

SŪRAH 30
Al-Rūm
(The Byzantines)

Prologue

The first few verses of this *sūrah* were revealed when Persia overpowered the Byzantine Empire in the Arab areas that were under its rule. This was also a time when arguments in Makkah raged between the early Muslims and Arab idolaters. Since the Byzantines at that time were Christians, and the Persians were Magians, the unbelievers in Makkah exploited the event, drumming up the victory of polytheism over monotheism, and seeing in this Persian victory an omen for their own victory over the believers.

Therefore, the opening of this *sūrah* heralds a victory for the people of the Scriptures, the Byzantines, within a few years. It says that this victory will bring much rejoicing to the believers for they love for believers of any divine religion to gain the upper hand.

The Qur'ān does not, however, stop at making this promise, nor does it confine itself to the event mentioned. In fact, it uses the event to show the believers and their opponents wider horizons; in essence, it establishes a link between them and the universe. It also relates God's rule to support divine faith to the great truth that regulates the heavens, the earth and all that is between them, as well as to the past, present and future of humanity. It then moves on to the life to come and the world beyond this earth. Indeed, the Qur'ān takes us on a great round in which we see the marvels of the universe, the human soul, people's situations and the wonders of nature. We are, thus, able to look at the wider horizons of knowledge, for our lives have been elevated and broadened. Furthermore, we are released from the strict

confines of time, place and event, and are able to look at the universe, its operative rules, history, present and future.

Thus, people's concept of the true nature of the bonds and relations in this great universe is set on a higher platform. They begin to feel the real greatness of the laws that govern the universe and human nature, and appreciate those that regulate human life and its events. In this way, positions of victory and defeat are defined, and fair measures to judge people's actions and activities in this life are set, so as to give them just reward both in the present life and in the life to come.

In the light of this broad concept, the universality of the Islamic message is clearly shown. Its interaction with events and world situations, even when it is still in its infancy and confined to Makkah and the surrounding valley, appears to be very positive. Its scope is broadened beyond this earth so as to link it to the nature of the universe and its major rules, human nature and its profound depths, as well as to the past and present of human life both in this world and in the world beyond.

Thus, a Muslim's heart and mind are linked to these horizons, so as to influence his feelings and the way he looks at life and values generally. He looks up to heaven and the life to come and contemplates the wonders and marvels of the universe. He appreciates his own position, and that of his community, in this great expanse. He realizes his own value and the value of his faith both in people's and God's measures. He thus fulfils his role and does his duties with a clear mind and with confidence and reassurance.

In the method it follows in outlining these links and their significances in the overall system of the universe, as well as their effects on people's hearts, the *sūrah* may be thought of as consisting of two interlinked sections. In the first, it establishes a link between the victory granted to the believers and the truth that provides the firm basis on which the universe is established and with which this life as well as the next are closely associated. It directs people's attention to God's laws as they applied to earlier communities and generations, and in this context makes use of an analogy about resurrection. Here the *sūrah* depicts a scene from the Day of Judgement and what happens then to believers and unbelievers. This is followed with further scenes of the universe and the signs God has placed in it, highlighting the effects these scenes have on people's hearts. The *sūrah* then gives an example drawn from themselves and their relations with their slaves to show the stupidity of the idea of multiple deities, proving that it is based on whims and desires that are devoid of truth and knowledge. This section concludes with a directive to the Prophet to follow the clear path of truth, which is the path of an upright nature that neither alters to suit desires nor divides into sects or divergent groups.

In the second section the *sūrah* depicts the fickleness of people's cares and interests

and how these are unsuitable as a basis for building human life. What people should look to instead is a constant measure that does not bend to suit nefarious interests. It describes such people when they enjoy God's mercy and when they are afflicted by hardship, as well as in situations of affluence and poverty. It moves on to speak of how provisions should be used and increased. It then discusses the question of God's alleged partners from this angle, showing how such alleged deities can never provide sustenance, initiate or terminate life. It links the spread of corruption on land and sea with what people do, and directs them to go about the earth reflecting on the ends met by past communities of unbelievers who associated partners with God. It then directs the Prophet to follow the religion of pure human nature before a day comes when everyone will be rewarded for what they do. Like it did in the first section, the *sūrah* then provides some scenes of the universe, commenting that true guidance is that given by God, while the Prophet's task is only to deliver his message. It is not in his power to make the blind see or the deaf hear. The *sūrah* then takes us on a new round within the human constitution, reminding us of the stages of man's development from beginning to end, starting with utter weakness in childhood, before it mentions death, resurrection and judgement, giving us a new scene of that day. This section and the *sūrah* itself conclude with a directive to the Prophet to remain patient in adversity and to bear whatever difficulties he meets. He should always remain confident that God's promise will be fulfilled. Hence, he must not let himself be disturbed by those who lack faith.

Both the ambience of the *sūrah* and its general flow contribute to its main theme, namely the close relation between people's situations and life's events; the past, present and future in human life and universal laws. This shows that every little action, event, growth, consequence, setback and victory are all closely linked, and subject to an accurate law. In all these, the final decision rests with God: "*All power of decision belongs to God before and after.*" (Verse 4) This truth is confirmed time after time in the Qur'ān, because it is the basic truth in the Islamic faith which gives rise to all concepts, values and standards.

1

Signs to Reflect Upon

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

الم

Defeated have been the Byzantines (2)

غَلَبَتِ الرُّومُ ۝ فِي أَدْنَى الْأَرْضِ وَهُمْ
مِنْ بَعْدِ غَلَبِهِمْ سَيَغْلِبُونَ ۝

*in the lands close-by; yet despite this
their defeat, they will gain victory (3)*

فِي بَضْعِ سِنِينَ ۝ لِلَّهِ الْأَمْرُ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَمِنْ
بَعْدِ ۝ وَيَوْمَئِذٍ يَفْرَحُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ ۝

*within a few years. All power of decision
belongs to God before and after. And on
that day the believers will rejoice (4)*

بِنَصْرِ اللَّهِ ۝ يَنْصُرُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۝ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ
الرَّحِيمُ ۝

*in God's support. He grants support to
whomever He wills. He alone is
Almighty, Merciful. (5)*

*This is God's promise. Never does God
fail to fulfil His promise; but most people
do not know it. (6)*

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ ۝ لَا تَخْلِفُ اللَّهُ وَعْدَهُ ۝ وَلَكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ۝

*They only know the outer surface of this
world's life, whereas of the hereafter they
remain unaware. (7)*

يَعْلَمُونَ ظَهْرًا مِّنَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ
عَنِ الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ غَافِلُونَ ۝

Would they never reflect in their own minds? God has not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them other than in accordance with the truth and for a specific term set [by Him]. Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord. (8)

Have they never travelled around the world and seen what was the fate of those who lived before their time? Superior were those in power than they are, and they cultivated the earth and built it up even better than these are doing. To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth. Yet, it was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. (9)

But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil, denying God's revelations and deriding them. (10)

God originates creation, and then brings it back; then to Him shall you all return. (11)

When the Last Hour strikes, the guilty will be speechless with despair, (12)

for they will have no intercessors from among those their alleged partners [of God], and they will themselves reject those alleged partners. (13)

And when the Last Hour strikes, they

أَوَلَمْ يَتَفَكَّرُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ ۗ مَا خَلَقَ اللَّهُ
السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا إِلَّا بِالْحَقِّ
وَأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۗ وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ النَّاسِ
بِلِقَائِ رَبِّهِمْ لَكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨﴾

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ
كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۚ كَانُوا
أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَأَثَارُوا الْأَرْضَ وَعَمَرُوهَا
أَكْثَرَ مِمَّا عَمَرُوهَا وَجَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ
بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ ۗ فَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيَظْلِمَهُمْ
وَلَكِن كَانُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ ﴿٩﴾

ثُمَّ كَانَ عَاقِبَةَ الَّذِينَ أَسَاءُوا السُّوْءَىٰ ۚ أَن
كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَكَانُوا بِهَا
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

اللَّهُ يَبْدَأُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ ثُمَّ إِلَيْهِ
تُرْجَعُونَ ﴿١١﴾

وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ يُبْلِسُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ ﴿١٢﴾
وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُمْ مِّنْ شُرَكَائِهِمْ شُفَعَاءُ
وَكَانُوا بِشُرَكَائِهِمْ كَافِرِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ يُؤْمِدُ يُتَفَرَّقُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

will all be divided: (14)

as for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight; (15)

but as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment. (16)

Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. (17)

To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon. (18)

He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life. (19)

One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide. (20)

And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness

فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
فَهُمْ فِي رَوْضَةٍ يُحْبَرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَكَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَلِقَاءِ
الْآخِرَةِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ فِي الْعَذَابِ مُحْضَرُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

فَسُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ حِينَ تُمْسُونَ وَحِينَ
تُصْبِحُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

وَلَهُ الْحَمْدُ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَعَشِيًّا وَحِينَ تُظْهِرُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

تُخْرِجُ الْحَيَّ مِنَ الْمَيِّتِ وَيُخْرِجُ الْمَيِّتَ
مِنَ الْحَيِّ وَيُحْيِي الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا
وَكَذَٰلِكَ تُخْرَجُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

وَمِنَ ءَايَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَكُمْ مِّنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ إِذَا
أَنْتُمْ بَشَرٌ تَنْتَشِرُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

وَمِنَ ءَايَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ
أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ
مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think. (21)

And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge. (22)

And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen. (23)

And among His signs is that He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason. (24)

And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise. (25)

