

SŪRAH 31

Luqmān

Prologue

The Qur'ān addresses human nature with its own logic. It was revealed from on high by the One who created human nature. He knows what suits it and brings the best out of it. He also knows how to address it and what affects its inner thoughts and feelings. The Qur'ān explains to human nature the truth that is deeply ingrained in it, which it knew long before it was addressed by the Qur'ān, because it was initially created with it. This is the truth of acknowledging God as the Creator, the One, the Supreme, and offering worship to Him alone. Similarly, the entire universe glorifies and praises Him at all times. The problem is that certain aspects of life on earth, some physical impulses, desires, whims and cravings may cloud human nature's vision or force its deviation from the right path. Therefore, the Qur'ān addresses our nature with the logic it knows, presenting to it the truth that it has overlooked. In this way, it moulds human nature on the basis of its code for living, leading it to earn the pleasure of God, the Creator who controls everything.

Revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* provides an example of how the Qur'ān addresses our hearts. It tackles the question of faith among the idolaters who had deviated from the truth. This is indeed the overall issue that all *sūrahs* revealed in Makkah tackle, albeit in a variety of ways and from different angles. That the Qur'ān employs such different means is an essential part of its method to keep our hearts on the alert.

The central issue of faith focuses in this *sūrah* on God's oneness. It demonstrates how we should address worship to Him alone, express gratitude for His blessings, establish firm belief in the hereafter and what this involves of careful reckoning and just reward. Believers should also follow what God has revealed and abandon all notions that are at variance with this.

The *sūrah* presents this whole issue in a way that invites reflection on the remarkable approach of the Qur'ān. It addresses our natures and our hearts. All who advocate faith should study this approach carefully.

The issue of faith is presented here against the backdrop of the entire universe: its skies, earth, sun and moon, night and day, seas and atmosphere, waves and rain, plants and trees, etc. This colossal background is frequently employed in the Qur'ān, so as to make the universe a host of clear signs placed all around us, speaking to our hearts and minds, bringing them alive.

Four Presentations of One Issue

Although the issue is one, and the background is the same, it is presented in this *sūrah* four times in four sections. In each the *sūrah* takes us around the great expanse of the universe, picking up new influences and using new styles. Looking carefully at these four presentations, and how each starts and finishes in a remarkable way is especially pleasant and encourages a positive response.

The first begins immediately after the three separate letters that begin the *sūrah*. These indicate that the *sūrah* is composed of such letters, and that it is from these that verses of this book are presented packed with wisdom and divine guidance. Furthermore, it assures those who excel in goodness of receiving God's mercy. These are the ones who *"attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter."* (Verse 4) Thus it confirms the certainty of the hereafter and the duty of offering worship to God. These are coupled with a clear psychological influence: *"Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful."* (Verse 5)

On the other hand there are those who would pay for idle talk in order to divert others from the path of God, ridiculing these verses. These are faced with a fearsome prospect that suits their ridicule: *"For such people there is shameful suffering in store."* (Verse 6) It describes the movements of these people thus: *"When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them."* (Verse 7) This is coupled with a psychological touch showing how contemptible such people are: *"as though there were heaviness in his ears."* (Verse 7) Another touch sends fear into their hearts although this is given mockingly: *"Give him, then, the news of painful suffering."* (Verse 7) The Arabic term, *bashshirhu*, used for 'giving news' is always employed when people are given good and happy news. Its use here, however, denotes a clear sense of mockery.

The *sūrah* again refers to the believers, giving details of their success, which was already mentioned in general terms. It shows what reward awaits them in the hereafter, just as it has shown the requital of arrogant unbelievers: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verses 8-9) At this point, the *sūrah* portrays a panoramic scene of the great universe as providing the proof that speaks to human

nature from every aspect, and in every language. It clearly presents this great truth, yet most people remain heedless of it: *“He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs.”* (Verse 10) As it presents these aspects of universal evidence which overwhelm people’s minds, the *sūrah* shakes those erring hearts that associate partners with God despite seeing His great creation: *“This is all God’s creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error.”* (Verse 11) As this touch makes its profound universal note, the first presentation concludes.

The second presentation begins with real people, and tackles the same issue with a new approach to produce further effects: *“We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān.”* (Verse 12) What is, then, the nature of this wisdom and what is its distinctive feature? It is summed up in a word: *“Be grateful to God.”* (Verse 12) This is true wisdom in action. The second step shows Luqmān as he gives counsel to his son. It is the advice of a sage to his young son, which means that it is free of fault. No one can describe such advice as insincere or dishonest: how could they when it is from father to son? This advice states the major issue of faith which was referred to in the first presentation, as well as the issue of the hereafter, but it employs new influences here: *“Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.”* (Verse 13)

Here we see relations with one’s parents in a way that overflows with tenderness and compassion: *“We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents.”* (Verse 14) The *sūrah* makes clear the first rule concerning faith, which makes its bond the primary one in human life, taking precedence over that of blood and kinship. Strong and appealing as the latter bond is, it is lower on the scale than the bond of faith: *“Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world’s life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me.”* (Verse 15) It adds here the truth of the life to come: *“In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life].”* (Verse 15) This is then followed with a very strong psychological factor demonstrating the extent, accuracy and comprehensiveness of God’s knowledge. This is done in such a way that makes us shudder as we contemplate it against the background of the great universe: *“My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All Aware.”* (Verse 16)

Luqmān continues his admonition to his son, outlining the duties imposed by

faith, including the all-important duty of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and what follows from both of remaining patient in adversity, as difficulties are bound to be encountered by the advocates of faith: *“Endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve.”* (Verse 17) This should be coupled with commitment to good manners. No advocate of faith should ever be arrogant, as such action is bound to spoil his advocacy efforts: *“Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass.”* (Verses 18-19) Not only does the *sūrah* dismiss such proud, haughty and arrogant behaviour, it looks upon it with contempt. This provides a marked psychological effect.

The third presentation begins with a new factor derived from people’s attachment to the heavens and the earth, and the blessings God has placed in them for mankind, even though they do not show any gratitude: *“Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations.”* (Verse 20) This new factor shows all argument about God to be abhorrent to an upright nature and sound mind. The *sūrah* denounces the unbelievers’ stagnant attitude: *“When it is said to them: ‘Follow what God has revealed’, they say, No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.”* (Verse 21) This is a stupid attitude betraying total ignorance. The comment that follows also carries a strong psychological component: *“Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire.”* (Verse 21)

The question of reward and requital on the Day of Judgement is then shown to be closely connected with the question of belief or denying faith: *“Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events. And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life].”* (Verses 22-23) The *sūrah* then refers to God’s absolute knowledge: *“God has full knowledge of what is in people’s hearts.”* (Verse 23) A strong element of warning is then added: *“We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering.”* (Verse 24)

As this third presentation draws to a close people are made to face up to the logic of human nature as it reflects different aspects of the universe and its inevitable acknowledgement of the One Creator: *“If you were to ask them: ‘Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?’ they will be sure to answer: ‘God’ Say: All praise is due to God alone! Yet most of them do not understand.”* (Verse 25) The section then concludes with a scene of the universe, showing God’s knowledge as infinite, while His will of creation and origination is unrestricted. These are given as universal evidences in

support of the concept of resurrection and return, as this also proves creation in the first place: *“Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all.”* (Verses 27-28)

The fourth presentation begins with a universal scene that produces special effects on people’s hearts. It is the scene of the night and the day as each creeps into the other. This scene also shows the sun and the moon as they move in their orbits within certain limits and up to a point in time that is known to no one other than God who created them and who knows them as well as He knows people and their actions: *“Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do?”* (Verse 29) This scene is made to provide human nature with fresh evidence in support of the central issue: *“Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great.”* (Verse 30)

The *sūrah* then touches our hearts with another strongly effective note derived from an aspect of God’s grace represented by the ships as they go about the sea: *“Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God’s blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God.”* (Verse 31) The comment here shows man’s natural attitude as he faces the might of the sea when he is free of the deceptive influence of power and knowledge that keeps him away from his Lord. Such a natural attitude provides evidence for the central theme of God’s oneness: *“When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude. Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers.”* (Verse 32)

While the sea’s waves can be fearsome, they provide a reminder of the greatest fear that severs blood relations, a bond which can never be severed in this present life: *“Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God’s promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you.”* (Verse 33) At this point, with man trembling in fear, the *sūrah* concludes with a verse that states the final verdict in all the issues it has treated: *“Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things.”* (Verse 34)

These four presentations of the same theme, with their different styles, effects and conclusions constitute an example of how the Qur'ān deals with human hearts. They provide an approach chosen by God who has created these hearts and knows what suits them. In the following pages we will discuss these four presentations in detail, putting two into each of the two following chapters as they manifest stronger interaction in this way.

