

SŪRAH 14

Ibrāhīm

(Abraham)

Prologue

This *sūrah* is a Makkan revelation. Its subject matter, namely faith, revelation and the divine message, God's Oneness, resurrection, reckoning and reward permeate Makkan *sūrahs*. Just as every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān has its distinctive character, this *sūrah* adopts a unique approach in presenting its material, with highlights and shading that accentuate the principles and issues it tackles. These may not be different from the principles and issues other *sūrahs* illustrate, but they are tackled here from a different angle so as to generate special effect and emphasis. Furthermore, certain aspects are added and others omitted, giving the reader and the listener the overall impression that they deal with new issues and principles.

The general ambience of the *sūrah* derives from its title, namely Abraham, the father of all prophets who came after him. He was a blessed man, most grateful to God, most clement, tender-hearted, and devout. All the connotations of these attributes are felt throughout this *sūrah*, in its main issues, general approach, mode of expression as also in its rhythm.

The *sūrah* addresses a number of issues relating to faith, but two of these permeate the whole *sūrah*. These are the two issues most relevant to Abraham himself. The first is the unity of the divine message and God's messengers, and their united stand, despite their different times and places, as one community against the state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*. The other is God's favours bestowed on mankind, the increase He grants to those who are grateful and the fact that most people remain ungrateful. The *sūrah* definitely includes other issues, but these two give the *sūrah* its

special ambience.

The *sūrah* begins with an outline of the mission of God's Messenger and the book revealed to him: *"This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light, to the path of the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due."* (Verse 1) It concludes with the same point, highlighting the truth of God's oneness which is at the heart of the divine message: *"This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and only God. Let those who are endowed with insight take heed."* (Verse 52)

In between, the *sūrah* mentions that Moses was sent to do the same task as Muḥammad, using practically the same wording: *"We have sent forth Moses with Our revelations, saying, lead your people out of darkness into the light."* (Verse 5) It also explains that the general purpose behind sending God's messengers was to make things clear: *"Never have We sent a messenger otherwise than speaking the language of his own people, so that he might make [the truth] clear to them."* (Verse 4) In addition, it explains that because God's Messenger is human, this inevitably provides the parameters for his mission: he is to inform, explain and give warning and good counsel. He cannot, however, perform a miracle except by God's permission, and at a time God determines. Neither he nor his people have any say in this. Nor can he oblige his community to follow guidance or sink into error, for these things follow a certain rule God has set in operation according to His own free choice.

That God's messengers were all human was a matter objected to by all past ignorant communities. The *sūrah* sums up all these objections and the reply given by God's messengers, as if the objections and the reply were made all at the same time: *"They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship. Bring us, then, a clear proof' Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants. It is not within our power to bring you any proof except by God's leave. It is in God that all believers must place their trust.'"* (Verses 10-11)

The *sūrah* also explains that taking mankind from darkness into light can only be accomplished 'by their Lord's leave'. Every messenger makes the issues clear to his people, then: *"God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. He is Almighty, truly Wise."* (Verse 4)

These are the main lines defining the nature of a messenger sent by God, and the mission assigned to him. Nothing of the nature of God's messengers or their qualities can be confused with God's nature and attributes. Thus God's oneness is shown in its full light, with no hint of similarity to anyone or anything.

The *sūrah* also speaks about the fulfilment of God's promise to His messengers

and to those who truly believe in them. This promise is fulfilled in this present life when they are given victory and power, and in the life to come with generous reward given to the believers and severe punishment to the unbelievers. This is shown at the end of the scene showing the battle between God's messengers standing together and their different communities also standing together in this world: *"The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.' Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings.' And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief"* (Verses 13-15) It is also shown in the images drawn from the Day of Judgement: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting shall be: Peace:"* (Verse 23) *"On that day you will see the guilty chained together in fetters, wearing garments of black pitch, and their faces covered with flames."* (Verses 49-50)

The same fact is also emphasized in the analogies given for both groups: *"Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky. It yields its fruits at all times by its Lord's leave. Thus does God set parables for people so that they may reflect. And an evil word is like a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the earth. It cannot have a stable position. God will strengthen the believers through the true, unshakeable word in both this life and the life to come; but the wrongdoers God lets go astray. God does whatever He wills."* (Verses 24-27) *"The works of those who disbelieve in their Lord are like ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day. They cannot achieve any benefit from all that they might have earned. This [disbelief] is indeed going very far astray."* (Verse 18)

The Message of All Prophets

The first of the two major issues that run through the whole *sūrah* is the unity of the divine message preached by all God's messengers. This is presented here in a unique way. Other *sūrahs* demonstrated this through the fact that every messenger made the same address to his people. Every one of them would state the same truth, complete his work and pass away, to be followed by other messengers, each of whom stated the same truth in the same words, receiving the same reply. The unbelievers who deny the truth suffer whatever they may suffer in this life, although some of them are given respite, so as to face their fate on the Day of Judgement. In those *sūrahs* every messenger was shown in a separate scene, like we see a film playing back different events. The best examples of this method are seen in *Sūrahs* 7 and 11, The Heights and Hūd, respectively.

In this *sūrah*, all the prophets are grouped together on one side and their erring communities on the other. The battle goes on between them in this life, but does not come to an end here. On the contrary, we follow its progress until the Day of Judgement. Despite the great difference in time and place, we see in front of us the community of God's messengers and their followers standing together as a single group. Indeed time and place are two transitory factors, while the great truth of faith and unbelief is far greater than both time and place:

Have you not received accounts of what befell those who lived before you? The people of Noah, the `Ād and Thamūd, and those who came after them? None knows them all but God. Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth, but they put their hands to their mouths, and said: 'We disbelieve in that with which you have been sent, and we are in grave doubt about that to which you call us.' Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth? He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.' They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship. Bring us, then, a clear proof' Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants. It is not within our power to bring you any proof except by God's leave. It is in God that all believers must place their trust. And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God let all the faithful place their trust.' The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.' Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings. 'And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief. Behind him stretches hell where he shall be made to drink putrefied water, gulping it little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. Death will beset him from every side, yet he shall not die. More severe suffering still awaits him. (Verses 9-17)

All generations starting with the time of Noah and all messengers are grouped together, while time and place dwindle into insignificance, to give prominence to the truth of the one divine message. The objections of the unbelievers remain the same throughout. Similarly, help is given to believers, for power is granted by God to good people, while failure and humiliation are the lot of tyrants, and suffering awaits them in the hereafter. All these factors apply to them all in exactly the same way. We see that what is said by Muḥammad and Moses (peace be upon them both) to their peoples is identical: "This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that

you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light." (Verse 1) *"We have sent forth Moses with Our revelations, saying, 'Lead your people out of darkness into the light."* (Verse 5)

The battle between faith and unfaith does not end in this world. The *sūrah* follows it into the hereafter. We see it featured prominently in the different scenes and images the *sūrah* draws of the hereafter. For example:

They will all appear before God, and then the weak will say to those who acted with arrogance: 'We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?' [And the others] will reply: Had God given us guidance, we would have guided you. It is now all one for us whether we grieve impatiently or endure with patience. There is no escape for us now.' And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: 'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store. Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting shall be: 'Peace'. (Verses 21-23)

Never think that God is unaware of what the wrongdoers are doing. He only grants them respite till the Day when eyes will stare fixedly in horror, when they will be dashing in confusion, with their heads lifted up, unable to turn their eyes from what they behold, and their hearts an utter void. (Verses 42-43)

They devised their plots, but their plots are all within God's grasp, even though their plots are so powerful as to move mountains. Never think that God may ever fail to fulfil the promise which He has given to His messengers. Indeed God is Almighty, avenger of evil! On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth, as shall be the heavens, and when all people stand before God, the One who holds sway over all that exists. On that day you will see the guilty chained together in fetters, wearing garments of black pitch, and their faces covered with flames. (Verses 46-50)

All these examples confirm that it is all one battle that starts in this world and ends in the life to come. The two parts are mutually complementary, with no gap in between. The examples, with events starting in this world and ending in the hereafter, also bring into sharp relief the main features of this battle and its results: a good word is like a good tree; and the tree is that of prophethood, faith and goodness. By contrast, an evil word is like a corrupt tree; the tree of ignorance,

falsehood, rejection of the truth, evil and tyranny.

Gratitude for Unending Favours

Gratitude to God for what He bestows on us animates the whole *sūrah*. God enumerates His favours, which He grants to all mankind, believers and unbelievers, righteous or unrighteous, God-fearing and wrongdoers. God is most certainly compassionate and merciful when He grants such favours to unbelievers, disobedients and wrongdoers in the same way as He grants them to the faithful who strive for His cause. It is their place that they should be grateful. Here God's grace is shown extending across the widest horizon, within a framework of universal imagery: *"It is God who has created the heavens and the earth, and who sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance. He has placed under your service ships which by His leave sail through the sea, and He has made the rivers subservient to [His law] for your benefit. And for your benefit He has made the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses, subservient to [His law]; and has made the night and the day subservient to [His law]. And He gives you of everything you ask of Him. Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. Yet man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful."* (Verses 32-34)

Indeed, sending messengers to mankind is an equal, if not greater favour: *"This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light."* (Verse 1) Light is perhaps God's most majestic favour in the universe, but the light referred to in this verse is the greatest light that shines through our whole beings and which makes the world around us shine. The same task was assigned to Moses with his people, and indeed to all messengers, as clearly explained in the *sūrah*. We also note a favour in what God's messengers say: *"He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins."* (Verse 10) That people are called to forgiveness is a great favour almost equal to that of light.

Within the context of God's favours, Moses reminds his people of what God bestowed on them: *"Moses said to his people: 'Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when He saved you from Pharaoh's people who afflicted you with grievous torment, slaughtered your sons and spared [only] your women. That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord.'" (Verse 6) And within the same context, the *sūrah* mentions God's promise to His messengers: "Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings.'" (Verses 13-14) Again, this should be counted among God's many great favours.*

The *sūrah* also highlights the fact that God's favours are increased when people are

grateful: *“For your Lord had declared: If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed.”* (Verse 7) It makes clear that God is in no need of gratitude, thanks or those who give them. *“And Moses said: If you and whoever lives on earth were to deny God, [know that] God is indeed Self-Sufficient, worthy of all praise.”* (Verse 8) The *sūrah* explains that generally man does not show proper gratitude for the favours God bestows on him. *“Should you try to count God’s blessings, you will never be able to compute them. Yet man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful.”* (Verse 34) However, those who reflect on the signs God has placed all around them, and show insight, will persevere in the face of adversity and show gratitude for favours and blessings: *“Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God].”* (Verse 5)

Both patience in adversity and gratitude are expressed by Abraham in a position of humility before God, expressed in a prayer addressed near the Sacred Mosque in Makkah. It overflows with praise and gratitude to God:

Abraham said: ‘My Lord. Make this land secure, and preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols. My Lord, they have indeed led many people astray. Hence, he who follows me belongs to me. As for him who disobeys me, well, You are truly Much-Forgiving, Merciful. Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers. So, cause You people’s hearts to incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks. Our Lord, You certainly know all that we conceal and all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, on earth or in heaven, can be hidden from God. All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac. Surely my Lord hears all prayers. My Lord, cause me and [some of] my offspring to establish regular prayers. My Lord, accept my prayer. Our Lord, grant Your forgiveness to me and my parents, and all the believers on the Day when the reckoning will come to pass.’ (Verses 35-41)

Because God’s favours and blessings, gratitude for them and, by contrast, their denial permeate the *sūrah*, many comments at the end of verses fit with this. For example: *“provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks.”* (Verse 37) *“Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God].”* (Verse 5) *“Have you not seen those who have exchanged God’s blessings for unbelief and landed their people in the House of Perdition.”* (Verse 28) *“Remember the blessings God bestowed on you.”* (Verse 6) *“All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac.”* (Verse 39)

When the prophets answer the unbelievers’ objections that they, i.e. the prophets, are only human, they say: *“We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants.”* (Verse 11) Thus, God’s grace is

highlighted to fit with the general atmosphere of the *sūrah*, which radiates with aspects of grace, mercy, favour and gratitude on the one side and ingratitude on the other. Thus, verbal expression is brought in harmony with the *sūrah* as a whole to perfect the Qur'ānic artistic method.

The *sūrah* can be divided into two main passages: the first explains the nature of the divine message and the messenger delivering it, portraying the battle between their community and those who deny the message. It comments on all this, giving examples of good and evil words. The other passage speaks of the favours God grants to mankind, describing those who display an arrogant ingratitude and the believers who express their gratitude. The first perfect example of the latter is Abraham. It describes the fate of the wrongdoers who deny God's favours in a series of most powerful and lively images of the Day of Judgement. Thus, the conclusion of the *sūrah* is brought into harmony with its opening: *"This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and Only God. Let those who are endowed with insight take heed."* (Verse 52)

1

One Message for All Mankind

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Alif Lām. Rā. This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light, to the path of the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due, (1)

to God, to whom all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth belongs. Woe to the unbelievers; for theirs will be a severe suffering. (2)

These are the ones who love the life of this world preferring it to the life to come, and who turn others away from God's path and try to make it appear crooked. They have gone far astray. (3)

الرَّحْمَٰنُ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ لِتُخْرِجَ
النَّاسَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ بِإِذْنِ
رَبِّهِمْ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ ﴿١﴾

اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمٰوٰتِ وَمَا فِي
الْأَرْضِ ۗ وَيُوَلِّئُ لِلْكَٰفِرِينَ مِنْ عَذَابٍ
شَدِيدٍ ﴿٢﴾

الَّذِينَ يَسْتَحِبُّونَ الْحَيٰوةَ الدُّنْيَا عَلَى
الْآخِرَةِ وَيَصُدُّونَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
وَيَبْغُونَهَا عِوَجًا ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ فِي ضَلٰلٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٣﴾



Never have We sent a messenger otherwise than speaking the language of his own people, so that he might make [the truth] clear to them. But God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills. He is Almighty, truly Wise. (4)

We have sent forth Moses with Our revelations, saying, 'Lead your people out of darkness into the light, and remind them of the Days of God.' Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God]. (5)

Moses said to his people: 'Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when He saved you from Pharaoh's people who afflicted you with grievous torment, slaughtered your sons and spared [only] your women. That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord. (6)

For your Lord had declared: "If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed." (7)

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ ۗ
لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ ۖ فَيُضِلُّ اللَّهُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ
وَيَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۗ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ



وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِآيَاتِنَا أَنْ
أَخْرِجْ قَوْمَكَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ
وَذَكِّرْهُمْ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ
لَآيَاتٍ لِّكُلِّ صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ ﴿٥﴾

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ
اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ أَنْجَيْنَاكُمْ مِنْ آلِ
فِرْعَوْنَ ۖ يَسُومُونَكُمْ سُوءَ الْعَذَابِ
وَيَذْبَحُونَ أَبْنَاءَكُمْ وَيَسْتَحْيُونَ
نِسَاءَكُمْ ۗ وَفِي ذَلِكَ بَلَاءٌ مِّنْ
رَّبِّكُمْ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٦﴾

وَإِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكُمْ لَئِن شَكَرْتُمْ
لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ ۖ وَلَئِن كَفَرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي

And Moses said: 'If you and whoever lives on earth were to deny God, [know that] God is indeed Self-Sufficient, worthy of all praise.' (8)

Have you not received accounts of what befell those who lived before you? The people of Noah, the `Ad, and Thamūd, and those who came after them? None knows them all but God. Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth, but they put their hands to their mouths, and said: 'We disbelieve in that with which you have been sent, and we are in grave doubt about that to which you call us.' (9)

Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth? He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.' They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship. Bring us, then, a clear proof.'

