

SŪRAH 81
Al-Takwīr
(The Darkening)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

When the sun is darkened, (1)

إِذَا الشَّمْسُ كُوِّرَتْ ﴿١﴾

when the stars fall and disperse, (2)

وَإِذَا النُّجُومُ انْكَدَرَتْ ﴿٢﴾

when the mountains are made to move away, (3)

وَإِذَا الْجِبَالُ سُيِّرَتْ ﴿٣﴾

*when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left
untended, (4)*

وَإِذَا الْعِشَارُ عُطِّلَتْ ﴿٤﴾

when the wild beasts are brought together, (5)

وَإِذَا الْوُحُوشُ حُشِرَتْ ﴿٥﴾

when the seas are set alight, (6)

وَإِذَا الْبِحَارُ سُجِّرَتْ ﴿٦﴾

*when people's souls are paired [like with like],
(7)*

وَإِذَا النُّفُوسُ زُوِّجَتْ ﴿٧﴾

when the infant girl, buried alive, is asked (8)

وَإِذَا الْمَوْءُودَةُ سُئِلَتْ ﴿٨﴾

بِأَيِّ ذَنْبٍ قُتِلَتْ ﴿٩﴾

for what crime she was slain, (9)

when the records are laid open, (10)

when the sky is stripped bare, (11)

when hell is made to burn fiercely, (12)

when paradise is brought near, (13)

*every soul shall know what it has put forward.
(14)*

I swear by the turning stars, (15)

*which move swiftly and hide themselves away,
(16)*

and by the night as it comes darkening on, (17)

and by the dawn as it starts to breathe, (18)

*this is truly the word of a noble and mighty
messenger, (19)*

*who enjoys a secure position with the Lord of the
Throne. (20)*

He is obeyed in heaven, faithful to his trust. (21)

وَإِذَا الصُّحُفُ نُشِرَتْ ﴿٩﴾

وَإِذَا السَّمَاءُ كُشِطَتْ ﴿١٠﴾

وَإِذَا الْجَحِيمُ سُعِرَتْ ﴿١١﴾

وَإِذَا الْجَنَّةُ أُزْلِفَتْ ﴿١٢﴾

عَلِمَتْ نَفْسٌ مَّا أَحْضَرَتْ ﴿١٣﴾

فَلَا أَقْسِمُ بِالْخُنُوسِ ﴿١٤﴾

الْجَوَارِ الْكُنُوسِ ﴿١٥﴾

وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا عَسْعَسَ ﴿١٦﴾

وَالصُّبْحِ إِذَا تَنَفَّسَ ﴿١٧﴾

إِنَّهُ لَقَوْلُ رَسُولٍ كَرِيمٍ ﴿١٨﴾

ذِي قُوَّةٍ عِنْدَ ذِي الْعَرْشِ مَكِينٍ ﴿١٩﴾

مُطَاعٍ ثَمَّ أَمِينٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَمَا صَاحِبُكُمْ بِمَجْنُونٍ ﴿٢١﴾

وَلَقَدْ رَءَاهُ بِالْأُفُقِ الْمُبِينِ ﴿٢٢﴾

Your old friend is not mad. (22)

He saw him on the clear horizon. (23)

He does not grudge the secrets of the unseen. (24)

It is not the word of an accursed devil. (25)

Whither then are you going? (26)

This is only a reminder to all mankind, (27)

to those of you whose will is to be upright. (28)

*Yet, you cannot will except by the will of God,
Lord of all the worlds. (29)*

وَمَا هُوَ عَلَى الْغَيْبِ بِضَنِينٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَمَا هُوَ بِقَوْلِ شَيْطَانٍ رَّجِيمٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

فَأَيْنَ تَذْهَبُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

إِنَّ هُوَ إِلَّا ذِكْرٌ لِلْعَامِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

لِمَنْ شَاءَ مِنْكُمْ أَنْ يَسْتَقِيمَ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَمَا تَشَاءُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ

الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

Overview

This *sūrah* may be divided into two parts, each of them treating one major principle of faith. The first is the principle of resurrection accompanied by a great upheaval in the universe, which affects the sun and the stars, the mountains and seas, heaven and earth, wild and domestic animals, as well as man. The second principle is that of revelation. The *sūrah* has something to say about the angel carrying the divine revelation, the Prophet receiving it, the people addressed by it, and the Supreme Will which has shaped their nature and bestowed this revelation.