1

A Sage's Admonition

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Alif. Lām. Mīm. (1)

These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom, (2)

providing guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good, (3)

attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter. (4)

Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful. (5)

Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk, so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule. For such people there is shameful suffering in store. (6)

When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them, as though there were heaviness in his ears. Give him, then, the news of painful suffering.' (7)

الم ﴿١﴾

تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ الْحَكِيمِ ﴿٢﴾

هُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِّلْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴿٣﴾

الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ

وَهُمْ بِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ يُوقِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾

أُولَئِكَ عَلَى هُدًى مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٥﴾

﴿٥﴾

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَشْتَرِي لَهْوَ الْحَدِيثِ

لِيُضِلَّ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ

وَيَتَّخِذَهَا هُزُوًا أُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ

مُهِينٌ ﴿٦﴾

وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِ آيَاتُنَا وَآلَىٰ مُسْتَكْبِرًا

كَأَن لَّمْ يَسْمَعْهَا كَأَنَّ فِي أُذُنَيْهِ وَقْرًا ﴿٧﴾

Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss (8)

in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise. (9)

He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs. (10)

This is all God's creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error. (11)

We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: 'Be grateful to God; for he who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised. (12)

Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: 'My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.' (13)

We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents. With Me is the end of all journeys. (14)

فَبَشِّرْهُ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٧﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
هُمْ جَنَّاتُ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٨﴾

خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَعَدَّ اللَّهُ حَقًّا وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ
الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ بِغَيْرِ عَمَدٍ تَرَوْنَهَا وَأَلْقَىٰ
فِي الْأَرْضِ رَوْسِيًّا أَنْ تَمِيدَ بِكُمْ وَبَثَّ
فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ دَابَّةٍ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً
فَأَنْبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ زَوْجٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿١٠﴾

هَذَا خَلْقُ اللَّهِ فَأَرُونِي مَاذَا خَلَقَ الَّذِينَ
مِنْ دُونِهِ ۗ بَلِ الظَّالِمُونَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ
﴿١١﴾

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا لُقْمَانَ الْحِكْمَةَ أَنْ اشْكُرْ لِلَّهِ
وَمَنْ يَشْكُرْ فَإِنَّمَا يَشْكُرُ لِنَفْسِهِ ۗ وَمَنْ
كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ حَمِيدٌ ﴿١٢﴾

وَإِذْ قَالَ لُقْمَانُ لِابْنِهِ ۗ وَهُوَ يَعِظُهُ رِيبُنِي
لَا تُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ
﴿١٣﴾

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ
وَهَنَّا عَلَىٰ وَهْنٍ وَفَصَّلَهُ فِي عَامَيْنِ أَنْ

Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me. In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. (15)

'My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All-Aware. (16)

My dear son! Attend regularly to prayer, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve. (17)

Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. (18)

Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass.' (19)

أَشْكُرُّ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيْكَ إِلَى الْمَصِيرِ ﴿١٥﴾

وَإِنْ جَاهَدَاكَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ تُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَا تُطِعْهُمَا ۗ وَصَاحِبَيْهِمَا فِي الدُّنْيَا مَعْرُوفًا ۗ وَاتَّبِعْ سَبِيلَ مَنْ أَنَابَ إِلَيَّ ۚ ثُمَّ إِلَيَّ مَرْجِعُكُمْ فَأُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٦﴾

يَبْنِيَّ إِنَّهَا إِنْ تَكَ مِثْقَالَ حَبَّةٍ مِّنْ خَرْدَلٍ فَتَكُنْ فِي صَخْرَةٍ أَوْ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ أَوْ فِي الْأَرْضِ يَأْتِ بِهَا اللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَطِيفٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٦﴾

﴿١٦﴾

يَبْنِيَّ أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَانْهَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأَصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا أَصَابَكَ ۗ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ عَزْمِ الْأُمُورِ ﴿١٧﴾

وَلَا تُصَعِّرْ خَدَّكَ لِلنَّاسِ وَلَا تَمْشِ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَرَحًا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ ﴿١٨﴾

وَأَقْصِدْ فِي مَشْيِكَ ۗ وَأَغْضُضْ مِن صَوْتِكَ ۚ إِنَّ أَنْكَرَ الْأَصْوَاتِ لَصَوْتُ الْحَمِيرِ ﴿١٩﴾

A Book of Wisdom

Alif. Lām. Mīm. These are verses of the divine book, full of wisdom, providing guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good, attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter. Those are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful. (Verses 1-5)

The *sūrah* begins with three separate letters which are then described as “*These are the verses of the divine book, full of wisdom.*” (Verse 2) This serves to emphasize that the verses of this book are composed of letters of the same sort. The book is described here as being one of wisdom because wisdom is repeatedly mentioned in this *sūrah*. Hence, it is fitting, in the normal method of the Qur’ān, that this particular aspect of the book is emphasized in this context. Moreover, speaking of the book as one of wisdom gives it connotations of life and will. It is as though the book itself is a living creature which is wise in what it says and the way it directs people to behave. It chooses its objective and serves it. This is indeed true of the book as it has life, spirit, movement and a distinctive personality. Furthermore, it provides friendly companionship, one which is felt by those who live with it and under its shade. They relate to it and have a mutual response with it just like close friends.

This book, which is full of wisdom provides “*guidance and mercy for those who excel in doing good.*” This is its essential and permanent status: providing guidance so that goodly people can follow the right way. Indeed, travellers who follow its way are never in error. This book also provides people with mercy as they feel reassured and contented by the guidance they are given. They feel God’s mercy as they attain success, establish firm bonds and strong mutual commitments among those who follow such guidance, and also between them and the laws of the universe in which they live.

The ones who excel in doing good are those who “*attend regularly to prayers, give in charity and are indeed certain of the hereafter.*” (Verse 4) Such people attend regularly to prayers, and offer them in full, on time and in the right manner. This fulfils the purpose of those prayers and enhances their effect on feelings and behaviour. Thus prayer creates a very strong bond with God, one which spreads an air of pleasantness on life as a whole. Giving generously in charity enables the giver to rise above the natural instinct to hold on to things. It helps to establish a social system based on mutual cooperation where both the affluent and the deprived find confidence and reassurance, as well as genuine mutual care. Certainty of the hereafter ensures that believers stay alert, seeking what God will give, and resisting the lure of all worldly comforts and luxuries. Furthermore, it keeps the believer heedful of what God desires, in public and private, in matters small or large. Thus he

aims to achieve excellence in doing good, or *ihsān*, which the Prophet defined as: "To worship God as though you see Him; if you do not see Him, remember that He sees you." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

It is for those who excel in doing good that the divine book is both guidance and mercy. The transparency of their hearts enables them to find comfort and reassurance in this book. They are able to relate to the light that is at the core of its nature and understand its wise objectives. Therefore, they accept it feeling the harmony that it provides with the universe at large and appreciating the clarity of the way they follow. This Qur'ān gives to every heart what suits its openness and sensitivity. Furthermore, it responds to the love, appreciation and high esteem with which hearts approach it. The Qur'ān is indeed alive, reciprocating people's feelings.

