

SŪRAH 83
Al-Muṭaffifīn
(The Stinters)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

Woe to the stinters (1)

*who, when others measure for them, exact in full,
(2)*

*but who, when they measure or weigh for others,
defraud them. (3)*

*Do such people not think that they will be raised
to life (4)*

on a great day, (5)

*the day when all mankind shall stand before the
Lord of all the worlds? (6)*

*No indeed! The record of the transgressors is in
Sijjīn. (7)*

Would that you knew what Sijjīn is! (8).

وَيْلٌ لِّلْمُطَفِّفِينَ ﴿١﴾

الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَكْتَالُوا عَلَى النَّاسِ يَسْتَوْفُونَ

﴿٢﴾

وَإِذَا كَالُوهُمْ أَوْ وَزَنُوهُمْ يُخْسِرُونَ ﴿٣﴾

أَلَا يَظُنُّ أُولَٰئِكَ أَنَّهُمْ مَبْعُوثُونَ ﴿٤﴾

لِيَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٥﴾

يَوْمَ يَقُومُ النَّاسُ لِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٦﴾

كَلَّا إِنَّ كِتَابَ الْفُجَارِ لَفِي سِجِّينَ ﴿٧﴾

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا سِجِّينَ ﴿٨﴾

It is a record inscribed. (9)

Woe on that day to the unbelievers (10)

who deny the Day of Judgement. (11)

None denies it but the guilty aggressors, the evildoers, (12)

who, when Our revelations are recited to them, cry: 'Fables of the ancients!' (13)

No indeed! Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts. (14)

No indeed! On that day they shall be shut out from their Lord. (15)

They shall enter the blazing fire, (16)

and will be told: 'This is [the reality] which you denied!' (17)

But the record of the righteous is in 'Illiyūn. (18)

Would that you knew what 'Illiyūn is! (19)

It is a record inscribed, (20)

كِتَابٌ مَّرْقُومٌ ﴿٩﴾

وَيْلٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِلْمُكَذِّبِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

الَّذِينَ يُكَذِّبُونَ بِيَوْمِ الدِّينِ ﴿١١﴾

وَمَا يُكَذِّبُ بِهِ إِلَّا كُلُّ مُعْتَدٍ أَثِيمٍ ﴿١٢﴾

إِذَا تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِ ءَايَاتُنَا قَالَ أَسَاطِيرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ ﴿١٣﴾

كَلَّا ۗ بَلْ رَانَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِم مَّا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

كَلَّا إِنَّهُمْ عَنْ رَبِّهِمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ لَّحَجُوبُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

ثُمَّ إِنَّهُمْ لَصَالُوا الْجَحِيمِ ﴿١٦﴾

ثُمَّ يُقَالُ هَذَا الَّذِي كُنْتُمْ بِهِ تَكْذِبُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

كَلَّا إِنَّ كِتَابَ الْأَبْرَارِ لَفِي عِلِّيِّينَ ﴿١٨﴾

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا عِلِّيُّونَ ﴿١٩﴾

كِتَابٌ مَّرْقُومٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

witnessed by those who are closest to God. (21)

The righteous will surely be in bliss. (22)

[Reclining] on couches, they will look around them. (23)

In their faces you shall mark the glow of bliss. (24)

They will be given to drink of a pure-drink, securely sealed, (25)

with a seal of musk, for this let the strivers emulously strive. (26)

It is a drink mixed with the waters of Tasnīm, (27)

a fountain at which those who are closest to God will drink. (28)

Those who are given to sinful practices scoff at the faithful (29)

and wink at one another as they pass by them. (30)

When they go back to their folk they speak of them with jests, (31)

and when they see them they say: 'These have indeed gone astray!' (32)

يَشْهَدُهُ الْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

إِنَّ الْأَبْرَارَ لَفِي نَعِيمٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

عَلَى الْأَرَآئِكِ يَنْظُرُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

تَعْرِفُ فِي وُجُوهِهِمْ نَضْرَةَ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٢٤﴾