The rhythm of the *sūrah* is one of violent movement which leaves nothing in its place. Everything is thrown away, smashed or scattered. The movement is so violent that it excites and frightens. It alters every familiar situation and shakes people's hearts violently so that they feel deprived of both shelter and reassurance. In such a violent destructive storm the human heart is no more than a little feather, blown in every direction. No protection and, indeed, no safety can be found except what is granted by God, the Eternal. Thus, the rhythm of the *sūrah* has, on its own, the effect of pulling man's heart and soul away from everything associated with safety and

security, in order to seek peace, safety and protection with God.

The *sūrah* is also a gem of striking images drawn from the universe in both its present beautiful condition, which is familiar to us, and its condition on the Day of Resurrection when every familiar thing is changed beyond recognition. The *sūrah* is, moreover, rich in fine expressions which add colour to the images portrayed. As the *sūrah* is so short, the rhythm, images and expressions combine together to produce a very strong and lasting effect. Had it not been for the fact that the *sūrah* contains some words which are no longer familiar to us today, I would have preferred not to comment on it. Its rhythm and images leave a far stronger effect than any human interpretation can aspire to achieve.

Upheaval in the Universe

When the sun is darkened, when the stars fall and disperse, when the mountains are made to move away, when the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended, when the wild beasts are brought together, when the seas are set alight, when people's souls are paired [like with like], when the infant girl, buried alive, is asked for what crime she was slain, when the records are laid open, when the sky is stripped bare, when hell is made to burn fiercely, when paradise is brought near, every soul shall know what it has put forward. (Verses 1-14)

These verses sketch a scene of great upheaval which envelops the whole universe. It is an event which reveals every guarded secret and leaves nothing hidden away. Every human being faces what he has put forward for the day of reckoning and judgement. The great events mentioned indicate that the present familiar state of the universe, with its perfect harmony, measured movement, controlled relations, perfected by the Maker whose work is flawless, will suffer a complete break down. Its role will be finished. Along with all creation, it will move into a new predetermined phase of life, unlike anything known to us in this world.

The *sūrah* aims to get this idea of the inevitable upheaval well established in people's hearts and minds so that they may attach little or no importance to the values and riches of this world, though these may seem to be of lasting consequence. People should establish a firm bond with the everlasting truth, i.e. the truth of God, the Eternal, who never changes when everything else changes and disappears. They should break the chains of what is familiar in this life in order to recognize the absolute truth which admits no restrictions of time, place, finite faculties or temporal standards.

As one goes through the events of this universal upheaval, one cannot fail to observe an inner feeling for this affirmation.

As to what exactly happens to all these creations during the resurrection we can only say that it is known to God alone. We can only comprehend what we have experienced. When we think of a great upheaval in the world, our imagination cannot stretch beyond a violent earthquake or volcano, or, perhaps, the fall of a comet or a small celestial body. Floods are perhaps the most destructive manifestation of the power of water known to us. The most powerful events in the universe we have monitored were some limited explosions in the sun, which is millions of miles away from us. All these events, great as they may be, seem so small when they are compared to the universal upheaval which will take place on the Day of Resurrection that they may be considered akin to child's play. If we really want to know what will happen then, we can do no more than attempt to draw some sort of comparison with what we have experienced in this life.

The darkening of the sun probably means that it will cool down and its flames which stretch out for thousands of miles in space will dwindle and die. As the sun is now in gaseous form because of its intense heat, which reaches a maximum of 12,000 degrees, its darkening probably means its transformation by freezing to a form similar to that of the surface of the earth. It may adopt a circular shape without becoming stretched out. This is probably the meaning of the opening verse, but it could also mean something different. As to how it will happen, or its causes, we can only say that this is known only to God.