Those who attend to prayer, give in charity and are certain of the hereafter "*are the ones who follow their Lord's guidance, and they are the ones who will be successful.*" (Verse 5) Whoever accepts divine guidance will be successful. Such a person moves along with enlightenment which leads him to his goal. He is thus free from error in this life and from the consequences of error in the life to come. He has reassurance, comfort, and friendly interaction with all that exists.

The Other Party

On the other side stand a totally different type of people:

Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk, so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule. For such people there is shameful suffering in store. When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them, as though there were heaviness in his ears. Give him, then, the news of painful suffering.
(Verses 6-7)

Idle talk is any type of talk that distracts hearts and kills time without yielding any benefit to man or his mission on earth. Let us remind ourselves that man's mission is to build human life on the basis of goodness, justice and righteousness. Islam defines this mission, its nature, limits and means, charting the way it should follow. The Qur'ānic statement here is general describing a type of person that always exists. There are, however, reports that suggest that the Qur'ān is describing a particular incident that took place in the early years of Islam. These reports speak of al-Naḍr ibn al-Ĥārith who used to buy books recording the legends and stories of Persian heroes. He made every effort to get people to listen to his narratives instead of listening to the Prophet reciting the Qur'ān. This statement, however, is more general

and wider in scope than this. It describes a type of person with clear characteristics. This type is seen in every generation just as they were evident in Makkah among the first community addressed by the Qur'ān.

"Among people there are some who would pay for idle talk." (Verse 6) Such people would pay money, time and life to buy such idle talk. How high the price, and cheap the commodity in which such people spend their lives. They buy such talk *"so as to lead people astray from the path of God, without knowledge, and thus they turn it to ridicule."* (Verse 6) They are truly ignorant. Their action is neither based on sound knowledge, nor aims for a wise objective. They have bad intentions and aims. They want to use such idle talk to lead themselves and others astray from God's path. They are ill-mannered, ridicule God's path, and mock the way God has laid down for people's lives. Hence, the Qur'ān issues a strong warning to such people. It shows them as contemptible, even before it completes their picture: *"For such people there is shameful suffering in store."* (Verse 6) The description of their suffering as shameful is deliberate for this replies to their mocking of the divine way of life.

Painting the image of this other party is then resumed: *"When Our revelations are conveyed to such a person, he turns away in his arrogance as though he had not heard them."* (Verse 7) The image here is full of movement, showing this person as arrogant, turning away in pride. He is, therefore, decorated with shame and this makes us look at him with contempt: *"as though there were heaviness in his ears."* (Verse 7) It is this heaviness that stops him from listening to God's verses. No person listens to these divine verses and then turns away so arrogantly. This description is completed with further ridicule: *"Give him, then, the news of painful suffering."* (Verse 7) As explained in the Prologue, the verse uses here the term *bashshir*, which connotes the giving of happy news. Its usage adds further ridicule.

By way of contrast, the *sūrah* speaks of the reward to be given to the good believers who act on the basis of their faith. It also provides some details of their success to which earlier reference was made: *"Those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide in accordance with God's true promise. He alone is Almighty, Wise."* (Verses 8-9)

Whenever the Qur'ān mentions reward, it precedes this by mentioning faith and good action. It is in the nature of the Islamic faith that it must never remain an idle belief that triggers no action. It must always be a living, active reality. Indeed, Islam hardly settles in a person's heart before it begins to establish itself in action and behaviour. It reflects its nature and what it does to believers' consciences through its clear effects on people's lives.

Those believers who have translated their faith into good action *"shall have gardens of bliss in which to abide."* (Verse 9) Their admission to heaven and their abode there

simply fulfils God's true promise. The grace God bestows on His servants means that He commits Himself to reward them generously for what they do for themselves, not for Him, as He is in no need of anyone. "He alone is Almighty, Wise." (Verse 9) He is certainly able to fulfil His promise, and He is wise in all that He does, including creation, promise and fulfilment.

Signs of Wisdom

The ultimate proof of God's might, wisdom and all other issues mentioned in the *sūrah* is the great universe, whose creation no human being ever claims for himself or for anyone other than God. The universe is huge and awesome, reflecting harmony and coherence. It has a fine and elaborate system. It captivates our hearts and readily faces human nature in such a way that it cannot turn away from it. Hence, it readily acknowledges the great Creator's oneness and declares anyone who associates partners with Him as erring, as those who transgress the bounds of clear truth:

He has created the skies without any supports that you can see, and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you, and has scattered through it all manner of living creatures. We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs. This is all God's creation. Show me, then, what others might have created! Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error. (Verses 10-11)

If we take the term 'skies' at its apparent meaning, without going into complex scientific research, we see how awesome, expansive and sublime they are. 'Whether the reference here is to planets, stars, galaxies or other celestial bodies that move in the space whose nature and extent are known only to God, or to this blue dome which we see with our eyes but no one knows what exactly it is, the fact remains that there are huge, majestic bodies that are elevated without supporting pillars. People see them with their eyes, wherever they look during the night or day and wherever they travel on earth. To contemplate the sky with our naked eyes, even though we cannot comprehend its great dimensions, is sufficient to send a shudder through our whole beings. We see a great, endless expanse without limits, but we also see a fine and beautiful system that holds all these creatures in such perfect harmony. Neither our eyes nor our hearts ever tire of contemplating such majesty. Indeed, this beauty is so captivating that all our feelings are absorbed. What does man say when he realizes that each little dot of light moving in this great expanse may be millions of times bigger than the earth he lives on?

This reference to the limitless space, "He has created the skies without any supports that you can see," is made quickly and briefly, before we are returned straight to earth which is no more than a tiny particle when compared to the great universal expanse.

Yet man sees the earth as huge indeed: no man can traverse it all, even though he spends his life in continuous travel. Thus, the *sūrah* returns us to earth so we contemplate it with open minds, and without the effects of familiarity that cloud our vision: *"and has placed firm mountains on earth, lest it sway with you."* (Verse 10)

Geologists say that mountains are undulations of the face of the earth resulting from underground pockets of coolness where gases get frozen and reduce in size. Thus the surface of the earth shrinks and becomes wrinkled allowing elevations and falls to take place in proportion to underground reductions in size. This may or may not be true, but God's book clearly states that these mountains stabilize the earth so that it does not sway. Thus, the rise of a mountain in one place balances shrinkage in another. However, God's word remains supreme. He is indeed the One who always states the truth.

God *"has scattered through it all manner of living creatures."* (Verse 10) This is one of the great wonders of existence. Up to the present day, no one can claim to have fathomed the secret of the presence of life on earth. This applies to life in its simplest, one-cell form. How then can we fathom the greater secret that causes life to become more varied and complex, giving rise to countless species, types and kinds of creatures? Yet most people choose to pass by such great wonders with their eyes and minds closed, just as they pass by something very ordinary that does not deserve a second look. These very people stand amazed as they look at a man-made machine which is very simple when compared to a single living cell and its accurately regulated behaviour. We need not compare such machines to more sophisticated living creatures, let alone to the human body which contains hundreds of chemical laboratories, storehouses, distribution centres, wireless stations that receive and transmit messages, as well as hundreds of other complicated functions, the secrets of which are known only to God.