يُسْقَوْنَ مِنْ رَحِيقٍ مَخْتُومٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

خِتْمُهُمْ مِسْكَ ۗ وَفِي ذَلِكَ فَلْيَتَنَافَسِ
الْمُتَنَفِّسُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَمِزَاجُهُمْ مِنْ تَسْنِيمٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

عَيْنًا يَشْرَبُ بِهَا الْمُقَرَّبُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ أَجْرَمُوا كَانُوا مِنَ الَّذِينَ
ءَامَنُوا يَضْحَكُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

وَإِذَا مَرُّوا بِهِمْ يَتَغَامَزُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَإِذَا انْقَلَبُوا إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهِمْ انْقَلَبُوا فَكِهِينَ
﴿٣١﴾

وَإِذَا رَأَوْهُمْ قَالُوا إِنَّ هَٰؤُلَاءِ لَضَالُّونَ

Yet they have not been assigned the mission of being their guardians. (33)

So on this Day [of Judgement] the faithful will laugh at the unbelievers, (34)

as they recline upon their couches and look around them. (35)

Shall the unbelievers be requited for what they were wont to do? (36)

﴿٣٣﴾

﴿٣٣﴾ وَمَا أُرْسِلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ حَافِظِينَ

فَالْيَوْمَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مِنَ الْكُفَّارِ
﴿٣٤﴾ يَضْحَكُونَ

﴿٣٥﴾ عَلَى الْأَرَآئِكِ يَنْظُرُونَ

﴿٣٦﴾ هَلْ ثَوَابَ الْكُفَّارِ مَا كَانُوا يَفْعَلُونَ

Overview

The *sūrah* describes the conditions the Islamic message faced in Makkah. Its other objective is to awaken people's hearts and draw their attention to the new event which would help the Arabs, and mankind in general, to take a new turn in their lives. The event in question is the arrival of the divine message to earth.

A particular aspect of Arabian society is portrayed at the outset, as the *sūrah* threatens the stinters with what will befall them on the great day, "the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds." (Verse 6) The reason for such a threat is revealed at the end, when the *sūrah* sketches the manners of the evildoers, their attitude towards the believers, their scoffing at them, winking to one another as they pass by and their assertion that the believers have gone astray. Moreover, the *sūrah* shows the reality of the righteous on the one hand and the transgressors on the other.

The *sūrah* can be divided into four parts The first opens with a declaration of war against the stinters: "Woe to the stinters who, when others measure for them, exact in full, but who, when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them. Do such people not think that they will be raised to life on a great day, the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all worlds?" (Verses 1-6)

The second part warns the transgressors and denounces them in strong terms. It threatens them with woe and ruin and establishes their guilt and aggression. It explains the reasons for their blindness and describes the punishment awaiting them on the Day of Judgement. "No indeed! The record of the transgressors is in Sijjīn. Would

that you knew what Sijjīn is! It is a record inscribed. Woe on that day to the unbelievers who deny the Day of Judgement. None denies it but the guilty aggressors, the evildoers, who, when Our revelations are recited to them, cry: 'Fables of the ancients! No indeed! Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts. No indeed! On that day they shall be shut out from their Lord. They shall enter the blazing fire, and will be told: 'This is [the reality] which you denied!'" (Verses 7-17)

The third part gives an account of the righteous. It describes their high rank, the bliss they will enjoy, the delight on their faces, and the pure drink they will have while they recline on soft couches, and look all around them. It is an image of happiness: *"But the record of the righteous is in `Illiyyūn. Would that you knew what `Illiyyūn is! It is a record inscribed, witnessed by those who are closest to God. The righteous will surely be in bliss. [Reclining] on couches, they will look around them. In their faces you shall mark the glow of bliss. They will be given to drink of a pure-drink, securely sealed, with a seal of musk, for this let the strivers emulously strive. It is a drink mixed with the waters of Tasnīm, a fountain at which those who are closest to God will drink."* (Verses 18-28)