لَشَدِيدٌ ﴿٧﴾

وَقَالَ مُوسَىٰ إِنَّ تَكْفُرُوا أَنْتُمْ وَمَنْ فِي
الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَغَنِيٌّ حَمِيدٌ ﴿٨﴾

أَلَمْ يَأْتِكُمْ نَبُؤُا الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ
قَوْمِ نُوحٍ وَعَادٍ وَثَمُودَ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ
بَعْدِهِمْ لَا يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ۗ جَاءَتْهُمْ
رُسُلُهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَرَدُّوا أَيْدِيَهُمْ فِي
أَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَقَالُوا إِنَّا كَفَرْنَا بِمَا أُرْسِلْتُمْ
بِهِ ۗ وَإِنَّا لَفِي شَكٍّ مِمَّا تَدْعُونَنَا إِلَيْهِ

مُرِيبٍ ﴿٩﴾

﴿٩﴾ قَالَتْ رُسُلُهُمْ أَفِي اللَّهِ شَكٌّ فَاطِرِ
السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۗ يَدْعُوكُمْ لِيَغْفِرَ
لَكُمْ مِّنْ ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُؤَخِّرَكُمْ إِلَىٰ
أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۗ قَالُوا إِنَّا أَنْتُمْ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُنَا
تُرِيدُونَ أَنْ تَصُدُّونَا عَمَّا كَانَ يَعْبُدُ

(10)

Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants. It is not within our power to bring you any proof, except by God's leave. It is in God that all believers must place their trust. (11)

And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God alone let all the faithful place their trust.' (12)

The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.' Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: 'Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, (13)

and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My

ءَابَاؤُنَا فَآتُونَا بِسُلْطٰنٍ مُّبِيْنٍ ﴿١٠﴾

قَالَتْ لَهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ اِنْ نَحْنُ اِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ وَلٰكِنَّ اللّٰهَ يَمُنُّ عَلٰى مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهٖ ۗ وَمَا كَانَ لَنَا اَنْ نَّاتِيَكُمْ بِسُلْطٰنٍ اِلَّا بِالْاِذْنِ مِنَ اللّٰهِ ۗ وَعَلَى اللّٰهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١١﴾

وَمَا لَنَا اِلَّا اَنْ نَتَوَكَّلَ عَلَى اللّٰهِ وَقَدْ هَدٰنَا سُبُلَنَا ۗ وَلَنْصَبِرَنَّ عَلَى مَا ءَاذَيْتُمُونَا ۗ وَعَلَى اللّٰهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُتَوَكِّلُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِيْنَ كَفَرُوْا لِرُسُلِهِمْ لَنُخْرِجَنَّكُمْ مِّنْ اَرْضِنَاۤ اَوْ لَتَعُوْدُنَّ فِيْ مِلَّتِنَا ۗ فَاَوْحٰى اِلَيْهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ لَنُهْلِكَنَّ الظّٰلِمِيْنَ ﴿١٣﴾

وَلَنَسْكَنَنَّكُمْ اِلَآرْضَ مِنْۢ بَعْدِهِمْ ۗ ذٰلِكَ لِمَنْ خَافَ مَقَامِيْ وَخَافَ وَعِيْدِ

warnings.' (14)

And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief. (15)

Behind him stretches hell where he shall be made to drink putrefied water, (16)

gulping it little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. Death will beset him from every side, yet he shall not die. More severe suffering still awaits him. (17)

The works of those who disbelieve in their Lord are like ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day. They cannot achieve any benefit from all that they might have earned. This [disbelief] is indeed going very far astray. (18)

Do you not see that God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring into being a new creation. (19)



وَأَسْتَفْتَحُوا وَخَابَ كُلُّ جَبَّارٍ عَنِيدٍ



مِّنْ وَرَائِهِ جَهَنَّمُ وَيُسْقَىٰ مِنْ مَّاءٍ صَدِيدٍ



يَتَجَرَّعُهُ وَلَا يَكَادُ يُسِغُهُ وَيَأْتِيهِ الْمَوْتُ مِنْ كُلِّ مَكَانٍ وَمَا هُوَ بِمَيِّتٍ

وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِ عَذَابٌ غَلِيظٌ

مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِرَبِّهِمْ أَعْمَالُهُمْ كَرَمَادٍ اشْتَدَّتْ بِهِ الرِّيحُ فِي يَوْمٍ عَاصِفٍ لَا يَقْدِرُونَ مِمَّا كَسَبُوا عَلَىٰ شَيْءٍ

ذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الضَّلَالُ الْبَعِيدُ

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِالْحَقِّ ۚ إِنَّ يَشَاءُ يَذْهَبِكُمْ وَيَأْتِ

بِخَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ

وَمَا ذَٰلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ بِعَزِيزٍ

This is no difficult thing for God. (20)

They will all appear before God, and then the weak will say to those who acted with arrogance: 'We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?'

[And the others] will reply: 'Had God given us guidance, we would have guided you. It is now all one for us whether we grieve impatiently or endure with patience. There is no escape for us now.' (21)

And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: 'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store. (22)

Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting

وَبَرَزُوا لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا فَقَالَ الضُّعَفَاءُ لِلَّذِينَ
اسْتَكْبَرُوا إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَنْتُمْ
مُغْنُونَ عَنَّا مِنَ عَذَابِ اللَّهِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ^ع

قَالُوا لَوْ هَدَانَا اللَّهُ هَدَيْنَاكُمْ سَوَاءٌ
عَلَيْنَا أَجْرَعْنَا أَمْ صَبَرْنَا مَا لَنَا مِنْ
مَحْصٍ^ط

وَقَالَ الشَّيْطَانُ لَمَّا قُضِيَ الْأَمْرُ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ وَعَدَّكُمْ وَعَدَّ الْحَقُّ وَوَعَدْتُكُمْ
فَأَخْلَفْتُكُمْ^ط وَمَا كَانَ لِي عَلَيْكُمْ مِنْ
سُلْطَنٍ إِلَّا أَنْ دَعَوْتُكُمْ فَاسْتَجَبْتُمْ لِي^ط
فَلَا تَلُومُونِي وَلُومُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ^ط مَا أَنَا
بِمُصْرِخِكُمْ وَمَا أَنْتُمْ بِمُصْرِخِيَّ^ط إِنِّي
كَفَرْتُ بِمَا أَشْرَكْتُمُونِ مِنْ قَبْلُ^ط إِنَّ
الظَّالِمِينَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ^ط

وَأَدْخَلَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا
الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ^ط تَحِيَّتُهُمْ

shall be: 'Peace'. (23)

Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky. (24)

It yields its fruits at all times by its Lord's leave. Thus does God set parables for people so that they may reflect. (25)

And an evil word is like a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the earth. It cannot have a stable position. (26)

God will strengthen the believers through the true, unshakeable word in both this life and the life to come; but the wrongdoers God lets go astray. God does whatever He wills. (27)

فِيهَا سَلَامٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً

كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي

السَّمَاءِ ﴿٢٤﴾

تُؤْتِي أَكْلَهَا كُلَّ حِينٍ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهَا ۗ

وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ

يَتَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَمَثَلُ كَلِمَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ كَشَجَرَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ

أَجْتَثَّتْ مِنْ فَوْقِ الْأَرْضِ مَا لَهَا مِنْ قَرَارٍ

﴿٢٦﴾

يُثَبِّتُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا بِالْقَوْلِ

الَّذِي فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ ۗ

وَيُضِلُّ اللَّهُ الظَّالِمِينَ ۗ وَيَفْعَلُ اللَّهُ مَا

يَشَاءُ ﴿٢٧﴾

From Darkness into Light

"Alif. Lām. Rā. This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high." (Verse 1)

This book which consists of words made up of letters like these is one which you certainly have not authored. It has been revealed to you for a definite purpose, *“so that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord’s leave, from darkness into the light.”* (Verse 1) Your role is to take mankind out of the depths of darkness into which they have sunk, the darkness of superstition, conflicting systems and traditions; the darkness of believing in alleged deities, and false concepts, values and standards. You are to bring them, i.e. all of mankind, into the real light which removes all darkness. Not only does this light dispel all darkness from people’s consciences and minds, it also affects their lives generally, setting for them new values and traditions.

Faith based on God’s oneness is a light that shines within the human heart, to make the whole human being shine as well. Man is created out of cold clay in which God has blown of His spirit. Should he abandon the light of this breath of spirit, he turns back into dark clay, and becomes a mass of flesh and blood like an animal. It is indeed the flesh and blood alone that are made of the earth’s clay. It is with this breath from God’s spirit that light spreads over it. Then faith makes it appear in its full glory. With it the mass of flesh and blood blooms.

Faith is a light that illuminates the soul so that it can see the way leading to God, clear without any confusion caused by superstition or desires, and without any misleading fancy or greed. When the human soul sees the way so clearly ahead of it, it proceeds with steady steps, and without hesitation.

The light of faith illuminates the whole of life, making all mankind equal servants of God, united together by their bond of faith. They submit themselves to none other than God, which means that they are never divided into slaves and tyrants. With the universe around them they establish a bond based on knowledge of the great law that sets the whole universe and all its forces into operation. This brings them peace with the universe and with all creatures that live in it.

Faith is the light of justice, freedom and knowledge. It is the light of a bond with God based on compassion. It is a bond that gives us reassurance of God’s justice, grace and wisdom in situations of ease and hardship. Such reassurance requires that we adopt an attitude of patience in adversity and gratitude in happier circumstances. It also adds the light of understanding that adverse situations occur for a definite purpose.

Believing in God alone as the Supreme Lord is not merely a personal faith that fills one’s conscience and spreads light over one’s soul. It is a complete code of living based on the concept of total submission to God alone, discarding all claims of lordship by other creatures, and rejecting any attempt that gives such creatures any form of sovereignty. This code of living fits completely with human nature so as to satisfy all its needs and fill it with happiness, light and reassurance. It is also so stable

that it protects people against the sort of upheaval experienced by societies that submit to the sovereignty claimed by others and who follow systems devised by them in politics, government, economics, social structure, morals and social behaviour, as well as in customs and traditions. Furthermore, this code of living preserves and promotes human potential. It prevents people from glorifying and singing the praises of despots.

Indeed this short phrase, *“so that you may bring forth all mankind, by their Lord’s leave, from darkness into the light,”* covers profound truths relevant to the human mind, as also practical day to day living. It is impossible for human language to do more than point to these horizons.

“So that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord’s leave, from darkness into the light.” God’s Messenger cannot do more than deliver the divine message, and his role is merely to explain it. As for the bringing of mankind out of darkness into light, this is done by God’s leave, and according to the laws He has willed to set in operation. The Prophet is only His Messenger.

“So that you might bring forth all mankind, by their Lord’s leave, from darkness into the light, to the path of the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due.” (Verse 1) The phrase, *‘the path of the Almighty,’* means His way and law which governs the whole universe, and the code which governs life. Linguistically speaking, it is used here as a substitute for ‘light’. This means that the ‘light’ guides to ‘the path of the Almighty’, or that the light is His path. The second meaning is however stronger and richer. The light that illuminates the human soul is the light that illuminates the whole universe. It is the way, the law and the code of living. A soul which lives in this light will never be in error, or entertain misconceptions, or opt for wrong behaviour. It follows the straight path, *“the path of the Almighty, the One to whom all praise is due.”* He is the One who has absolute power in the universe, and who is praised by all creatures.

His might is highlighted here as a threat to the unbelievers, while the fact that He is worthy of praise is mentioned as a reminder to those who express gratitude to Him.

Then follow some of God’s attributes. He is notably mentioned as the One to whom everything in the heavens and on earth belong, who is in need of no one, and who controls the universe and all creatures therein: *“God, to whom all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth belongs.”* (Verse 2) Whoever, then, comes out of darkness into light and follows guidance does well. The *sūrah* does not mention anything about such a person here. Instead, it goes on to warn the unbelievers against woeful suffering. This is inflicted on them as a result of their rejection of the greatest blessing God has bestowed on humanity, that is, sending them a Messenger whose task is to bring them out of darkness into light. That is an act of God’s grace

for which we cannot show enough gratitude. Yet some people reject it outright. Hence, *“woe to the unbelievers; for theirs will be a severe suffering.”* (Verse 2)

The *sūrah* then mentions a quality that tells us the reason for their rejection of the blessing God bestows on mankind through His noble Messenger: *“These are the ones who love the life of this world preferring it to the life to come, and who turn others away from God’s path and try to make it appear crooked. They have gone far astray.”* (Verse 3) Giving preference to the life of this world puts a person in a position of conflict with the requirements of faith, and on a collision course with the ‘path of God’. The situation is reversed when preference is given to the life to come. For then, this life is set on the right course. People enjoy it with moderation, always keen to earn God’s pleasure. Hence there is no conflict between their preference for the life to come and their enjoyment of this life and the pleasures it offers.

Those who turn their minds and hearts towards ensuring a happy outcome in the hereafter do not lose the pleasures of this world, as some people with faulty concepts imagine. In Islam, a happy life in this world is a prelude to a happy future life. The fulfilment of man’s task as God’s vicegerent on earth requires building a happy life. In Islam, there is no denunciation or renunciation of any aspect of this life as people wait for the hereafter. What Islam requires is that life should prosper with truth, justice and sound behaviour by people who seek God’s pleasure and a happy life in the hereafter. This is the Islamic outlook.

Those who choose the life of this world in preference to the hereafter cannot monopolize the resources of this world, exploiting, cheating and oppressing people to serve their own interests in a society where the light of faith shines and people follow God’s guidance. Hence they turn themselves and others away from God’s path and try to make it appear crooked, devoid of truth and justice. It is only when they have done this, and managed to lead themselves away from the straight path of God and justice that they resort to their oppressive ways, cheating people and persuading them to share in their corruption. It is only in this way that they can get what they want of self- aggrandisement, taking for themselves most of the resources God has placed on earth, and behaving arrogantly towards others. People then submit to their authority without resistance.

