

SŪRAH 89

Al-Fajr

(The Dawn)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

By the dawn, (1)

by the ten nights, (2)

by that which is even and that which is odd, (3)

by the night as it journeys on! (4)

*Is there not in that an oath for a man of sense?
(5)*

*Have you not heard how your Lord dealt with
the 'Ad, (6)*

the people of Iram, the many-pillared [city], (7)

*the like of whom has never been created in the
whole land? (8)*

*And with the Thamūd, who hollowed out rocks
in the valley? (9)*

وَالْفَجْرِ ﴿١﴾

وَلَيَالٍ عَشْرٍ ﴿٢﴾

وَالشَّفْعِ وَالْوَتْرِ ﴿٣﴾

وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَسْرِ ﴿٤﴾

هَلْ فِي ذَلِكَ قَسَمٌ لِّذِي حِجْرِ ﴿٥﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِعَادٍ ﴿٦﴾

إِرَمَ ذَاتِ الْعِمَادِ ﴿٧﴾

الَّتِي لَمْ يُخْلَقْ مِثْلُهَا فِي الْبِلَدِ ﴿٨﴾

وَتَمُودَ الَّذِينَ جَابُوا الصَّخَرَ بِالْوَادِ ﴿٩﴾

And with Pharaoh, of the tent-pegs? (10)

*They were all transgressors throughout their lands,
(11)*

bringing about much corruption there. (12)

*Therefore, your Lord let loose on them the scourge
of suffering. (13)*

Your Lord surely observes all. (14)

*As for man, whenever his Lord tries him by His
generosity and with a life of ease, he says, 'My
Lord is bountiful to me.' (15)*

*But whenever He tries him by stinting his means,
he says, 'My Lord has disgraced me.' (16)*

*No indeed; but you are not generous towards the
orphan, (17)*

nor do you urge one another to feed the needy. (18)

*You devour the inheritance [of others] greedily,
(19)*

and you love wealth passionately. (20)

*No indeed! When the earth is systematically
levelled down, (21)*

وَفِرْعَوْنَ ذِي الْأَوْتَادِ ﴿١٠﴾

الَّذِينَ طَغَوْا فِي الْبَلَدِ ﴿١١﴾

فَأَكْثَرُوا فِيهَا الْفَسَادَ ﴿١٢﴾

فَصَبَّ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّكَ سَوْطَ عَذَابٍ ﴿١٣﴾

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَبِالْمِرْصَادِ ﴿١٤﴾

فَأَمَّا الْإِنْسَانُ إِذَا مَا ابْتَلَاهُ رَبُّهُ فَأَكْرَمَهُ
وَنَعَّمَهُ فَيَقُولُ رَبِّي أَكْرَمَنِ ﴿١٥﴾

وَأَمَّا إِذَا مَا ابْتَلَاهُ فَقَدَرَ عَلَيْهِ رِزْقَهُ
فَيَقُولُ رَبِّي أَهْنَنِ ﴿١٦﴾

كَلَّا ۗ بَلْ لَا تُكْرِمُونَ الْيَتِيمَ ﴿١٧﴾

وَلَا تَحْضُرُونَ عَلَى طَعَامِ الْمَسْكِينِ ﴿١٨﴾

وَتَأْكُلُونَ التُّرَاثَ أَكْلًا لَمًّا ﴿١٩﴾

وَمُحِبُّونَ الْمَالَ حُبًّا جَمًّا ﴿٢٠﴾

كَلَّا إِذَا دُكَّتِ الْأَرْضُ دَكًّا دَكًّا ﴿٢١﴾

and your Lord comes, with the angels rank on rank, (22)

and on that day, hell is brought near, then man will remember, but how will that remembrance avail him? (23)

He shall say, 'Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!' (24)

On that day, none will punish as He punishes, (25)

and none will bind with chains as He binds. (26)

'Oh soul at peace! (27)

Return to your Lord, well pleased and well pleasing. (28)

Enter, then, together with My servants! (29)