The last part of the *sūrah* describes what the transgressors mete out to the righteous in this world of conceit and hollow vanity, harsh treatment, ridicule and bad manners. Juxtaposed are descriptions of the ultimate situation of each group, the transgressors and the righteous, in the world of truth and immortality: *"Those who are given to sinful practices scoff at the faithful and wink at one another as they pass by them. When they go back to their folk they speak of them with jests, and when they see them they say: 'These have indeed gone astray!' Yet they have not been assigned the mission of being their guardians. So on this Day [of Judgement] the faithful will laugh at the unbelievers, as they recline upon their couches and look around them. Shall the unbelievers be requited for what they were wont to do?"* (Verses 29-36)

The *sūrah* depicts a social environment. It also provides an account of the Islamic way of dealing with the world as it exists and with the human mind. This is what we shall attempt to explain as we consider the *sūrah* in detail.

Giving a Raw Deal

Woe to the stinters who, when others measure for them, exact in full, but who, when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them. Do such people not think that they will be raised to life on a great day, the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds? (Verses 1-6)

The *sūrah* opens with God's declaration of war against the stinters: *"Woe to the stinters"*. The Arabic term, *way*, used for 'woe' implies destruction and ruin. The implication is the same whether we consider this verse as a statement of a future

eventuality or a curse, for a curse made by God has the same effect as that of a statement about what is going to happen. The next two verses explain the meaning of the 'stinters' or defrauders as intended in the *sūrah*. They are those "*who, when others measure for them, exact in full, but who, when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them.*" (Verses 2-3) They are those who want their merchandise complete and intact when they buy, but who do not give the right amount when they sell. The following three verses wonder at the defrauders, who behave as if they will not have to account for what they gain in this life. "*Do such people not think that they will be raised to life on a great day, the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds?*"

The fact that the defrauders' behaviour is tackled in this manner in a Makkan revelation is very interesting. Makkan *sūrahs* generally concentrate on the fundamentals, such as the assertion of God's unity, the supremacy of His will and His dominion over the universe and mankind, and with assertions about the truth of revelation and prophethood, the truth of the Day of Judgement, reckoning and reward. The Makkan revelations also endeavour to form and develop the moral sense and relate it to the fundamentals of faith. The tackling of a specific issue of morality, such as the stinting of weights and measures, or business dealings in general, is a later concern; it is more characteristic of Madinan revelations, which regulate the life of the community in an Islamic state. The fact that this Makkan *sūrah* makes the issue of stinting its focal point therefore deserves careful consideration.

The first point to note is that in Makkah the nobility were very rich, but totally unscrupulous. They exercised a complete monopoly of trade in their business concerns. They organized the export and import trade using caravans which travelled to Yemen in winter and to Syria in summer. They had their seasonal trade fairs such as the 'Ukāz fair which was held during the pilgrimage season. The fairs were for business dealings as well as literary activities.

The text suggests that the defrauders against whom war was declared belonged to the nobility and wielded much power and influence, enabling them to force others to succumb to their wishes. Several features of the Arabic wording used here connote that for some unspecified reason they were able to impose their will and exact in full. The meaning implied is not that they exacted their full due; for this would not justify a declaration of war against them. What is meant is that they obtained by sheer force what they had no right to demand. But when it was their turn to weigh or measure for others, they exercised their power by giving less than what was due.

Indeed this warning, coming so early in the Makkan period, gives an idea of the nature of the religion of Islam. It demonstrates that Islam embraces all sides of life and aims to establish a firm moral code which accords with the basic principles of divine teachings. At the time when this *sūrah* was revealed the Muslim community was still weak. The followers of Islam had not yet won power in order to organize

society and the life of the community according to Islamic principles. Yet Islam demonstrated its opposition to those acts of flagrant injustice and unethical dealings. It declared war against stinters and threatened them with woe and destruction at a time when they were the powerful rulers of Makkah. It declared its uncompromising stand against the injustices suffered by the masses whom it has never sought to lull into a state of lethargy and apathy.