The way of life advocated by faith protects human life against the selfishness and greed of those who are preoccupied with the life of this world in preference to the life to come. Under this way of life no one person or group can monopolize the earth’s wealth and resources.

In Their Own Language

“Never have We sent a messenger otherwise than speaking the language of his own people,

so that he might make [the truth] clear to them." (Verse 4) This is a blessing God grants to people with every message He sends to them. For a messenger to be able to bring people out of darkness into light, by their Lord's leave, he must be given his message in his own people's language. This is how he is then able to explain God's message to them. It is how the objectives of the message are fulfilled.

Although the Prophet Muḥammad is a Messenger to all mankind, he is given his message in his own people's language, so that he can explain matters to them. They are the ones who would be conveying his message to the rest of mankind. His own life is, after all, limited. Therefore, he is commanded to call first on his own people so that the Arabian Peninsula becomes purely Muslim. It will then fulfil its role as the place from which the final divine message is carried to the rest of the world. What happened in practice, as God, who knows everything, determined, was that the Prophet passed away when Islam became the religion in the whole of Arabia. The Prophet raised an army under the command of Usāmah to be dispatched to areas bordering on Arabia, but the Prophet (peace be upon him) died before the army began its march. It is true that the Prophet sent his letters and emissaries to the heads of countries outside Arabia, calling on them to accept the message of Islam, and making it clear that his message was addressed to all mankind. However, what God determined for him, which fits with the limited duration of human life, is that Muḥammad (peace be upon him) delivered his message to his own people in their own language. Then the task was completed by those who carried his message to other communities all over the world. Hence, there is no contradiction between his message being addressed to all humanity, and its being expressed in Arabic, the language of his own people.

"Never have We sent a messenger otherwise than speaking the language of his own people, so that he might make [the truth] clear to them. But God lets go astray whomever He wills, and guides whomever He wills." (Verse 4) A messenger's task is completed when he has made the truth clear to people. What comes out of it in the form of people following guidance or going astray is not in his power, and does not follow his desire. It is entirely up to God who has subjected human beings to a law of His own making, in keeping with His free-will. Whoever follows the way of error is left to go astray, and whoever follows the way of divine guidance reaches his destination. Both are subject to God's will.

"He is Almighty, truly Wise." (Verse 4) He conducts life in accordance with His wisdom and careful planning. Nothing is left haphazard, without guidance or planning.

This applied to the message *"We have sent forth Moses with Our revelations, saying, 'Lead your people out of darkness into the light, and remind them of the Days of God. Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God]."*

Moses said to his people: 'Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when He saved you from Pharaoh's people who afflicted you with grievous torment, slaughtered your sons and spared [only] your women. That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord. For your Lord had declared: If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed.' And Moses said: *'If you and whoever lives on earth were to deny God, [know that] God is indeed Self-Sufficient, worthy of all praise.'*" (Verses 5-8)

The *sūrah* uses the same wording to report the instructions given to Moses and those given to Muḥammad (peace be upon them both), so as to maintain the same style of expression. Muḥammad is told, *"This is a book which We have bestowed on you from on high so that you might bring forth mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light."* (Verse 1) Similarly Moses is instructed, *"Lead your people out of darkness into the light."* (Verse 5) The first applies to all mankind, while the second addressed Moses's people in particular. The ultimate goal, however, was the same.

"Lead your people out of darkness into the light, and remind them of the Days of God." (Verse 5) All days are indeed God's days, but what is intended here is that he should remind them of the days when people, or a group of them, encounter a special situation, reflecting either God's grace or punishment, as we will see when Moses carries out this order. He reminds them of some days they themselves had witnessed, and of others belonging to the time of the peoples of Noah, the 'Ad, and Thamūd and other communities that followed them.

"Surely in this there are signs for everyone who is patient in adversity and deeply grateful [to God]." (Verse 5) Some of these days occasioned adversity, making of them a sign requiring patience, while others were occasions when God's grace was bestowed, and they invite gratitude. A person who qualifies as, *'patient in adversity, deeply grateful [to God],'* is the one who recognizes these signs and what lies behind them. He finds in them lessons to be learnt and reminders to be appreciated.

A Reminder of God's Favours

Moses began to fulfil his task and remind his people. *"Moses said to his people: 'Remember the blessings God bestowed on you when He saved you from Pharaoh's people who afflicted you with grievous torment, slaughtered your sons and spared [only] your women. That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord.'"* (Verse 6) He reminds them first of God's grace when he delivered them from the great torment inflicted on them by Pharaoh's people. That torment was visited on them time after time, with little reprieve. One of the ghastlier features of that torment was the killing of the male but not the female population as a means of preventing them from increasing in number. This aimed to ensure their continued weakness and subjugation. The fact that God

saved them from all this was a great act demonstrating His grace. It should be remembered with gratitude.

“That was indeed an awesome trial from your Lord.” (Verse 6) Their trial consisted of the affliction visited on them by Pharaoh. It was a means to test their patience, resistance, perseverance and determination. Patience does not merely entail enduring hardship. It is rather endurance without being shaken or mentally defeated, coupled with the determination to stand up to tyranny until freedom is achieved. Endurance that only entails tolerating humiliation is not worthy of praise. The Israelites also experienced the trial of deliverance from tyranny, so as to test their gratitude for God’s grace, which should be reflected in following the path of His guidance.

Moses continues to explain matters to his people after having reminded them of the Days of God, and directed them to the ultimate objective of the trial. He tells them about the reward God attaches to gratitude and His punishment for ingratitude: *“For your Lord had declared: ‘If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed.’”* (Verse 7)

It is useful to reflect a little here on this great truth whereby God’s blessings are increased for the grateful and whereby severe punishment awaits those who adopt the opposite stance. In the first instance, we feel reassured, since it is a promise by God, and God always fulfils His promises. It must come to pass. If we want to see it in practice, and look for its material causes, we need not go very far.

Expressing gratitude for a blessing is evidence of implementing correct standards in day-to-day life. The proper reward for a blessing, according to sound human nature, is to be grateful for it. Moreover, a person who thanks God for His blessings is always watching Him when it comes to making use of such blessings. He shows no arrogance, and he never puts God’s blessings to foul or evil use. Both qualities add to the purity of the human soul, and motivate it to further good action that helps such blessings grow and increase. Thus a grateful person also earns other people’s goodwill, and they are then ready to help. This reflects on the community as a whole, as ties within the community are placed on a sound footing. Its wealth increases with security. God’s promise is however sufficient reassurance for a believer, whether he understands the causes or not. He knows that God’s promise always comes true.

Denying God’s grace can take many forms. For example, omitting to thank God for it or refusing to recognize that it is God who has bestowed it, and attributing it to one’s own knowledge, expertise, hard work, or intelligence, as if these are not part of the grace God bestows on His servants. It may also take the form of misusing or abusing God’s blessings, as when these are used to behave arrogantly when dealing with other people or to satisfy evil or corrupt desires.

The severe punishment threatened here may include being deprived of God’s

blessings, either by removing them literally, or by removing their effects on one's feelings. Many a blessing may become a curse which brings unhappiness, to the extent that the person given it may envy those who do not have it. Or the punishment may be deferred to its right time either in this life or in the life to come, as God may wish. It will however undoubtedly take place, because denying God's grace does not go unpunished.

Giving thanks to God for His grace does not benefit God Himself, just as denying it and being ungrateful does not cause Him any harm. God is in no need of anyone or anything. He is praised as He is God. He does not need people's praise or gratitude. *"And Moses said.: 'If you and whoever lives on earth were to deny God, [know that] God is indeed Self-Sufficient, worthy of all praise.'"* (Verse 8) Indeed it is human life that is elevated through thanking God for His grace. People's souls are purified by turning to God, and by giving thanks where thanks belong. They are reassured when they establish a bond with the One who bestows abounding grace. They do not fear that blessings are withdrawn. They do not feel heart-broken when they miss something they would have liked. God, the Most Gracious, is there and He bestows His grace in abundance. Such grace then is increased when people show their gratitude.

The Dialogue between Messengers and Unbelievers

Moses continues with his reminders, but now he no longer features in the scene painted in the *sūrah*. Instead, a picture is drawn of the raging battle between the community that follows the Prophets and *jāhiliyyah* society which denies the messengers and their messages alike. This is a remarkable aspect of the refined style of the Qur'ān which brings the scene alive, transforming it from a historical one that someone is reporting to an immediate one that we see in front of our eyes, able to listen to the people in it as they talk, and notice all their actions and reactions. In this panoramic scene, all limitations of time and space are done away with.

Have you not received accounts of what befell those who lived before you? The people of Noah, the `Ād, and Thamūd, and those who came after them? None knows them all but God. Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth, but they put their hands to their mouths, and said: 'We disbelieve in that with which you have been sent, and we are in grave doubt about that to which you call us.' (Verse 9)

This reminder is made by Moses, but as he goes behind the scenes the *sūrah* continues with its account of what happened to God's messengers and messages during all periods of history, and the confrontation between them and *jāhiliyyah* in its different states and societies, and the fate of those who denied these messages. It is as

if Moses is a narrator who begins with a reference to the main events of a great history, before leaving its players to take over and enact that history, and say whatever they wish. This method of narrating a story or historical account is often employed in the Qur'ān. It serves to bring the historical account alive. We see here God's noble messengers following one another, and confronting all mankind who had given in to *jāhiliyyah*. The gaps between generations and communities disappear, while the great truths stand out without being tied to a specific time or place.

"Have you not received accounts of what befell those who lived before you? The people of Noah, the `Ād, and Thamūd, and those who came after them? None knows them all but God." (Verse 9) Thus, they are numerous. There were many other such communities than those mentioned in the Qur'ān, who lived during the intervening period between the time of Thamūd and that of Moses. The *sūrah* does not give any details of them, because there is complete unity in the message preached by all prophets, and a unity in the reaction to it.

"Their messengers came to them with clear evidence of the truth." (Verse 9) That evidence is absolutely clear, giving no room for confusion by anyone with undistorted faculties of understanding. *"But they put their hands to their mouths, and said: 'We disbelieve in that with which you have been sent, and we are in grave doubt about that to which you call us.'" (Verse 9)* They put their hands to their mouths as does he who wishes to change the pitch of his voice so that it can be heard at a distance. He moves his hand in front of his mouth as he raises his voice, and this causes the sound to break and be heard from afar. The *sūrah* paints this movement in order to indicate the fact that they were outspoken in their denial of the divine message. Furthermore, they make such an impolite movement to reassert their open rejection of the faith.

Since what the messengers call for is belief in God's oneness, and His being the only Lord of mankind and the whole universe, casting doubts on this clear truth sounds extremely odd and peculiar. This truth is self-evident, easily recognized by human nature, and repeatedly confirmed by numerous signs that can be seen everywhere in the universe. Hence, the messengers are horrified at such doubting, pointing to the heavens and the earth as witnesses: *"Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth?'" (Verse 10)* Everything in the heavens and the earth testifies to the truth of God being the Creator and Originator of all. How can there be any doubt about Him? The messengers say this because the heavens and the earth are two very clear signs of God's existence. A mere reference to them is sufficient to quickly help any straying person come back to his senses. The messengers do not add anything to this quick reference, as they know it to be sufficient. Instead, they go on to point out God's grace to mankind, as He calls on them to believe, and gives them respite while they reflect and begin to take action to avert His punishment.

“Said the messengers sent to them: ‘Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and earth? He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins.’” (Verse 10) The call is originally to believe in God, and that leads to the forgiveness of sins. However, the *sūrah* then makes the call a direct one for forgiveness so that God’s grace and blessings are brought out in sharp relief. In such a context, it is especially odd that people adopt such a negative attitude.

“He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.” (Verse 10) With this call to forgiveness, God does not demand an immediate positive response, nor does He inflict His punishment immediately when they make their first rejection. He grants them another favour by giving them a period of grace, either for a time He sets in this life or to the Day of Reckoning. During this respite they may reflect on various signs and indicators, and on the messengers’ warnings. Such respite is an act of grace, considering their negative response to His call.

Yet those ignorant people revert to their baseless objection: *“They replied: ‘You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship.’”* (Verse 10) Human beings should have been proud at God’s selection of one of their number to bring them His message. Instead they object to this choice and make of it grounds for suspecting the validity of the message. They claim that what the messengers call on them to believe in is a mere wish to turn them away from what their forefathers worshipped. They do not bother to ask themselves why the messengers should wish to turn them away from that. All ignorant societies are rigid. Hence people of such societies do not reflect on the true nature of what their forefathers worshipped, and why they objected to such false deities. Nor do they think about the nature of the new call. Instead, they ask for a miracle to force them to believe. *“Bring us, then, a clear proof”* (Verse 10)

The messengers do not deny their human status. On the contrary they confirm it, but they draw their attention to the favours God gives when He chooses human messengers and gives them what they need in order to be fully equipped to discharge their great duty: *“Their messengers replied: ‘We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants.’”* (Verse 11) The phrase, *‘bestows His grace,’* is used here so that the dialogue fits in harmoniously with the general atmosphere of the *sūrah*. It is an atmosphere generated by speaking about God’s grace which He bestows on whomever He chooses of His servants. His grace is limitless. It is not granted only to God’s messengers, but rather affects humanity as a whole. For mankind has been honoured by the choice of one of its number to undertake this great task of receiving a message from on high.

It is also a special favour granted to mankind, so that they can come out of darkness into the light. Their faculties of reception and understanding are reawakened so as to resume an active life after a long state of stagnation akin to

death. But the greatest aspect of divine grace bestowed on mankind is that they are saved from submission to others, which means humiliation and servitude to mortals like themselves.

Faith Versus Tyranny

As for producing clear proof, which means a miracle or some supernatural event, the messengers make it clear to their communities that this is something determined by God alone. The messengers try to make people realize very clearly the difference between Godhead and their own mortal beings. They want them to understand the true significance of the oneness of God who is unlike anyone else in nature and attributes. The lack of such clarity was the source of the great confusion into which pagan beliefs had sunk, as well as the church concepts which mixed Christianity with the pagan beliefs of Greece, Rome, Egypt and India. The starting point in this confusion into which Christianity had sunk was the attribution of supernatural powers to Jesus himself, leading to a great mix-up between the Divine Being and His servant, Jesus Christ (peace be upon him).

The messengers made their position very clear: *"It is not within our power to bring you any proof except by God's leave."* We do not rely on any power other than His own: *"It is in God that all believers must place their trust."* (Verse 11) The messengers announce this as a permanent truth. A believer does not place his trust in anyone other than God. He turns to no one else for help or support, and he seeks refuge with none other than Him.