"We send down water from the skies to cause every kind of goodly plant to grow on earth in pairs." (Verse 10) Sending rain down from the sky is yet another universal wonder which we take for granted, oblivious to what is involved. The water that runs in rivers, fills up lakes, or bursts out in springs comes from the sky according to a carefully planned system that, in turn, is linked to the regulation of the heavens and the earth, their relative distances, natures and formations. The growing of plants after rain has fallen is another wonder that remains infinitely amazing. It reflects several miracles, including those of the springing up of life, its diversity, and the hereditary genes within a small seed allowing replication of all types of flora. To study the colour diversity in one flower of a single plant leads an open heart to reflection on life and its profound secrets, and hence to genuine belief in God, the Originator of life.

The *sūrah* makes clear that God has caused plants to grow in pairs, which is a fascinating fact that scientific research has only recently discovered. All plants have male and female cells which may combine within the same flower, or in two flowers in the same little branch, or in two branches or trees. No fruit can be produced unless pollination takes place between the two types, just as happens in animal and human life.

That these plants and their pairs are described as 'goodly' imparts a significant feeling, making it suited as God's creation. Hence, it is raised in front of our eyes: "This is all God's creation." (Verse 11) And a challenge follows: "Show me, then, what others might have created." (Verse 11) Then follows the comment: "Surely, the wrongdoers are in obvious error." (Verse 11) What could be worse than wrongdoing and the error of associating partners with God when looking at God's great and universal creation? With this profound note the first presentation concludes.

A Totally New Approach

The second presentation starts with a new construction, using narration and indirect advice. It takes up the question of gratitude to God alone, believing in His absolute oneness, and the question of the hereafter, reward and requital.

We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: Be grateful to God; for he who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised. (Verse 12)

The *sūrah* chooses Luqmān as its spokesman on the questions of God's oneness and the life to come. Reports on Luqmān's identity vary, with some suggesting that he was a prophet, while others say that he was a devout person, but not a prophet. The majority of scholars prefer this second view. It is also suggested that he was an Abyssinian slave, while some reports say that he was from Nubia, the area stretching today from southern Egypt to northern Sudan. It is also said that he was one of the Children of Israel and that he was a judge. Whoever Luqmān truly was, the Qur'ān states that he was a man endowed with wisdom, embodied in gratitude to God: "We bestowed wisdom on Luqmān: 'Be grateful to God.'" (Verse 12) The verse thus contains an implicit directive to show gratitude to God, emulating this sage who is chosen as an example to be followed. This is coupled with another directive making it clear that being grateful to God is of benefit only to the person expressing such gratitude, while it is of no benefit to God, who is ever praised even though none of His creatures offers any such praise: "He who is grateful is only grateful for his own benefit. As for the one who is ungrateful; well, God is self-sufficient, ever to be praised." (Verse 12) Thus, the person who abandons wisdom and who does not keep something for his future life

betrays the worst type of stupidity.

The question of God's oneness is then raised in the form of an admonition by Luqmān to his son: "*Luqmān said to his son, admonishing him: My dear son! Do not associate any partners with God; for, to associate partners with Him is indeed a great wrong.*" (Verse 13) This is a sincere piece of advice, for no parent wishes anything but good for his child. The sage, Luqmān, warns his son against associating partners with God, explaining that to do so is to be guilty of great wrongdoing. He emphasizes this fact twice: firstly, by explaining the reason, and secondly through the emphatic style employed. This is the truth that Muhammad presented to his people, but they argued and disputed with him, suspecting his motives and fearing that he might want to take power and place himself above them. What would they, then, say when they heard Luqmān, the sage, urging it upon his son? A father's counsel is honest, sincere, free of suspicion. The fact is that God's oneness is the old truth stated by everyone to whom God has imparted knowledge and wisdom. It aims to bring pure goodness and nothing else. This is the psychological effect intended here.

Relations with Parents

Continuing on from this parental advice, the *sūrah* speaks in gentle terms about relations between parents and children, delivering this in an inspiring and tender way. Nevertheless, the bond of faith takes precedence over such close relations:

We have enjoined upon man goodness to his parents: his mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years. Be grateful to Me and to your parents. With Me is the end of all journeys. Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness, and follow the path of those who turn towards Me. In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return, when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life]. (Verses 14-15)

That children are enjoined to be good to parents is mentioned repeatedly in the Qur'ān and by the Prophet. The reverse recommendation enjoining kindness to children occurs only rarely, but mostly in connection with infanticide, a special case with special circumstances. Human nature ensures that a newborn is taken care of by its parents. It is because of their very nature that people look after the new generation in order to ensure the continuity of life, as God wills. In this way, parents normally offer their personal efforts, resources, possessions and lives generally, without complaint or boredom. Indeed they often do not realize how much they give. They do it willingly and with pleasure, as if they were the recipients. Thus, parents do not

need to be urged to take care of their children. It is children who need to be urged to look after the generation that has already given its all and stands at life's departure gate. Children can compensate parents for even a portion of what they have given, even though they may dedicate their entire lives to such ends. Such parental dedication is given an inspiring image: *"His mother bore him going from weakness to weakness, and his weaning takes place within two years."* (Verse 14) Needless to say, the mother gives the larger share of such sacrifice, with more love and care. "A man was carrying his mother on his back in ṭawāf, [a worship ritual of pilgrimage], when he asked the Prophet: 'Do I thus pay her back for what she did for me?' The Prophet said: 'No; not even for one heaved sigh.'" [Related by al-Bazzār.] This is how the Prophet compares the two actions. The man could not repay his mother for even one heaved sigh during pregnancy or childbirth, for she carried her child in weakness upon weakness.

With this image of compassion the *sūrah* directs people to the need to express gratitude to God, the first Benefactor, and then to show gratitude to parents who are always ready to give to their children. These duties are given in order of priority: *'Be grateful to Me and to your parents.'* (Verse 14) This fact is linked to the reality of the hereafter: *"With Me is the end of all journeys."* (Verse 14) It is then, at the end of the journey, that what has been advanced of good work will be of benefit.

This bond between parent and child, with all its care, love and sacrifice, nevertheless comes second to the bond of faith. Hence, immediately after the statement enjoining man to be dutiful to parents, he is told: *"Yet should they endeavour to make you associate as partner with Me something of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them."* (Verse 15) Should this happen, the duty of obeying one's parents is no longer valid. The bond of faith supersedes all bonds. Hence, no matter how hard parents try to persuade, coerce, pressurize or force their son or daughter to associate with God anyone whose godship is unknown to them – and no being other than God has any godship to be known – they must not be obeyed. This is an order from God whom all creatures must obey.

However, differences of faith and the order not to obey parents against one's faith does not deprive parents of their right to receive kindly and caring treatment and companionship: *"but [even then] bear them company in this world's life with kindness."* (Verse 15) This life is, after all, a short journey that does not affect the truth: *"Follow the path of those who turn towards Me,"* i.e. the believers. *"In the end, it is to Me that you shall all return,"* after this short journey on earth; *'when I shall inform you about all that you were doing [in life].'* (Verse 15) Everyone will have the just reward of their deeds.