This gives us an insight into the real motives behind the stubborn opposition to Islam by the masters of Makkah. They were undoubtedly keenly aware that what Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was calling for was not merely a matter of personal conviction which demanded no more than a verbal assertion of God's oneness and Muḥammad's prophethood, and a form of prayer addressed to God and not idols. They realized that the new faith would establish a way of life which would cause the very basis of their positions and interests to crumble. They were fully aware that the new religion, by its very nature, did not admit any partnership or compromise with any worldly concepts alien to its divine basis, and that it posed a mighty threat to all *jāhiliyyah* values. This is why they launched their offensive, which continued in full force both before and after the Muslims' migration to Madinah. It was an offensive launched to defend their way of life in its entirety, not only a set of concepts which have no effect beyond individual acceptance and personal conviction.

Those, in any age or land, who attempt to prevent Islam from organizing and ruling human life also recognize these essential facts. They know very well that the pure and straightforward Islamic way of life endangers their unjust order, interests, hollow structure and deviant practices. Indeed the tyrannical stinters – whatever form their stinting takes and wherever it is, in money and finance, or in rights and duties – are those who fear most the ascendancy of Islam and the implementation of its just methods.

The representatives of the two Arabian tribes of Madinah, the Aws and the Khazraj, who pledged their support and loyalty to the Prophet were also aware of all this. Ibn Ishāq, the Prophet's biographer, wrote: `Āsim ibn `Umar ibn Qatādah told me that when the Madinan Muslims came to give their pledge to the Prophet, al-`Abbās ibn `Ubadah al-Anṣārī, who belonged to the clan of Sālim ibn `Awf, said to them: "You Khazraj! Do you know what your pledge to this man really means?" They answered "Yes, we do." His rejoinder was: "You are pledging to fight the rest of mankind, white and black alike! So it would be better to leave him alone now if you think you would give him up to his enemies in the event of your sustaining material losses or losing your leaders. If you do such a thing you will bring upon yourselves great humiliation both in this life and in the life hereafter. But if you feel that you will honour your pledges despite any sacrifice in money and men, then go ahead, because this will be best for you here and in the hereafter!" They said: "We

offer our loyalty and support and declare our readiness to sustain any sacrifice, material or personal!" Turning to the Prophet, they asked him: "What will be our reward if we honour our pledges?" He said: "Heaven." They said: "Stretch out your hand." He did and they gave him their pledges of support.

These supporters, like the Makkan tyrants, were keenly aware of the nature of Islam. They realized that it stands for absolute justice and fairness in the social order it seeks to create. It accepts no tyranny, oppression, conceit, injustice or exploitation. Hence it faces the combined forces of all forms of despotism, arrogance and exploitation.

"Do such people not think that they will be raised to life on a great day, the day when all mankind shall stand before the Lord of all the worlds?" (Verses 4-6) Their attitude is singularly strange. The mere idea of being raised to life again on that great day, when all mankind shall stand as ordinary individuals in front of the Lord of the universe, awaiting His just judgement, without support from any quarter, should be enough to make them change course. But they persist, as if the thought of being raised to life after death has never crossed their minds.

The Inevitable Reckoning

They are called stinters in the first part of the *sūrah*; but in the second they are described as transgressors. The *sūrah* proceeds to describe the standing of this group with God, their situation in this life, and what awaits them on the great day. *"No indeed! The record of the transgressors is in Sijjīn. Would that you knew what Sijjīn is! It is a record inscribed. Woe on that day to the unbelievers who deny the Day of Judgement. None denies it but the guilty aggressors, the evildoers, who, when Our revelations are recited to them, cry: 'Fables of the ancients!' No indeed! Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts. No indeed! On that day they shall be shut out from their Lord. They shall enter the blazing fire, and will be told: 'This is (the reality) which you denied!'"* (Verses 7-17) They think they will not be raised to life after death, so the Qur'ān rebukes them and affirms that a record of their actions is kept.