The messengers then confront tyranny and rejection with an attitude based on faith, remaining steadfast in the face of adversity and abuse. They ask a question which means an assertion: *"And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God alone let all the faithful place their trust."* (Verse 12)

"And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths?" (Verse 12) This is a statement by one who is certain of his attitude and the way he follows. He entertains no doubts about the support he has, and believes that God who guides to the straight path will undoubtedly give him His support. What does it matter if victory is not given in this present life, when one is sure that God is guiding him along the right path?

Anyone who feels deep in his heart that God's hand guides his footsteps is someone that has real contact with God. Such a person does not mistake the sense of His existence and that He is God who controls everything. This is a feeling that leaves no room for reluctance in following the path of faith, regardless of what obstacles may lie along the way, including tyrannical forces that persecute those who

follow it. This explains why God's messengers' reply links their feeling of being guided by God with their placing their trust in Him as they faced open opposition from tyrants. It also explains their determination to go along the way despite all the threats.

Such an association is real only in the hearts and minds of people who take positive action to confront the tyranny of *jāhiliyyah* society. Such hearts and minds realize deep inside that God's hand opens windows for them to see the light that illuminates great horizons before them. They feel the comfort of faith and true knowledge, and feel reassured by their strong bond with God. Hence, they do not care about the threats they receive from tyrants. Threats and temptations do not have any effect on them, as they look down on all the tyrants on earth and their means of oppression and persecution. Why would a heart that knows its link with God fear anything that others may have?

"And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution." (Verse 12) We will remain steadfast and never budge in the face of all the persecution visited on us. We will never entertain any doubt and we will never go back on our faith. *"In God alone let all the faithful place their trust." (Verse 12)*

At this point tyranny reveals its intentions. It does not argue, think or take a rational approach. It feels that it has no power to face up to faith, and that it will inevitably be defeated. Hence, it threatens the use of brute force, which is the only means to which tyranny can resort: *"The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.'" (Verse 13)*

This shows clearly the nature of the battle between Islam and ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*. The latter does not agree that Islam should have its own entity, which is independent from it. It will not tolerate a separate existence for Islam, and will not live in peace with Islam, even if Islam wants peace with it. That is because Islam wants to be represented in a social set up with its own leadership and because it claims allegiance from its followers. But *jāhiliyyah* cannot tolerate this. Therefore, the demand the unbelievers make of their messengers is not merely to stop calling on people to believe. They further demand that they return to their own ways and be fully integrated in their own society. They must not have their separate entity. But divine faith will not accept this as it is contrary to its nature. Hence, the messengers reject this demand. It is not for a person who submits to God to go back on that and return to *jāhiliyyah*.

When brute force reveals its shameless face, there is no room for argument or a peaceful call to accept the faith. But God will not abandon His messengers to face *jāhiliyyah* on their own.

By its very nature, a society based on *jāhiliyyah* does not allow anyone who submits to God to work from within its boundaries, unless the work of that believer and his efforts and potentials will support that society and contribute to its power. Those who imagine themselves able to serve their faith by penetrating un-Islamic society and working within its system do not actually understand the nature of the organic structure of that society. It is a society that forces everyone to work for its beliefs and concepts. Hence, the noble messengers' refusal to revert to their people's old ways, after they had been saved from them by God.

At this point the Supreme Power levels its blow to which no resistance can be made by weak human beings, even though they may be ruthless despots: *"Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers, and most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone. This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings."* (Verses 13-14)

Prayers for God's Support

We must realize here that the Supreme Power does not intervene to settle the issue between the messengers and their communities until the messengers themselves declare their final split with their people. The believers must make it clear that they will never return to their people's old ways after God has saved them. They must also insist on having their own separate identity, society and leadership. This means that the community is split into two which differ in faith, lifestyle, leadership and structure. This is when God intervenes to destroy the despots who persecute the believers. This is when God fulfils His promise to His messengers to grant them victory and establish the believers on earth. Such intervention will never happen while the believers are integrated in un-Islamic society, working from within its institutions. They must first have their own identity and their own separate structure and leadership.

"Their Lord revealed this to His messengers: Most certainly shall We destroy the wrongdoers." (Verse 13) Here we have an emphatic statement. Furthermore, it adds power through its use of inversion and the plural pronoun in reference to God. It asserts a promise to destroy the tyrants who threaten the believers and, by their threats, do wrong to themselves, the truth, God's messengers and all people. *"And most certainly shall We cause you to dwell in the land long after they are gone."* (Verse 14) This is not an act of favouritism, but the work of a fair law of nature that God has set in operation.

"This [I promise] to all who stand in awe of My presence, and stand in awe of My warnings." (Verse 14) This settlement in the land after the tyrants have gone is promised to those who fear God and do not act with arrogance or overbearing pride.

Such people fear what God has warned them against, so they take measures to avoid it. They do not engage in corruption or wrongdoing against other people. Hence they deserve to be given their chance and be established on earth.

This sets the scene for a confrontation between the feeble power of wrongdoing despots and the great power of God, the Supreme Being who controls the whole universe. The messengers' task has been completed with the clear delivery of the message and the declaration of a split between themselves and the unbelievers. The tyrants marshal all their feeble power and stand to one side, and the messengers, who in all humility call people to faith, stand opposite, but they are supported by God, the Almighty. Both parties pray for victory, and the result is as expected: *"And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief. Behind him stretches hell where he shall be made to drink putrefied water, gulping it little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. Death will beset him from every side, yet he shall not die. More severe suffering still awaits him."* (Verses 15-17)

This is a remarkable scene showing every hardened despot ending up in failure in this life on earth. As he takes his position of miserable failure, hell is looming large behind him. There he is made to drink putrefied fluids. He is violently forced to gulp it down, although he can hardly take a sip because it is both dirty and bitter. His disgust is evident from the look on his face, so much so that we can almost see it through the words. Death approaches him from every corner, but he will not die, because he must take his punishment in full. But beyond this is an even sterner punishment.

It is indeed a remarkable scene showing the tyrant coming to grief, engulfed by a fate that appears to him in this horrific way. The words used here add their own connotations which make the punishment fit the brute force the tyrants themselves employed to threaten the advocates of the truth.

So Easy for God

The fitting comment on the destiny of tyrants and the misery they are made to suffer is part of a scene painting the situation of the unbelievers, with its assertion of God's power, a power which can easily do away with them all and replace them with a new creation. This picture follows the last confrontation that takes place in this life. The curtains are drawn here before they open again to show what happens to both sides in the life to come.

"The works of those who disbelieve in their Lord are like ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day. They cannot achieve any benefit from all that they might have earned. This [disbelief] is indeed going very far astray." (Verse 18) The image of ashes

being blown about on a stormy day adds action to the concept that the unbelievers' works will come to nothing. People cannot hold on to any part of their actions, or make use of them. This image gives a far more profound effect than any expression of the same meaning of total loss in intellectual terms.

This scene expresses a basic truth about what the unbelievers do. Actions that have no basis in faith, and are not controlled by that bond relating every action to its motive, and relating that motive to God remain loose, lacking a solid entity. They are like ashes or flying particles. It is not the action itself that carries paramount value, but rather the motivation behind it. Action is a mechanical movement, but its motive is what differentiates man from machine.

The comment which follows is also very apt: "*This [disbelief] is indeed going very far astray.*" (Verse 18) Just like the ashes blown far away by fierce winds, so too have they gone far astray.

The following verses then speak of the fate of the unbelievers of olden times in order to demonstrate the fate of the unbelieving Arabs of the Quraysh. These verses threaten them with God's ability to replace them with a new creation: "*Do you not see that God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring into being a new creation. This is no difficult thing for God.*" (Verses 19-20)

This switch from a discussion about faith and disbelief, and the dispute between God's messengers and the unbelievers in un-Islamic societies, to a picture of the heavens and the earth is very natural in the Qur'ān. It is also natural in human feelings and perceptions. This is a further indication of the divine source of the Qur'ān. There is a secret but intelligible discourse between man and the universe. Human nature responds instinctively to this secret communication once it tunes in to it and receives its signals.

Those who do not pick up on these signals and indicators must examine their receptive faculties. For these must be faulty. Eyes may turn blind, and ears may become deaf, and a person may be dumb. Those who cannot receive the signals of the universe have defective faculties. Hence they are unsuited to positions of leadership. This includes all those who accept a materialistic philosophy which produces what is falsely called 'scientific doctrines'. Science cannot function with faulty faculties and a defective means of contact with the universe. Such people are described in the Qur'ān as blind. It is not possible for human life to prosper under a system, doctrine or philosophy promoted by someone who is blind.

The fact that the heavens and the earth have been created with the truth gives the impression of limitless ability and solid stability. The truth is solid and stable even in the sound the word 'truth' makes. This contrasts completely with the ashes blown

about fiercely on a stormy day, dispersed far and wide, as it contrasts with people going far astray.

In light of the fate suffered by despots who stubbornly took the wrong side in the battle between truth and falsehood, a strong warning is issued: *“If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring into being a new creation.”* (Verse 19) He who is able to create the heavens and the earth can easily replace the human race with a different one, or bring about a new community of humans in place of the present one. Again the connotations of taking a community away to replace it with another fits properly with the image of ashes blown far away.

“This is no difficult thing for God.” (Verse 20) The creation of the heavens and the earth testify that it is indeed easy for God. The fate of earlier unbelieving communities also testifies to it, and so do the ashes scattered hither and thither. It is indeed a remarkable feature of the Qur’ānic style that imagery and connotations slot together in perfect harmony.

Acrimonious Exchanges between Allies

At this point in the *sūrah* we note an even higher level of the inimitable style of the Qur’ān, and its power of imagery, expression and harmony between scenes and ideas. A short while ago we saw obstinate tyrants coming to grief, with an image of hell looming large behind them as they are made to suffer their greatest disappointment in this life. Now we see them on the Day of Judgement. It is at once an extraordinary and powerful scene, full of movement, reaction and dialogue between the weak and the powerful, and between both and Satan.

They will all appear before God, and then the weak will say to those who acted with arrogance: ‘We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God’s punishment?’ [And the others] will reply: Had God given us guidance, we would have guided you. It is now all one for us whether we grieve impatiently or endure with patience. There is no escape for us now.’ And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: ‘God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.’ Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store. Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord’s leave. Their greeting shall be: Peace. (Verses 21-23)

We have now moved from this world's stage to that of the next where everyone appears before God: *"They will all appear before God."* They all come forward: the arrogant tyrants who reject His message and their weak subordinates, joined by Satan, and also those who believed in the messengers and did righteous deeds. In fact they have always been exposed before God, but now they know and feel that there is no screen to give them cover or protection. They all appear in front of Him, and now the dialogue starts:

"Then the weak will say to those who acted with arrogance: 'We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?'" (Verse 21) The weak are those who forfeited the most essential quality of the human being honoured by God when they forfeited their rights to freedom of thought, belief and choice, making themselves no more than the slaves of arrogant despots. They submitted themselves like servants to such despots like themselves in preference to submission to God alone. Such weakness is no excuse; indeed it is their crime.

God does not like that anyone should feel weak. Indeed he calls on all people to seek His protection, and find strength in His support. He does not like that anyone should abandon, willingly or unwillingly, his or her share of freedom, which is a privilege for which they deserve honour. No material force, great as it may be, can force into submission a human being who wants to remain free and hold on to his human dignity. The maximum that brute force can achieve is to have power over the body, imprisoning and tormenting it. As for the mind, conscience and spirit, these cannot be imprisoned by anyone unless the victim so agrees to hand them over.

Who has the power to make such weak people follow despots in faith, thought and behaviour? Who has the power to make them submit to anyone other than God, their Creator who is the only One to provide them with their means of sustenance? The answer is none other than their own weak souls. They are not weak because of any lack of material power, or because they have less dignity, wealth, or position than despots. All these are of little consequence. They are external or superficial aspects, and lacking them does not mean any real weakness. Instead, they are weak in their souls and dignity. They do not truly appreciate man's most essential quality.

The oppressed represent the majority while the despots are in the minority. How come, then, that the majority are subjugated by the minority? It is only a weakness of spirit and soul, and forfeiture of the dignity with which God has graced human beings. Despots cannot humiliate and subjugate the masses unless the masses are willing to be subjugated. The masses are always able to stand up to tyrants, if only they choose to do so. What is lacking, then, is the will. Humiliation does not come about without a susceptibility to being humiliated. In fact the tyrants rely only on this susceptibility.

Here we see those weak and humble 'followers' as they come on the stage of the hereafter. Addressing arrogant tyrants, they say: *"We were your followers: can you relieve us of something of God's punishment?"* (Verse 21) We have followed you and, as a result, we are now facing this painful destiny. Or maybe it is that after seeing the punishment that awaits them they try to reproach the tyrants for having led them to this end. The *sūrah* quotes what they say, which carries overtones of humility.

The arrogant tyrants reply to their question, saying: *"Had God given us guidance, we would have guided you."* (Verse 21) Why should you blame us when we are facing the same destiny as you? We have not followed guidance ourselves and left you to go astray. Had God given us guidance we would have led you to it, just as we led you to error when we went astray. They attribute both their guidance and error to God, now acknowledging His great power, when once they had denied these. They exercised their tyranny, subjugating the weak to their power, in a manner which took no account of God's power. They now try to absolve themselves by attributing their error and role in leading other people astray to God. But God does not command anyone to go astray, as He says: *"Never does God enjoin what is indecent."* (7: 28)

They go on to implicitly reproach the weak, telling them that there is no use in panic or patient endurance. God's punishment is due and it cannot be averted. The time has passed when panic could have helped those who went astray to return to God in repentance. Similarly, patience in adversity used to be of benefit, because God would bestow His mercy on those who were patient. But now this is all over. There is no more room for escape: *"It is now all one for us, whether we grieve impatiently or endure with patience. There is no escape for us now."* (Verse 21)

Realities That Must be Faced

Matters have been settled and there can be no room for discussion or argument. Everyone has been shown their place in the life to come. But at this point we see a remarkable portrait: it is Satan, the one who did everything in his power to divert people away from the truth and turn them towards error and falsehood, who reproaches both the weak and the tyrants. His words may sound to them worse than the torture they will soon face: *"And when everything will have been decided, Satan will say: 'God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them. Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me. Hence, do not now blame me, but blame yourselves. It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine. I have already disclaimed your associating me with God.' Indeed, for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store."* (Verse 22)

What an amazing scene. Satan is truly devilish! His personality appears here in its most striking colours, just as we have seen the true character of the weak and the

powerful. Satan who was the constant whisperer, presenting every type of temptation, turning people away from the voice of truth is now stabbing his followers in the back. Now that matters have been settled, they cannot make any counter attack. They cannot even reply to him. It is he who says now, after the issues have been decided: *"God has made you a true promise. I, too, made promises to you, but I did not keep them."* (Verse 22) He goes on to rub it in, reproaching them for responding to him when he had no power over them. It is they who gave themselves up to him, forgetting all the old enmity between themselves and Satan. They embraced his falsehood and abandoned the message of truth God had sent them.