The falling of the stars probably means that they will break away from the system which holds them together and lose their light and brightness. Only God knows which stars will be affected by this event: will it affect only a small group of stars, say, our own solar system, or our galaxy, which comprises hundreds of millions of stars, or will it affect all the stars in their millions of millions? The universe, as everyone knows, comprises an almost infinite number of galaxies, each with its own space.

Forcing the mountains to move away probably means that they will be crushed and blown away as indicated in other *sūrahs*: *"They ask you about the mountains. Say: My Lord will crush them to fine dust and leave them a desolate waste."* (20: 105) *"When the mountains crumble away and scatter into fine dust."* (56: 5) *"And the mountains are made to move away, and seem to have been a mirage."* (78: 20) All these verses refer to a certain event which will affect the mountains and do away with their firm foundations and stability. This may be the beginning of the quake which will shake the earth violently, and which is mentioned in *Sūrah* 99, The Earthquake: *"When the earth is rocked with her final earthquake, when the earth shakes off her burdens."* (99: 1-2) All these events will take place on that very long day.

"When the camels, ten months pregnant, are left untended." (Verse 4) The Arabic description of the camel here specifies that she is in her tenth month of pregnancy.

When in this state, she is to the Arab his most valuable possession because she is about to add to his wealth a highly valued young camel, and to give him a lot of milk which he and his family will share with the new-born animal. However, on that day, which will witness such overwhelming events, such priceless camels will be left without care, completely untended. The Arabs who were the first to be addressed by this verse never left such camels untended, except for the gravest of dangers.

“When the wild beasts are brought together.” (Verse 5) The great terror which overwhelms the wild beasts in their jungles is the cause of their coming together. They forget their mutual enmities, and move together, unaware of their direction. They neither seek their homes nor chase their prey as they usually do. The overwhelming terror changes the character of even the wildest of beasts. What then will it do to man?

“When the seas are set alight.” (Verse 6) The Arabic term, *sujjirat*, used here may mean that the seas will be overfilled with water, from floods similar to those which characterized the early stages of life on earth. On the other hand, earthquakes and volcanoes may remove the barriers now separating the seas so that the water of one will flow into the other. The Arabic expression may also mean that the seas will experience explosions which set them ablaze, as mentioned elsewhere in the Qur’ān: *“When the oceans are made to explode.”* (82: 3) Such explosions may result from separating oxygen and hydrogen which make sea water. They could also be atomic explosions of some sort. If the explosion of a limited number of atoms in a hydrogen or atom bomb produces such dreadful consequences as we have seen, then the atomic explosion of the waters of the oceans, in whatever manner it may occur, will produce something much too fearful for our minds to visualize. Similarly, we cannot conceive the reality of hell, which stands beyond these vast oceans.

“When people’s souls are paired.” (Verse 7) The pairing of souls may mean the reunion of body and soul at the time of resurrection. It may also mean their grouping, like with like, as mentioned elsewhere in the Qur’ān: *“You will be divided into three groups.”* (56: 7) These are the chosen elite, the people of the right, and the people of the left. It may also mean some other way of grouping.

Girls Buried Alive

“When the infant girl, buried alive, is asked for what crime she was slain.” (Verses 8-9) The value of human life must have sunk very low in pre-Islamic Arabian society. There existed a convention of burying young girls alive, for fear of shame or poverty. The Qur’ān describes this practice in order to portray its horror and denounce it as a practice of ignorance or *jāhiliyyah*. Its condemnation fits in perfectly with the declared aim of Islam, to destroy *jāhiliyyah* and save mankind from sinking to its depths. In

Sūrah 16, The Bee, we read in translation: "When the birth of a girl is announced to one of them, his face grows dark and he is filled with rage and inward gloom. Because of the bad news he hides himself from everybody: should he keep her with disgrace or bury her under the dust? How ill they judge."(16:58-9) And in Sūrah 17, The Night Journey: "You shall not kill your children for fear of want. We will provide for them and for you."(17:31)