The location of that record is specified as an additional confirmation of the fact, albeit a location unknown to man. They are threatened with woe and ruin on that day when their record shall be reviewed: *"No indeed! The record of the transgressors is in Sijjīn. Would that you knew what Sijjīn is! It is a record inscribed. Woe on that day to the unbelievers."* (Verses 7-10)

The transgressors, as the Arabic term, *fujjār*, here connotes, are those who indulge excessively in sin. Their book is the record of their deeds. We do not know the nature of this book and nor are we required to know. The whole matter belongs to that realm of which we know nothing except what we are told by God. The statement that

there is a record in *Sijjīn* of the transgressors' deeds, is followed by the familiar Qur'ānic form of expression associated with connotations of greatness: "Would that you knew what *Sijjīn* is!" (Verse 8) Thus, the addressee is made to feel that the whole matter is too great to be fully understood.

The *sūrah* then gives a further account of the transgressors' book: "It is a record inscribed." (Verse 9) There is no possibility of addition or omission until it is thrown open on that great day. When this takes place, "woe on that day to the unbelievers." (Verse 10) Then we are given information about the subject of unbelief, and the true character of the unbelievers who deny the Day of Judgement. "None denies it but the guilty aggressors, the evildoers, who, when Our revelations are recited to them, cry: *Fables of the ancients!*" (Verses 12-13) So, aggression and bad deeds lead the perpetrators to deny the Day of Judgement and to take a rude and ill-mannered attitude towards the Qur'ān, describing it as "Fables of the ancients!" This description by the unbelievers is, of course, based on the fact that the Qur'ān contains some historical accounts of former nations. These accounts are related as a lesson for later generations as they demonstrate with much clarity the working of the divine rules to which all nations and generations are subject.

They are strongly rebuked and reprobated for their rudeness and rejection of the truth. These connotations, carried by the Arabic term *kallā*, translated here as 'No indeed', are coupled with an assertion that their allegations are unfounded. We are then given an insight into the motives of their insolent disbelief and the reasons for their inability to see the obvious truth or respond to it: "Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts." (Verse 14) Indeed the hearts of those who indulge in sin become dull, as if they are veiled by a thick curtain which keeps them in total darkness, unable to see the light. Thus they gradually lose their sensitivity and become lifeless.

The Prophet says: "When a man commits a sin, it throws a black spot over his heart. If he repents, his heart is polished; but if he persists in his practice, the stains increase." [Related by Ibn Jarīr, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.] Al-Tirmidhī describes this *ḥadīth* as authentic. Al-Nasā'ī's version differs in wording but not in import. His version may be translated as follows: "When a man commits a sin, a black spot is formed on his heart. If he desists, prays for forgiveness and repents, his heart will be polished; but if he persists, the spot grows bigger until it has covered his whole heart. This is what God refers to when He says: 'No indeed! Their own deeds have cast a layer of rust over their hearts.'" (Verse 14) Explaining this verse, Imām al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said: "It is a case of one sin on top of another until the heart is blinded and dies."

Thus we have learnt the situation of transgressing unbelievers, as well as their motives for transgression and rejection of the truth. Then we are told what will

happen to them on that great day, a destiny which befits their evil deeds and denial of the truth: *“On that day they shall be shut out from their Lord. They shall enter the blazing fire, and will be told: ‘This is [the reality] which you denied!’”* (Verses 15-17) Because their sins have cast a thick veil over their hearts, they are unable in this life to feel God’s presence, and it is only appropriate that they not be allowed to see His glorious face. They will be deprived of this great happiness, which is bestowed only on those whose hearts and souls are so clean and transparent that they deserve to be with their Lord, without any form of separation or isolation. Such people are described in *Sūrah* 75, The Resurrection: *“On that day there shall be joyous faces, looking towards their Lord.”* (75: 22-23)

This separation from their Lord is the greatest and most agonizing punishment and deprivation. It is a miserable end of a man whose very humanity is derived from only one source, namely his contact with God, his benevolent Lord. When man is torn away from this source of nobleness he loses all his humanity and sinks to a level which ensures hell is his just reward: *“They shall enter the blazing fire.”* (Verse 16) On top of this, there is something much worse and much more agonizing, namely, rebuke. *“And will be told: ‘This is [the reality] which you denied!’”* (Verse 17)