To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him. (26)

It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the

وَمِنْ ءَايَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَإِخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَالْوَالِدَاتُ إِذَا
ذَلِكَ لَأَيَاتٍ لِلْعَالِمِينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَمِنْ ءَايَاتِهِ مَنَامُكُمْ بِاللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ
وَأَبْتِغَاؤُكُمْ مِّنْ فَضْلِهِ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ
لَأَيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

وَمِنْ ءَايَاتِهِ يُرِيكُمُ الْبَرْقَ خَوْفًا
وَطَمَعًا وَيُنزِلُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَيُحْيِي
بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا إِنَّ فِي
ذَلِكَ لَأَيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

وَمِنْ ءَايَاتِهِ أَنْ تَقُومَ السَّمَاءُ وَالْأَرْضُ
بِأَمْرِهِ ثُمَّ إِذَا دَعَاكُم دَعْوَةً مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ
إِذَا أَنْتُمْ تَخْرُجُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَلَهُ مَن فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ كُلُّ
لَهُ قَنِينٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي يَبْدَأُ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ يُعِيدُهُ وَهُوَ
أَهْوَنُ عَلَيْهِ وَلَهُ الْمَثَلُ الْأَعْلَىٰ فِي
السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

﴿٢٧﴾

most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (27)

He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life. Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it, and you would fear them just as you might fear one another? Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason. (28)

Nay, but the wrongdoers follow their own desires, without having any knowledge. Who could guide those whom God has let go astray? They shall have none to support them. (29)

Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man. Nothing can change God's creation. Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it. (30)

Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God-fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, (31)

those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold. (32)

ضَرَبَ لَكُمْ مَثَلًا مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ هَلْ لَكُمْ
مِّنْ مَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ مِّنْ شُرَكَاءَ فِي
مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ فَأَنْتُمْ فِيهِ سَوَاءٌ تَخَافُونَهُمْ
كَخِيفَتِكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ كَذَلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ
الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

بَلِ اتَّبَعَ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا أَهْوَاءَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ
عِلْمٍ فَمَنْ يَهْدِي مَنْ أَضَلَّ اللَّهُ وَمَا لَهُمْ
مِّنْ نَّصِيرِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَتَ اللَّهِ
الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ
اللَّهِ ذَٰلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

﴿٣١﴾ مُنِيبِينَ إِلَيْهِ وَاتَّقُوهُ وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ
وَلَا تَكُونُوا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

مِنَ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا
شِيَعًا كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

The Natural Bond of Faith

Alif Lām. Mīm. Defeated have been the Byzantines in the lands close-by; yet despite this their defeat, they will gain victory within a few years. All power of decision belongs to God before and after. And on that day the believers will rejoice in God's support. He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful. This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise; but most people do not know it. They only know the outer surface of this world's life, whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware. (Verses 1-7)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate letters. In our opinion, that a number of *sūrahs* so commence served to alert people to the fact that the Qur'ān is composed of letters they knew well, being the letters of their own alphabet and the sounds of their own language. Yet they cannot produce anything like the Qur'ān. Indeed, it continues to challenge and defy them, and still they cannot match it.

These letters are followed by a true prophecy that the Byzantines would regain victory against the Persians within a few years. Al-Ṭabarī reports on `Abdullāh ibn Mas`ūd's authority: "The Persians won victory against the Byzantines. The Arab idolaters liked that the Persians should win, while the Muslims preferred that the Byzantines should be victorious because they were followers of a monotheistic faith, which was closer to their own beliefs. When the opening of this *sūrah* was revealed, some idolaters said to Abū Bakr: 'Your friend says that the Byzantines will score a victory against the Persian Empire within a few years.' He replied: 'He tells the truth.' They said: 'Will you be prepared to bet on that?' He made a bet with them wagering four young camels that this victory would take place within seven years.¹⁴ But seven years passed and nothing took place. The idolaters were delighted and the Muslims felt this hard. They mentioned it to the Prophet and he asked them: 'How do you define the phrase "within a few years" in your language?' They said: 'Less than ten.' He said to Abū Bakr: 'Go and increase the bet and extend the duration by two years.' The two years were not out before travellers brought the news that the Byzantines had scored a great victory against the Persians. The believers were delighted." We do not need to go into other reports that speak about this event, but we will now look at some of the effects of this historical event.

The first thing to note in all this is the mutual support between different groups of unbelievers, in all generations and areas, against the message based on God's oneness. States did not have close contacts in former times as they do now. Nevertheless, those Makkan idolaters felt that a victory achieved by a community of unbelievers like them against the followers of divine Scripture was akin to their own victory. On the other hand, the Muslims felt that there was a bond between them and

¹⁴ This clearly took place before the prohibition of betting as part of gambling. The prohibition was decreed much later, after the Muslim state was established in Madinah.

the followers of the Scriptures. They were grieved that polytheists anywhere should succeed. Muslims felt that their faith and prospects were not isolated from what took place elsewhere in the world. For all events have a bearing on the great issue of faith or unfaith.

Many are those in our time who overlook this fact of which both Muslims and non-Muslims were cognizant 14 centuries ago, during the Prophet's lifetime. Hence such people limit themselves within their own geographical or national boundaries, oblivious of the fact that the true issue is that of faith, and that the real battle is between Satan's party and the believers. Muslims today badly need to form a proper understanding of the nature of that battle so that they are not deceived by the false banners raised by unbelievers. These do not fight against Muslims for anything other than their faith, numerous as the pretexts and causes are that they advance.

We also note the Muslim's absolute confidence in the fulfilment of God's promise, as is clearly apparent in Abū Bakr's unhesitating attitude. The unbelievers try to create doubt in his mind pointing out what the *sūrah* says about the Byzantines' future victory, but he maintains that it is the truth. They ask him whether he is prepared to bet on this and he does so unhesitatingly. Then the promise is fulfilled within the time specified, i.e. 'within a few years'. This absolute confidence was a great asset for the early Muslims, strengthening and supporting them as they faced all manner of obstacles and endured persecution until God's promise to them was fulfilled. Such confidence is indispensable for every advocate of faith embarking on the long struggle for his faith.

It is also noteworthy that the opening verses giving information of future events include an interpolated sentence: "*All power of decision belongs to God before and after.*" (Verse 4) This statement refers all matters, in all situations, to God. It is a maxim that applies to all events: victory and defeat, and the rise and fall of states and empires. Indeed all that takes place anywhere in the universe is determined by God, and fulfils His purpose in accordance with His wisdom. Events and changing situations are only aspects of the operation of God's unrestricted will which is not subject to influence by anything or anyone. It is God alone who knows what lies beyond it and how it operates. Hence, the best that we can do is unhesitatingly submit to God's will.

To Whom Power Belongs

"Alif. Lām. Mīm. Defeated have been the Byzantines in the lands close-by; yet despite this their defeat, they will gain victory within a few years. All power of decision belongs to God before and after. And on that day the believers will rejoice in God's support." (Verses 1-5) God's promise was certainly fulfilled as stated, and the believers rejoiced at the

victory granted by God. *"He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful."* (Verse 5) Thus the decision is His while His support is granted to whom He chooses. Nothing opposes His will. Indeed His will, which determines the results, is the same as the will that brings about the elements and the causes that leads to these results. Thus, there is no conflict between the desired results and the prevailing circumstances. The laws that operate the whole universe are devised by the same free will. It is this will that has determined that there should be laws of nature which operate without fail, and systems to ensure stability. Both victory and defeat are the results of certain factors that work in accordance with the laws set in operation.

The Islamic faith is very clear and logical. While it makes clear that all power of decision rests with God, it does not exempt people from taking the measures that are normally necessary to bring about practical results. Whether these results take effect is not part of people's responsibility, because it ultimately belongs to God's overall design. A bedouin left his she-camel untied and went into the mosque to pray. As he entered, he said: 'I fully rely on God.' The Prophet said to him: 'Tie your she-camel and then rely on God.' [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] Thus, Islam makes true reliance on God conditional on taking all the necessary measures in any particular situation, knowing that ultimately all decisions are left to Him.

"He grants support to whomever He wills. He alone is Almighty, Merciful." (Verse 5) Victory is thus the result of the power that makes it a reality and the mercy that fulfils what is in the best interests of people. In this way, such a victory is an aspect of mercy for both the victors and the vanquished. God says in the Qur'ān: *"Had it not been for the fact that God repels one group of people by another, the earth would have been utterly corrupted."* (2: 251) That the earth should remain free of corruption is ultimately good for all, including those who are defeated.

"This is God's promise. Never does God fail to fulfil His promise; but most people do not know it. They only know the outer surface of this world's life, whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware." (Verses 67) Such victory has been promised by God, which means that it will certainly come about in real life. For, *"never does God fail to fulfil His promise."* The facts of the matter are that His promise issues from His free-will and absolute wisdom; He is able to fulfil it, as no power can repel His judgement. Indeed, nothing takes place in the universe except as He wills.

Thus, the fulfilment of God's promise is part of the overall universal law that is subject to no alteration. Yet, *"most people do not know it,"* even though they may appear to be great scientists who have a firm grasp and wide scope of knowledge. The fact is that their knowledge is superficial, related to what is apparent in life. It does not extend to basic laws and rules, and cannot comprehend their interrelations: *"They only know the outer surface of this world's life."* They cannot penetrate any deeper than this outer surface or fathom what lies beyond it. This outer surface of the

present life is very limited, even though it may appear to us to be wide and vast. Only a small part of it occupies all their efforts. They cannot learn all that is related to that small part even when they devote their entire lives to it. Still, this world's life is only a small part of the great universe which is run in accordance with laws and rules operating throughout it all.

