

SŪRAH 40

Ghāfir

(The Forgiver)

Prologue

This *sūrah* deals with the major issues of truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, the message and those who reject it, as well as unjustifiable tyranny and how God smites tyrants who seek to impose their will on others. It also refers to the position of believers who follow Divine guidance and obey God's commandments. It mentions how the angels pray that they may be forgiven their sins, and how God answers their prayers. It also speaks about the reward awaiting them in the life to come.

Such being its subject matter, the whole atmosphere of the *sūrah* is one of a battle, the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and tyranny. This is interspersed with an air of grace and mercy whenever the believers are mentioned. The general atmosphere is generated through a description of how earlier communities were destroyed as a result of their opposition to Divine faith, as well as several images of the Day of Judgement. All in all, these awesome images suit the sombre air of the *sūrah*.

Fittingly, the opening of the *sūrah* uses short phrases that carry a distinctive beat: *'who forgives sins; accepts repentance; is severe in retribution; limitless in bounty; there is no deity other than Him; to Him is the ultimate return.'* (Verse 3) These phrases sound like hammers

striking in unison, with harmony between meaning and rhythm. Note also that words like 'might' and 'power' are frequently used in the *sūrah*.

As a whole, the *sūrah* has a powerful effect on us, portraying as it does scenes of the Day of Judgement and images of the fate of earlier communities. At times, it softens its rhythm so as to gently touch our hearts, showing us images of the angels who carry God's throne, as well as those around it, praying to God to bestow His grace on His devoted servants. The same may be said regarding the verses that refer to universal scenes or to the finer elements of the human soul, as both provide evidence in support of the truth of faith. Here, then, are some examples of the verses that generate these feelings:

1. In reference to earlier communities and their fate: *"Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!"* (Verse 5) *"Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is powerful, stern in retribution."* (Verses 21–22)
2. In reference to the Day of Resurrection: *"Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded."* (Verse 18) *"Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell."* (Verses 69–72)

3. A softer touch is provided in the scene of those who carry God's throne, devoted as they are in humble prayer: *"Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph."* (Verses 7–9)
4. Inspirational touches are achieved in the portrayals of miraculous phenomena in the universe and within the human soul: *"It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is."* (Verses 67–68) *"It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?"* (Verses 61–62) *"It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 64)

In all these images there is evident harmony and consistency, the whole ambience perfectly fitting the *sūrah's* subject matter.

The *sūrah* may be divided into four parts. The first begins with two separate letters: "Hā. Mīm. The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing." (Verses 1–2) This is followed by the short

phrases with their distinctive beat, to which we referred earlier. The *sūrah* then states that the whole universe submits to God and obeys Him. Only the unbelievers dispute God's revelations, thus they separate themselves from the rest of the universe. Therefore, the Prophet should pay no attention to them, no matter how affluent and well pleased they appear to be. They will inevitably face the same fate suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers. God smote them with a stern punishment. Nevertheless, more suffering awaits them in the life to come. By contrast, the angels carrying God's throne, as well as those surrounding it, declare their belief in their Lord, address their worship to Him alone, and pray for the forgiveness of the believers among the dwellers of the earth, as well as for their success and prosperity.

At the same time, the *sūrah* gives an image of the unbelievers when the entire universe, which believes in God, calls out to them on the Day of Resurrection, saying: *"Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it."* (Verse 10) In their position of humiliation, which contrasts with their arrogance in this present life, they admit their faults and acknowledge their Lord, but such realization is now of no use to them. They are only reminded of what they used to do when they associated partners with God and arrogantly turned from His guidance.

This image of the hereafter is followed by one presenting people's situation in this present life: *"He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you."* (Verse 13) They are so reminded in order that they may turn to their Lord and declare their belief in Him as the only God: *"Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers."* (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then adds a strong warning of that fearful day, and follows this with an image of how they stand on that day: *"the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God."* (Verse 16) Those who are arrogant, tyrannical or disputant will all disappear into insignificance: *"With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists."* (Verse 16) The *sūrah* goes on to give further images of that day when judgement over all belongs to God alone. All those worshipped instead or alongside Him are nowhere to be seen.

The second part begins with a reference to the fate suffered by some past communities. This serves as a prelude to the narration about certain events from Moses' life history and specifically his encounter with Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah or Qārūn. These events, representing tyrants' attitude to the message of truth, are only told in this *sūrah*. There is no reference to them anywhere else in the Qur'ān. They tell us of a believer from Pharaoh's own household, who concealed the fact that he believed in Moses' message. He tries first to protect Moses against Pharaoh's attempt to kill him. He states the word of truth, putting it cautiously at first, then ultimately declaring it openly and clearly. In his argument with Pharaoh, this believer presents strong and clear evidence for the truth, warns Pharaoh and his people of the Day of Judgement, describes some images of the day in an inspirational way and reminds them of their attitude and that of generations before them to Joseph and his message. The story is developed in such a way as to link it, eventually, to the life to come, and we see them all there, disputing among themselves as they suffer in hell. The dialogue occurs between the weak elements of society and their arrogant leaders, on the one side, and another takes place between them all and the angels in charge of hell, trying to find a way out when there is none. In the light of this last scene, the *sūrah* directs the Prophet Muḥammad to remain patient in adversity, to have full trust that God's promise will come true, and to glorify and praise Him.

The third part starts with a statement that those who dispute God's revelations without providing any sound argument in support of what they say are only motivated by a quest for greatness. Yet they are too insignificant to attain this. The *sūrah* then directs people's hearts to reflect on the great universe God has created, which is far greater than all mankind. This reminder may perhaps make those who are arrogant better appreciate the greatness of God's creation, rather than remaining blind to it: *"The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand."* (Verse 57) It reminds them of the approach of the Last Hour and directs them to pray to God, for He responds to those who pray to Him.

Those who choose to remain arrogant will inevitably enter hell in complete humiliation. Here the *sūrah* portrays some of the universal signs that they ignore. We see the night portrayed as a time for rest and

the day is given eyes, while the earth is shown as a resting place and the sky a canopy. In relation to themselves, the *sūrah* also reminds them to reflect on the pleasing shape and form God has given them. It directs them to submit to God with sincerity. It instructs the Prophet to distance himself from what they worship, declare God's order to him to reject their deities and to submit to the Lord of all the worlds. It seeks to make their hearts more responsive by mentioning that God, the Creator of the universe, is the One who originated them from dust first, then from a gamete. It is He who gives life and deals death. Again the *sūrah* makes the Prophet wonder at those who argue about God, warning them against punishment in the hereafter, and portrays a very powerful image of such punishment: *"They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell."* (Verses 70–72) Indeed, those whom they worshipped will disown their worship, while they themselves deny having ever worshipped anyone. Ultimately, they end up in hell, as they are told: *"Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant."* (Verse 76) Again, in the light of this scene the Prophet is instructed to remain patient in adversity, and to trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether he remains alive to see some of what this promise involves or he is made to die before its fulfilment. The promise will come true at the time appointed for it.

The *sūrah's* fourth and final part is closely linked with its third. As the Prophet is directed to wait patiently, he is told that God sent many messengers before him: *"No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave."* (Verse 78) Still, there are many signs in the universe, and there are also plenty of signs that people ignore. Who, for example made cattle subservient to man? Furthermore, the ships that carry them on the sea are a sign they see with their eyes. The fate of past communities should also serve as an admonition to them. The *sūrah* then concludes with a powerful image coupled with strong rhythm, showing a community of unbelievers faced with God's might. They declared their belief, but it was too late: *"But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost."* (Verse 85) This is a fitting ending, one that depicts the fate of those who are arrogant.

I

A Prayer by Angels

Ghāfir (The Forgiver)

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

Hā. Mīm. (1)

The revelation of this book is
from God, the Almighty, the All-
Knowing, (2)

who forgives sins, accepts
repentance, is severe in retribution
and limitless in bounty. There is
no deity other than Him. To Him
is the ultimate return. (3)

None but the unbelievers dispute
God's revelations. Let it not
deceive you that they seem to be
able to do as they please on earth.
(4)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

حَمْدٌ

تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ
الْعَلِيمِ

غَافِرِ الذَّنْبِ وَقَابِلِ التَّوْبِ شَدِيدِ
الْعِقَابِ ذِي الطُّلُوعِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ
إِلَهُ الْمَصِيرِ

مَا يُجَادِلُ فِي آيَاتِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
فَلَا يَغْنَصُوكَ فَتَفُتِنُهُمْ فِي الْيَلْدِ

Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! (5)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ
وَالْأَخْزَابُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ وَهَمَّتْ
كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ بِرَسُولِهِمْ لِيَأْخُذُوهُ
وَجَادَلُوا بِالْبَاطِلِ لِيُدْحِضُوا
بِهِ الْحَقَّ فَأَخَذْتُهُمْ فَكَيْفَ كَانَ
عِقَابِ ۝

Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell. (6)

وَكَذَلِكَ حَقَّتْ كَلِمَتُ رَبِّكَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ
كَفَرُوا أَنَّهُمْ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ ۝

Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire. (7)

الَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ الْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُ
يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ
وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا رَبَّنَا
وَسِعَتْ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ رَحْمَةً وَعِلْمًا
فَاغْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا سَبِيلَكَ
وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ ۝

'And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. (8)

رَبَّنَا وَأَدْخِلْهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ عَدْنٍ الَّتِي
وَعَدْتَهُمْ وَمِنْ صَلَاحٍ مِنْ
ءَابَائِهِمْ وَأَزْوَاجِهِمْ وَذُرِّيَّاتِهِمْ
إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٨﴾

'Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (9)

وَقِهِمُ السَّيِّئَاتِ وَمَنْ يَوْ
السَّيِّئَاتِ يَوْمَئِذٍ فَقَدْ رَحِمْتُهُ
وَذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ ﴿٩﴾

The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' (10)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يُبْغِضُونَ
لِمَقَّتْ اللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ مِنْ مَقَّتِكُمْ
أَنفُسَكُمْ إِذْ تُدْعَوْنَ إِلَى
الْإِيمَانِ فَتَكْفُرُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' (11)

قَالُوا رَبَّنَا أَمَتْنَا اثْنَتَيْنِ وَأَحْيَيْتَنَا اثْنَتَيْنِ
فَاعْتَرَفْنَا بِذُنُوبِنَا فَهَلْ إِلَى خُرُوجٍ
مِنْ سَبِيلٍ ﴿١١﴾

[They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.' (12)

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُ إِذَا دُعِيَ اللَّهُ وَحْدَهُ
كَفَرْتُمْ وَإِنْ يُشْرَكَ بِهِ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ
فَالْحُكْمُ لِلَّهِ الْعَلِيِّ الْكَبِيرِ ﴿١٢﴾

He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. (13)

Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. (14)

High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; (15)

the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. (16)

This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning. (17)

هُوَ الَّذِي يُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُنَزِّلُ لَكُمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ رِزْقًا وَمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ إِلَّا مَنْ يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

فَادْعُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

رَفِيعُ الدَّرَجَاتِ ذُو الْعَرْشِ يُلْقِي الرُّوحَ مِنْ أَمْرِهِ عَلَى مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ لِيُنْذِرَ يَوْمَ التَّلَاقِ ﴿١٥﴾

يَوْمَ هُمْ بَدْرُؤٌ لَا يُخْفَى عَلَى اللَّهِ مِنْهُمْ شَيْءٌ لِمَنِ الْمُلْكُ الْيَوْمَ لِلَّهِ الْوَاحِدِ الْقَهَّارِ ﴿١٦﴾

الْيَوْمَ تُجْزَى كُلُّ نَفْسٍ بِمَا كَسَبَتْ لَا ظُلْمَ الْيَوْمَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ ﴿١٧﴾

Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. (18)

God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. (19)

God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all. (20)

وَأَنذِرْهُمْ يَوْمَ الْأَرْفَةِ إِذِ الْقُلُوبُ لَدَى
الْحَنَاجِرِ كَظِيمٍ مَّا لِلظَّالِمِينَ مِنْ
حَاسِبٍ وَلَا سَفِيحٍ يُطَاعُ ﴿١٨﴾

يَعْلَمُ خَائِنَةَ الْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِي
الصُّدُورُ ﴿١٩﴾

وَاللَّهُ يَقْضِي بِالْحَقِّ وَالَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ
مِنْ دُونِهِ لَا يَقْضُونَ شَيْئًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ
هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿٢٠﴾

Clear Outline

Hā. Mīm. *The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.* (Verses 1–3)

This is the first of seven *sūrah*s that all begin with the two separate letters, *Hā Mīm*. In one of these seven *sūrah*s three other separate letters, *‘Ayn Sīn Qāf*, are added after the initial two. We have already discussed why some *sūrah*s start with these separate letters, thereby indicating that the Qur’ān, which defies imitation, is composed of such letters which the Arabs used every day, orally and in writing, in their language.

This is followed by a statement of a fact that is frequently used in Makkan *sūrah*s given these seek to establish faith: the fact of revelation: “*The revelation of this book is from God, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.*” (Verse 2) A number of God’s attributes are then stated. These are directly relevant to the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the issues it discusses:

“the Almighty, the All-Knowing, who forgives sins, accepts repentance, is severe in retribution and limitless in bounty. There is no deity other than Him. To Him is the ultimate return.” (Verses 2–3) In fact all the issues the *sūrah* raises relate to these attributes of God, powerfully stated at the outset to give an impression that they are well and firmly established.

Limitless in His glory, God outlines to His servants these of His attributes that have a profound effect on their lives. Thus, He raises their hopes and fears, making them feel that they are within His grasp and can never elude what He wills. The attributes highlighted here are:

The Almighty: He is overpowering. No one can get the better of Him, while He has power over all things. When He decides something, nothing can stop this from occurring.

The All-Knowing: He conducts all affairs on the basis of perfect knowledge. Nothing is hidden from Him.

He forgives sins: He grants His forgiveness on the basis of His knowledge about those servants who deserve to be forgiven.

He accepts repentance: When sinners repent, He accepts their repentance and bestows His grace on them, opening the door for them to address Him directly.

He is severe in retribution: He punishes the arrogant who are hardened in sin, unwilling to show regret or seek forgiveness.

Limitless in bounty: He bestows His limitless grace, multiplies the reward for good deeds and gives without reckoning.

There is no deity other than Him: He alone is the Godhead who has no partners or equals.

To Him is the ultimate return: None can evade meeting Him or escape accountability.

These attributes provide a clear outline of the interrelation between Him and His servants. They should be clear in their feelings, thoughts and understanding of how to deal with Him. Then, they will have no ambiguity about what pleases Him or incurs His anger.

In the past, those who held beliefs based on legends were at a loss in knowing how to deal with their deities, because they had no clear idea of what pleased or angered them. They pictured them as impulsive, having no clear aim or purpose, demonstrating violent reactions and causing people much worry and confusion. They resorted to charms and sacrifices in their attempts to please such deities, but could only guess about whether they were satisfied or not. By contrast, Islam provides a very clear concept, establishing a relationship between people and their true Lord, outlining His attributes, defining His will, and instructing them on how to draw closer to Him, fear His punishment and pray for His mercy, always following a straight and clear path.

The Same Old Battle

None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations. Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth. Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment! Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell. (Verses 4–6)

Having established the truth of God's oneness and His Divine attributes, the *sūrah* makes clear that this truth is accepted by all creatures. It is, in fact, firmly rooted in their nature and directly related to the nature of the universe. All creation is entirely convinced by the signs testifying to God's oneness. Only the unbelievers dispute these signs and argue about God's revelations. Thus they are a class apart, choosing to be at odds with the universe and all other creatures within it.

"None but the unbelievers dispute God's revelations." (Verse 4) Throughout the entire expanse of the universe, only the unbelievers stand apart, deviating from the true path. In relation to the whole universe, they are weaker and less significant than an ant in relation to planet earth. When they stand on their own disputing God's revelations and denying His signs, the rest of the universe declares its acceptance of Him and recognizes His oneness, deriving its strength from Him. With their odd attitude, the unbelievers' fate is sealed, no matter how powerful, affluent and mighty they may appear to be: *"Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth."* (Verse 4) They may be able to move about, gather wealth, enjoy their power and revel in easy living. However, they are ultimately doomed. The battle, if there could ever be a battle between them and the Creator of the universe, will lead to its inevitable end.

There were in former times communities that followed the same path. Their fate should make clear to the unbelievers what happens in the end to anyone who tries to stand against the power of the Almighty: *"Before their time the people of Noah rejected the truth, as did other groups and communities after them. Each of these communities schemed against the messenger sent to them, aiming to lay their hands on him. With false argument they strove to refute the truth, but then I took them to task. How awesome was My punishment!"* (Verse 5) It is the same old story, beginning with the Prophet Noah. In other words, the battle remains the same throughout all generations. This verse provides an overall picture: a message from God received with rejection and tyranny, which leads to the inevitable end. Every messenger is met by those in power in his community who do not try to justify their stance with sound argument. On the contrary, they resort to tyranny and try to do away with God's messenger. They also resort to trickery in order to deceive the masses and claim victory for themselves. Therefore, God's power intervenes and smashes them in the most amazing way: *"How awesome was My punishment!"* (Verse 5) The punishments meted out were indeed severe, leaving in their wake ruins that testify to the same. Furthermore, all this is recorded in human history.

The battle, however, is not over yet. There is a further episode in the life to come: *"Thus your Lord's word shall come true against the*

unbelievers: they will be the dwellers in the fire of hell." (Verse 6) When God's word applies to someone, it always comes true. There can be no argument about this.

Thus does the Qur'ān describe the true nature of the battle between faith and unfaith, truth and falsehood, those who advocate God's oneness and those who, against all right, behave arrogantly on earth. We then realize that this is an old and on-going battle that started at the dawn of human life. The battlefield is wider than the whole earth because the universe and all that exists in it believe in God and submit to Him. The only exceptions are those who dispute God's revelations. The two sides are far from equal: on the side of truth stand an endless line, while on the side of falsehood only a small band stands, weak and powerless even though it may appear to be able to do as it likes on earth and to possess power and authority.

The Qur'ān describes the nature of the battle so that advocates of the truth, in all generations, are reassured. They should never be deceived by the apparent might enjoyed by the forces of falsehood at any particular time, or by the outcome of a single round in the battle. Such instances after all do not reflect the complete truth. The truth is that which is described in God's book, in His own words. He is the most truthful of all speakers, and He is the Almighty, the All-Knowing.

A Universal Bond

A relevant point is that even the angels carrying God's throne and those surrounding it, who rank among the forces of faith in the universe, remember the believers among human beings, mention them in God's presence and pray for their forgiveness. They also pray to Him for the fulfilment of His promise to those believers with whom the angels share their bond of faith:

Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers: 'Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the

suffering in the blazing fire. And, our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise. Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph.' (Verses 7–9)

We do not know what this throne is: we have no image of it. Nor do we know how those assigned to carry it do so or how the others are present around it. It is futile to try to determine something which is beyond the reach of human understanding or perception. No purpose can be served by arguing about something over which God has not provided information. All that can be said concerning this fact is that there are some creatures who are close to God, and these *'extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him.'* Although the fact that they are believers can be taken for granted, this is specifically mentioned in the Qur'ān to emphasize the bond between them and human believers. Having extolled God's limitless glory, these servants of God pray for the believers among humanity, requesting the best that one believer can ask for another.

They begin their supplication in a very polite way, in the process teaching us how to couch our own prayers. They say: *"Our Lord! You embrace all things with [Your] grace and knowledge."* (Verse 7) As they address God, they make clear their request that God bestows His grace on people, that they are relying on the fact that His grace embraces all, and that His knowledge encompasses everything. Thus, they do not make any assumptions; they simply refer to God's grace and knowledge. *"Forgive, then, those who turn to You in repentance and follow Your path, and shield them from the suffering in the blazing fire."* (Verse 7) This reference to God's forgiveness and people's repentance corresponds to the opening of the *sūrah* where God is described as the One who forgives sins and accepts repentance. Likewise, the reference to the *'suffering in the blazing fire'* corresponds to the earlier description of His retribution as being severe.

These servants of God continue with their supplications, praying now for the admission of believers among human beings into heaven,

in fulfilment of His promise to His good servants: *"Our Lord, admit them to the gardens of perpetual bliss You have promised them, together with the righteous from among their ancestors, spouses and offspring. You alone are the Almighty, the Wise."* (Verse 8) Admission into heaven is a great triumph and means a life of bliss. When there is added to this the company of righteous ancestors, spouses and offspring, another dimension of bliss is thus granted. Moreover, this is an aspect of the unity of all believers. It is in the bond of faith that fathers, spouses and offspring are united. Without it, all their ties are severed. This part of their supplication highlights God's attributes of power and wisdom. It is this combination that determines how people are judged.

The supplication continues: *"Shield them from all evil. Anyone whom on that day You shall shield from evil, You shall have graced with mercy. That will be the supreme triumph."* (Verse 9) Having prayed for their admission to heaven, this prayer refers to the most important point in the whole difficult process. It is evil deeds that ruin people and lead them to their doom. When God shields a believer from evil, He actually shields that believer from the consequences of such evil. This is the great mercy on the Day of Judgement, and it is only the first step to bliss and happiness. This shielding from evil is indeed the great triumph.

Hating Oneself

As the carriers of the throne and those surrounding it address their prayer to God appealing for His grace to be bestowed on believers, their brethren in faith, the unbelievers find themselves in a totally different capacity. Everyone is looking for support, but none is to be found. In fact all bonds with all beings and things in the universe are severed. They are called out so that they can listen to the rebuke coming from all directions. The arrogance they demonstrated in this life is turned now into humiliation. They want to place their hopes in someone, but none is available to encourage their hopes:

The unbelievers will be addressed: 'Indeed, greater than your present loathing of yourselves is God's loathing of you when you were called to the faith and you rejected it.' They will say: 'Our Lord! Twice

have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?' [They will be told]: 'This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.' (Verses 10-12)

The Arabic text uses the strongest word for hate. We see them addressed from all corners and told that God's loathing of them when they were called upon to believe and still rejected the faith is far stronger than their feelings of hate towards themselves as they realize to what end they have brought themselves. They realize how different their fate could have been, had they responded to the call to faith before it was too late. This reminder is exceptionally painful for them in their newly difficult situation.

Now that all delusion is gone, they realize that the only One to turn to is God Himself; and so they do: "*They will say: Our Lord! Twice have You caused us to die, just as twice You have brought us to life! Now that we have recognized our sins, is there any way out?*" (Verse 11) Their words betray their misery and despair. They call out: '*Our Lord!*' Yet they had once denied Him and rejected His message. You gave us life the first time when You breathed of Your spirit into what was dead and thus You gave it life and we became alive. Again You have given us life after we died. We are now turning to You because You are the only One who can save us from the misery we are in. We acknowledge our faults and admit our sins. Is there, then, a way out of this misery?

Their appeal betrays the direness of their situation. They are in bitter despair. They are made to see the reason for their plight: "*This is all because when God alone was invoked, you denied this truth; whereas, when partners were associated with Him, you believed in them! All judgement rests with God, the Exalted, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 12) This is what has brought you to your present position of humiliation. You denied God's oneness and attributed partners to Him. All judgement, then, rests with Him, the Exalted, the Supreme. Both attributes fit well with the position of judgement. He is Exalted above all things and Superior to all beings.

No Injustice

The *sūrah* now dwells on one of God's attributes that fits with His exalted position. The believers are instructed to address their prayers to Him, associating no partners with Him and to be sincere in their devotion to Him alone. The *sūrah* also refers to the fact of revelation so as to give a warning about the day when all mankind will be brought together for judgement, reward and punishment. On that day, all dominion and sovereignty belong to God alone:

He it is who shows you His signs and sends down sustenance from the sky for you. Yet only those who turn to God will take heed. Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers. High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants, so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him; the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God. With whom does sovereignty rest today? With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists. This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning. (Verses 13–17)

“He it is who shows you His signs.” (Verse 13) God's signs are seen in everything in the universe: in the great bodies such as the sun and the planets, and also in the great phenomena such as the day and night, rain, thunder and lightning. Likewise, they are seen in minute things such as the atom, cell, leaf or flower. In each of these there is a miraculous sign which appears clearly when man tries to imitate it, let alone initiate it. Never can man fully imitate even the simplest little thing God has created.

And He it is who “sends down sustenance from the sky for you.” (Verse 13) Of all the sustenance God sends down people know best the rain, which is the origin of life on earth and the source of food and drink. Yet there is so much more than rain that God sends down and people learn about this gradually. Part of it consists of the rays that are necessary for life on earth. Such sustenance may also include the Divine messages

that have provided guidance for mankind ever since the early stages of human life on earth. They showed man the right way and provided sound codes for living.

"Yet only those who turn to God will take heed." (Verse 13) It is the one who turns to God that remembers His grace as well as His signs and revelations which the unbelievers, with hardened hearts, prefer to ignore. In connection with turning to God, the believers are instructed to pray to God alone and to be sincere in their faith, paying little heed to what the unbelievers feel or say: *"Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers."* (Verse 14) The unbelievers will never accept that the believers should hold on sincerely to their faith in God alone and their worship of none but Him. There is no way they will accept this, no matter how much the believers try to appease them. Therefore, the believers should stay their course, praying to God alone, completely sincere and devoted. They should pay no heed to whether the unbelievers are happy with them or not, because they will never be satisfied.

The *sūrah* adds at this point the following attributes of God: *"High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne. By His own will does He bestow revelation on whomever He wills of His servants."* (Verse 15) It is God alone who is exalted in His position, high above all orders of being, the Lord of the Throne who controls everything. It is He who gives His orders, which give life to hearts and souls, to those whom He chooses from among His servants. This expression refers to the revelation of the Divine message, and it highlights here the fact that God's revelations bring life to humanity. It further states that revelation is bestowed from on high to those chosen elite among God's servants. All these facts are in harmony with God's attributes mentioned earlier in the *sūrah*, stating that He is *"the Exalted, the Supreme One."* (Verse 12)

The main task undertaken by a servant of God chosen to receive such a message is to deliver a warning: *"so as to warn of the Day when all shall meet Him."* (Verse 15) That is the day when people will meet together, and they will also stand face to face with the deeds they did during their lives on earth, and they will meet other creatures such as the *jinn*, the angels and other types of God's creation. All of them will

meet their Lord at the time of reckoning. Hence the day is described as 'the day of the meeting'. Furthermore, it is the day when they all stand without any cover to screen their reality. Hence, no one can put up a false image: "*the Day when they shall come forth, with nothing about them concealed from God.*" (Verse 16) In fact, nothing about them is concealed from God at any time. However, at all times other than that day, they may imagine that they are covered or screened by something or other, or that what they do or say may remain secret. On that day, however, they will be truly exposed, unable to enjoy even an imaginary cover.

Therefore, on that day the arrogant and the mighty are made to face their humble reality. The whole universe stands in awe, and all creatures demonstrate their submission. Sovereignty belongs completely to God, the One who overpowers all. In fact this is true at all times. However, on that day, this fact becomes clear to all and sundry. Every tyrant of old and every conceited person will come to know and feel it. Then every sound dies down and every movement stops. A majestic voice asks a question and replies to it, as there is no one else to ask or reply: "*With whom does sovereignty rest today?*" ... "*With God, the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists.*" (Verse 16)

"*This day each soul will be requited for what it has earned: no injustice will be done today. God is swift in reckoning.*" (Verse 17) An air of awe, heightened by silence spreads. All creatures listen and realize; everything is settled, the reckoning is over. This is in harmony with what the *sūrah* said at the outset about those who dispute God's revelations: "*Let it not deceive you that they seem to be able to do as they please on earth.*" (Verse 4) This is the end of unjustified arrogance, tyranny and injustice, as well as of wealth and affluence.

The *sūrah* instructs the Prophet to warn his people about this day. The instruction is given against a backdrop of an image of the Day of Resurrection when God sits alone for judgement. Up till now the *sūrah* has not addressed people directly; instead it used a reporting style:

Warn them of the Day that is ever drawing near, when people's hearts will chokingly come up to the throats. The wrongdoers will have neither intimate friend nor intercessor to be heeded. God is

well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal. God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all. God alone hears all and sees all. (Verses 18–20)

The *sūrah* describes the Day of Judgement as ever drawing near, and we perceive it to be hastening towards us. Souls are in distress, pressing against people's throats. They try to suppress their worries and fears, and the effort is difficult. Nevertheless, they can find no one to support or protect them. No one can put up a word of intercession that finds response from anyone.

They stand in full view; nothing can conceal their reality. Even a stealthy glance and a heart's secret is brought into the open: "*God is well aware of the most stealthy glance, and of everything the heart would conceal.*" (Verse 19) An eye looking stealthily will try hard to conceal its stealthy gaze, but God is well aware of it. A secret may be hidden safely in one's soul, but it is not hidden from God who knows it all.

