! Let those whom you rightfully possess, and those of you who have not yet attained to puberty, ask leave of you at three times of day: before the prayer of daybreak, and whenever you lay aside your garments in the middle of the day, and after the prayer of nightfall. These are three occasions on which you may happen to be undressed. Beyond these occasions, neither you nor they will incur any sin if they move freely about you, attending to one another. Thus God makes clear to you His revelations. God is All-Knowing, Wise. (Verse 58)

Earlier in the *sūrah* the proper manner of seeking permission before entering a house is outlined. Now the *sūrah* speaks of the need to seek permission within the home. Servants, who were slaves, and children who are not so young but have not yet attained puberty enter rooms without knocking to seek permission, except during three times of the day. These are periods of relaxation when adults may be undressed. These three occasions are: 1) shortly before the daybreak prayer, i.e. *fajr*, when people normally still wear their night garments, or they may be putting on their day clothes in readiness to go out; 2) about midday when people take a nap after changing into more comfortable garments for relaxation; and 3) after they have offered their nightfall prayer, i.e. *ishā'*. At this time, people put on their night clothes for more comfort.

During these three periods, servants and children below the age of puberty must knock before entering rooms in the house so that they do not see their relatives undressed. Many people do not observe such manners at home, thinking little of the psychological and moral effects of their laxity. Or they may think that servants do not stare at their masters' nakedness, or that children below the age of puberty do not take notice. With the progress achieved today in the field of human psychology, experts emphasize that people are often influenced for life by what they see or experience in childhood, and that such experience may cause them psychological problems that are not easy to cure. God, who knows everything, including the finest and most subtle feelings, outlines these manners which He wants the Muslim community to observe, so that it remains a community with sound hearts and minds, free from psychological problems.

These three occasions are specified because it is more likely that people will be undressed. Children and servants are not required to knock before entry all the time, because this would be difficult to observe, considering that these two groups frequently enter their elders' rooms: either because servants are going about their tasks or because children cannot stay away from their parents for long. Hence the

description: *“Beyond these occasions, neither you nor they will incur any sin if they move freely about you, attending to one another.”* We see how the divine instruction strikes a balance between the need to ensure that people do not show their nakedness in front of others, even though they may be young or servants, and the practical need for easy access. Hence, the instruction does not order seeking permission to enter on all occasions.

When children attain to puberty, the same rules of entry apply to them as to those who are not related to the family. This means that they must seek permission before entering a room at any time, in accordance with the general rules outlined earlier in the *sūrah*: *“Yet when your children attain to puberty, let them ask leave of you, as do those senior to them [in age]. Thus does God make revelations clear to you. God is All-Knowing, Wise.”* (Verse 59)

We note that the final comment in these verses stresses God’s knowledge and wisdom, because the instructions given are based on His knowledge of our inner feelings and the manners that are most likely to refine such feelings. In His wisdom, God lays down the teachings that set minds and hearts on the right course.

Rules Relaxed

Earlier in the *sūrah* orders were given requiring women to cover their charms and adornments so that there is little room for temptation or exciting desire. An exception is made here in the case of older women who no longer have the desire to consort with men, and who no longer excite men’s desires:

Such elderly women as are past the prospect of marriage incur no sin if they lay aside their [outer] garments, provided they do not make a showy display of their charms. But it is better for them to be modest. God hears all and knows all. (Verse 60)

Such elder women may, if they choose, put aside their cloaks and outer garments, provided that this does not expose their nakedness, and that they do not make a show, displaying their charms or adornments. It is better for them that they should not do so, continuing to wear their outer, loose garments. In describing such modesty the *sūrah* uses the word *yasta`fifna*, which is derived from the Arabic root *`iffah*, meaning chastity. Thus, this attitude is described as aiming to maintain chastity because of the close link between chastity and covering women’s charms, while exposing such charms is closely linked to temptation. This instruction is in line with the general Islamic view that the best method of guarding people’s chastity is to reduce the chances for temptation.

“God hears all and knows all.” He is aware of all things, including what is uttered

and what is entertained in one's thoughts. The question here is one of intention and conscience.

