

SŪRAH 88
Al-Ghāshiyah
(The Enveloper)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Have you heard the story of the Enveloper? (1)

هَلْ أَتَكَ حَدِيثُ الْغَاشِيَةِ ﴿١﴾

Some faces on that day are downcast, (2)

وَجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ خَاشِعَةٌ ﴿٢﴾

labour weary, worn out, (3)

عَامِلَةٌ نَّاصِبَةٌ ﴿٣﴾

about to enter a scorching fire, (4)

تَصَلَّى نَارًا حَامِيَةً ﴿٤﴾

made to drink from a boiling fountain. (5)

تُسْقَى مِنْ عَيْنٍ آَانِيَةٍ ﴿٥﴾

*Their only food shall be nothing but dry thorns,
(6)*

لَيْسَ لَهُمْ طَعَامٌ إِلَّا مِنْ ضَرِيعٍ ﴿٦﴾

*which will neither nourish nor satisfy their hunger.
(7)*

لَا يُسْمِنُ وَلَا يُغْنِي مِنْ جُوعٍ ﴿٧﴾

Other faces on that day are jocund, (8)

وَجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَاعِمَةٌ ﴿٨﴾

well-pleased with their striving, (9)

لِسَعْيِهَا رَاضِيَةٌ ﴿٩﴾

in a sublime garden, (10)

where they hear no babble. (11)

A running fountain shall be there, (12)

and raised couches, (13)

and goblets placed ready, (14)

and cushions laid in order, (15)

and carpets spread out. (16)

Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created; (17)

and heaven, how it is raised aloft; (18)

and the mountains, how they are hoisted; (19)

and the earth, how it is spread out. (20)

Therefore exhort them; your task is only to exhort. (21)

You are not their overseer. (22)

فِي جَنَّةٍ عَالِيَةٍ ﴿١٠﴾

لَا تَسْمَعُ فِيهَا لَغِيَةً ﴿١١﴾

فِيهَا عَيْنٌ جَارِيَةٌ ﴿١٢﴾

فِيهَا سُرُرٌ مَّرْفُوعَةٌ ﴿١٣﴾

وَأَكْوَابٌ مَّوْضُوعَةٌ ﴿١٤﴾

وَمَنَارِقُ مَصْفُوفَةٌ ﴿١٥﴾

وَزَرَائِبٌ مَبْتُوثَةٌ ﴿١٦﴾

أَفَلَا يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَى الْإِبِلِ كَيْفَ خُلِقَتْ

﴿١٧﴾

وَالِى السَّمَاءِ كَيْفَ رُفِعَتْ ﴿١٨﴾

وَالِى الْجِبَالِ كَيْفَ نُصِبَتْ ﴿١٩﴾

وَالِى الْأَرْضِ كَيْفَ سُطِحَتْ ﴿٢٠﴾

فَذَكِّرْ إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُذَكِّرٌ ﴿٢١﴾

لَسْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ بِمُصَيِّرٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

But he who turns his back and disbelieves, (23)

إِلَّا مَنْ تَوَلَّىٰ وَكَفَرَ ﴿٢٣﴾

*God shall inflict on him the greatest suffering.
(24)*

فَيُعَذِّبُهُ اللَّهُ الْعَذَابَ الْأَكْبَرَ ﴿٢٤﴾

To Us they shall surely return, (25)

إِنَّ إِلَيْنَا إِيَابَهُمْ ﴿٢٥﴾

when We shall bring them to account. (26)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ عَلَيْنَا حِسَابَهُمْ ﴿٢٦﴾

Overview

This *sūrah* is a deep and calm melody which invites meditation, hope and fear. It warns man to be ready for the day of reckoning. It carries man's heart into two vast spheres: the life hereafter with its limitless world and moving scenes; and the visible sphere of existence, with the signs God has spread in all the creatures sharing this existence held out for everyone to see. After these two great scenarios, the *sūrah* reminds man of the reckoning on the Day of Judgement, of God's power, and of the inevitable return to Him. Throughout, the style is characterized by its depth of tone: it is calm but highly effective, powerful and awesome.

"Have you heard the story of the Enveloper?" (Verse 1) With this introduction, the *sūrah* wants to make hearts turn back to God, to remind men of His signs in the universe, His reckoning on the Day of Judgement, and His certain reward. It starts with this inquiry, which implies greatness and indicates a positive statement. It points out that the question of the hereafter had already been affirmed and earlier reminders had been given. The Day of Resurrection is here given a new name, "the Enveloper", which suggests that a calamity will befall mankind and envelop them with its horrors. It is one of the many evocative names mentioned in the *sūrahs* included in this volume. Others are: The Overwhelming, The Deafening, The Stunning Event. They all suit the general tone and nature of these *sūrahs*.