"Yet I had no power at all over you, except that I called you and you responded to me." (Verse 22) He not only rebukes them, but calls on them to rebuke themselves for having obeyed him: *"Do not now blame me, but blame yourselves."* (Verse 22) He then adds insult to injury, lets them down unashamedly, and declares that he wants nothing further to do with them. Yet it was he who had previously given them all sorts of rosy promises. He went on to tell them that no one could ever defeat them. Now he will not even try to give them any support should they appeal to him for it, nor will they help him when he cries out: *"It is not for me to respond to your cries, nor for you to respond to mine."* (Verse 22) There is no contact or relationship between us now. He then absolves himself of their associating him as a partner with God. *"I have already disclaimed your associating me with God."* (Verse 22) He then finishes this Satanic speech with a devastating blow directed at those who followed him in every way: *"Indeed for all wrongdoers there is grievous suffering in store."* (Verse 22)

This is what they receive from Satan, after they have followed him blindly into error. This is what they get from him for having abandoned God's messengers who called on them to follow God's guidance.

Before the curtains are drawn, we see on the other side the believers who have won the battle against Satan, and who are now enjoying their success: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds will be admitted to gardens through which running waters flow, wherein they will abide, by their Lord's leave. Their greeting shall be: Peace."* (Verse 23) Thus the scene ends. This is the outcome of the whole story between the message and its advocates on the one side and powerful tyrants who deny God and His messengers on the other.

A Word to Strengthen the Believers

While the nature of the story is the same in every age, the believers who follow God's messengers stand in this world face to face against tyrannical ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*: *"And they prayed for God's help and victory [for the truth]. And every powerful, obstinate enemy of the truth shall come to grief. Behind him stretches hell where he shall be*

made to drink putrefied water, gulping it little by little, and yet hardly able to swallow it. Death will beset him from every side, yet he shall not die. More severe suffering still awaits him.” (Verses 15-17)

While this takes place in this life, a scene of the hereafter is portrayed whereby an unusual conversation ensues between arrogant tyrants, their powerless followers and Satan. The *sūrah* also portrays the widely different destinies of good and evil people before providing an analogy of what good and bad words are like. This portrays the working of the law God has set in nature concerning good and evil in life. It also serves as a final comment on the story: *“Do you not see how God compares a good word to a good tree? Its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky. It yields its fruits at all times by its Lord’s leave. Thus does God set parables for people so that they may reflect. And an evil word is like a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the earth. It cannot have a stable position. God will strengthen the believers through the true, unshakeable word in both this life and the life to come; but the wrongdoers God lets go astray. God does whatever He wills.”* (Verses 24-27)

This scene describing words and utterances, good and evil, is derived from the general atmosphere of the *sūrah*, and from the history of prophets and those who deny their messages, as well as the destiny of both groups. The tree of prophethood, with its prominent figure of Abraham, the Prophet Muḥammad’s ancestor, is portrayed here as it delivers its great yield every now and then, in the shape of a new prophet who spreads faith and goodness.

Yet the analogy is far more comprehensive, real and effective than just that. For the good word of truth is indeed like a great firm tree, yielding its fruits, solid, unaffected by wind and undisturbed by the storm of evil. It cannot be uprooted by evil tyranny, even though there may be times when it seems to be exposed to grave danger. As it stands high, it looks on evil, injustice and tyranny from above, even though it sometimes seems to the short-sighted that evil squeezes it into a narrow corner. Its fruits are yielded time after time, because its seeds grow within good souls, generation after generation.

The same analogy applies in reverse. An evil word of falsehood is like a foul tree which may spread its branches high and wide, and which may seem to some people to be greater and stronger than the good tree of truth. Nevertheless, it is weak and hollow. Its roots are easily pulled out, as though they stretch on the surface of the earth. One day, it will definitely be uprooted, and then it will have no stable means of existence.

Neither of these is a parable given by way of consolation or encouragement to good people. This is the reality of life, even though it may appear at times to come very slowly. Real goodness does not die or fade away, even though it may be pressed hard by evil which seems to possess enormous power. Conversely, evil exists only

while it consumes the little goodness which may be mixed with it. For evil rarely exists in a pure form. In most cases, it has some good within it, and as long as it has that good element, it continues to exist. When this good element no longer exists, evil crumbles and is destroyed, regardless of its initially great appearance. Good remains in its healthy position, enjoying good prospects, whilst evil remains in its foul position, engulfed by serious threats.

“Thus does God set parables for people so that they may reflect.” (Verse 25) These are examples that exist in real life, but people often forget under the pressures of life.

The *sūrah* provides several elements that contribute to the concept of stability associated with the good, firm tree. It is painted here as having firm roots, well entrenched in the earth, its branches stretching wide on the horizon, giving the clear impression of solidity, strength and firmness. As this great tree is compared to a good word, we are told that “God will strengthen the believers through the true, unshakeable word in both this life and the life to come.” (Verse 27) And just like the bad tree that is uprooted from the face of the earth, lacking stable existence, “the wrongdoers God lets go astray.” (Verse 27) Thus the modes of expression fit harmoniously with the connotations stressed in the *sūrah*.

God strengthens the believers in this life and in the life to come with the good word of faith that is firmly established in human nature and conscience, yielding its fruit through good and renewed action that has a lasting impact on human life. He further strengthens them with His word contained in the Qur’ān, with the Prophet’s statements, and with His true promise of victory in this life and success in the hereafter. These are all unshakeable words which will always be seen to be true. Those who believe in them will never suffer from worry or confusion.

On the other hand, God lets the wrongdoers go astray as a result of their wrongdoing and associating partners with Him. In fact, ‘wrongdoing’ is often used in the Qur’ān as being synonymous with associating partners with God, since both are manifestations of injustice. Such wrongdoers turn away from the light of divine guidance, and move aimlessly in a great maze of legend and superstition, following laws based on desire, and not on the proper guidance provided by God. As they do so, they are left to go astray. This happens in accordance with the law God has set in operation, which leads to error and confusion anyone who chooses to close his eyes to His guidance and follow his desire.

“God does whatever He wills.” (Verse 27) His will is free. It chooses the law it sets in operation, but is not limited or restricted by it. Whenever God’s wisdom determines to change it, it is changed by God’s will which is free, unimpeded by anything, irresistible. Indeed, everything in the universe takes place in accordance with God’s will.

This statement serves as a final comment on the main topic that takes up more than half of the *sūrah* that is entitled Abraham, after the father of the prophets. This principal subject matter is God's message and its advocacy. The good tree with its good fruit and stretching, cool shade, and the good word that survives one generation after another, contain together the great truth of the one message which never changes, namely the message of the oneness of God, the Almighty.

Messengers versus Unbelievers

We need to pause here in order to reflect on the main facts in the history of God's messengers and their encounter with *jāhiliyyah*. We have already made brief references to these in our commentary, but they now merit further discussion.

The first basic fact which God, in His absolute wisdom and faultless knowledge, tells us is that there has been a procession of faith ever since the beginning of human history. This procession has continued uninterrupted, led by God's messengers who have advocated the same truth and followed the same method. They have advocated the oneness of God, the Lord of the universe. None of them has ever associated any partners with God. None relied on, or sought support from, or appealed to, anyone other than God.

This means that faith in the One God has not come about progressively or developed from a belief in a multiplicity of deities, to dualism and then the concept of a single God, as claimed by scholars of Comparative Religion. This claim saying that man started with the worship of totems, spirits and stars before progressing to the worship of a single deity is false. Nor is it true to claim that such progress parallels the progress of human knowledge and experience, or the development of political power in human society. All such claims are false.

Faith in God, the only deity to be worshipped, has been preached by God's messengers ever since the beginning of history. The basic truth of God's oneness was established in its full form in all divine messages. None of these messages or divine religions introduced any change in, or modification of, this truth. This is what we are told by God whose knowledge encompasses all things.

Had such scholars said that acceptability of the faith based on God's oneness developed over the centuries, and that pagan beliefs have been influenced by the different forms of the divine faith, preached by God's successive messengers who confronted such pagan beliefs, until there was a time when the masses were more ready to accept the divine faith, then their claims might have had some validity. But such scholars follow a method of research and investigation that is based on an old subtle hostility to the church in Europe. This old hostility still survives although it may go unnoticed by modern scholars. They are motivated by an underlying desire,

of which they may or may not be aware, to disprove the religious way of thinking. In this respect, they want to prove that religion never came about as revelation from on high, but was instead invented by human beings. When it is classified as such, then it is subject to all the rules applicable to human thinking, such as modification, experimentation, and revision. It is such old hostility and subtle desire that have given birth to the study of Comparative Religion which is falsely called a branch of science.

Such claims may deceive some people into accepting what such scholars say. However, no Muslim who respects his faith and its method of establishing the facts should be deceived by it for a moment. How can he, when such claims contradict clear Islamic texts that put the facts in a most lucid manner?⁴

One Message by All Messengers

A long procession of God's messengers called on humanity, right from the very first day, to believe in a single message embodying the same faith. *Jāhiliyyah*, on the other hand, confronted this call to faith with the same type of rejection. The Qur'ān portrays this confrontation, disregarding the elements of time and place, in order to show the fact that the resistance to the divine faith has not changed throughout history. This in itself is very noteworthy. *Jāhiliyyah* is the same throughout history. It is not a particular stage of human history. It is a state of mind giving rise to a belief and a social structure based on it.

The state of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, is based on the submission of one group of people to another, giving the qualities of Godhead to someone other than God, or assigning lordship to anyone other than God. Whether people believe in polytheism or in a monotheism that acknowledges a multiplicity of lords, they sink into a state of ignorance, or what is described in Islamic terminology as *jāhiliyyah*, with all its secondary characteristics.

The message preached by God's messengers is essentially based on God's oneness and the rejection of all false lords. Submission to God must be pure and complete. He is the only Lord, and to Him belongs sovereignty and all authority. Hence it is in direct conflict with the conceptual foundation of *jāhiliyyah* society, constituting a direct threat to it. This is especially so when the message begins to form a separate grouping that draws its members from within that society, giving them new beliefs and a new leadership and loyalties. This is a normal and essential line of action which divine religion inevitably follows.

As a single unit, *jāhiliyyah* society begins to feel the ideological threat to its

⁴ This concept is discussed at length in the commentary on *Sūrah 11*, Vol. IX, pp. 184-190

existence, particularly when the faith based on submission to God alone, or Islam, comes to be represented as a separate entity. Hence, *jāhiliyyah* society declares its hostile attitude to Islam, in its general meaning of submission to God alone.

The conflict, then, is between two entities which cannot co-exist peacefully. It is a conflict between two structures, each one of which has a basis that is totally opposed to that of the other. One of them permits submission to human beings, while the other rejects this totally. The Islamic grouping, particularly during its formative period, takes its recruits from *jāhiliyyah* society. Later, it confronts that society to take over leadership and liberate all mankind from submission to anyone other than God. Such development is inevitable when the advocates of Islam follow the right course defined by their faith. In view of this, *jāhiliyyah* society does not tolerate Islam right from the beginning. With this being the case, we can readily understand the unity of reaction by all *jāhiliyyah* societies to the messages of all God's messengers. *Jāhiliyyah* society is defending its own existence. It has usurped God's sovereignty, and it wants to keep it.

Since *jāhiliyyah* society senses the danger to its very existence represented by the Islamic message, it confronts that message with an onslaught that accepts neither a truce nor a *modus vivendi*. It is a war to the bitter end, since it is over survival. Neither *jāhiliyyah* society nor God's noble messengers indulge in any self-deception over the nature of this confrontation. Nor did God's messengers ever deceive their followers over it. "The unbelievers said to their messengers: 'We shall most certainly expel you from our land, unless you return to our ways.'" (Verse 13) They do not accept that the messengers or their followers should have a separate faith, leadership or grouping. They demand that they should return to their ways, integrating in their society, or else they will be thrown out of their land altogether.

Likewise, God's messengers do not accept any reverting to full integration into *jāhiliyyah* society, or to shedding their independent personality or grouping. They realize that their community is based on a totally different foundation to that of *jāhiliyyah* society. Nor do they say, as do those who do not realize the true nature of Islam or the nature of the organic structure of societies, "Let us integrate into that society so that we can advocate our message and serve our cause from within it." The fact that a Muslim living in an un-Islamic society has his own distinct faith must inevitably be followed by having an independent community that has its own leadership and allegiance. This is not a matter of choice. It is absolutely inevitable. By its very structure, un-Islamic society is highly sensitive to the Islamic faith which has as its foundation belief in the oneness of God, to whom all people must submit themselves. It removes all false deities from positions of leadership and authority. Every Muslim who integrates into *jāhiliyyah* society becomes a servant of that society, when he should be serving the cause of Islam only.

There remains the fact of destiny which advocates of Islam must never lose sight of. The fulfilment of God's promise to His servants that He will grant them victory and authority and will judge between them and their people on the basis of the truth will not take place until the believers have separated themselves and declared their allegiance to the truth they preach. God's victory is not given while Islam's advocates are integrated within un-Islamic society, serving its interests. When such integration occurs, it delays victory. This is then a great responsibility which must be clearly understood by the advocates of Islam.

A Style of Exceptional Refinement

A brief note on the style employed in this passage should be added. It is at this juncture that we find the breathtakingly beautiful style of the Qur'ān demonstrating the procession of faith as it confronts erring *jāhiliyyah* throughout human history. It is the beauty of the truth: simple, natural, clear, confident, reassured, strong and profound: *"Said the messengers sent to them: 'Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth? He calls you, so that He may forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.' They replied: 'You are but mortals like ourselves. You want to turn us away from what our forefathers used to worship. Bring us, then, a clear proof' Their messengers replied: 'We are indeed but mortals like yourselves. But God bestows His grace on whomever He wills of His servants. It is not within our power to bring you any proof except by God's leave. It is in God that all believers must place their trust. And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God let all the faithful place their trust.'"* (Verses 10-12)

Here we see all God's messengers marching in a single procession, confronting *jāhiliyyah* which is one in nature. This essential fact remains true despite the changing circumstances. The beauty of the Qur'ānic style is at its best where it describes the truth embodied in the message preached by the prophets as related to the truth behind the existence of the universe: *"Said the messengers sent to them: Can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and earth?"* (Verse 10) *"And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths?"* (Verse 12) *"Do you not see that God has created the heavens and the earth in accordance with the truth. If He so wills, He can do away with you and bring into being a new creation. This is no difficult thing for God."* (Verses 19-20)

Thus the fundamental relationship between the truth embodied in the divine message and the truth of the existence of the universe is emphasized as one single truth, derived from God who is the truth. It is firmly established and deeply rooted, just like *"a good tree: its roots are firm and its branches reach to the sky."* (Verse 24) Everything else is false, transitory, similar to *"a corrupt tree, torn up onto the face of the*

earth. It cannot have a stable position.” (Verse 26)

The same beauty is seen in the nature of the messengers’ understanding of the nature of their Lord, and the nature of Godhead as it fills the hearts of His faithful servants: *“And why should we not place our trust in God, when He has guided us on our paths? Hence we will bear with patience all your persecution. In God alone let all the faithful place their trust.” (Verse 12)*

All these are aspects of that spectacular beauty which human expression cannot describe. It can only be pointed to, just like we point to a far away star. We do not reach it with our signal, but we draw attention to it as it lights up our horizon.