Faces Radiant with Joy

Then follows an account of the other group, the righteous. This is given in the customary Qur’ānic manner of providing two elaborately contrasting images, so that a detailed comparison may be drawn: *“But the record of the righteous is in ‘Illiyūn. Would that you knew what ‘Illiyūn is! It is a record inscribed, witnessed by those who are closest to God. The righteous will surely be in bliss. [Reclining] on couches, they will look around them. In their faces you shall mark the glow of bliss. They will be given to drink of a pure-drink, securely sealed, with a seal of musk, for this let the strivers emulously strive. It is a drink mixed with the waters of Tasnīm, a fountain at which those who are closest to God will drink.”*(Verses 18-28)

This section of the *sūrah* starts with the Arabic term, *kallā*, which connotes strong reproach and a firm command to the transgressors to desist from their rejection of the truth. It then proceeds to speak about the righteous. Since the record of the transgressors is in *Sijjīn*, that of the righteous is in *‘Illiyūn*. The term ‘righteous’ refers to the obedient who do good. They are the exact opposite of the transgressors, who indulge in every excess. The name *‘Illiyūn* connotes elevation and sublimity, which suggests that *Sijjīn* is associated with baseness and ignominy. The name is followed by the form of exclamation often used in the Qur’ān to cast notions of mystery and grandeur: *“Would that you knew what ‘Illiyūn is!”* (Verse 19)

The *sūrah* then states that the book of the righteous is *“a record inscribed, witnessed*

by those who are closest to God.” (Verses 20-21) We have already stated what is meant by ‘a record inscribed.’ We are told here that the angels closest to God see this book and witness it. This statement gives the feeling that the record of the righteous is associated with nobility, purity and sublimity. The angels closest to God look at it and enjoy its description of noble deeds and glorious characteristics. The whole image provides evidence of the honour the righteous receive.

There follows an account of the situation in which the righteous find themselves. We are told of the bliss they enjoy on that great day: “*The righteous will surely be in bliss.*” (Verse 22) This contrasts with hell, in which the transgressors dwell. “[*Reclining! on couches they will look around them.*” (Verse 23) This means that they are given a place of honour. They look wherever they wish. They do not have to look down, out of humility; and they suffer nothing which distracts their attention. The description here represents to the Arabs, who were the first to be addressed by the Qur’ān, the highest form of comfort and luxury.

In their bliss, the righteous live in mental and physical comfort. Their faces are radiant with unmistakable joy: “*In their faces you shall mark the glow of bliss. They will be given to drink of a pure- drink, securely sealed, with a seal of musk.*” (Verses 24-26) Their drink is absolutely pure without any unwanted additions or particles of dust. Describing it as securely sealed with musk indicates, perhaps, that it is ready made in secured containers to be opened when refreshment is needed. All this adds to the impression of meticulous care being taken. The fact that the seal is of musk also adds an element of elegance and luxury. The whole picture, however, is understood only within the limits of human experience in this world.

In the life to come people will have different concepts, tastes and standards which will be free from all the bonds of this limited world.

The description is carried further in the following two verses: “*It is a drink mixed with the waters of Tasnīm, a fountain at which those who are closest to God will drink.*” (Verses 27-28) o, this pure, securely sealed drink is opened and mixed with a measure of the water from a fountain called *Tasnīm* and described as the one from which the favoured who are close to God drink. Before this last part of the description is given we are also given a significant instruction: “*For this let the strivers emulously strive.*” (Verse 26)

Those stinters who defraud their fellow men pay no regard to the Day of Judgement, and, worse still, deny that such a Day of Reckoning will come. Hardened by their sins and excesses, they strive endlessly for the petty riches of this world. Each of them tries to outdo the others and gain as much as possible. Hence, he indulges in all types of injustice and vice for the sake of ephemeral luxuries. It is the other type of luxury and honour which deserves emulous striving: “*For this let the*

strivers emulously strive." (Verse 26)

Those who strive for an object of this world, no matter how superb, grand or honourable it is, are in reality striving for something hollow, cheap and temporary. This world, in its totality, is not worth, in God's view, one mosquito's wing. It is the hereafter which carries real weight with Him. So, it should be the goal for strenuous competition and zealous striving.