Whenever the Prophet (peace be upon him) listened to this *sūrah*, he felt that the address "Have you heard..." was directed to him personally, as if he was receiving it from his Lord directly for the first time. He was extremely moved by this. The reality of this divine address was always present in his mind. A tradition related by `Umar ibn Maymūn says that the Prophet once passed by a woman who was reading this *sūrah*. When she read "Have you heard the story of the Enveloper...?" he stopped to listen and said "Yes, I have heard it."

The address is nevertheless a general one, directed at everyone who hears the Qur'ān. The story of the Enveloper is an oft-repeated theme in the Qur'ān, reminding men of the hereafter, warning them of its punishment, and promising its rewards. It is a story which aims to awaken people's consciences, to arouse their fear and apprehension as well as their hope and expectancy.

The Story in Brief

The *sūrah* opens with a question: "Have you heard the story of the Enveloper?" (Verse 1) It follows this by relating part of its story: "Some faces on that day are downcast, labour weary, worn out, about to enter a scorching fire, made to drink from a boiling fountain. Their only food shall be nothing but dry thorns, which will neither nourish nor satisfy their hunger." (Verses 2-7) The scene of suffering and torture is given before the scene of joy, because the former is closer to the connotations of the name given to the event, the Enveloper, and the impressions it generates.

Thus we are told that there are on that day faces which look humble, downcast and worn out. They belong to people who have laboured and toiled without satisfactory results. Indeed the results they get are a total loss, which increases their disappointment, and causes looks of humiliation and exhaustion on their faces. Hence they are described as "labour weary, worn out". (Verse 3) They had laboured and toiled for something other than God's cause. Their work was totally for themselves and their families, for their own ambitions in the life of this world. Then they come to reap the fruits of their toil, not having made any provision for their future life. Hence they face the end with a mixture of humiliation, exhaustion, misery and hopelessness. In addition to all this they roast "at a scorching fire." (Verse 4)

They are "made to drink from a boiling fountain. Their only food shall be nothing but dry thorns, which will neither nourish nor satisfy their hunger." (Verses 5-7) The Arabic text uses the term *darī*, which is translated here as 'dry thorns'. However, some commentators say that it refers to a tree of fire in hell. This explanation is based on what has been revealed about the tree of *zaqqūm* which grows at the centre of hell. It is also said to be a kind of cactus thorn, which when green is called *shabraq* and is eaten by camels. However, when it is fully grown it becomes poisonous and cannot be eaten. Whatever it is in reality, it is a kind of food like *ghislīn* and *ghassāq* [names given in the Qur'ān to refer to the food available in hell] which neither nourishes nor appeases hunger.

It is obvious that we, in this world, cannot fully comprehend the nature of such suffering in the hereafter. The description is made in order to give our perceptions the feeling of the greatest possible pain, which is produced by a combination of humiliation, weakness, failure, the scorching fire, drinking and bathing in boiling

water, and eating food unacceptable even to camels, which are used to eating thorns when they travel in desert areas. This type of thorn, however, is dry and gives no nourishment. From all these aspects we get a sense of the ultimate affliction. But the affliction of the hereafter is, nevertheless, greater. Its true nature is incomprehensible except to those who will actually experience it. May God never count us among them.

On the other hand we find *"other faces on that day are jocund, well pleased with their striving, in a sublime garden, where they hear no babble. A running fountain shall be there, and raised couches, and goblets placed ready, and cushions laid in order, and carpets spread out."* (Verses 8-16) Here are faces bright with joy, animated with pleasure. They are well pleased with what they are given. They enjoy that splendid, spiritual feeling of satisfaction with what they have done, as they sense God's pleasure with them. There is no better feeling for man than to be reassured of his own actions, and to see the results reflected in God being pleased with him. The Qur'ān gives precedence to this kind of happiness over the joys of heaven. Then it describes heaven and the joys it affords to its happy dwellers: *"in a sublime garden."* (Verse 10) It is glorious and sublime, with lofty positions and elevated gardens.

The description of height and elevation gives us a special feeling. *"Where they hear no babble."* (Verse 11) This expression creates a sense of calmness, peace, reassurance, love, satisfaction and pleasant discourse between friends. It also provides a feeling of raising oneself above any vain conversation. This is in itself a kind of joy and happiness, which is better felt when one remembers the first life and its increasing polemics, disputes, contentions, quarrels, sin and uproar. When one remembers all this, one relaxes into complete calmness, total peace of mind and a pleasant happiness generated by the Qur'ānic expression *"where they hear no babble"*. The very words are endowed with a pleasant fragrance. They flow with gratifying rhythm. It also implies that, as the believers turn away in this life from polemics and vain discourse, their way of life acquires a heavenly element.