Enter My paradise!' (30)

وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا ﴿٢٢﴾

وَجِئْنَا يَوْمَئِذٍ يَوْمَئِذٍ بِجَهَنَّمَ ۚ يَوْمَئِذٍ يَتَذَكَّرُ
الْإِنْسَانُ وَأَنَّى لَهُ الذِّكْرَى ﴿٢٣﴾

يَقُولُ يَلَيْتَنِي قَدَّمْتُ لِحَيَاتِي ﴿٢٤﴾

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَا يُعَذِّبُ عَذَابُهُ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٥﴾

وَلَا يُوثِقُ وَثَاقَهُ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٦﴾

يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ﴿٢٧﴾

أَرْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً ﴿٢٨﴾

فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي ﴿٢٩﴾

وَادْخُلِي جَنَّتِي ﴿٣٠﴾

Overview

The present *sūrah* follows, in general, the line of this part of the Qur'ān, inviting the human heart to faith, urging man to awake, meditate and follow the path of righteousness. It uses different kinds of emphasis, connotation and rhythm, but constitutes, nevertheless, a single harmonious piece of music, varying in tones but maintaining the same cadence. Some of its scenes impart a touch of quiet beauty and a light, pleasant rhythm. This is particularly evident in its opening, which describes certain charming aspects of the universe and provides at the same time an aura of worship and prayer: "By the dawn, by the ten nights, by that which is even and that which is odd, by the night as it journeys on!" (Verses 1-4) Other scenes are tense and dramatic in both what they describe and in their music, like this violent, frightening picture: "No indeed! When the earth is systematically levelled down, and your Lord comes, with the

angels rank on rank, and on that day, hell is brought near, then man will remember, but how will that remembrance avail him? He shall say, 'Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!' On that day, none will punish as He punishes, And none will bind with chains as He binds." (Verses 21-26)

Some of the portraits drawn in the *sūrah* are pleasing, gentle and reassuring, striking perfect harmony between subject matter and rhythm. This is especially true of its ending: *"Oh soul at peace! Return to your Lord, well pleased and well pleasing. Enter, then, together with My servants! Enter My paradise!"* (Verses 27-30)

The *sūrah* also includes references to the destruction that befell insolent peoples of the past. The rhythm here falls somewhere between that of easy narration and that of violent destruction: *"Have you not heard how your Lord dealt with the `Ād, the people of Iram, the many pillared [city], the like of whom has never been created in the whole land? And with the Thamūd, who hollowed out rocks in the valley? And with Pharaoh, of the tent pegs? They were all transgressors throughout their lands, bringing about much corruption there. Therefore, your Lord let loose on them the scourge of suffering. Your Lord surely observes all."* (Verses 6-14)

We also have an outline of some human concepts and values which are at variance with faith. This part has its own style and rhythm: *"As for man, whenever his Lord tries him by His generosity and with a life of ease, he says, My Lord is bountiful to me.' But whenever He tries him by stinting his means, he says, My Lord has disgraced me."* (Verses 15-16)

A refutation of these erroneous concepts and values is provided through an exposition of the human conditions which give rise to them. Here we have two kinds of style and rhythm: *"No indeed; but you are not generous towards the orphan, nor do you urge one another to feed the needy. You devour the inheritance [of others] greedily, and you love wealth passionately."* (Verses 17-20)

It is clear that the latter style and rhythm serves as a bridge between the statement of erroneous human ways and that which explains their inevitable attendant fate. These verses are immediately followed by a picture of the earth as it is levelled.

This brief overview reveals to us the numerous colours of the scenes described and explains the change of metre and rhyme according to the change of scenes. The *sūrah* is indeed an excellent example of an exceptionally beautiful style which is varied and harmonious at the same time.

A Serene Opening

"By the dawn, by the ten nights, by that which is even and that which is odd, by the night as it journeys on! Is there not in that an oath for a man of sense?" (Verses 1-5) This

opening groups together a few scenes and creatures who have familiar, pleasant, and transparent souls. "By the dawn," refers to the time when life starts to breathe with ease and happiness, a time of fresh, friendly companionship. This dormant world gradually wakes up in a prayer-like process.

