

SŪRAH 85
Al-Burūj
(The Constellations)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

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

By the heaven with its constellations, (1)

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْبُرُوجِ ﴿١﴾

by the promised day, (2)

وَالْيَوْمِ الْمَوْعُودِ ﴿٢﴾

by the witness and that which is witnessed, (3)

وَشَاهِدٍ وَمَشْهُودٍ ﴿٣﴾

slain be the people of the pit (4)

قُتِلَ أَصْحَابُ الْأُحْدُودِ ﴿٤﴾

of the fire abounding in fuel, (5)

النَّارِ ذَاتِ الْوَقُودِ ﴿٥﴾

when they sat around it, (6)

إِذْ هُمْ عَلَيْهَا قُعُودٌ ﴿٦﴾

watching what they did to the believers. (7)

وَهُمْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَفْعَلُونَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ شُهُودٌ ﴿٧﴾

They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, to whom all praise is due, (8)

وَمَا نَقَمُوا مِنْهُمْ إِلَّا أَن يُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ

الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ ﴿٨﴾

to whom the dominion of the heavens and the earth belongs. But God is witness of all things. (9)

Those who persecute the believers, men and women, and do not repent shall suffer the punishment of hell, and suffer the punishment of burning. (10)

But those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens through which running waters flow; that is the supreme triumph. (11)

Stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance. (12)

It is He who brings into being, and then restores to life. (13)

He is All-Forgiving, Compassionate, (14)

Lord of the Throne, Glorious, (15)

He does whatever He wills. (16)

Have you heard the story of the hosts, (17)

of Pharaoh and Thamūd? (18)

Yet the unbelievers persist in their denial [of the truth]. (19)

الَّذِي لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَاللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٩﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَتَنُوا الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ
ثُمَّ لَمْ يَتُوبُوا فَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ جَهَنَّمَ وَهُمْ
عَذَابُ الْحَرِيقِ ﴿١٠﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ هُمْ
جَنَّاتُ تَجْرَىٰ مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ
الْفَوْزُ الْكَبِيرُ ﴿١١﴾

إِنَّ بَطْشَ رَبِّكَ لَشَدِيدٌ ﴿١٢﴾

إِنَّهُ هُوَ يُبْدِي وَيُعِيدُ ﴿١٣﴾

وَهُوَ الْغَفُورُ الْوَدُودُ ﴿١٤﴾

ذُو الْعَرْشِ الْمَجِيدُ ﴿١٥﴾

فَعَالٌ لِّمَا يُرِيدُ ﴿١٦﴾

هَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ الْجُنُودِ ﴿١٧﴾

فِرْعَوْنَ وَثَمُودَ ﴿١٨﴾

بَلِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فِي تَكْذِيبٍ ﴿١٩﴾

But God surrounds them all. (20)

وَاللَّهُ مِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ مُحِيطٌ ﴿٢٠﴾

This is indeed a glorious Qur'ān, (21)

بَلْ هُوَ قُرْءَانٌ مَجِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾

inscribed on an imperishable tablet. (22)

فِي لَوْحٍ مَّحْفُوظٍ ﴿٢٢﴾

Overview

This short *sūrah* outlines the essentials of faith and the basics of belief as matters of great importance. It sheds a powerful and searching light over these essentials in order to reveal what lies beyond the elementary facts expressed in the text. Every verse, and sometimes every word, in this *sūrah* virtually opens a window overlooking a limitless world of truth.

The immediate theme of the *sūrah* is the pit incident, when a community of believers who lived before the advent of Islam, said to be unitarian Christians, were faced by ruthless and tyrannical enemies who sought to force them away from their faith. The believers refused. The tyrants then lit a great fire in a pit they had dug, and threw them into it. The believers were thus burnt to death in front of large crowds that had gathered to witness this ghastly act of extermination. The tyrants sat by, amused by the believers' sufferings: "They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, to whom all praise is due." (Verse 8)

The *sūrah* starts with an oath: "By the heaven with its constellations, by the promised day, by the witness and that which is witnessed, slain be the people of the pit." (Verses 1-4) In this way the *sūrah* links heaven and its magnificent constellations, the promised Day of Judgement and its great events, the multitudes which witness that day and the events they witness with the pit incident and God's anger with the aggressors responsible for it. The *sūrah* then proceeds to portray the tragic scene in a few, quick flashes which demonstrate the horror without dwelling on detail.