On that day, it is God only who passes judgement in fairness. Their alleged deities have nothing to do with such judgement: "*God will judge in accordance with truth and justice, whereas those whom they invoke beside Him cannot judge at all.*" (Verse 20) His judgement is based on perfect knowledge and full awareness. He will not entertain any injustice for anyone, and He forgers nothing: "*God alone hears all and sees all.*" (Verse 20)



A Believer in Pharaoh's House

Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. (21)

That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution. (22)

We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority (23)

to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: 'A sorcerer, a teller of lies.' (24)

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا
كَيْفَ كَانَ عِقَابُ الَّذِينَ كَانُوا مِنْ
قَبْلِهِمْ كَانُوا هُمْ أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً
وَأَنَارًا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَأَخَذَهُمُ اللَّهُ
بِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَا كَانَ لَهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِنْ
وَاقٍ ﴿٢١﴾

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانَتْ تَأْتِيهِمْ رُسُلُهُمْ
بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَكَفَرُوا فَأَخَذَهُمُ اللَّهُ إِنَّهُ
قَوِيٌّ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ ﴿٢٢﴾

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا مُوسَىٰ بِآيَاتِنَا
وَسُلْطَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢٣﴾

إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ وَهَامَانَ وَكَورَافَافَةَ
فَقَالُوا سِحْرٌ كَذِبٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.' Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong. (25)

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ بِالْحَقِّ مِنْ عِنْدِنَا قَالُوا
اقْتُلُوا أَبْنَاءَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ
وَاسْتَحْيُوا نِسَاءَهُمْ وَمَا كَيْدُ
الْكَافِرِينَ إِلَّا فِي ضَلَالٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

Pharaoh said: 'Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.' (26)

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ ذَرُونِي أَقْتُلْ
مُوسَى وَلْيَدْعُ رَبَّهُ إِنِّي أَخَافُ
يُبَدِّلَ دِينَكُمْ أَوْ أَنْ يُظْهِرَ
فِي الْأَرْضِ الْفَسَادَ ﴿٢٦﴾

Moses said: 'I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning.' (27)

وَقَالَ مُوسَى إِنِّي عُذْتُ بِرَبِّي
وَرَبِّكُمْ مِنْ كُلِّ مُتَكَبِّرٍ
لَا يُؤْمِنُ بِيَوْمِ الْحِسَابِ ﴿٢٧﴾

A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: 'Would you kill a man because he says, "God is my Lord," when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. (28)

وَقَالَ رَجُلٌ مُؤْمِنٌ مِنْ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ
يَكْتُمُ إِيمَانَهُ أَتَقْتُلُونَ رَجُلًا أَنْ
يَقُولَ رَبِّيَ اللَّهُ وَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ
بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ وَإِنْ يَكُ
كَذِبًا فَعَلَيْهِ كَذِبُهُ وَإِنْ يَكُ
صَادِقًا يُصِيبْكُمْ بَعْضُ الَّذِي
يَعِيدُكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي مَنْ هُوَ
مُسْرِفٌ كَذَّابٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

'My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?' Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.' (29)

يَقَوْمِ لَكُمْ الْمُلْكُ الْيَوْمَ ظَاهِرِينَ
فِي الْأَرْضِ فَمَنْ يَنْصُرُنَا مِنْ بَأْسِ
اللَّهِ إِنْ جَاءَنَا قَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ مَا أُرِيكُمْ
إِلَّا مَا أُرَى وَمَا أَهْدِيكُمْ إِلَّا سَبِيلَ
الرَّشَادِ ﴿٢٩﴾

Then said the man who believed: 'My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; (30)

وَقَالَ الَّذِي آمَنَ يَقَوْمِ إِنِّي أَخَافُ
عَلَيْكُمْ يَوْمَ الْآخِزَابِ ﴿٣٠﴾

the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ād, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. (31)

مِثْلَ دَابِ قَوْمِ نُوحٍ وَعَادٍ وَثَمُودَ
وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ وَمَا اللَّهُ يُرِيدُ
ظُلْمًا لِلْعِبَادِ ﴿٣١﴾

'And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; (32)

وَيَقَوْمِ إِنِّي أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ يَوْمَ
النَّارِ ﴿٣٢﴾

the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. (33)

يَوْمَ تَوَلَّوْنَ مُدْبِرِينَ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ اللَّهِ
مِنْ عَاصِرٍ وَمَنْ يَضِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ
مِنْ هَادٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

'Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: "God will never send any messenger after him." In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. (34)

'Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.' (35)

Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; (36)

the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin. (37)

وَلَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ يُوسُفُ مِنْ قَبْلُ
بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَأَزَلْتُمْ فِي شَكِّكُمْ
مَعَا جَاءَكُمْ بِهِ حَقٌّ إِذَا هَلَكَ قُلْتُمْ لَنْ يَبْعَثَ
اللَّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ رَسُولًا كَذَلِكَ يُضِلُّ
اللَّهُ مَنْ هُوَ مُسْرِفٌ مُرْتَابٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

الَّذِينَ يُجَادِلُونَ فِي آيَاتِ اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ
سُلْطَانٍ أَتَاهُمْ كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ
وَعِنْدَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كَذَلِكَ يَطْبَعُ اللَّهُ
عَلَى كُلِّ قَلْبٍ مُتَكَبِّرٍ جَبَّارٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَنْهَكُنْ أَبْنِي لِي صَرْعًا
لَعَلِّي أَبْلُغُ الْأَسْبَابَ ﴿٣٦﴾

أَسْبَابَ السَّمَوَاتِ فَأَطَّلِعَ إِلَى إِلَهِ
مُوسَى وَإِنِّي لَأَظُنُّهُ كَاذِبًا وَكَذَلِكَ
زُيِّنَ لِفِرْعَوْنَ سُوءُ عَمَلِهِ وَصُدَّ عَنِ
السَّبِيلِ وَمَا كَيْدُ فِرْعَوْنَ
إِلَّا فِي تَبَابٍ ﴿٣٧﴾

The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. (38)

وَقَالَ الَّذِي آمَنَ يَنْقُومِ اتَّبِعُونِ
أَهْدِيكُمْ سَبِيلَ الرَّشَادِ ﴿٣٨﴾

'My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. (39)

يَنْقُومِ إِنَّمَا هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا مَتَاعٌ
وَإِنَّ الْآخِرَةَ هِيَ دَارُ الْقَرَارِ ﴿٣٩﴾

'Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. (40)

مَنْ عَمِلَ سَيِّئَةً فَلَا يُجْزَى
إِلَّا مِثْلَهَا وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا
مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أَنْثَى وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ
فَأُولَئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ يُرْزَقُونَ
فِيهَا بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ ﴿٤٠﴾

'My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? (41)

وَيَنْقُومِ مَا لِي أَدْعُوكُمْ إِلَى النَّجْوَةِ
وَتَدْعُونَنِي إِلَى النَّارِ ﴿٤١﴾

'You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. (42)

تَدْعُونَنِي لِأَكْفُرَ بِاللَّهِ وَأُشْرِكَ
بِهِ مَا لَيْسَ لِي بِهِ عِلْمٌ وَأَنَا أَدْعُوكُمْ
إِلَى الْعَزِيزِ الْغَفَّارِ ﴿٤٢﴾

'There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. (43)

لَا جُرْمَ أَنَّمَا تَدْعُونَنِي إِلَيْهِ لَيْسَ لَهُ
دَعْوَةٌ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَلَا فِي الْآخِرَةِ
وَأَنْ مَرَدَّنَا إِلَى اللَّهِ وَأَنَّ الْمُسْرِفِينَ
هُمُ أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ ﴿٤٣﴾

'You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.' (44)

God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: (45)

before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' (46)

They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' (47)

The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' (48)

Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' (49)

فَسَتَذْكُرُونَ مَا أَقُولَ لَكُمْ
وَأَفْوِضْ أَمْرِي إِلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٤﴾

فَوَقَّهَ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِ مَا مَكَرُوا وَحَاقَ
بِثَالِ فِرْعَوْنَ سُوءُ الْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٥﴾

النَّارُ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا غُدُوًّا وَعَشِيًّا
وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ أَدْخِلُوا آلَ فِرْعَوْنَ
أَشَدَّ الْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٦﴾

وَلَذِيَّتَحَابُّونَ فِي النَّارِ فَيَقُولُ
الضُّعْفَتَاءُ لِلَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا
إِنَّا كُنَّا لَكُمْ تَبَعًا فَهَلْ أَنْتُمْ مُغْنُونَ
عَنَّا نَصِيبًا مِنَ النَّارِ ﴿٤٧﴾

قَالَ الَّذِينَ اسْتَكْبَرُوا إِنَّا كُلٌّ فِيهَا
إِنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ حَكَمَ بَيْنَ الْعِبَادِ ﴿٤٨﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ فِي النَّارِ لِخَزَنَةِ جَهَنَّمَ
ادْعُوا رَبَّكُمْ يُخَفِّفْ عَنَّا يَوْمًا مِّنْ
الْعَذَابِ ﴿٤٩﴾

They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain. (50)

We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. (51)

On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. (52)

And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel (53)

as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. (54)

Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning. (55)

قَالُوا أَوَلَمْ تَكُنَّا نُرْسِلُكُمْ
بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ قَالُوا فَادْعُوا
وَمَا دُعَاؤُا الْكَافِرِينَ إِلَّا فِي
ضَلَالٍ ﴿٥٠﴾

إِنَّا لَنَنْصُرُ رُسُلَنَا وَالَّذِينَ
آمَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَيَوْمَ
يَقُومُ الْأَشْهَادُ ﴿٥١﴾

يَوْمَ لَا يَنْفَعُ الظَّالِمِينَ مَعَذِرَتُهُمْ وَلَهُمُ
الْعَذَابُ وَلَهُمْ سُوءُ الدَّارِ ﴿٥٢﴾

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْهُدَىٰ وَأَوْرَثْنَا
بَنِي إِسْرَءِيلَ الْكِتَابَ ﴿٥٣﴾

هُدًى وَذِكْرَىٰ لِلأُولَى الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٥٤﴾

فَاصْبِرْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ وَأَسْتَغْفِرْ
لِدُنْيِكَ وَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ بِالْعِشِيِّ
وَالْأَبْكَرِ ﴿٥٥﴾

Overview

We outlined in the Prologue the theme discussed in this part of the *sūrah*. Before we discuss it in detail, we should observe that this episode from Moses' life story is closely intertwined with the main theme of the *sūrah*, and uses the same style even to the extent of employing the same phrases and expressions. The man from Pharaoh's household who concealed the fact that he was a believer following the true faith presents a number of ideas that have already been mentioned in the *sūrah*. He reminds Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah that they were enjoying a life of comfort and authority, warning them against a fate similar to that which befell earlier communities and couples this with a warning against what may happen to them on the Day of Resurrection. He also refers to those who dispute God's revelations and how God loathes them, as do the believers; a fact also already mentioned in the *sūrah*'s first part. The *sūrah* then portrays their condition in hell, where they are humiliated, praying hard but without any response. A similar image was also given earlier. All this suggests that the logic of faith is the same across all generations, and all believers in all communities use the same arguments. This is only to be expected because the logic and the arguments are derived from the same truth. The *sūrah*, thus, carries the same ambience throughout, giving it its consistent and unique personality. Such uniqueness applies to each and every *sūrah* in the Qur'ān.

Citing an Historical Example

Have they, then, never travelled through the land and beheld what happened in the end to those who lived before them? Greater were they in power than they are, and in the impact which they left on earth. God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God. That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution.
(Verses 21–22)

These two verses provide a bridge between what has already been discussed in the *sūrah* and the story of Moses. It serves as a reminder to

the Arabs, highlighting the lessons of history and directing them to go about in the land and reflect on the fate of those communities which in former times adopted the same attitude the Arabs showed towards the Prophet Muḥammad and his message. It states that those communities commanded superior strength and left their mark on the land. Yet their weakness was all too clear when they faced God's might. Their sins isolated them from the source of true strength and rallied against them the forces of faith, supported by God's power: *"God, however, took them to task for their sins, and they had none to defend them against God."* (Verse 21) There is, in fact, no protection for anyone other than what is provided by faith and good action. To deny the Divine message and reject God's messengers and the clear evidence of the truth they provide will inevitably lead to ruin: *"That was because their messengers came to them with all the evidence of the truth, yet they rejected it. So God took them to task. He is Powerful, Stern in retribution."* (Verse 22)

This general reference to earlier communities of unbelievers is followed by an example of such people whom God smote as a result of their sins. The example is provided by Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, together with other arrogant and tyrannical forces.

This episode from Moses' life story may be divided into sections variously outlining attitudes and depicting scenes. It begins by presenting the message to Pharaoh and his notables, but finishes in the hereafter, when they argue as they suffer the punishment of hell. It is a very long journey, but the *sūrah* highlights certain scenes from it to drive home the idea.

"We sent Moses with Our signs and a clear authority to Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah, but they said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies." (Verses 23–24) This is the attitude adopted in the first encounter: Moses, equipped with the signs given to him by God, is held in awe by all around him due to the fact that he spoke the word of truth. On the other side, however, stood Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah with their falsehood and apparent might, guarding their positions which they felt to be threatened by this power of truth. Therefore, they resort to false argument, seeking thus to defeat the truth: *"They said: A sorcerer, a teller of lies."* (Verse 24)

The Argument of Brute Force

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened after this first encounter, omitting the match with the sorcerers when Moses' staff swallowed their trickery and forced them to declare their acceptance of triumphant truth. Instead, it goes on to the situation that prevailed after these initial events: "*When he came to them, setting forth the truth from Us, they said: 'Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.'*" (Verse 25) A comment on this attitude is given straight away, before the verse is even finished: "*Yet the schemes of the unbelievers can only go wrong.*" (Verse 25)

Whenever tyranny is faced with a clear argument it cannot refute, it resorts to such tactics. It dreads that truth should prevail with its clear and strong arguments that appeal directly to sound human nature. Pharaoh witnessed how his sorcerers, whom he marshalled in the hope that they would defeat Moses, were the first to respond to the truth, immediately declaring themselves as believers. By contrast, Pharaoh, Hāmān and Korah said: "*Kill the sons of those who share his faith, and spare only their women.*" (Verse 25)

At the time Moses was born, Pharaoh had issued a similar decree. What we now need to consider is whether the Pharaoh who issued that decree had died and been succeeded by his son or crown prince. Furthermore, whether under this new Pharaoh, the original decree had been stopped, until Moses came back and confronted him with his message. Moses was after all known to this Pharaoh when he was a crown prince, and was aware that Moses had been brought up in the palace. He was also aware of the original decree to slay the male children of the Israelites and to spare their females. Now, his courtiers refer to this decree, advising Pharaoh to apply it in particular to those who believed with Moses, be they the sorcerers or the minority of Israelites who accepted Moses' message despite fearing Pharaoh and his forces. It is also possible that the original Pharaoh who adopted Moses was still in power, but the implementation of his decree had slackened with time or had even been suspended altogether. Now his courtiers advise him to revive it, applying it only to those who followed Moses, so that it would scare people away from Moses, the prophet.

Pharaoh himself seems to take a different point of view, or to have an additional measure which he mentioned during consultations on what tactics he would employ against Moses and his message. Essentially, he wanted to do away with Moses and rid himself of the whole problem:

Pharaoh said: Leave it to me to kill Moses, and let him invoke his Lord! I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land. (Verse 26)

His words, 'leave it to me to kill Moses,' suggest that his view was not immediately accepted. Reservations might have been expressed, such as someone suggesting that killing Moses would not end the problem. On the contrary, it might inspire the masses to consider him a hero or a martyr, which could in turn generate enthusiasm towards him and his new faith, particularly after the sorcerers, who were supposed to expose his myth, declared their acceptance of his faith. One or other of Pharaoh's advisers might also have feared that Moses' God might avenge his killing and inflict punishment on his killers. This was a distinct possibility since idolaters believed in multiple deities and could imagine that Moses had a God who would punish his killers. This possibility explains Pharaoh's statement, 'let him invoke his Lord!' Pharaoh might have meant this as a rejoinder to the objection. On the other hand, his wild remark might have merely been to show that he did not care about the consequences. His carelessness was suitably punished in the end, as we shall presently learn.

It is useful to reflect a little on Pharaoh's argument in support of his declared intention to kill Moses: "*I fear that he will change your religion and cause corruption to spread in the land.*" (Verse 26) Could there be anything more laughable than Pharaoh, the idolater, saying this of Moses, God's messenger? Yet, is it not the same statement every tyrant repeats about everyone who advocates the truth and seeks to reform people's beliefs? Is it not the word of ugly falsehood about splendid truth? What trickery seeking to shake people's faith! It is indeed the same logic repeated whenever falsehood is confronted by the truth, tyranny by justice and unfaith by faith, anywhere in the world.

For his part, Moses resorted to the secure shelter that is always extended to advocates of the truth: *"Moses said: I seek refuge with Him who is my Lord and your Lord from everyone who is too arrogant and will not believe in the Day of Reckoning."* (Verse 27) As he said this, Moses felt reassured. He submitted himself to the One who overpowers every arrogant despot and is able to protect those who seek His shelter against arrogant enemies. He referred to God's oneness, stating it clearly, fearing nothing of the threats he received. He also referred to the rejection of the true promise that a day will inevitably come when people will have to account for their deeds. No one can resort to arrogance if they believe in the Day of Reckoning. How can they if they realize that they will stand in front of their Lord, humble, deprived of all power, without friend or intercessor?

In Defence of Moses

At this point, a man from Pharaoh's own household who had accepted the truth but kept his faith secret begins his argument in defence of Moses. In his address to Pharaoh and his courtiers, the man tries to touch their hearts with his advice and makes very convincing arguments that combine facts with the prospect of dreadful consequences.

A believing man of Pharaoh's family, who until then had concealed his faith, said: Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord,' when he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord? If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him; but if he is speaking the truth, something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you. God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor. My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us? Pharaoh said: 'I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.'

Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ad, and Thamūd and those who

came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures. And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide. Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant. (Verses 28–35)

This is a long, powerful argument advanced by a believer against the conspirators in Pharaoh's court. His argument relies on the sound logic of uncorrupted human nature. It is a skilful argument that combines caution with power. He begins first by describing the enormity of what they propose to do: "*Would you kill a man because he says, 'God is my Lord?'*" (Verse 28) Do such innocent words that imply personal conviction deserve killing the person who says them? Can such words be answered by murder? Shown in this way, your action appears to be gruesome, horrid and repugnant.

He then takes a step forward, saying that this person, Moses, supports his own statement with solid and clear evidence: "*he has brought you all evidence of the truth from your Lord.*" (Verse 28) Here, he is referring to the signs Moses had shown them. They certainly saw these signs, and when they were together, away from the masses, they could not argue about such signs nor their import.

The believer then puts to them the worst possible situation, taking an objective attitude to allow them to reflect on such a scenario: "*If he is a liar, his lie will fall back on him.*" (Verse 28) If he is lying, he will bear the consequences of his lie and suffer his punishment. However, this does not justify killing him. There is, however, the other possibility that what he says is true. It is, then, prudent to be careful and not to expose oneself to its consequences: "*but if he is speaking the truth,*

something of what he warns you against is bound to befall you." (Verse 28) Again this is the least that can be expected in this case. The man did not ask them to consider anything beyond this. His purpose was to make an objective stand, one that provided the most convincing argument.

He then delivers an implicit warning: one that applies to them and to Moses alike: *"God will not grace with His guidance anyone who is a lying transgressor."* (Verse 28) If this applies to Moses, God will not allow him to escape unscathed. Leave him to God, then, to receive his due punishment. However, you must be careful lest you be the ones who are lying transgressors, because this will mean your inescapable doom.

The believer then gives them a strong warning against incurring God's punishment, reminding them that should it befall them, no power can avert it. Their kingdom and power will then be of little use. They should remember this and be grateful to God for having given them what they enjoyed: *"My people! Yours is the dominion today, having the upper hand in the land; but who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?"* (Verse 29)

At heart, the man feels what a true believer should feel: God's punishment is closest to those who are in power. Therefore, they are the ones who should be most careful and should try their best to avoid it. It could come upon them at any moment of the night or day, so they must dread such a possibility. The man reminds them of the power and authority they enjoyed, and includes himself among them as he reminds them of God's punishment: *"Who will rescue us from God's punishment should it befall us?"* (Verse 29) He, thus, shows them that what happens to them is a matter of great concern to him; he is one of them, awaiting the same destiny. Hence, his kind and caring advice. He hopes that they will take this to heart, realizing that it is meant most sincerely, and that they stand no chance against God's punishment should it befall them.

At this point Pharaoh demonstrates the feeling that possesses any tyrant receiving honest advice. He turns in arrogance, perceiving detraction from his authority and encroachment on his dominion: *"Pharaoh said: I am only putting before you what I see myself; and I am*

guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude." (Verse 29) I am only telling you what I know to be true and useful. It is indeed the proper path to follow. Has anyone ever heard of a tyrant who did not feel that what he said was right and full of wisdom? Would any tyrant allow for someone to imagine that he be wrong? Do tyrants allow anyone to uphold a view other than theirs? How else do they become tyrants?

The believer, however, feels that it is his duty to warn and give sound advice, and to express his view lucidly. It is also his duty to stand by the truth, regardless of what tyrants say. He then tries another argument, in the hope that their hearts will soften to it and that they will begin to see the light of the truth. He refers to the fates of earlier communities of unbelievers. They testify to how powerfully God smites arrogant tyrants: *"Then said the man who believed: My people! I fear for you the like of what one day befell earlier communities; the like of what happened to Noah's people, to the 'Ad, and Thamūd and those who came after them. God does not will any injustice for His creatures."* (Verses 30–31) Each community had its day, but the believer combines them together, making it the day when God's retribution strikes. The nature of these days is the same; hence, they are made to appear as just one day. God wills no injustice on anyone. He only punishes them for their sins, so that those who are close to them and those who come after them may take heed and follow the right course.

The man touches their hearts again, reminding them of another day, the Day of Resurrection, when everyone is calling out: *"And, my people! I fear for you the Day [of Judgement] when people will call out to one another [in distress]; the Day when you shall turn back and flee, with no one to defend you against God. He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide."* (Verses 32–33)

On that day, the angels responsible for gathering people will be calling out to them; the people standing on the heights will call out, speaking to the people destined for heaven and to the people of hell; the people of heaven and hell will call out addressing each other. Thus, calling out takes place in different ways. Describing it as the 'day of calling out' imparts a feeling of loud clamouring emanating from everywhere, as also a day of overcrowding and dispute. The general air fits well with the believer's words: *"the Day when you shall turn back*

and flee, with no one to defend you against God." They may try to flee when they see hell, but there is no escape. Yet the image of fright and attempting to flee is the first to be shown here of those who considered themselves mighty and who behaved arrogantly, revelling in their earthly power.

"He whom God lets go astray can never find a guide." (Verse 33) Do we see here an implicit reply to Pharaoh's earlier statement when he said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This also implies that true guidance comes only from God. Whoever God lets go astray will have no one to guide him. God knows people's conditions and who of them deserves to be guided and who deserves to be left astray.

Finally, the believer reminds them of their attitude to the Prophet Joseph, Moses' ancestor. They also doubted him and his message despite the clear evidence he showed them. They must not adopt the same attitude towards Moses who is confirming what Joseph had brought them earlier. In fact, Moses' message disproves their assertions that God would not send a messenger after Joseph. For, Moses has been sent to prove them wrong: "*Long before this, Joseph came to you with clear evidence of the truth; but you never ceased to cast doubt on the message he brought you. When he died, you said: 'God will never send any messenger after him.' In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt. Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant.*" (Verses 34–35)

This is the only reference in the Qur'ān to Joseph's message addressed to the people of Egypt. In the *sūrah* carrying his name we learn that he was placed in charge of Egypt's storehouses. He also carried the title of 'Azīz, which probably meant the chief minister. There is an indication in the *sūrah* that he sat on Egypt's throne, but this is not confirmed. This may be understood from the verse that says: "*And he raised his parents to the throne, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true.*" (12: 100)

The 'throne' to which Joseph raised his parents might have been something other than Egypt's throne. Be that as it may, Joseph attained a position of power and authority. In light of all this, we can imagine the situation to which the believer in Pharaoh's household was referring: they doubted Joseph's message, but dared not deny it outright when he was the man in power. Then they said: *'God will never send any messenger after him.'* They were practically relieved when he died. Expressing their relief in this way suggests that they did not accept his message based on God's complete oneness. They asserted that God would not send another messenger after him, yet this expressed nothing but their own desire. It is often the case that people desire something and then believe it to be true.

At this juncture, the believer takes a strong stance against such hardened denials of the truth: *"In this way God lets go astray those who are transgressors and live in doubt."* (Verse 34) He warns them that God will abandon those who continue to doubt His message after seeing clear evidence of its truth, letting them go astray. He then tells them plainly that those who continue to dispute God's revelation, without justification or evidence, will be loathed by God and the believers. Pharaoh and his people did this in a very deplorable way. He also condemns arrogance and warns against God's punishment to those who continue to behave arrogantly and resort to high-handedness. *"Those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, commit something that is exceedingly loathsome in the sight of God and of those who believe. In this way God sets a seal on the heart of every arrogant tyrant."* (Verse 35) These words, from a believer among Pharaoh's household, are almost identical to those at the outset of the *sūrah* speaking of how God dislikes those who dispute His revelations without any proof in support of what they say. The result is that God lets them go astray until there is no room in their hearts for the light of guidance.

Pharaoh's Manoeuvre

Despite such solid arguments from the believer, Pharaoh persisted in his erring ways, adamant in his rejection of the truth. However, he

sought to pretend that he wanted to find out whether what Moses said was true. It appears then that the believer's argument was so convincing and hard-hitting that Pharaoh and his courtiers could not totally ignore it. Therefore, Pharaoh tried to find a way out:

Pharaoh said: 'Hāmān! Build me a lofty tower that I may attain the right means; the means of approach to the heavens, so that I may have a look at this god of Moses. I am convinced that he is lying.' Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path. Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin. (Verses 36–37)

Thus, Pharaoh instructed Hāmān, his minister, to build him a very high tower so that he might climb and look into the heavens searching for Moses' God. He also added: *'I am convinced he is lying.'* Pharaoh resorted to this manoeuvring so that he did not have to face the truth which would compel him to acknowledge God's oneness. Such acknowledgement would lose him his throne and dispel the legends upon which his kingdom was based. It is improbable that such was Pharaoh's understanding, or that he seriously wanted to look for Moses' God in this stupid, physical way. In fact, Pharaoh would have attained a high standard of education and knowledge. Therefore, his words really betray his ridicule on the one hand and trickery on the other. He wanted to deceive people into thinking that he was fair-minded, willing to test Moses' claims. Or perhaps this manoeuvre was meant as a retreat in the face of the strong logic advanced by the believer. Whatever is the truth behind his actions, all these possibilities indicate that he persisted in his erring ways, arrogantly denying the truth. *"Thus, goodly seemed to Pharaoh the evil of his deed, and he was barred from the right path."* (Verse 37) He deserved to be so barred, having chosen to persist with falsehood and deviancy. The *sūrah's* comment makes clear that such scheming can only lead to failure and utter loss. *"Pharaoh's scheming led only to ruin."* (Verse 37)

Faced with such thoughtless and devious manoeuvring, the believer makes his final say clear, free of ambiguity. He calls on his people to

follow him in pursuing the right course leading to God. He emphasizes to them that this present life is worthless, while the life to come provides pure bliss. He warns them against the punishment of the hereafter, exposing the hollow and false nature of idolatrous beliefs:

The man who believed said: 'My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude. My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment, whereas the life to come is the lasting home. Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning. My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire? You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire. You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants. (Verses 38–44)

These are the same facts established at the beginning of the *sūrah*. The believer restates them here as he confronts Pharaoh and his noblemen. He calls on them: "*My people! Follow me: I shall guide you to the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 38) Only a few moments earlier, it was Pharaoh who said: "*I am guiding you to none other than the path of rectitude.*" (Verse 29) This means that the believer was making a clear challenge, stating the word of truth, fearing nothing that the tyrant Pharaoh, or his two ministers, Hāmān and Korah, could do to him. He tells them of the nature of this present life: "*My people! This worldly life is but a brief enjoyment.*" (Verse 39) It cannot continue. It will soon disappear; "*whereas the life to come is the lasting home.*" (Verse 39) It is the one to be preferred.

He states for them the rule that governs reward and punishment in the life to come: "*Anyone who does a bad deed will be requited with no more than its like, whereas anyone, be it man or woman, who does*

righteous deeds and is a believer will enter paradise where they will receive blessings beyond reckoning." (Verse 40) It is out of God's grace that good deeds will be rewarded in multiples, while bad ones are requited with no more than what they actually are. God is fully aware of people's weaknesses, the temptations to which they are exposed and the impediments they have to face when they try to adhere to His guidance. Therefore, He multiplies their good deeds and makes them a means to erase their bad ones. If, after the reckoning, they attain admittance into heaven, God grants them there blessings beyond all ken.

The believer expresses his amazement that he should call them to what saves them from punishment, while they call him to what will lead him to the fire: *"My people! How is it that I call you to salvation, while you call me to the fire?"* (Verse 41) Needless to say, they did not call on him to throw himself into a fire, but they called on him to associate partners with God. The two are synonymous. Therefore, he states the other call in the next verse: *"You call upon me to deny God and to associate with Him others of whom I have no knowledge, the while I call you to the Almighty, the All-Forgiving."* (Verse 42)

The difference between his and their calls cannot be wider. His call is clear, straight, requiring them to believe in God, the Almighty, the All-Forgiving. He calls them to believe in the One God, whose work in the universe testifies to His oneness, limitless ability and infinite power. They should believe in Him so that He will forgive them, as He is the One who forgives all. How does this contrast with what they call him to do? They call him to disbelieve in God, to associate with Him beings of whom he has no knowledge: idols, myths, legends and paradoxes.

The believer then states in all clarity that those alleged partners have no say on any matter in this present world or in the life to come. All shall return to God Almighty when those who transgress the bounds will be the dwellers of fire: *"There is no doubt that what you call me to is not fit to be invoked either in this world or in the life to come. To God is our return, when the transgressors shall find themselves in the fire."* (Verse 43)

Thus the basic facts of the true faith are laid down, clear, free of all ambiguity. This believer unhesitatingly states them in front of Pharaoh

and his noblemen, although until then he had kept secret the fact that he believed in God. Now he declares his faith openly. What is left for him, then? Nothing other than to surrender himself to God. He has stated the truth as he knew it in the depths of his heart. He warns them that they are certain to remember his words when remembrance will avail them nothing. All matters are referred to God: "*You shall then remember what I am telling you now. As for me, I commit myself to God: God is well aware of all His servants.*" (Verse 44)

The argument is now over, for the believer from among Pharaoh's household has declared the word of truth, which remains clear and valid for the rest of time.

Who Bears the Blame?

The *sūrah* does not dwell on what happened between Moses, Pharaoh and the Children of Israel after this, up to the point of Pharaoh's drowning while Moses and his people were saved. Instead, it affords some glimpses of what happened thereafter, indeed, after life itself:

God delivered him from the evils of their scheming, whereas grievous suffering was to encompass Pharaoh's folk: before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: 'Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.' They will contend with one another in the fire: the weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?' The arrogant will reply: 'We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures.' Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: 'Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only.' They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.' [The keepers of hell] will say: 'Pray, then!' But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain. (Verses 45-50)

This present world is over, and we see the first event that succeeds it. We see the believer who stated the truth being saved from Pharaoh

and his aides' scheming. They could not cause him any harm in this world, nor after it. By contrast, Pharaoh's folk were engulfed by suffering: *"Before the fire they are brought, morning and evening, and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering."* (Verse 46)

The way this verse is phrased suggests that they are brought before the fire during the time between their death and the Day of Judgement. This may be a reference to the torment suffered in the grave. The statement that follows reads: *'and then on the Day when the Last Hour comes, it will be said: Cast Pharaoh's people into the worst suffering.'* This means that this suffering precedes the Day of Judgement. It is a terrible punishment involving exposure to the fire morning and evening, either to make them expect its burning and pain, which is a terrible suffering, or to experience it, which is even worse. Then, on the Day of Judgement, they will be cast into the worst suffering.

The verse that follows tells us of something that happens after resurrection. The unbelievers are shown arguing in hell: *"The weak will say to those who were arrogant, 'We have been your followers, so can you relieve us of some share of the fire?'"* (Verse 47) This means that the weak are together with the arrogant in the fire of hell. The weak have not been spared on account of their weakness, or their being driven like cattle, having no say or choice. God granted them a position of honour, which equipped them to exercise free choice and to be responsible for what they choose. They relinquished all this and followed their arrogant leaders instead. They did not object to anything the leaders said. In fact, it did not occur to them that they could object. They did not think about what their arrogant leaders said to them, or the errors they landed them in: *"We have been your followers."* The fact of their relinquishing responsibility and what God granted them could never serve as extenuating circumstances in God's sight. Therefore, they will be in hell, driven there by their leaders, just as they used to drive them like sheep in the life of this world. We see them asking their leaders: *"Can you relieve us of some share of the fire?"* (Verse 47) This question is a reminder of what such leaders used to assert, pledging to protect their followers against evil and harm.

Such arrogant leaders, however, are soon fed up with their weak followers requests. Their answer betrays their boredom, but nonetheless they acknowledge what has happened: *"We are all in it together. For God has judged between His creatures."* (Verse 48)

"We are all in it together." We are all weak, lacking all support and help. We are all alike. So why do you put such a question to us when you realize that the noble and the weaker elements are all the same? *"God has judged between His creatures."* There can be no review or change to His judgement. The matter is settled. No creature can reduce or amend God's judgement.

When all realize that no refuge can be sought from God's punishment except with Him, they all humbly appeal to the guards of hell, in a way that makes them all equal: *"Those in the fire will say to the keepers of hell: Pray to your Lord that He lighten this suffering of ours, though it be for one day only."* (Verse 49) They want the guards of hell to intercede on their behalf, hoping that their terrible ordeal can be lifted a little. They ask them to pray to God to reduce their punishment for one day, just to breathe and have a bit of rest. Even a day's reduction is worth such appeals.

The guards of hell, however, do not respond to this humble and passionate appeal. They know their limits, and they are aware of God's law and that the time is long passed. Therefore, they increase the suffering of the dwellers of hell by rebuking them and reminding them of the reasons for their suffering: *"They will ask: 'Did your messengers not come to you with clear evidence of the truth?' They will say: 'Yes, indeed.'" (Verse 50)* The question and its answer suffice. There is no need for any more argument. The guards of hell leave them to their fate, allowing them to sink into despair. *"[The keepers of hell] will say: Pray, then!" (Verse 50)* If any praying will change your situation even a bit, why do you not offer such prayers yourselves? The verse concludes with a comment on such prayers: *"But the prayers of the unbelievers will be all in vain."* (Verse 50) Such prayer is ignored, remains unanswered. Those who say it are forgotten, be they the leaders or their followers.

God's Unfailing Support

The *sūrah* then adds a comment on the whole episode and what preceded it of reference to the different communities which suffered God's punishment after taking a negative attitude towards His message.

We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes. And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding. Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning. (Verses 51–55)

This definitive comment suits the decisive situation. We have been given an example of the end of truth and falsehood, both in this world and in the life to come. We have seen what fate befell Pharaoh and his noblemen in this life, and we have seen them disputing in hell, utterly humiliated. Such is the end of these communities, as stated in the Qur'ān: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes.*" (Verses 51–52)

As for the life to come, perhaps no believer in life after death will argue about this. They do not find any reason to argue. As for victory in this present world, this may need some explanation.