It is reported that this verse and the two similar to it in *Sūrah* 29, The Spider, and *Sūrah* 46, The Sand Dunes, were revealed in connection with Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ and his mother [as reported earlier]. The story is mentioned in Muslim's *Ṣaḥīḥ*?,

which is universally recognized as an authentic *Ĥadīth* anthology. However, its import is general and applies to any similar situation. It draws an order for bonds and relations, and one for duties. Thus, the bond of faith in God ranks top, and with it the requirement to fulfil His orders. The Qur'ān emphasizes this rule on every occasion and in a variety of forms so that it is solidly implanted in a believer's consciousness. There can be no confusion or ambiguity about this.

The Hereafter and the Reckoning

The next paragraph in Luqmān's admonition speaks about the hereafter and its accurate reckoning of people's deeds and its just reward. This reality is not, however, presented as bare facts. It is shown against the panoramic scene of the universe, in an image that makes the human conscience tremble as it reflects on God's detailed and perfect knowledge:

My dear son! If there be something which is no more than the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be hidden in a rock, or in the skies, or in the earth, God will bring it forth. God is Gracious, All-Aware. (Verse 16)

No abstract presentation of God's knowledge and its comprehensiveness, His power, accuracy of reckoning and fairness of weighing can match this clear and vivid image. This is the distinction of the unique Qur'ānic method, beautifully effected, profoundly effective. A grain of mustard seed, without weight or value, misplaced deep in a rock where it cannot be seen or found! Or it could be 'in the skies', in that vast, endless structure where a huge star appears no more than a little dot or a floating particle! Or it could be 'in the earth' lost in its sand and dust with nothing to indicate it. Nevertheless, 'God will bring it forth.' (Verse 16) His knowledge traces it and His power does not let go of it. "God is Gracious, All-Aware." (Verse 16) A fitting comment on the magnificent scene!

Our imagination continues to follow that mustard seed in those deep and vast areas so we reflect on God's knowledge which never loses sight of it. Thus, our hearts are filled with awe and we turn to God appreciating His knowledge of all that is beyond the realm of our perception. Thus, the truth the Qur'ān wants to drive home is established in our minds.

The *sūrah* continues with Luqmān as he goes on admonishing his son. Having established the faith in man's conscience and clarified its main essentials, he now speaks about attending to prayer, advocacy of the faith and perseverance in the face of inevitable difficulties:

My dear son! Attend regularly to prayer, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and endure with fortitude whatever befalls you. These are matters that require strong resolve. (Verse 17)

Such is the way of faith: declaring God's oneness, knowing that He sees all, aspiration to His reward, trust in His justice and fear of His punishment. This is followed by a call to people to maintain the right path, enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. Prior to all this, however, we should ensure that we have the right equipment for the battle against evil: we should worship God alone, address prayers to Him, and remain steadfast despite adversity. Adversity can take many forms from deviation to stubbornness, turning away as well as verbal and physical abuse, loss of property and wealth, as also physical hardship: *"These are matters that require strong resolve."* Such strong resolve allows no hesitation after a decision has been firmly taken.

Luqmān goes on to speak about the manners that should be characteristic of advocates who call on people to adopt the divine faith. Such advocacy of what is good does not permit behaving arrogantly towards people under the pretext of leading them to what is of benefit. Needless to say, arrogant behaviour that is not accompanied by the advocacy of goodness is even worse and more abominable:

Do not turn your cheek away from people in false pride, nor walk haughtily on earth. God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful. Be of modest bearing in your walk, and lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass. (Verses 18-19)

In drawing this image of arrogance the *sūrah* uses the Arabic term *tuṣa'ir* which is translated here as *'turn your cheek away'*. This term is derived from the disease *ṣa'ar* which affects camels causing them to involuntarily turn their necks sideways. The *sūrah* chooses this term in order to describe the repugnance of turning one's cheek away from people in a gesture similar to what camels affected by this disease do. Walking haughtily is another type of behaviour suggesting carelessness about people and their feelings. This is again a gesture that is disliked by God and man. It is a sign of a sick mind and a self-centred person: *"God does not love anyone who is arrogant, boastful."* (Verse 18)

The order not to walk haughtily on earth is coupled with a statement about the proper way of walking: *"Be of modest bearing in your walk."* (Verse 19) Such modesty is expressed in Arabic with the word *iqṣid*, which connotes economy and definite purpose. The economy aspect referred to here is the need not to waste energy in a boastful, arrogant gait, and the purposeful walk is one which does not waste time;

rather it moves towards its goal easily.

Luqmān's admonition also urges his son to lower his voice, which is a mark of politeness, self-confidence and reliability. Only an impolite person, or one who has self doubt or uncertainty about what he says, resorts to speaking loudly as he tries to disguise such doubts by raising his voice. The *sūrah* shows this behaviour as disgusting, adding to its abhorrence with the comment: "*Lower your voice; for the most hideous of voices is the braying of the ass.*" (Verse 19)

2

God's Absolute Knowledge

Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations. (20)

أَلَمْ تَرَوْا أَنَّ اللَّهَ سَخَّرَ لَكُمْ مَّا فِي
السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَأَسْبَغَ عَلَيْكُمْ
نِعْمَهُ ظَهْرَةَ وَبَاطِنَةً ۗ وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن
يُجَادِلُ فِي اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَلَا هُدًى وَلَا

كِتَابٍ مُّنبِئٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.' Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire. (21)

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ اتَّبِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا
بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَا وَجَدْنَا عَلَيْهِ ءِآبَاءَنَا ؕ أُولَٰئِكَ
كَانَ الشَّيْطَانُ يَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَىٰ عَذَابٍ

السَّعِيرِ ﴿٢١﴾

Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events. (22)

۞ وَمَن يُسَلِّمْ وَجْهَهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ
فَقَدْ آسْتَمَسَكَ بِالْعُرْوَةِ الْوُثْقَىٰ ۗ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ

عَقِبَةُ الْأُمُورِ ﴿٢٢﴾

And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life]. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (23)

We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering. (24)

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them do not understand. (25)

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (26)

Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. (27)

The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all. (28)

وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَلَا يَحْزُنكَ كُفْرُهُ ۚ إِلَيْنَا
مَرْجِعُهُمْ فَنُنَبِّئُهُمْ بِمَا عَمِلُوا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ
بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ ﴿٢٣﴾

نُمَتِّعُهُمْ قَلِيلًا ثُمَّ نَضْطَرُّهُمْ إِلَىٰ عَذَابٍ
غَلِيظٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

وَلَيْن سَأَلْتَهُمْ مَنْ خَلَقَ السَّمَوَاتِ
وَالْأَرْضَ لَيَقُولُنَّ اللَّهُ ۚ قُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ ۚ بَلْ
أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ
الْغَنِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَلَوْ أَنَّ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَمٌ
وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةُ أَنْهَارٍ مَا
نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ
﴿٢٧﴾

مَا خَلَقَكُمْ وَلَا بَعَثَكُمْ إِلَّا كَنَفْسٍ
وَاحِدَةً ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do? (29)

Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great. (30)

Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God's blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God. (31)

When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude. Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers. (32)

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُولِجُ اللَّيْلَ فِي النَّهَارِ
وَيُولِجُ النَّهَارَ فِي اللَّيْلِ وَسَخَّرَ الشَّمْسَ
وَالْقَمَرَ كُلًّا يَجْرِي إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى
وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَأَنَّ مَا يَدْعُونَ
مِن دُونِهِ الْبَطْلُ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْعَلِيُّ
الْكَبِيرُ ﴿٣٠﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ الْفُلَّكَ تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ
بِنِعْمَتِ اللَّهِ لِيُرِيكُمْ مِنْ آيَاتِهِ ۗ إِنَّ فِي
ذَٰلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّكُلِّ صَبَّارٍ شَكُورٍ ﴿٣١﴾