It includes a reference to the greatness of faith which exalted itself over the tyrants' atrocious cruelty and triumphed over the fire, attaining a level of sublimity which is an honour to all mankind. It also refers to the heinous crime and the evil and injustice it involves in comparison with the sublimity, innocence and purity of the believers: "Slain be the people of the pit of the fire abounding in fuel, when they sat around it, watching what they did to the believers." (Verses 4-7)

Then follows a series of short comments stating a number of principles which are highly important to the Islamic faith, its outlook and advocacy. We have firstly a

reference to the fact that all the heavens and earth are part of God's kingdom and to His witnessing of all that takes place in them. He is the Sovereign of the heavens and the earth, who witnesses all.

Secondly, we have a reference to the burning in hell which awaits the tyrants, and a reference to the perfect heavenly bliss which awaits the believers who choose faith over life and exalt themselves despite their persecution. The believers' action is referred to as the great triumph: *"Those who persecute the believers, men and women, and do not repent shall suffer the punishment of hell, and suffer the punishment of burning. But those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens through which running waters flow; that is the supreme triumph."* (Verses 10-11)

A further reference is made to the power with which God smites His enemies and to the fact that He creates and brings back to life after death: *"Stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance. It is He who brings into being, and then restores to life."* (Verses 12-13) This relates directly to the lives blotted out in the pit incident.

The *sūrah* then mentions some of the divine attributes, each of which has a specific relevance to the subject matter of the *sūrah*: *"He is All-Forgiving, Compassionate."* (Verse 14) He forgives those who repent regardless of the enormity and horror of their sins. He also loves His servants who choose Him. His love is the soothing balsam which heals whatever injuries they may have suffered. *"Lord of the Throne, Glorious, He does whatever He wills."* (Verses 15-16) These attributes portray God's absolute will, dominance and power, all of which are relevant to the event discussed in the *sūrah*.

Then follows a reference to examples of God's punishment of tyrants even though they were heavily armed. *"Have you heard the story of the hosts, of Pharaoh and Thamūd?"* (Verses 17-18) These were two very different instances of God's punishment with widely different effects. Along with the pit horror, they carry numerous implications.

Finally, the *sūrah* explains the situation of the unbelievers and that God surrounds them though they may be unaware of the fact. *"Yet the unbelievers persist in their denial [of the truth]. But God surrounds them all."* (Verses 19-20) It concludes with a statement of the truth of the Qur'ān and its blessed origin: *"This is indeed a glorious Qur'ān, inscribed on an imperishable tablet."* (Verses 21-22)

The Horrendous Event

"By the heaven with its constellations, by the promised day, by the witness and that which is witnessed." (Verses 1-3) Before making any reference to the pit event, the *sūrah* opens with an oath by a heaven full of constellations. The Arabic term, *burūj*, used

for 'constellations' may be taken to mean the huge mass of planets which resemble great towers or palaces built in the sky. In this sense the verse can be related to two other verses: *"We built heaven with Our might, and gave it a wide expanse."* (51: 47) and, *"Which is stronger in constitution: you or the heaven He has built?"* (79: 27) The Arabic term may, alternatively, be interpreted as meaning the positions between which these planets move as they go round in orbit. These constitute the spheres within which the planets remain as they move. This reference to the constellations however, gives an impression of a huge creation. This is, indeed, the connotation intended at the outset.

"By the promised day." (Verse 2) That is the day when judgement is passed on all the events of this life and when the accounts of this world are settled. It is a day God has promised will come, and is a great day awaited by all creation. *"By the witness and that which is witnessed."* (Verse 3) On that day all deeds and creatures are exposed and witnessed. Everybody becomes a witness. Everything becomes known as there is no cover to hide anything from beholding eyes.

References to the heaven and the constellations, the promised day, the witness and what is witnessed all combine to impart an aura of seriousness, concern, attention and momentum to the manner in which the pit event is related. They also provide the framework in which the event is viewed, judged and settled on the basis of its true nature. It is a framework stretching far beyond the limits of this short life.

Having thus provided the desired atmosphere, the *sūrah* then refers to the event in just a few brief strokes. *"Slain be the people of the pit of the fire abounding in fuel, when they sat around it, watching what they did to the believers. They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, to whom all praise is due, to whom the dominion of the heavens and the earth belongs. But God is witness of all things."* (Verses 4-9)

Reference to the event starts with a declaration of anger with the tyrants: *"Slain be the people of the pit."* (Verse 4) It also gives an impression of the enormity of the crime which has invoked the displeasure and anger of God, the All-Clement, and which makes Him threaten the perpetrators. We then have a description of the pit: *"The fire abounding in fuel."* (Verse 5) The literal meaning of 'pit' is a hole in the ground, but the *sūrah* defines it as 'the fire' instead of using the term 'trench' or 'hole' in order to give an impression that the whole pit was turned into a blazing furnace.