"By the ten nights." (Verse 2) The Qur'ān does not specify which these ten nights are. Several explanations, however, have been advanced. Some say they are the first of the month of Dhu'l-Hijjah; some say they are in al-Muharram; and others state that they are the last ten nights of Ramaḍān. As it leaves them undefined, the Arabic reference acquires an added yet amiable effect. They are merely ten nights known to God but the expression connotes that they have special character, as if they were living creatures with souls and there was mutual sympathy between them and us, transmitted through this Qur'ānic verse.

"By that which is even and that which is odd." (Verse 3) This verse adds an atmosphere of worship to that of the dawn and the ten nights. According to al-Tirmidhī, the Prophet says: "Some prayers are of even number and some are odd." This is the most appropriate import to be attached to this verse, in the general context of the *sūrah*. It suggests a mutual response between the souls of the worshippers and those of the selected nights and the brightening dawn.

"By the night as it journeys on." (Verse 4) The night here is personified as if it were a traveller journeying in the universe. Its portrait is like that of an insomniac walking on and on in the darkness, or a wayfarer who prefers to start his long journey at night. What a beautiful expression, one enhanced by its superb rhythm! The harmony between this verse and the dawn, the ten nights, the even and the odd is perfect. These are not mere words and expressions: they provide a feeling of the breeze at dawn, and of the morning dew diffusing the fragrance of flowers.

This is the effect of a gentle, inspiring whisper on our hearts, souls and consciences. The beauty of this loving address is far superior to any poetic expression because it combines the beauty of originality with the statement of certain fact. Hence it concludes with a rhetorical question: "Is there not in that an oath for a man of sense?" (Verse 5) The oath and the conviction are certainly there for anyone with a meditative mind. Although the positive meaning is intended, the interrogative form is used because it is gentler. Thus harmony with the preceding address is maintained.

Swift Punishment of Tyranny

The subject of the oath is omitted, but it is explained by the discussion that follows on tyranny and corruption. The punishment inflicted by God on the insolent, tyrannical and corrupt communities is a law of nature asserted by this oath. The assertion takes the form of a hint befitting the generally light tone of this *sūrah*: "Have

you not heard how your Lord dealt with the `Ād, the people of Iram, the many pillared [city], the like of whom has never been created in the whole land? And with the Thamūd, who hollowed out rocks in the valley? And with Pharaoh, of the tent pegs? They were all transgressors throughout their lands, bringing about much corruption there. Therefore, your Lord let loose on them the scourge of suffering. Your Lord surely observes all." (Verses 6-14)

The interrogative form in such a context is more effective in drawing the attention of the addressee, who is, in the first instance, the Prophet (peace be upon him) and then all those who may ponder over the fates of those past communities. The people of the Prophet's generation, who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān, were aware of what happened to these nations. Their fates were also explained in reports and stories conveyed by one generation to another. The description of these outcomes as the deeds of God is comforting and reassuring for the believers. It was particularly so to those believers in Makkah who, at the time when this *sūrah* was revealed, were subjected to relentless persecution and hardship by the unbelievers.

These short verses refer to the fates of the most powerful and despotic nations in ancient history. They speak of the earlier tribe of `Ād of Iram, a branch of extinct Arabs. They used to dwell in al-Aḥqāf, a sandy piece of land in southern Arabia, midway between Yemen and Ḥadramawt. The `Ād were nomadic, using posts and pillars to erect their tents. They are described elsewhere in the Qur'ān as being extremely powerful and aggressive. Indeed they were the most powerful and prestigious of all contemporary Arabian tribes: "*The like of whom has never been created in the whole land.*" (Verse 8) The distinction here is restricted to that particular age.

