

SŪRAH 103

Al-`Aṣr

(The Declining Day)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

I swear by the declining day, (1)

وَالْعَصْرِ

that man is a certain loser, (2)

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَنَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ

except for those who have faith and do righteous deeds and counsel one another to follow the truth and counsel one another to be patient in adversity. (3)

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّابَرِ

Overview

This very short *sūrah* outlines a complete system for human life based on the Islamic viewpoint. It defines, in the clearest and most concise form, the basic concept of faith in the context of its comprehensive reality. In a few words the whole Islamic constitution is covered and in fact, the Muslim community is described in its essential qualities and message in one verse only, the last. Such is the clear and most expressive style of which only God is capable.

The great fact which this *sūrah* affirms is simply that throughout the history of mankind there has been one worthwhile and trustworthy path, which is, specifically, the one the *sūrah* describes. All other ways lead only to loss and ruin. As it says in outline, this way means first the adoption of faith, followed by good deeds and exhortation to follow the truth and to persevere in the face of adversity.

Faith and Its Significance

What does the adoption of faith then mean? We shall not give here its juristic definition. Instead, we shall describe its nature and importance in human life.

Faith is the characteristic by which man, a small creature with a life of short duration in a limited world, attains closeness to the Absolute and Everlasting Originator of the universe and all that exists in it. He thus establishes a link with the whole universe, which springs from that One Origin, with the laws governing it and the powers and potentialities it provides. As a result, he breaks away from the narrow boundaries of his trivial self to the broadness of the universe, from his inadequate power to the great unknown universal energies, and from the limits of his short life to the eternity that God alone comprehends.

This bond with God grants man assured power, limitless scope and freedom. It endows him with great enjoyment of this beautiful life and enriches his life with a mutual friendship with other creatures. Thus life becomes a pleasant journey for man everywhere and at all times. From this an everlasting happiness and intimate understanding of life and creation are derived. This is the invaluable gain, to lack which is an immeasurable loss.

The qualities of faith are also precisely those of sublime and dignified humanity, such as the worship of one God which elevates *man* above servitude to others and establishes within him the truth of all mankind's equality so that he neither yields nor bows down his head to anyone other than God, the One, the Absolute. The result is that man enjoys true liberty, which radiates from within his conscience following his realization that there is only one power and one Lord in this world. This liberation is spontaneously developed from such an awareness, for it is the only logical sequence.

Godliness is the second quality of dignified humanity. This quality determines for man the source from which he derives his concepts, values, criteria, considerations, doctrines, laws and whatever brings him into relation with God, the world at large and with his fellow human beings. Thus, equity and justice replace personal desires and self-interest. This strengthens the believer's realization of the value of his way of life and keeps him above all *jāhiliyyah* concepts, interests and mundane values. This is so even when a believer finds himself alone, with no one else of his kind. For he counters all these features with values he derives directly from God. As such, they are the highest in value, most sound and most deserving of devotion and esteem.

A third quality of faith and dignified humanity is the clarity of the relationship between the Creator and His creatures. Thus, man, who is a creature restricted by his own world, is connected with the Everlasting Truth without any mediator. It supplies his heart and soul with light and contentment; and it gives him confidence

and purpose. It eliminates from his mind perplexity, fear and anxiety, as well as any inclination towards arrogance and tyranny over others.

Following the path ordained by God, with steadfastness and clarity of vision, is the next quality of the community of believers. This must be maintained so that goodness does not come about casually, incidentally or without deliberation but rather springs from definite motives and heads towards certain aims. People united for God's cause collaborate. Thus, with a single definite purpose and a single distinguished banner, the Muslim community is raised. This is true for all generations that are similarly welded together.

Another quality is belief in the dignity of man in God's sight. This heightens man's regard for himself and restrains him from aspiring to a position higher than that which the Creator has defined for him. For man to feel that he is dignified in God's sight is the loftiest concept he may attain of himself. Any ideology or philosophy that abases this valuation and ascribes a dishonourable origin to man, separating him from the Supreme society of God is, in effect, nothing but a position of ignominy and degradation, even though it may not say so openly. Hence, the effects of Darwinism, Freudianism and Marxism are among the most horrid disasters human nature has encountered. For they teach mankind that all abasement and downright animalism are natural phenomena with which we should be familiar and of which we need not be ashamed.