The perpetrators aroused God's wrath for the evil crime they committed: *"When they sat around it, watching what they did to the believers."* (Verses 6-7) They sat over the fire, in the actual vicinity of the horror, watching the various stages of torture, and madly enjoying the burning of human flesh in order to perpetuate in their minds this ghastly scene.

The believers had not committed any crime or evil deed against them: *“They took vengeance on them for no reason other than that they believed in God, the Almighty, to whom all praise is due, to whom the dominion of the heavens and the earth belongs. But God is witness of all things.”* (Verses 8-9) That was their only crime: they believed in God Almighty who deserves praise for every situation even though ignorant people do not do so. He is the Lord who deserves to be worshipped, the sole sovereign of the kingdoms of the heavens and the earth. As He witnesses all things He has witnessed what the tyrants did to the believers. This verse reassures the believers and delivers a powerful threat to the tyrants. God has been a witness and He suffices for a witness.

The narration of the event is completed in a few short verses which charge our hearts with a feeling of repugnance towards the terrible crime and its evil perpetrators. They also invite us to contemplate what lies beyond the event, its importance in the sight of God and what it has aroused of God’s wrath. It is a matter which is not yet completed. Its conclusion lies with God.

As the narration of the event concludes we feel overwhelmed by the magnificence of faith as it exalts the believers and attains its triumph over all hardships, and indeed over life itself. We feel the elevation of the believers as they rid themselves of the handicaps of human desire and worldly temptation. The believers could easily have saved their lives by accepting the tyrants’ terms. But what a loss humanity as a whole would have incurred! How great the loss would have been had they killed that sublime concept of the worthlessness of life without faith, its ugliness without freedom and its baseness when tyrants are left free to exercise their tyranny over people’s souls after they have exercised it over their bodies. But they have won a very noble and sublime concept while the fire burned their flesh. Their noble concept has triumphed as it was purified by the fire. They will, later on, have their reward from God and their tyrannical enemies will have their retribution. The *sūrah* then goes on to explain both.

Different Destinies

“Those who persecute the believers, men and women, and do not repent shall suffer the punishment of hell, and suffer the punishment of burning. But those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens through which running waters flow; that is the supreme triumph.” (Verses 10-11) What happens on earth in this first life is not the end of the story. There remains an inevitable part which will follow later. There remains the allocation of awards, which will restore the balance of justice and provide the final settlement of what took place between the believers and the tyrants.

That it will come is certain and confirmed by God: *“Those who persecute the believers, men and women”* and persist with their evil ways, careless, unrepentant, *“and*

do not repent shall suffer the punishment of hell, and suffer the punishment of burning." Burning is specified although it is also implied by the very mention of hell.

It earns its specific mention in order to serve as a counterpart to the burning in the pit. Although the same word signifying the action is used, the two types of burning are dissimilar in intensity and duration. The burning here is by fire lit by human beings while the burning in the hereafter is by fire lit by the Creator. In this present world, the burning is over in a few minutes while in the hereafter it goes on for ages unknown except to God. The believers who suffer the burning here earn with it God's pleasure, and ensure the triumph of that noble human concept referred to earlier. In the hereafter the burning is attended by God's anger and man's abject degradation.

Paradise symbolizes God's pleasure with righteous believers and His reward to them. *"But those who believe and do righteous deeds shall have gardens through which running waters flow; that is the supreme triumph."* (Verse 11) The Arabic term, *fawz*, used here for triumph also connotes escape and success. To escape the punishment of the hereafter is to achieve success. How to describe, then, the reward of gardens with running waters!

With this conclusion justice is restored and the whole question is finally resolved. What has taken place on earth is no more than one part; the matter remains unfinished here. This is the fact emphasized by this initial comment on the pit event, so that it may be fully comprehended by the few believers who have accepted the faith in Makkah, and by every group of believers subjected to trial and tyranny during any period of history.

God's Unique Attributes

Further comments follow: *"Stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance."* (Verse 12) This comment suitably contrasts God's punishment with the petty and trifling vengeance exacted by tyrants, and thought by them and by people generally to be very powerful. The real power is that levelled by the Almighty, to whom belongs the heavens and the earth, not that levelled by insignificant people who impose their rule over a limited piece of land for a limited period of time.

The statement also emphasizes the relationship between the addressee, namely, God's Messenger (peace be upon him) and the speaker, who is God Almighty. He says to him, *"stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance."* He is your Lord, in whose Godhead you believe, and on whose assistance you rely. This relationship is very significant in situations where believers are afflicted by tyrants.