"And with the Thamūd, who hollowed out rocks in the valley?" (Verse 9) The Thamūd used to live at Al-Ḥijr, a rocky tract in northern Arabia, on the road from Madinah to Syria. They excelled in using rocks to build their palaces and homes. They also dug shelters and caves into the mountains.

"And with Pharaoh, of the tent pegs." (Verse 10) The term, *tent- pegs'*, refers to the pyramids which are as firm in their construction as pegs well dug into the ground. The Pharaoh referred to here is the despot who was Moses's contemporary.

These people "*were all transgressors throughout their lands, bringing about much corruption there.*" (Verses 11-12) Corruption is an inevitable result of tyranny, and it affects the tyrant and his subjects alike. Indeed, tyranny ruins all human relations. It forces human life out of its healthy, constructive and straight path and diverts it into a line which does not lead to the fulfilment of man's role as God's vicegerent on earth. Tyranny makes the tyrant captive of his own desires because he is uncommitted to any principle or standard and unrestrained within any reasonable limit. Thus the tyrant is always the first to be corrupted by his own tyranny. He assumes for himself a role other than that of a servant of God, entrusted with a

specific mission. This is evident in Pharaoh's boastful claim: *"I am your supreme Lord."* (79: 24)

Here we have an example of the corrupting influence, indeed insolence, of despotism in Pharaoh's aspiring to a status greater than that of an obedient creature. Tyranny also corrupts the masses, as it humiliates them and compels them to suppress their discontent and hatred. It kills all human dignity and wastes all creative talents, which cannot flourish except in an atmosphere of freedom. A humiliated soul inevitably rots away and becomes a breeding ground for sickly desires. Hence, digression from the right path becomes the order of the day as clear vision becomes an impossibility. In such conditions no aspiration to a higher human standard can be entertained. The net result of all this is the spread of corruption.

Tyranny also destroys all healthy standards and concepts because they constitute a threat to its existence. Hence, values are falsified and standards are distorted so that the repulsive idea of despotism becomes acceptable as natural. This, in itself, is great corruption.

When these aforementioned peoples caused such corruption, the remedy was, inevitably, a complete purge: *"Therefore, your Lord let loose on them the scourge of suffering. Your Lord surely observes all."* (Verses 13-14) God is certainly aware of their deeds and He records them all. So, when corruption increased, He severely punished the corrupt. The text connotes that the punishment was very painful as it uses the term 'scourge', or 'whip' as the Arabic term literally means, and that it was in large supply as indicated by use of the phrase 'let loose'. Thus these tyrants were made to suffer a plentiful and painful retribution.

As the believer faces tyranny in any age or place, he feels great reassurance emanating from far beyond the fates of all those communities. He also feels a particular comfort as he reads the verse: *"Your Lord surely observes all."* (Verse 14) Nothing passes unnoticed and nothing is forgotten. So let the believers be always reassured that God will deal, in time, with all corruption and tyranny.

Thus the *sūrah* provides some examples of what God may do about the cause of faith, which are totally different from the example of the people of the pit outlined in *Sūrah* 85, The Constellations. All these stories are related for a definite purpose, namely, the education of the believers and their preparation to face whichever course God chooses for them. They will, then, be ready for all eventualities and equipped with God's reassurance as they submit themselves to Him and let His will be done.

Human Short-Sightedness

"Your Lord surely observes all." (Verse 14) He sees, records, holds to account and

rewards according to a strict and accurate measure which neither errs nor exceeds the limits of justice. It is never deceived by appearances because it judges the essence of things. Human measures and standards are liable to all sorts of errors. Man sees nothing beyond appearances unless he adopts the divine measure.

“As for man, whenever his Lord tries him by His generosity and with a life of ease, he says, My Lord is bountiful to me.’ But whenever He tries him by stinting his means, he says, My Lord has disgraced me.” (Verses 15-16) Such is man’s thinking about the various forms of trial God may set for him, be it comfort or hardship, abundance or scarcity. God may test him with comfort, honour, wealth or position but he does not realize the probationary nature of what he is given. Rather he considers the gesture as proof that he deserves to be honoured by God and as evidence that He has chosen him for a special honour. It is a line of thinking which mistakes trial for reward and test for result. It imagines honour in the sight of God to be measured by worldly comforts. God may also try man by stinting his means, and man again mistakes trial for reward and imagines the test to be a retribution. He feels that God has made him poor in order to humiliate him.