Girls were killed in an extremely cruel way. They were buried alive! The Arabs used different ways of doing so. Some would leave the girl until she was six years of age. The father would then say to his wife to dress the girl in her best clothes and make her presentable because she would be visiting her prospective in-laws. He would have already dug a hole for her in the desert. When the girl got there, he would tell her that the hole is a well and then tell her to look down it. As she stood at the edge, he would push her into the hole and as she fell, he would throw sand over her and bury her. In certain tribes when a pregnant woman was about to give birth, she would sit over a hole in the ground. When the baby was born she would first establish its sex. If it was a boy, she would take him home, and if it was a girl, she would throw her in the hole and bury her. If a father decided not to bury his daughter alive, he would bring her up in a condition of deprivation until she was old enough to tend sheep or cattle, giving her only an overall made of rough wool to dress and making her do this type of work.

Those Arabs who did not kill their young daughters or send them to mind cattle, had different methods of ill-treating women. If a man died, the head of the clan would throw his gown over the widow. This was a gesture of acquisition which meant that the widow could not marry anyone except the owner of the gown. If he was attracted to her, he would marry her, paying absolutely no regard to her feelings. If he did not marry her, he would keep her until she died so as to inherit any money or property she might leave behind.

Such was the attitude of *jāhiliyyah* society in Arabia to women. Islam condemns this attitude and spurns all these practices. It forbids the murder of young girls and shows its abhorrent and horrifying nature. It is listed as one of the subjects of reckoning on the Day of Judgement. Here, the *sūrah* mentions it as one of the great events which overwhelms the universe in total upheaval. We are told that the murdered girl will be questioned about her murder. The *sūrah* leaves us to imagine how the murderer will be brought to account.

The *jāhiliyyah* social order of the pre-Islamic period would never have helped women to gain a respectable, dignified position. That had to be decreed by God. The way of life God has chosen for mankind secures a dignified position for both men and women who share the honour of having a measure of the divine spirit breathed into them. Women owe their respectable position to Islam, not to any environmental factor or social set-up.

When the new man with heavenly values came into being, women became respected and honoured. The woman's weakness of being a financial burden to her family was no longer of any consequence in determining her position and the respect she enjoyed. Such considerations have no weight on the scales of heaven. Real weight belongs to the noble human soul when it maintains its relationship with God. In this men and women are equal.

When one puts forward arguments in support of the fact that Islam is a divine religion, and that it has been conveyed to us by God's Messenger who received His revelations, one should state the change made by Islam in the social status of women as being irrefutable. Nothing in the social set-up of Arabia at the time pointed to such elevation for women. No social or economic consideration made it necessary or desirable. It was a deliberate move made by Islam for reasons which are totally different from those of this world and from those of *jāhiliyyah* society in particular.

"When the records are laid open." (Verse 10) This is a reference to the records of people's deeds. They are laid open in order that they may be known to everybody. This, in itself, is hard to bear. Many a breast has a closely hidden secret, the remembrance of which brings shame and a shudder to its owner. Yet all secrets are made public on that eventful day. This publicity, representative of the great upheaval which envelops the whole universe, is part of the fearful events which fill men's hearts with horror on the day.

"When the sky is stripped bare." (Verse 11) This image corresponds closely to throwing open people's secrets. When the word 'sky' is used, our first thoughts reach to the blue cover hoisted over our heads. Its stripping means the removal of that cover. How this happens remains a matter of conjecture. It is enough to say that when we look up we will no longer see our familiar blue dome.

The last scene of that fearful day is portrayed by the next two verses: *"When hell is made to burn fiercely, when paradise is brought near."* (Verses 12-13) Where is hell? How does it burn? What fuel is used in lighting and feeding its fire? The only thing we know of it is that it *"has the fuel of men and stones."* (66: 6) This is, of course, after they have been thrown in it. Its true nature and its fuel prior to that is part of God's knowledge. Heaven, on the other hand, is brought near to those who have been promised admission. They see it to be of easy access. Indeed, the expression here shows it ready to receive its dwellers.

When all these great events take place throughout the universe, changing the status of all life, no one can entertain any doubt about what they have done in this present life, or what they have carried with them to the next life: *"Every soul shall know what it has put forward."* (Verse 14) In the midst of all these overwhelming events, every soul shall know for certain what sort of deeds it has brought and that it

cannot change, omit from or add to what it has done.