وَإِذَا غَشِيَهُمْ مَوَّجٌ كَالظُّلَلِ دَعُوا اللَّهَ
مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّاهُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ
فَمِنْهُمْ مُّقْتَصِدٌ ۗ وَمَا تَجْحَدُ بِآيَاتِنَا إِلَّا
كُلُّ خَتَّارٍ كَفُورٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God's promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you. (33)

Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things. (34)

يَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ أَتَقُومُوا رَبَّكُمْ وَأَحْشَوْا يَوْمًا
لَا يَجْزِي وَالِدٌ عَن وَلَدِهِ وَلَا مَوْلُودٌ
هُوَ جَازٍ عَن وَالِدِهِ شَيْئًا إِنَّ وَعْدَ
اللَّهِ حَقٌّ فَلَا تَغُرَّنَّكُمُ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا
وَلَا يَغُرَّنَّكُم بِاللَّهِ الْغُرُورُ ﴿٣٣﴾

إِنَّ اللَّهَ عِنْدَهُ عِلْمُ السَّاعَةِ وَيُنزِلُ
الْغَيْثَ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْأَرْحَامِ وَمَا تَدْرِي
نَفْسٌ مَّاذَا تَكْسِبُ غَدًا وَمَا تَدْرِي
نَفْسٌ بِأَيِّ أَرْضٍ تَمُوتُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ
خَبِيرٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

Blessings Galore

The third presentation of this central issue of faith employs a different style, showing us in the first place the universal proof as it relates to human life, interests and livelihood. It speaks of God's blessings, visible and subtle, which people enjoy. Nevertheless, they continue to engage in arguments about God, who gives them all these blessings. The *sūrah* then follows the same pattern in presenting the central theme of faith as already discussed in the first two presentations:

Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and the earth, and has lavished upon you His blessings, outward and inward? Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light giving revelations. When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.' Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire. (Verses 20-21)

This remark occurs repeatedly in the Qur'ān. Conveyed in different ways, it appears new every time, because the universe appears new whenever we contemplate its secrets and reflect on its unending wonders. Indeed, it takes far longer than man's lifetime to review these wonders. Yet every time he looks at them, they appear to have a different colour and a different tone.

The *sūrah* portrays these from the viewpoint of harmony between man's needs in his life on earth and the construction of the universe. This leaves no possibility for such harmony to have been achieved by mere coincidence. It is inevitable, therefore, that we should acknowledge the single will that makes such harmony a reality.

Planet earth is no more than a little particle when compared to the universe. Compared to the size of the earth, man is a tiny and weak creature. Moreover, the earth contains forces as well as animate and inanimate beings in comparison to which man appears no more than a tiny creature in size, weight and strength. By His grace, however, and by breathing into him of His own spirit and honouring him above many of His creatures, God has given man a special position in the universal system. Indeed, He has given him the ability to use many of the forces and resources of this universe. This is what the *sūrah* describes as 'making things subservient' to man within the context of granting him countless blessings that are subtle and apparent, inward and outward. These blessings go beyond making things in the heavens and earth subservient to man. Mere human existence is a blessing, as are man's powers, abilities, talents and skills. Sending human messengers with divine messages is an even bigger and greater blessing. The breathing of God's spirit into man at the time of his creation is also an aspect of blessing. Indeed, every breath man draws, every heart beat, every sigh, sound, feeling and thought is a blessing which he could not have had without God's grace.

God has made what is in the skies available and subservient to man. Thus, he is able to benefit from the sun's rays, the moon's light, the guidance provided by the stars, rain, air and birds that fly. He also enabled him to benefit and use what is on and in the earth. This is even easier to note and reflect upon. Man is placed in charge of this vast kingdom, and given the ability to use all the resources of the earth, some of which are clear and apparent while others are subtle and hidden; some are known fully to man, some he knows only by their effects, and some he benefits from without even knowing what they are. In every moment of the night and day man is given the great abundance of God's blessings, the extent and form of which he does not fully know. Yet in spite of all this, some people are ingrate, do not reflect on the world around them and do not appreciate the blessings they enjoy: *"Yet some people argue about God without having any knowledge, without guidance, and without any light-giving revelations."* (Verse 20)

This argument sounds singular in the light of this universal proof. Considering

that God's grace is so great and abundant, man's denial looks both absurd and ugly. Both human nature and conscience find it repugnant. The type of person who argues about the truth of God, and what this means, is deviant, unresponsive to the inspiration the universe shines with, denies God's grace, and unashamedly argues about the One who has granted all these blessings. What is worse is that in their argument, such people do not rely on any true knowledge, have no proper guidance, and refer to no guiding revelation.

"When it is said to them, 'Follow what God has revealed', they say, 'No; but we will follow only what we found our forefathers believing in.'" (Verse 21) This is their only basis and evidence! It is nothing other than blindly following traditions which lack knowledge and intelligent thinking. Islam wants to free them from such blind imitation, so as to set their minds free. It wants them to be able to think, reflect and benefit by the light, but they adamantly hold on to the chains of their deviant past.

Islam means freedom of conscience, active feelings, aspiration for enlightenment and a new way of life that is free of blind tradition. Yet such people turn their backs on it, rejecting its light and guidance. They argue about God without knowledge or guidance. Hence, the *sūrah* looks upon them with ridicule, making a subtle reference to the end such attitudes lead to: *"Why, even if Satan is beckoning them to the suffering of the blazing fire."* (Verse 21) Indeed their attitude is nothing less than an invitation by Satan leading them to God's punishment. Will they persist with this despite the end which they will be certain to have? This last remark should at least alert them to the difficulty of their position.

The *sūrah* then refers to the proper attitude that should result from reflecting on the universal evidence and God's countless blessings: *"Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support. With God rests the final outcome of all events."* (Verse 22) Together with good deeds, what is required is total submission to God. One should feel reassured of God's will, obey His commands, fulfil the duties He requires, have confidence in His mercy, trust His care, and so enjoy total contentment. All this is grouped under the heading of submission to God.

"Whoever submits himself to God and excels in good deeds has indeed taken hold of a most firm support." This support is a bond that is never severed or weakened. It never lets down anyone who holds to it, whether in situations of ease or difficulty. No one who holds to it will ever be lost, even though his road is rough, dark and beset by hardships. This firm support is the close, confident link between the submitting believer and his Lord. Thus, whatever comes through God's will is accepted without qualm. It gives the believer the sort of reassurance that keeps him calm and confident as he faces all events. Furthermore, in this way, he is able to rise above comforts, luxuries, difficulties, surprises and all other impediments.

Man's journey is long, hard and full of danger. The danger posed by luxury and affluence is no less than that arising from misery and deprivation. Hence the need for firm and ever-present support. The firmest support is that which comes about from submitting oneself to God and doing good deeds. *"With God rests the final outcome of all events."* (Verse 22) With Him all journeys end, and to Him we all return. Hence, it is better for man to submit to Him from the start, so that he moves along his journey with confidence, reassurance and guidance.

And whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you. To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing [in life]. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. We will let them enjoy themselves for a short while, but We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering. (Verses 23-24)

This is, by contrast, the end of the unbeliever who is deceived by life's comforts. In this present life, he is shown to the Prophet and the believers as being of no consequence: *"Whoever disbelieves; let not their unbelief grieve you."* (Verse 23) He is too small for you to grieve over. As for his end in the life to come, it is again of no insignificance. He cannot escape God's punishment, when God knows all his actions and intentions: *"To Us they must all return, and then We shall inform them about all that they were doing in life. God has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts."* (Verse 23) The enjoyments that deceive such people are small, short in duration, trifling in value, but the results at the end are terrifying. These they cannot escape: *"We shall ultimately drive them into severe suffering."* (Verse 24) The Arabic term, *ghalīz*, used here to describe the suffering, has more physical connotations than 'severe' suggests. Thus the verse imparts a more tangible feeling of the suffering into which they are driven, unable to avoid it. How vastly different the two ends are.