God's promise is clear and definitive: "*We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and...*" (Verse 51) Yet we see that some messengers were killed, and some had to abandon their homes after being rejected and driven out. Some believers have also been exposed to grievous suffering; some were thrown into the fire pit; some fell martyrs; some live in exceedingly difficult

circumstances. What happens, then, to God's promise of support being given to them in this present life? Satan tries hard to exploit this situation, working hard to shake people's faith.

People, however, use superficial measures when evaluating things, and they overlook many values and facts. They look at a brief period of time and a small area or space. These are limited human measures. A comprehensive look shows the situation to occur in a broad span of time and place. It does not erect limits between one era or place and another. If we look at the question of faith from such a broad perspective, we will see it triumphant, no doubt. Its triumph is the victory of its upholders. They have no existence separate from its existence. The first thing faith requires of them is to dedicate themselves to it completely, so that it is almost as if they disappear while it stays in full vision.

Moreover, people often limit the meaning of victory to a specific outcome they know and can easily recognize. But victory can take different forms, some of which might superficially at least appear akin to defeat. When the Prophet Abraham was thrown in the fire and remained resolute in his determination to stick to his faith and advocate it, was he in a position of victory or defeat? From a faith perspective, he was undoubtedly at the highest point of victory as he was being cast into the fire. He again triumphed when he was saved from the fire. These are two different images that appear to be poles apart, but they are in fact very close to each other. Al-Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson, met his martyrdom in a way that is tragic from one angle and splendid from another: so was he victorious or vanquished? On the surface, and judging by immediate considerations, it was a defeat. In reality and from a wider perspective, though, it was a true victory. No other martyr excites sympathy and feelings of support, among both Sunnis and Shī'ah, like al-Ḥusayn. Indeed, such feelings also apply to many non-Muslims.

Many are the martyrs who achieved for their faith through martyrdom what they could never have achieved in life had they lived a thousand years. They could not impress great meanings on people's minds or motivate them to action like they did with their final sermon,

written with their own blood. Their martyrdom provided motivation for their children and grandchildren, and at times they provided the motivation to change history over several generations.¹

What constitutes victory? What is meant by defeat? We need to review our concepts and our sense of values before we ask about whether God's promise to His messengers and to believers comes true in this present life?

Yet there are many situations where victory takes its familiar form, particularly when such form is linked to a permanent one. The Prophet Muḥammad achieved victory in his lifetime because his victory was necessary for the establishment of the faith in its full reality in human life. This faith of ours can only be brought to its fullness when it governs the life of its community. It can, thus, conduct all affairs, from those of a single heart and soul to those of state and government. It was God's will that the messenger preaching this faith should triumph during his own lifetime, so that he could establish the full form of the Islamic faith, leaving a real example for future generations. Thus, the familiar form of victory was linked in his case to a much wider one, and the two were united by God's will and according to His planning.

Another point to consider is that God's promise is given to His messengers and to believers. Thus, a prerequisite for victory is the presence of true faith in people's hearts so as to make the promise applicable to them. Yet people often overlook the significance of the truth of faith which comes into existence only when people remove all forms of idolatry. There are some very subtle forms of idolatry which can only be purged when a person is totally devoted to God, relies on Him alone and submits totally to His will in all affairs. He then feels that God guides His footsteps and that He chooses nothing other than what God has chosen for him. Thus, he accepts God's will with contentment. When a person attains this state, he does not suggest to God any particular form of victory. He

1. These words apply to the author himself and his martyrdom. He rejected all tempting offers that sought to make him change his course. His standing in the history of Islamic advocacy was greatly enhanced after his death. Indeed, his books have achieved far wider circulation after his death and have been translated into many languages. — Editor's note.

leaves the matter to God to determine. He accepts whatever befalls him as good. This is one of the meanings of victory. It is victory over one's pleasures and desires. It is an internal victory, one that is prerequisite for achieving the external victory: *"We shall indeed support Our messengers and the believers both in this world's life and on the Day when all the witnesses shall stand up. On that Day their excuses will be of no avail to the wrongdoers: their fate will be rejection, and they will have the worst of homes."* (Verses 51–52)

We have seen in the previous image drawn how the excuses advanced by the wrongdoers were of little use to them, and how they were rejected and made to dwell in the worst of homes. Moses' story shows yet another form of victory: *"And indeed, We bestowed Our guidance on Moses, and passed down the Book to the Children of Israel as a guide and a reminder to people of understanding."* (Verses 53–54) Providing guidance and passing the book down to them was a form of victory that clearly reflects the breadth of its scope.

The final note in this part of the *sūrah* is given in the form of a directive to the Prophet and the believers facing much hardship in Makkah, and to all future generations of believers who face such hardship: *"Therefore, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning."* (Verse 55) Remain patient in adversity, whether this adversity takes the form of rejection of the message, denying its truth, or the infliction of physical harm. Remain patient when you are unable to check falsehood that appears to enjoy wealth and power for a period of time. Bear with patience what you have to face of people's rough attitudes and behaviour. Check your own desire to achieve a quick victory. Remain patient as you may have to face many difficulties caused by friends, if not by enemies.

"Remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true." (Verse 55) It may appear slow coming; matters may become complicated; prospects may become gloomy; yet it is the promise of the One who can fulfil it, and whose will it has been to make the promise. As you go along your way, take the necessary equipment: *"Ask forgiveness for your sins, and extol your Lord's glory and praise evening and morning."* (Verse 55) This is what is of most benefit

along the hard way of patience; seeking forgiveness of one's sins and extolling God's praise and glory. While this serves to refine our hearts and feelings, it also ensures a positive response. Indeed, it is through such seeking of forgiveness and extolling of God's praise and glory that victory is achieved within our selves, to be followed by victory in life.

The evening and morning are specified either as a reference to all time, since these are the two ends of the day, or because these are times when hearts are calm and reflective. They can, thus, appreciate God's greatness better.

Such is the way, then, that God has chosen to provide the necessary equipment for achieving victory.



Always Responding to Prayers

As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. (56)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُجَادِلُونَ فِي آيَاتِ
اللَّهِ يَغْتَرِبُونَ أَتَهُمُ إِنَّ فِي
صُدُورِهِمْ إِلَّا كِبْرًا مَا هُمْ
يَبْلِغُونَ فَاسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ
هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿٥٦﴾

The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. (57)

لَخَلْقُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَكْبَرُ
مِنْ خَلْقِ النَّاسِ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٥٧﴾

The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. (58)

وَمَا يَسْتَوِي الْأَعْمَى وَالْبَصِيرُ
وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
وَالَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٥٨﴾

The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. (59)

إِنَّ السَّاعَةَ لَآتِيَةٌ لَّا رَيْبَ فِيهَا وَلَكِنَّ
أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.' (60)

It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. (61)

Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? (62)

Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. (63)

It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (64)

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمْ ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ
إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِي
سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ ﴿٦٠﴾

اللَّهُ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ
لِتَسْكُنُوا فِيهِ وَالنَّهَارَ
مُبْصِرًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَذُو فَضْلٍ
عَلَى النَّاسِ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ
النَّاسِ لَا يَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٦١﴾

ذَٰلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ خَالِقُ كُلِّ
شَيْءٍ وَلَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَاَن تَوَفَّقُونَ ﴿٦٢﴾

كَذَٰلِكَ يُؤْفِكُ الَّذِينَ كَانُوا يُرْسِلُ
اللَّهُ بِمَحَدُونٍ ﴿٦٣﴾

اللَّهُ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ
فَرَاشًا وَالسَّمَاءَ بَنَاءً وَصَوَّرَكُمْ
فَاحْسَنَ صُورَكُمْ وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِنَ
الطَّيِّبَاتِ ذَٰلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّكُمْ
فَتَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٦٤﴾

He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. (65)

Say: 'Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds.' (66)

It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your appointed term, and you may use your reason. (67)

It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. (68)

Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? (69)

هُوَ الْحَيُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَادْعُوهُ
مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ
الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٦٥﴾

قُلْ إِنِّي نُهَيْتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ الَّذِينَ
تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَمَّا جَاءَنِي
الْبَيِّنَاتُ مِنْ رَبِّي وَأُمِرْتُ أَنْ
أَسْلِمَ لِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٦٦﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ
نُطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ مِنْ عَلَقَةٍ ثُمَّ يُخْرِجُكُمْ طِفْلًا
ثُمَّ لِيَتَّبِعُوا أَشَدَّكُمْ ثُمَّ لِيَتَّكُونُوا
شُيُوخًا وَمِنْكُمْ مَنْ يُوَفِّي مِنْ قَبْلُ
وَلِيَتَّبِعُوا أَجَلًا مُسَمًّى وَلَعَلَّكُمْ
تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٦٧﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ فَإِذَا قَضَوْا أَامْرًا
فَأَنَّمَا يَقُولُ لَهُ كُنْ فَيَكُونُ ﴿٦٨﴾

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ يُجَادِلُونَ فِي آيَاتِ
اللَّهِ أَنَّى يُصْرَفُونَ ﴿٦٩﴾

Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know (70)

الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِالْكِتَابِ وَبِمَا أَرْسَلْنَا بِهِ رُسُلَنَا فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged (71)

إِذَا الْأَغْلالُ فِي أَعْنَاقِهِمْ وَالسَّلَاسِلُ يُسْحَبُونَ ﴿٧١﴾

into scalding water, and then burnr in the fire of hell. (72)

فِي الْحَمِيمِ ثُمَّ فِي النَّارِ يُسْجَرُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity (73)

ثُمَّ قِيلَ لَهُمْ أَنْتُمْ مَا كُنْتُمْ تُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. (74)

مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ قَالُوا ضَلُّوا عَنَّا بَلْ لَمْ نَكُنْ نَدْعُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ شَيْئًا كَذَلِكَ يَضِلُّ اللَّهُ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٧٤﴾

'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. (75)

ذَلِكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَفْرَحُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ وَبِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَمْرَحُونَ ﴿٧٥﴾

'Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (76)

أَدْخُلُوا أَبْوَابَ جَهَنَّمَ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا فَبَلِّسَ مَثْوَى الْمُتَكَبِّرِينَ ﴿٧٦﴾

Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return. (77)

فَاصْبِرْ إِنَّ وَعْدَ اللَّهِ حَقٌّ فَكَيْمًا
تُرِيدُكَ بَعْضُ الَّذِينَ نَعُدُّهُمْ أَوْ
تَوَفِّيكَ فَإِلَيْنَا يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

Overview

This part of the *sūrah* is closely linked to the previous one. It is, in fact, a continuation of the last point in that passage. It further directs the Prophet to remain patient as he faced adversity in the shape of rejection and physical harm. It also directs him to remain patient when the unbelievers used every means to prevent others from accepting the truth and even boasted about falsehood. Having made this directive, the *sūrah* explains the real reason for disputing God's revelations without any sound basis. In short, it is nothing but arrogance and conceit that prevent people from acknowledging the truth. Yet they cannot even attain the status to which, in their arrogance, they aspire.

The *sūrah*, therefore, emphasizes the greatness of the universe created by God, and the smallness of all mankind, compared to the heavens and the earth. In this part, the *sūrah* highlights some of the universal signs and how God, by His grace, has made them subservient to man even though man is much smaller and weaker than them. The *sūrah* also refers to aspects of God's grace within man himself. In all, these aspects confirm the oneness of the Creator.

The Prophet is then directed to proclaim God's oneness and to turn his back on what the unbelievers worshipped beside God. This part then adds a powerful scene of the Day of Resurrection, when the idolaters are rebuked for associating partners with God. The conclusion in this part is the same as in the previous one: a directive to the Prophet to remain patient in adversity, whether God keeps him alive until he has witnessed the realization of some of what He has promised or gathers him to Himself before that. This is something that God determines. All will ultimately return to Him.

Small Fry but Arrogant

As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain. Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all. The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand. The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal. How seldom you reflect. The Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe. Your Lord says: 'Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated.' (Verses 56–60)

Man often forgets the fact that he is a small, weak creature and that whatever strength he may have does not emanate from within himself, but from his bond with God, the source of all strength and power. He may sever this bond and begin to swell and take on airs. Arrogance, thus, begins to establish itself within him. Satan, who doomed himself as a result of his arrogance, works on man to increase his arrogance knowing that through it he can bring man to ruin.

The unbeliever disputes God's revelations even when they are clear, addressing human nature with the sort of argument that appeals to it. He also claims to himself and others that he is only raising questions because he is not as yet convinced. However, God who knows the inner feelings and secret thoughts of all His creatures makes clear that all this is the result of man's arrogance. It is such arrogance which prompts man to argue and dispute God's revelations over which there can be no dispute. Such arrogance also drives man to aspire to what is beyond his status and what his nature cannot attain. Yet he has no solid basis for such argument for it is rooted deeply in nothing but his own arrogance: *"As for those who dispute God's revelations, with no authority granted to them, there is nothing in their hearts but a quest for a greatness they will never attain."* (Verse 56)

If only man would understand the truth about himself and the universe, recognizing his role and not trying to exceed it, appreciating

that he is one of countless creatures each doing their role by God's will and according to His design which He alone knows, he would certainly feel relaxed, humble, living in peace with himself and with the world around him. If he did this, he would easily and readily submit himself to God. He would also do this without any hesitation.

"Seek, then, refuge with God, for He is the One who hears all and sees all." (Verse 56) Seeking refuge with God against arrogance is indicative of how gruesome it is. We seek God's refuge in order to escape what is ghastly, horrible and evil. Arrogance combines all these. Moreover, it is hard for the arrogant person and for those around him. It causes harm to the heart in which it stirs and to other people's hearts. It is an evil we should seek refuge with God from. God hears all and sees all. Arrogance is normally manifested in visible action and audible words. Therefore, it is left to God to decide upon it as He pleases.

Man is then told of his true position in this great universe: how small he is in comparison to some of God's creatures, the great magnitude of which is readily visible and better appreciated on careful examination: *"The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand."* (Verse 57) The heavens and the earth are there for man to see and to measure himself in relation to them. When he knows the reality of the proportions of distance, dimension, size and power, he reduces his pride, feels his smallness and almost disappears. He can only hold his own when he remembers the superior element God has granted him, and for which He has honoured him. It is this element alone that allows man to stand on his feet in front of the greatness that is the universe.

A quick glance at the universe is sufficient to appreciate all this. The earth on which we live is merely a small satellite of the sun; its mass compared to the mass of the sun is no more than three to a million, while its size is one-millionth of the size of the sun. Yet the sun is only one of around one hundred million suns our galaxy includes. Man now knows that there are around one hundred million such galaxies dispersed in the great expanse of the universe. Still, what we have discovered of the universe is merely a small part; it is so great that we become dazed when we even try to imagine it. The distance between

us and the sun is about 93 million miles. The sun is the head of the family of our planet earth, and most probably the sun is the mother of the earth. Therefore the earth remains close to its mother, standing merely 93 million miles away from it!

The diameter of our galaxy is measured at one hundred billion light years, with one light year measuring 5.8 billion miles, because light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. The closest galaxy to our own is around 750,000 light years away.

We may say again that these distances and dimensions are the best man's little knowledge has determined. Scientists acknowledge that all their discoveries cover only a small part of this great universe.

God says to us: "*The creation of the heavens and the earth is indeed greater than the creation of man; yet most people do not understand.*" (Verse 57) When we speak of God's power and ability, the concepts of greater or smaller, harder or easier do not apply. He creates everything by a single word, 'Be!' The reference here is to how things appear in themselves and how people see and measure them. How does man compare to this great expanse of the universe? How high can his arrogance take him in God's great creation?

"*The blind and the seeing are not equal; nor can those who believe and do good works and those who do evil be deemed equal.*" (Verse 58) The one who is able to see learns and understands, recognizing his station. He does not give himself airs, nor does he allow conceit to distort his judgement. By contrast, a blind person cannot recognize his position in relation to his surroundings. Therefore, he misjudges his position and what is around him. The same applies to those believers who do good works and those who do evil. The first group see things for what they are and form accurate ideas, while the other group misjudges all due to their blind ignorance. They harm themselves and others, and above all they assign to themselves an erroneous position in relation to their environment. They are blind, for true blindness is that of the mind: "*How seldom you reflect.*" (Verse 58) Had we reflected, we would have known. The whole thing is clear, needing only some reflection before it becomes totally apparent.

If only we would remember the hereafter, be certain of its coming, reflect on our position then and recall how we will then stand ... "*The*

Last Hour is sure to come: of this there is no doubt. Yet most people will not believe." (Verse 59) Because they do not believe, they argue and give themselves airs; they do not submit to the truth and do not limit themselves to their rightful position.

Addressing our worship to God, praying and appealing to Him, are all means to cure hearts of arrogance, which is the evil that leads people to dispute His revelations and signs without any clear evidence. God opens the door for us to address and pray to Him. He tells us that He has committed Himself to respond to those who pray to Him, warning those who are too proud that they will be made to suffer total humiliation: *"Your Lord says: Call on Me, and I shall answer you. Those who are too proud to worship Me shall enter hell humiliated."* (Verse 60)

Supplication and prayer must observe certain manners. Hearts must be totally dedicated to God, reassured that He will answer our prayer. We must not suggest a particular form or time or circumstance for answering it. To make such a suggestion is improper when appealing to God. We should be clear in our minds that it is a blessing that we address our prayers to God, and that His response is another blessing. 'Umar used to say: "I am not worried about my prayer being answered. I am worried about addressing my prayer. Once I am inspired to pray to God, prayer will be answered." These are the words of someone who has insight, knowing that when God wills to respond to someone's prayer, He also wills that person to pray to Him. The two are concurrent.

Those who are too proud to pray to God and appeal to Him deserve their just reward, which leads them to enter hell in total humiliation. Such is the fitting end of the arrogance that fills some hearts in this small planet and short life, forgetting the greatness of God's creation, let alone His own greatness. It is suitable requital for forgetting the Last Hour, which will inevitably come.

Blessings of All Sorts

The *sūrah* now speaks about certain aspects of God's blessings which testify to His greatness, yet the unbelievers do not offer thanks to

Him for such blessings. On the contrary, they are too proud to address their worship to Him:

It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see. God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks. Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be? Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations. It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy. He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things. Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds. He is the Ever-Living. There is no deity other than Him. So call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him. All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.
(Verses 61–65)

The night and day are two universal phenomena, while the earth and the heavens are creatures in the universe. They are all mentioned alongside God's creation of man, who has been given a comely shape, been provided with wholesome sustenance. All these are mentioned within the context of God's oneness and being sincere in our faith in Him. This indicates that all these phenomena, creatures and concepts are interlinked. They should be looked at within their broad environment, noting their mutual interrelations.

The fact that the universe is built on the solid basis God has given it, and its following the course God has assigned to it, allowed life to emerge, evolve and progress on earth. It also allowed human life to take the shape and form familiar to us. It fits with man's needs dictated by his nature and make-up. It has made the night a time for his rest and recuperation, while the day, with its light, a time for movement and action. It has made the earth stable as a field of activity, while the skies are raised like a canopy that does not fall apart. All the necessary proportions are maintained; otherwise, man's existence on earth would have been endangered or impossible. It has allowed wholesome provisions to grow on earth or come down from the sky for man's enjoyment. Moreover, it is God's will that gave man his comely shape and a wealth

of abilities that are in harmony with what is in the universe. All these matters are interlinked, which is the reason for referring to them together in the Qur'ān. Indeed, the Qur'ān makes this interrelation between them evidence of the Creator's oneness. It directs our hearts to call on God, sincere in our devotion, declaring that all praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds. It states that the One who creates all these and establishes such harmony between them is the only one to deserve to be a deity. He is indeed God Almighty, the Lord and Creator of all. How can people be turned away from this truth?

It is perhaps useful here to mention some aspects of the harmony and interrelation evident within the universe and their bearing on man's life.

If the earth did not rotate facing the sun, there would be no succession of night and day. Had the rotation of the earth been at a higher speed than it actually is, houses would have shattered, and indeed the earth itself would have fallen apart and scattered in space. Had its rotation been slower, mankind would have perished from hot or cold weather. Indeed the current speed of its rotation is the one most suitable for the continuity of plant, animal and human life in its broadest sense. If the earth stopped rotating, all seas and oceans would be without water.²

What would happen if the earth's axis became straight and the earth orbited the sun in a circle where the sun would be at the centre? The seasons would be lost and people would not know summer from winter, spring from autumn.³

Had the crust of the earth been ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, without which animal life is impossible; and had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and vegetable life on the surface of the land could not exist...

2. Zakī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. The author gives no other details about this quotation. I managed to locate a copy of this book, only to discover that this quotation is taken from different pages, with practically every sentence from a different page. The copy I have seen is published by Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, but it is not dated. Perhaps the author referred to an earlier edition. – Editor's note.

3. Ibid., pp. 88–89.

If the atmosphere had been much thinner, some of the meteors which are now burned in the outer atmosphere by the millions every day would strike all parts of the earth. They travel from six to forty miles a second and would set fire to every burnable object. If they travelled as slowly as a bullet, they would all hit the earth and the consequences would be dire. As for man, the impact of a tiny meteor travelling ninety times as fast as a bullet would tear him in pieces by the heat of its passage.⁴

If, for instance, instead of 21 per cent oxygen [there] were 50 per cent or more of the atmosphere, all combustible substances in the world would become inflammable to such an extent that the first stroke of lightning to hit a tree would ignite the forest, which would almost explode. If it were reduced to 10 per cent or less, life might through the ages have adjusted itself to it, but few of the elements of civilization now so familiar to man, such as fire, would be available.⁵

There are thousands of fine balances in the design of the universe that are necessary for human life. If any of them is disturbed only slightly, human life as we know it would not be possible.

As for man, one of the elements of his perfect shape is his unique form among all living things. His constitution enables his systems to fulfil their functions easily and meticulously. Moreover, the harmony between him and his surroundings is perfect, allowing him to live and act within his environment. All this may be added to his most fundamental and unique quality that enables him to be in charge of planet earth. He is equipped with the tools necessary for the fulfilment of his task, having been given a mind and spiritual contact with what is beyond the physical.

If we were to study the great accuracy of the human constitution and the harmony between the different parts and systems of man's body, relating it to the Qur'ānic statement: "*He has moulded you into a comely shape*", (Verse 64) we would need to reflect at length on every small organ, and indeed on every single cell in this marvellous creature. Take for example man's jaw and how teeth are placed in it:

4. Morrison, A. Cressy, *Man Does Not Stand Alone*, Kingswood, Surrey, 1962, pp. 27-28.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

the jaw is so finely shaped that if the gum or the tongue were to protrude by one tenth of a millimetre this would be enough to make the gum or the tongue unfit within the mouth. A protrusion of similar thickness in a tooth or a molar will bring it into friction with the opposite tooth or molar. Take, for example, something as thin as a cigarette paper which when pressed between the upper and lower jaws is left with marks on it. As the two jaws close they press against any object between them even if its thickness is no more than that of the finest paper.

Man's constitution is equipped to live on this planet. His eyes are made to receive the light frequency which he needs to see. His ears pick up the sound frequencies he needs to hear. Every single organ in his constitution is designed for the environment in which he lives, with a limited ability to adapt to changing conditions. Man is created to live in this particular environment and to have a mutual impact on it. There is a close relationship between him and his environment, i.e. with the earth and the skies. Therefore, the Qur'ān mentions man's shape in the same verse in which it mentions the earth and sky. How fitting!

Let us now briefly discuss the text itself: *"It is God who has made for you the night in which to rest, and the day to make you see."* (Verse 61) Rest at night is necessary for every living thing. A period of darkness is needed so that living cells can rest before resuming their activity during the day. Sleeping is not enough to afford the needed rest; darkness is also necessary. A living cell that is exposed to light continuously reaches a degree of fatigue that ruins its structure.

"And the day to make you see." (Verse 61) A literal translation would render this phrase as, 'and the day able to see.' The expression brings the day alive as if it is a living entity that can look at and see things. In fact, it is people that can see during the day, but this quality is given to the day itself because it is almost universal.

The succession of the day and the night in this way is a blessing that involves further blessings. Had one or the other of them stretched permanently, or if it were merely several times as long, life would come to an end. It is fitting, then, that the succession of day and night is often mentioned within the context of God's blessings for which most

people do not give thanks: *"God is limitless in His bounty to man, but most people do not give thanks."* (Verse 61)

These two phenomena are brought into existence by the One who alone deserves to be named God: *"Such is God, your Lord, the Creator of all that exists: there is no deity other than Him. How deluded can you be?"* (Verse 62) People do recognize God's hand in everything, and they know for certain that He is the Creator of all. Such knowledge, in fact, forces itself on our minds by the very existence of things. No one can claim to have created these, and it is impossible that they could have come into existence of their own accord. It is most amazing then that people should turn away from believing in God: *"How deluded can you be?"* Yet, this does happen: people turn away from the clear truth, in the same way as some of those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān turned away. This takes place throughout all generations, without reason or evidence: *"Such it is: far deluded are those who knowingly deny God's revelations."* (Verse 63)

The *sūrah* then mentions the universal design that gives the earth and the sky their respective functions: *"It is God who has made the earth a resting place for you and the sky a canopy."* (Verse 64) The earth is a place suited for man's life, considering the many balances operating in it, some of which we have briefly discussed. The sky is a structure with careful proportions, dimensions and cycles to ensure stability and the continuity of human life. Indeed human life is taken into consideration in the design of the universe itself.

Furthermore, the *sūrah* specifies a link between the structure of the heavens and earth on the one hand and man's constitution and the wholesome provisions made for him on the other: *"He has moulded you into a comely shape and provided you with wholesome things."* (Verse 64) These blessings and provisions are followed by a comment similar to the earlier one: *"Such is God, your Lord. So glory be to God, the Lord of all the worlds."* (Verse 64) He is the One who creates, measures and designs, giving you a specified place in His kingdom. He is your Lord, so glorify Him. His bounty encompasses all worlds.

"He is the Ever-Living." (Verse 65) His life is from Himself, neither gained nor created, without a beginning or an end. It does not alter,

change or finish. Nothing else has such qualities to its life. All glory to Him; unique is His life.

Again He alone is the Godhead. The One who has a unique life is God: "*There is no deity other than Him.*" Therefore, "*call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him.*" And when you pray to Him, give Him due praise: "*All praise is due to God, the Lord of all the worlds.*" (Verse 65)

Definitive Declaration

The Prophet is given clear instructions to declare to his people that he has been forbidden to worship what they invoke other than God. He has also been commanded to submit himself to the Lord of all the worlds:

Say: Since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord, I am forbidden to worship those whom you invoke instead of God. I am commanded to submit to the Lord of all the worlds. (Verse 66)

He is to declare to those who turn away from God's revelations and deny His blessings that he has been ordered not to worship the ones they invoke instead of God. He is to tell them that he has acted on this prohibition '*since all evidence of the truth has come to me from my Lord.*' He has the evidence, and he believes in it. It is right that he should then declare the word of truth. The prohibition to worship anyone other than God denotes a negative action, while submission to God Almighty is a positive one. It is from these two opposite parts that faith is brought to its fullness.

Having highlighted certain signs of God in the wide universe, the *sūrah* now highlights a sign from within man himself. It is the miracle of human life and its marvellous stages. This is given here by way of a prelude to stating the true nature of life granted by God:

It is He who creates you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass; and then He brings you forth as infants. He then lets you reach maturity, and then grow old – although some of you die earlier. [All this He ordains] so that you may reach your

appointed term, and you may use your reason. It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. (Verses 67–68)

This beginning of human life includes facts that man's knowledge could not know because they took place before his existence, and others which man sees and monitors. Yet such monitoring started only recently, centuries after the revelation of the Qur'ān.

That man was created out of dust refers to a fact taking place before his existence. Dust is the origin of all life on earth, including human life. Only God knows how this miracle was accomplished, and how this great event took shape. As for subsequent procreation, this takes place when a male's sperm fertilizes a female's egg. Conception takes place and a cell mass clings to the uterus. At the end, a baby is born after having gone through a number of major development stages. When carefully considered in comparison to what happens after birth, these stages appear to be longer and greater than the stages we go through from birth till death. The *sūrah* mentions some of these latter stages: childhood, full adulthood at around 30, and old age. These stages represent maximum vigour in between two ends characterized by weakness. "*Some of you die earlier,*" before attaining to some of these stages. God ordains all this "*so that you may reach your appointed term*", when you die at the specified time, unable to delay it or indeed hasten it. "*And you may use your reason.*" To follow the journey travelled by the foetus and then by a baby and to reflect on what they indicate of elaborate planning requires good use of our reason.

The embryonic journey is truly fascinating. We have come to know much about it with the many recent advancements in medicine and embryology. The Qur'ānic reference to it, so accurate and precise, fourteen centuries earlier, is exceptionally interesting. Any reasonable person is bound to reflect on this fact.

These two journeys, of the embryo and the baby, directly affect our hearts, regardless of our social environment or standard of education. Every generation feels this effect in its own way and according to the information available to it. The Qur'ān addresses these facts to all

generations, and they receive the message contained in them, and then determine their response or lack of it.

This is followed by mentioning the facts of giving life and taking it away, creation and origination: *"It is He who ordains life and death. When He wills something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is."* (Verse 68) The Qur'an repeatedly refers to life and death as they are signs that have a strong effect on man's heart. Indeed both phenomena affect everything in man's world. Both have wider scope than initially thought. There are different forms and aspects of both life and death. We need only to think of a dead, barren land, and then we see it quicken, becoming full of life. We see a tree with dry leaves and stripped branches in one season, and we see it later with life bursting through every part of it. It soon blossoms with leaves, flowers and fruit. We can look at an egg, a chick, a seed, a plant, etc. These are all aspects of the journey from death to life. There is also the opposite journey, from life to death. Both can strongly affect us as we contemplate them.

Added to these two phenomena there is the origination. It is sufficient that God's will is directed to the creation of anything through the word, 'Be,' and the subject matter of this comes into existence. Blessed be God, the best of all creators.

A Singular Argument

Against the backdrop of the emergence of human life, the cycle of life and death, the truth of initiation and origination, disputing the truth of God's revelations or the import of His signs sounds singular. Equally odd is any denial of God's messengers. Hence, a fearful warning is given in the form of a scene from the Day of Resurrection:

Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers. They will certainly come to know when, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell. Then they will be asked: 'Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?' They will answer: 'They have

forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.' Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray. 'This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant.' (Verses 69–76)

These verses first wonder at those disputing God's revelations when they see the great signs He has placed in the universe. This serves as a prelude to outlining the fate that awaits them in the life to come. "*Do you not see how those who dispute God's revelations are turned away from the truth? Those who reject the Book and the messages We sent through Our messengers.*" (Verses 69–70) They have rejected one book and one messenger, but, in fact, they reject everything all God's messengers said. Theirs is the same faith, put in its most perfect form in the final message. This means that they actually denied every single message and rejected every single messenger. Everyone who opposed the Divine faith, at any time in history including the present, did this when he or she opposed the truth advocated by the messenger addressing him personally.

"*They will certainly come to know.*" (Verse 70) This statement adds humiliation to painful punishment. "*When, with chains and shackles round their necks, they will be dragged.*" (Verse 71) They are dragged like animals and beasts to add further humiliation to their predicament. Why should they be given honourable treatment when they have discarded every single cause of honour? Their humiliation and dragging eventually leads them "*into scalding water, and then burnt in the fire of hell.*" (Verse 72) There they are tied up after the place is filled with a burning fire and scalding water.

Such is the end they face. It is then that they are further rebuked and painfully embarrassed: "*Then they will be asked: Where now are those to whom you ascribed divinity side by side with God?*" (Verses 73–74) Their reply is that of someone who is in total sorrow after he realizes that he has been badly deceived: "*They will answer: They have forsaken us, or rather, what we used to invoke were nothing.*" (Verse 74) We have lost them and we have no way of finding them. Nor can they find us. In fact we did not ascribe divinity to anyone. These were all myths and

false presumptions. After this sorrowful answer, the *sūrah* adds a general comment: *"Thus does God let the unbelievers go astray."* (Verse 74)

A further and final reproach is then added: *"This is because on earth you took delight in things that are untrue and you were insolent. Enter now the gates of hell, where you shall abide. Evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant."* (Verses 75–76) God save us! What, then, was all that dragging, the chains, the scalding waters and fire? It appears that these were a prelude before entering hell where they would abide. It was because of their arrogance that they were so humiliated.