A person who cannot relate to the depths of the universe and its operative laws will inevitably fail to see even though he looks. He will only see the outer shape and movement, but will fail to recognize the wisdom behind it or interact with it. Most people fall into this category, because it is only true faith that links what appears on life's surface with universal secrets. It is only that which gives knowledge its spirit that can look into these secrets. Believers who have such true faith are few among the worlds' population. Hence, the great majority of people are incapable of acquiring true knowledge.

"Whereas of the hereafter they remain unaware." (Verse 7) The hereafter is another stage in the chain of creation; it is one of the many pages of the universe. People who do not understand the wisdom of creation or the law governing the universe remain unaware of the life to come, unable to give it its true measure and value. They do not realize that it is a part of the way of the universe and, as such, will never fail.

To be unaware of the hereafter makes all measures such people use inaccurate, and their values suspect. They cannot correctly appreciate life's events and values. Their knowledge of life remains superficial, incomplete. When anyone takes the hereafter and its life into account, his perspective and the way he looks at all events in this life changes. He realizes that his life on earth is but a short stage in his journey through the universe, and his lot in this present life is but a small portion of his share in the universe. He feels that all events that take place on earth are no more than a brief act in a long play on the universal stage. To base one's judgement on a short stage, a small portion or a brief act is unwise and can only lead to error.

The person who believes in the life to come and takes it into account will not be able to see eye to eye on anything with someone whose cares and interests are only for this present life. So much so that they will not be able to agree in judging a single event or question. They have two different viewpoints and perspectives; they look at things in different lights. One of them sees only the outer surface of this present life and the other looks at the bonds, laws and rules that are behind things, taking into account not only what we see in our world, but what lies beyond our perception, life and death, the present life and the life to come, and the universe stretching into the limitless. It is to such a great horizon that Islam wants humanity to look up. It is this broad perspective that befits man, the creature God has honoured when He placed him in charge of the earth.

An Invitation to Reflect

As both God's promise of victory and the certainty of the life to come are related to the truth upon which the universe is founded, the *sūrah* takes us on a round through the universe and through the depths of our own souls. It wants people to appreciate this fundamental truth which they overlook when they remain unmindful of the life to come:

Would they never reflect in their own minds? God has not created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them other than in accordance with the truth and for a specific term set [by Him]. Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord. (Verse 8)

Their very nature and the nature of the universe around them suggest that this whole existence is based on the truth and its consistent, unchanging laws that do not permit friction or conflict. They follow neither blind coincidence, nor changing desires. The whole universe operates according to the accurate system God has put in place for it.

It is a requirement of this truth that there should be a second life when reward for action is given, with good deeds being granted handsome reward while evil ones are fairly and fully requited. Yet everything takes place at its appointed time, without a moment's hurry or delay. That people do not know the timing of the Last Hour does not mean that it will not come. The fact that its time is unknown, however, tempts those who are deluded by the little they know of the outer surface of this life: "*Yet there are many people who deny the truth that they will meet their Lord.*" (Verse 8)

The *sūrah* then takes us on a different round, looking deep in history so as to reflect on the operation of God's laws that never change:

Have they never travelled around the world and seen what was the fate of those who lived before their time? Superior were those in power than they are, and they cultivated the earth and built it up even better than these are doing. To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth. Yet, it was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves. But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil, denying God's revelations and deriding them. (Verses 9-10)

This is an invitation to carefully consider the fates of past communities. These were ordinary people belonging to God's creation. The ends they met indicate what ends await present and future generations, since God's laws are applicable to all, and they are part of the universal truth that does not favour any particular generation, nor make allowances for changing desires. Far be it from God to do so. This

invitation wants people to understand the truth of life and its bonds, and the true nature of humanity which has the same origin and the same end throughout all generations. Thus, no single generation can look at itself or its life, values and concepts in isolation, heedless of the strong bond between all human generations, the laws that apply to them all and the values that remain valid throughout human life.

Those past generations lived before the Arab unbelievers in Makkah. They were superior in power to those Arabs, *“and they cultivated the earth,”* opened it up and discovered its treasures, *“and built it up even better than these are doing.”* They had a higher standard of civilization than the Arabs and were better able to raise life standards. Yet they confined themselves to the outer surface of the life of this world, not delving beyond it. *“To them also came their messengers with all evidence of the truth,”* but they did not open their eyes and minds to such evidence. They refused to believe and so deprived themselves of the light that illuminates the way. Hence, God’s law of dealing with communities that refuse to believe applied to them. Neither their power, nor knowledge, nor civilization were of any avail to them. They had their fair retribution: *“It was not God who wronged them, but it was they who had wronged themselves.”* (Verse 9) *“But then, evil was the end of those who wrought evil.”* (Verse 10) Since they entertained evil, evil was their end. This was the right recompense for *“denying God’s revelations and deriding them.”* (Verse 10)

The Qur’ān invites those who deny God’s revelations to travel on earth so that they do not remain confined to their own locality. They must reflect on the ends met by those earlier communities and realize what their own end could be. They should know that God’s law applies to all without favouritism. They should open their minds to the fact that humanity is one, the divine message is one and the laws that apply to all generations of humanity are the same. This is the concept Islam is keen to instil in the minds and hearts of all believers. Hence, it is repeatedly stated in the Qur’ān.

Two Divergent Ways

The *sūrah* then speaks about the truth of resurrection, of which they remain heedless, when it is part of the great truth upon which the universe is based: *“God originates creation, and then brings it back; then to Him shall you all return.”* (Verse 11) This is a clear and simple truth, with the link and harmony between its two parts or stages also abundantly clear. Bringing back creation is the same as its origination: the two are inseparable parts in the chain of creation, while the ultimate return is to the Lord of all the worlds who initially originates then brings them back so as to remunerate them for their actions in the final stage.

As the *sūrah* speaks of resurrection, it portrays a scene of the Day of Judgement,

painting the fates of believers and unbelievers when they are returned to life. It shows the absurdity of associating partners with God and the stupidity of the unbelievers' beliefs:

When the Last Hour strikes, the guilty will be speechless with despair, for they will have no intercessors from among those their alleged partners [of God], and they will themselves reject those alleged partners. And when the Last Hour strikes, they will all be divided: as for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight; but as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment. (Verses 12-16)

So the Last Hour, of which some people remain heedless while others deny it, arrives, and the guilty stand in despair, with no hope of salvation. They cannot hope for even a word of intercession by the false deities they claimed to be partners with God. They are without support and without a saviour. At that moment, they deny the false deities they claimed to be God's partners.

Hence we see the parting of the ways between believers and unbelievers: "As for those who believed and did righteous deeds, they shall be happy in a garden of delight." (Verse 15) There they receive what gives them true happiness. However, "as for those who rejected the truth and denied Our revelations and the certainty of the meeting in the hereafter, they will be brought up for punishment." (Verse 16) Thus, we see the end of the journey and the outcome for both the believers and those who do evil.

The *sūrah* then paints other scenes of the universe and life, highlighting some of the wonders of creation, the depths of the human soul, and miraculous events. This round starts with acknowledging God's limitless glory as the night and day succeed each other, and extolling God's praise at night and during the glorious day:

Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon. He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life. One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide. And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think. And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge. And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In

this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen. And among His signs is that He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason. And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise. To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him. It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (Verses 17-27)

These verses represent a great tour far and wide into the universe, showing the human heart the approaching evening, the breaking of dawn, the skies, the earth, the night and the day. It calls on the human mind to reflect on the continuous cycle of life and death, as well as the first origins of man and the inclinations, desires and powers implanted in his nature, as also the bonds between the two sexes. It turns its attention to the great sign God has placed in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the great differences in language and colour according to place and environment. It highlights the different situations of man: sleep, awareness, rest and tiredness; as well as different world phenomena such as lightning, rain and the feeling of awe and hope they generate, and the life they bring to the earth. This great tour leads man's heart in the end to the truth that the skies and the earth stand firm by God's command, while all that lives in the heavens and the earth belong to Him. It concludes by restating the simple truth that now appears in absolute clarity: that it is God who originates and brings back, and that bringing creation back to life is easier for Him.

The Cycle of Life and Death

“Extol, then, God's limitless glory both in your evening hours and in your morning hours. To Him is due all praise in the heavens and the earth, at twilight and at noon.” (Verses 17-18) This glorification and praise of God are stated here in comment on the previous section that shows a scene of the Day of Judgement when the believers win the prize of entry into heaven while those who disbelieve are brought to witness their own suffering. They also serve as an introduction to the great tour that immediately follows. They thus provide a smooth link between the previous scene and the forthcoming tour.

The *sūrah* mentions that glorification and praise are made at certain times: evening, morning, night and noon, and also links these to the heavens and the earth. Thus, it encompasses both time and place in their great dimensions, establishing the

bond between the human heart and God in all times and places, making us feel this bond as we move with the great cycle that is the universe. Thus our hearts remain open, alert, appreciating all that is around us of scenes and phenomena. Every change of time and place reminds us to glorify God and extol His praises.