In both situations the human concept is faulty. Wealth and poverty are two forms of a test which God sets for His servants. A test with abundance reveals whether a man is humble and thankful to his Lord or arrogant and haughty, while a trial of the opposite kind reveals his patient acceptance or his irritability and fretfulness. A man’s reward is given according to what he proves himself to be. What he is given or denied of worldly comforts is not his reward, and a man’s standing in the sight of God is in no way related to his possessions, for He gives and denies worldly comforts regardless of whether a man is good or bad. A man devoid of faith cannot comprehend the wisdom behind God’s action of giving or denying worldly comforts. However, when his mind is enlightened with faith and truth becomes apparent to him, he realizes the triviality of worldly riches and the value of the reward after the test. So he works for this reward whether he is tried with worldly abundance or scarcity. As he disregards the hollow considerations of wealth and poverty, he is reassured about his fate and his position in God’s sight.

At the time of revelation, the Qur’ān addressed a kind of people common to all *jāhiliyyah* societies, one who had lost all relation with a world beyond our present life. Such people adopt this mistaken view about God’s granting or denial of wealth, and apply a set of values which reserve all honour to money and social standing. Hence, their craving for wealth is irresistible. It makes them covetous, greedy and stingy. The Qur’ān reveals their true feelings. It states that their greed and stinginess are responsible for their inability to understand the true significance of divine trial, whether by granting or denying wealth. *“No indeed; but you are not generous towards the orphan, nor do you urge one another to feed the needy. You devour the inheritance [of*

others] greedily, and you love wealth passionately.” (Verses 17-20)

The real issue is that when people are given wealth they do not fulfil the duties demanded of the wealthy. They do not look after the young orphan who has lost his father and become, therefore, in need of protection and support. They do not urge one another to contribute to general welfare. Such mutual encouragement is indeed an important feature of the Islamic way of life. Since such people do not comprehend the significance of the trial, they do not even try to come out of it successfully by looking after the orphans and urging one another to feed the needy. On the contrary, they greedily devour the orphans’ inheritance, and unrestrainedly crave for wealth. It is a craving which kills all their nobility.

In Makkah, Islam faced this common urge to accumulate wealth by every possible means. The weak position of orphans, and orphan girls in particular, tempted many to deprive them of their inheritance in different ways. The ardent love of wealth, the craving to accumulate it through usury and other means, was a distinctive feature of Makkan society as it is a distinctive feature of all *jāhiliyyah* societies at all times.

These few verses do not merely expose the true nature of such an attitude. They also condemn it and urge its discontinuation. Condemnation is evident in the repetition noted in these verses, their rhythm and metre: *“You devour the inheritance [of others] greedily, and you love wealth passionately.” (Verses 19-20)*

The Fateful Day

Once their erroneous concept of the trial with wealth and poverty is outlined, and their vile attitude is exposed there follows a stern warning about the Day of Judgement which comes after the result of the test is known. Here the rhythm is very powerful: *“No indeed! When the earth is systematically levelled down, and your Lord comes, with the angels rank on rank, and on that day, hell is brought near, then man will remember, but how will that remembrance avail him! He shall say, ‘Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!’ On that day, none will punish as He punishes, and none will bind with chains as He binds.” (Verses 21-26)*

The total destruction of all that is on earth and its systematic levelling is one of the upheavals that overwhelm the universe on the Day of Resurrection. God’s coming with the angels is unexplained but the expression overflows with reverence, awe and fear. The same applies to bringing hell closer. We take it to mean that hell on that day will be very close to its prospective dwellers. What actually happens and how it happens is part of the divine knowledge God has chosen to withhold until that day. These verses, with their captivating rhythm and sharp notes, portray nevertheless a scene which strikes fear into people’s hearts, and makes it apparent in their eyes. The earth is being systematically levelled; God Almighty judges everyone; the angels

stand there rank on rank, while hell is brought near and set in readiness.