Again, the *sūrah* urges the Prophet to remain patient in the face of the many levelled adversity he was encountering, represented in the arrogance shown by the unbelievers and their persistent disputing of God's revelations. He is told to have complete trust in the fulfilment of God's promise, whether God keeps him alive to see with his own eyes some aspects of what He warned the unbelievers against or He gathers him to Himself first. The whole question is determined by God. God's messenger's task is to deliver his message. Ultimately, all will return to God:

Hence, remain patient in adversity, for God's promise always comes true. Whether We show you something of what We hold in store for them or We cause you to die before that, it is to Us that they shall all return. (Verse 77)

There is something that deserves careful attention here. The Prophet Muḥammad, God's messenger, who faced a determined onslaught of rejection, persecution and arrogant hostility is being told in short: 'Fulfil your duty and do not be concerned with anything else. The outcome is none of your concern.' He was not even to entertain wishes that God might act in fulfilment of some aspects of the punishment promised to the arrogant unbelievers. He is simply required to fulfil his responsibility. The whole dispute is not his; it is God's and He determines how He will settle it.

This is a very high standard of discipline which God requires from the advocates of His message, starting with His noble messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). What is required of them is very

hard indeed. It requires them to keep their strong feelings and wishes in check. Is it for this reason that the command to remain patient is given at this point in the *sūrah*? In this sense, it is not a repeat of the earlier order to be patient. Rather, it points to a different type of patience, which can be harder than handling arrogance and physical harm with patience.

Here we see that ordinary human beings, advocating God's message, are required to purge themselves of the desire to see how God punishes His and their enemies who continue to fight against them. This is extremely difficult. Yet it is part of the cultivation of the ideals of those who serve God's cause. They are to shed everything that they desire for themselves, even though this may be no more than to see the enemies of their faith defeated and punished.

When the advocates of God's faith attain this level, they equip themselves with what saves them from drowning in the ocean of desire. Desires may seem pure and justified to start with, but Satan tries hard to manipulate them for his own ends.



When it is Too Late to Believe

We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood. (78)

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلًا مِّن قَبْلِكَ
مِنْهُمْ مَّن قَصَصْنَا عَلَيْكَ
وَمِنْهُمْ مَّن لَّمْ نَقْصُصْ عَلَيْكَ
وَمَا كَانَ لِرُسُلِنَا أَنْ يَأْتِيَكَ بِشَايَءٍ
إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ
فُضِّقَ بِالْحَقِّ وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ
الْمُبْطِلُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. (79)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَنْعَامَ لِتَرْكَبُوا
مِنْهَا وَمِنْهَا تَأْكُلُونَ ﴿٧٩﴾

You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. (80)

وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَنَافِعُ وَلِتَبْلُغُوا عَلَيْهَا
حَاجَةً فِي صُورِكُمْ وَعَلَيْهَا وَعَلَى
الْفُلْكِ تُمْكَلُونَ ﴿٨٠﴾

And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny? (81)

وَيُرِيكُمْ ءَايَاتِهِ فَأَيَّ ءَايَاتِ
اللَّهِ تُنْكِرُونَ ﴿٨١﴾

Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. (82)

When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. (83)

And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him.' (84)

But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (85)

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا
كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ
قَبْلِهِمْ كَانُوا أَكْثَرُ مِنْهُمْ وَأَشَدَّ
قُوَّةً وَأَنَارًا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَمَا أَغْنَى
عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٨٢﴾

فَلَمَّا جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ
فَرَحُوا بِمَا عِنْدَهُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ
وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ
يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

فَلَمَّا رَأَوْا بَأْسَنَا قَالُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ
وَعَدُّهُ وَكَفَرْنَا بِمَا كُنَّا بِهِ
مُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٨٤﴾

فَلَمْ يَكُنْ يَنْفَعُهُمْ إِيمَانُهُمْ لَمَّا رَأَوْا بَأْسَنَا
سُنَّتِ اللَّهُ إِلَاقٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ فِي عِبَادِهِ
وَخَسِرَ هُنَالِكَ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨٥﴾

Overview

This final part of the *sūrah* elaborates on the comments given at the end of the previous part. It again directs the Prophet and the believers to remain patient in adversity, until God wills to bring about what He has promised the believers and what He has warned the unbelievers against. This may take place during the Prophet's lifetime or may be

delayed until a later time. The question here is that of faith, the believers and the rejecters who dispute its truth. The arbiter in all this is God. It is He who determines the course of His message as He pleases.

In this part the *sūrah* outlines some additional aspects of this point. The Divine message has a long history. It did not start with the Prophet Muḥammad and the Islamic message embodied in the Qur'ān. Before him there were many messengers, some of whom God mentioned to the Prophet and some He did not. They all faced rejection and arrogance. They were all required to demonstrate miracles. Everyone of them dearly wished that God would give him a miracle which would force the rejecters to submit to the truth. However, showing such a sign or a miracle is a matter that God determines at His own time. The message is His and He conducts its affairs.

Nevertheless, there are numerous signs in the universe, which can be seen by all at all times. Of these, the *sūrah* mentions here cattle and ships, and refers in general to other signs which no one can deny.

The *sūrah* concludes with a strong reminder of the destruction of earlier communities all of whom displayed similar arrogance. Their power and civilization were of little use to them when God's law was applied: *"But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost."* (Verse 85) On this powerful note the *sūrah* concludes. It is a *sūrah* that focuses its attention on the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice.

Past Messengers

We sent other messengers before your time; some We have given you an account of, while others We have not. No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave. When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood. (Verse 78)

This whole question of the message has had many precedents, some of which are told by God to His messenger in this book, the Qur'ān. Others, He chose not to tell him about. The accounts that have been

given clearly show the long, clearly marked way that advocacy of the Divine message should take. They also outline the rules that cannot be altered, since God has set them into operation. Furthermore, these accounts of past messengers make clear the nature of the message, the role of the messengers and the limits they have to observe.

The present verse strongly emphasizes a fact that needs to be fully understood: *"No messenger could bring a sign except by God's leave."* (Verse 78) Every believer, even though he may be a messenger of God, would love to see the Divine message victorious. They dearly wish that those who stubbornly reject it will soon succumb to its truth. Therefore, they would love to see a miracle that would break the stubbornness of hardened unbelievers. However, God wants His chosen servants to remain absolutely patient in the face of all adversity. He, therefore, makes it clear to them that they have no say in the matter; their task is completed when they have delivered their message. Miracles occur at the time of His choice. Thus, they should be reassured, satisfied with whatever is accomplished through them, leaving the final outcome to God, who determines it as He pleases.

God also wants people to understand the nature of Godhead and the nature of prophethood. He wants them to realize that God's messengers are mortals like them: He has chosen them and assigned them their missions. Not only can they not exceed that mission, they would not try to do so. Moreover, people should know that miracles are delayed out of God's mercy. It is God's will that should people continue to reject His faith after they have been given a miracle, He will destroy them soon after that. Thus, they are given time and a period of grace: *"When God's will becomes manifest, judgement will be passed between them in all justice, and lost will be, then and there, all who have followed falsehood."* (Verse 78) There will be no time left for any further action, nor for repentance or mending of ways.

Signs Everywhere

Those who demand miracles are directed to reflect on God's signs that are present everywhere in the world around them. Because of the long familiarity of these, they are often forgotten. Reflection on them, however, is sufficient to give them all the evidence they want. They

testify to the fact that God is the Creator of everything in the universe. No one can claim that these have been created by anyone other than God; nor can there be any claim that they existed without being created by God who has planned everything:

It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried. And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?
(Verses 79–81)

The creation of livestock is a miracle in the first place, just like the creation of man. To shape and fashion them and to give them life are all miracles which human beings do not even claim. Another miracle is making such livestock subservient to man, when some of them are larger and stronger than man. Yet, “*It is God who provides livestock for you, some for riding and some for your food.*” (Verse 79) To say that such livestock merely exist and we need not concern ourselves with how or why they do is unacceptable. To claim that they are not a clear miracle in relation to man and his ability, or that they do not point to the Creator who originated them and gave them their characteristics, as He did with man, is to make arbitrary claims that run against logic and reason.

The *sūrah* reminds them of the favours God has granted them through these creatures: “*some for riding and some for your food. You have other benefits in them too. You can reach on them any destination you wish. On them, as on ships, you are carried.*” (Verses 79–80) The things that they used to desire and accomplish through travelling on such mounts were great at the time; this before the invention of modern means of travel and transport. There are still certain things that continue to be done by using such livestock. Even today, certain mountainous areas can only be reached by using animals, despite the fact that cars, trains, planes and other vehicles are available to us. Access to them is through narrow passages that can only be traversed by animals.

“*On them, as on ships, you are carried.*” (Verse 80) This is also a sign from God; indeed, a great blessing from Him. The fact that ships sail on the sea is based on a number of natural laws and balances that are of the essence of the universe's design. They involve the earth, sky, dry

land, sea and river, as well as the nature of the elements and components of the universe. These are essential whether a boat uses sail, steam, combustion engine, nuclear power, or some other power God has placed on our planet and the use of which He has facilitated for man. Hence, ships are mentioned here as an aspect of God's signs on the one hand and the blessings He bestows on man on the other.

God's signs throughout the universe are countless. They cannot be denied by any serious minded person: "*And He shows you His signs: which of God's signs can you still deny?*" (Verse 81) Yes, indeed! Some people do deny and dispute God's revelations and signs, using false arguments to try to undermine the truth. Such people, however, are motivated only by ulterior motives, arrogance, twisted concepts or some purpose other than establishing the truth. A tyrant like Pharaoh, who feared for his throne because he knew that the truth of God's oneness would disprove the legends on which his kingship was based, disputed God's signs and His message. Some people believe in certain creeds that are incompatible with the principle of God's oneness such as communism. Communists wanted people to confine themselves to the earth, concentrating all their cares on their bellies and sexual desires. They wanted people to worship nothing other than the creed or the leader. Others suffered under the yoke of the clergy, as happened during the Middle Ages in Europe when the Church held excessive powers, and people wanted to get rid of such tyranny. Therefore, they rejected God in whose name the Church exercised its tyranny.

There are other motives that make people dispute the truth of faith. However, human nature finds such disputes repugnant and acknowledges the truth testified by everything in the universe.

Lessons of History

The *sūrah* concludes on a very powerful note:

Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them? They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth. Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them. When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled

in what knowledge they had; and so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked. And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all. This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures. There and then the unbelievers will be lost. (Verses 82–85)

Many communities were destroyed during human history. What happened to some of these communities can be seen in their ruins; others are recorded in history, written or transmitted by word of mouth. The Qur'an often directs our attention to these histories because they are indicative of human life and its course of history. They also have a powerful effect on our minds and hearts. The Qur'an addresses human nature by what God, who revealed the Qur'an, knows of human nature: what influences it and what opens its receptors. Some of these receptors need only a light tap, while others require strong hammering because of the thick veils that have covered them over time.

At this point the *sūrah* questions them, encouraging them to travel across the land with open eyes, alert feelings and an objective approach. They should look at what took place on earth before their time, and consider whether they too might be exposed to the same: "*Have they not travelled through the land and seen what was the end of those who lived before them?*" (Verse 82) Before specifying what end they met, the *sūrah* describes the conditions of those past communities so that the addressees can consider how it could affect them and also enable them to draw the right lessons: "*They were more numerous than them, and greater in power and in the impact they left on earth.*" (Verse 82) Thus, they enjoyed power and civilization. Some of these belonged to generations that preceded the Arabs, the history of some is given to the Prophet, while others were known to the Arabs who passed by their ruins: "*Yet what they achieved was of no avail to them.*" (Verse 82)

Neither material power nor numerical strength was of any avail to them. Indeed their advancement was the cause of their tragedy: "*When God's messengers came to them with all evidence of the truth, they revelled in what knowledge they had.*" (Verse 83) Without faith, knowledge becomes a test that may cause blindness and excess. Such superficial

knowledge can lead to conceit and arrogance. Given such knowledge, a person may think that he can control immense powers and immeasurable resources and this leads him to transgress beyond his limits. He tends to forget the great many things he does not know. These are present in the universe, but he has no power over them. Indeed, he is not fully aware of them. He only knows their ends that are close to him. Yet he boasts falsely, emphasizing his knowledge and overlooking his ignorance. If he would only compare what he knows to what he does not, and what he is able to do to with what he cannot even begin to understand, he would certainly moderate his excitement about his knowledge.

Those people, however, revelled in what little knowledge they had and ridiculed whoever reminded them of what is beyond their knowledge: *"And so they were overwhelmed by the very thing which they mocked."* (Verse 83) Therefore, when they see God's might, they begin to realize the truth of their arrogance and acknowledge what they used to deny. They declare their belief in God's oneness and disown those deities which they alleged to be God's partners. All this, however, comes when it is too late: *"And then when they saw Our might, they said: 'We believe in God alone, and we renounce those we used to associate as partners with Him. But accepting the faith after they had seen Our might was not going to benefit them at all.'"* (Verses 84–85) It is a rule God has established that repentance after demonstrating God's might is not acceptable, because it is motivated by fear, not by faith. *"This has always been God's way of dealing with His creatures."* (Verse 85) God's way remains operative at all times. It never changes, deviates or fails: *"There and then the unbelievers will be lost."* (Verse 85)

This is a very powerful conclusion to the *sūrah*, with God's might overwhelming the rejecters when they are raising their voices with appeals motivated by fear. Thus, the end fits well with overall ambience and main subject matter of the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* tackles those issues of faith that feature prominently in Makkan revelations, such as God's oneness, resurrection and revelation. These, however, are not the main themes of the *sūrah*. Its main theme is the battle between truth and falsehood, faith and unfaith, tyranny and justice. Indeed, the development of this battle gives the *sūrah* its distinctive features.

SŪRAH 41

Fuṣṣilat

(Clearly Expounded)

Prologue

The question of faith and its essential principles is the major theme of this *sūrah*: God's oneness, the life to come, the revealed message as well as advocacy of the message and the manners an advocate of the Divine message should adopt. All that the *sūrah* includes serves to explain these fundamental principles and provide evidence supporting them. The *sūrah* presents some of God's signs that are available in man and in the expanse of the universe, warns against denying such signs, and reminds people of the fates suffered by earlier generations that denied the truth and shows what happens to such unbelievers on the Day of Resurrection. It explains that only such unbelievers among men and *jinn* refuse to acknowledge these truths or to submit themselves to God. By contrast, the heavens, the earth, the sun, the moon and the angels submit themselves and humbly prostrate themselves before God.

Concerning the truth of God's oneness, we read at the beginning of the *sūrah* verses such as: "*Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to those who associate partners with Him.*" (Verse 6) "*Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two Days? And do you*

claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds." (Verse 9) Speaking of the people of 'Ād and Thamūd, the *sūrah* tells us that the messengers sent to them explained the same truth to them: "Worship none but God." (Verse 14) In the middle of the *sūrah* we have the commandment: "Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God." (Verse 37) Speaking about the same basic truth, the *sūrah* says towards its end: "on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'" (Verse 47)

On the question of the life to come the *sūrah* issues a stern warning to those who do not believe in it: "Woe to those who associate partners with Him, and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come." (Verses 6–7) It concludes with this verse: "They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything." (Verse 54) The truth of the Day of Judgement is also mentioned in the images the *sūrah* portrays of what happens on that day, which confirms, with even greater certainty, the fact of its undoubted coming.

As for the question of revelation, there is much about it in this *sūrah*, almost to the point of revelation being its main theme. In fact, the *sūrah* opens with a detailed discussion of this issue: "Hā. Mīm. A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful: a book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge. It gives good news as well as a warning. Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear. They say: 'Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.' Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that...' (Verses 1–6) The middle part of the *sūrah* mentions how the idolaters received the Qur'ān: "The unbelievers say: Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand." (Verse 26) Then we are given a more detailed account of how the Qur'ān was received and a response to what the unbelievers used to assert about it: "Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a

sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. Nothing is being said to you that was not said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away." (Verses 41–44)

In its discussion of the method of advocating the Divine message and the manners adopted by such advocates, the *sūrah* says: "Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing." (Verses 33–36)

These issues are presented against a backdrop of images that have a profound effect on the listener. The *sūrah* draws these images from a universe replete with signs and from the human soul with its remarkable constitution. It also shows images of the fates suffered by earlier communities of unbelievers and intense scenes from the Day of Resurrection.

One of these scenes of the universe is a very detailed image of the original creation of the heavens and the earth: "Say: 'Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two Days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said:

'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing." (Verses 9–12)

We also have images of the creation of the night and day, the sun and moon, the worship offered by the angels and the earth as it humbly worships God and how it springs into life: *"Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things."* (Verses 37–39)

The human soul is laid bare before our eyes such that we see it as it really is: *"Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer."* (Verses 49–51)

Regarding the fates of earlier communities, the *sūrah* presents what happened to the 'Ād and Thamūd: *"As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance."*

Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing." (Verses 15–18)

Several scenes are presented from the Day of Resurrection. One intensely effective and detailed image shows the unbelievers speaking to their own senses: *"On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return.'*" (Verses 19–21) Another image shows, in full clarity, the anger felt by those who were deceived in this life against those who deluded them: *"The unbelievers say: 'Our Lord! Show us those jinn and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.'*" (Verse 29)

This great variety of imagery, forming the background against which the main issues of faith are presented, constitutes the overall ambience of the *sūrah*. Right from the very outset until the end we find ourselves before the most striking and powerful of influences.

The *sūrah* may be divided into two parts, each consisting of closely interlinked sections. The first part begins with verses speaking about the Qur'ān, its nature and revelation, as well as the unbelievers' attitude to it. This is followed by an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth and the stories of the 'Ād and Thamūd. Then, comes a scene of the unbelievers on the Day of Judgement and how they face the testimony of their own senses. It then speaks about those unbelievers in this present life and how they have gone so astray. It states that they had cronies who made evil things seem fair to them. As a result they used to urge one another not to listen to the Qur'ān, but instead to try to silence it so that they might win. This is followed by an image depicting how angry they feel on the Day of Judgement with those cronies who deluded them. A contrasting image shows us those who believed in God's oneness and followed the straight path. These receive angels who reassure them and give them news of their great prospects.

The angels tell them that they will be their friends and guardians in both this present life and in the life to come. This part concludes with a reference to the message and those who advocate it.

The second part begins by speaking about the signs God placed in the universe: the night, day, sun, moon, angels in devotion, the desolate earth and how it quickens and becomes full of life. This is followed by a reference to those who dispute God's signs and His revelations, leading to a reference to God's book and its main qualities before a brief reference is made to Moses' book and the disputes that arose among his people concerning it. The *sūrah* leaves judgement concerning all these disputes to God, at the time appointed by Him. At this point the *sūrah* adds a reference to the Last Hour and that knowledge of it belongs to God alone. He also knows the fruit that will eventually develop from flowers and what offspring will be born to pregnant females. It also shows an image of the unbelievers and how they ask about those deities whom they alleged to be God's partners. Following this the *sūrah* presents the human soul as it is, shedding all its coverings. Although man is keen to protect himself he takes no precautions to spare himself the results of denying God and His messages.

The *sūrah* concludes with a promise by God that He will make His signs within man and in the universe available to people so that they have a chance to review their attitude and be assured of their faith: "*We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verses 53–54)



Testimony of One's Own Senses

Fuṣṣilat (Clearly Expounded)

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

Hā. Mīm. (1)

A revelation from the Lord of
Grace, the Ever Merciful: (2)

a book, the verses of which have
been clearly spelled out as a
discourse in Arabic for people of
knowledge. (3)

It gives good news as well as a
warning. Yet, most of them turn
away, so that they do not hear. (4)

They say: 'Our hearts are veiled
from whatever you call us to, and
in our ears is deafness, and there
is a barrier between us and you.
So do you what you will, and so
shall we.' (5)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

حَمْدٌ

نَزِيلٌ مِنَ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

كِتَابٌ فَصِّلْتُ آيَاتُهُ، قُرْءَانًا عَرَبِيًّا
لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا، فَاعْرِضْ أَكْثَرَهُمْ فَهُمْ
لَا يَسْمَعُونَ

وَقَالُوا أَفَلَوْا فِاتٍ أَكْثَرُ مِمَّا نَدْعُونَ
إِلَيْهِمْ فِي آذَانِنَا وَقُرْءَانٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكَ
حِجَابٌ فَأَعْمَلْ إِنَّا عَمِلُونَ

Say: 'I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness.' Woe to those who associate partners with Him, (6)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰ إِلَىَّ أَنَّمَا
إِلَهُكُمْ إِلَهٌُ وَاحِدٌ فَاسْتَقِيمُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ
وَأَسْتَغْفِرُوا لَهُ وَيُؤْتِلْ لِّلْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿٦﴾

and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come. (7)

الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَهُمْ
بِالْآخِرَةِ هُمْ كَافِرُونَ ﴿٧﴾

Those who believe and do good deeds shall have an unfailing reward. (8)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
لَهُمْ أَجْرٌ غَيْرُ مَمْنُونٍ ﴿٨﴾

Say: 'Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. (9)

قُلْ أَتَيْتُكُمْ لَتَكْفُرُونَ بِالَّذِي خَلَقَ
الْأَرْضَ فِي يَوْمَيْنِ وَيَتَحَدَّثُونَ لَهُ
أَنذَادًا ذَٰلِكَ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٩﴾

He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. (10)

وَجَعَلَ فِيهَا رَوَاسِيَ مِن فَوْقِهَا وَبَرَكَ فِيهَا
وَقَدَّرَ فِيهَا أَقْوَاتَهَا فِي أَرْبَعَةِ أَيَّامٍ سَوَاءً
لِّلنَّاسِ يَلِينَ ﴿١٠﴾

Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' (11)

So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (12)

If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.' (13)

There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: 'Worship none but God.' They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.' (14)

As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. (15)

ثُمَّ أَسْتَوَىٰ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ وَهِيَ دُخَانٌ فَقَالَ لَهَا
وَلِلْأَرْضِ أَقْبِيَا طَوْعًا أَوْ كَرْهًا قَالَتَا أَتَيْنَا
طَائِعِينَ ﴿١١﴾

فَقَضَيْنَهُنَّ سَبْعَ سَمَوَاتٍ فِي يَوْمَيْنِ
وَأَوْحَىٰ فِي كُلِّ سَمَاءٍ أَمْرَهَا وَزَيَّنَّا
السَّمَاءَ الدُّنْيَا بِمَصْبِيحٍ وَحِفْظٍ
ذَٰلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ الْعَزِيزِ الْعَلِيمِ ﴿١٢﴾

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا فَقُلْ أَنْذَرْتُكُمْ صَاعِقَةً مِّثْلَ
صَاعِقَةِ عَادٍ وَثَمُودَ ﴿١٣﴾

إِذْ جَاءَهُمُ الرُّسُلُ مِنْ بَيْنِ أَيْدِيهِمْ
وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا اللَّهَ
قَالُوا لَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّنَا لَأَنْزَلَ مَلَائِكَةً فَإِنَّا
بِمَا أُرْسِلْتُمْ بِهِ كَافِرُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

فَأَمَّا عَادٌ فَاسْتَكْبَرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ
بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ وَقَالُوا مَنْ أَشَدُّ مِنْ قُوَّةِ
أَوَّلَئِكَ رَوَّا أَنَّهُ اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَهُمْ هُوَ
أَشَدُّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَكَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا
يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿١٥﴾

Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. (16)

As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance. Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. (17)

And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing. (18)

On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards (19)

until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. (20)

فَأَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ رِيحًا صَرْصَرًا فِي أَيَّامٍ
نُحِسَاتٍ لِنَذِيقَهُمْ عَذَابَ الْخِزْيِ فِي
الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَلَعَذَابُ الْآخِرَةِ أَخْزَىٰ
وَهُمْ لَا يُصَرُّونَ ﴿١٦﴾

وَأَمَّا ثَمُودُ فَهَدَيْنَاهُمْ فَاسْتَحَبُّوا الْعَمَىٰ
عَلَى الْهُدَىٰ فَآَخَذْتَهُمْ صَاعِقَةً الْعَذَابِ
أَلْهَوْنَ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

وَنَجَّيْنَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَكَانُوا يَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

وَيَوْمَ يُحْشَرُ أَعْدَاءُ اللَّهِ إِلَى النَّارِ
فَهُمْ يُوزَعُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا مَا جَاءُوهَا شَهِدَ عَلَيْهِمْ
سَمْعُهُمْ وَأَبْصَرُهُمْ وَجُلُودُهُمْ
بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return. (21)

وَقَالُوا لِلْجُلُودِ هِمَّ لِمَ شَهِدْتُمْ عَلَيْنَا قَالُوا أَنْطَقَنَا اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنْطَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ وَهُوَ خَلَقَكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَلَإِيهِ تَرْجَعُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

'You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you. Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing. (22)

وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَسْتَرُونَ أَنْ يَشْهَدَ عَلَيْكُمْ سَمْعُكُمْ وَلَا أَبْصَرُكُمْ وَلَا جُلُودُكُمْ وَلَكِنْ ظَنَنْتُمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَعْلَمُ كَثِيرًا مِمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

'And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.' (23)

وَذَلِكُمْ ظَنُّكُمُ الَّذِي ظَنَنْتُمْ بِرَبِّكُمْ أَرَدْتُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ ﴿٢٣﴾

If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home; and if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so. (24)

فَإِنْ يَصْبِرُوا فَالنَّارُ مَثْوًى لَهُمْ وَإِنْ يَسْتَغِيثُوا فَمَا لَهُمْ مِنَ الْمُعْجِبِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

We have assigned to the unbelievers companions who made their past and present seem goodly to them, but the sentence has fallen due upon them together with bygone generations of *jinn* and humans. They will indeed be lost. (25)

وَقَيَّضْنَا لَهُمْ قُرَنَاءَ فَزَيَّنُوا لَهُمْ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَحَقَّ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَوْلُ فِئْتِ أُمَمٍ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ مِنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنْسِ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا خَاسِرِينَ ﴿٢٥﴾

The unbelievers say: 'Do not listen to this Qur'an, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.' (26)

We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a taste of severe suffering; and We shall most certainly requite them according to the worst of their deeds. (27)

Such is the requital of the enemies of God: the fire will be their lasting home: a fit requital for their having knowingly rejected Our revelations. (28)

The unbelievers say: 'Our Lord! Show us those *jinn* and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low.' (29)

As for those who say: 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way, the angels will descend on them, saying: 'Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. (30)

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَا تَسْمَعُوا لِهَذَا الْقُرْآنِ
وَالْغَوْا فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٢٦﴾

فَلَنُذِيقَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا عَذَابًا
شَدِيدًا وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَشْوَأَ الَّذِي
كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَاءُ أَعْدَاءِ اللَّهِ النَّارُ هُمْ فِيهَا
دَارُ الْخُلْدِ جَزَاءُ إِمَّا كَانُوا بِآيَاتِنَا يَجْحَدُونَ ﴿٢٨﴾

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا رَبَّنَا أَرِنَا
الَّذِينَ أَضَلَّانَا مِنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنسِ
نَجْعَلَهُمَا تَحْتَ أَقْدَامِنَا لِيَكُونَا
مِنَ الْأَسْفَلِينَ ﴿٢٩﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ
اسْتَقَمُوا اسْتَزَلَّ عَلَيْهِمُ
الْمَلَكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا
وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا وَابْشُرُوا بِالْجَنَّةِ
الَّتِي كُنتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

'We are your guardians in the life of this world and in the life to come. There you shall have all that your souls desire, and all that you ask for, (31)

نَحْنُ أَوْلَىٰ أَلْوَمَ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا
وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا
مَا تَشْتَهُى أَنْفُسُكُمْ وَلَكُمْ
فِيهَا مَا تَدْعُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

as a ready welcome from Him who is much-forgiving, ever-merciful.' (32)

فَرَلَا مِن عَفْوَ رَحِيمٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God'? (33)

وَمَن أَحْسَنُ قَوْلًا مِّن دَعَا إِلَى اللَّهِ
وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا وَقَالَ إِنِّى مِنَ
الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٣﴾

Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. (34)

وَلَا تَسْتَوِى الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ
أَدْفَعْ بِالَّتِى هِىَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِى
يَبْغُوكَ وَيَبْغَىٰكَ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِىٌّ
حَمِيمٌ ﴿٣٤﴾

Yer none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. (35)

وَمَا يُلْقِئُهَا إِلَّا الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَمَا يُلْقِئُهَا
إِلَّا أَذْوَ حَظٍّ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (36)

وَمَا يَزَعْنَكَ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ نَزْعٌ
فَأَسْتَعِذْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ
الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٦﴾

The Source of Divine Revelations

The *sūrah* opens with the two separate letters, *Hā. Mīm*. We have explained elsewhere the reason why many *sūrahs* start with separate letters of the Arabic alphabet. That this is often stated fits in with the Qur'ānic method of repeating references to the facts it wants our hearts to internalize. By nature, the human heart needs such repetition because it tends to forget with the passage of time. In order to instil a fact in one's conscience one needs to have it repeated in a variety of ways. The Qur'ān addresses the human heart with all the qualities instilled in its nature in accordance with its Creator's knowledge.

It is as if the two letters with which the *sūrah* starts, *Hā, Mīm*, are a name given to the *sūrah* or to the Qur'ān. The two letters constitute the subject of the first sentence while the predicate forms the next verse: "*Hā, Mīm. A revelation from the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verses 1–2) Choosing to identify the Divine attributes of grace and mercy in connection with the revelation of the Qur'ān highlights the quality that is most characteristic of this revelation, namely Divine mercy. There is no doubt that the revelation of the Qur'ān is an act of mercy for all mankind. It is a mercy for those who believe in it and implement it as also for other creatures, not merely humans. The Qur'ān defines a code of living that brings good results for all. It has had a profound impact on the life of humanity, its concepts, values and course of action. Its impact is universal and consistent, ever since it was revealed. Those who study human history with true objectivity, following its course in its wider perspective, which includes all facets of human activity, are able to recognize this truth. Many of them have also recorded this in clear terms.

"*A book, the verses of which have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in Arabic for people of knowledge.*" (Verse 3) Spelling out the verses, clearly and distinctly, according to purpose, people's nature and mentality, generations, communities, psychologies and needs is a major characteristic of the Qur'ān. Its verses are indeed clearly expounded for people who are ready to learn and receive knowledge. In this way the Qur'ān gives good news to believers who put their faith in practice, and delivers warnings to those who reject its message and entertain

evil. It also explains why such good news and warnings have been given in a fine Arabic style to Arabic-speaking people. Most of them, however, refused its message, receiving it coolly: "*Yet, most of them turn away, so that they do not hear.*" (Verse 4)

This is indeed what they did, turning away so as not to hear or be exposed to the powerful logic of the Qur'ān. As the *sūrah* later informs us, they tried hard to persuade others not to listen to the Qur'ān. Of those that did listen their attitude was the same as those who did not: they all resisted the influence of the Qur'ān on their hearts. Thus they were like the deaf, deprived of their hearing faculty.

"*They say: Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, and in our ears is deafness, and there is a barrier between us and you. So do you what you will, and so shall we.*" (Verse 5) Such was their stubbornness. They hoped that the Prophet would despair of them ever responding to him and that he would, therefore, stop calling on them to believe. They did so because of the powerful effect of what he said when they deliberately wanted not to believe. Thus, they said to the Prophet: our hearts are covered over so as not to allow your words any penetration, and the deafness in our ears prevents us from hearing you, and the barrier between you and us allows you no interaction with us. Therefore, leave us alone and do what you will. We will go our own separate way. Equally, they might carelessly have said: we will neither listen to what you say nor heed your warnings. You may do what you please. We will continue to follow our own ways, caring nothing for what you do or say.

This is just one example of what the first advocate of the message of Islam had to face. Yet, still he continued to call on people to accept his message, allowing no element of despair to creep into or disrupt his work. He never hastened the fulfilment of God's promise to him or the infliction of punishment on those who denied him. He acted instead upon instruction, declaring to people that putting the warnings into action was not up to him. He was no more than a human being receiving revelations and delivering a message. His task was to call on people to believe in God's oneness and to adhere to His message. He was also mandated to warn the idolaters. Once he had done this, matters

were left to God while he himself had no say in what was bound to happen: *"Say: I am but a human being like yourselves. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One and only God. Therefore, take the straight path to Him and seek His forgiveness. Woe to those who associate partners with Him."* (Verse 6)

What perseverance! What endurance and what dedication! Only a person who has experienced at first hand something of this condition can appreciate the power and resilience required to persevere against such odds. Yet this perseverance is coupled with the realization that one has no say in what turn developments take. Yet the Prophet faced such unrelenting opposition, arrogance and carelessness, without ever requesting a miracle to silence his opponents.