Purity of motivation is yet another quality of the dignified humanity established by faith. This directly follows the realization of man's dignity in God's sight, His supervision over human conscience and His knowledge of what man harbours in his innermost soul. A normal human being, whom the theories of Freud, Karl Marx and their type have not deformed, feels ashamed should another person come to know what unhealthy feelings he may incidentally experience. The believer feels the awesome presence of God in his innermost consciousness and his awareness makes him tremble. He, therefore, resorts to self-purification and spiritual cleansing. A refined moral sense is the natural fruit of faith in God who is just, kind, compassionate, generous and forbearing and who abhors evil, loves goodness, knows every furtive look and every secret thought. From this follows the believer's responsibility, which is the direct result of his free-will and the fact that God is aware of all that he does and feels. It stimulates within him healthy awareness, sensitivity, serenity and foresight. His is a communal, rather than an individual responsibility. What is more is that it is a responsibility towards all humanity, pure and simple. A believer feels all this in every action. He achieves a higher degree of self-respect and calculates results before taking any step. He is of value in the world and the whole realm of existence and has a role in its smooth running.

The final quality is man's elevation above greed for worldly gains, preferring

instead God's richer, everlasting reward for which all people should strive, as the Qur'ān directs them to do. Such striving for all that is good results in spiritual elevation, purification and cleansing. Of immense help in this regard is the fact that a believer has a broad scope for action: between this life and the next and between the heavens and the earth. Man's elevation lessens his anxiety about the results and fruits of his actions. He does what is good only because it is good and because God requires it. It is never his concern whether it leads to further goodness in his own short life. God, for whom he performs the good, neither dies, forgets nor ignores anyone's deeds. The reward is not to be received here, for this life is not the last. Thus, a believer acquires the power to continue to perform good deeds without waiting for immediate results. He is sustained in his determination to do good deeds by his unshakable belief in God. This is what guarantees that doing good becomes a carefully chosen way of life, not a casual incident or motiveless event. It is this belief that supplies believers with the power and fortitude to face evil, whether manifested in the despotism of a tyrant, the pressures of *jāhiliyyah*, or the frailty of their will-power to control their passions. All these represent pressures which arise primarily from a sense that this life is too short for us to achieve our aims and pleasures and from our inability to comprehend the deeper results of doing good or to see the ultimate victory of right over evil. Faith provides a radical and perfect way of dealing with such feelings.

Faith in Human Life

Faith is the foundation of all goodness in human life. It is from faith that all forms of goodness spring and to which all its fruits are due. What does not spring from faith is a branch cut from its tree: it is bound to fade and perish; or else, it is a stray shoot, limited and temporary! Faith is the axis to which all the fine fabric of life's networks is connected. Without it life is a loose event, wasted through the pursuit of yearnings and fantasies. It is the ideology which brings together diversified deeds under a consistent system, following the same route and geared to the same mechanism, possessing a definite motive and a well-defined goal.

Hence, all deeds not stemming from this origin and not related to that way are completely disregarded by the Qur'ān. Islam is invariably candid over this. In Sūrah 14, Abraham, we read: "*The works of those who disbelieve in their Lord are like ashes which the wind blows about fiercely on a stormy day. They cannot achieve any benefit from all that they might have earned.*" (14: 18) In Sūrah 24, Light, we read: "*As for the unbelievers, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty traveller supposes to be water, but when he comes near to it, he finds that it is nothing.*" (24: 39) These are clear statements discrediting every deed not related to faith. The fact is that faith gives a person's deed a motive that is connected with the origin of existence and an aim compatible

with the purpose of all creation. This is a logical view of an ideology that attributes all events to God. Whoever dissociates himself from Him, vanishes and loses the reality of his existence.

Faith is a sign of health in a person's nature and soundness in his disposition. It also indicates man's harmony with the nature of the whole universe, and the presence of mutual effect between man and the world around him. His life, as long as his behaviour is straightforward, must bring about an orientation which ends up in his adoption of faith because of what this universe itself possesses of signs and testimonies about the absolute power that created it. Were the contrary the case, something must then be wrong or lacking in the state of the recipient, i.e. man, which would be a sign of corruption that only leads to loss and nullifies any deed which might somehow give an appearance of righteousness. So extensive and comprehensive, so sublime and beautiful, so happy is the believers' world that the world of unbelievers appears, by comparison, minute, trivial, low, feeble, ugly and miserable.