Using the Creation Argument

In its contemplation of the universe, the *sūrah* puts the unbelievers face to face with the logic of their own nature. In this way, they cannot deny the truth it emphasizes. Yet still there are those who deviate and remain heedless:

If you were to ask them: 'Who is it that has created the heavens and the earth?' they will be sure to answer: 'God.' Say: All praise is due to God alone!' Yet most of them do not understand. To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise. (Verses 25-26)

When man questions his own nature and conscience, he cannot avoid admitting this clear truth. The heavens and the earth stand as they are: with careful planning of

their sizes, movements, dimensions, qualities and characteristics. They are made in deliberate measure and full harmony. Yet they are creatures that no one claims to have created, and no one alleges that any creator other than God has had a share in their making. They cannot have come into existence by themselves. Nor can they follow a system or establish harmony without elaborate planning or a planner. To suggest that they have existed by themselves, or as the result of coincidence, does not merit argument. Moreover, human nature profoundly rejects any such claim.

Those who associated partners with God, and argued very strongly against the Prophet and his message, could not falsify the argument of their own nature when they were confronted with the universal proof of the creation of the heavens and the earth. Hence, they did not hesitate in their reply to the question: 'Who has created the heavens and the earth?' Their answer was clear: 'God.' Therefore, God directs His Messenger to comment on their answer thus: *"Say: All praise is due to God alone."* (Verse 25) Praise is due to God for keeping the truth of the universe and its creation clear in human nature. The argument is discontinued so as to give a new comment: *"Yet most of them do not understand."* (Verse 25) It is because they do not understand that they continue to argue, ignoring the logic of human nature and the fact that the whole universe points to its supreme Creator.

The *sūrah* adds a statement of God's ownership of all that is in the heavens and the earth, whether it is made available to man or not. He is in no need of anything in the heavens or the earth. He is praised even though people may not praise Him: *"To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. Indeed, God is the One who is self-sufficient, worthy of all praise."* (Verse 26)

This presentation concludes with a scene of the universe which symbolizes God's inexhaustible riches, and unlimited knowledge. It further expresses His supreme and ever-renewing ability to create and His unrestricted will:

Were all the trees on earth to be made into pens, and the sea ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is indeed Almighty, Wise. The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all. (Verses 27-28)

This scene is taken straight from people's limited knowledge and observations, but aims to put before them the meaning of God's ever-renewing will which is neither limited nor restrained. Their minds cannot visualize this concept without such a comparison. People record their knowledge and speeches, and sign their orders, using pens, which used to be made of reed, and ink which hardly filled an inkpot or a bottle. The comparison drawn here shows them that if all the trees on earth were made into pens, and all the seas were made into ink this would still be

insufficient to describe God's inexhaustible might. Furthermore, even if this sea of ink was given supplies with seven more seas, while scribes sat to record God's words that speak of His knowledge and will, it would still be insufficient. All the pens, ink, trees and seas will be used up and exhausted, while God's words will not end. It is a case where what is finite is faced with the infinite. No matter how huge the finite is, it will come to an end, while the infinite remains undiminished. God's words will not finish, not ever, because His knowledge is unlimited and His will unrestricted.

Trees, seas, living creatures, objects, and situations all come to an end. The human heart stands in awe before God's majesty, which is endless, unchanging: *"God is indeed Almighty, Wise."* (Verse 27)

Then comes the final note in this section, using the previous image as evidence confirming the ease with which God creates and the simplicity with which He brings the dead back to life: *"The creation of you all and your resurrection is but like [the creation and resurrection of] a single soul. God hears all and sees all."* (Verse 28) The will that creates simply by willing the creation to take place does not see any difference between creating one or many. This will does not exert any measurable effort in creating an individual, and such an effort is not repeated with the creation of every individual. Hence, creating one and creating millions are exactly the same. Likewise is their resurrection. It is only the word, or the will: *"When He wills a thing to be, He but says to it, 'Be', and it is."* (36: 82) With the knowledge that accompanies creation and resurrection come the reckoning and fair reward: *"God hears all and sees all."* (Verse 28)

God the Truth

The fourth presentation tackles the same issue addressed in the previous three, stating that God is the truth while all those they invoke beside Him are false. It speaks of addressing worship purely to God alone and of the Day of Judgement when neither parent nor child can avail the other. Several psychological influences are brought to bear here against a universal background:

Do you not see that God causes the night to pass into the day, and the day to pass into the night, and that He has made the sun and the moon subservient [to His laws], each running its course for a set term, and that God is fully aware of all that you do? Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great. (Verses 29-30)

The scenes of the night passing into the day and the day passing into the night, as well as their shortening and increase in length with the different seasons are indeed

remarkable. However, our long familiarity with them makes most of us oblivious to this wonder that occurs regularly, without fail or disturbance. It follows a regular cycle that never deviates from its set pattern. It is only God who can initiate such a system and maintain it. To appreciate this fact needs no more than observation of this unfailing cycle.

The relation of this cycle to the sun, the moon, their regular movements and their being made subservient is an even greater wonder than the day and night, their shortening and increase in length. No one could do this other than God Almighty. It is He who knows and determines how long they will continue to follow this cycle, until the time He has appointed. Another truism is added to these two universal facts in the same verse: *"God is fully aware of all that you do."* (Verse 29) Thus, the three are cited together as closely-linked, indisputable facts. This is followed by a comment stating the great truth upon which all facts are based. It is the central theme of this *sūrah*, which is preambled by this evidence: *"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth, and all that people invoke beside Him is sheer falsehood, and because God alone is Most High, Great."* (Verse 30)

This accurate, balanced, coherent and unfailing universal system functions by the fact that God is the Ultimate Truth and that whatever else people may invoke is false. This is the great truth upon which is based every other truth, and by which the whole universe fulfils its existence. That God — limitless is He in His glory — is the Ultimate Truth means that it is He who brings the universe into existence, maintains it, conducts its affairs, guarantees its stability and coherence for the length of time He chooses.

"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth." (Verse 30) Everything else changes and alters, increases and decreases, is subject to strengthening and weakening, flourishing and withering. Everything else comes into existence and goes out of it, but God alone is Eternal, unchanging, subject to no transformation or alteration.

Yet there remains in my mind something I have not expressed about the statement: *"Thus it is, because God alone is the Ultimate Truth."* It is something that cannot be communicated in words; something which is not in my power to express; something I feel strongly in my heart, yet human language cannot put into words. The same is true of the last statement in this verse: *"God alone is Most High, Great."* (Verse 30) Indeed, no one else is high or great. Have I said anything about what works inside me about this Qur'ānic statement? I feel that any human expression of these sublime truths detracts from them. Indeed, the Qur'ānic expression is uniquely inspiring.

The *sūrah* follows this great universal scene and the inspiring statement that

follows it by drawing a familiar image in human life. It paints a picture of ships sailing across the sea by God's grace. It puts the unbelievers face to face with human nature when it encounters the dangers of the sea, when no power or arrogance is of any use:

Do you not see that the ships sail the sea by God's blessing, so that He might show you some of His signs? In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God. When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone; but as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them falter [between faith and unbelief]. Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers. (Verses 31-32)

Ships sail through water in accordance with the laws of nature God applies to the sea, wind, the earth and the skies. Since He has created all these and given them their respective qualities, He thus enables the ships to sail through the sea without sinking to the bottom or standing still. Should these qualities be disturbed in any way, the ships will not be able to traverse the waters. If disturbance occurs in the density of seawater, or the substances from which the ships are made, or air pressure at water surface, or the water currents, or the wind, or if the temperature goes beyond the level that keeps water in its present form and maintains the water currents and winds at suitable levels, ships would not be able to so sail the seas. But beyond all this, it is God who keeps ships floating on the surface, protecting them against strong waves, tempests and severe weather conditions. None other than God can keep them afloat. They move by God's grace and blessing, carrying some aspects of God's grace and His blessings. The Qur'ānic statement includes both meanings.