In order to be able to face such situations, God's prophets and messengers were often directed to remain patient in adversity. Advocacy of the Divine message can only take the road of long patience and perseverance. The first thing that requires such patience is the advocate's keen desire to see the Divine message triumph, but then realize that such triumph is slow coming. Indeed, no sign of it may appear for a long time, yet those who undertake such advocacy must accept this willingly and without hesitation.

The maximum the Prophet could do in the face of such arrogant rejection and ridicule of his message was to say: *"Woe to those who associate partners with Him, and who do not pay the obligatory charity, and who refuse to believe in the life to come."* (Verses 6–7) The fact that *zakāt*, or the obligatory charity, is specified here must have been in response to a certain situation, which we cannot now determine. This verse was revealed in Makkah, while *zakāt* was only imposed as a duty in the second year after the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. The overall requirement of *zakāt* was known about during the Makkan period, but only as a general requirement whereby people paid as they wished. Later, in Madīnah, this was modified to make it a specific duty with defined rates on different types of property. To disbelieve in the life to come is the essence of rejection of the Divine message, and it should be met with stern warnings. Some scholars argue that in this particular instance, *zakāt* means purity of faith. The general tone of the *sūrah* and the circumstances prevailing at the time admit this possibility.

Creation of the Earth

Continuing to advocate the Divine message, the Prophet puts before them the enormity of the offence they commit by associating partners with God and rejecting His message. He points first to the universe, in relation to which they are tiny and flimsy creatures. He shows them God's power as reflected in the nature of this universe of which they constitute only a small part. He wants to draw them out of the narrow angle through which they look at the Divine message. From that angle, they see themselves as large, occupying important positions. Preoccupied with their own selves, positions and interests, and the fact that Muḥammad was chosen by God in preference to them, they overlook the great truth expounded in the Qur'ān and set before them by Muḥammad. This great truth relates to the universe, to all generations of humanity, and carries absolutism that transcends time, place and people:

Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]. Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (Verses 9–12)

When you declare disbelief, you are being nothing other than careless, gross and vulgar. You are denying the One who created the earth and placed firm structures over it, blessing it and assigning its varied provisions. He has indeed operated the systems of the universe, adorned the nearest sky with secure lights. Everything in the heavens and the earth willingly submit themselves to Him, while you, a mere single inhabitant on earth, arrogantly refuses to accept the truth. The

presentation of these facts in the *sūrah* typically shakes every heart: *"Say: Do you indeed disbelieve in Him who has created the earth in two days? And do you claim others to be His equals? It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds. He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it, and bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions in four days, ensuring equity for all who seek [such provisions]."* (Verses 9–10)

The *sūrah* begins here by mentioning the fact of creating the earth in two days and comments on this first stage of creation before telling us the rest of the story. The comment says: *"It is He who is the Lord of all the worlds,"* and yet you claim others to be His equals when it is He who created the earth you live on. How absurd and ghastly!

Then, what are these days: the two in which God created the earth and the two in which He placed the mountains above it, measured its provisions and showered His blessings? These are days of God, the length of which is known to Him alone. They are not the earthly days we know, because earth days are a time-measuring unit that came into existence after the creation of the earth. Just like the earth has its day, which is the length of time it takes to complete one full rotation of the sun, other planets have their days, some of which are longer and some shorter than an earth day. This means that those four days of the earth's creation and its provisions are measured by some other unit unknown to us. The closest we can surmise given our limited knowledge, is that they refer to the different stages the earth went through, divided into several eras, until its crust solidified and it settled into its present shape able to support the type of life we know. According to scientific theory, such stages took around two billion earth years.

These are only scientific estimates based on geological studies and soil and rock analyses. When we study the Qur'ān, we do not take such estimates as proven facts, for they are not. They are simply postulations open to amendment and change. Therefore, we do not interpret the Qur'ān on their basis. We conclude that they may be true if they are in agreement with the Qur'ānic text and serve to explain it without coercion. We say that a theory or a set of assumptions is closer to the truth because it is closer to the meaning of the Qur'ānic text.

Scientists now say that most probably the earth was originally a gas-like mass of flame just like the sun, and most probably it was once part of the sun before splitting away from it for some reason. It took long periods until its crust cooled down and solidified. Its centre remains in melting form because of the intense heat that melts even the hardest of rocks. In the early period when the crust solidified, it was composed of many layers of rock strata. Then at some other early stage, the oceans came into existence with water forming by the combination of two molecules of hydrogen with one molecule of oxygen.

The air and the water on this planet of ours worked together to break the rocky surface, carry it and deposit it in different places so as to make a soil that allows plants to grow. The two of them thus managed to carve out portions of hills and mountains, and to fill valleys. Wherever you turn your eyes on earth, you will see the effects of a continuous process of construction and destruction.¹

The earth's crust is in a process of constant change. The sea shakes its waves to bring its effect on the land. Sea water evaporates by the heat of the sun and it goes up into the sky where it forms clouds which produce rain of fresh water, falling down in torrents to form rivers. As the rivers run, they affect the surface of the earth, carrying some of its rocks, changing them and depositing them elsewhere. Over centuries counted in hundreds and thousands, the surface of the earth changes completely. Snow that has solidified into ice brings another effect on the surface of the earth. Likewise, its surface is affected by the wind as also by the sun, with the heat and the light it sends to the earth. The creatures living on earth cause further changes, as do the volcanoes that bring lava to the surface.

Should you ask a geologist about the rocks forming the earth's crust, he will give you a long list, but he will highlight three major

1. Zākī, Aḥmad, *Ma'a Allāh fī al-Samā'* [With God in Heaven]. Dār al-Hilāl, Cairo, (n.d.) I could not locate this quotation in the book. – Editor's note.

types. He will tell you first about the igneous rocks which came out from the lower reaches of the earth to its surface in melted form, and then cooled down and solidified. He may cite as examples granite and basalt. He may show you a sample, indicating its crystalline composition, with white, red and black crystals, saying that each one of these contains a different chemical compound. Thus, he points out that these rocks are in fact a solid mix. The geologist may further draw your attention to the fact that it was out of such igneous rocks that the surface of the earth was originally made in the early stages of its formation. Then different factors came into play: water falling from the sky or running in rivers or lying in the form of ice, air, wind and sun. They all worked hard changing the nature and the chemistry of the earth's surface, bringing into existence totally different rocks that have no similarity to the original ones.

The geologist will then speak to you about depository rocks, which make the second and largest type of rock. These are the ones which have been carved by natural factors or by man out of rocks that are firmer and more solid. They are called depository because they are no longer in their original places. They have been lifted and carried by water or wind and then settled somewhere else on earth. The geologist will cite limestone as an example of such depository rocks. Limestone forms mountains, such as al-Muqaṭṭam which provides the building material for all buildings in Cairo. He will tell you that limestone is made of a chemical compound known as calcium carbonates, produced by biological or chemical factors. Sand, clay and argillaceous earth are other examples of depository rocks and they are all formed from different origins.

When you enquire about these origins you are told that all depository rocks come from igneous ones. When the crust of the earth formed in the distant past, there was nothing on its solidified surface except igneous rocks. Then rain and sea water interacted with it. The air then came into play in the form of chemical gases, winds and gales, heat and light from the sun and all these elements began to interact according to their different natures. They thus

changed the useless, hard igneous rock into rocks that can be used to build houses and rocks from which minerals can be extracted. More importantly, it changed the hard solid rock to make depository soil that can support life.

Granite does not make the sort of earth surface fit for plants or irrigation. Such surface is provided by soil which ultimately came out of granite and similar rocks. When such soil was in place, plants grew allowing animals to exist. Then the earth became a fit abode for the head of all these creatures on earth, man.²

This journey long as it may be thought of by modern scientists, can help us to understand the meaning of the days in which the earth was created, firm mountains placed on it, then its blessing and the measuring of its different provisions in four days. We do not know the length of these four days, but we know that they are undoubtedly different from earth days.

A Blessed Planet

We need to dwell for a moment on every phrase of this Qur'ānic text before we turn our attention to the mention of the heavens in the next verse.

"He it is who placed on the earth firm mountains towering above it." (Verse 10) Mountains are often described in the Qur'ān as 'firm', and in some instances the purpose of their positioning is that they 'prevent' the earth from shaking or swaying. This means that the mountains are firm in themselves and stabilize the earth, ensuring that it remains well balanced. In times gone by, people used to think that the earth was based on firm foundations. They are told today that the earth is nothing more than a small ball that floats in a great expanse, without support. They may be scared when they listen to such words for the first time, and some of them may begin to look warily askance, worried that the earth might shake or fall in deep space. Let such people be reassured. God's hand holds the heavens and the earth, preventing their

2. Ibid., pp. 96-98.

disappearance. Should they vanish, no one else would hold them in place. Such people should banish worrying thoughts, because the laws that govern the universe are set in operation by the Almighty who holds sway over all things.

The same scientist says:

Every event that takes place on earth, whether on its surface or below it, causing one substance to be transferred from one place to another, has a bearing on the speed of the earth as it moves in its orbit. This is not affected only by the cycle of the tide. Even when rivers carry water from one place of the earth to another, this affects the speed of its movement. The blowing wind and whatever falls into the sea or protrudes on the surface has an effect on the earth's speed as it moves in orbit. Another thing that affects such speed is any expansion or retraction of its size, even though it increases or decreases by no more than a few feet.³

With the earth being so sensitive, it is no wonder that firm mountains are positioned over it to ensure its stability and that it does not 'sway with you', as expressed in verse 15 of *Sūrah* 16.

And He "*bestowed His blessings on it, and measured out its varied provisions.*" (Verse 10) When our predecessors read this statement, they used to think of the vegetation that grows on earth and the useful minerals God has placed in it, such as gold, silver, iron and the like. Now that we have learnt more of the great blessings God has bestowed on this planet and of the provisions He has placed in it over long periods of time, this statement gives us a much broader meaning.

We have mentioned how some elements in the air combine to produce water, while the combination of others produce the soil that supports vegetation, and another process gives us rain, the source of all fresh water in rivers, wells and springs. All this reflects the blessing God bestowed on the earth and its measured provisions.

Then, there is also the air we breathe:

3. Ibid., p. 82.

The earth is a circle covered with a rocky crust, and the greater part of this crust is covered by a layer of water, while above both the crust and water there is air, a thick gas layer similar to the sea, with different depths. All living creatures, man, animal and plant, live in this layer enjoying what it gives us.

As we breathe we obtain the oxygen necessary for us, while plants grow their structure using carbon, or rather carbon dioxide. We eat plants, and also eat animals which in turn eat plants, and in doing so ensure our physical growth. The nitrogen in the air is needed to reduce its content of oxygen. If we were to inhale oxygen on its own, we would be burnt by breathing. There remains in the air the evaporated water which gives it its freshness, and the hydrogen, as well as small quantities of other gases, such as helium and neon. Most probably these were part of the original composition of the earth and remained in the air.⁴

The provisions we need for survival are wider in scope than the food we eat. Yet all our food is composed of the basic elements that are present in the earth or in the air. Sugar, for example, is a compound of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, while water is made of oxygen and hydrogen. The same applies to everything we eat, drink, wear or use as a tool. They are all made of the earth's elements.

All this refers in some way to the blessing bestowed on the earth and the measured provisions placed in it, over a period of four of God's days, the length of which is known only to Him.

A Design for the Sky

Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke; and said to it and to the earth: 'Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly.' They both said: 'We do come willingly.' So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each

4. Ibid., p. 100.

heaven its task. We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure. Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (Verses 11–12)

What is meant here by the application of God's design is that it was His will to do so. The word, 'then', may not signify a chronological order; rather, it may mean turning to something higher. In our sense, the sky is higher. "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke.*" (Verse 11) Scientists believe that before the existence of stars there was what they call the nebula, a cloud of gas, or rather, smoke.

The nebulas, bright or dark, contain gas and dust, which is nothing other than what is left after the creation of the stars. The theory says that the galaxy was first formed of gas and dust, from which all stars were formed by a process of deposition and sedimentation. Yet some of the gas and dust remained, and from the remainder, the nebulas formed. Yet in this great galaxy remains a large quantity, equal to that which went into the formation of the stars. The stars continue to pull some of it by gravity, which means that the stars are dusting the sky to remove what is left, yet these dusters are too few in relation to the amount that needs to be dusted away and the space that needs to be cleaned.⁵

This may be true because it is close to the meaning of the Qur'ānic statement: "*Then, He applied His design to the sky, which was but smoke.*" (Verse 11) It is also closer to the fact that the creation of the skies was completed over a very long period of time, taking two of God's days.

A Willing Submission

The verse then adds a statement expressing an awesome truth: "*and said to it and to the earth: Come, both of you, willingly or unwillingly. They both said: We do come willingly.*" (Verse 11) This is a remarkable

5. Ibid., pp. 191–192.

reference to the fact of the universe being under God's control. It submits to its Creator and willingly does His bidding. This leaves only man who, in most cases, submits to God's law unwillingly. The law inevitably applies to him and he cannot take himself out of its domain. Man is no more than a little gear in the great machinery of the universe. All universal laws apply to him, whether he likes them or not. Yet he is the only creature who does not make the same submission as the earth and the sky. He always tries to deviate from an easy and smooth path, and, thus, he collides with the laws of nature, which will inevitably overpower him. He will then submit, albeit unwillingly. Exceptions to this are God's servants who, in their hearts, concepts, desires and actions, are not in conflict with the overall Divine law. These people submit willingly and find their way easy and smooth. They move in line with the movement of the universe, turning to God and living in harmony with all that exists. They are able to achieve wonders and produce miracles. They have no conflict with any force in the universe; on the contrary, they derive from its powers.

We, humans, submit to God's law unwillingly. How much better it would be for us to submit willingly, as do the earth and the skies. We would then enjoy the happiness that results from being consistent with the rest of the universe. At times, we also come up with what is absurd! The wheel of God's will turns in the way, direction and speed set for it, turning the universe with it according to well defined laws of nature. Yet we, out of all creation in the universe, try to force the wheel to run faster or slower, responding to what may motivate us of worry, selfishness, greed, fear or desire. We may move to this side or that, while the rest of creation moves along a well defined way. This inevitably means that we run into a collision here or there, endure pain or suffer a fatal crash. Thus, all our efforts and power go to waste. We should know, however, that when we truly believe, submit to God and relate to the rest of the universe, we will clearly understand our role, coordinate our movements with those of the universe, and move at the right time and speed, within the right space. Thus our movements will benefit by the power God has placed in the universe to produce truly great results. We will experience no arrogance or conceit because we know

the source of the power that enabled us to accomplish our great deeds. We will be certain that we do not achieve such results by our own efforts working in isolation. Instead, we achieve them when only we derive all that we do from the greatest power.

When we do this on our short journey spent on planar earth that submits willingly to God, we feel happy, comfortable and reassured. Indeed, the whole planet joins us on its own journey to its Lord. Moreover, we will enjoy the great peace that pours into our spirits as we live in a friendly universe submitting to its Lord. We will join the universe in willing submission to Him and, as a result, we will have no conflict with the universe, because we are part of it and we move with it in the same direction.

"They both said: We do come willingly. So He decreed that they become seven heavens in two days, and assigned to each heaven its task." (Verses 11–12) These two days may be the same as those in which the stars were formed from the nebulae, or during which the creation was completed as God only knows how. The assignment of tasks to each heaven refers to the operation of the natural laws in them, in accordance with God's directives. What, then, does the term 'heaven' mean? We have no definite answer. The word may refer to a measure of distance. On the other hand, each galaxy may be called a heaven, or several galaxies with varying distances may be called heavens. The word also admits several other possibilities.

"We adorned the sky nearest to the earth with lights, and made them secure." (Verse 12) Again the sky nearest to the earth can have several meanings. It could be the nearest galaxy to us, known as the Milky Way, which has a diameter of about 150,000 light years. It could mean something else that comprises stars and planets that shine for us like lights. These skies are 'made secure' from devilment, as can be understood from other references in the Qur'ān. Quite what this entails is beyond our grasp and hence our knowledge is limited to what the Qur'ān tells us.

"Such is the design of the Almighty, the All-Knowing." (Verse 12) Can anyone other than Him design all this? Can anyone other than the Almighty who knows all control the whole universe and conduct its affairs?

What Punishment for Turning Away?

Given this is the state of the entire universe, what position should be assigned to those who reject God's oneness and attribute partners to Him? How should their reckless arrogance be requited?

If they turn away, say: 'I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.' There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: 'Worship none but God.' They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.' As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: 'Who is mightier than us?' Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them? They continued to reject Our revelations. Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering. Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them. As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance. Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought. And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing. (Verses 13–18)

A warning against the type of thunderbolts that struck the peoples of 'Ād and Thamūd strikes fear in their hearts. It suits the terrible offence they commit. It answers the idolaters' arrogance referred to at the beginning of the *sūrah* showing them to be the only ones in the universe who reject the truth.

What sort of effect did this warning have on the unbelievers in Makkah? Ibn Ishāq, an early biographer of the Prophet, gives us the following story:

One day, as 'Utbah ibn Rabi'ah, one of the Quraysh chiefs, was sitting with a group of Quraysh notables, he noticed the Prophet sitting alone close to the Ka'bah. 'Utbah suggested to his friends: "Shall we go to Muḥammad and make him some offers? He may

have been spared the trouble. If he wins, whatever glory he achieves will be yours." They retorted: "He has certainly bewitched you." He said: "I have stated my opinion, and you can do as you wish."

Another report by Jābir suggests that when the Prophet recited these verses, 'Utbah listened. When the Prophet read verse 13 which says: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd,*" 'Utbah put his hand on the Prophet's mouth and appealed to him by the ties of kinship to his people to do nothing of the sort. Then 'Utbah left him, went home and stayed in doors. His people talked to him later about this and he explained his position: "When Muḥammad spoke this warning, I appealed to him not to do so. You know that when Muḥammad says something, he does not lie. I feared that such punishment be inflicted on you."

The Warning and Its Effect

This is, then, one image of the effect of the warning as stated by God's messenger to a person who did not believe in his message. Before we move on, we need to reflect a little on the image of the Prophet as he listened to 'Utbah making his petty proposals, his refined manners and his focus on the great issue in question. Although the proposals 'Utbah made sounded worthless, the Prophet listened attentively, without interrupting his interlocutor. He remained calm and friendly. When 'Utbah stopped speaking, the Prophet then graciously asked him: "Have you, Abū al-Walīd, finished what you have to say?" Then when 'Utbah confirmed that he had finished, the Prophet said: "Then listen to me." He waited until 'Utbah said, "I will do," before he read to him God's own words. Throughout he was friendly, calm, confident and reassured. This is typical of how the Prophet always captured his audience's attention, even though they might at the beginning jeer him and take a hostile stand. His was always a most admirable attitude. It is certainly as God says: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

What does this warning signify: "*If they turn away, say: I warn you of a thunderbolt like the thunderbolt that struck the 'Ād and Thamūd.*"

(Verse 13) Essentially, it begins a fresh round showing us images of the fates met by earlier communities who rejected God's message. The reckless arrogance of the present unbelievers is thus made all the more apparent through this reminder of what happened to similarly reckless and arrogant peoples: "*There came to them, from all directions, messengers saying: Worship none but God.*" (Verse 14) This is the single issue as presented by all God's messengers; it states the central point in every Divine religion.

"*They answered: 'If our Lord had wished, He would have sent down angels. We will never believe in your message.'*" (Verse 14) Similarly, this represents the same point of doubt faced by every messenger. Yet a messenger addressing human beings could not be other than human. This so that he would know the people he addressed and they would know him. In essence, a messenger should provide a practical example and share his people's problems. Yet the 'Ād and Thamūd declared themselves unbelievers simply because the messengers sent to them were human like themselves. They were not angels as they wanted them to be.

Up to this point, the *sūrah* speaks of the fates of both peoples as if they are one: both were struck by thunderbolts. Now, the *sūrah* gives us some specific details about both peoples: "*As for the 'Ād, they behaved arrogantly through the land, against all right, and said: Who is mightier than us?*" (Verse 15) The right attitude is that all creatures should submit to God and that people should not behave arrogantly. Who, then, are the 'Ād in comparison to God's great creation? All arrogant behaviour, by whatever creature, is against all right. Yet these people thought themselves powerful. They asked: "*Who is mightier than us?*" This is the false sense exhibited by all tyrants when they feel that they have silenced all opposition and that none can stand against their power. They forget the truth: "*Did they not realize that God, who created them, was mightier than them?*" This is a basic truth: the One who originated them is more powerful than they. He was the One who enabled them to exercise their power in the first place, albeit in the limited measure He allowed them. Yet tyrants always overlook facts: "*They continued to reject Our revelations.*" (Verse 15)

We see them here boasting of their power, thinking themselves mighty. The image portrayed in the next verse shows us the fate their despicable arrogance deserved: *"Therefore, We let loose upon them a howling gale raging through several days of misfortune, so as to give them, in the life of this world, a foretaste of humiliating suffering."* (Verse 16) It was a freezing gale lasting several days that brought them great misfortune. What was more was their humiliation in this life: a fitting response to their arrogance towards God's servants. Yet all this was a first instalment, a punishment in the life of this world. They will not escape further punishment in the life to come: *"Yet the suffering in the life to come will be even more humiliating, and they will have none to help them."* (Verse 16)

"As for the Thamūd, We offered them guidance, but they chose blindness in preference to guidance." (Verse 17) This appears to be a reference to their initial acceptance of God's message after they had seen the miracle of the she-camel which drank as much as all their other camels and cattle. However, they reverted to disbelief shortly after this, preferring to remain blind, straying from the path of truth. This is the worst type of blindness. *"Therefore, the thunderbolt of humiliating suffering struck them in consequence of what they had wrought."* (Verse 17) Humiliation is the most fitting outcome for such an attitude. It is not merely a punishment of destruction; it adds the suffering of humiliation.

"And We saved those who believed and were God-fearing." (Verse 18) The round is thus concluded. They should realize by now that nothing can withstand God's power. No one can give or seek protection against Him.

Unusual Witnesses

They have been told of God's power over the universe and mankind. Now the *sūrah* tells them of His power over their own selves. They have no authority over themselves, and no part of them is beyond the reach of His power. Even their ears, eyes and skins obey Him. They too disobey them so as to be witnesses against them on the Day of Judgement.

On the day when God's enemies will be gathered together before the fire, they will be driven onwards until, when they reach it, their ears, their eyes and their very skins will bear witness against them, speaking of what they used to do [on earth]. They will ask their skins: 'Why did you bear witness against us?' To which they will reply: 'God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak. It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return. You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you. Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing. And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost.' If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home; and if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so. (Verses 19–24)

There is a great surprise in this very difficult situation in which they see their own senses and faculties obeying God and doing as they are bid. In this situation they are branded as 'enemies of God'! What fate will God's enemies suffer? They are herded together, from all generations, like a flock of sheep, and driven to the fire. When they stand close to it and the reckoning begins, they find themselves facing witnesses whom they did not reckon with. Their tongues, long used to lie, fabricate falsehood and engage in ridicule are now tied, while their ears, eyes and skins rebel against them obeying their Lord. They report on what they used to consider secret. They used to hide themselves, thinking that God would not see them conceal their intentions and crimes. But they did not try to hide themselves from their own ears, eyes or skins. How could they, when these faculties are part of them? Now, these publicize what the unbelievers thought to be concealed from all creatures and from God Almighty as well.

As God so commands their own organs, they are overwhelmed and respond in complete obedience: "*They will ask their skins: Why did you bear witness against us?*" (Verse 21) They will put the facts clearly before them, attempting to hide nothing: "*To which they will reply: God, who gave speech to all things, has made us speak.*" (Verse 21) It is He who made tongues the organs of speech. He can easily give speech to

other organs. He gave speech to all things, making them speak and explain things as they are. *"It is He who created you in the first instance, and to Him you now return."* (Verse 21) From Him all originate, and to Him all shall return. There is no escape from His authority, neither at the beginning, nor at the end. Their minds used to deny this; now their skins state it to them in an undeniable way.

The remainder of the comments may be a continuation of what their own organs say to them, or equally it may be a comment on this amazing situation: *"You did not try to hide yourselves so that your ears, eyes and skins could not be made to testify against you."* (Verse 22) It never occurred to you that these, your organs, could rebel against you. In fact, you could not have hidden yourselves from your organs even if you had tried. *"Yet you thought that God did not know much of what you were doing."* (Verse 22) Your foolish and ignorant thoughts deceived you, leading you to hell: *"And it is this thought of yours which you entertained about your Lord that brought you to perdition, so that you are now among the lost."* (Verse 23)

We then have the final comment: *"If they resign themselves to patience, the fire will be their home."* (Verse 24) What an absurd situation. Patience now entails enduring the fire. It is no longer the patience that withstands adversity in order to achieve a cherished goal and earn reward from God. It is a sort of patience that incurs the penalty of hell where they abide: *"And if they pray to be allowed to make amends, they will not be allowed to do so."* (Verse 24)

There is no way back, no remonstrance or acknowledgement of error will suffice. It is customary for admissions of error to be coupled with a request for forgiveness, after removing the causes of strained relations. Now, no admission of error is allowed, let alone forgiveness and improved relations.

Control Over Human Souls

The *sūrah* also shows them how God's power extends over their hearts and minds, even when they are still on earth refusing to believe in Him. Since He is fully aware that their hearts have become corrupt, He lets some evil entities, from among both humans and *jinn*, befriend

them and make what is evil seem fair and goodly. Thus, they lead them astray until they join those who ruin themselves and become liable to punishment:

We have assigned to the unbelievers companions who made their past and present seem goodly to them, but the sentence has fallen due upon them together with bygone generations of jinn and humans. They will indeed be lost. (Verse 25)

They are too proud to worship God when they are subject to His power. Their own hearts lead them to ruin and ultimately to God's punishment. God allocates them wicked companions who whisper in their ears, assuring them that all the evil they see around them is good, and who present their own bad deeds to them in a fair appearance so that they do not see how foul these are. Perhaps the worst thing that can happen to man is that he loses his balanced judgement and can no longer see how foul or deviant his actions are. In this way, he perceives everything he does as good and fair. Inevitably, though, this leads him to ruin. When the unbelievers reach this stage, they find themselves among the lost herd of past communities that suffered God's punishment: "*They will indeed be lost.*" (Verse 25)

One aspect of what such wicked companions persuaded them to do was to fight the Qur'ān when they realized how powerful was its argument: "*The unbelievers say: Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand.*" (Verse 26) The elders of the Quraysh in Makkah used to counsel each other to do just this, and they also persuaded the masses to do the same. They realized that they were no match for the Qur'ān, its beauty, power and eloquence: "*Do not listen to this Qur'ān.*" (Verse 26) They claimed that it cast a magical spell over their minds and ruined their lives, causing division between a man and his children or a man and his wife. It is true that the Qur'ān causes such division, but only through God's criterion that separates faith from unfaith, and guidance from going astray. The Qur'ān wins people's hearts so that they no longer value any other bond as they do their bond of faith. Thus, it was known as *al-Furqān*, meaning 'The Criterion'.

"Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand." (Verse 26) Such frivolity is totally unbecoming, yet it was the result of their knowing that they could not combat the Qur'ān with logic or consistent argument. Those who persist in such disbelief can basically do nothing other than drown out the voice of the Qur'ān with their own frivolities. They used to do this in a variety of ways: Mālik ibn al-Naḍr, for example, used to sit and relate accounts of Rustum and other Persian kings in order to impress people so that they would not listen to the Qur'ān, while others used to shout and make noises or recited poetry and rhymes. All this, however, came to nothing while the Qur'ān retained its power because it is the word of the truth, and the truth is overpowering.

In response to their singular remark they are given a stern warning: *"We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a taste of severe suffering; and We shall most certainly requite them according to the worst of their deeds. Such is the requital of the enemies of God: the fire will be their lasting home: a fit requital for their having knowingly rejected Our revelations."* (Verses 27–28) We soon see them suffering in hell and see how the deluded are so angry with the ones who led them astray. They realize now that it was they who led them to their fate when they persuaded them that their foul deeds were fair and goodly. *"The unbelievers say: Our Lord! Show us those jinn and men who have led us astray. We shall trample them under our feet so that they shall be among the lowest of the low."* (Verse 29) They are not merely angry with them; they want to exact revenge: *"We shall trample them under our feet."* What a contrast with their close friendly ties in this present world.

A different type of bond is that which the believers have. These are the ones who take the right path of endeavour to do only what is good. God assigns to them angels to give them reassurance, bring them the good news of their prospects in heaven and to be their guardians, both in the life of this world and the world to come:

As for those who say: 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way, the angels will descend on them, saying: Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your guardians in the life of

this world and in the life to come. There you shall have all that your souls desire, and all that you ask for, as a ready welcome from Him who is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful. (Verses 30–32)

To remain steadfast in pursuing what is entailed by the declaration, 'Our Lord is God,' means to keep it alive in one's conscience, to give proof to it in one's life and to discharge the responsibilities it imposes. This is serious, important and hard work. Therefore, it deserves the abundant grace God grants them: a friendly relation with angels who, as God tells us, reassure the believers with sweet words: "Have no fear, and do not grieve, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your guardians in the life of this world and in the life to come." (Verses 30–31) They also describe heaven to them, knowing that they will have there all that they desire and is pleasing to them. They make it even more inviting and pleasing by saying that it is "a ready welcome from Him who is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful." (Verse 32) It is a gift from God and a place assigned to them through His forgiveness and endless mercy.

What Image for the Advocate of Islam

This part of the *sūrah* concludes by painting an image of the advocate of the Divine faith, describing his personality, discourse and fine manners. God's messenger, and indeed every advocate of God's way, are called on to adopt such ways. The *sūrah* began by describing the hostile attitude of those called upon to accept the faith and how they met this call with arrogance. Now, the advocates of Divine faith are being told what course to follow, regardless of how their advocacy is met and how their efforts are received:

Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God?' Good and evil cannot be equal. Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend. Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune. If

a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (Verses 33–36)

An advocate of the Divine faith must put his addressees face to face with reality. He has to confront people's deviation, ignorance, inflated appreciation of their own deeds, as also their instinctive abhorrence of being told that they are wrong. He is opposed by people's determination to serve their own interests and maintain positions that might be threatened by the principle of equality of all people, which is basic to Divine faith. To face all this as part of the task of advocating Divine faith is indeed very hard. Yet it is something truly great: *"Who speaks better than he who calls people to God, does what is right, and says, 'I am one of those who have surrendered themselves to God?'"* (Verse 33)

Taking all this into account, a word of advocacy, calling on people to believe in God's oneness, is the best word that may be said on earth. It is at the forefront of good words that are raised to God in heaven, provided it is endorsed by good action and confirmed with self-surrender to Him. Thus, such advocacy becomes pure and sincere, free of self-interest. The advocate's aim is merely to discharge his duty by presenting the Divine message. Once he has discharged his duty, he should not care whether his words are rejected or whether people are rude or boastful in their denials. He is merely presenting what is good, which puts him in the higher position. Anyone who opposes him entertains evil, and, as such, is far below an advocate of God: *"Good and evil cannot be equal."* (Verse 34) Advocates of the Divine message cannot return evil with its like. A good deed cannot be equal in its impact or value to a bad one. Patient perseverance, forbearance and rising above the desire to return evil with its like eventually brings people back to their senses. Their earlier hardness softens and they become friendly: *"Repel evil with what is better, and he who is your enemy will become as close to you as a true friend."* (Verse 34)

This rule proves true in the overwhelming majority of cases: a stormy attitude will be replaced by calmness, fury by cordiality and arrogance by humility. All this may result from a good word, a soft tone and a smile to meet the fury of one whose anger gets the better of him. Had

such a person been met with a similarly furious approach, he would only be more quarrelsome and completely lose his self control.

Such a forbearing attitude requires a great heart, one that can forgive when it might otherwise return evil with its like. Such ability is necessary for forbearance to be effective. Otherwise, forbearance may be thought a mark of weakness. If the party resorting to evil feels that a kindly attitude results from weakness, he will not respect it. Indeed, kindness will not have any effect on the matter. Moreover, such kindness and forbearance are limited to personal insults and injuries. When the attack is levelled at believers' faith, trying to turn them away from it, then every form of resistance should be employed, or else, we remain patient in adversity until God makes His judgement in the matter.