“He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive, and gives life to the earth after it has been lifeless. Likewise shall you be raised to life.” (Verse 19) It is a continuous cycle that never stops for a moment of the night or day at any place on earth, in space, or the depths of the sea. At every moment this great miracle occurs, but we remain heedless of it because of our long familiarity with it. Not a moment passes by without a life coming out of a dead thing, or a living being dying: a small bud shoots out of a seed or splits a stone to come into a life; or conversely a branch or a tree withers away. Still in the heap of dying plants and trees a seed or a stone is ready to start the life cycle again, and out of that heap gases spread into the air or provide nourishment to the soil that becomes fertile. At every moment life starts in a foetus, a bird or an animal. A corpse buried in the earth becomes part of the soil and gives it vapours and gases that make new life matter and nourishment for plants, which in turn provide food for man and animal. A similar cycle takes place in the depths of the sea and in limitless space. It is an awesome, fascinating cycle if we would only contemplate it with insight, guided by the light of the Qur’ān.

“Likewise shall you be raised to life.” (Verse 19) It is all an ordinary, simple matter, familiar in the universe, occurring at every moment of the night and day and in all places.

“One of His signs is that He created you from dust; and, behold, you become human beings spreading far and wide.” (Verse 20) Dust, which is the first origin of man, is dead, motionless. Another verse states: *“Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay.”* (23: 12) Clay, then, is the distant origin of man, but in this verse, only a brief reference is made to this before we see people spreading and moving about. The *sūrah* thus provides a sharp contrast between the dead dust and living people. As this immediately follows the verse that includes, *“He it is who brings forth the living out of that which is dead, and brings forth the dead out of that which is alive,”* it enhances harmony in the argument’s presentation.

This great miracle is one of the signs of God’s power. It gives a strong hint of the close link between the earth and the people living on it, as it is from the earth that they were originally formed. Both they and the earth are subject to the same laws within the universal system. The great leap from the still image of dead dust to the bustling image of the highly sophisticated human being should encourage deep reflection on God’s power of creation. It should encourage people to extol God’s glory and praise.

The next verse looks at the shared life between the two sexes: *“And among His signs is that He creates for you spouses out of your own kind, so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think.”* (Verse 21) People are well aware of their feelings towards the other sex; indeed, they are often preoccupied with this relationship. Very often they are motivated to a certain action but they seldom remember that it is God who created their spouses out of their own kind and gave them emotions and feelings. He it is who has made the relationship between the two a source of physical and emotional comfort, stability, spiritual friendship, and reassurance for both. The gentle Qur’ānic expression of this relationship profoundly inspires our hearts: *“so that you might incline towards them, and He engenders love and tenderness between you.”* (Verse 21)

“In this there are clear signs indeed for people who think.” (Verse 21) When people think and reflect, they appreciate the divine wisdom in creating each of the two sexes in such a way that is complementary to the other, providing fulfilment for natural needs whether psychological, mental or physical. Thus both incline towards each other and find comfort and stability, tenderness and reassurance, love and compassion. This is so because God has made the physical and mental constitution of each naturally inclined to fulfil the needs of the other, while their meeting and union ensures the beginning of a new life for a new generation.

Man and the Universe

“And among His signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours. In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge.” (Verse 22) The Qur’ān frequently mentions the great sign of creating the heavens and the earth, but we often pass it by without reflection, although it merits long contemplation.

When the Qur’ān mentions the creation of the heavens and the earth it actually refers to this great expanse of the universe, with its fine and elaborate system, of which we know only very little. It includes countless numbers of planets, stars, orbits, celestial bodies and galaxies, in relation to which our earth seems no more than a weightless particle. This great and limitless expanse is coupled with remarkable harmony between its celestial bodies, orbits and motions, as well as the distances between them, ensuring that no collision occurs haphazardly, and that everything is kept functioning according to a set measure. This, however, relates to size and system. As for the essence of these great creatures, their respective natures, qualities, what occurs in or on them, the major laws that protect and regulate them, and how their affairs are conducted – these are beyond any human being’s

knowledge. What we know of all this is very scanty indeed. In fact, our study of the small planet on which we live remains at a very elementary stage.

This is just a cursory look at the great sign that is the creation of the heavens and the earth. Very often though we speak about this carelessly, in passing, yet at the same time we speak at great length, expressing amazement and admiration, about a small machine scientists make. Yet the harmony the latter achieves between its component parts is such that it only works in unison for a short span of time. Still some people who are lost in error claim that this great universe, with its fine and elaborate systems, exists without a Creator. Not only so, but such people find scientists who are prepared to listen to such absurdity!

Together with the great sign of the creation of the heavens and the earth, the *sūrah* mentions the amazing variety of human languages and colours. This must be related to the creation of the universe. Differences in climate and environment that result from the variations of the earth's position in the cosmos have a marked influence in producing such variety in language and colour, despite the single origin of mankind. Scholars and scientists today note the great variety of human languages and colours but they do not relate this to God and His creation of the heavens and the earth. Instead, they undertake an academic study of this phenomenon, but do not pause to glorify the Creator who plans everything, visible or hidden. This is due to the fact that most people are devoid of knowledge: *"they only know the outer surface of this world's life."* (Verse 7) Besides, the wonders of the creation of the universe and the great variety of language and colour are only appreciated by those who have true knowledge: *"In this there are clear signs indeed for those who are endowed with knowledge."* (Verse 22)

"And among His signs is your sleep, at night and in daytime, as well as your quest for some of His bounty. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen." (Verse 23) This verse mentions certain universal phenomena and their effects on the different situations of mankind, pointing to the harmony within the great universal existence. It combines the two phenomena of night and day with people's sleep and activity in pursuit of their livelihoods, which God grants in abundance. God has ensured that their lives are in harmony with the universe: their need for work and activity is ensured by the light of day, and their need for relaxation and sleep is brought about by the night's darkness. This also applies, in varying measures and degrees, to all living things on earth. They all find the universal system meets their needs and natures, allowing their lives to progress. *"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who listen."* (Verse 23) Sleep and movement are two conditions that are felt through hearing. Thus, the comment at the end of the verse fits well with the universal sign it discusses.

"And among His signs is that He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear

and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless. In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason." (Verse 24) The phenomenon of lightning is part of the universal system. Some explain that it occurs from an electrical discharge between two clouds, or between a cloud and the ground, such as the top of a mountain, producing an air vacuum that gives the thunder that follows the lightning. In most cases, this is accompanied by rain. Whatever the cause, lightning is a natural phenomenon produced by the universal system God has set in operation.

As usual, the Qur'ān does not give much detail about universal phenomena and their causes. It only uses these to establish a link between human hearts, the universe and its Creator. Hence, it states here that one of God's signs is that He displays the lightning *"giving rise to both fear and hope."* Both feelings are naturally experienced when lightning occurs. People fear a thunderbolt that results from lightning, one that could burn things and even people. There is also that obscure feeling of apprehension which lightning causes as people feel the presence of the great power that controls the universe. People also hope for plentiful harvests as a result of the rain that often accompanies thunder and lightning. Hence, it is mentioned in the same verse: *"He displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and sends down water from the skies, with which He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless."* (Verse 24)

When life and death are applied to the earth, it makes the earth appear as a living entity which lives and dies. It is indeed so, as described by the Qur'ān. The universe is a living entity that feels and responds. It obeys its Lord, the Creator of all, and it glorifies Him in complete submission. Man, who lives on earth, is one of God's creatures, all of whom look up to God, the Lord of all the worlds.

Moreover, when water falls on earth, it makes it fertile, allowing plants to grow, so as to make its surface come alive first with vegetation, then with animals and man. Water is the means of life; wherever it is available, life prospers. *"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who use their reason."* (Verse 24) There is indeed much scope for people's minds to reflect.

"And among His signs is that the skies and the earth stand firm at His behest. Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise." (Verse 25) The fact that the skies and the earth stand firm, following an elaborate system and moving according to plan, cannot come about except through God's will. No one can ever claim that either he or anyone else brings this about, or that it happens without a plan. Hence, it is God's great sign that the skies and the earth stand firm and function by His command, obeying Him, without deviation, hesitation or delay.

"Then, in the end, when with one call He summons you from the earth, you will all rise."

(Verse 25) No one who sees the great and elaborate system of the universe, how it functions, and the power that controls its potentials and resources, will entertain any doubt that humans, weak as they are, will immediately respond to the great Creator's order to rise from their graves.

The final note that concludes this statement shows that all creatures in the heavens and the earth submit to God in complete obedience: *"To Him belongs all those in the heavens and the earth: all devoutly obey Him."* (Verse 26) Although most people are neither devout nor obedient to God, the Qur'ānic statement here means that all creatures in the universe are subject to His will. All act and function in accordance with His laws that never fail or deviate from their set course. They are subject to these laws even though they may be unbelievers. It is their hearts and minds that disbelieve or disobey, but they are nevertheless governed by God's laws, and He controls them as He does all other creatures. They have no option but to obey and submit.

This great tour concludes by restating the essential question which people remain heedless of, namely resurrection: *"It is He who creates [life] in the first instance, and then brings it forth anew; and most easy is this for Him. His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth. He is the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 27) The *sūrah* has already mentioned the initiation of creation and bringing creatures back to life after they had died. Now this is repeated after mentioning a galaxy of God's signs, but there is also an addition here, *"and most easy is this for Him."* (Verse 27) There is indeed nothing that is easier or more difficult for God: *"When He wills a thing to be, He but says to it, Be' – and it is."* (36: 82) The Qur'ān addresses people in a way they understand. According to their own standards, initiating creation should be more difficult than bringing it back to life. Why, then, should they deem it difficult for God when by the nature of things it should be easier?

"His is the most sublime attribute in the heavens and the earth." (Verse 27) His attributes are not shared with anyone else. Nothing is similar to Him in any way. *"He is the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 27) He does what He wills, having sway over all things, and in His wisdom, He conducts the affairs of all His creation.