"So that He might show you some of His signs." These are obvious, available for all to see and contemplate. Anyone can see them. There is no ambiguity or confusion about them. *"In this there are clear signs indeed for all who are truly patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God."* (Verse 31) These are two conditions that are frequently experienced in life.

People however are neither patient nor grateful. When harm afflicts them, they raise their voices with prayer. When God lifts harm from them, only a few are truly grateful. *"When the waves engulf them like shadows, they call to God, sincere in their faith in Him alone."* (Verse 32) In the face of such danger, with the waves engulfing them from all sides, and their ships rocking in the angry sea, hearts and souls shed their assumed and delusive power which, in times of ease and comfort, might shield their true nature, severing its links with its Creator. Yet when all masks are torn and human nature emerges from behind its blinding covers, it acknowledges its Lord and

turns to Him in true submission. It abandons all alleged partners, declaring them false. At such moments of danger, people call to God in earnest, with sincere faith in Him and His oneness.

But *“as soon as He has brought them safe to land, some of them are restrained in their attitude.”* (Verse 32) Security and comfort do not drive them back to carelessness. They remain mindful of God's bounty and give thanks for it, but they do not do enough to fulfil their duties towards God in thanksgiving. In other words, they are restrained in their thanks.

There are others who deny God's signs once danger is over and security is again felt. *“Yet none could knowingly reject Our revelations except those who are utterly perfidious or hardened unbelievers.”* (Verse 32) Both treachery and unbelief are here described in superlative terms that are nevertheless true of anyone who disbelieves after having seen all the universal indications and listened to the clear arguments about human nature.

The Lure of Comfortable Living

Drawing on the great danger presented by a stormy sea and how it puts things into perspective, the *sūrah* then reminds them of an even greater danger, in comparison with which the danger of the sea appears ever so small. This is the danger of the day when all relations are severed, parents and children are separated and preoccupied with their own positions; when each soul stands on its own, without support, unable to call upon anyone for help:

Mankind! Fear your Lord and fear a day when no parent will be of any avail to his child, nor any child will in the least avail his parents! God's promise is most certainly true. Let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you. (Verse 33)

The horror described here is psychological, measured by its effect on hearts and souls. Nothing severs blood relations and ties between parent and child, and nothing makes everyone preoccupied solely with their own positions unless it be a fear totally unknown to people. The call to fear God, therefore, comes here at the right time, when people are ready to respond. The issue of the hereafter is presented against the background of such great horror so that hearts will listen.

“God's promise is most certainly true.” (Verse 33) It will never fail. There can be no avoidance of this very difficult situation. No one can escape the accurate reckoning and the fair reward, when none can avail another of anything.

"Let not, then, the life of this world delude you." (Verse 33) It is full of lure, luxury and comfort, but it is limited in duration, and it is only a test to determine the eventual reward. *"And let not deceptive thoughts about God delude you."* (Verse 33) Let no comfort, work, or interest delude you. Above all, let no devil tempt you, for there are many devils, such as money, science, life, power, authority, desire, fancy and passion. Each has its own lure and temptation which can be very deluding. Fear of God and remembrance of the Day of Judgement, however, should be enough to protect believers from all such temptations.

Knowledge Absolute

At the end of this fourth presentation, which completes the *sūrah*, a final note is given, one which is both powerful and awesome. It describes God's perfect and comprehensive knowledge contrasting this with our own limited, human knowledge. It states the question discussed throughout the *sūrah*, in its four sections, and presents all this in one of the most wonderful images drawn in the Qur'ān:

Indeed with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He it is who sends down rain; and He knows what the wombs contain; whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow, and no one knows in what land they will die. God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things. (Verse 34)

God Almighty has chosen to keep the knowledge of the Last Hour to Himself; none knows it other than Him. Thus people will always remain cautious, expecting its arrival at any time, trying to be ready for it. They know that there is no time to lose in preparing for its arrival.

It is God who sends down rain in accordance with His wisdom, and in the measure He chooses. People may know by experience and measurement that rain is due, but they cannot create the conditions that bring rain about. The Qur'ānic statement makes clear that it is God who sends down the rain, as it is He who initiates the universal conditions that form and regulate it. Thus, what is exclusive to God in this respect is the ability to send down the rain, as is made clear in the text. Scholars who have included rain among matters that belong exclusively to God's knowledge are mistaken. Yet God's knowledge is true, complete, comprehensive and permanent in all matters. It is not liable to increase or decrease.

"He knows what the wombs contain." (Verse 34) This is exclusive knowledge similar to that of the Last Hour. It is God alone who knows, with absolute certainty, what wombs contain at every moment and in every stage, how they swell or shrink, what type of foetus, even when it has no shape, form or size. He knows whether it is a

male or a female, even at the moment when no one can have any knowledge of this, at the time when the female egg is fertilized. He further knows the features the foetus will have, its characteristics and future abilities. All this is part of God's exclusive knowledge.

"Whereas no one knows what they will earn tomorrow." (Verse 34) No one knows what will happen to them tomorrow: good or bad, benefit or harm, ease or hardship, health or sickness, obedience to God or disobedience. 'Earning' is far more general than material gain. It applies to everything that happens to a person tomorrow, which is kept hidden under thick covers. People may try to discover this, but they will always fail, remaining unable to discern anything beyond those covers.

Similarly, *"No one knows in what land they will die."* (Verse 34) Such knowledge is kept behind thick blinds which cannot be penetrated by hearing or seeing.

As human beings we stand before these covers acknowledging our weakness and limited knowledge. Thus, the arrogance of assumed, penetrative knowledge is thus seen for what it is. We realize that, compared with what is withheld from us, our knowledge is indeed limited. Even when human knowledge achieves all that it can, there remains a great deal about which we do not know. We will always remain blind to what happens tomorrow, or even in the next moment. With such realization, humans should reduce their arrogance and submit to God.

The *sūrah* presents these highly effective notes against an expansive backdrop of time and place, the present, the near future, the great realm that lies beyond our perceptions, our thoughts and imaginations. This background includes the Last Hour that seems so distant, rain which originates far away, wombs and their hidden contents, what is earned tomorrow which is close in time yet remains unknown, and our place of death and burial which is driven away in our thoughts. Although the background is expansive, the Qur'ānic style gathers it from its broad perspective so that it comes close and points to God's hidden knowledge. Thus we stand as though we try to look through a peephole, but find it blocked. Should even a tiny opening be made in it, what is behind is in the same position as what is before it. It remains closed to man because it is beyond human ability and knowledge. It continues to belong exclusively to God. None knows anything about it except by His permission and according to the measure He determines. *"God alone is omniscient and takes cognisance of all things."* (Verse 34)

Thus the *sūrah* concludes and we feel that it has taken us on a very long journey to distant worlds and horizons. Our hearts return in a slow move after traversing such great distances. Our minds are heavy with thought and reflection on what we have seen of worlds beyond worlds. Yet it is a *sūrah* made of just 34 verses. All glory belongs to God, the Creator of hearts. He has bestowed this Qur'ān on us which heals

hearts, provides guidance and brings mercy to believers.