Grace and Gratitude

Have you not seen those who have exchanged God's blessings for unbelief, and landed their people in the House of Perdition, (28)

hell, which they will have to endure? How vile a place to settle in! (29)

They set up false deities as equal to God, and so they lead people to stray from His path. Say: 'Enjoy yourselves [in this life], for you will surely end up in hell.' (30)

Tell My servants who have attained to faith that they should attend regularly to their prayers and spend [in My way], secretly and openly, out of the sustenance We provide for them, before a day shall come when there will be no trading and no friendship. (31)

It is God who has created the heavens and the earth, and who sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance. He has placed under your service ships which by His leave sail through the sea, and He has made the rivers subservient to [His law] for your benefit. (32)

And for your benefit He has made the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses, subservient to [His law]; and has made the night and the day subservient to [His law]. (33)

﴿۲۸﴾ أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ بَدَّلُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ كُفْرًا
وَأَحَلُّوا قَوْمَهُمْ دَارَ الْبَوَارِ ﴿۲۸﴾

﴿۲۹﴾ جَهَنَّمَ يَصَلُّونَهَا وَبَسَّ الْقَرَارُ ﴿۲۹﴾

﴿۳۰﴾ وَجَعَلُوا لِلَّهِ أَنْدَادًا لِيُضِلُّوا عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ
﴿۳۰﴾ قُلْ تَمَتَّعُوا فَإِنَّ مَصِيرَكُمْ إِلَى النَّارِ ﴿۳۰﴾

﴿۳۰﴾

﴿۳۱﴾ قُلْ لِعِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا يُقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ
وَيُنْفِقُوا مِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ سِرًّا وَعَلَانِيَةً مِّن
قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ يَوْمٌ لَا بَيْعَ فِيهِ وَلَا خِلَالٌ ﴿۳۱﴾

﴿۳۱﴾

﴿۳۲﴾ اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ
وَأَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَخْرَجَ بِهِ
مِنَ الشَّجَرَاتِ رِزْقًا لَكُمْ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ
الْفُلْكَ لِتَجْرِيَ فِي الْبَحْرِ بِأَمْرِهِ ﴿۳۲﴾

﴿۳۳﴾ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ الَّلَّانَّهَرَ ﴿۳۳﴾

﴿۳۳﴾ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ دَائِبِينَ ﴿۳۳﴾

And He gives you of everything you ask of Him. Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them. Yet man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful. (34)

Abraham said: 'My Lord! Make this land secure, and preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols. (35)

My Lord, they have indeed led many people astray. Hence, he who follows me belongs to me. As for him who disobeys me, well, You are truly Much- Forgiving, Merciful. (36)

Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers. So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks. (37)

Our Lord, You certainly know all that we conceal and all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, on earth or in heaven, can be hidden from God. (38)

All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac. Surely my Lord hears all prayers. (39)

وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ الَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ ﴿٣٤﴾

وَأَتَاكُمْ مِنْ كُلِّ مَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُ وَإِنْ تَعُدُّوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ لَا تَحْصُوهَا إِنَّ

الْإِنْسَانَ لَظَلُومٌ كَفَّارٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ رَبِّ اجْعَلْ هَذَا الْبَلَدَ

﴿٣٥﴾

رَبِّ إِنِّي أَخْلَلَنْ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ النَّاسِ فَمَنْ تَبِعَنِي فَإِنَّهُ مِنِّي وَمَنْ عَصَانِي فَإِنَّكَ

غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٣٦﴾

رَبَّنَا إِنِّي أَسْكَنْتُ مِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي بِوَادٍ غَيْرِ ذِي زَرْعٍ عِنْدَ بَيْتِكَ الْمُحَرَّمِ رَبَّنَا لِيُقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ فَاجْعَلْ أَفْئِدَةً مِّنَ النَّاسِ تَهْوِي إِلَيْهِمْ وَارْزُقْهُمْ مِّنَ الثَّمَرَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ

يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ تَعْلَمُ مَا نُخْفِي وَمَا نُعْلِنُ وَمَا نَخْفَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا

فِي السَّمَاءِ ﴿٣٨﴾

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي وَهَبَ لِي عَلَى الْكِبَرِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ إِنَّ رَبِّي لَسَمِيعٌ

My Lord, cause me and [some of] my offspring to establish regular prayers. My Lord, accept my prayer. (40)

Our Lord, grant Your forgiveness to me and my parents, and all the believers on the Day when the reckoning will come to pass.' (41)

Never think that God is unaware of what the wrongdoers are doing. He only grants them respite till the Day when eyes will stare fixedly in horror, (42)

when they will be dashing in confusion, with their heads lifted up, unable to turn their eyes from what they behold, and their hearts an utter void. (43)

Hence, warn mankind of the Day when suffering may befall them; when those who do wrong will say: 'Our Lord, grant us respite for a short while, so that we may respond to Your call and follow Your messengers.' Why? Did you not in time past swear that you would suffer no decline? (44)

And you dwelt in the dwellings of those who wronged their own souls before you. Yet you knew for certain how We had dealt with them, and We placed many examples before you.' (45)

They devised their plots, but their plots are all within God's grasp, even though their plots are so powerful as to move mountains. (46)

الدُّعَاءِ ﴿٤٠﴾

رَبِّ اجْعَلْنِي مُقِيمَ الصَّلَاةِ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي

رَبَّنَا وَتَقَبَّلْ دُعَاءِ ﴿٤١﴾

رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيَّ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَوْمَ

يُقُومُ الْحِسَابُ ﴿٤٢﴾

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ اللَّهَ غَفِيلاً عَمَّا يَعْمَلُ

الظَّالِمُونَ إِنَّمَا يُؤَخِّرُهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ

تَشْخَصُ فِيهِ الْأَبْصَارُ ﴿٤٣﴾

مُهْطِعِينَ مُقْنِعِي رُءُوسِهِمْ لَا يَرْتَدُّ

إِلَيْهِمْ طَرْفُهُمْ وَأَفْعَدْتَهُمْ حَوَاءً ﴿٤٤﴾

وَأَنْذِرِ النَّاسَ يَوْمَ يَأْتِيهِمُ الْعَذَابُ فَيَقُولُ

الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا رَبَّنَا أَخْرْنَا إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ قَرِيبٍ

نَحْنُ دَعَوْتَكَ وَنَتَّبِعَ الرَّسُولَ أَوْلَمَ

تَكُونُوا أَقْسَمْتُمْ مِّن قَبْلُ مَا لَكُم مِّن

زَوَالٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

وَسَكَنتُمْ فِي مَسْكَانِ الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا

أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمْ كَيْفَ فَعَلْنَا

بِهِمْ وَضَرَبْنَا لَكُمْ الْأَمْثَالَ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَقَدْ مَكَرُوا مَكْرَهُمْ وَعِنْدَ اللَّهِ

مَكْرُهُمْ وَإِنْ كَانَ مَكْرُهُمْ لِتَزُولَ

Never think that God may ever fail to fulfil the promise which He has given to His messengers. Indeed God is Almighty, avenger of evil! (47)

On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth, as shall be the heavens, and when all people stand before God, the One who holds sway over all that exists. (48)

On that day you will see the guilty chained together in fetters, (49)

wearing garments of black pitch, and their faces covered with flames. (50)

God will requite each soul according to what it has done. God is indeed swift in reckoning. (51)

This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and Only God. Let those who are endowed with insight take heed. (52)

مِنْهُ الْجِبَالُ ﴿٤٦﴾

فَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ اللَّهَ مُخْلَفًا وَعَدِيهِ رُسُلَهُ إِنَّ

اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ ذُو انتِقَامٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

يَوْمَ تَبْدُلُ الْأَرْضَ غَيْرَ الْأَرْضِ
وَالسَّمَوَاتِ وَبَرَزُوا لِلَّهِ الْوَاحِدِ الْقَهَّارِ

﴿٤٨﴾

وَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ يَوْمَئِذٍ مُّقْرَّنِينَ فِي

الْأَصْفَادِ ﴿٤٩﴾

سَرَابِيلُهُمْ مِّنْ قَطِرَانٍ وَتَغْشَىٰ وُجُوهُهُمْ

النَّارُ ﴿٥٠﴾

لِيَجْزِيَ اللَّهُ كُلَّ نَفْسٍ مَّا كَسَبَتْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ

سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ ﴿٥١﴾

هَذَا بَلَّغٌ لِلنَّاسِ وَلِيُنذَرُوا بِهِ وَلِيَعْلَمُوا

أَنَّ مَا هُوَ إِلَهُهُ وَاحِدٌ وَلِيُنذَرَ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

﴿٥٢﴾

Overview

This second part of the sūrah begins where the first ends. The first part outlined the purpose of the Prophet Muḥammad's message, namely, "to bring forth all mankind, by their Lord's leave, from darkness into the light." (Verse 1) And it outlined the purpose of Moses's message: "Lead your people out of darkness into the light, and remind them of the Days of God." (Verse 5) He explained to them his message and reminded them of

God's favours and blessings. He also announced what God had promised them: *"If you are grateful, I shall certainly give you more; but if you are ungrateful, then My punishment shall be severe indeed."* (Verse 7) He then related to them the history of prophets with communities who refused to believe them. In fact he began this narrative, but immediately disappeared to let the *sūrah* relate it with magnificent theatre, culminating in the scene where the unbelievers listen to Satan giving them a memorable lesson, which comes too late to be of any benefit.

Now the *sūrah* turns to the unbelievers among the Prophet Muḥammad's community, who have been given a long reel showing the great episodes of history. These people have indeed been blessed with many favours granted to them by God. One such major favour is the fact that God sent them a messenger to bring them out of darkness into light, and to call on them to repent so that they might receive His forgiveness. But they reject God's blessings, and deny His message. The second part of the *sūrah* starts then with an expression of amazement at such people who lead their communities to destruction, just like those before them who led their followers to hell.

It goes on to portray some of the aspects of God's favours in one of the greatest scenes of the universe. It then provides an example of thanksgiving by Abraham. This example follows a clear order to the believers to offer prayers and be kind to people as an aspect of thanksgiving. They must do so before a day comes when wealth can no longer grow and no buying or selling can take place. As for the unbelievers, they are not just forgotten. They are given respite until a day comes when eyes are opened wide. God's promise to His messengers will inevitably be fulfilled, no matter what the unbelievers scheme against them. All this indicates that the second part of the *sūrah* is in full harmony with the first, one complementing the other.

Bartering away God's Blessings

This passage begins with drawing attention to a highly singular state of affairs: *"Have you not seen those who have exchanged God's blessings for unbelief and landed their people in the House of Perdition, hell, which they will have to endure? How vile a place to settle in! They set up false deities as equal to God, and so they lead people to stray from His path. Say: 'Enjoy yourselves [in this life], for you will surely end up in hell.'"* (Verses 28-30)

These are people who have been granted God's blessings in the form of a prophet sent to call on them to believe in God, and to lead them along the way to God's forgiveness of their sins, and to a heavenly destiny. Yet they abandon all this and choose instead a state of unbelief. These, the Prophet is told, are the chiefs of his own people who follow the same practice as the elders or the chiefs of most communities.

Thus by their singular exchange, they lead their communities to hell. Just as we have seen in the histories of past nations and communities mentioned earlier in the *sūrah*, they land their people in hell. It is a vile and ignominious abode.

The *sūrah* invites the Prophet, and every believer, to marvel at the curious behaviour of such people, particularly since they have seen what happened to earlier communities. All this has been portrayed for their benefit in this *sūrah* in a most vivid way, accounting for what took place between the unbelievers and the messengers sent to them. It was all shown to them as if it were taking place before their very eyes. In fact, the Qur'ān only portrays what is going to take place in the hereafter as if it is happening now, or just happened before our very eyes.

These people have exchanged God's blessing of a messenger sent to them with disbelief. The messenger called on them to believe in God alone and to associate no partners with Him, but they abandoned all this, and "*they set up false deities as equal to God, and so they lead people to stray from His path.*" (Verse 30) They place their false deities in a position equal to that of God, and offer worship to them as they would offer it to Him. They submit to these false deities as they would submit to Him, and they attribute to them some of the attributes that belong only to God. They thus lead people astray from the only straight path leading to God, the only deity in the universe.

The chiefs or elders have deliberately misguided their own people, leading them astray by claiming that their false deities were equal to God. The fact, however, is that the faith based on God's oneness represents a threat to the power and vested interests of tyrannical forces in every generation, not merely in this first period of *jāhiliyyah* when the Prophet preached his message. Whenever people turn away from the pure faith based on God's oneness, whatever shape this may take, and assign their leadership to others, they revert to a state of un-Islam, or *jāhiliyyah*. In such a state, people surrender their own freedom and personality, follow their desires and implement laws enacted on the basis of their leaders' desires instead of deriving them from God's revelations. In such a situation the advocacy of God's oneness becomes a threat to those chiefs and their interests. Hence, they try to avert this threat in every way open to them. In older forms of *jāhiliyyah*, this took the shape of adopting false deities, claiming that they were equal to God. In our present time, it takes the form of implementing man-made laws that permit what God has not permitted and prohibit what He has made lawful. Those who enact such laws are thus placed on an equal footing with God in the way people look at them and in everyday life as well.