An Analogy Drawn from Human Life

When the human heart has seen God's great signs, gone over such horizons and looked at such a great variety of situations, the *sūrah* then changes the tone of its address:

He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life. Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on

you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it, and you would fear them just as you might fear one another? Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason. (Verse 28)

This comparison is drawn for people who used to associate partners with God. All the more so when such alleged partners are part of His creation, be they *jinn*, angels, idols, trees, etc. People themselves do not accept that their slaves have any share in their property. Indeed, they will not treat their slaves as equal to them in any sense. Thus, this situation is singular indeed. They make some of God's creatures partners with Him when He alone is the Creator and the Provider for all. Furthermore, they refuse to accept their slaves as partners in their property when their property is given to them by God who creates it. The contradiction in their attitude is stark indeed.

This comparison is stated in detail, step by step: *"He sets you this comparison, drawn from your own life."* You do not need to travel or make an effort to contemplate it. *"Would you have some of those whom your right hands possess as partners in whatever We may have bestowed on you as sustenance, so that you all would have equal shares in it?"* You do not accept that your slaves have even a small share of your provisions, let alone that they be equal to you. *"And you would fear them just as you might fear one another?"* You look at them in the same way as you look at partners who are free men, fearing that they might be unfair to you, or that you be unfair to them. Although none of this happens, you still suggest that it applies to God when His are the most sublime attributes in the heavens and the earth. It is a simple comparison that admits no contradiction or dispute because it is based on simple logic: *"Thus clearly do We spell out revelations for people who use their reason."* (Verse 28)

The *sūrah* now exposes the basic reason behind this anomaly. Essentially, it is due to following one's own desires without reasonable basis or proper thought: *"Nay, but the wrongdoers follow their own desires, without having any knowledge. Who could guide those whom God has let go astray? They shall have none to support them."* (Verse 29) Desire has no control, since it is merely based on people's whims, fleeting passions, fears, hopes and cravings that have no rightful basis and no proper limit. This is a case of error that lacks any correcting guidance: *"Who could guide those whom God has let go astray?"* They go astray because they follow their own desires. *"They shall have none to support them."* (Verse 29)

Concluding Directive

Now the *sūrah* directs the Prophet to remain steady in following the divine faith which is consistent and based on the pure nature God has given to people. It is a single faith that cannot be pulled in different directions, like the unbelievers who

were divided into groups and factions according to their desires.

Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man. Nothing can change God's creation. Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it. Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God-fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold.
(Verses 30-32)

This directive to follow the true faith is given at the right time and the proper place, following the great round of signs drawn from the universe and the human soul. It thus addresses hearts that are ready to receive it, while those that have followed deviant beliefs find all their arguments devoid of substance. They stand alone without support. This is the powerful authority that is the Qur'ān and which no heart or mind can resist.

"Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false," and move straight towards it, for it protects you from the influence of divergent desires that have no right basis and which rely on no true knowledge. They are subject only to whim and passion, lacking control or evidence. When you set your face steadily towards true faith, you turn away from everything else. This is *"in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man."* (Verse 30) Thus the *sūrah* links human nature with the nature of this faith. Both are made by God, in accordance with the law of existence; both are mutually harmonious in their natures and objectives. It is God who has created man and revealed this religion so that it can regulate human life and conduct its affairs, healing man of ills and deviation. God certainly knows best what He has created. Human nature is set on a firm basis, and so is divine religion. *"Nothing can change God's creation."* When people deviate from the proper path of nature, only divine religion turns them back to it, since it is in full harmony with both human and universal nature. *"Such is the ever-true faith; but most people do not know it."* Because they do not know, they follow their desires and deviate from the true path that leads to true happiness.

Although this directive to set his face towards the right faith is given to the Prophet, it is meant for all believers. Therefore, the *sūrah* continues its directives, explaining the meaning of setting one's face towards the right faith: *"Turn, all of you, to Him, and remain God-fearing. Attend regularly to prayer and do not be among those who associate partners with God, those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects, each group delighted with what they hold."* (Verses 31-32) This means turning to God and referring to Him in all matters. This is what it is to be God-fearing, alert to what pleases Him in all that we do, whether in public or in private. It also means

attending regularly to our prayer in full devotion to God. It means, above all, believing firmly in His absolute oneness, which is the characteristic that distinguishes believers from unbelievers.

The *sūrah* describes the unbelievers as *“those who have broken the unity of their faith and have become sects.”* (Verse 32) Unbelief and associating partners with God may take many forms and patterns. Some unbelievers consider the *jinn* to be God’s partners, others associate the angels, some their forefathers, while others take kings, rulers, priests, rabbis, trees, stones, planets, stars, the fire, night and day, false values, desires, and the like as partners with God. The forms and patterns are unending, yet *“each group is delighted with what they hold.”* (Verse 32) Meanwhile, the true faith is one, unchanging and undivided. It leads its followers towards God alone, at whose command the skies and the earth are set firm, and to whom belong all those who are in the heavens and the earth. All devoutly submit themselves to Him.

2

Bringing Life out of the Dead

When harm touches people they call out to their Lord for help, turning to Him in repentance. But when He gives them a taste of His grace, some of them associate partners with their Lord, (33)

[as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. (34)

Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with God? (35)

When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope. (36)

Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills? In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe. (37)

وَإِذَا مَسَّ النَّاسَ ضُرٌّ دَعَوْا رَبَّهُمْ مُنِيبِينَ
إِلَيْهِ ثُمَّ إِذَا آذَاهُمْ مِنْهُ رَحْمَةٌ إِذَا فَرِيقٌ

مِّنْهُمْ بِرَبِّهِمْ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

لِيَكْفُرُوا بِمَا آتَيْنَاهُمْ^ج فَتَمَتَّعُوا فَسَوْفَ

تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

أَمْ أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ سُلْطَانًا فَهُوَ يَتَكَلَّمُ بِمَا

كَانُوا بِهِ يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَإِذَا آذَقْنَا النَّاسَ رَحْمَةً فَرِحُوا بِهَا وَإِن

تُصِبْهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ إِذَا هُمْ

يَقْنَطُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ

وَيَقْدِرُ^ج إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ

﴿٣٧﴾

Hence, give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the needy and the traveller in need. This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful. (38)

Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God, whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase. (39)

It is God who has created you, and then has provided you with sustenance, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you to life again. Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things? Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him. (40)

Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought; and so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings, so that they might mend their ways. (41)

Say: 'Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God.' (42)

فَآتِ ذَا الْقُرْبَىٰ حَقَّهُ وَالْمِسْكِينَ وَابْنَ
السَّبِيلِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ خَيْرٌ لِّلَّذِينَ يُرِيدُونَ
وَجْهَ اللَّهِ ۗ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

وَمَا آتَيْتُم مِّن رَّبًّا لِّيَرْبُوًا فِي أَمْوَالِ
النَّاسِ فَلَا يَرْبُوًا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ ۗ وَمَا آتَيْتُم
مِّن زَكَاةٍ تُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَ اللَّهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ
هُمُ الْمُضْعِفُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ ثُمَّ رَزَقَكُمْ ثُمَّ
يُمِيتُكُمْ ثُمَّ يُحْيِيكُمْ ۗ هَلْ مِن شُرَكَائِكُم
مَّن يَفْعَلُ مِن ذَٰلِكُم مِّن شَيْءٍ ۚ سُبْحٰنَهُ
وَتَعَالَىٰ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

ظَهَرَ الْفَسَادُ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ
أَيْدِي النَّاسِ لِيُذِيقَهُم بَعْضَ الَّذِي
عَمِلُوا لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٤١﴾

قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ
عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلُ ۚ كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُم
مُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٤٢﴾

So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith before there comes from God a day which cannot be averted. On that day all will be divided: (43)

he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves. (44)

And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds. He certainly does not love the unbelievers. (45)

And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news, so that He might give you a taste of His grace, and that ships might sail at His bidding; so that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty, and that you might have cause to be grateful. (46)

We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth. Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers. (47)

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ الْقَيِّمِ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ يَوْمٌ لَا مَرَدَّ لَهُ مِنْ اللَّهِ يَوْمَئِذٍ

يَصَّدَّعُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

مَنْ كَفَرَ فَعَلَيْهِ كُفْرُهُ ۖ وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا

فَلِأَنْفُسِهِمْ يَمْهَدُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

لِيَجْزِيَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ

مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۚ إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

وَمِنْ ءَايَاتِهِ أَنْ يُرْسِلَ الرِّيَّاحَ مُبَشِّرَاتٍ

وَلِيُذِيقَكُمْ مِنْ رَحْمَتِهِ وَلِتَجْرِيَ الْفُلُكُ

بِأَمْرِهِ ۖ وَلِتَبْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ

تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ رُسُلًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِمْ

فَجَاءَهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَأَنْتَقَمْنَا مِنَ الَّذِينَ

أَجْرُمُوا ۖ وَكَانَ حَقًّا عَلَيْنَا نَصْرُ

الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٤٧﴾

It is God who sends forth the winds so that they raise clouds, whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up so that you can see the rain issuing from within it. As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice, (48)

even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope. (49)

Behold, then, the effects of God's grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless! It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things.(50)

If We send a [scorching] wind and they see it turning yellow, they begin after that to deny the truth. (51)

Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. (52)

Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]. (53)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي يُرْسِلُ الرِّيحَ فَتُثِيرُ سَحَابًا
فَيَبْسُطُهُ فِي السَّمَاءِ كَيْفَ يَشَاءُ وَيَجْعَلُهُ
كِسْفًا فَتَرَى الْوَدْقَ يَخْرُجُ مِنْ خِلَالِهِ
فَإِذَا أَصَابَ بِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ إِذَا