Such forbearance, which requires us to repel an evil deed with a good one, rising above feelings of anger, is a sublime grade which cannot be attained by everyone. It does not merely require patience in the face of adversity; it is also a blessing which God bestows on His servants who try hard to achieve it: *"Yet none will attain this except those who are patient in adversity; none will attain it except those endowed with truly great fortune."* (Verse 35) We say that it is a sublime grade; in fact it is so sublime that Muhammad, God's messenger, who never showed anger for anything personal, yet nothing could stand to his anger when it was for God's sake, is told, as indeed every advocate of the Divine message is told: *"If a prompting from Satan should stir you up, seek refuge with God. He alone is All-Hearing, All-Knowing."* (Verse 36) Anger may open the way to Satan's prompting who will then try to persuade us to be impatient and unforgiving when others resort to evil. In such a situation, we will do well to seek refuge with God against Satan. This is the best shelter against Satan's efforts to exploit our anger.

God, man's Creator, knows the keys to each and every heart, as well as its abilities and qualities. He knows where and how Satan can penetrate his machinations. Therefore, He protects the advocates of His message from stirred up anger as we face what excites the fury of even the most forbearing of us. Yet this too is a difficult road to follow, requiring that we submit here, as in every situation, to Divine directives, to the exclusion of all else.

No Concealment from God

Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. (37)

If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. (38)

Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things. (39)

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ اللَّيْلُ وَالنَّهَارُ وَالشَّمْسُ
وَالْقَمَرُ لَا تَسْجُدُوا لِلشَّمْسِ وَلَا لِلْقَمَرِ
وَأَسْجُدُوا لِلَّهِ الَّذِي خَلَقَهُنَّ إِن
كُنْتُمْ إِيَّاهُ تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

فَإِنْ أَسْتَكْبَرُوا فَالَّذِينَ عِنْدَ
رَبِّكَ يُسَبِّحُونَ لَهُ بِاللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ
وَهُمْ لَا يَسْأَمُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ تَرَى الْأَرْضَ خَاشِعَةً
فَإِذَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْهَا الْمَاءَ اهْتَزَّتْ وَرَبَتْ
إِنَّ الَّذِي أَحْيَاهَا لَمُحْيِي الْمَوْتِ إِنَّهُ
عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٣٩﴾

Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He sees all that you do. (40)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُلْحِدُونَ فِي آيَاتِنَا لَا يَخْفَوْنَ عَلَيْنَا أَفَمَنْ يُلْقَى فِي النَّارِ خَيْرٌ أَمْ مَنْ يَأْتِي آمِنًا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَعْمَلُوا مَا شِئْتُمْ إِنَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'an] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a sublime book; (41)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِالذِّكْرِ لَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ وَإِنَّهُ لَكِتَابٌ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٤١﴾

no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. (42)

لَا يَأْتِيهِ الْبُطْلُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَلَا مِنْ خَلْفِهِ تَنْزِيلٌ مِنْ حَكِيمٍ حَمِيدٍ ﴿٤٢﴾

Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. (43)

مَا يُقَالُ لَكَ إِلَّا مَا قَدْ قِيلَ لِلرُّسُلِ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لَذُو مَغْفِرٍ وَذُو عِقَابٍ أَلِيمٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in

وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْءَانًا عَجَمِيًّا لَقَالُوا لَوْلَا فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ أَفَعْجَمِيٌّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ قُلْ هُوَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا هُدًى وَشِفَاءٌ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ فِي آذَانِهِمْ

their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away. (44)

وَقَرُّهُ وَهُوَ عَلَيْهِمْ عَمًى أُولَٰئِكَ
يُنَادُونَ مِنْ مَّكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

We gave the Book to Moses but disputes arose about it. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, all would have been decided between them. As it is, they are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (45)

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ فَاخْتَلَفَ
فِيهِ وَلَوْ لَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِنْ
رَبِّكَ لَفُضِّ بَيْنَهُمْ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَفِي
شَكٍّ مِنْهُ مُرِيبٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

Whoever does what is right does so for his own good; and whoever does evil will himself bear its consequences. Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures. (46)

مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ
أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ
لِّلْعَمِيدِ ﴿٤٦﴾

Knowledge of the Last Hour belongs to Him alone. No fruit comes out of its calyx and no female ever conceives or gives birth, without His knowledge. And so, on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.' (47)

إِلَيْهِ يُرْدُّ عِلْمُ السَّاعَةِ وَمَا تَخْرُجُ مِنْ
تَمْرَتٍ مِنْ أَكْثَامِهَا وَمَا تَحْمِلُ
مِنْ أُنْثَى وَلَا تَضَعُ إِلَّا بِعِلْمِهِ وَيَوْمَ
يُنَادِيهِمْ أَتَيْنَ شُرَكَاءُكُمْ قَالُوا
أَذُنْكَ مَا مِثْلُ شَيْءٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

Whatever they used to invoke before will have forsaken them; and they will know that there is no escape for them. (48)

وَضَلَّ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَدْعُونَ مِنْ قَبْلُ
وَتَطْنُوا أَمْلَهُمْ مِنَ النَّجْصِ ﴿٤٨﴾

Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. (49)

Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. (50)

When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer. (51)

Say: 'Have you ever thought if this be truly a revelation from God and yet you deny it? Who could be more astray than one who places himself so far in the wrong?' (52)

لَا يَسْتَمُ الْإِنْسَانُ مِنْ دُعَاءِ الْخَيْرِ وَإِنْ
مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ فَيَئُوسٌ قَنُوطٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

وَلَئِنْ أَذَقْتَهُ رَحْمَةً مِنَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ
ضَرْأَةٍ مَسَّتْهُ لَيَقُولَنَّ هَذَا إِلَى
وَمَا أَظُنُّ السَّاعَةَ قَائِمَةً وَلَئِنْ
رُجِعْتُ إِلَى رَبِّي إِنَّ لِي عِنْدَهُ
لَلْحُسْطَىٰ فَلَنُنَبِّئَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا
بِمَا عَمِلُوا وَلَنُذِيقَنَّهُمْ مِنَ
عَذَابٍ غَلِيظٍ ﴿٥١﴾

وَإِذَا أَنْعَمْنَا عَلَى الْإِنْسَانِ أَعْرَضَ
وَنَسَىٰ بِمَا أَنعَمْنَا عَلَيْهِ وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ
فَذُودٌ عَكَوْءٍ عَرِيضٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ كَانَ مِنَ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ
نُفٌّ كَفَرْتُمْ بِهِ مَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنْ هُوَ
فِي شِقَاقِ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٥٣﴾

We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? (53)

سَرِّبَهُمْ اَيَّتَنَانِي الْاَفَاقِ وَفِي
اَنْفُسِهِمْ حَقِّي يَبَيِّنْ لَهُمْ اَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ
اَوَلَمْ يَكْفِ بِرَبِّكَ اَنَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ
شَهِيدٌ ﴿٥٣﴾

They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything. (54)

اَلَا اِنَّهُمْ فِي مَرِيبَةٍ مِّنْ لِّقَاءِ رَبِّهِمْ
اَلَا اِنَّهُمْ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ مُّحِيطٌ ﴿٥٤﴾

Overview

This new part of the *sūrah* addresses human hearts. It starts with a round highlighting some of God's signs in the universe, such as the night and day, sun and moon. Some of the idolaters used to prostrate themselves before the sun and the moon alongside God, when they too are no more than His creatures. They are told that if they are too proud to worship God, there are others who worship Him and are closer to Him than they. Indeed the whole earth stands in a position of worship as it receives its life from God, just as they do but who nevertheless do not use this opportunity to move closer to God. On the contrary, they deny God's universal signs as they dispute His Qur'anic revelations, when the Qur'ān is expressed in clear Arabic, free of any non-Arabic influence. This round then presents before them a scene from the Day of Resurrection and shows them their own reality with all its weakness, changing moods and forgerfulness, eagerness to grab good things, and panicking when it is touched by harm. Nevertheless, they do not try to protect themselves from the harm that God may inflict on them. The *sūrah* ends with a promise from God that He will reveal to them His signs in the universe and within themselves

until they realize that He is the truth, removing all that remains of doubt in their hearts.

Clear Universal Signs

Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. (Verse 37)

These signs are there for all to see, and they have a direct effect on the human heart, even though we may not have any scientific information about them. Their relation with man is more profound than scientific knowledge because it is based on the fact that we share with them a common origin, nature and make-up. They belong to us and we belong to them: our constituting elements, nature, law and our Maker who created us all. Therefore, we warm to them and understand the message they impart to us. Therefore, the Qur'an often directs our attention to them, without delving any deeper. It only wants us not to overlook them as a result of either long familiarity with them or other barriers. The Qur'an removes these so as to make us alert to and interact with the messages given by this friendly universe.

The verse also points to a particular aspect of deviation. Some people exaggerated the importance of the sun and the moon, and thus deviated from the truth. They worshipped them in the hope of drawing nearer to God through worshipping the most beautiful of His creatures. The Qur'an puts them back on track, removing their confusion and saying to them that if they want to worship God they must not prostrate themselves before the sun and the moon. Instead, they must prostrate themselves before God who created them. It is the Creator alone whom they, and all creatures, should worship.

If they persist in their arrogance, it will make no difference. Others offer worship to God in all humility: *"If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that."* (Verse 38) The first creatures we think of as being referred to by the expression, 'those who are with your Lord,' are the angels.

However, there may be other creatures close to God and about whom we know only very little.

Those creatures who are with your Lord are more noble and honourable than humans for they do not show any arrogance like those earth dwellers who have gone astray. Nor do they allow the fact that they are close to God to go to their heads. They do not stop glorifying Him day and night. They never grow weary of this. What is the significance, then, when some people living on earth take a different stand from the rest of all creatures, and refuse to submit themselves to God?

The earth, their mother from which they originate and to which they return, stands humble before God as it receives life from His hand. On the surface of the earth they are no more like ants; and from the earth they derive all their food and drink. This earth, however, presents a different attitude from theirs: *"Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]. He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things."* (Verse 39)

We need to reflect a little on the precision of the expression used here. In the Arabic original, the word *khāshi'ah*, translated here as 'lying desolate', is used. The term connotes a humble and attentive attitude, but it means here that it is motionless before rain falls on it. When rain is sent upon it, it stirs and swells. It is as if this is a movement expressing gratitude for giving it the means to support life. The context in which this verse occurs is one of attentive worship and humble glorification of God. The earth is mentioned here as one of the figures in the scene, expressing a suitable feeling and making a suitable movement.

We should refer here to one aspect of the Qur'ānic style, comparing word usage:

The image of how the earth looks before rainfall and the appearance of shoots is used twice in the Qur'ān. In the first instance, the earth is described as *hāmidah* which means 'dry and barren', while in this instance it is described as *khāshi'ah* which means 'lying desolate'. Some people may think that this is mere

variation which writers normally use. It is far more than this. Let us look at the context in which each description is used.

The first description, *hāmidah*, occurs in the following verse: *"Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom."* (22: 5)

Khāshi'ah, has a totally different context: *"Among His signs are the night and the day, and the sun and the moon. Do not prostrate yourselves before the sun or the moon; but prostrate yourselves before God, who has created them, if it is Him you really worship. If the unbelievers are too arrogant, those who are with your Lord glorify Him night and day and never grow weary of that. Another of His signs is this: you see the earth lying desolate, but when We send down rain water upon it, it stirs and swells [with life]."* (Verses 37–39)

A quick reflection is enough to show how each of these two adjectives fits perfectly in its context. In the first instance, the long verse speaks about creation and resurrection. It is most fitting that the earth should be shown as dry and barren before it stirs and swells, putting forth each blooming and radiant plant. In the second instance, the whole ambiance is one of worship and prostration before God. Hence the description of the earth as desolate, and then when water falls it stirs and swells. We also note that the image of sprouting different plants is not added in the second case because it does not fit in the context of worship. The stirring and swelling in the second case has a different purpose from that in the first case. Here, they merely give an image of the earth's movement after it has lain desolate. Everything in the scene described here is making the movement involved in worship.

Hence, it does not fit that the earth should remain motionless. It stirs and swells, sharing in the movement of other worshippers. Thus, not a single detail in the scene remains fixed while all others are in motion. This sort of harmony is superior to anything we know of literary expression.⁶

The comment at the end of the verse refers to bringing the dead back to life, citing the earth as an example: "*He who brings it to life will surely give life to the dead. He has power over all things.*" (Verse 39) This image is frequently used in the Qur'ān as an example of how the dead are resurrected on the Day of Judgement. Indeed, the reviving of the earth points to the facts of resurrection and God's limitless power. The image of the earth stirring with life is close to our hearts, touching them before it addresses our minds. Moreover, when life springs in what is dead it gives a subtle feeling of the power behind it. The Qur'ān addresses human nature in its own language, using the shortest way.

How to Describe Unfaith

Against this backdrop of universal signs, the *sūrah* condemns and warns those who deny God's signs and dispute His revelations:

Those who distort the meaning of Our revelations are not hidden from Us. Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day? Do what you will; He sees all that you do. (Verse 40)

The warning begins in an implicit but fearful way, stating that such people "*are not hidden from Us.*" God is fully aware of them. They will have to account for what they perpetrate, no matter how they try to distort meanings or resort to deception. They may think that they can escape God's punishment in the same way as their deception spared them accountability before human authority. However, the warning is then

6. Quṭb, Sayyid, *Al-Taḥwīr al-Fannī fī al-Qur'ān*, fourth edition, Cairo, (n.d.), pp. 89–100.

stated clearly: "Who is in a better state: he who is cast into the fire, or he who shall come safe on Resurrection Day?" (Verse 40) This puts before them the prospect that lies ahead. It is they who will be cast in the fire, in contrast with the believers who will be safe on the Day of Resurrection. The verse concludes with another implicit warning: "Do what you will; He sees all that you do." (Verse 40) Terrible indeed is the fate of the one who is given the freedom to do what he wills and who distorts the meaning of God's revelations when God sees all that he does.

The *sūrah* then speaks about those who specifically deny the Qur'ānic revelations, describing the Qur'ān as a sublime book, admitting no falsehood:

Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ... It is indeed a sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise. Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment. Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?' Say: 'This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it.' They are, as it were, being called to from too far away. (Verses 41-44)

The *sūrah* refers to those who reject the Qur'ān when it comes to them, but does not mention their status or what will happen to them. The sentence is left without a predicate: "Those who reject this reminder [i.e. the Qur'ān] when it comes to them ..." It is a case of saying that such people do something so horrible that it cannot be properly described. The *sūrah* simply mentions them and moves on to describe the reminder which they reject; thus showing their action in its true and ghastly colours: "It is indeed a sublime book; no falsehood can ever touch it openly or in a stealthy manner. It is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise." (Verses 41-42)

How could falsehood touch or creep into this book when it comes from God who is the truth absolute? It is a book which clearly presents the word of truth, one that is permanently linked to the truth that ensures the proper conduct of the affairs of the universe. How could falsehood come into it when it is a sublime book, given protection by God who undertakes to keep it intact: *"It is We Ourselves who have bestowed this reminder from on high, and it is We who shall preserve it intact."* (15: 9)

Anyone who looks carefully at the Qur'ān will find in it the truth it has come to establish. We find this truth in its spirit and its text: it is simple, natural, reassuring, and addresses human nature in its totality with profound effect. Moreover, *"it is bestowed from on high by One who is wise, worthy of praise."* (Verse 42) Wisdom is clearly apparent in its structure, directives, the way it was revealed, and in its direct address to the human heart. God who revealed the Qur'ān is worthy of praise. There is in the Qur'ān much that makes our hearts eager to express its praise of God.

The *sūrah* then establishes a bond between the Qur'ān and earlier revelations, and between the Prophet Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), and all messengers sent before his time. Thus, all prophets belong to one family which receives the same discourse from God. Their hearts and souls look up to Him as they pursue their course advocating His message. Thus, the last in this family, the Prophet of Islam, feels that he is a branch of a great tree with deep roots, a member of a great family that goes back to the beginnings of history.

"Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time. Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment." (Verse 43) It is all one message and one faith. Likewise, it is received in the same way: the same rejection and the same objections. Yet it establishes one bond, making one family which endures the same experience and feels the same pain. Ultimately, it follows the same way, leading to the same goal.

How comforting this fact is to advocates of the Divine message. It strengthens their resolve to continue along the same way that was traversed before them by God's noble messengers, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and the others, (peace be upon them all). How honoured and confident the advocates of God's message feel

knowing that they follow in the footsteps of such a select group. Such a feeling motivates them to go along, caring little for the difficulties and hardships they meet on the way.

It is certainly true: *"Nothing is being said to you other than what was said to the messengers sent before your time."* (Verse 43) The impact this fact can have when it becomes firmly established in the minds of believers is truly profound.

Included in what was said to God's messengers, and to Muḥammad (peace be upon him), the last among them, was: *"Your Lord is the Lord of forgiveness, but He also inflicts painful punishment."* (Verse 43) Thus balance is emphasized. A believer then hopes for God's grace and forgiveness, never despairing that these will be bestowed on him by God's will, but always fearing to incur God's punishment. Striking the right balance is an essential characteristic of Islam.

The *sūrah* then reminds the Arabs of God's blessing by making Arabic the language of the Qur'ān. At the same time, it refers to their contentious disputes and rejection. *"Had We willed to make this revelation a discourse in a non-Arabic tongue, they would have said: 'If only its verses were clearly spelled out! Why [a message in] a non-Arabic tongue and an Arab [messenger]?'"* (Verse 44) They do not listen to it in its Arabic form. In fact, they feared it because it addressed their Arab nature in their own language. Hence, they urged each other to adopt this strategy: *"Do not listen to this Qur'ān, but drown it in frivolous talk, so that you may gain the upper hand."* (Verse 26) Had God expressed His message in a different tongue, they would still have objected to it, calling for it to be put clearly in Arabic. They would object even if part of it were in Arabic and the other part in a different language. Their notion, therefore, was to argue in all cases and all situations.

The truth that emerges from this argument about the form given to the message is that this book provides guidance and healing to believers. Believers' hearts appreciate its nature and truth, receive its guidance and benefit from its healing. Those who do not believe remain in confusion, and their hearts do not feel the cheerfulness of its message. Hence, it becomes like deafness to their ears and blindness in their eyes. They recognize nothing, because they are far removed from the

nature of this book and its address: *"Say: This is guidance and healing for all those who believe; but as for the unbelievers: there is deafness in their ears, and they are blind to it. They are, as it were, being called to from too far away."* (Verse 44)

We feel the truth of this statement in every community and generation. Some people are profoundly affected by the Qur'ān. It transforms them, giving them a different type of life, and enables them to achieve miracles within themselves and in their environment. Others feel this Qur'ān too heavy for their hearts and ears. When they listen to it, they only grow more deaf and blind. The Qur'ān never changes; it is hearts that are different.

A reference follows to Moses and his book, and how his people differed in their attitude to the Qur'ān. God has deferred His judgement on their disputes. He has decreed that judgement on all this will be given on the Day of Judgement: *"We gave the Book to Moses but disputes arose about it. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, all would have been decided between them. As it is, they are in grave, disquieting doubt about it."* (Verse 45) Likewise, He has decreed that judgement on the question of His final message will be similarly deferred. He thus lets people do as they like, and they will ultimately receive what their action merits: *"Whoever does what is right does so for his own good; and whoever does evil will himself bear its consequences. Your Lord is never unjust to His creatures."* (Verse 46)

This message proclaims that mankind have attained maturity. This makes man responsible for his choices. Such responsibility is based on individual accountability. Therefore, each one is free to choose, knowing that *"your Lord is never unjust to His creatures."*

Man's Vacillating Attitude

As judgement is deferred to the Day of Judgement, the *sūrah* makes clear that knowledge of its timing belongs to God alone. God's knowledge is described by highlighting some of its aspects in an inspiring way. This serves as a prelude to a scene from the Day of Judgement when unbelievers are questioned, and their answers are reported:

Knowledge of the Last Hour belongs to Him alone. No fruit comes out of its calyx and no female ever conceives or gives birth, without His knowledge. And so, on the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?' They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.' (Verse 47)

The timing of the Last Hour signalling the Day of Judgement is beyond anyone's ken; the fruit in its calyx is something that cannot be seen; and what a pregnant female is bearing is similarly concealed. Yet they are all within God's knowledge. Our mind looks far and wide, trying to think of the fruits when they are still in calyxes and embryos in their wombs. Who can think of their count, let alone what they actually are. An image is thus drawn of the extent of God's knowledge, to the extent our mental capacity allows. Yet His knowledge extends far beyond this, as it is without limit.

Our mind then imagines those who have gone astray, as they stand before God, realizing that His knowledge encompasses everything, no matter how well concealed it is. They face the questioning: "*On the Day when He shall call out to them, 'Where now are those alleged partners of Mine?'*" On that day, no argument is of any use. No one can utter anything but the truth. What will they say then: "*They will say, 'We confess to You that none of us can vouch for them.'*" (Verse 47) They will declare that none of them will then claim any partners to God.

"*Whatever they used to invoke before will have forsaken them; and they will know that there is no escape for them.*" (Verse 48) They will know nothing of their previous claims. They will realize that there is no escape from their fate. They will forget their past and think only of their present situation.

Such is the day about which they take no precautions despite the fact that man is eager to achieve every good thing and fears what brings him harm. At this point, the *sūrah* shows them their naked reality, without cover or disguise:

Man never tires of asking for good [things], but if evil fortune touches him, he abandons all hope, sinking into despair. Yet whenever We let him taste some of Our grace after hardship has

befallen him, he is sure to say, 'This is but my due!' and, 'I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come; but even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him.' We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering. When we bestow Our blessings on man, he tends to turn aside and stay aloof; but as soon as evil touches him, he turns to prolonged prayer. (Verses 49–51)

Man is so insistent in his requests, urging and repeating, appealing for what he feels to be good for him. Indeed, he never tires of this. Yet should misfortune befall him, even in the slightest way, he loses hope and sinks into despair. He feels his burden too heavy, thinks that God's grace has abandoned him. All this comes about because his relationship with God is not strong enough in his heart.

Yet should God grant him something of His grace after he has suffered some harm, he will be so elated that he will forget how this grace was given to him, and he will not give due thanks. On the contrary, he will consider that he has deserved this grace and that he should have it forever. He will even dismiss the Day of Judgement thinking that it will never come: *"I do not think that the Last Hour will ever come."* (Verse 50) He will boast of his own position, thinking that he deserves favouritism with God. He will even go further than this, denying the Day of Judgement and, thus, disbelieving in God. Nevertheless, he thinks that should he be returned to God, he will have a secure position with Him: *"Even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, the best reward awaits me with Him."* (Verse 50) This betrays no small degree of arrogance. Here the *sūrah* issues a suitable warning to those who are so arrogant: *"We shall most certainly give the unbelievers a full account of what they did, and We shall most certainly give them a taste of severe suffering."* (Verse 50)

Man is always moving to extremes. If God bestows His grace on him, he blows his own trumpet and behaves with arrogance. When harm or misfortune befalls him, he sinks low and collapses. He will pray insistently, prolonging his prayer. How accurate this description of man's inner thoughts is! No wonder; it is a description by God who

created man and knows the subtle workings of his mind. He knows that man will continue to follow round and circular ways, unless he is guided to the right path.

Now that they face their own naked reality, the question is put to them about what they would do if it is proven that the message they deny is actually God's own message? Are they really prepared to expose themselves to the consequences of such rejection: "Say: 'Have you ever thought if this be truly a revelation from God and yet you deny it? Who could be more astray than one who places himself so far in the wrong?'" (Verse 52) It is a possibility to be reckoned with. Have they taken any steps to deal with this should it come true?

Signs Galore

They are left to think and consider. The *sūrah* now turns to the open universe, revealing some of the signs placed in it, as well as some of what is within their own selves:

We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything? They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord. Most certainly, He encompasses everything.
(Verses 53–54)

This is the final note in the *sūrah*, and it is a profound one. It is a promise by God to mankind to put before them some of the secrets in the universe and some of the secrets working within themselves. These are His signs. They will thus be able to realize that this faith, this book and its discourse are the truth. Indeed it is, for it is all from God, and whose word is truer than God's? And God's promise has certainly come true. Over the fourteen centuries that followed this promise He has made many of His signs in the universe and within man known to us, and He continues to show us more of these every day.

When we look around us we see that man has discovered much since then. Wide horizons have opened before us, as well as much of

what was unknown about man. If people would only reflect on how they came to know these and show gratitude for this, they would have ensured great benefit. They now know that the earth, which people used to imagine as the centre of the universe, is no more than a small satellite of the sun, and that the sun is merely a small circle of which the universe contains millions and millions. They also know the nature of their earth and sun, as well as the nature of the universe, if their modern information is true.

People now know much about the matter of which the universe is made, if it is true that it is made of matter. They know that the atom is the basic unit of which the universe is made, and that the atom can be transformed into radiation. They thus know that the whole universe is made of radiation that takes many different forms, making a great variety of shapes and sizes. We have also come to know much about our planet, learning that it is round in shape, like a circle or close to a circle, and that it rotates on its axis and moves in orbit around the sun. We have learnt about all its continents, oceans and rivers, and discovered what was previously unknown to us of what is below its surface. Moreover, we now know much of the provisions placed inside it and in its atmosphere.

Man has also learnt much about the laws that link his planet with the great universe and which operate within the universe as a whole conducting its affairs. Some people have gone further, moving from knowledge of these laws to knowledge of the One who created them. Others have remained stationary, looking at what has become known without moving forward. Although scientific advancement led mankind first to go astray, it has begun now to return, through scientific advancement, realizing that God is the truth absolute.

New knowledge about man is in no way less spectacular than that about the universe. We have learnt much about the human body: its characteristics, make-up, physiology, the food it needs and what it makes of it, the illnesses affecting it, how the body works and the functions of its different organs. These discoveries put before us real miracles that can only be the work of God. We have also learnt something about the human soul. Our new knowledge does not compare with what we learnt about the human body, because our study

and research have concentrated far more on the physical rather than the mental and spiritual in man's life. Yet what we have learnt so far heralds great discoveries in this field as well.⁷

Yet man has not reached the end of the road. God's promise remains true and valid: "*We shall show them Our signs in the wide horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear to them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth.*" (Verse 53) Early signs of the fulfilment of the last part of this promise have come to be noticed since the early years of the twentieth century. People are flocking from different parts of the world to join the camp of faith. Many are coming forward through material science. Numerous others are coming from far away, despite the great tide of atheism that almost drowned the earth in the past. This tide of atheism is now on the retreat, although to all appearances it seems still to be rising. By the close of this twentieth century it may almost have disappeared, by God's will.⁸ For, God's promise will certainly come true: "*Is it not enough that your Lord is witness to everything?*" (Verse 53) It is He who has made this promise, and it is He who knows the truth and is witness to it.

"*They are certainly in doubt as to whether they will meet their Lord.*" (Verse 54) It is because of their doubt that they will meet their Lord that people continue to perpetrate what they do. Yet the promise is true, no doubt. "*Most certainly, He encompasses everything.*" (Verse 54) How can they escape meeting Him when He encompasses all?



7. The author wrote this nearly 50 years ago, and his prediction has come true. Research in mental health has made great advancements, but scientists in this field assure us that we are still at the beginning and there are bound to be more spectacular discoveries. – Editor's note.

8. The author here was over optimistic, but it is such optimism and trust in the fulfilment of God's promise that continues to motivate advocates of the Divine faith despite the great obstacles in their way. – Editor's note.

SŪRAH 42

Al-Shūrā

(Consultation)

Prologue

Like all the *sūrah*s revealed in Makkah, this *sūrah* deals with the issue of faith, but it especially focuses on the question of revelation and the Divine message. It can truly be said that this question provides the central theme of the *sūrah* and that all points discussed in it serve this purpose.

Yet the *sūrah* also expands on the truth of God's oneness, presenting it from different angles. It also speaks of the truth of resurrection and the need to believe in it. The life to come is mentioned in several places with different images of it presented. The *sūrah* also outlines some of the believers' qualities and the good manners characterizing their behaviour. It also mentions man's provisions and how they are given in plenty or in scant measure. Furthermore, it speaks about man and his two states when he enjoys happiness or suffers hardship.

Nevertheless, the question of revelation and the Divine message provides the basic truth the *sūrah* expounds upon, giving it its general ambiance. It is as if all the points and ideas discussed in the *sūrah* are meant to emphasize this truth and drive it home.

The line the *sūrah* takes in presenting this truth and its associated topics requires further discussion. It is presented in different ways, each separated from the other with a few verses that speak about God's

oneness through showing that the Creator, or the Provider, or who controls hearts, or determines all creatures' fates is the One God. As the *sūrah* tackles its main theme of revelation and message, it emphasizes that the source of all revelation is one, as also are the message, the faith, the code of living and the line to be followed. Similarly, the leadership of humanity under the banner of faith is one. Thus the theme of oneness, with all its meanings and connotations, is brought into sharp relief throughout the *sūrah*, whatever topic it may be discussing. We will now briefly refer to some such examples:

The *sūrah* begins with five separate letters: "Hā. Mīm. 'Ayn. Sīn. Qāf." These are immediately followed by the statement: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It, thus, begins by stating that all revelations, throughout all generations, come from the same source. Further attributes of God are added in the next verse: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) These attributes highlight the fact that the heavens and the earth belong to one owner, and that He is the Supreme One.

The *sūrah* then takes another line, describing how the universe stands with regard to the question of belief in the One Owner, and to the deviation leading some people to associate partners with Him: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verses 5–6) We thus see the whole universe preoccupied with the question of faith and unbelief to the extent that the heavens are about to be rent asunder because of the deviation by some earth dwellers. For their part, the angels pray for the forgiveness of all those on earth specifically because of the grave offence perpetrated by some of them.

The *sūrah* then returns to its main theme: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall*

be in paradise and some in the blazing fire." (Verse 7) It moves on with the two groups and their different abodes to state that God could have made them all one community. However, His will has decreed on the basis of His knowledge and wisdom that some are admitted to His grace, *"whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them."* (Verse 8) It further states that God is the Protector of all, and that *"He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things."* (Verse 9)

Again the *sūrah* returns to the central theme of the truth of revelation and message, stating that judgement on all matters that are subject to dispute between people belongs to God who has revealed the Qur'ān to which people must refer in all situations: *"Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn."* (Verse 10) It then proceeds from God's Lordship to His being the One Creator who alone administers everything in the universe, determines provisions and knows all: *"He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything."* (Verses 11–12)

Having made these points, the *sūrah* immediately returns to its central theme: *"In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been*

commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high...' (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* follows this pattern in presenting the truth of revelation and message, maintaining this ambiance while turning to address other issues of faith which, in turn, endorse that truth. This pattern is abundantly clear in the first part of the *sūrah*, up to and including verse 24, in which the theme of revelation and message is encountered time after time.

The second part, taking up the rest of the *sūrah*, begins with a discussion of God's signs that are seen in the way He gives some people abundant provision while others receive small measure, how He sends rainfall, the creation of the heavens and the earth with all creatures therein, and ships that traverse the sea. It then moves on to outline the basic quality that distinguishes believers and their community. This is followed by an image of the Day of Judgement showing the wrongdoers as they face their punishment: *"you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance."* (Verses 44–45) By contrast, the believers will be in a dignified position, stating the fate that the wrongdoers face: *"The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering."* (Verse 45) Against this backdrop, the *sūrah* calls on people to spare themselves such an end before it is too late: *"Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins."* (Verse 47) Then the *sūrah* reverts to its central theme, the truth of revelation and message, highlighting one of its many aspects: *"If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]."* (Verse 48)

The *sūrah* continues to refer to its central theme, directly and indirectly, up to its end and moves after each reference to address other ideas relating to it. Its conclusion provides the following statement regarding revelation and message: *"Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our*

servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return." (Verses 52–53)

One of the clear objectives of the *sūrah* emerges from the way it tackles its central theme and how it proceeds, time after time, to refer to related issues. This objective is nothing less than to appoint a new leadership for the advocates of Divine faith. This new leadership is in fact this final message, the messenger delivering it and the Muslim community that follows the straight course defined by God. The first reference to this objective is made at the outset: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) It thus makes it clear that it is God who reveals all messages to all messengers. This final message is a clear progression of something that has long been established.