The *sūrah* then tackles another aspect of relations with friends and relatives:

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick; and neither to yourselves for eating from your houses, or your fathers' houses, or your mothers' houses, or your brothers' houses, or your sisters' houses, or your paternal uncles' houses, or your paternal aunts' houses, or your maternal uncles' houses, or your maternal aunts' houses, or in houses of which the keys are in your possession, or in the houses of your friends. You will incur no sin by eating in company or separately. But when you enter houses, greet one another with a blessed, goodly greeting, as enjoined by God. Thus does God make His revelations clear to you, so that you may use your reason. (Verse 61)

Reports suggest that in the early days of Islam, Muslims used to eat in such houses mentioned in this verse without asking the owners' permission. They also took with them poor people who were blind, lame or ill. Then when aversion was revealed stating: "Do not devour one another's property wrongfully," (2: 188) they felt very uneasy about eating in relatives' homes. Furthermore, such poor people as were blind, lame or ill felt uneasy about joining them, unless they were specifically invited by the owner. This reflects the keen sensitivity of the early Muslims, and their desire to avoid anything that was even remotely connected with what God prohibited. Hence, this present verse was revealed, making it perfectly permissible for relatives to eat in the homes of such relatives mentioned in the verse, and to bring with them such needy people as the verse describes. All this is understood to be contingent on the clear understanding that the home owner is not averse to this, and their eating in his home does not cause him any harm. Adding such a proviso is based on general rules like those outlined in the following two *ḥadīths*: "There shall be no infliction of harm on oneself or others," and "It is not permissible to take the property of a Muslim except with his consent." [Related by al-Shāfi'ī]

Since this verse lays down certain legislation we note how it is phrased, choosing its wording very carefully so as not to leave any room for doubt or confusion. We also note how relatives are mentioned in a specific order. It starts with a reference to the homes of one's own children and spouses without even mentioning these relatives. The verse includes these in the general reference to "your houses", because the house of one's son, daughter, wife or husband is like one's own. Then other homes are mentioned, starting with those belonging to a father, mother, paternal uncle and aunt, maternal uncle and aunt. Added to these is a person who is entrusted with looking after one's property, having the keys to it. Such a person may eat from that house in accordance with what is reasonable, not taking more than

what he needs for his own food. Also added are friends' homes so as to make the relation with them similar to that with one's own relatives. Indeed, friends may be very happy for friends to eat at their homes without the need for any permission. But all this is conditional on causing no harm to the home owner.

Having mentioned the homes in which one may eat without seeking prior permission, the verse continues to explain the manner in which such eating may take place: "You will incur no sin by eating in company or separately." In pre-Islamic days some Arabs disliked eating alone. If such a person did not find someone to eat with, he would not touch the food. God lifted this restriction, because it causes unnatural complications. He left the matter simple to cater for all situations. Hence people may eat alone or in company.

The verse adds an instruction on manners to be observed when entering such homes where people are allowed to eat: "*When you enter houses, greet one another with a blessed, goodly greeting, as enjoined by God.*" (Verse 61) The phraseology of this instruction in the Arabic original employs a fine touch as it says: *sallimū `alā anfusikum* 'greet yourselves' to express the meaning given in translation as 'greet one another'. This is an indication of the strength of the relationship between those mentioned in this verse. A person who greets his relative or friend is actually greeting himself, and the greeting offered is enjoined by God, as though coming from Him. It is thus blessed, full of goodness. As such it establishes a bond between them that is never severed.

These instructions emphasize that the believers feel their bond with God in all matters and appreciate the wisdom behind divine legislation: "*Thus does God make His revelations clear to you, so that you may use your reason.*" (Verse 61)

Good Manners with the Prophet

The *sūrah* then moves on to organizing relations within the larger family of the Muslim community and its leader, the Prophet, and how Muslims should behave in his presence:

They only are true believers who believe in God and His Messenger, and who, whenever they are with him upon a matter requiring collective action, do not depart unless they have obtained his leave. Those who ask leave of you are indeed the ones who believe in God and His Messenger. Hence, when they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose, and pray to God to forgive them. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful. Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another. God certainly knows those of you who would slip away surreptitiously. So, let those who would go against His bidding beware, lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them. To

God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Well does He know what you are intent upon. One day, all will be brought back to Him, and then He will tell them all that they have done. God has full knowledge of everything. (Verses 62-64)

Ibn Ishāq mentions the occasion when these verses were revealed. He says that when the Quraysh and the confederate tribes marched towards Madinah, pledging to annihilate the Muslims, the Prophet ordered the digging of a moat around the entrance to Madinah. He himself took part in the digging work so as to encourage those who were also taking part. All Muslims were working hard, except for a number of hypocrites. They tried to hide their lack of commitment by doing a little work before sneaking away, without the Prophet's knowledge or permission. On the other hand, the true Muslims continued to work hard. If any of them needed to leave for some important business, he mentioned this to the Prophet, requesting permission before so leaving. The Prophet granted him permission, and he returned as soon as he had attended to the business in hand. They all felt that taking part in this work would earn them reward from God. God described those true believers in the verse: *"They only are true believers..."* In reference to the hypocrites who sneaked away without permission, God says: *"Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another..."*