It is remarkable that striving for the hereafter elevates the souls of all strivers, while competition for worldly objects sinks the competitors' souls to the lowest depths. As man works continuously to achieve the happiness of the hereafter, his work makes this world a happy and pure one for everybody. On the other hand, efforts made for the achievement of worldly ends turn this world into a filthy marsh, where animals devour one another and insects bite the flesh of the righteous.

Striving for the hereafter does not turn the earth into a barren desert, as some transgressors imagine. Islam considers this world a farm, and the hereafter its fruits. It defines the role of the true believer as the building of this world while following the path of piety and righteousness. Islam stipulates that man must look on his task as an act of worship which fulfils the purpose of his existence as defined by God: *"I have not created the jinn and mankind to any end other than that they may worship Me."* (51: 56) The statement, *"For this let the strivers emulously strive,"* inspires man to look far beyond this finite, little world, as he sets out to fulfil his mission as God's vicegerent on earth. Thus as they work on purifying the filthy marsh of this world their souls are elevated to new heights.

Man's life on earth is limited while his future life is of limitless duration. The luxuries of this world are also limited while the happiness of paradise is much too great for us to conceive. The elements of happiness in this life are well known to everyone, but in the next world they are on a level befitting a life everlasting.

What comparison can then hold between the two spheres of competition or the two goals, even when we apply the human method of balancing losses against profits? It is, indeed, one race and a single competition: *"For this let the strivers emulously strive."* (Verse 26)

Stark Contrast

The beatitude enjoyed by the righteous is discussed at length in order to give a detailed account of the hardships, humiliation and insolence they are made to suffer at the hands of the transgressors. The final comment of the *sūrah* taunts the unbelievers as they behold the righteous enjoying heavenly bliss: *"Those who are given to sinful practices scoff at the faithful and wink at one another as they pass by them. When*

they go back to their folk they speak of them with jests, and when they see them they say: 'These have indeed gone astray!' Yet they have not been assigned the mission of being their guardians. So on this Day [of Judgement] the faithful will laugh at the unbelievers, as they recline upon their couches and look around them. Shall the unbelievers be requited for what they were wont to do?" (Verses 29-36)

The images portrayed by the Qur'ān of the evildoers' derision of the faithful, their rudeness and insolence, and their description of the faithful, as having 'gone astray' are taken directly from Makkan life at the time. But the same actions happen over and over again in all ages and places. Many people in our own age have witnessed similar actions, and it is as if the *sūrah* was revealed to describe what they see with their own eyes. This proves that the attitude of the transgressors and the evildoers to the believers hardly ever changes from one country to another or from one period of time to another.

"Those who are given to sinful practices scoff at the faithful." (Verse 29) In the Arabic original, the past tense is used here so as to take us away from this world to the hereafter to see the righteous in their bliss while we also hear what happened to them in this world. The believers were made to suffer ridicule and derision by the transgressors, either because they were poor or weak or because their self-respect would not allow them to return the abuse of base evildoers. What a contrast: the evildoers persecute the believers and laugh at them shamelessly while the believers stick to dignified self respect and perseverance.

"And wink at one another as they pass by them." (Verse 30) They wink at one another or make certain actions intended as mockery and derision. Such behaviour betrays their baseness and bad manners. They try to make the believers feel embarrassed and helpless. *"When they go back to their folk they speak of them with jests."* When they have nourished their evil, little minds with such mockery and injurious actions they go back to their own folk to continue their laughter and derision. They are satisfied with what they have done. Although they have sunk to the lowest depths, they cannot imagine how contemptible they are.