هُمَّ يَسْتَبْشِرُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

وَأِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يُنْزَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ

قَبْلِهِ لَمُبْلِغِينَ ﴿٤٩﴾

فَأَنْظُرْ إِلَىٰ آثَارِ رَحْمَتِ اللَّهِ كَيْفَ تُحْيِي
الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ لَمُحْيٍ
الْمَوْتَىٰ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

وَلَئِنْ أَرْسَلْنَا رِيحًا فَرَأَوْهُ مُصْفَرًّا لَظَلُّوا مِنْ

بَعْدِهِ يَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٥١﴾

فَإِنَّكَ لَا تَسْمَعُ الْمَوْتَىٰ وَلَا تَسْمَعُ الصُّمَّ

الْدُّعَاءَ إِذَا وَلَّوْا مُدْبِرِينَ ﴿٥٢﴾

وَمَا أَنْتَ بِهَادٍ الْعُمَىٰ عَنْ ضَلَالَتِهِمْ إِنْ
تَسْمَعُ إِلَّا مَنْ يُؤْمِنُ بِآيَاتِنَا فَهُمْ

مُسْلِمُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you, and then after strength He brings about your weakness and old age. He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power. (54)

﴿ اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ ضَعْفٍ ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ ضَعْفٍ قُوَّةً ثُمَّ جَعَلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ قُوَّةٍ ضَعْفًا وَشَيْبَةً ۚ سَخَّلُكُمْ ط ۚ مَا يَشَاءُ ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَلِيمُ الْقَدِيرُ ﴿٥٤﴾

When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour. Thus they used to delude themselves. (55)

﴿ وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ يُقْسِمُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ مَا لَبِثُوا غَيْرَ سَاعَةٍ ۚ كَذَلِكَ كَانُوا يُؤْفَكُونَ ﴿٥٥﴾

But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: 'Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it.' (56)

﴿ وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ وَالْإِيمَانَ لَقَدْ لَبِثْتُمْ فِي كِتَابِ اللَّهِ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْبَعْثِ فَهَذَا يَوْمُ الْبَعْثِ وَلَكِنَّكُمْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٦﴾

And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends. (57)

﴿ فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَا يَنْفَعُ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مَعذِرَتُهُمْ وَلَا هُمْ يُسْتَعْتَبُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

We have set for people in this Qur'an all sorts of illustrations. Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: 'you are but making false claims.'

﴿ وَلَقَدْ ضَرَبْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ ۚ وَلَئِنْ جِئْتَهُمْ بِآيَةٍ لَيَقُولُنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِنْ أَنْتُمْ إِلَّا مُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

(58)

Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth].

(59)

Therefore persevere patiently. For certain, God's promise will come true. So, let not the ones deprived of certainty trouble your mind. (60)

كَذَلِكَ يَطْبَعُ اللَّهُ عَلَى قُلُوبِ الَّذِينَ

لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

فَاصْبِرْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَلَا

يَسْتَخِفُّكَ الَّذِينَ لَا يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

Overview

This section of the *sūrah* follows its main line, looking at the universal expanse to which people's lives and events are related. It is in this great expanse that we see how the laws governing life and the universe operate in harmony with the laws of the true faith, suffering no conflict or contradiction.

This section draws an image of how human desires frequently change while God's rules and laws remain constant. It shows how flimsy idolatrous beliefs are compared with the power of true faith. It describes people's attitudes in times of ease and hardship, when provisions are plentiful and stinted. Unless people rely on God's measure, which never fluctuates, and unless they accept God's will who gives as He pleases, in plenty or in small measure, their values and standards will remain unstable. Since it mentions the provision of sustenance, the *sūrah* directs them to the means that purifies money and makes it grow, which is in line with true faith. In this way, it makes clear to them who the Creator that gives sustenance, initiates life and causes death is. The false deities they allege to be God's partners do nothing of the kind. It alerts them to the corruption that idolatry and false beliefs spread everywhere.

The *sūrah* directs the Prophet and Muslims to remain steadfast in following the true faith before there comes a day when no action is of any use. It is the day when everything people have done is reckoned and when they receive their fair reward for it all. Within the context of what God provides, the *sūrah* directs their attention to certain aspects of such provisions, some of which relate to their existence, such as the rain that comes from the skies, giving life to the earth after it was dead. Likewise,

God's revelations are given to the Prophet to bring life to hearts and souls. Yet they neither listen nor follow guidance. The *sūrah* also takes us on a round in which we look at the stages of creation of humans and their lives until they return to their Lord. At that time, no excuse or justification will benefit the wrongdoers. The *sūrah* then concludes with reassuring the Prophet. It directs him to show more patience until God's promise is fulfilled, as it certainly will be.

Vacillating Conditions

When harm touches people they call out to their Lord for help, turning to Him in repentance. But when He gives them a taste of His grace, some of them associate partners with their Lord, [as if] to show their ingratitude for what We have given them. Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know [the truth]. Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with God? When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope. Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills? In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe. (Verses 33-37)

These verses draw a picture of the human soul that does not rely on solid concepts, or follow clear lines. It thus vacillates between sudden reactions, in response to conflicting influences or events. Thus, when harm touches such people, they turn to God, realizing that only He can save them. Yet when the affliction is over, and things are comfortable again, with God bestowing His grace on them, "some of them associate partners with their Lord." (Verse 33) These are they who do not follow true faith and who do not benefit from the light it gives to the faithful. Ease and comfort remove the emergency that made them turn to God for support and protection. They forget their earlier hardship. Thus, rather than maintain the path of turning to God and of being grateful to Him, they disbelieve in His guidance and the grace He has bestowed on them.

A warning is given in the first instance to those unbelievers who opposed the Prophet's message, making it clear that they belong to this group: "Enjoy, then, your life [as you may]; before long you will come to know." (Verse 34) It is a serious threat that sends terror into their hearts. People fear threats issued by rulers or presidents. How then will they react to a threat from the Creator of this universe, He who brought it into existence by merely saying to it, 'Be'?

Having delivered this stern warning, the *sūrah* questions them about the basis of their associating partners with God when it is He who bestows His grace upon them: "Have We ever sent down to them a warrant to confirm what they associate as partners with

God?" (Verse 35) No one should ever accept anything about faith from any source other than God. So, have they received any clear, powerful argument to warrant an attitude that is contrary to belief in God's oneness? This is a rhetorical question, one that depicts the fallacy of all types of idolatry. At the same time it serves to state that the only proper and true faith is that revealed by God, with clear sanction from Him. Otherwise, it remains flimsy, devoid of substance.

The *sūrah* then depicts a different situation showing people as they euphorically rejoice at any taste of God's grace. In contrast, they feel frustrated and hopeless when affliction befalls them: *"When We give people a taste of grace, they rejoice in it; but if evil befalls them as an outcome of what their own hands have wrought, they lose all hope."* (Verse 36)

This is another image of a soul that either does not follow a clear line in judging situations or which lacks an accurate standard that does not sway with events. These are they who emotionally rejoice at every taste of grace forgetting its source and purpose. They are elated, overjoyed, but do not express their gratitude to the One who has granted them such grace. They do not realize that a situation of grace also poses a test. When it is God's will to requite them for their deeds, making them taste a situation of hardship, they are again blind to God's wisdom in such a test. They lose all hope that God will remove their affliction. Such is the situation of people who do not maintain their bonds with God and, consequently, do not understand His laws or wisdom. These are the ones who only know the outer surface of the life of this world.

This image is followed by another rhetorical question that wonders at their attitude and lack of insight. In both situations of grace and affliction one consistent law applies. Both are the result of God's will. It is He who bestows grace and tests people with hardship, gives in abundance or in a scant measure, in line with His wisdom. This takes place all the time, but they do not see: *"Are they not aware that God gives in abundance, or in scant measure, to whom He wills?"* There is no need, then, for elation at the time of grace, or for despair during times of hardship. These are situations that befall people at different times as serves God's purpose. A believer sees in them confirmation that all matters ultimately belong to God. It all indicates the consistency of God's laws in all situations: *"In this there are clear signs indeed for people who believe."* (Verse 37)

Since it is God who grants provisions and sustenance, giving in abundance or in small measure as He pleases, He indicates to people the way in which they can make handsome profit, increasing their wealth. This is different from what they think:

*Hence, give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the needy and the traveller in need.
This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful.*

Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God, whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase. (Verses 38-39)

Since all wealth belongs to God and it is He who grants it to some of His servants, He, the original owner, has determined that a portion of it should go to certain groups, to be given to them by those who are in actual possession of it. Therefore, He calls it a right due to these groups, of which the *sūrah* mentions here *"the near of kin, the needy and the traveller in need."* At the time this *sūrah* was revealed, *zakāt* had not yet been determined, nor its beneficiaries. The principle, however, is stated clearly, making all money God's property since it is He who grants it in the first place, and assigning to certain needy groups a right which they should receive from those who are in possession of the money. This is the basic financial principle Islam lays down, from which all aspects of the Islamic economic theory derive. Since all money and wealth belong to God, it is subject to what He, as the original owner, determines with regard to how it is owned, invested or spent. The person who is in control of it does not enjoy absolute authority in this respect.