The second reference follows shortly after that to establish the centre of the new leadership to which reference will be later made: "*So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The third reference states the unity of the message whereas the first reference identified the unity of its source: "*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muhammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.*" (Verse 13) In this third reference, the *sūrah* clearly states that division occurred because people disobeyed God's injunction. This did not come about as a result of any ignorance on the part of the followers of those noble messengers; they had the knowledge to spare them such division. It simply occurred as a result of injustice and envy: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them.*" (Verse 14) The *sūrah* then moves on to describe the conditions of those who came after the generations that differed: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

At this point it becomes abundantly clear that humanity had sunk into a state of confusion and doubt. It no longer had a wise leadership following a well-defined code. The Divine message that assumes the

leadership of humanity suffered from the division that took place between its followers, while succeeding generations viewed it with profound suspicion, thereby precluding the emergence of wise leadership. The *sūrah* therefore declares that this final message and the messenger delivering it are to assume the role of leadership: *"Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord.'"* (Verse 15) Thus the detailed description of the Muslim community, which occurs in the second part of the *sūrah*, comes as a natural progression, because it is this community that will assume the leadership of humanity.



I

A Message Revealed by God

Al-Shūrā (Consultation)

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

Hā. Mīm. (1)

'Ayn. Sīn. Qāf. (2)

Thus has God, the Almighty, the
Wise, sent revelation to you,
Prophet, and to those who
preceded you. (3)

His is all that is in the heavens
and the earth. He is the Most
High, the Supreme One. (4)

The heavens are well-nigh rent
asunder from above as the angels
extol their Lord's limitless glory



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

حَمْدٌ (1)

عَسَقٌ (2)

كَذَلِكَ يُوحِي إِلَيْكَ وَإِلَى الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ
اللَّهُ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ (3)

لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَهُوَ
الْعَلِيُّ الْعَظِيمُ (4)

تَكَادُ السَّمَوَاتُ يَتَفَطَّرْنَ مِنْ
فَوْقِهِنَّ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ يُسَبِّحُونَ

and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever Merciful. (5)

As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them. (6)

So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. (7)

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (8)

Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things. (9)

يَحْمَدُ رَبَّهُمْ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِمَنْ
فِي الْأَرْضِ أَلَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ
الرَّحِيمُ ﴿٥﴾

وَالَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ
اللَّهُ حَفِيفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَمَا أَنْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ
بِوَكِيلٍ ﴿٦﴾

وَكَذَلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا
لِنُنْذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَى وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا
وَنُنْذِرَ يَوْمَ الْبَعْثِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ فَرِيقٌ
فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ فِي السَّعِيرِ ﴿٧﴾

وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَهُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ
يُدْخِلُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ وَالظَّالِمُونَ
مَا لَهُمْ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٨﴾

أَمْ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ
الْوَكِيلُ وَهُوَ يَحْيِي الْمَوْتَى وَهُوَ عَلَى كُلِّ
شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٩﴾

Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. (10)

وَمَا اخْلَفْتُمْ فِيهِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ فَحُكْمُهُ
إِلَى اللَّهِ ذَٰلِكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبِّي عَلَيْهِ
تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أُنِيبُ ﴿١٠﴾

He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. (11)

فَاطْرُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ جَعَلَ لَكُم
مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَمِنَ الْأَنْعَامِ
أَزْوَاجًا يَذُرُّكُمْ فِيهِ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ
شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ ﴿١١﴾

His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything. (12)

لَهُ مَقَالِيدُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ
إِنَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. (13)

شَرَعَ لَكُم مِّنَ الدِّينِ مَا وَصَّى بِهِ نُوحًا
وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِ
إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَى وَعِيسَى أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ
وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ كَبُرَ عَلَى الْمُشْرِكِينَ
مَا تَدْعُوهُمْ إِلَيْهِ اللَّهُ يَجْتَبِي إِلَيْهِ مَن
يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي إِلَيْهِ مَن يُنِيبُ ﴿١٣﴾

They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. (14)

وَمَا نَفَرَقُوا آلَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمْ الْحُكْمُ
بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةٌ سَبَقَتْ مِنْ
رَبِّكَ إِلَى أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى لَفُضِّ بَيْنَهُمْ
وَالَّذِينَ أُورِثُوا الْكِتَابَ مِنْ
بَعْدِهِمْ لَنْ يَشْكُرُوا مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ ۝١٤

Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.' (15)

فَلِذَلِكَ فَادْعُ وَاسْتَقِمْ كَمَا
أُمِرْتَ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَ هُمْ وَقُلْ ءَامَنْتُ
بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَأُمِرْتُ
لِأَعْدِلَ بَيْنَكُمُ اللَّهُ رَبُّنَا وَرَبُّكُمْ لَنَا
أَعْمَالُنَا وَلَكُمْ أَعْمَالُكُمْ لَا حُجَّةَ
بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمُ اللَّهُ يَجْمَعُ بَيْنَنَا وَإِلَيْهِ
الْمَصِيرُ ۝١٥

As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord's sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them. (16)

وَالَّذِينَ يُحَاجُّونَ فِي اللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ
مَا اسْتُجِيبَ لَهُمْ جَحِشُهُمْ دَاخِضَةٌ
عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ وَعَلَيْهِمْ غَضَبٌ وَلَهُمْ
عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ۝١٦

It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. (17)

Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. (18)

God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. (19)

To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come. (20)

Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. (21)

اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ
وَالْعِزَّانُ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّ
السَّاعَةَ قَرِيبٌ ﴿١٧﴾

يَسْتَعْجِلُ بِهَا الَّذِينَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ
بِهَا وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مُشْفِقُونَ
مِنْهَا وَيَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهَا الْحَقُّ أَلَا إِنَّ
الَّذِينَ يُمَارِئُونَ فِي السَّاعَةِ لَيَئِي
ضَلَالٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿١٨﴾

اللَّهُ لَطِيفٌ بِعِبَادِهِ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ
وَهُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ ﴿١٩﴾

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ الْآخِرَةِ نَزِدْ
لَهُ فِي حَرْثِهِ وَمَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ حَرْثَ
الدُّنْيَا نُؤْتِهِ مِنْهَا وَمَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ
مِنْ نَصِيبٍ ﴿٢٠﴾

أَمْ لَهُمْ شُرَكَاءُ شَرَعُوا لَهُمْ مِّنَ
الدِّينِ مَا لَمْ يَأْذَنْ بِهِ اللَّهُ وَلَوْ لَا
كَلِمَةُ الْفَصْلِ لَفُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ وَإِنَّ
الظَّالِمِينَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٢١﴾

You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. (22)

تَرَى الظَّالِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ
مِمَّا كَسَبُوا وَهُوَ وَاقِعٌ
بِهِمْ وَالَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ فِي رَوْضَاتِ
الْجَنَّاتِ لَهُمْ مَا يَشَاءُونَ
عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَضْلُ
الْكَبِيرُ ﴿٢٢﴾

It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative. (23)

ذَلِكَ الَّذِي يُبَشِّرُ اللَّهُ عِبَادَهُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا
وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ قُلْ لَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ
أَجْرًا إِلَّا الْمَوَدَّةَ فِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَمَن يَقْرِفْ
حَسَنَةً نَّزِدْ لَهُ فِيهَا حُسْنًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ
شَكُورٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (24)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا فَإِن يَشِإِ
اللَّهُ يَخْتِمْ عَلَىٰ قَلْبِكَ وَيَمْحُ اللَّهُ الْبَاطِلَ
وَيُحْيِي الْحَقَّ بِكَلِمَاتِهِ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ
الصُّدُورِ ﴿٢٤﴾

Angels Praying for Mankind

We talked previously about the separate letters that begin several *sūrah*s. Here we have five of these, followed by the verse saying: "*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*" (Verse 3) Thus, in this way and following this pattern, God sent down His revelations to you and to messengers before you. It is made of words and phrases composed of those letters known to man. People know these words and phrases and grasp their meanings, but they cannot compose anything like it out of the letters they know so well.

At the same time, the unity of revelation is established. This comes from the same source as it is revealed by God, the Almighty, the Wise. Those who receive it are the messengers He sent across different generations. The message revealed is essentially the same, despite the fact that it was given to different recipients at different times. Thus we see the Divine message as a story beginning far back in ancient times, having numerous intertwined episodes, and following the same principles, like a mature tree graced with a large number of branches and firm, deep roots.

When this fact is well established in believers' hearts, they feel that their faith is well-founded, stable and authoritative. They are, thus, strongly attracted to the source of this revelation, who is 'God, the Almighty, the Wise.' They also value the bond between them and the believers who followed such revelations throughout all generations, since the family of believers goes far back in history, and they all turn ultimately to God. How can they abandon the straight path of the Divine message to take other, divergent ways that have unclear beginnings and lead nowhere?

The *sūrah* then adds other attributes belonging to God: "*His is all that is in the heavens and the earth. He is the Most High, the Supreme One.*" (Verse 4) People are often deluded, thinking that they own something of what they have in their hands; it appears to be at their disposal and they use it for their own benefit. Theirs, however, is not true ownership. The true owner is God who creates, brings to life and deals death. He alone can give people whatever He wishes, withhold,

take away or replace what He chooses. He is the One who determines the nature of everything and conducts this in accordance with the law He has chosen. Everything, then, complies with this law and behaves according to it. Every single thing in the universe, thus, belongs to God, who is the sole owner, without partners. He is the '*Most High, the Supreme One*.' His ownership is marked by His supremacy, making everything else appear lowly and inferior.

When this truth is well established in our minds, we know to whom we should turn to request what we wish for good things, provisions and earnings. Since He is the owner of the heavens and the earth, it is He who can decide what to give. Moreover, being '*the Most High, the Supreme*', He does not degrade or demean those who stretch out their hands requesting what they want from Him, as they would feel if they made their requests to other creatures. The *sūrah* then gives us an aspect of the significance of God's sole ownership of the universe and His supremacy. We see this in the heavens that are almost rent asunder, overawed as they are by God's greatness, when they realize that some earth dwellers deviate from the right way. We also see this in the angels' action as they glorify their Lord and pray to Him to forgive those who live on earth: "*The heavens are well-nigh rent asunder from above as the angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth. Surely God is Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*" (Verse 5)

The 'heavens' are those creatures which we see above us wherever we are on earth and of which we know very little. We now know that these heavens include at least one hundred million galaxies, every one of which includes one hundred million stars like our sun which is larger than our earth by at least a million times. These galaxies, which humans have managed to establish with their telescopes, are scattered in space, with large distances between them, amounting to hundreds of thousands of light years. Yet these very heavens are almost rent asunder from above, fearing God, the Supreme, because some people on earth overlook His supremacy which the rest of the universe feels with a clear sense of awe.

"*The angels extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and beg forgiveness for all who are on earth.*" (Verse 5) The angels are creatures

whose obedience to God is absolute. Hence, they should be the most reassured of all creatures. Yet they never cease to extol God's praise because they feel His total supremacy and fear that they may fall short in extolling His glory. By contrast, humans, the earth dwellers, reject and deviate. Hence, the angels fear that God's anger may, thus, be incurred and they begin to pray to Him to forgive the people of earth for the sins they perpetrate. The verse may also refer to the angels praying for the forgiveness of believers, as stated in *Sūrah* 40, the Forgiving One: "*Those who bear the Throne and those around it extol their Lord's limitless glory and praise, and have faith in Him, and pray for the forgiveness of all believers.*" (40: 7) We see here how the angels dread that any act of disobedience is committed on earth, even by believers. They pray to God for forgiveness, knowing that He is surely '*Much-Forgiving, Ever-Merciful.*' (Verse 5)

This opening of the *sūrah* ends with a reference to those who take for themselves protectors other than God, when it has become clear that no one else in the universe can give any protection. In this way, He makes it clear to His messenger that he is not responsible for them. It is God who watches over them and He will deal with them as He likes: "*As for those who take for their protectors beings other than Him, God watches them, and you are not responsible for them.*" (Verse 6)

Those miserable people who seek protection with beings other than God, are like those who clutch nothing but thin air. They hold nothing in their hands. Little as they and their alleged protectors are, they appear to us weak and insignificant as they are subject to God's power. The Prophet, and the believers with him, need not think or worry about them. God will make His own decision about them.

This truth must be well established in the hearts of all believers so that they are reassured, and this whether the unbelievers appear to wield power on earth or not. No matter how arrogant and tyrannical the ones wielding power are, they remain insignificant as long as they do not derive their power from God, and as long as God watches over them and encompasses them with His might. The whole universe around them believes in God and they alone are the ones who deviate, just like an odd beat in a beautiful symphony. From another point of view, the believers are reassured as they learn that they are not held in

any way responsible for anyone who turns away and deviates. Their only task is to give sincere and sound counsel. It is God who ultimately holds people's hearts in His hand. With such reassurance, the believers can continue along their way, caring nothing for the unbelievers and their deviation.

The Mother City

So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. Have they chosen protectors other than Him? God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead; and He has power over all things. (Verses 7–9)

Here we are back with the truth stated at the beginning, with this new aspect of the truth of revelation now closely intertwined. There is a clear link between the separate letters the *sūrah* begins with and the fact that the Qur'ān is revealed in Arabic. These letters constitute part of the Arabic alphabet, and the Qur'ān delivers its message in Arabic, for a particular purpose: "*in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it.*" (Verse 7) The Mother City is Makkah, which is honoured by the presence of God's Sacred House, the first ever built for worship. God has chosen that this Mother City and its surroundings should be the place where His final message is revealed, expressing the Qur'ān in its Arabic tongue, for His particular purpose: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

When we look today, with hindsight, reviewing events and circumstances, studying the line the message has followed to produce its results, we can partly understand God's wisdom behind the choice of this particular spot on earth, at that particular time, to be the base

of the final message addressed to all mankind. Its universal nature was made clear from its early days.

At the advent of this final Divine message, the earth was more or less divided between four empires: the Byzantine Empire, which stretched from Europe over some parts of Asia and Africa; the Persian Empire, which ruled large parts of Asia and some African areas; and also the Indian and Chinese Empires. The latter two were confined to their areas, each having its own faith and limited political relations outside of their territories. This isolation made the first two the real superpowers, which enjoyed far reaching influence over human life and its development. The two Divine religions, Judaism and Christianity, were in one way or another under the influence of these two empires, and were effectively controlled by the then political authorities controlling them. Hence, both religions suffered distortion.

Judaism in particular suffered persecution under the Byzantines at one stage and under the Persians at another. It had practically no power on earth. Several factors contributed to its becoming confined to the Children of Israel, with neither ambition nor desire to attract other communities.

Christianity, on the other hand, was born within the Byzantine Empire which ruled Palestine, Syria and Egypt where Christianity spread secretly. The Byzantine authorities launched a wicked persecution campaign against the Christian faith leading to massacres that claimed the lives of tens of thousands. When this decimation ended with the conversion of a Byzantine emperor to Christianity, he brought with him pagan Byzantine legends and Greek philosophy, which was also pagan in nature. These imparted an alien colour to Christianity, turning it into something totally different from its original Divine revelation. Moreover, political power in Byzantium continued to wield the real authority, allowing religion only a minor influence. In addition, the different Christian schools were at loggerheads with one another, thereby weakening the Church and threatening to engulf the whole empire in acrimony. In turn, this also led to further persecution of those who dissented from the official doctrine. Yet both parties, those who toed the official line and those who dissented from it, deviated from true Christianity.

The Arabian Environment

At this juncture, Islam was revealed. It was a message that aimed to save humanity from the corruption, persecution, immorality and blind ignorance that had spread into all populated areas. It aimed to lead humanity on a way to God, providing light and guidance. Hence, it was necessary that Islam should have power and authority in order to accomplish the great transformation in human life that was required. It was imperative, therefore, that Islam start its operation in a free land, over which none of those empires had any control, so as not to let any power that was alien to its nature influence it. On the contrary, it was necessary that Islam have the power to shape its own domain and to influence its own surroundings. The Arabian Peninsula, especially the Mother City and its neighbouring areas, provided the best place on earth for the emergence of Islam and from where it would start its global march.

There was no established government with laws, legislation, an army, a police force or complete authority in Arabia, ensuring proper control over its population as was the case in the empires we have described. Moreover, Arabia did not have a clear and well-defined religion. Indeed, the opposite was true: in Arabia there was a medley of pagan beliefs. People worshipped a great variety of deities, including angels, *jinn*, stars and idols. Although the Ka'bah and the Quraysh enjoyed some overall religious hegemony in the Arabian Peninsula, this did not constitute a real authority that could mount firm opposition to the new faith. Had it not been for their economic interests and special position, the Quraysh chiefs would not have opposed Islam as solidly as they actually did. They realized how hollow and confused their beliefs were. In this way, then, the loose and weak political and religious systems in Arabia provided the best environment for the emergence of the new Islamic faith, one where it could not be influenced by any real authority alien to its nature.

Moreover, Arabia's unique social make-up provided a measure of protection for this new message. The Arabian system was tribal, where each clan had its weight and position. When Muḥammad (peace be upon him) started preaching Islam, his Hāshimite clan provided him with protection, and the general tribal balance provided him with a

good opportunity to go about his task. Other clans did not wish to fight against the Hāshimite clan realizing that the majority of its people did not follow Muḥammad's faith. Indeed, the clans were very reluctant to assault any individual Muslim who had real clan affiliation. They left the task of punishing such individuals to their own families. Indeed, those weaker elements and slaves who embraced the faith were tortured by their own masters. Therefore, Abū Bakr used to buy such slaves and free them, thus making them immune to such persecution. Needless to say, this situation provided the new faith with a particularly suitable environment to establish itself. Furthermore, the qualities of the Arabs, including their bravery, warm-heartedness, pride and sense of honour stood them in good stead and qualified them to be the bearers of this new message.

At the time, the Arabian Peninsula benefited from a suitably fertile soil to support a general renaissance. It had people with various abilities and potentials ready to serve such a development as and when it started. Experience had been accumulated as a result of trips to the nearest areas within the Byzantine and Persian Empires. The most notable of these trips were the winter one to the south and the summer one to the north. These are mentioned in the Qur'ān: *"For the tradition of the Quraysh, their tradition of travelling in winter and summer. Let them worship the Lord of this House, who provided them with food against hunger, and with security against fear."* (106: 4) Many other circumstances helped to build a great wealth of experience which was coupled with a natural readiness to receive the great task assigned to Arabia, making it the birthplace of God's final message to mankind. When Islam began to be revealed, it made use of this wealth of experience and utilized all latent potential. It was thus able to rap the readily available Arabian resources to serve its message. Perhaps this explains the presence of a large number of great men among the Prophet's Companions such as Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Alī, Ḥamzah, al-'Abbās, Abū 'Ubaydah, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Khālīd ibn al-Walīd, Sa'd ibn Mu'ādh, Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī and many others who warmed to Islam and embraced it. No doubt all these people were able to rise to a far higher standard under Islam, but they had the potential to so rise in the first place.

The Division of Mankind

Thus the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic to warn the Mother City and its surrounding area. When the Arabian Peninsula moved out of ignorance into Islam and became totally Muslim, it carried the banner of Islam, moving with it to the East and to the West. These Muslims presented Islam and the human system based on it to the world, since, by nature, this message is addressed to all humanity. They were the best and most suitable people to advocate it, stemming as it did from the most suitable place for its birth and growth.

It was by God's design that the Prophet lived until Arabia, with all its population, embraced Islam. The land chosen to be the cradle of Islam now permanently adopted the full colours of the new faith. Likewise, the language to express it and deliver it to the world was clearly chosen. Arabic had by that time achieved full maturity so as to be most suitable for delivering God's message to all corners of the world. Had Arabic been a deficient or immature language, it would not have been able to embody the message in the first place, or to deliver it to people outside Arabia. In short, the language, the people and the environment were all the best suited for this great universal event. Thus, wherever we look in our attempt to understand God's purpose, wisdom and choice, we find a long list of positive factors converging together to provide the new message with the conditions most suited for its welcome. This confirms God's statement: "*God knows best whom to entrust with His message.*" (6: 124)

So We have revealed to you a discourse in the Arabic tongue in order that you may warn the Mother City and all who dwell around it; that you may forewarn them of the Day of the Gathering, of which there is no doubt, when some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire. (Verse 7)

The hardest, most fundamental and often repeated warning in the Qur'ān is that concerning the Day of Gathering, when God will gather together all creatures from all generations and places, prior to dividing them into two groups according to what they did during their life on earth, the place where people choose what to do: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7)

Had God so willed, He could have made them all one single community, but He admits to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them. (Verse 8)

God could, if He wished, create people in a different form so as to make their behaviour and actions uniform. Had He done so, their end would have been the same and they would all go either to heaven or to hell. However, in His limitless glory, God created man for a purpose, assigning to him the task of building human life on earth. In order for this task to be accomplished He made it necessary for man to have special qualities distinguishing him from both angels and devils, as also from all types of creation with a nature of singular direction. In this respect, then, He gave man qualities and abilities which make some people lean towards guidance, light and good action, while others lean towards error, darkness and evil action. Each group follows one of these two susceptibilities inherent in human nature, leading them to the end determined for the type of action they choose: "*some shall be in paradise and some in the blazing fire.*" (Verse 7) Thus God will "*admit to His grace whoever He will, whereas the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) His decisions are based on His knowledge of the conditions of both parties and whether they follow guidance and thus deserve His grace or go astray and thus deserve His punishment.

It has already been mentioned that some people take protectors for themselves other than God. Now, the *sūrah* makes it clear that "*the wrongdoers will have no one to protect them and no one to support them.*" (Verse 8) The fact is that their alleged protectors do not exist.

Again, the *sūrah* disapprovingly asks: "*Have they chosen protectors other than Him?*" (Verse 9) It follows this rhetorical question with a statement making it clear that God is the only protector who is able to do everything. His power is clearly seen in the fact that He brings the dead back to life. This is indeed the action which shows His unique power at its most splendid: "*God alone is the Protector of all; He is the One who gives life to the dead.*" (Verse 9) His power is then stated to be total and to extend over all beings, with no limits whatsoever: "*He has power over all things.*" (Verse 9)

Who Judges in Disputes?

The *sūrah* returns to the central issue, identifying the ultimate point of reference in judging any dispute. It is this new revelation from God, containing His judgement. This ensures that changeable personal preferences and fleeting desires cannot influence life under the Divine code that admits no prejudice:

Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God. Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn. He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all. His are the keys of the heavens and the earth. He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills. He has full knowledge of everything. (Verses 10–12)

These verses express a number of facts, but the way these are stated and their sequence and juxtaposition in this short passage is truly remarkable, requiring proper reflection. Upon such reflection, the interlinking between their inner and outer aspects is both subtle and precise. Everything over which dispute arises between people should be judged by God: “*Whatever the subject of your disputes, the final word belongs to God.*” (Verse 10) God has made His judgement clear in this Qur'ān, stating His final word concerning this life and the life to come. He also established the code of living which people should follow in their personal and community lives, in their dealings among themselves, their system of government and their moral values and manners. He has made all this abundantly clear, making the Qur'ān a comprehensive constitution for human life, with a scope that is broader than their own constitutions. Therefore, should dispute arise between them, the right judgement is ready for them, outlined in His revelation delivered to them by His messenger.

When this truth has been established, the verse quotes the Prophet's statement whereby he clearly submits himself and all his affairs to God,

turning to Him in all situations: *"Such is God, my Lord. In Him have I placed my trust, and to Him do I always turn."* (Verse 10) Thus, the Prophet's statement that he turns to God, places all his trust in Him and relies on Him in all situations, occurs at the most suitable point, serving as it does as a comment on the preceding rule. When God's messenger who receives guidance from God declares his attitude in these terms, how can other people refer their disputes to anyone else or place their trust in other beings? Knowing that God is his Lord who provides everything for him and guides him to what is best, the Prophet makes his choice, turning to Him alone. How can others make a different choice?

When this is established in a believer's heart, he sees his way ahead, clearly defined and well enlightened. He does not look for any other way. He is confident, reassured, knowing where to go. He entertains no doubt because he knows that God takes care of him and protects him. Moreover, he attaches a high value to his system which he derives from God's revelations, clear in his mind that no system can be superior to God's word.

A further comment is then made to consolidate this truth: *"He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth. He made mates for you from among yourselves, just as He made mates for animals, so that you will multiply. Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him. He alone hears all and sees all."* (Verse 11) The One who revealed the Qur'ān to provide final judgement on all people's disputes is *"the Originator of the heavens and the earth,"* who controls them. The law that governs the heavens and the earth is His final judgement on all that concerns them. Human life is only a part of what takes place in the heavens and the earth. Therefore, His judgement on human matters ensures harmony between human life and the life of the great universe.

God, to whose judgement they should refer all their disputes, is the One who created them and moulded their souls: *"He made mates for you from among yourselves."* (Verse 11) Thus He designed your life giving it its very foundation. He knows what is best for you and what suits your life, putting it in harmony with the rest of His creation: *"just as He made mates for animals."* (Verse 11) This unity in biological

form confirms the unity of will and design. Hence, people and animals multiply and procreate in the same natural process. By contrast, He is alone in the way He is, with no comparability to anything or anyone: *"Nothing bears even the slightest comparability to Him."* (Verse 11) Human nature accepts this without hesitation. The Creator of all cannot be compared to anything He creates. Therefore, His creatures refer to Him when they differ. They cannot refer to anyone else alongside Him because nothing is comparable to Him.

Although God, in His limitless glory, is beyond comparability with anyone or anything, contact between Him and His creation is not severed. On the contrary, *"He alone hears all and sees all."* (Verse 11) His judgement is that of the One who knows, hears and sees.

Given that He makes His judgement final in all people's disputes, this can only mean that this rule is based on the fact that having originated the heavens and the earth and set their laws in operation, He continues to hold their keys: *"His are the keys of the heavens and the earth."* (Verse 12) Since mankind are only part of what lives in the heavens and earth, the same fact applies to them, which means that the keys and treasures of the universe belong to God. Moreover, it is He who provides them with sustenance, determining its measure in the same way as He conducts all affairs: *"He gives abundant sustenance, or gives it in scant measure to whomever He wills."* (Verse 12) It is He who gives them the food they eat and the water they drink, providing everything they need in their lives. Can they, then, refer to anyone else for judgement in their affairs? It is the most natural procedure for people to turn to the One who controls all this according to His perfect knowledge: *"He has full knowledge of everything."* (Verse 12) Needless to say, the One who knows everything is the One who can make a final judgement in all fairness.

This is just one example of how the meanings of the component parts of the *sūrah's* verses converge in complete harmony and perfect subtlety to work on the human heart. It is akin to the harmonious tones that combine to make a superb melody.

The Same Faith of Old

Once more the *sūrah* addresses its central theme:

In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muḥammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: 'Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.' Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on them to accept. God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him. They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it. Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return. (Verses 13–15)

The *sūrah* began with a general reference to the unity of the source of all Divine faiths: “*Thus has God, the Almighty, the Wise, sent revelation to you, Prophet, and to those who preceded you.*” (Verse 3) Now it gives more details of this fact, pointing out that the legislation God has enacted for Muslims is, in essence, the same as He legislated for Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, requiring them all to establish the Divine faith and not to split into factions over it. This requires that they, in turn, steadfastly pursue the Divine code of living, paying no heed to the desires of those who fall into dispute. This Divine faith is thus meant to govern human life, while those who argue about God have no leg to stand on. They are the ones who are warned of the painful punishment they might incur.

This passage enjoys the same level of perfect harmony as the preceding one: “*In matters of faith, He has ordained for you the same as He had*

enjoined on Noah – that which We have revealed to you [Muhammad] – and as We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: ‘Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.’” (Verse 13) Thus the *sūrah* confirms the truth we explained at its very outset: God is the source of all Divine religions, starting far back in history. A little touch is added here which has a pleasant, subtle effect on every believer. He or she looks out to see who were their predecessors on this long line only to find that they were those noble elite: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be on them all). Every believer then realizes that he has joined their procession, travelling the same way they travelled. He will then enjoy his journey along that way, no matter how much trouble, persecution or deprivation he suffers. Who would not put up with trouble, knowing that it is only transient, when he is assured of the company of such an elite nobility?

Moreover, there is a profound sense of peace between believers in the one Divine faith who implement His law. No conflict or dispute arises between them. They feel their strong bond urging them to collaborate and understand each other so that they can maintain the link between present and past.

Since the religion God ordained for the Muslims who believe in Muḥammad is the same as He enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, why do the followers of Moses and Jesus fight against each other? Indeed, what causes fighting between the followers of different Christian sects? Why do the followers of Moses and Jesus go to war against the followers of Muḥammad? And why do those idolaters who claim to follow Abraham’s faith wage a war against Muslims? Should not all these group together under the one banner hoisted by God’s last messenger? The same order was issued to them all: *“Steadfastly uphold the faith and do not divide into factions.”* (Verse 13) Only when they unite under this banner do they uphold the faith, fulfil its duties, maintain its path and work under the same banner hoisted high in succession by Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus until it was eventually carried by Muḥammad, who received the final testament.

The idolater Arabs in the Mother City and its surrounding area, who claimed to follow Abraham’s faith, adopted a different stance towards the new faith: *“Hard for the idolaters is that which you call on*

them to accept." (Verse 13) They found it hard that revelation should be vouchsafed to Muḥammad, when they wanted it to be given to a person of high position and authority among them. Muḥammad's personal qualities of unblemished honesty and perfect reliability, which they readily acknowledged, and his lineage descending from the noblest family among them, did not match, in their view, the status of a tribal chief who exercised power in his tribe. In short, it was far too difficult for them to accept that their own religious authority, founded on paganism and its legends, had come to an end. They realized that its ending threatened the economic and personal interests that such authority had given them. Hence they held on to their pagan beliefs, refusing to accept the message of God's oneness advocated by His noble messenger. Similarly difficult for them was that they were told that their idolatrous ancestors were in error. Therefore, they maintained their folly choosing to cast themselves in hell rather than acknowledge the truth.

The *sūrah* comments on their attitude stating that God chooses whom He wills and guides everyone who wishes to follow His guidance: "*God draws to Himself whoever He pleases and guides to Himself everyone who turns to Him.*" (Verse 13) He drew Muḥammad to Himself and chose him to deliver His message. He always leaves the way wide open for anyone who turns to Him and seeks His guidance.

Division in Religion

Again the *sūrah* speaks of the followers of earlier messengers who divided into sects and groups although the messengers preached the same faith: "*They became divided, out of selfish rivalry, only after the knowledge had reached them. Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them. As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14) Their divisions did not come about as a result of ignorance, or because they did not know the single source that grouped their messengers and faiths together. They divided after knowledge was given to them. This division was caused by selfish rivalry and mutual envy. Thus, they were not only unjust to the truth but also to themselves. There was no

single reason based on the true faith for their division. Had they been true to their faith, they would have remained united.

They deserved to be immediately taken to task in requital for their division and deviation, but God, in His wisdom, had already ordained to allow them time, up to a specified point only He knows: "*Had it not been for a decree that had already been issued by your Lord, until a term set [by Him], all would have been decided between them.*" (Verse 14) Thus, the truth is established and falsehood is seen in its true guise. Matters are settled in this present life, but judgement is deferred until the Day of Resurrection. The generations that came after the division that split the followers of every one of God's messengers received the faith and the Divine book uncertain of its truth. Division, then, had allowed doubt and confusion to creep in, making people unable to determine which of the numerous doctrines and groups was right: "*As it is, those after them, who inherited the Divine book, are in grave, disquieting doubt about it.*" (Verse 14)

Faith cannot be taken in this way. Faith is the solid rock on which a believer stands ensuring that he remains steadfast in his beliefs, even when the whole world around him is shaking hard. Faith is his guiding star that assures him of his way when different forces try to pull him in opposite directions. When faith itself becomes subject to such strong doubts, nothing remains certain in man's mind. He cannot be sure which way to take and which course to follow. Reassurance is no longer available to him. God revealed the Divine faith so that those who follow it would know the way that leads them to Him and ensures His pleasure. In turn, they too would be able to lead other people along the right way, unaffected by doubt or uncertainty. When they themselves become immersed in doubt, however, they cannot lead anyone anywhere.

Such was the state the followers of earlier prophets were in at the time Islam was revealed. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, an eminent Indian scholar, writes:

Great religions became playthings in the hands of debased clergymen who corrupted and twisted them beyond recognition, so much so that, if it were possible for their founders to return to the physical life, they would not have recognized them.