Need for Righteous Deeds

Doing what is righteous is the natural fruit of faith. It is a spontaneous interaction generated once the reality of faith settles inside the human heart and mind. For faith is a positive and active concept which, once it has pervaded the human conscience, hastens to reflect itself to the outside world in good deeds. This is the Islamic view of faith. It must be dynamic. If it is not, then it is either phoney or nonexistent, just as a flower cannot withhold its fragrance which naturally spreads. Otherwise, it is not in the flower at all.

From all this we recognize the value of faith: it is dynamic, active, creative, productive and totally devoted to God's pleasure. It is the opposite of narrowness, negativity or introversion. It is not just sincere and innocent intentions that never develop into actions. This is the distinguishing characteristic of Islam that makes it a creative power in practical life.

All this is logical only as long as faith remains the link with the way of life God has outlined. This way of life is characterized by perpetual dynamism in the world and among people. It is founded according to a specific plan and orientated towards a definite goal. Moreover, faith propels humanity towards implementing what is good, pure, constructive and utilitarian.

Counselling one another to follow the truth and to persevere in the face of adversity reveals a picture of Islamic society which has its own very special entity, a unique inter-relationship between its individual members and a single objective. It fully understands its position, role and duties. It realizes the essence of its faith and

what it has to do of good deeds which include, among other tasks, the leadership of humanity along its own way. To execute this tremendous duty, mutual counselling and exhortation become a necessity.

From the meaning and nature of the very word 'counsel' appears a most magnificent picture of a united, co-ordinated, righteous and enlightened community or society which pursues right, justice and goodness on this earth. This is exactly how Islam wants the Muslim community to be.

Mutual counsel aimed at that which is right is a necessity because it is hard always to maintain what is right, bearing in mind that the obstacles in its way are innumerable: egoistic passions and predilections, false concepts in the social environment, and the tyranny, inequity and despotism of some. Hence the mutual exhortation urged here means reminding, encouraging and expressing the unity of aim and destination and equality in duty and responsibility. It also collects individual efforts into a unified whole and thus increases feelings of brotherhood in every guardian of truth, in so far as there are others with him to exhort, encourage, support and love him. This is precisely the case with Islam, the righteous way of life whose establishment requires a co-ordinated, interdependent, self-sufficient and self-supporting community.

Counsel and exhortation to persevere in the face of adversity are also a necessity because the sustenance of faith and good deeds and catering for right and equity are the hardest tasks to carry out. This makes endurance utterly indispensable. Endurance is also necessary when adapting oneself to the Islamic way of life, confronting others, and when afflicted with ill-treatment and hardship. Perseverance is necessary when evil and falsehood triumph. It is necessary for traversing the length of the route, putting up with the slowness of the process of reform, the obscurity of the road-posts and the lengthy road leading to the destination.

Exhortation to endure hardship and persevere against adverse conditions broadens man's capacities by inspiring unity of aim and direction as well as feelings of togetherness in everyone, equipping them with love, fortitude and determination. It generates vitality in the community where the truth of Islam can survive and through which it is implemented.

Judging by the doctrine which the Qur'ān outlines for the life of the successful group which attains salvation, we are gravely shocked to see the loss and the ruin in which humanity today finds itself everywhere. We are amazed at the frustrations humanity suffers in this present world and at how humanity turns away from the goodness God has bestowed upon it. We are the more distressed by the absence a righteous and faithful authority to stand up for the truth. Moreover, the Muslims, or rather people claiming to be Muslims, are the farthest of all from what is good and

the most averse to the ideology God ordained for their community and the one route He pointed out for their deliverance from loss and ruin. People, in the very realm where this righteousness took its roots, have deserted the banner God raised for them, that is the banner of faith. They have raised instead banners of race which have never done them any good throughout their history or given them a respectable position either on earth or in the heavens. For it was Islam that raised for them the banner totally conforming to God's will, hoisted in His name only and identified with Him alone. Under this banner the Arabs triumphed, were predominant and gave humanity a righteous, strong, enlightened and successful leadership for the first time in human history. Shaikh Abū'l al-Ḥasan `Alī Nadwī outlines the characteristics of this unique leadership:

