

SŪRAH 84
Al-Inshiqāq
(The Rending)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

When the sky is rent asunder, (1)

إِذَا السَّمَاءُ أَنْشَقَّتْ ﴿١﴾

obeying her Lord in true submission; (2)

وَأَذِنَتْ لِرَبِّهَا وَحُقَّتْ ﴿٢﴾

when the earth is stretched out (3)

وَإِذَا الْأَرْضُ مُدَّتْ ﴿٣﴾

and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, (4)

وَأَلْقَتْ مَا فِيهَا وَتَخَلَّتْ ﴿٤﴾

obeying her Lord in true submission! (5)

وَأَذِنَتْ لِرَبِّهَا وَحُقَّتْ ﴿٥﴾

O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet Him. (6)

يَتَأْتِيهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ

كَدْحًا فَمُلَاقِيهِ ﴿٦﴾

He who is given his record in his right hand (7)

فَأَمَّا مَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ ﴿٧﴾

will in time have a lenient reckoning, (8)

فَسَوْفَ تُوَفَّىٰ تَحْسَابُ حِسَابًا يَسِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

and return rejoicing to his people. (9)

But he who is given his record behind his back
(10)

will in time call down destruction upon himself
(11)

and will enter the fire of hell. (12)

He lived joyfully among his people. (13)

He surely thought he would never return. (14)

Yes, indeed; his Lord was watching over him.
(15)

I swear by the twilight, (16)

and by the night and what it envelops, (17)

and by the moon in her full perfection, (18)

that you shall certainly move onward, stage after
stage. (19)

Why then do they not accept the faith? (20)

Or, when the Qur'an is read to them, they do not
fall down in prostration? (21)

وَيَنْقَلِبُ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهِ مَسْرُورًا ﴿٩﴾

وَأَمَّا مَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَابَهُ وَرَاءَ ظَهْرِهِ ﴿١٠﴾

فَسَوْفَ يَدْعُوا ثُبُورًا ﴿١١﴾

وَيَصَلِّي سَعِيرًا ﴿١٢﴾

إِنَّهُ كَانَ فِي أَهْلِهِ مَسْرُورًا ﴿١٣﴾

إِنَّهُ ظَنَّ أَنْ لَنْ يَحُورَ ﴿١٤﴾

بَلَىٰ إِنَّ رَبَّهُ كَانَ بِهِ بَصِيرًا ﴿١٥﴾

فَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِالشَّفَقِ ﴿١٦﴾

وَاللَّيْلِ وَمَا وَسَقَ ﴿١٧﴾

وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا اتَّسَقَ ﴿١٨﴾

لَتَرْكَبَنَّ طَبَقًا عَنْ طَبَقِ ﴿١٩﴾

فَمَا لَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَإِذَا قُرِئَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقُرْآنُ لَا يَسْجُدُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

﴿٢١﴾

But the unbelievers persist in rejecting [the truth],
(22)

yet God knows very well what they are hiding.
(23)

So give them the tidings of a grievous suffering,
(24)

except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs is an unfailling reward. (25)

بَلِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يَكْذِبُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَاللَّهُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يُوعُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

فَبَشِّرْهُمْ بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ لَهُمْ
أَجْرٌ غَيْرُ مَمْنُونٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

Overview

The *sūrah* opens by sketching a few images of the universal upheaval portrayed in greater detail in *Sūrahs* 81, 82 and earlier in *Sūrah* 78, The Darkening, Cleaving Asunder and The Tiding, respectively. These scenes, however, are now given a special tone by means of the emphasis placed on the complete submission to God by both heaven and earth: “When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission.” (Verses 1-5)

This powerful opening, with its emphasis on submission to God, is a foreword to the subsequent address encouraging man towards humbleness before his Lord. Man is reminded of his position and his ultimate destiny when he returns to God: “O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet Him. He who is given his record in his right hand will in time have a lenient reckoning, and return rejoicing to his people. But he who is given his record behind his back will in time call down destruction upon himself and will enter the fire of hell. He lived joyfully among his people. He surely thought he would never return. Yes, indeed; his Lord was watching over him.” (Verses 6-15)

The third part of the *sūrah* paints a picture of life on earth which is well known to man. Such images point to God’s planning, which is both elaborate and faultless. An oath is made to assert that men must live through deliberately planned stages which they cannot escape from: “I swear by the twilight, and by the night and what it envelops, and by the moon in her full perfection, that you shall certainly move onward, stage after stage.” (Verses 16-19)