"It is He who brings into being, and then restores to life." (Verse 13) In their wider

connotations, origination and restoration refer to the first and second processes of bringing into life. The two terms, however, signify two events which constantly take place. In every moment there is origination as well as restoration of what has died and decayed. The whole universe is in a state of continuous renovation, and constant decay. Within the context of this ever-repeated cycle of origination and re-origination the whole affair of the pit and its apparent results seem to be, in reality, no more than a beginning of what can be created anew, or a re-creation of what has already been originated. It is part of a continuous process.

"He is All-Forgiving, Compassionate." (Verse 14) Forgiveness relates to the earlier statement: *"and do not repent"*. Forgiveness is part of God's mercy and grace which have no limits or restrictions. It is an open door which is never closed in the face of anyone who repents, no matter how grave his sins are. Compassion, however, relates to the believers' attitude who choose their Lord in preference to all things. It is a generous touch of divine benevolence. God elevates His servants who love and choose Him to a grade which one would hesitate to describe except for the fact that God, out of His blessing, bestows it. It is the grade of friendship between Lord and servant. It is a tie of love which exists between God and His favoured servants. How insignificant the transitory life they have sacrificed and the momentary affliction they have suffered appear when compared to only a small part of this splendid and tender love. Some of those who live in servitude to another human being take fatal risks in order to win a word of encouragement or receive a sign of pleasure from their master. They do this although both master and servant are God's slaves. What, then, should be the attitude of God's servants who receive that compassionate love and benevolence from the *"Lord of the Throne, the Glorious"*, the All-Powerful, the Sublime. So petty becomes life, so paltry becomes all suffering, and so trifling becomes every treasured object when the pleasure of the loving Lord of the Throne is at stake.

"He does whatever He wills." (Verse 16) This is His constantly realized, never failing attribute. His will is absolute. He may choose, on a certain occasion, that believers should, by His grace, win victory for a specific purpose He wants to accomplish. He may choose, on other occasions, that faith should triumph over persecution and trial. This may be manifested, at times, through the physical elimination of believers from this transitory life, again to accomplish a specific purpose. He may decide to smite tyrants in this life, or to delay their punishment to the promised day. Either course of action fulfils a certain purpose behind which divine wisdom lies. Any action He performs is part of His well-defined scheme and His ability to do what He wills. All this fits very well with the account of the pit and with what comes later of reference to the fates of Pharaoh and Thamūd and their respective hosts. Beyond all these events and beyond life and the universe there exist the free will and absolute power

of God.

Examples of this are given: *“Have you heard the story of the hosts, of Pharaoh and Thamūd?”* (Verses 17-18) This is a reference to two long stories well known to the addressees as they have been mentioned several times in the Qur’ān. The two nations concerned are described here by the term “the hosts” in reference to their might and equipment. Have you heard their stories and how God did with them as He pleased? Theirs were two stories, different in nature and consequence. Pharaoh and his army were eliminated when the Children of Israel were saved by God. He gave them power to rule for a certain period in order to accomplish a certain scheme. As for the Thamūd, God exterminated them and saved His prophet, Ṣāliḥ, along with his few followers. The believers in this instance did not establish a state of their own; they were merely saved from corrupt enemies.

Both stories are manifestations of the divine will and its performance. They provide two examples of what may befall advocates of the Islamic faith. They are mentioned along with a third possibility which distinguishes the pit event. The Qur’ān explains all three eventualities to the believers in Makkah and to all generations of believers.

The *sūrah* concludes with two statements characterized by their sharp and decisive rhythm. Each is a statement of fact and a final verdict. *“Yet the unbelievers persist in their denial [of the truth]. But God surrounds them all.”* (Verses 19-20) The truth about the unbelievers is that they are in a constant state of disbelief, crying “lies” morning and evening *“But God surrounds them all.”* They are unaware that God’s might and His knowledge engulf them, making them even more powerless than mice stranded in a great flood.

“This is indeed a glorious Qur’ān, inscribed on an imperishable tablet.” (Verses 21-22) The term ‘glorious’ signifies nobility and sublimity. Indeed, there is nothing more noble or more sublime or more glorious than God’s word. It is inscribed on an imperishable tablet, the nature of which we cannot comprehend because it is part of the knowledge God has reserved for Himself. We benefit, however, from the connotations of the statement and the impression it leaves that the Qur’ān is well preserved and well-guarded. It is the final word in every matter it deals with.

The Qur’ān states its judgement in the pit event and what lies behind it. This judgement is final.