People will find themselves completely separated from all that has been familiar to them, and from their world as a whole. Everything will have undergone a total change except God. If man turns to God, he will find that His support is forthcoming when the whole universe is overwhelmed by change. Thus ends the first part of this *sūrah*, leaving us with a vivid impression of the universal upheaval on the Day of Resurrection.

A Splendid Universal Scene

The second part of the *sūrah* opens with a form of oath using some very beautiful scenes of the universe. Essentially, this oath is made to assert the nature of revelation, the angel carrying it, and the Messenger receiving and delivering it to us, as well as people's attitudes to it, all in accordance with God's will: *"I swear by the turning stars, which move swiftly and hide themselves away, and by the night as it comes darkening on, and by the dawn as it starts to breathe, this is truly the word of a noble and mighty messenger, who enjoys a secure position with the Lord of the Throne. He is obeyed in heaven, faithful to his trust. Your old friend is not mad. He saw him on the clear horizon. He does not grudge the secrets of the unseen. It is not the word of an accursed devil. Whither then are you going? This is only a reminder to all mankind, to those of you whose will is to be upright. Yet, you cannot will except by the will of God, Lord of all the worlds."* (Verses 15-29)

The stars referred to here are those which turn in their orbit, and are characterized by their swift movement and temporary disappearance. In translating the text we have to forego the metaphor used in Arabic which draws an analogy between these stars and the deer as they run at great speed towards their homes, disappear for a while and then reappear at a different point. This metaphor adds considerable liveliness and beauty to the description of the movement of the stars, which echoes the fine rhythm of the expression.

Again, the rhythm of the Arabic verse translated as *"and by the night as it comes darkening on"* gives a feeling of life, depicting the night as a living being. The beauty of the Arabic expression is of surpassing excellence. The same applies to the next verse: *"and by the dawn as it starts to breathe"*. This verse is indeed more effective in portraying dawn as alive, breathing. Its breath is the spreading light and the life that begins to stir in everything. I doubt whether the Arabic language, with its inexhaustible wealth of imagery and vivid expression, can produce an image portraying dawn which can be considered equal to this Qur'ānic image in aesthetic effect. After a fine night, one can almost feel that dawn is breathing.

Any aesthete will readily perceive that the divine words of the first four verses of this second part of the *sūrah* constitute a gem of expression and description: *"I swear*

by the turning stars, which move swiftly and hide themselves away, and by the night as it comes darkening on, and by the dawn as it starts to breathe.” (Verses 15-18) This descriptive wealth adds power to man’s feelings as he responds to the natural phenomena to which the verses refer.

The Two Messengers

As the Qur’ān makes this brief, full-of-life description of these phenomena it establishes a spiritual link between them and man, with the result that, as we read, we feel the power which created these phenomena, and the truth which we are called upon to believe. This truth is then stated in a manner which fits in superbly with the general theme of the *sūrah*: “*This is truly the word of a noble and mighty messenger, who enjoys a secure position with the Lord of the Throne. He is obeyed in heaven, faithful to his trust.*” (Verses 19-21) This Qur’ān with its description of the Day of Judgement is the word of a noble and mighty messenger, i.e. Jibrīl or Gabriel, the angel who carried and delivered it to Muḥammad (peace be upon him).

The *sūrah* then gives a description of this chosen messenger. He is ‘noble’, honoured by God who says that he is ‘mighty’, which suggests that considerable strength is required to carry and convey the Qur’ān. “*Who enjoys a secure position with the Lord of the Throne.*” (Verse 20) What a great honour for Jibrīl to enjoy such a position with the Lord of the universe. “*He is obeyed in heaven*”, i.e. by the other angels. He is also “*faithful to his trust*”, carrying and discharging the message.

These qualities add up to a definite conclusion: that the Qur’ān is a noble, mighty and exalted message and that God takes special care of man. It is a manifestation of this care that He has chosen an angel of Jibrīl’s calibre to bring His revelations to the man He has chosen as His Messenger. As man reflects on this divine care he should feel humble. For he himself is worth very little in the kingdom of God, were it not for the care God takes of him and the honour He bestows on him.