The last part of the *sūrah* wonders at those who deny the faith when their position is as described in the previous two parts, and the end of their world is as described at the beginning of the *sūrah*: “Why then do they not accept the faith? Or, when the Qur’ān is

read to them, they do not fall down in prostration? But the unbelievers persist in rejecting [the truth], yet God knows very well what they are hiding. So give them the tidings of a grievous suffering, except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs is an unfailing reward.” (Verses 20-25)

Two main qualities are evident in this *sūrah*: its quiet rhythm and its earnest message. Both are clearly felt, even in the images of universal upheaval the *sūrah* sketches. Scenes of this upheaval are portrayed with much more violence elsewhere, as in *Sūrah* 81, The Darkening. Here an attitude of sympathetic and compassionate cautioning is adopted. The cautioning is gradual, presented in a quiet, inspiring statement beginning with the words “O man”. This awakens people’s consciences.

The various parts of the *sūrah* are ordered according to a special plan. This carries the reader through a variety of scenes, some relating to the universe, others to man himself. The scenes are sketched one after the other in a thoughtful order starting with universal submission to God, which leaves a gentle but real impression on the reader’s heart. Then we are given an image of the reckoning, reward and retribution, followed by a contemporary scene of life on earth and its phenomena. Then follows a statement of wonder at those who, after all this, still refuse to accept the faith. This statement combines with a warning of severe punishment, and a promise of unfailing reward to the believers.

All this is embodied in the few lines which compose this short *sūrah*. Such succinctness is just one aspect of the unique nature of the Qur’ān . The ideas the *sūrah* sets out to explain could not normally be tackled with such power and to such effect, even if entire books were devoted to the task. But the Qur’ān achieves its purpose because it addresses our hearts directly. No wonder! It is the word of God.

Complete Universal Submission

“When the sky is rent asunder, obeying her Lord in true submission; when the earth is stretched out and casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty, obeying her Lord in true submission.” (Verses 1-5) The splitting of the sky has been dwelt upon in the commentary on other *sūrahs*. One new element here is the submission and complete obedience of the sky to her Lord: *“obeying her Lord in true submission.”* (Verse 2) Another new element is the stretching of the earth: *“When the earth is stretched out.”* (Verse 3) This means perhaps an expansion of her size or shape as a result of a disruption of the laws of nature which govern her and preserve her in her present shape. The statement, made in the passive, suggests that this will be carried out through the intervention of an outside force. *“And casts forth all that is within her and becomes empty.”* (Verse 4) This image portrays the earth as a living entity casting out what is within her and getting rid of it.

There are indeed a great many things within the earth, countless types of creation that have lived, died and been buried over a long period of time, the span of which is known to no one but God. It also includes an abundant resource of metals, water and other secrets unknown except to the Creator. The earth carries all this load one generation after another until that final day when it casts forth all that is within her. *"Obeying her Lord in true submission,"* she follows the sky's suit and declares total obedience and complete submission to God.

These short verses vividly demonstrate how both the living sky and earth receive their orders and instantly comply with them. Their obedience is a manifestation of their conscious and dutiful submission. The image drawn here has shades of humility, solemnity and tranquillity that are brought out in full relief. The impression it leaves is one of humble and obedient submission to God.

Man's Hard Labour

In such an atmosphere of conscious obedience, man is addressed from on high: *"O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord, and you shall meet Him."* (Verse 6) *"O man!"* your Lord has made you in a perfect way. He has given you your humanity which distinguishes you from the rest of creation. Your humanity endows you with certain characteristics which should have made you more conscious of your Lord, and more obedient and submissive to Him than both the sky and the earth. He has given man of His own spirit and endowed him with the ability to communicate with Him, receive His light, ennoble himself with God's grace in order to achieve the highest degree of perfection attainable by man. This is no little distinction.

"O man! You have been toiling towards your Lord and you shall meet Him." (Verse 6) Man certainly labours hard in this life, shouldering his responsibilities and exerting himself. All this he does in order to return, in the end, like all the rest of creation, to God. Man labours even for what he enjoys! Nothing in this life comes easily or without effort: if sometimes no physical labour is needed, then surely some mental and emotional effort is required. In this the rich and poor are alike, although the labour exerted may differ in kind and form. This address reminds man that labouring hard is the lot of all in this life on earth. But when we meet our Lord, we will fall into two groups: one will suffer hardship incomparable to that suffered on earth; and the other, consisting of those who have demonstrated their obedience and true submission, will enjoy a rest in which the suffering of this life will be forgotten.