Once the Muslims were aroused, they quickly burst the bounds of Arabia and threw themselves zealously into the task of the fuller working out of human destiny. Their leadership held the guarantee of light and happiness for the world; it gave the promise of turning humanity into a single divinely-guided society. Some of the characteristics of Muslim leadership were:

The Muslims had the unique advantage of being in possession of the divine book (the Qur'ān) and the sacred law (the Shariah). They did not have to fall back on their own judgement on the vital questions of life, and were thus saved from the manifold difficulties and perils that are attendant upon such a course. The divine word had illumined all the avenues of life for them and had enabled them to progress towards a destination which they clearly envisaged. With them it was not to be a case of trial and error. Says the Holy Qur'ān: "*Can he who is dead, to whom We give life and a light whereby he can walk amongst men, be like him who is in the depths of darkness from which he can never come out?*" (6: 122)

They were to judge among men on the basis of the revealed word; they were not to diverge from the dictates of justice and equity; their view was not to be blurred by enmity, hatred or desire for revenge. "*O you who believe, stand out firmly for God as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just; that is nearer to piety; and fear God, for God is well acquainted with all that ye do.*" (5: 8)

They had not by themselves leapt into power all of a sudden from the abysmal depth of degradation. The Qur'ān had already beaten them into shape. They had been brought to a high level of nobility and purity by the Prophet through long years of unremitting care. The Prophet had conditioned them to a life of austerity and righteousness; he had instilled into their hearts the virtues of humility and courageous self-denial; he had purged them clean

of greed and of striving after power, renown or wealth. It was laid down by him as a fundamental principle of Islamic polity that "We shall not assign an office under the government to anyone who makes a request for it, or shows his longing for it in any other way." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.]

The Muslims were as far removed from falsehood, haughtiness and mischief as white is from black. The following words of the Qur'ān had not in vain been grounded into them night and day: "*That home of the hereafter We shall give to those who intend not high-handedness or mischief on earth; and the end is (best) for the righteous.*" (28: 37)

Instead of aspiring for positions of authority and trust, they accepted them with great reluctance and when they did accept an official position they accepted it as a trust from God, to whom they would have to render full account of their sins of omission and commission on the Day of Judgement. Says the Holy Qur'ān: "*God commands you to render back your trusts to those to whom they are due; and when you judge between man and man, that you judge with justice.*" (4: 58) "*It is He Who has made you (His) vicegerents on the earth. He has raised you in ranks, some above others, that He might try you in the gifts you receive; for your Lord is quick in punishment, yet He is indeed Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.*" (6: 165)

Further, the Muslims were not the agents of any particular race or country; nor were they out to establish Arab imperialism. Their mission was a universal mission of faith and freedom. They were happily free from all the sickly obsessions of colour and territorial nationality. All men were equal before them. The Qur'ān had pointedly said: "*O mankind, We created you from (a single pair of) a male and a female; and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other [not that you may despise each other]. Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is [he who is] the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted [with all things].*" (49: 13)

Once the son of `Amr ibn al-`Āṣ, the Governor of Egypt, struck an Egyptian commoner with a whip. The matter was brought to the notice of Caliph `Umar. The Caliph did not show the least regard for the high status of the offender's father, and ordered the Egyptian straightforwardly to avenge himself for harm done to him. To the offender's father he administered this telling rebuke, "Why have you made them slaves when they were born free?"

The Arabs were not stingy in making the benefits of faith, culture and learning available to the non-Arabs. They did not care for the nationality or the family connections of the recipients when it came to the conferment of high honours and positions in the State. They were, as it were, a cloud of bliss that rained ungrudgingly over the entire world, and from which all peoples,

everywhere freely profited according to their own capacity.