As has been said earlier, of all the descriptions of heaven, God emphasizes first this sublime and brilliant element, before He mentions the joys which satisfy the senses. These are given in a form comprehensible to man, but in heaven they take the form which is suited for the elevated standards of the people there. Thus they remain unknown except to those who actually experience them.

"A running fountain shall be there." (Verse 12) The description combines a sense of quenching thirst, with beauty of movement and flow. Running water gives a sense of liveliness and youth. It is pleasant to the eye and the mind, and touches the depths of human feeling.

"And raised couches." (Verse 13) The adjective, raised, gives an impression of

cleanliness and purity. *“And goblets placed ready,”* (Verse 14) so they are ready for drinking – there is no need to order or prepare them. *“And cushions laid in order.”* (Verse 15) These are prepared for dwellers to recline and relax. *“And carpets spread out.”* They serve the dual purpose of decoration and comfort. All these luxuries are similar to the luxuries enjoyed in this life, but these are mentioned merely to make them comprehensible to us. Their true nature, and the nature of their enjoyment, are left for the experience of those whom God has rewarded.

It is useless to make comparisons or enquiries concerning the nature of the joys of the hereafter, or the nature of its afflictions. People gain their understanding by means that are limited to this world, and the nature of life in it. When they are in the next life all veils will be lifted and barriers removed. Souls and senses will be free from all restrictions, and the connotations of the very words will alter as a result of the change in the feelings to which they refer. These Qur’ānic descriptions help us to imagine the ultimate of sweetness and joy. This is all that we can do while we live on earth, but when God honours us with His grace and pleasure, as we pray He will, we will know the reality to which the Qur’ān refers.

Reflection on God’s Creation

When this account of the hereafter comes to its close, the *sūrah* refers to the present world, which is in itself a manifestation of the power and perfect planning of God, the Almighty: *“Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created; and heaven, how it is raised aloft; and the mountains, how they are hoisted; and the earth, how it is spread out.”* (Verses 17-20) These four short verses join together the boundaries of the world of the Arabs – the first people to be addressed by the Qur’ān. They also group together the prominent ends of creation in the universe as they speak of the sky, earth, mountains and camels. The last of these stands for all animals, although the camel has its own distinctive features and a special value for Arabs.

All these aspects of creation – the sky, earth, mountains and animals – are always in front of man wherever he is. Whatever man’s level of civilization and scientific advancement, they remain within his world and within his sphere of consciousness. When he considers their roles, they suggest to him something of what lies beyond. In each of them there is a miracle of creation. The distinctive, incomparable work of the Creator is clear in them all, and this alone is sufficient to indicate the true faith. Hence the Qur’ān directs to them the attention of every human being.

“Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created.” (Verse 17) The camel was the most important animal for the Arab. It was his means of transport which also carried his belongings. It gave him food and drink. From its hair and skin he made his

clothes and dwellings. Besides, the camel is unique among all animals. Despite its strength, size and firm build, it is tame: a young boy can manage it. It gives man great service and, at the same time, it is inexpensive to keep and its food is easy to find. Moreover, it is the only animal to endure hunger, thirst, hard work and poor conditions. Its shape has also a special characteristic which is in perfect harmony with the portrait drawn here, and this will be discussed later on.

So, the Qur'ān, asks of its first audience to ponder on how the camel is made. This does not require them to undertake any difficult task or to discover any obscure field of science. *"Let them reflect on the camels, how they were created."* (Verse 17) Camels were a part of their world, and they only needed to look and consider how they were made most suitable for their role; how their shape and build fitted perfectly with their environment and function. Man did not create camels, nor did camels create themselves. o, they must have been made by the Supreme Maker whose work reflects His limitless ability and perfect planning, and testifies to His existence.

"And heaven, how it is raised aloft." (Verse 18) The Qur'ān repeatedly directs man's reflective faculties to the skies. The desert people should be the first to undertake this, because in the desert the sky is much richer and more inspiring – as if it has a unique existence. In the middle of the day, the sky is brilliant and beaming; at late afternoon, it is captivating and fascinating; at sunset, most charming and inspiring. Then as the night spreads its wings the sky shows its sparkling stars and makes its friendly whispers. At sunrise, the sky comes alive again and becomes animating. All this is certainly worth a good deal of reflection and contemplation. They should consider how it was raised up. Who placed it so high without pillars to support it? Who scattered those innumerable stars? Who endowed it with its beauty and inspiration? They certainly did not lift it up, and it could not have been lifted by itself. A power is responsible for its creation and erection, and intelligent thought is enough to indicate Him.