Whatever was the background behind the revelation of these verses, they include important rules for the Muslim community which should be observed between the leader and the members of that community. These rules should be so ingrained as to become part of the traditions, feelings and regulations within the community. Otherwise, the community will fall into total chaos. Thus, *"They only are true believers who believe in God and His Messenger,"* and not the ones who verbally declare themselves believers but show no practical evidence of their obedience. *"And who, whenever they are with him upon a matter requiring collective action, do not depart unless they have obtained his leave."* (Verse 62) This applies to serious matters that require collective action, such as a decision on going to war, or a matter that concerns the whole community. When such a grave matter is being considered or acted upon, believers do not absent themselves without first obtaining their leader's permission. Thus, no room is left for disorder.

People with faith do not seek permission to leave unless they are in real need to do so. Their faith and discipline ensure that they are not away when a serious collective matter is at hand. The Qur'ān, however, gives the Prophet, who is the leader of the Muslim community, the right to grant or withhold such permission: *"When they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose."* (Verse 62) This means that there is no harm in withholding permission, should the situation require this. The leader of the Muslim community thus exercises his authority in determining whether or not to allow an individual to leave,

depending on how he sees the interests of the community being best served.

Nevertheless, the *sūrah* makes clear that it is better for the individual to try to overcome personal needs, so as to stay with the Prophet. Receiving permission to depart for a while means falling short on fulfilling one's duty. Hence, it needs for the Prophet to pray to God to forgive those who needed to be absent for a time: "*When they ask your leave to attend to some business of theirs, grant you this leave to whomever of them you choose, and pray to God to forgive them. God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful.*" (Verse 62) This puts a check on the believer through his own conscience, ensuring that he does not seek a leave of absence in such situations unless he has very compelling reasons.

A Stern Warning to the Disobedient

The *sūrah* then alerts the Muslims to the need to address the Prophet with respect when they seek his permission, and indeed in all situations. They should not call him by his name or nickname, as they call each other. He is to be addressed as the man God has honoured by making him His Messenger: "*Do not address God's Messenger in the manner you address one another.*" (Verse 63) Indeed people must be full of respect for him as God's Messenger, so that they pay due heed to every word he says and every directive he gives. Teachers and leaders should be held in high esteem and addressed with respect. The fact that the Prophet was very modest in his approach, and easy to deal with, did not mean that it was appropriate for his Companions to forget that he was their leader who educated them and refined their manners, addressing him as they would address one another. Deep in their hearts, those who are being educated should hold their educator in high regard so that they are ashamed if they happen to overstep the requirements of respect when dealing with him.

The hypocrites who sneaked away, covering for one another, are given a stern warning. If the Prophet could not see them, God was certainly watching them: "*God certainly knows those of you who would slip away surreptitiously.*" (Verse 6.3) The Arabic wording, *yatasallalūn.. liwādhā*, practically shows their stealthy movements, as they left stealthily, like despicable cowards.

"*So, let those who would go against His bidding beware, lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them.*" (Verse 63) The warning here is very stern. Those who disobey the Prophet's orders, seeking a way different from his, sneaking away in pursuit of personal gain or to avoid potential risk, should beware. They may find themselves in the midst of a situation where values and standards are blurred, where the true and false are not easily distinguished and the community finds itself in disarray. In such a situation no one is sure of his own safety, as people do not abide by the law and

good may not be easily distinguished from evil. Such a situation is miserable for everyone: *“Lest some affliction or grievous suffering befall them.”* Such grievous suffering could befall people in this life or in the life to come, in retribution for disobeying God’s orders and rejecting the way of life He has laid down.

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse that balances the warning with a statement making it clear to both believers and unbelievers that God sees them all, and knows their actions and the intentions behind each action:

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on earth. Well does He know what you are intent upon. One day, all will be brought back to Him, and then He will tell them all that they have done. God has full knowledge of everything. (Verse 64)

Thus, the conclusion aims to remind people to remain God-fearing. Being so provides the ultimate guarantee for the fulfilment of His orders, abiding by the rules He has set, observing the manners He has outlined. We have seen many of these clearly stated in this *sūrah*, relating to different aspects of life, but all treated on an equal footing.