The Arabs allowed a free and equal partnership to all nations in the establishment of a new socio-political structure and in the advancement of mankind towards a fuller and richer moral ideal. There were no national divisions, no colour bars, no vested interests, no priesthood and no hereditary nobility in the Islamic Commonwealth. No special benefits were reserved for anyone. There was nothing to prevent the non-Arabs from surpassing the Arabs in the various fields of life. Even as Doctors of *Fiqh* and Ḥadīth a number of non-Arabs attained to distinction for which the Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular feel proud. Ibn Khaldūn writes: "It is an amazing fact of history that though their religion is of Arabian origin and the Law that the Prophet had brought had an Arab complexion, with a few exceptions, all eminent men of learning in the Muslim *Millat* [i.e. faith], in the field of theological as well as secular sciences, are non-Arabs. Even those who are Arabs by birth are non-Arabs by education, language and scholarship. During the later centuries, too, the non-Arab Muslims continued to produce leaders, statesmen, saints and savants of exceptional merit. This would obviously not have been possible, had the Arabs been mean or prejudiced in sharing their opportunities with the people of other nationalities in the Islamic world. Humanity has many sides – physical, emotional, social, moral, mental and spiritual. We cannot neglect any one of them for the benefit of another. Humanity cannot progress to its highest level unless every human instinct is brought into proper play. It would be futile to hope for the establishment of a healthy human society till an intellectual, material, moral and spiritual environment is created in which a man is enabled to develop his latent potentialities in harmony with God's plan of creation. We learn from experience that this goal must remain a dream so long as the reins of civilization are not held by those who attach due importance to both the material and the spiritual yearnings of life, and can, together with having a high moral and spiritual sense, fitly appreciate the claims of flesh and blood upon man and the interrelationship between the individual and the society.⁴⁴

Shaikh Nadwī then speaks of the reign of the first four Caliphs who ruled after the Prophet:

We, consequently, find that no period in the recorded history of the human race has been more auspicious for it in the true sense of the term than what is known among the Muslims as *Khilāfat-i-Rāshidah*. During this epoch, all the material, moral and spiritual resources of man were brought into use to make

⁴⁴ Abu'! al-Ḥasan `Alī Nadwī, *Islam and the World*, pp. 75-78.

him an ideal citizen of an ideal State. The Government was judged by the yard-stick of morality, and the morals were judged by their utility to lift humanity in permanent values and establishing justice in human society. Though the Islamic Commonwealth was the richest and the most powerful State of its time, the popular heroes and ideal personalities in it used to be drawn from among those who possessed, not earthly glory, but purity and nobleness of character. There was no disparity between power and morality. Material advancement was not allowed to outrun moral progress. That is why in the Islamic world the incidence of crime was very low in spite of the abundance of wealth and the great heterogeneity of its population. To put it in a nutshell, this epoch was the most beautiful springtime mankind has to this day experienced.⁴⁵

We know some features of that glorious period of human history whose generation lived under the Islamic constitution, the pillars of which this particular *sūrah* erects. That happy period of history was made possible under the banner of faith carried by a group of believers who performed righteous deeds and encouraged each other to follow the truth and to persevere in adversity.

Profit and Loss

Now what, in the light of all this, is the loss humanity is suffering everywhere? How great is its failure in the battle between good and evil as a result of turning a blind eye to the great message the Arabs delivered to it when they raised the banner of Islam and thus assumed the leadership of mankind? Having abandoned Islam, the Arab nation is in the forefront of the caravan which is heading towards loss and ruin. Since then, the banners of mankind have been for Satan, falsehood, error, darkness and loss. No banner has been raised for God, truth, guidance, light or success. God's banner, however, is still there awaiting the arms that will raise it and the nation which under it will advance towards righteousness, guidance and success.

All that has been said so far concerned gain and loss in this life which, though of great importance, is very trivial in comparison with the hereafter. There is an everlasting life and a world of reality where real profit is made or real loss is suffered; that is, either the attainment of, or deprivation from, paradise and the pleasure of God. There man either accomplishes the highest of perfection allowed for him or completely collapses so that his humanity is crushed and ends up as worthless as pebbles or even worse: "*On the day when man will look on what his hands have forwarded and the unbeliever will cry: 'Would that I were dust.'*" (78: 40)

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

This *sūrah* is unequivocal in indicating the path leading humanity away from loss: “*except for those who have faith and do righteous deeds and counsel one another to follow the truth and counsel one another to be patient in adversity.*” (Verse 3) There is only one right path – that of faith, good deeds and the existence of a Muslim community whose members counsel one another to follow the truth and to show endurance and perseverance.

Consequently, whenever two Companions of God’s Messenger were about to depart from each other, they would read this *sūrah*, after which they would shake hands. This was indicative of a pledge to accept this doctrine fully, to preserve this faith, piety and a willingness to counsel each other to follow the truth and to persevere in the face of adversity. It was a mutual compact to remain good elements in an Islamic society established according to that doctrine and to preserve the foundation of this society.