"And the mountains, how they are hoisted." (Verse 19) For the Arab in particular, a mountain is a refuge and a friend. In general, it always looks majestic and awesome. Next to a mountain, a man appears small and humble. It is natural for a man on a mountain to think of God, and feel himself nearer to Him. He feels a distinct detachment from the petty concerns of his worldly life. It was neither a vain whim nor a coincidence that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) should go to the cave on Mount Ḥirā' for periods of worship and contemplation before he was given God's message. It is also not surprising that those who want to spend a period in self-purification should seek to do so on a mountain. The reference here to the mountains speaks of them being 'hoisted', because this fits in perfectly with the image portrayed, which we will discuss presently.

"And the earth, how it is spread out." (Verse 20) The earth is obviously outstretched

and made suitable for human life and its full and varied range of activities. Man could not have made it so, as its creation was completed long before his existence. o should not man consider who spread out the earth and made life feasible on it? Intelligent reflection on all these aspects will always inspire minds and excite souls into recognition of God, the Creator.

Perhaps we should pause a little to consider the perfection with which this image of the universe is portrayed. The Qur'ān addresses man's religious conscience in a language of artistic beauty, and both coalesce in the believer's perception to bring the whole image into full relief. The scene portrayed here includes the elevated heaven and the spread out earth. Across such a boundless horizon stand the mountains. They are not described as firmly-rooted, but rather they are 'hoisted'. The camels also stand with their upright humps. It is a majestic scene, vast and infinite, with merely two horizontal lines and two vertical ones. This manipulation of graphic description for the expression of ideas is a distinct characteristic of the Qur'ānic style.

The Prophet's Mission

Having dealt first with the hereafter, and pointed out some apparent aspects of the universe, the *sūrah* now addresses the Prophet, (peace be upon him), laying down the nature of his mission and limits of his role. It then concludes with a final reminder to mankind: *"Therefore exhort them; your task is only to exhort. You are not their overseer. But he who turns his back and disbelieves, God shall inflict on him the greatest suffering. To Us they shall surely return, when We shall bring them to account."* (Verses 21-26)

Remind them, then, of the hereafter and the universe, and all there is in each of them. Your specific task is to remind people, and you have no other role. This is indeed your mission for which you have been suitably equipped.

"You are not their overseer." (Verse 22) You have no control over their hearts and you cannot compel them to adopt the faith. Men's hearts are in the hands of God, the Merciful. *Jihād*, which means striving for God's cause and which was later made a duty of the Prophet and all Muslims, did not aim at converting people to Islam by force. Its only aim was to remove all hindrances in the way of the Islamic message, so that it could be delivered freely, and people would not be prevented from listening to it or be persecuted for doing so. This is the role the Prophet can fulfil: to remove the obstacles which prevent him from delivering his message.

The notion that the Prophet's mission is confined to reminding people and delivering God's message is often repeated and stressed in the Qur'ān. There are several reasons for this emphasis, the first of which is to relieve the Prophet of the heavy burden of directing the course of the Islamic message once he has conveyed it. He must leave it to God to decide its course. The urgency of the human yearning to

win victory for the truth and to get people to benefit from its absolute goodness is so keen that such repetition is required to make the advocates of this message distinguish their own desires and ambitions from their mission. When this distinction is clear, they proceed in fulfilment of their duty, regardless of the response and consequence. Thus advocates of Islam do not worry themselves over who has accepted the faith and who has not. They are not charged with this burden, which becomes particularly heavy at times of adversity, when a favourable response becomes a rarity and enemies abound.

But the delivery of the message, which is the limit of the Prophet's task, is not the end of the matter. The unbelievers are not to be left alone. They cannot deny God and be safe. *"But he who turns his back and disbelieves, God shall inflict on him the greatest suffering."* (Verses 23-24) They will no doubt return to God, and He will inevitably administer their retribution. Such is the final and decisive note on which the *sūrah* ends: *"To Us they shall surely return, when We shall bring them to account."* (Verses 25-26)

The definition of the Prophet's role and the role of every subsequent advocate of Islam is thus completed. They have only to remind and the reckoning will be made by God. It must be stressed, however, that the process of reminding includes the removal of hindrances so that people are free to listen to the divine message. This is the aim of *jihād* as it is understood from the Qur'ān and the Prophet's history. It is a process which neither admits negligence nor permits aggression.