"He who is given his record in his right hand will in time have a lenient reckoning, and return rejoicing to his people." (Verses 7-9) He who is given his book in his right hand is the happy one who was true to his faith. God is pleased with him and rewards him well. He will have a lenient reckoning, that is to say that he will not be called to

account for what he did in this life. This is abundantly clear in the traditions of the Prophet. `Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife, quotes him as saying: "He who is called to account will suffer affliction." Continuing her report, she pointed out that God says, 'He... shall have a lenient reckoning.' God's Messenger answered: 'That is not what is meant by reckoning and accountability. Lenient reckoning signifies no more than showing him his record. He who is called to account on the Day of Judgement will suffer affliction.'" [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā'ī.]

`Ā'ishah also related: "I heard God's Messenger (peace be upon him) saying in his prayers 'My Lord, make my reckoning a lenient one'. When he had finished his prayers I asked him, 'What is the lenient reckoning?' He answered: 'He who receives lenient reckoning will have his record looked into and will be forgiven, but he who is called to account on that day will perish.'" [Related by Aḥmad.]

This is, then, the lenient reckoning accorded to him who receives his record in his right hand. He shall win "*and return rejoicing to his people,*" who will also have won and arrived in heaven ahead of him. We deduce from this statement that those who accept the faith in this life and adhere to the right path will gather together in heaven. Everyone ends up with those whom he loves. We also have an image of the winner's all-important test: he returns with his face overflowing with happiness.

This image is the opposite of what happens to the afflicted one who has to account for his evil deeds and receives his record with reluctance. "*But he who is given his record behind his back will in time call down destruction upon himself and will enter the fire of hell.*" (Verses 10-12)

The Qur'ān usually makes a distinction between receiving one's record with one's right or left hand. Here we have a new image: the record is given from behind one's back. There is no reason to prevent anyone being given his record in his left hand and from behind his back at the same time. It is an image of one who feels great shame and hates to be confronted with what he has done. We have no real knowledge of the nature of this record or how it is given in one's right or left hand or behind one's back. But we can comprehend from the first expression the reality of being a winner, and from the second the reality of doom. This is indeed what we are meant to appreciate. These various forms of expression are used mainly to drive the point home to us and to enhance its effects. For exact knowledge of what will happen and how it will happen belongs only to God.

So, the unfortunate one who lived his life on earth labouring hard but disobeying God and indulging in what is forbidden will know his destiny. He realizes that what lies in front of him is more suffering and hard labour with the only difference being that this time the suffering is greater, uninterrupted and endless. So, he calls destruction upon himself, for he sees his own destruction as the only means of

salvation from what will befall him. When man seeks refuge in his own destruction, then he is certainly in a helpless position. His own non-existence becomes his strongest desire. His hopelessness is beyond description. This is the meaning implied by the Arab poet al-Mutanabbī in his poem which starts with what may be rendered in English as: "Suffice it a malady that you should think death a cure. It says much that doom should be eagerly desired." It is certainly a case of indescribable distress and misery. "And [he] will enter the fire of hell." (Verse 12) This is the end from which he wishes to escape by means of his own destruction; but there is no way out.

Having portrayed this miserable scene, the *sūrah* gives us a glimpse of the sufferer's past which led him to this endless misery: "He lived joyfully among his people. He surely thought he would never return." (Verses 13-14) The past tense is used here because we feel that the Day of Judgement has arrived, after this life has ended. The indulgence and the joy had taken place in this life. "He lived joyfully among his people." He cared for nothing beyond the moment he was in, and made no preparation for the hereafter. "He surely thought he would never return," to his Lord. Had he thought about the return at the end of his journey through life, he would have carried provisions to sustain him. "Yes, indeed; his Lord was watching over him." (Verse 15) Indeed God has always been aware of man's thoughts, actions and feelings. God knows that, contrary to what man may think, there will be a return to Him to receive the reward merited by actions on earth. This is indeed what happens when all return to God to meet their appointed destiny, when what God has ordained will take place.

"He lived joyfully among his people. He surely thought he would never return. Yes, indeed; his Lord was watching over him." (Verses 13-15) This image of the misery of the one who was joyful among his people during his short life on earth has a counterpart in the image of the happy one who returns rejoicing to his people to live with them an eternal happy life, free from hardship: "He who is given his record in his right hand will in time have a lenient reckoning and return rejoicing to his people." (Verses 7-9)

Suffering Through Life

The *sūrah* then refers briefly to some worldly scenes. People, however, continue to overlook the evidence such scenes provide of the deliberate planning that has gone into the making of this world. Indeed, this planning includes the creation of man himself, and his phases and transitions through life: "I swear by the twilight, and by the night and what it envelops, and by the moon in her full perfection, that you shall certainly move onward, stage after stage." (Verses 16-19) The oath, which is indirect in the Arabic text, serves to draw man's attention to these universal scenes. The connotations here are in perfect harmony with those of the opening of the *sūrah* and the scenes portrayed there. The twilight refers to that period of stillness after sunset when the

soul is overwhelmed by a deep feeling of awe. The heart feels, at such a time, the significance of parting with a beloved companion, and the quiet sadness and deep melancholy this involves. It also experiences fear of the approaching darkness.