"And when they see them they say: 'These have indeed gone astray!'" (Verse 32) This is even more singular! Nothing is more absurd than that those transgressors should speak about right and error, or that they should say that the believers have gone astray. Transgression knows no limits. The transgressors never feel ashamed of what they do or say. Their description of the believers as having gone astray is a clear manifestation of this fact. The Qur'ān does not try to defend the believers or refute the evil accusation levelled at them, because it is not worth refuting. It laughs loudly, however, at those who involve themselves impudently in something which does not concern them, *"Yet they have not been assigned the mission of being their guardians!"* (Verse 33) No one has asked them to look after the believers, or to watch over them,

or to assess their situation. So why do they give their unsolicited opinion?

This sarcasm concludes the narration of what the transgressors do in this life. The *sūrah* relates it as if it is something of the past, and gives an image of the present, i.e. in the hereafter, when the believers rejoice in their heavenly bliss: “*So on this Day [of Judgement] the faithful will laugh at the unbelievers, as they recline upon their couches and look around them.*” (Verses 34-35) On that day the unbelievers will be shut out from their Lord, suffering isolation combined with the torture of hell when they are told: “*This is [the reality] which you denied!*” (Verse 17) At the other end of the scale, the believers recline on couches, in total beatitude, partaking of a pure drink which is secured with a seal of musk and mixed with the waters of *Tasnīm*. As the *sūrah* draws the two images, it shows how the tables are turned; for then it is the believers who laugh at the unbelievers.

The *sūrah* concludes with another loud, ironic question: “*Shall the unbelievers be requited for what they were wont to do.*” (Verse 36) Their requital is not a good one, as the term used here connotes. For we have just been given an image of their doom, which is described here sarcastically, as their reward.

Who Laughs at Whom?

The scene of the evildoers’ ridicule of the believers merits further discussion. It is portrayed in considerable detail, in the same way as the earlier scene of the righteous in heavenly bliss. This detailed description is highly artistic. It also has a marked psychological effect which is at once soothing, comforting and reassuring. The Muslim minority in Makkah was facing a sustained, demoralizing onslaught by the unbelievers, but God did not leave the Muslims on their own: He comforted them and urged them to persevere.

They are comforted by the very fact that their sufferings are outlined by God in detail. He sees what the believers suffer and does not ignore what He sees, although He may let the unbelievers do as they wish, if only for a while. He also sees how the transgressors laugh unrepentantly at the sufferings of the faithful. Since He describes all this in the Qur’ān then He must take it into account. This, in itself, is enough consolation for the believers.

There are also those scornful remarks about the evildoers. They may go unnoticed by the unbelievers because their indulgence in their sinful practices have made them insensitive. The highly sensitive hearts of the believers, however, are touched and comforted by them.

It must be noted that the only consolation offered by God to the believers who were subjected to harsh treatment and painful ridicule was heaven for the believers

and hell for the unbelievers. This, again, was the only promise the Prophet (peace be upon him) made to the believers when they pledged all their property as well as their lives for the cause of Islam. Victory in this life was never mentioned in the Makkan Qur'ānic revelations as a consolation or as an incentive to persevere. The Qur'ān was instead cultivating the hearts of the believers, and preparing them to fulfil the task with which they were entrusted. It was necessary that such hearts attain a high standard of strength and self-denial so that they would give everything and suffer all hardship without looking for anything in this life. They were to seek only the reward of the hereafter and to win God's pleasure. They were prepared to go through life suffering all sorts of hardship and deprivation with no promise of reward in this life, not even victory for the cause of Islam.

Such a group of people must be first established. When this happens and God knows that they are sincere and determined in what they have pledged themselves to do, then He will give them victory in this life. Victory will not be theirs as a personal reward. They will be given power as trustees appointed for the implementation of the Islamic way of life. They will be worthy trustees because neither were they promised nor did they look for any worldly gain. They pledged themselves truly to God at a time when they were unaware of any worldly benefit that may befall them except that they would win God's pleasure.

All the Qur'ānic verses which speak of victory were revealed later in Madinah when this was no longer an issue. Victory was given because God willed that successive human generations should have an actual, definite and practical example of the Islamic way of life. It was not a reward for sacrifices made or hardships suffered.