There follows a description of the Prophet who conveys this revelation to mankind. The *sūrah* seems to say to them: You have known Muḥammad very well over a considerable length of time. He is your old, honest, trusted friend. Why, then, are you fabricating tales about him, when he has been telling you the simple truth which he has been entrusted to deliver to you: “*Your old friend is not mad. He saw him on the clear horizon. He does not grudge the secrets of the unseen. It is not the word of an accursed devil. Whither then are you going? This is only a reminder to all mankind.*” (Verses 22-27)

They knew the Prophet perfectly well. They knew that he was a man of steady character, great sagacity and complete honesty. But in spite of all this they claimed that he was mad, and that he received his revelations from the devil. Some of them

took this view as the basis for their sustained attack on the Prophet and his Islamic message. Others did so out of amazement and wonder at the words revealed to him, which are unlike anything said or written by man. Their claim confirmed the traditional belief that each poet had a devil writing his poems, and each monk had a devil uncovering for him the secrets of the unknown world. They also believed that the devil might come into contact with people causing them to say some very strange things. They ignored the only valid explanation, that the Qur'ān was revealed by God, the Lord of all the worlds.

The *sūrah* counters this attitude by a reference to the surpassing beauty of God's creation, noticeable everywhere in the universe, and by portraying some universal scenes, as they appear, full of life. This method of reply suggests that the Qur'ān comes from the same creative power which has endowed the universe with matchless beauty. It also tells them about the two messengers entrusted with the Qur'ān, the one who brought it down and the one who delivered it to them, i.e. their own friend whom they knew to be sane, not mad. The *sūrah* tells them that he has indeed seen the other noble and mighty messenger, Gabriel, with his own eyes, on a clear horizon where no confusion is possible. He is faithful to his trust and cannot be suspected of telling anything but the truth. After all, they have never associated him with anything dishonest. *"It is not the word of an accursed devil"*. (Verse 25) Devils, by nature, cannot provide such a straightforward and consistent code of conduct. Hence the *sūrah* asks disapprovingly: *"Whither then are you going?"* (Verse 26) How far can you err in your judgement. And where can you go away from the truth which stares you in the face wherever you go?

"This is only a reminder to all mankind." (Verse 27) It reminds them of the nature of their existence, their origin and the nature of the universe around them. The reminder is to all men and women.

Islam here declares the universal nature of its call right from the start, in Makkah, where it was subjected to sustained and unabating persecution.

Free Choice

The *sūrah* then reminds us that it is up to every individual to choose whether to follow the right path or not. Since God has granted everyone his or her free will, then every human being is responsible for himself: *"To those of you whose will is to be upright"*, (Verse 28) that is to say, to follow God's guidance. All doubts have been dispelled, all excuses answered by this clear statement of all the relevant facts. The right path has been indicated for everyone who wishes to be upright. Anyone who follows a different path shall, therefore, bear the responsibility for his actions.

There are, in the human soul and in the universe at large, numerous signs which

beckon every man and woman to follow the path of faith. These are so clearly visible and so powerful in their effect that one needs to make a determined effort to turn one's back on them, especially when one's attention is drawn to them in the stirring, persuasive manner of the Qur'ān. It is, therefore, man's own will which leads him away from God's guidance. He has no other excuse or justification.

The *sūrah* concludes by stating that the operative will behind everything is the will of God: "*You cannot will except by the will of God, Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 29) We notice that the Qur'ān makes statements of this type whenever the will of human beings or creatures generally is mentioned. The reason for this is that the Qur'ān wants to keep the fundamental concepts of faith absolutely clear. These include the fact that everything in the universe is subject to God's will. No one has a will which is independent from that of God. That He grants man free will is part of His own divine will, like everything else. The same applies to His granting the angels the ability to show complete and absolute obedience to Him and to carry out all His commandments.

This fundamental fact must be clearly understood by believers, so that they have a clear concept of absolute truth. When they acquire this concept they will turn to divine will for guidance and support, and regulate their affairs according to this will.