At that moment *"man will remember."* Man, who lived unaware of the wisdom behind the trial with worldly riches or with deprivation; who devoured the inheritance of orphans greedily; who craved for money and did not care for the orphans or the needy; who tyrannized, spread corruption and turned away from divine guidance, will then remember the truth and take account of what he beholds. But alas! It is too late: *"But how will that remembrance avail him?"* (Verse 23) The time for remembrance is over, so remembrance on the Day of Judgement and reward will not profit anybody. It serves merely as an act of grief for a chance given but not taken in this present life.

When man is fully aware of the true nature of his situation he says despairingly, *"Oh, would that I had prepared for my life!"* (Verse 24) For the true life, the only one that deserves the name, is indeed the life hereafter. It is the one which is worth preparing for. *"Oh, would that I had..."* It is a sigh of evident regret and grief, but it is the most a man can do for himself then.

The *sūrah* goes on to portray man's fate after his desperate sighing and useless wishing: *"On that day, none will punish as He punishes, and none will bind with chains as He binds."* (Verses 25-26) It is God Almighty who inflicts His incomparable punishment, and who binds as no one can bind. This divine punishment and binding are explained in detail in other parts of the Qur'ān, but the reference here is very brief, stressing mainly their incomparability to human action.

The reference to divine punishment here brings to mind the earlier reference to human tyranny in the given examples of the 'Ād, Thamūd and Pharaoh. Those tyrants are stated to have spread much corruption in their lands, including physically torturing people and binding them with chains and ropes. These last verses serve as an address to the Prophet and the believers, reminding them that their Lord will punish and chain those who tortured and chained others. But the two kinds of punishment are entirely different. Meagre is the torture that any creature can administer, but great is that inflicted by the Creator. Let the tyrants continue with their punishment and in different ways. The ardent love of wealth, the craving to accumulate it through usury and other means, was a distinctive feature of Makkan society as it is a distinctive feature of all *jāhiliyyah* societies at all times.

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The reference to divine punishment here brings to mind the earlier reference to human tyranny in the given examples of the `Ād, Thamūd and Pharaoh. Those tyrants are stated to have spread much corruption in their lands, including physically torturing people and binding them with chains and ropes. These last verses serve as an address to the Prophet and the believers, reminding them that their Lord will punish and chain those who tortured and chained others. But the two kinds of punishment are entirely different. Meagre is the torture that any creature can administer, but great is that inflicted by the Creator. Let the tyrants continue with their punishment and persecution; they will have their turn and be the sufferers of a punishment which is beyond all imagination.

Amidst all this unimaginable horror comes an address from on high to the believers: *"Oh soul at peace! Return to your Lord, well pleased and well pleasing. Enter, then, together with My servants! Enter My paradise!"* (Verses 27-30)

It is a tender, compassionate and reassuring address: *"Oh soul at peace!"* (Verse 27) It speaks of freedom and ease, after the earlier reference to chains and affliction: *"Return to your Lord."* (Verse 28) After your alienation on earth and your separation from the one you belong to. Return now to your Lord with whom you have strong ties: *"well pleased and well pleasing."* (Verse 28) It is a gentle address which spreads compassion and satisfaction. *"Enter, then, together with My servants, "* among those servants chosen to enjoy this divine grace." *Enter My paradise,"* to receive God's mercy and protection.

As it opens, this address generates an aura of heaven: *"Oh soul at peace!"* The believer's is a soul at peace with its Lord, certain of its way, confident of its fate. It is a soul satisfied in all eventualities, happiness or affliction, wealth or poverty. It entertains no doubts; it is free from transgressions. The gentle music adds a feeling of intimacy and peace. The majestic face of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, with all His splendour looks on from above.