God Almighty issues this directive to those He has placed as trustees of wealth showing them the best methods for investment, growth and prosperity. This means sharing with one's near kin, the needy and stranded travellers, and spending generally in ways that serve God's cause: *"This is best for all who seek God's countenance. It is they who shall be successful."* (Verse 38)

At that time some people tried to increase their money by giving gifts to wealthy individuals, hoping that they would receive better gifts in return. The *sūrah* tells them that this is not the way to achieve true growth: *"Whatever you may give out in usury so that it might increase through other people's property will bring no increase with God."* This is what some reports mention as the meaning of this statement, but it is a general statement that applies to all methods people use to usuriously increase their wealth.¹⁵ God also makes clear the way that ensures true growth: *"Whereas all that you give out in charity, seeking God's countenance, will bring you multiple increase."* (Verse 39)

This is the guaranteed way of increasing money: to give it freely, expecting no favours from anyone, but seeking only God's pleasure. Is He not the One who gives sustenance in plenty or in small measure? Is He not the One who bestows or denies favours? He, thus, gives in multiples to those who spend of their money for no reason other than to please Him. He also takes away from the usurers who seek to increase their wealth at other people's expense. One method makes its calculation by

¹⁵ This method is not forbidden like other methods based on usury. However, it is neither a proper nor honourable way to increase wealth.

this world's standards, while the other looks at the standards of the life to come, when rewards are given in multiples. This last method is the one that makes real profits both in this life and in the life to come.

Corruption and Pollution

The *sūrah* then discusses the issue of polytheism from the viewpoint of providing sustenance and earning a living, and how this affects their lives as it affected the lives of generations before them. It also shows the end of earlier communities and the ruins standing witness to such ends:

It is God who has created you, and then has provided you with sustenance, and then will cause you to die, and then will bring you to life again. Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things? Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him. Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought; and so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings, so that they might mend their ways. Say: 'Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God.' (Verses 40-42)

The *sūrah* puts before them the realities of their lives which they cannot dispute to be of God's own making and in which they cannot claim a share for their alleged deities. It tells them that it is God who has brought them into existence, provides them with sustenance, causes them to die, and then brings them back to life. They acknowledge the fact that it is God who creates them. As for sustenance, they cannot claim that their alleged deities provide them with any of it. They have no argument against what the Qur'ān states about causing death. It is the question of resurrection that they dispute. The *sūrah* includes this with other acknowledged realities so that resurrection becomes established in their consciences. The method employed in this Qur'ānic address is uniquely effective. It speaks directly to their nature, sidestepping all deviant thinking. Human nature cannot deny the fact of resurrection.

They are then asked: "*Can any of those whom you associate as partners with Him do any of these things?*" (Verse 40) No answer to this question is expected. Indeed, the verse puts forward the only possible and negative response in the form of a rebuke, thus doing away with the need for a direct answer. This is followed by a glorification of God which denies partnership with Him in any form: "*Limitless is God in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything which people may allege to be partners with Him.*" (Verse 40)

The *sūrah* then makes clear that life situations are directly related to people's actions, and that when corruption finds its way into people's hearts, faiths and deeds, both land and sea also become corrupted, to the extent that corruption becomes the order of the day: *"Corruption has become rife on land and sea in consequence of what people's hands have wrought."* (Verse 41) This spreading of pollution across the land and sea does not happen by coincidence. It is a manifestation of the working of God's laws. The reason being: *"so He will let them taste the consequences of some of their doings."* (Verse 41) They will thus suffer the consequences of the evil they do and the corruption they spread. It is hoped that when they have done so *"they might mend their ways."* (Verse 41) They might resolve to stop corruption and return to faith and its course of action which sanctions the doing of only what is good.

At the end of this round, the *sūrah* warns them against incurring a punishment similar to what was inflicted on communities before them. They were aware of the ends met by many of those, as they used to see their ruins on their travels: *"Say: Travel around the world and see what was the fate of those who lived before you. Most of them did associate partners with God."* (Verse 42) Their fates are sufficient to discourage anyone from wanting to follow in their footsteps.

Now we have a reference to the other way whose travellers will never be lost. This leads to a different horizon which never brings disappointment:

So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith before there comes from God a day which cannot be averted. On that day all will be divided: he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves. And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds. He certainly does not love the unbelievers. (Verses 43-45)

Taking up the true faith is expressed here in an inspiring way, suggesting full and serious commitment: *"So set your face steadfastly towards the one true faith."* (Verse 43) This implies full attention and clear aspiration. It looks up to a high horizon and a sublime goal. The same sort of directive was given to the Prophet in this *sūrah* when it spoke about groups and sects with divergent beliefs. It is repeated here as the *sūrah* speaks about God's alleged partners, increase in sustenance, corruption resulting from unbelief, what people suffer as a result of the spread of corruption and pollution, and the fates of those who associate partners with God. Therefore, we have a statement here of the reward expected in the life to come and what both believers and unbelievers then stand to receive. The *sūrah* warns against a day that cannot be averted. On that day, people will be divided into two great groups: *"On that day all will be divided: he who has denied the truth will have to bear the consequences of his denial, whereas those who did what is right will have smoothed a way [to paradise] for themselves."*

(Verses 43-44)

The Arabic text uses the word *yamhad* which is given in translation as ‘*smoothed a way*’. In its original meaning, the word means ‘prepare a place of repose, or a comfortable way to follow, a cradle.’ All these connotations combine to describe good deeds and their role. A person who does good deeds actually prepares a position of comfort for himself, this at the same time he does such deeds, not later. This is the meaning the verse highlights. “*And so it is that He might reward, out of His bounty, those who have believed and done righteous deeds.*” (Verse 45) Whatever anyone receives as a reward comes out of God’s bounty. No one deserves heaven on the basis of his or her actions alone. No matter what we do, we do not thank God enough for a part of what He has given us. Yet His grace continues to be bestowed on the believers. As for the unbelievers, He has no love for them: “*He certainly does not love the unbelievers.*” (Verse 45)

Aspects of God’s Grace

The *sūrah* begins a new round showing some of God’s signs and how they reflect His grace as He provides them with sustenance and guidance. They recognize only parts of this, denying others. Nevertheless, they do not give thanks or follow His guidance:

And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news, so that He might give you a taste of His grace, and that ships might sail at His bidding; so that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty, and that you might have cause to be grateful. We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth. Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers. It is God who sends forth the winds so that they raise clouds, whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up so that you can see the rain issuing from within it. As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice, even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope. Behold, then, the effects of God’s grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless! It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things. (Verses 46-50)

God’s signs here include the winds as heralds bearing good news, sending messengers with clear signs, giving support to believers, sending rain to give life to dead land and bringing the dead back to life. This combination is very significant. All these are aspects of God’s mercy and grace, and they are all part of the laws God has set in operation. Indeed there are close links between the system of the universe, the

messages of divine guidance preached by God's messengers, and the victory granted to the believers. All these are among God's signs, and aspects of His grace. They are important to human life, and they are closely related to the universal system.

"And among His signs is that He sends forth the winds bearing good news." (Verse 46) These winds herald rain. From experience, people know the winds that bring rain which raises their hopes. *"So that He might give you a taste of His grace,"* with this prospect of rain, fertility and growth. *"And that ships might sail at His bidding,"* either with the help of rain or by causing rivers to flow and allowing ships to sail on them. Yet the ships are actually run by God's bidding, according to the laws He operates in the universe, giving everything its qualities and functions. An aspect of this is that ships are easily carried by water and they float and move, pushed by the wind, either with or against the current. With Him everything is made to measure. *"So that you might go about in quest of some of His bounty,"* on your business travels, in cultivating the land, and in business exchanges. All this is part of God's bounty, given by the One who has created everything and perfectly proportioned them all so *"that you might have cause to be grateful,"* for His grace in all this. This comment at the end of the verse serves as an indication of how people should behave when they receive God's bounty.

Similar to sending the winds bearing good news is the sending of messengers with veritable signs of the truth: *"We have certainly sent before you messengers to their own peoples, and they brought them clear evidence of the truth."* (Verse 47) Yet people did not receive this aspect of God's grace, which is much greater and further reaching than the wind that brings the prospect of rain. Nor did they benefit by them as they did by rain, even though their messages were far more beneficial and longer lasting. Essentially, they took two different attitudes towards God's messengers. Some of them refused to believe or reflect on God's messages and continued to inflict harm on the messengers and to turn people away from God's path. Others, who believed, recognized God's signs, offered thanks for His grace, and bore with patience the harm inflicted on them by the other group. Furthermore, they were confident that God's promise would come true. The outcome was in accordance with divine justice and in fulfilment of His certain promise: *"Therefore, We inflicted punishment upon those who deliberately did evil. It is incumbent upon Us to give support to the believers."* (Verse 47)

All glory to God Almighty who, by His grace, has committed Himself to support the believers and give them victory, making this their right. He has emphatically confirmed it in clear, unambiguous terms. How could there be any ambiguity when the One making the commitment is God Almighty who has sway over all His creatures? He makes this statement expressing His will that will always be done, and pointing to the working of His law which never fails. He is the All-Knowing, the

Wise.

God's support may appear, in people's reckoning, to be slow in coming, because they have a measure and a perspective that are different from His. He, in His knowledge and wisdom, fulfils His promise at the time He chooses in accordance with His law. People may or may not be able to appreciate the wisdom of His timing. Yet His will brings the best; it is His timing that is the most appropriate, and it is His promise that will most certainly be fulfilled. Believers who reflect the quality of patience in adversity await its fulfilment with unshakeable confidence.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that it is God who sends the winds, brings down the rain, gives life to the earth after it was dead, and also brings the dead back to life: it is all one law, one method and different stages in the chain of the overall universal law.