Hence, the Prophet is instructed to say to such people that they may enjoy themselves in this life as they please, but that this enjoyment will last only for the limit God has determined. The eventual outcome is well known: "*Say: 'Enjoy*

yourselves [in this life], for you will surely end up in hell.” (Verse 30)

The Prophet is further instructed to leave these people alone, not to trouble himself with them any more. Instead he should address God’s servants who have accepted the faith. These are the people who will take heed when they are warned against evil. They accept God’s blessings and appreciate them, and will never exchange them for disbelief. The Prophet is to address these people and teach them how to be grateful for God’s blessings. They should express their gratitude through worship, obedience to God and kindness to His servants: *“Tell My servants who have attained to faith that they should attend regularly to their prayers and spend [in My way], secretly and openly, out of the sustenance We provide for them, before a day shall come when there will be no trading and no friendship.”* (Verse 31)

God commands His Messenger to say to those who have attained to faith that they should express their gratitude to God by establishing regular prayer, for prayer is the most express form of gratitude to God. They should also spend in charity out of the sustenance God provides for them, and make such spending both in secret and in public. Secret charity protects the dignity of the taker and enhances the virtue of the giver. This ensures that charity does not become a source of pride and arrogance. Charitable spending in public serves to demonstrate obedience to God’s orders, and provides a good example to others in the community. Both ways are left to the discretion and sensitivities of every believer.

The believers are told to spend on others now so that their balance which is preserved for them increases through gains they make by charitable spending. This they have to do before a day comes when there is no longer any possibility for wealth to grow, or friendship to bring any benefit. What is of benefit to people is only the good works they have already done, for their reward is stored: *“Tell My servants who have attained to faith that they should attend regularly to their prayers and spend [in My way], secretly and openly, out of the sustenance We provide for them, before a day shall come when there will be no trading and no friendship.”* (Verse 31)

God’s Numerous Blessings

At this point, the *sūrah* opens the book of the universe where every page speaks of God’s countless blessings. These extend beyond the furthest point our senses can reach, and go into the skies, the earth, the sun, the moon, the day and night, the water pouring down from the skies and the fruits of all plants on earth, the oceans and seas where ships and boats sail, and the rivers flowing with the different means of producing what sustains life. All these universal images are available for all to see, but people do not look, reflect or express gratitude. Man is truly unjust, ingrate, exchanging God’s blessings for unbelief, and setting up deities which he claims to be

equal to God, when it is God who creates, sustains and controls the universe and all creatures therein: *“It is God who has created the heavens and the earth, and who sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance. He has placed under your service ships which by His leave sail through the sea, and He has made the rivers subservient to [His law] for your benefit. And for your benefit He has made the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses, subservient to [His law]; and has made the night and the day subservient to [His law]. And He gives you of everything you ask of Him. Should you try to count God’s blessings, you will never be able to compute them. Yet man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful.”* (Verses 32-34)

These verses represent an onslaught that employs such universal phenomena as tools, or rather as whips with rhythm and sound to awaken the conscience of man, a creature indulging in wrongdoing and lacking gratitude. One aspect of the unique nature of the Qur’ān is the way it relates everything in the universe and every human feeling to belief in God’s oneness. Thus, every flash of inspiration in the universe and in man’s conscience becomes proof confirming this belief. The universe is transformed into an exhibition of God’s signs where the magnificence of His hand excels so as to leave its distinct mark in every image, feature and shadow. The basic question of Godhead and servitude is not presented as a logical debate or an abstract theological argument, or an issue of metaphysical philosophy. Such methods do not appeal to, influence or inspire the human heart. The Qur’ān presents this central issue within a framework of a multitude of inspiring scenes and facts from the great universe, creation, human nature and basic thoughts and impressions, adding an element of breathtaking beauty and superb harmony.

The great scene of God’s blessings that is presented here is painted with fascinating skill, drawing its lines in the same directions the different blessings take in relation to man. This is noticeable in the line of the heavens and the earth, followed by that of water pouring down from the skies and plants and fruits shooting up from the earth. We then have a line depicting the oceans with ships sailing on their surface and rivers flowing with much bounty. A new line takes us back to the skies to show us the sun and the moon, coupled with the line of the night and day, which is closely connected to the sun and moon but remains firm on earth. The final line is comprehensive, throwing its colour and shade over the whole panoramic scene: *“And He gives you of everything you ask of Him. Should you try to count God’s blessings, you will never be able to compute them.”* (Verse 34) Here we see a harmony that incorporates every touch, line, colour and shade in a universal scene of God’s blessings.

Is all this placed at man’s service? Is this whole world, with its heavens, earth, seas, rivers, sun and moon, day and night, made subservient to the small creature known as man? Is it so, and still man does not give thanks or even remember God’s

favours? Hence, it is indeed true that *“man is persistent in wrongdoing, stubbornly ungrateful.”* (Verse 34)

“It is God who has created the heavens and the earth.” (Verse 32) Yet people set up deities and regard them as equal to Him. What more injustice could there be?

“And who sends down water from the sky with which He brings forth fruits for your sustenance.” (Verse 32) Plants are the first means of sustenance and the most visible source of God’s blessings. Rain and the growth of plants run in accordance with the nature God has given this world and the natural laws that allow rain to fall, plants to shoot and fruits to ripen, making all this compatible with man and his nature. For a single seed to grow requires that the Power that controls the whole universe utilizes universal phenomena to give that seed the ability to produce a plant and then provide it with the necessary means of life, such as a fertile place, water, sunlight and air. When people hear the word *rizq*, which we often translate as sustenance or a means of sustenance, they think only of their livelihood, earning money. But the Arabic term has much wider connotations. It includes everything that God provides for man. Even the smallest of such provisions requires operating celestial bodies in accordance with a law that ensures that several hundred thousands of matching conditions fall together in a coherent and complementary way, without which man could not have come into existence and, once existing, his life could not be sustained. It is sufficient to mention the celestial bodies and phenomena referred to in these verses to understand how we can only function when we are under God’s care.

“He has placed under your service ships which by His leave sail through the sea.” (Verse 32) It is He who has placed in the sea all that is necessary for these ships to float, and it is He who has given man the ability to understand natural phenomena and rules so as to use them for his benefit.

“And He has made the rivers subservient to [His law] for your benefit.” (Verse 32) The rivers flow and life flourishes, and they overflow and man gets an increase of goodness. Rivers also carry fish, weeds and many other things that are useful to man and to other creatures man uses such as birds and cattle.

“And for your benefit He has made the sun and the moon, both diligently pursuing their courses, subservient to [His law].” (Verse 33) Man does not use the sun and the moon directly as he uses water, the fruit, the seas, ships and rivers. Yet he benefits by them and derives from them substances and energies that are required to sustain life. Thus they are made subject to God’s law which controls the universe, so that they produce what is of benefit to man in his life on earth, and indeed in the make-up and renewal of the cells of his own body.

“And has made the night and the day subservient to [His law].” (Verse 33) Again both night and day are made subservient so as to fit with the needs and constitution of

man and with his time of activity and that of rest. Had there been permanent day or permanent night, man's whole functioning would have been destroyed, as would the whole world around him. His life would have been impossible, inactive and unproductive.

Yet all that the *sūrah* portrays consists of general lines that gather glimpses of God's blessings. In each line there are countless points. Therefore, a general aspect is added here without any detail so that it fits with the overall scene: *"And He gives you of everything you ask of Him."* (Verse 34) That includes whatever people ask of wealth, offspring, health, luxuries and refinements. *"Should you try to count God's blessings, you will never be able to compute them."* (Verse 34) Indeed they are too many to be computed by any one person, or by all human beings, for humans are restricted to a period of time with definite beginning and end. They are also restricted to certain limits of knowledge within time and space. God's favours and blessings, however, are not only numerous, but also unlimited. Hence, they are beyond human reckoning.

Yet despite all this, human beings adopt false deities and consider them equal to God. And instead of thanking God for His blessings, they exchange them for unbelief. Certainly *"man is persistent in wrongdoing, totally ungrateful."* (Verse 34)

Passionate Prayer by a Devoted Believer

When man's conscience is awakened, he looks at the universe around him and realizes that it is made for his benefit, either directly or through the harmony between its laws and human life and needs. When he looks around him, he finds it all made friendly by God's grace, and by His power and permission it is both helpful and useful. When man considers and contemplates, he must stand in awe of his Lord, prostrate himself and express his gratitude. He always looks up to his Lord to replace with ease any hardship he may be going through, and to preserve any aspect of grace and happiness he may be enjoying.

The perfect example of a human being who always remembers God and expresses his gratitude to Him is Abraham, the father of prophets. His truly thankful character imparts a definite ambience to the whole *sūrah*, which also reflects God's grace and how it is received with gratitude or ingratitude. Abraham is shown here in a scene of devotion, making a heartfelt appeal to God. His melodious supplication is inspirational as it rises to God in heaven:

Abraham said: 'My Lord.' Make this land secure, and preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols. My Lord, they have indeed led many people astray. Hence, he who follows me belongs to me. As for him who disobeys me, well, You are

truly Much-Forgiving, Merciful. Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers. So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks. Our Lord, You certainly know all that we conceal and all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, on earth or in heaven, can be hidden from God. All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac. Surely my Lord hears all prayers. My Lord, cause me and [some of] my offspring to establish regular prayers. My Lord, accept my prayer. Our Lord, grant Your forgiveness to me and my parents, and all the believers on the Day when the reckoning will come to pass.' (Verses 35-41)

Here Abraham is shown in front of the House he built for God in Makkah, and whose custody has passed to the Quraysh, an Arabian tribe bent on disbelief in God, yet benefiting by the House built for the worship of God alone. Abraham is shown addressing his supplication with perfect devotion and heartfelt gratitude. This should make the ungrateful reflect and revise their attitude. It should make the unbelievers turn back to faith, and the oblivious remember God. It should make people generally follow Abraham in his exemplary attitude.

Abraham begins his supplication by saying: *"My Lord! Make this land secure."* (Verse 35) Security and safety is so important for man, for it is intertwined with his survival. The *sūrah* mentions this here so as to remind of it the people of Makkah who enjoy it as if it was theirs by right, and who do not give thanks for it. They forget that it is the result of answering the supplication made by Abraham, their first father. Hence, they follow a course which is different from that of Abraham. They turn away from pure faith, yet the second prayer in Abraham's supplication is: *"And preserve me and my children from ever worshipping idols."* (Verse 35)

This second aspect with which Abraham opens his prayer reflects his total submission to God, and his turning to Him in the deepest recesses of his heart. He appeals to Him for help in steering away, together with his children, from idol worship. He also makes it clear that to be so preserved is yet another of God's blessings. It is indeed a great blessing that one's heart is saved from the darkness of polytheism and its ignorance in order to be brought into the light of faith in God and belief in His oneness. This blessing takes a human being out of error, loss and confusion to the comfort of knowledge, reassurance and stability, and out of humiliating submission to a variety of false lords to honourable submission to God, the Lord of all worlds. Abraham appeals to God to maintain this blessing for him by preserving him and his children from the worship of idols.

Abraham is fully aware of the great number of people in his generation and previous generations who went astray when they were deluded by such idols.

Hence, he addresses his passionate appeal to God to spare him from such delusion: *"My Lord, they have indeed led many people astray."* (Verse 36)

Abraham continues his supplication stating that whoever follows his way and does not give in to idol worship belongs to him, as they would have the strongest bond of faith joining them together. *"Hence, he who follows me belongs to me."* (Verse 36) The others who disobey him he leaves to God to determine what He does with them: *"As for him who disobeys me, well, You are truly Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 36)

In this last prayer we see Abraham, the caring, forbearing and compassionate. He does not pray to God to destroy those of his offspring who leave his path of guidance. He does not precipitate God's punishment. Indeed he does not even mention punishment. Instead, he leaves them to God, to His forgiveness and mercy. Thus Abraham lends to the whole scene an air of forgiveness and compassion, leaving the taint of disobedience to disappear altogether. Compassionate as he is, Abraham does not let it appear again.

Continuing his supplication, Abraham mentions the fact that he settled some of his offspring in a barren valley where there was no cultivation, next to God's Sacred House and also states the task they were settled there to perform: *"Our Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a valley without cultivation, by Your Sacred House, so that they may establish regular prayers."* (Verse 37)

So this is the task for the performance of which they have migrated and for which they are to tolerate a life of poverty and lack of cultivation. *"So, cause You people's hearts to incline towards them."* (Verse 37) The style here is tender, reflecting love and compassion. It describes hearts as having wings and coming from the sky to that Sacred House and its neighbours in that barren valley. Its tenderness counterbalances the hardship of a barren place with the inclination of loving hearts.

"And provide them with fruits." (Verse 37) Why does Abraham pray that they should have such fruit? To eat and enjoy themselves? Certainly, but also to bring about what Abraham, exemplary in his gratitude to his Lord, hopes for: *"so that they may give thanks."* (Verse 37) Thus the purpose of settling close to the Sacred House is given prominence. It is to establish regular prayer in the most devoted and pure form. Similarly, the purpose of the prayer to incline people's hearts to the dwellers in the neighbourhood of the Sacred House and their abundant provision from the fruits of the earth is to give thanks to God who provides all. With such a passionate prayer, there is an evident irony in the attitude of the Quraysh, the Arabian tribe living near the Ka`bah at the time of the Prophet. They offered no worship to God, and no thanks after Abraham's prayer had been answered, giving them people's love and abundant provisions.

Abraham follows this prayer with an acknowledgement that God knows all that people harbour in their hearts and when they turn to God with thanks and sincere supplication. It is not vocal appearances that are meant here. It is what a person feels deep in his heart, and the way he addresses God, who knows what we reveal and conceal. Indeed, nothing in heaven and earth is hidden from God's knowledge: *"Our Lord, You certainly know all that we conceal and all that we bring into the open: for nothing whatever, on earth or in heaven, can be hidden from God."* (Verse 38)

Abraham then mentions an aspect of grace which God has shown him, and he praises God for it and thanks Him, providing an example for all believers. They must not forget God's grace, and they must always be thankful for it. *"All praise is due to God who has given me, in my old age, Ishmael and Isaac. Surely my Lord hears all prayers."* (Verse 39) Giving a person children when he has attained to old age is felt more keenly, because children represent the extension of one's life into another generation. This is a great feeling for an elderly person who begins to think life is approaching its end. The need to feel the continuity represented by children is thus instinctive. Hence, Abraham praises God and prays for more of God's grace: *"Surely my Lord hears all prayers."* (Verse 39)

A Prayer for All Time

Abraham follows his thanksgiving with a supplication to God to make him always thankful. His thanks take the form of prayer, worship and obedience to God. Thus he declares his determination to always be a devout worshipper, but fears that something may divert him from it. Hence, he prays that God may help him to carry out his intention: *"My Lord, cause me and [some of] my offspring to establish regular prayers. My Lord, accept my prayer."* (Verse 40)

Abraham's supplication shows the irony in the Quraysh's attitude, the Arab tribe which had custody of the Ka`bah. Abraham is appealing to God for help to attend to his prayers, and to enable him to perform these at all times. They, however, turn away from it, denying the truth of what God's Messenger tells them of how Abraham prayed for himself and his offspring. Now, Abraham concludes his humble supplication by appealing to God to forgive him and forgive his parents and all believers. He prays for that forgiveness to be forthcoming on the Day of Judgement when nothing is of benefit to anyone except the good works he or she may have done in life and God's forgiveness for what they might have committed or omitted to do: *"Our Lord, grant Your forgiveness to me and my parents, and all the believers on the Day when the reckoning will come to pass."* (Verse 41)

Abraham's long and humble supplication, which also mentions a number of God's blessings and expresses gratitude and thanks for them, employing a fine musical

rhythm, now comes to a close. It imparts an air of gentle tenderness and care which makes people's hearts long to be with God, and remember His grace and blessings. Abraham, the father of a long line of prophets, is seen as a pious servant who does not forget His Lord's grace, or his duty to be thankful for it. He is given as an example to be followed by God's servants who truly believe in Him, for, just before relating Abraham's supplication, the *sūrah* addressed them. We note how Abraham repeats several times the addressing phrase, "My Lord" or "Our Lord". This repeated acknowledgement of God's Lordship over him and his offspring is significant. He does not mention God by His attribute of Godhead, but instead by His Lordship. Godhead has rarely been subject to controversy even in *jāhiliyyah* societies. Nor was it so in the ignorant society of Arabia at the advent of Islam. What people have always argued about is the Lordship of God, and the need to submit to Him in everyday life on earth.