“And by the night and what it envelops.” (Verse 17) What the night envelops is left unspecified to enhance the effect. Imagination can travel far and wide as one thinks of what the night may conceal of events and feelings. But the travels of the imagination cannot capture all the images generated by the short Qur’ānic verse, *“And by the night and what it envelops.”* We are left with an overwhelming feeling of reverence which is in perfect harmony with the stillness and awe associated with the twilight.

“And by the moon in her full perfection.” (Verse 18) This is another quiet and splendid scene, describing the full moon as her light descends over the earth. The full moon is always associated with tranquillity. The general impression formed here is closely associated with twilight, and the dark night as it conceals everything. The feeling is one of a complementary stillness and reverence.

“That you shall certainly move onward, stage after stage.” (Verse 19) This means, you will pass from one stage of suffering to another, as has been charted for you. The Qur’ān uses the term ‘ride’, although we use the expression ‘move onward’, to denote the undergoing of various stages of suffering. ‘Ride’ is frequently used in Arabic to signify the passage through risk and difficulty. This usage suggests that difficulties and risks are like horses or mules to be ridden. Each one will take the rider to the stage determined for them. Thus each one will deliver the rider to a new, predetermined stage, in the same way as twilight, the night and perfect moon are predetermined. They eventually end with their meeting with God, which was mentioned in the preceding part. This coherent ordering of the parts of the *sūrah* and the smooth movement from one point to another is characteristic of the superb Qur’ānic style.

Unfailing Reward

There then follows an expression of wonder at those who persist in their denial of the faith when they have all these signs and all this abundant evidence within themselves and in the world at large which indicates the truth: *“Why then do they not accept the faith?”* Or, *“when the Qur’ān is read to them, they do not fall down in prostration?”* (Verses 20-21) Indeed, why do they not accept the faith? There are numerous indications in the universe and within the soul which point out that the path of faith is the right path. They are at once numerous, profound and powerful, so they besiege the heart if it tries to run away from them. But if someone listens to them, then they address him in a friendly and affectionate way.

The Qur'ān addresses them in the language of pure human nature. It opens the heart to the truth and points out its evidence both within themselves and over the horizon. It kindles in people's hearts God-consciousness, humbleness, obedience and submission to the Creator of the universe. The expression, "*fall down in prostration,*" refers to these feelings. The universe is splendid and inspiring: it offers a multitude of signs, mental stimuli and moments of purity which combine to arouse in us a ready response and a willing submission. The Qur'ān is also superb and inspiring; it links the human heart with the splendid universe and, consequently, with the Creator who made it. It gives us a feeling of truth about the universe which also demonstrates the truth of creation and the Creator. Hence the wonder: "*Why then do they not accept the faith? Or, when the Qur'ān is read to them, they do not fall down in prostration?*" (Verses 20-21)

It is indeed amazing, but the Qur'ān does not dwell on this for long. It proceeds to describe the behaviour of the unbelievers and the end which awaits them. "*But the unbelievers persist in rejecting [the truth], yet God knows very well what they are hiding. So give them the tidings of a grievous suffering.*" (Verses 22-24) The unbelievers shout, 'lies', but the object of their denunciation as lies is unspecified. In Arabic, omission of the object serves to widen the scope of reference for the verb. Thus, here we understand that the denunciation as lies is an entrenched habit and a characteristic of unbelievers. But God is fully aware of the evil they conceal in their hearts and He knows perfectly well their motives for denouncing the truth.

The *sūrah* then halts its discussion of their state and addresses God's Messenger: "*So give them the tidings of a grievous suffering,*" an unpleasant tidings for anyone who is awaiting news of his future.

At the same time the *sūrah* describes what awaits the believers who prepare for their future by good deeds. This description is made in the form of an exception from what awaits the unbelievers: "*except for those who believe and do good deeds; for theirs is an unfailing reward.*" (Verse 25) This type of exception is known in Arabic linguistics as "unrelated exception". The believers, not originally among the recipients of the gloomy news, are then excepted from it. This form of expression serves to draw attention to what follows. The unfailing recompense is one which is continuous and unceasing, and will be given in the hereafter, when people will be immortal.

On this decisive note the *sūrah* ends. It is a *sūrah* of short yet immensely powerful verses.