"It is God who sends forth the winds," in accordance with the law He has set in operation to regulate the universe and its affairs. *"So that they raise clouds,"* by the vapour they carry from the surface of water bodies on earth. *"Whereupon He spreads them as He wills across the skies, and causes them to break up,"* allowing its pieces to gather and condense, accumulate in layers, or collide with one another, or send an electrical charge from one layer or piece to another. *"So that you can see the rain issuing from within it,"* when such clouds are heavy with rain. *"As soon as He causes it to fall upon whomever He wills of His servants, they rejoice."* (Verse 48) No one knows the extent of such rejoicing better than the people for whom rain means survival. The Arabs were the first people to realize the importance of this statement, because their lives depended on rain. Their poetry and folk stories mention it with hope and endearment.

"Even though a short while ago, before it was sent down upon them, they had abandoned all hope." (Verse 49) This describes their condition before rain. In fact, rain changes their condition completely, from despair to hope and rejoicing. *"Behold, then, the effects of God's grace."* You see these effects in people's faces as they brighten up after being gloomy with despair, in the quickening earth, and in the liveliness affecting all.

"Behold, then, the effects of God's grace: how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless!" (Verse 50) This is a fact that needs no more than that we look and reflect. It is given here as evidence confirming the resurrection when people are brought back to life. This is consistent in the Qur'ānic argument where universal images and facts of life are given as substantial evidence: *"It is indeed He, the One who can bring the dead back to life; for He has power over all things."* (Verse 50) We need only to look at the effects of God's grace on the earth to be certain of the truth of this eventuality and the fulfilment of this promise.

The *sūrah* then describes the feelings of those very people who are happy at seeing the wind carrying water and who rejoice as they see rain bringing God's grace. What

would they feel, however, if they saw the winds as yellowish in colour carrying dust and sand? Such winds destroy fields and livestock, or cause plants to dry and wither: *“If We send a [scorching’ wind and they see it turning yellow, they begin after that to deny the truth.”* (Verse 51) Rather than submitting to God’s will and praying to Him earnestly to remove their affliction, they deny the truth out of frustration and despair. This is the status of people who do not believe in God or His will, of people who cannot discern God’s wisdom in what He decides, and cannot appreciate that it is God’s hand that determines everything in the universe, ensuring harmony between all its events and situations.

The Different Stages of Man’s Life

Thus the *sūrah* describes the fluctuation of people’s desires, their inability to benefit by God’s signs that they see in the universe around them, and their failure to recognize God’s wisdom behind life’s events. It then addresses the Prophet consoling him for not being able to persuade many of them to follow divine guidance. It tells him that this is due to their nature and blindness, which he can never cure.

Indeed you cannot make the dead hear; and you cannot make the deaf hear your call when they turn their backs and go away. Nor can you lead the blind out of their error. You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves [to God]. (Verses 52-53)

The *sūrah* shows them to be lifeless, deaf and blind, devoid of motion, hearing and sight. They have isolated themselves from the world around them and thus they are unable to understand the universal laws affecting it. Hence, they have no more than an animal life, or even less. An animal is guided by its nature, which rarely lets it down. By contrast, a person who does not respond to God’s revelations despite its powerful effect on hearts and minds is deaf even though he may have ears that hear. Similarly, the one who does not see God’s signs placed everywhere in the world around him is blind, even though he may have functioning eyes.

“You can only get those who believe in Our signs to listen; and they will then submit themselves (to God).” (Verse 53) These are the ones who listen to the divine message because they have active minds and hearts, as well as sound understanding. When they listen to the divine message, they realize that it is the truth and they declare their submission to Him. They only need that their nature be alerted, and they respond.

The *sūrah* then takes us on a new round, but this time it is within ourselves looking at the different stages of our life on earth, before it refers to the next life and

the close link between the two:

It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you, and then after strength He brings about your weakness and old age. He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power. When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour. Thus they used to delude themselves. But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: 'Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it.' And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends. (Verses 54-57)

They see the beginnings in their own life, and they see the end brought to them in a vivid image as though it were happening before their very eyes. They only need to have a receptive mind to gather the inspiration behind these verses.

"It is God who creates you in a state of weakness." Literally, this is given in Arabic as "it is God who creates you from weakness," which suggests to the Arabic reader that weakness is the substance from which man is made. The weakness in man's formation meant here has several aspects to it. It includes the physical weakness of the single, tiny cell that makes the foetus which goes through several stages, remaining weak throughout all of them. This weakness continues during childhood, until the person reaches adolescence and the prime of youth. Another weakness is that of the substance from which man is made, which is clay. Had it not been for the breath of God's spirit, man would have remained in the physical image of clay or in an animal image. Both of these are very weak compared to man. There is also the psychological weakness that makes man yield to desire, passion and lust. It is again the breathing of God's spirit into him that gives him the ability and resolve to resist such emotions. Without this spirit man would have been weaker than animals which behave according to their natures.

"It is God who creates you in a state of weakness, and then after weakness He brings about strength in you." The strength mentioned here covers all those aspects discussed under weakness: strength in physical build, human potential, mental ability and psychological constitution. *"And then after strength he brings about your weakness and old age."* Again this new weakness applies to the whole human constitution. Old age is a decline into childhood in all aspects. It may be accompanied with psychological decline due to weakness of will. An old person may have an urge similar to that of a child without having the willpower to resist it. The Arabic word *shaybah*, translated here as 'old age' also connotes 'grey hair'. It is specially selected here to give a tangible impression of old age.

No one escapes these stages. They never fail to affect anyone who survives; nor are they ever slow so as to come later than usual. These stages confirm that mankind is subject to a greater will that creates and determines as it pleases. That is the will of God who determines the age, life and stages of every creature in accordance with perfect knowledge and elaborate planning: *"He creates what He wills; and He alone has all knowledge and power."* (Verse 54)

This well-regulated creation must certainly have a well-regulated end. Indeed, this is shown in a scene from the Day of Judgement that is full of movement and dialogue to bring it alive before our eyes: *"When the Last Hour strikes, the evildoers will swear that they had not tarried on earth longer than an hour."* (Verse 55) Thus, all that has passed before that day shrinks into insignificance so as to make them swear that they had not lived on earth more than one hour. Their oaths may also be taken to mean that they did not stay in their graves for more than an hour, or that this duration of one hour applies to all their time on earth in both their conditions of life and death. *"Thus they used to delude themselves."* They could not make a proper estimate of their time, until those who have true knowledge tell them the right duration: *"But those who were endowed with knowledge and faith will say: Indeed, you have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection. This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it."* (Verse 56)

Most probably the ones described as *'endowed with knowledge'* are the believers who were certain of the coming of the Last Hour, recognizing what lies beyond the apparent aspects of the life of this world. These are the ones who have true knowledge and enlightened faith. In their answer, they refer the matter to God's knowledge: *"You have tarried, in accordance with God's decree, until the Day of Resurrection."* This is the term appointed, and it does not matter whether it was of a long or short duration. The appointed time was met: *"This is, then, the Day of Resurrection, but you did not know it."* (Verse 56)

The scene is completed with a general statement of the overall result, referring to the fate of the wrongdoers who denied the Day of Judgement: *"And so on that day their excuse will be of no avail to those wrongdoers, nor will they be allowed to make amends."* (Verse 57) No justification will be accepted from them. In fact no acknowledgement of error or apology is sought from them. That is the Day of Judgement and punishment of the guilty, not a day of providing justification for wrong action.

No Change of Position

The *sūrah* then describes how the unbelievers persist in their ways, after having explained the fate of such persistent unbelief:

We have set for people in this Qur'ān all sorts of illustrations. Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: you are but making false claims.' Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth]. (Verses 58-59)

There is a wide gap here in time and place, but it sounds in the *sūrah* as if it is ever so near; indeed both time and place have been rolled back. People are again reminded of what the Qur'ān provides by way of illustrations, modes of address, fine touches meant to alert minds and hearts, and inspiring images. They listen to it as it addresses every mind and heart in every social environment and speaks to the human soul in all its moods. Yet they continue to deny every sign. Nor do they stop at this, but rather insult those endowed with true knowledge describing them as making false assertions: *"Yet if you present them with any sign, the unbelievers will say: you are but making false claims."* (Verse 58) The *sūrah* comments on their disbelief, saying: *"Thus does God seal the hearts of those who do not want to know [the truth]."* (Verse 59) It is in this way and for this reason that God seals their hearts. They are indeed blind, unable to see God's signs, arrogant in their disbelief, unwilling to reflect. Hence, they deserve that God should seal their sight and their hearts.

The final note in the *sūrah* comes in the form of a directive to the Prophet and the believers: *"Therefore persevere patiently. For certain, God's promise will come true. So, let not the ones deprived of certainty trouble your mind."* (Verse 60)

Perseverance is the best policy for the believers as they go along their hard, long way that at times seems endless. They must remain confident of the fulfilment of God's promise. This will enable them to remain steadfast, free of worry and doubt. Other people may hesitate, or deny the truth, or doubt that God's promise will ever be fulfilled, because they have no true knowledge and lack the means of certainty. Believers, however, must persevere, remain steadfast and confident, even though their path may seem endless, and their goal seem concealed behind thick clouds.

Thus the *sūrah* that started with God's promise to grant victory to the Byzantines within a few years, and give support and victory to the believers, now ends with the directive to persevere until God's promise is fulfilled. Believers are instructed to remain steadfast in the face of all the unbelievers' attempts to weaken their resolve. There is perfect harmony between the opening and the end. As it concludes, the lingering impression is that of a firm resolve and unshaken trust that God's promise will be fulfilled.