This is in fact the central point between submission to God, and believing in His oneness on the one hand, and the association of partners with Him on the other. People either submit to God, and this means that they acknowledge Him as their Lord, or they submit to others who would become their lords. This makes all the difference in life. The Qur'ān relates Abraham's supplication to the Arab idolaters, emphasizing his acknowledgement of God's Lordship to draw their attention to the fact that their own way of life was in complete contrast with what this supplication truly signifies.

No Heeding of Past Lessons

The *sūrah* moves on with its presentation of these issues, speaking to those "*who have exchanged God's blessings for unbelief and landed their people in the House of Perdition.*" (Verse 28) It speaks to them as they continue with their erring ways, before they are subjected to God's punishment. They are the ones whom the Prophet had been told to say to them: "*Enjoy yourselves in this life, for you will surely end up in hell.*" (Verse 30) He is further ordered to address those who believe in God, and to command them to offer their prayers and pay their *zakāt*: "*Tell My servants who have attained to faith that they should attend regularly to their prayers and spend [in My way], secretly and openly, out of the sustenance We provide for them, before a day shall come when there will be no trading and no friendship.*" (Verse 31)

Here the *sūrah* completes the picture, showing what God has prepared for those unbelievers who deny God's blessings, and tells when they will face their inevitable destiny. This comes in quick images of the Day of Judgement which fill our hearts with fear: "*Never think that God is unaware of what the wrongdoers are doing. He only grants them respite till the Day when eyes will stare fixedly in horror, when they will be*

dashing in confusion, with their heads lifted up, unable to turn their eyes from what they behold, and their hearts an utter void.” (Verses 42-43)

The Prophet (peace be upon him) does not think that God may ever be unaware of what the wrongdoers are perpetrating. It might appear so to some people who see the wrongdoers enjoying a comfortable life in this world. Such people hear God’s warning, but see nothing of it taking place in this life. This explains the deadline which is fixed for their final punishment when they are given no further respite. That takes place on the day when eyes stare fixedly in horror, unable even to wink. The fear is so great that there is no blinking of a single eyelid.

This is followed by a picture of people rushing everywhere, unable to turn their faces to anything. Their heads are raised upward, but this is unintentional for they cannot move their heads. As they see the fearsome scene ahead of them, their eyes are fixed and their hearts are void, containing nothing they remember or understand. They are all empty.

It is to this day that God delays the wrongdoers’ punishment. Now they stand in their position, overwhelmed by fear. In this scene they are like a small bird caught in the claws of a predator: *“Never think that God is unaware of what the wrongdoers are doing. He only grants them respite till the Day when eyes will stare fixedly in horror, when they will be dashing in confusion, with their heads lifted up, unable to turn their eyes from what they behold, and their hearts an utter void.” (Verses 42-43)*

The Prophet is required to warn people that when this day arrives, there can be no excuses given and no evasion of responsibility. Another picture is then drawn of this horrific day: *“Hence, warn mankind of the Day when suffering may befall them; when those who do wrong will say: ‘Our Lord, grant us respite for a short while, so that we may respond to Your call and follow Your messengers.’ ‘Why? Did you not in time past swear that you would suffer no decline? And you dwelt in the dwellings of those who wronged their own souls before you. Yet you knew for certain how We had dealt with them, and We placed many examples before you.’” (Verses 44-45)*

Warn them against the day when the suffering drawn earlier is bound to befall them. At this point, the wrongdoers turn to their Lord with an urgent appeal, saying: *“Our Lord.”* Now they say this while earlier they were bent on unbelief, associating partners with Him: *“Our Lord, grant us respite for a short while, so that we may respond to Your call and follow Your messengers.” (Verse 44)*

At this point the flow of the discourse is changed from the narrative form to that of an address, as though they are now at that point, staring fixedly in horror, making their passionate appeal. This whole world is rolled over and we seem to be already in the hereafter, and they are being reproached from on high, reminded of the wrongs they used to do in their first life: *“Why, did you not in time past swear that you would*

suffer no decline?" (Verse 44) How do you see yourselves now? Have you suffered any decline? You asserted this when you had in front of your eyes the ruins of those who went before you, giving proof of what happened to them and their inevitable destiny.

"And you dwell in the dwellings of those who wronged their own souls before you. Yet you knew for certain how We had dealt with them, and We placed many examples before you." (Verse 45) It is amazing that you should see the dwellings of former wrongdoers, testifying to what happened to them, and you dwelling in their place, and yet you swear that you would not suffer a decline. With this hard reproach the scene is completed. We understand what happens to them, and what takes place after their appeal and their disappointment.

This example repeatedly occurs throughout history. Many are the wrongdoers who succeed earlier tyrants. In fact, those tyrants were destroyed by their own hands, yet they follow in their footsteps and tyrannize like them. They take no heed of the lessons they see in front of their eyes. Hence, like them, they are put to the same fate. The same dwellings will be rid of them after a while.

The *sūrah* then turns to their present situation, and their wicked scheming against God's Messenger, and their evil devices in every aspect of life. It gives the clear impression that they will face their inevitable destiny, no matter what powerful and elaborate schemes they devise: *"They devised their plots, but their plots are all within God's grasp, even though their plots are so powerful as to move mountains."* (Verse 46)

God is certainly aware of their scheming, although it may be so strong and powerful that it causes mountains, the strongest and most solid and firm creation, to move. In fact, the last thing any human being would expect to move is a mountain. However, their scheming is in no way hidden from God, and never immune from God's power. It is in front of Him, and He can foil it and do with it what He likes.

Fair Reward for All

The Prophet is told again: *"Never think that God may ever fail to fulfil the promise which He has given to His messengers. Indeed God is Almighty, avenger of evil!"* (Verse 47) What the unbelievers devise is of no consequence. It cannot obstruct the fulfilment of God's promise to His messengers to grant them victory and to inflict a mighty punishment on the unbelievers: *"Indeed God is Almighty, avenger of evil!"* (Verse 47) He does not let injustice escape punishment. Those who resort to scheming and devising foul plans will not be spared. The word "avenge" is especially suitable here as it gives the meaning that counters both injustice and wicked scheming. A perpetrator of such injustice and wickedness deserves to suffer God's vengeance, which is, from God's point of view, the exercise of divine justice.

This is certainly inevitable, *“On the day when the earth shall be changed into another earth, as shall be the heavens.”* (Verse 48) We do not know how this happens, nor are we aware of the nature of the new earth or the new heavens, or their respective positions. The statement only gives us an impression of God’s might and His ability to change the earth and heavens. By contrast, the schemes the unbelievers devise are all too weak.

Suddenly, we see this as though it has happened: *“When all people stand before God, the One who holds sway over all that exists.”* (Verse 48) They realize that they are exposed, without cover or screen to protect them. They are neither in their homes nor in their graves. They stand in the open, in front of the Almighty. The emphasis here is on God’s power which cannot be resisted, not even by the scheming of the mighty tyrants which can almost make mountains move.

Then we are shown a scene of the humiliating suffering which stands in contrast to their scheming and tyranny: *“On that day you will see the guilty chained together in fetters, wearing garments of black pitch, and their faces covered with flames.”* (Verses 49-50) The evil-doers are thus chained, each two together, and they are made to pass in ranks. Their humiliation is again indicative of God’s might. In addition to their being chained together, they wear dirty, black pitch garments that can easily catch fire. The connotations here are humiliation and combustion as they draw near to the fire.

“Their faces [are] covered with flames.” It is all a scene of tyrants and schemers made to suffer humiliation and burning in flames. All this is a reward for their arrogance in this life. *“God will requite each soul according to what it had done. God is indeed swift in reckoning.”* (Verse 51) All they have earned is their scheming and injustice. Its reward is that they stand powerless, humiliated. The swiftness of God’s reckoning contrasts with the scheming they thought would protect them, and ensure them victory. Hence, they are dealt with swiftly to add to their humiliation.

Elimination of Pagan Concepts

The *sūrah* then ends with something similar to its opening, but it comes in the form of an open and loud declaration, intended to inform all mankind: *“This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and Only God. Let those who have insight take heed.”* (Verse 52) The essential purpose of this message and the warning it contains is that people should know that *“He is the One and Only God.”* This is the basic concept of this religion on which its code of living is built.

What is required here is not that people should merely acquire such information. The purpose is that they should conduct their lives on the basis of this knowledge. It is that people should submit to God alone, since He is the One and only God. It is

God who deserves to be the Lord, i.e. the Sovereign, the Ruler and the Legislator.

When life is conducted on this basis it becomes totally different from every type of life based on the lordship of creatures, which means that some submit to others who are considered sovereign over them. The difference involves faith, worship, morality, standards and values, behaviour and practices, as well as political, economic and social systems and every aspect of the life of the individual and society alike.

Believing in the One God is the basis of a complete system. It is not merely a matter of conviction. Faith comprises all aspects of life. In the Islamic perspective, sovereignty is a question of faith, as is morality. It is on the basis of faith that the code of life that comprises both moral values and legal matters is based.

We cannot appreciate the extent which faith takes in the Islamic perspective unless we understand the full meaning of the basic declaration every Muslim must make in order to be a Muslim: "I bear witness that there is no deity other than God, and I bear witness that Muḥammad is God's Messenger." We must also be aware of the meaning of addressing all worship to God alone. This means that submission is only to God, not merely during prayer, but in every life situation.

The worship of idols which Abraham prayed to God to spare him and his offspring from does not take only the primitive way which the pagan Arabs and other communities practised. It is not merely the worship of deities made of stones, trees, animals, birds, stars, fire or spirits. To limit the concept of polytheism to this primitive form blurs our view so that we cannot see other forms which may bedevil humanity in different states of *jāhiliyyah*. We need to have a fuller understanding of the nature of associating partners with God, its relevance to idols, and the nature of idols and how they are represented in modern states of ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*.

Associating partners with God may take any form and be represented in any situation where submission in all aspects of life is not to God alone. It is sufficient that a person should submit to beings other than God in certain aspects of his life to be in a situation of associating partners with God, even though he submits to God alone in the other aspects of his life. Worship is only one aspect of life where submission is reflected. But there are many other forms of submission in human life which give us practical examples of polytheism.

A person may believe that Godhead belongs completely to God alone, and he submits to Him in his prayers, fasting, performing pilgrimage and other aspects of worship, but he may at the same time submit to laws other than God's in his social, economic and political life. He may also submit to concepts other than those approved by God in his social standards and to other human beings in his moral values, traditions, customs and style of dress. Such a person practises polytheism in its essence, in full breach of the meaning of the declaration that "there is no deity

other than God and Muḥammad is God's Messenger". This is what people overlook. They take all such matters carelessly, without thinking that they demonstrate the same paganism that has been practised by different communities throughout history.

It is not necessary that idols be represented in primitive form. For idols are mere covers for tyranny which hides behind them in order to impose its authority over people. Yet none of these idols speak, hear or see. Its custodian or priest or the ruler was always around, chanting the idol's praises or acting as its spokesman, but saying what he wants to say. Therefore, when banners or slogans are raised in any community which give rulers or priests the power to put in place laws, values, standards and practices that are at variance with what is acceptable to God, then these are in effect, position and nature deities like those idols of old.

We see today that nationalism, patriotism or a certain class in society or people as a whole are made like banners or slogans which are adored in place of God. People are made to sacrifice for such banners their lives, property, morals and even their honour. Whenever divine law and its requirements come in conflict with what the service of such banners and slogans requires, then God's law is set aside and the requirements of these banners are met. To be more accurate we should say that it is the requirements of the tyrants standing behind these banners that are fulfilled. This is indeed a form of idol worship, because an idol need not be made of wood or stone. It can be represented in a doctrine or a slogan.

The role of Islam is not only to destroy wood or stone idols. That was not the purpose of all the efforts and sacrifices made by God's messengers and their followers in history. Islam aims rather to establish in a very clear way the difference between submission to God alone in all matters and affairs and submission to other beings or entities. It is necessary to look carefully at forms and appearances in every situation to establish whether the existing order conforms to the concept of God's oneness or to a form of paganism.

People may imagine themselves to be following the faith revealed by God because they declare, "There is no deity except God, and Muḥammad is God's Messenger", and they submit to God in all matters of worship and in marriage, divorce and inheritance. Yet when matters go beyond this narrow aspect, their submission is to other beings. They follow laws that are in clear conflict with what God has legislated. They even sacrifice their lives, property, honour and morals, willingly or unwillingly, to fulfil what this neo-paganism requires of them, even when it is in conflict with what is acceptable to God. They are thus totally mistaken when they imagine that they follow Islam. They should wake up and realize that theirs is a situation of clear paganism.

Divine faith is not as hollow as it is imagined to be by some of those who claim to

be Muslims. It is a complete way of life that comprises all the necessary details for daily life. Submission to God's law in the details of daily life, as well as in basic principles and concepts, is the core of the divine faith. It is Islam in its true sense, which is the only form acceptable to God.

As stated earlier, polytheism does not only take the form of believing in multiple deities and claiming that they are God's partners. It is instead the acknowledgement of other lords alongside Him. Idol worship is represented in adopting banners and slogans which are given the same sort of authority as belonged to idols of old. People everywhere then must examine their lives to determine whom they actually submit to. If they submit totally to God, obeying His orders and laws to the exclusion of any other, then they follow the divine faith. If not, then they have a religion based on idol worship. This is a terrible situation indeed.

This is a message to all mankind. Let them be warned thereby, and let them know that He is the One and Only God. Let those who are endowed with insight take heed.
(Verse 52)