As a result of the moral debasement of the great centres of civilization and general disorder and unrest, people everywhere became entangled in their internal problems. They had no message to offer to the world. The world had become hollow from within; its life-springs had dried up. It possessed neither the light of religious guidance for personal conduct, nor any abiding and rational principle for running a state.¹

Additionally, J.H. Denison, a European author, writes:

In the fifth and sixth centuries the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place...

It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. *The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate.* The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core...

It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south... Mohammed...²

1. Nadwi, Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, p. 2.

2. Denison, J.H., *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, New York and London, 1928, pp. 265–269.

– This quotation runs in the Arabic text as one continuous paragraph. Apparently the author used an Arabic translation which was an abridged one, with some difference of emphasis in places. The italicized sentence is omitted in the Arabic text, but it was felt necessary to include it here in order not to affect the author's flow. – Editor's note.

It is because of such divisions among the followers of earlier messengers and the doubts engulfing their subsequent generations, and because the leadership of mankind was in desperate need of someone who was certain of the way to God, that the last messenger, Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), was sent to all mankind. God commanded him to deliver His message, holding firm to it, paying no heed to the conflicting creeds around him. He was to announce the rebirth of the Divine faith embodied in the one message that God gave to all prophets:

Therefore, call people to that faith, and follow the straight path as you have been commanded. Do not follow their likes and dislikes, but say: 'I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high. I am commanded to ensure justice between you. God is our Lord and your Lord. To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds. Let there be no argument between us and you. God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return. (Verse 15)

This is a new leadership for all mankind; a strong leadership, sure of its way and firm in its beliefs. It advocates its message equipped with true insight, and follows God's orders without deviation, steering away from all conflicting forces. This new leadership of mankind declares that the Divine message is one and the way to which it guides people is the same. Thus, all Divine faith comes from one source and mankind must turn to that source only: "Say: *I believe in whatever revelation God has bestowed from on high.*" (Verse 15) Its constitution and policy is based on truth and justice: "*I am commanded to ensure justice between you.*" (Verse 15) This new leadership has definite authority enabling it to declare justice among all mankind even at the time when it was confined to the narrow valleys of Makkah, where its followers suffered unrelenting persecution. Yet its authority was clear to all. It clearly announces that: (1) the Lord of the universe is the One Lord: "*God is our Lord and your Lord.*" (Verse 15); (2) everyone is responsible for their own actions: "*To us shall be accounted our deeds, and to you, your deeds.*" (Verse 15); (3) all argument is ended as God's final word is given: "*Let there be no argument between us and you.*" (Verse 15); and

(4) all affairs are left to God for His final judgement: “*God will bring us all together, and to Him we shall all return.*” (Verse 15)

This single verse with short, clear and decisive statements describes the nature of this last message in all its clarity. It is a message that means to follow its own way, unaffected by people’s desires. It aims to extend its authority so as to ensure justice between all people. Its objective is to show the one way leading to God since it is the only way defined by all messages.

As the issues have thus been clarified and the community of believers have assuredly responded to God’s message, the argument of those still disputing about God appears to be both singular and trivial, lacking basis and weight. A final word is stated about them making clear that they will have to face the punishment they have been warned against: “*As for those who argue about God after He has been acknowledged, their argument is null and void in their Lord’s sight: anger will fall upon them and severe suffering awaits them.*” (Verse 16) Whoever posits an argument that is null and void in God’s sight has nothing to offer. Not only are his arguments proven false in this life, but in the life to come he will incur God’s anger and face severe punishment for persisting with such falsehood.

Hastening the Last Hour

Yet another round is started to drive the central theme of the *sūrah* home to us:

It is God who has bestowed revelation from on high, setting forth the truth, and established the balance. For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near. Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth. Those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray. God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty. To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come. (Verses 17–20)

It is God who revealed His book to set forth the truth, and it is He who ordained justice, making His book the criterion to judge in all disputes among the followers of earlier religions, as also in all disputes that arise between people. He based all His laws on true and accurate justice, which is comparable to a balance that weighs values, rights and actions. The same verse also mentions the Last Hour, which is a frequent Qur'ānic reference to the Day of Judgement. Its mention is appropriate because it is the time set for the final judgement based on absolute justice. The Last Hour belongs to the realm that is beyond the reach of human perception. Hence, no one can be sure of when it is due: *"For all you know, the Last Hour may well be near."* (Verse 17) People prefer to ignore it when it is close to them. It will inevitably bring them to the fair reckoning which takes every little detail into account, overlooking nothing.

The *sūrah* describes the different attitudes of people concerning the Last Hour: *"Those who do not believe in it seek to hasten it, whereas the believers stand in awe of it and know it to be the truth."* (Verse 18) The ones who do not believe in it neither feel its seriousness nor understand what awaits them when it comes. Hence, it is no wonder that they take a frivolous attitude asking for it to be hastened. In contrast, the believers are certain of it and, as a result, they shudder as they think about it, dreading its outcome. They know what it is like when it finally comes. They also know it to be the truth, for they have always had their bond with the truth. Whereas, *"those who argue about the Last Hour have gone far astray."* (Verse 18) Having gone far astray, it is difficult for them to turn back.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the sustenance God, out of His grace, provides for all people. *"God is most kind towards His creatures. He provides for whoever He will. He is the Powerful, the Almighty."* (Verse 19) The link between this verse and the previous one speaking about the Last Hour and the different attitudes people take towards it seems unclear. However, it becomes very apparent when we read the next verse: *"To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come."* (Verse 20)

God provides for all His servants, the good and the bad, the believer and the unbeliever. People are too weak to be able to provide for themselves. God has brought them into life and given them what meets their basic needs. Had He chosen not to provide for the unbelievers and the wrongdoers, they would not have had anything and would have died of thirst and hunger. Had this been the scenario, God's purpose of giving them life and allowing them a chance to do what may be counted for or against them would not have been fulfilled. Therefore, He attached the question of provisions to different factors related to life situations and personal abilities. He made it part of the test people undergo in this life and the result of which is known only in the life to come. Thus, it has nothing to do with belief or unbelief, goodness of character or personality.

Furthermore, God has made both this life and the life to come as a harvest for people, and they choose the type of harvest they want. A person who wants to have the harvest of the life to come will work to achieve this. God will help such people because of what they intend and bless their work. They will not only have their harvest in the life to come, but will also have whatever God has apportioned to them of provisions in this life. They will lose nothing of it. On the contrary, their provisions in this world may be, in as far as they are concerned, the means to achieve their harvest in the life to come. Such people use what God provides for them, investing, enjoying and spending it only in ways that are acceptable to, and please Him. By contrast, those who desire only a harvest in this life will have the provisions God has allocated for them, denying them nothing of this, but they will have nothing in the life to come. They do not work for such a harvest, and as a result, they receive nothing.

A glance at each group is sufficient to expose the folly of the one who desires only their harvest in this life. God grants both groups the provisions they will have in this life as He has determined. No one will miss out on any of it. What is achieved in the life to come is that which people actually desire and work for.

Among those who work only for the harvest of this life we find some who are rich and some who are poor, according to their means of earning a livelihood. Such means are interlinked with general

situations, local circumstances and personal abilities. The same applies in equal measure to those who desire a harvest in the life to come. There is absolutely no difference between the two groups in this present life concerning their livelihood. The difference, however, will be obvious in the life to come. So what folly makes anyone abandon the harvest of the life to come, when this will not change his lot in this life even by a small measure?

Ultimately, the matter is determined by the truth and the balance established by the book God has revealed. Truth and justice are evidently seen in providing sustenance for all people, and all living things, as also in increasing the harvest of the life to come or denying the same to those who desire only this present life.

Fearing One's Deeds

The basic truth providing the central theme of the *sūrah* again comes in for further discussion:

Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned? Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them. Painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers. You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them. And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds. Say: 'No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin.' Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative. (Verses 21–23)

The *sūrah* earlier stated that what God has legislated for the Muslim community is the same as He had enjoined on Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. In other words, all this is embodied in what God revealed to Muḥammad (peace be upon him). At this point, the *sūrah* employs a rhetorical question addressing the unbelievers' beliefs and practices:

essentially, these are contrary to what God has ordained in His messages, so who ordained the same for the unbelievers, without God's sanction?

"Do they believe in alleged partners [of God] who ordain for them things which God has not sanctioned?" (Verse 21) None of God's creatures may legislate anything that is at variance with what He legislates. It is God alone who legislates for all His creation. It is He who has created the universe and conducts its affairs through natural laws He has set in operation. Human life is merely a small gear in the great cog of the universe. Therefore, its law should be consistent with the laws governing the universe and its operation. This can only be achieved when the law of human life is enacted by the One who has full knowledge of universal law. No one other than God has such knowledge. Hence, no one can be entrusted with the task of legislating for human life.

Although the logic of this fact is abundantly clear, still there are many who dispute it or who are not convinced of its truth. They dare to enact laws and legislation that are at variance with God's law, claiming that they are only choosing what is good for their peoples, ensuring that their laws fit their specific circumstances. In doing so they suggest that they know better than God and are wiser than Him. The only other justification they put forward is that they believe in some beings whom they allege to be God's partners, and that it is these who enact laws for them that are not sanctioned by God. There can be no greater folly than such impudence.

God has enacted for mankind laws that He knows to be in harmony with their nature on the one hand and with the nature of the universe they live in on the other. Thus, His law ensures the maximum cooperation and harmony among mankind as also with universal powers. In all this, He has put in place basic principles. He has left it for people to enact legislation concerning the details that suit their needs according to their level of development, provided that such legislation remains within the framework of the principles He has laid down. Should people differ over something in this regard, they should refer the matter to God and the balance He has established through these principles. People must make sure that every detailed law they enact fits with this balance. In this way, the source of legislation remains one and the ultimate word remains God's. He is indeed the best of all judges. Anything that differs with this constitutes deviation from God's

law and the religion He ordained for Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad (peace be upon them all).

"Were it not for God's decree on the final judgement, all would have been decided between them." (Verse 21) God has made His decree to defer judgement to the final day. Had he not decreed such deferment, He would have made His judgement now, punishing those who deviate from His law. However, He postpones this to the Day of Judgement when *"painful suffering awaits the wrongdoers."* (Verse 21) Such suffering is in requital for their wrongdoing. Can there be anything more erroneous than choosing man-made laws in preference to God's law?

Those wrongdoers are shown as they will be on the Day of Judgement, afraid of what will happen to them. During their lives on earth, however, they entertained no such fear. On the contrary, they ridiculed the reckoning and asked for it to be hastened: *"You will see the wrongdoers full of fear on account of what they have done, which is bound to fall back on them."* (Verse 22) In the Arabic original they are described as 'full of fear for what they have done', as if their deeds are some fearful beast. Yet they performed these deeds with their own hands, enjoying their actions. Still, when they face these same deeds they are full of fear, realizing that they are 'bound to fall back on them,' as though the deeds themselves are transformed into a punishment they cannot avoid.

Conversely, we see the believers who used to be in awe of what would happen on that day now feeling safe, reassured, enjoying what God grants them: *"And you will see those who believe and do righteous deeds in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise. They will have whatever they wish from their Lord. This is indeed the supreme bounty. It is of this [bounty] that God gives good news to His servants who believe and do righteous deeds."* (Verses 22–23) The whole image is one of bliss and happiness. Those believers are 'in the flowering meadows of the gardens of paradise', where they will have 'whatever they wish from their Lord.' There is no limit to His bounty, which is indeed supreme. This is, then, the good news that God gives to His righteous servants. It is good news that is shown to be ready, immediate, confirming the earlier promise of good things to come.

With such a pleasant image imparting an air of relaxed enjoyment, the Prophet is instructed to say to them that he seeks no reward from

them for the guidance he gives them, leading them to such lasting bliss and sparing them the painful suffering. He only gives them such guidance because he loves them; they are his kinsfolk. This is enough reward for him: *"Say: No reward do I ask of you for this. It is only an act of affection due to kin. Whoever does good, We shall increase it for him. God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative."* (Verse 23)

The Prophet enjoyed relations with every single clan of the Quraysh tribe. Hence, he was keen that they should take up the guidance he was giving because it would bring them endless benefit. His motivation in all this was the affection he had for them as his kindred. He considered this as sufficient reward for his efforts.

This, then, is the meaning that sparked in my mind whenever I read this Qur'ānic expression about the Prophet's reward being merely an act of affection he does to his kinsfolk. There is, however, a different interpretation of it which I will state here because it is included in the authentic *Hadīth* anthology of Imām al-Bukhārī. Tāwūs, a scholar from the *Tābi'īn* generation, asking 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās about this phrase. Another scholar, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, answered first saying: 'It refers to the relatives of the Prophet.' Ibn 'Abbās said: 'You have been too quick! The Prophet had relations among every clan of the Quraysh. Hence he said to them that all he asked for was that they should be kind to his own kinsfolk.'" According to this interpretation, the verse should be translated as: *"Say: No reward do I ask of you for this other than the affection due to kin."* This means that they should stop causing him harm, which is something due one's relatives, and that they should listen to the guidance he gave them. This would be his reward from them. This interpretation by Ibn 'Abbās is closer to the verse's meaning than that of Sa'īd ibn Jubayr. However, I still feel that the interpretation I suggested is closer to the point. God knows best the meanings of His words.

Thus, within the context of the gardens of paradise and the good news he gives them, the Prophet reminds them that he asks no reward for anything he gives them. People normally demand hefty fees for advice that is well below what the Prophet gave his people. This is all part of God's grace. He does not deal with people according to principles of commerce, nor according to justice; instead He deals with them in accordance with the principles of grace and bounty: *"Whoever*

does good, We shall increase it for him." (Verse 23) It is not merely that the Prophet seeks no reward whatsoever from people; they are further promised increase in their reward for good deeds. In addition, they shall have forgiveness and their deeds will be appreciated: "*God is Most-Forgiving, Most-Appreciative.*" (Verse 23)

God's Word of Truth

Once more the *sūrah* refers to the basic fact behind its central theme:

Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?' If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words. He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts. (Verse 24)

This verse tackles the last excuse the unbelievers offer to justify their attitude to revelation: "*Do they say, 'He has invented a lie about God?'*" (Verse 24) Is this why they do not believe the Prophet, claiming that God has not revealed anything to him? Such a claim is invalid. God would not allow anyone to fabricate lies about Him, claiming to receive revelations from Him when he does not, without taking that person to task. He is easily able to seal such a person's heart rendering him incapable of saying anything like the Qur'an. He is also able to expose the falsehood such a person says and establish the truth: "*If God so willed, He could seal your heart and blot out all falsehood, and establish the truth by His words.*" (Verse 24) All Muḥammad's thoughts are known to God, even before Muḥammad (peace be upon him) expresses them: "*He has full knowledge of what is in people's hearts.*" (Verse 24)

This last excuse is, thus, seen to be hollow and unfounded. Moreover, it is contrary to what is well established of God's knowledge of everyone's inner thoughts, His ability to accomplish what He wills and His law that remains in operation, establishing the truth and blotting out all falsehood. Thus, the revelation of the Qur'an is truly from God, and what Muḥammad (peace be upon him) says is the truth. Claiming anything different from this is no more than a false allegation, one that is immersed in error.

God's Signs in the Created World

It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and who pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. (25)

He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. (26)

If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all. (27)

It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise. (28)

وَهُوَ الَّذِي يَقْبَلُ التَّوْبَةَ عَنْ عِبَادِهِ وَيَعْفُو
عَنِ السَّيِّئَاتِ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢٥﴾

وَيَسْتَجِيبُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا
الصَّالِحَاتِ وَيَزِيدُهُمْ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ
وَالْكَافِرُونَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٦﴾

وَلَوْ سَـَّطَ اللَّهُ الرِّزْقَ لِعِبَادِهِ لَبَغَوْا فِي
الْأَرْضِ وَلَكِنْ يُنْزِلُ بِقَدَرٍ مَآسَاءُ إِنَّهُ
بِعِبَادِهِ خَبِيرٌ بَصِيرٌ ﴿٢٧﴾

وَهُوَ الَّذِي يُنْزِلُ الْغَيْثَ مِنْ بَعْدِ
مَا قَنَطُوا وَيَنْشُرُ رَحْمَتَهُ وَهُوَ
الْوَلِيُّ الْحَمِيدُ ﴿٢٨﴾

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. (29)

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا مِنْ دَابَّةٍ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ جَمْعِهِمْ
إِذَا يَشَاءُ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. (30)

وَمَا أَصَابَكُمْ مِنْ مُصِيبَةٍ
فَمَا كَسَبَتْ أَيْدِيكُمْ وَيَعْفُوا
عَنْ كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support. (31)

وَمَا أَنْتُمْ بِمُعْجِزِينَ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَمَا لَكُمْ
مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ ﴿٣١﴾

And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. (32)

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ الْجَوَارِ فِي الْبَحْرِ كَالْأَغْلَامِ ﴿٣٢﴾

If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; (33)

إِنْ يَشَأْ يُسْكِنِ الرِّيحَ فَيَظْلَلْنَ رَوَاكِدَ
عَلَىٰ ظُهُورِهِمْ إِنْ فِي ذَلِكَ لَا يَنْتَرِكُوا
صَبَارًا شُكُورًا ﴿٣٣﴾

or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. (34)

أَوْ يُوقِعَهُنَّ فَمَا كَسَبُوا وَيَعْفُ
عَنْ كَثِيرٍ ﴿٣٤﴾

Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them. (35)

وَيَعْلَمُ الَّذِينَ يُجَادِلُونَ فِي آيَاتِنَا
مَا لَهُمْ مِنْ نَجِيصٍ ﴿٣٥﴾

Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; (36)

فَمَا أُولَئِكَ مِنْ شَيْءٍ مَنَعُ الْغَيُورِ ۚ
وَمَا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَى لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا
وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ ﴿٣٦﴾

who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; (37)

وَالَّذِينَ يَجْتَنِبُونَ كَبِيرَ الْإِثْمِ وَالْفَوَاحِشَ
وَإِذَا مَا عَصَبُوا لَهُمْ يَغْفِرُونَ ﴿٣٧﴾

who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; (38)

وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا
الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا
رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿٣٨﴾

and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. (39)

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَهُمُ الْبَغْيُ هُمْ يَنْصَرُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. (40)

وَجَزَاءُ سَيِّئَةٍ سَيِّئَةٌ مِّثْلُهَا ۖ فَمَنْ
عَفَا وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَجْرُهُ عَلَى اللَّهِ ۗ إِنَّهُ
لَا يُحِبُّ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾

However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. (41)

وَلَمَنِ انْتَصَرَ بَعْدَ ظُلْمِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ
مَاعَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤١﴾

Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. (42)

إِنَّمَا السَّبِيلُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ يَظْلِمُونَ النَّاسَ
وَيَبْغُونَ فِي الْأَرْضِ بِغَيْرِ الْحَقِّ
أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿٤٢﴾

As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve. (43)

وَلَمَنِ صَبَرَ وَعَفَرَ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ لَمِنْ
عَزْمِ الْأُمُورِ ﴿٤٣﴾

He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' (44)

وَمَنْ يُضْلِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ وَلِيٍّ مِنْ
بَعْدِهِ ۖ وَتَرَى الظَّالِمِينَ لَمَّا رَأَوْا
الْعَذَابَ يَقُولُونَ هَلْ لَنَا مَرَجْرٌ
مِنْ سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٤﴾

You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. (45)

وَتَرَاهُمْ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا خَشِيعِينَ
مِنَ الدَّلِيلِ يَنْظُرُونَ مِنْ طَرْفٍ خَفِيٍّ
وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّ الْخَاسِرِينَ
الَّذِينَ خَسِرُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيَهُمْ يَوْمَ
الْقِيَامَةِ أَلَا إِنَّ الظَّالِمِينَ فِي عَذَابٍ
مُقِيمٍ ﴿٤٥﴾

No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward. (46)

وَمَا كَانَتْ لَهُمْ مِنْ أَوْلِيَاءَ يَنْصُرُونَهُمْ
مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَمَنْ يُضْلِلِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ
مِنْ سَبِيلٍ ﴿٤٦﴾

Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. (47)

اسْتَجِيبُوا لِلرَّبِّ كَمَا مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ
يَوْمٌ لَا مَرَدَّ لَهُ مِنَ اللَّهِ مَا لَكُمُ
مِنْ مَلْجَأٍ يَوْمَئِذٍ وَمَا لَكُمُ مِنَ
نَكِيرٍ ﴿٤٧﴾

If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude. (48)

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا فَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ عَلَيْهِمْ
حَفِظْتَ أَنْ عَلَيْكَ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ وَإِنَّا
إِذَا أَذَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنَّا رَحْمَةً
فَرِحَ بِهَا وَإِنْ تُصِيبُهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ
بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَإِنَّ
الْإِنْسَانَ كَفُورٌ ﴿٤٨﴾

To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; (49)

لِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ يَخْلُقُ
مَا يَشَاءُ يَهَبُ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ إِنثًا وَيَهَبُ
لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ الذَّكَورَ ﴿٤٩﴾

or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is all-knowing, infinite in His power. (50)

It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is Exalted, Wise. (51)

Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muhammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, (52)

the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (53)

أَوْزَوْجَهُمْ ذَكَرْنَا وَإِنشَاءً وَبَجَعْلٍ مَنْ
يَشَاءُ عَقِيمًا إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

وَمَا كَانَ لِبَشَرٍ أَنْ يُكَلِّمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا
أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا
فَيُوحِيَ بِإِذْنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّهُ عَلِيمٌ
حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥١﴾

وَكَذَلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ رُوحًا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا
مَا كُنْتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَابُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ
وَلَكِنْ جَعَلْنَاهُ نُورًا نَهْدِي بِهِ مَنْ نَشَاءُ
مِنْ عِبَادِنَا وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَى صِرَاطٍ
مُسْتَقِيمٍ ﴿٥٢﴾

صِرَاطِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ
وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ أَلَا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَصِيرُ
الْأُمُورُ ﴿٥٣﴾

Overview

In this second part of the *sūrah*, the discussion continues to point to signs confirming the truth of faith within people's own selves and in the wide horizons. Further discussion is added about God's power and its evidence in people's surroundings and what affects their livelihood. The distinctive qualities of believers also come in for discussion. Towards the end of the *sūrah* we have further discussions on what the first part focused on, namely, revelation, its nature and how it is delivered. The two parts are closely linked, as both address the human heart and put the way to faith before us.

Affluence and People's Behaviour

It is He who accepts the repentance of His servants and pardons bad deeds. He knows everything you do. He responds to those who believe and do righteous deeds, and gives them much more of His bounty; but as for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them. If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all. (Verses 25–27)

These verses follow immediately after the verses that show the wrongdoers dreading having to face what they have done given it will inevitably fall back on them. Those verses also painted an image of the believers as they revel in their rewards, secure in the flowering meadows of paradise. Moreover, those earlier verses confirmed what the Prophet delivered to them of God's message and stated that God is fully aware of what their hearts may harbour.

As this second part opens, it calls on people to turn to God and abandon their erroneous ways before a final judgement is passed on them. The door to repentance is left wide open. God Almighty accepts repentance and pardons bad deeds. Hence, there is no need to despair, go further into disobedience, or panic because of the sins they have committed. God knows what they do, and He certainly knows sincere

repentance and accepts it, just as He knows their past sins and pardons them for these.

Again the *sūrah* refers to what believers and unbelievers will receive in reward or punishment. Those who believe and do good deeds are the ones who respond to their Lord's call. He, therefore, gives them an increase of His bounty. By contrast, *"As for the unbelievers, severe suffering awaits them."* (Verse 26) Yet the door to repentance, which will spare the repentant all suffering, is open to all at all times. Any unbeliever who repents will qualify for God's bounty which is, in the life to come, plentiful, unlimited. In this life, however, it is given according to a set criterion. God knows that in their lives on earth, human beings cannot cope with God's bounty should it be given to them without measure: *"If God were to grant plentiful provisions to His servants, they would behave on earth with much insolence. As it is, He bestows from on high in due measure, as He wills. He is fully aware of His creatures, and He sees them all."* (Verse 27)

Compared to the limitless bounty granted in the hereafter, the provisions people have in this life, no matter how abundant they may seem, are very small indeed. God knows that His human creatures can only cope with a small measure of richness. If He were to grant them abundance, of the sort He grants them in the life to come, they would behave with much insolence. They are too small to maintain their balance; too weak to cope with their burdens when these exceed a certain limit. God is fully aware of their limitations. Therefore, He keeps His bounty to them in this present life within the limits they can cope with. He keeps His unlimited bounty till later, and gives it only to those who pass the test of this life, reaching the life to come in safety. They will then receive His limitless bounty.

It is He who sends down rain when they have lost all hope, and spreads His grace far and wide. He is the Protector, worthy of all praise. (Verse 28)

Again, we are reminded of some aspects of God's grace as He bestows it on people living on earth. We see them here when they have gone without rain for some time. They feel their powerlessness as water, life's

necessity, is denied them. They are in total despair. At this point, the skies open and God's grace is spread far and wide. The land is alive again, green shoots spring up, the seeds that have been planted promise a good yield, the weather moderates, smiles are back on people's faces and hope is regained. What separates the old despair from the new hope is no more than a few minutes during which the gates of God's grace are open and rain pours down: "*He is the Protector, worthy of all praise.*" (Verse 28) His help is available at all times. He is not only worthy of praise in Himself but also for all His attributes.

The Arabic text uses the term *ghayth* to refer to rain. The term connotes providing emergency help for those who are in desperate need. The effects are given as God '*spreads His grace*', which enhances feelings of hope and happiness that we actually experience as we look at the emerging vegetation. Nothing has a greater comforting and calming effect on people than rain pouring down after a period of drought. Nothing helps to remove tension and worry better than seeing the land blooming after it has been barren and desolate.

What Causes Misfortune

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all the living creatures which He placed in them. He has the power to gather them all whenever He will. Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support. (Verses 29–31)

These verses refer to a universal sign that is there for all to see, endorsing the truth the revelation testifies to, even though they continue to doubt it. The sign they see in the heavens and the earth is very clear, admitting no doubt. It addresses human nature in the language it understands. No one seriously argues about it. It states the fact that neither man nor any other of God's creation was the originator of the heavens and the earth. Admitting that they have a Creator, therefore, is inescapable. The heavens and the earth are huge, yet they demonstrate a meticulous harmony and function endlessly according to consistent

laws. This cannot be logically explained except by acknowledging that they have been created by God who conducts their affairs. Human nature directly receives this logic imparted by the universe, understands and accepts it before it hears any word that may be said about it by any external source.

This universal sign incorporates another, for God did not only create the heavens and the earth. He also created "*all the living creatures which He placed in them.*" (Verse 29) Life on our planet alone is another sign, so how should we conceive of other types of life unknown to us existing elsewhere in the universe. Life on this planet is a secret no one has yet managed to fathom, let alone aspire to initiate. It is a secret engulfed with mystery. We do not know how or from where it comes; nor do we know how it entwines with other creatures. All attempts to identify its source or nature have failed to open these closed doors. All research is necessarily confined to the development of living creatures, after they have life, and their variety and functions. Even in this limited scope, there are conflicting views and theories. Behind the curtain, however, there remains the great secret that no mental understanding can explore. It belongs to God alone.

All living creatures, everywhere, on earth and within it, in the deep sea and at high altitude, not to think of the rest of creatures beyond our world, are largely unknown to us. Indeed man only knows about a small number of them. All these creatures that God has placed in the heavens and the earth can be gathered by God whenever He wills. Not a single one of them will go astray or absent itself.

People cannot gather together a flock of domestic birds should they flee their cages, or bees that escape their hive. Everywhere on earth there are collections of different types of birds, bees, ants, insects, bacteria, cattle, beasts, fish, sea mammals, as well as human communities. There are also in the heavens other creatures that may be greater in number and that live in habitats about which we know nothing. Yet God can gather all these together if He so pleases. The time it takes between their placement in their different habitats and their gathering together is no more than the uttering of one word. The verse, here, therefore, contrasts the placement of all these creatures everywhere in the universe with their gathering: it is all done in just a

moment. In true Qur'ānic style, these two great scenes are juxtaposed in one short verse that takes only a few seconds to read.

The *sūrah* then tells them of what happens to the unbelievers in this life, as a result of what they perpetrate. Yet God does not take them to task for all this; He overlooks a great many of their actions. It describes their powerlessness as they occupy only a small corner of the living world: *"Whatever misfortune befalls you is the outcome of what your own hands have done; but God forgives much. Never can you elude Him on earth. You have none to protect you from God and none to give you support."* (Verses 30–31)

In the first of these two verses we see in action both God's justice and His grace as He bestows it on man. Every misfortune or calamity that befalls man is a direct result of what man does, but God does not hold him to account for all his deeds. He knows man's weakness and the desires inherent in his nature which often tempt and overpower him. Therefore, God pardons much of what man does. In the second verse we see man as he truly is: weak, powerless and without support. From whom, then, can he seek protection other than from the One who protects all?

Control of Natural Laws

And among His signs are the ships that sail like floating mountains through the seas. If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea. In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God; or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought and yet He forgives much. Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them. (Verses 32–35)

Ships that traverse the sea are yet another of God's signs, just like mountains. It is a sign seen by all. They represent a phenomenon that is based on several factors each of which is a great sign put in place by God Almighty. Who created the sea? Can any human or any other creature claim that they made the sea? Who gave the sea its different characteristics: the density of its water, its depth and vast area allowing

it to carry such large craft? Then what about the wind that moves the ships that were known to those who were the first to be addressed by the Qur'ān; and what about other forces that man was subsequently able to use such as steam and nuclear power, and other forces God may place at man's disposal in future? Who has given these forces their qualities that make them able to move such huge ships in the sea, so that they look like mountains on its surface?

"If He wills, He stills the wind, and then they lie motionless on the surface of the sea." (Verse 33) The wind may die down at times and ships will lie motionless, as though life has departed from them. *"In this there are signs indeed for all who are patient in adversity and deeply grateful to God."* (Verse 33) The signs are both in making the ships sail across the sea and in leaving them motionless. Such signs are appreciated by everyone who is patient in adversity, thankful for blessings. Patience and gratitude are often mentioned together in the Qur'ān, as they are interrelated qualities of believers in conditions of hardship and happiness.

"Or else He may cause them to perish because of what they have wrought." (Verse 34) He may cause the ships to be destroyed or drowned as a result of people's sins or deviation from the faith that all creatures acknowledge, with the exception of the unbelievers. *"And yet He forgives much."* (Verse 34) He certainly does not punish people for every sinful action they do. Instead, He pardons and forgives much.

"Let those who call Our messages into question know that there is no escape for them." (Verse 35) Should God want to smite them, destroy their ships or visit them with some other punishment, they simply have no means of escape. Thus they are made to know that whatever they possess of this life's riches, comforts and pleasures can always be taken away from them. The only thing that is stable in this present life is to maintain a close relation with God.

A Community Moulded by Faith

The *sūrah* takes another step forward, alerting them to the fact that whatever they have in life on earth is transient. The only lasting value is what God grants in the life to come to those who have believed and

placed their trust in Him. Some of the distinctive qualities that make of true believers a separate community are then given:

Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord; who shun grave sins and gross indecencies; and who, when angered, will forgive; who respond to their Lord, attend regularly to their prayer, conduct their affairs by mutual consultation, and give generously out of what We have provided for them; and who, when oppressed, defend themselves. An evil deed is requited by an evil like it, but the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God. He does not love wrongdoers. However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store. As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve. (Verses 36–43)

Earlier in the *sūrah*, we had a description of the conditions pertaining to mankind. We learnt that those given revelations divided into groups: and such divisions were caused by petty rivalries rather than any lack of knowledge of the Divine book and the faith God established for mankind from the times of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them all). It also pointed out that the generations that followed those who were in dispute entertained serious doubts about Divine revelations. Needless to say, the conditions of those who did not receive revelations and had no messenger to guide them along the right path were even worse. Therefore, mankind needed wise leadership to save it from the depth of ignorance into which it had sunk and to guide its footsteps along the way that leads man to God, his Lord and the Lord of all the worlds. Therefore, God revealed this Qur'ān, in the Arabic tongue, to His servant Muḥammad, (peace be upon him), incorporating in it what He had enjoined upon Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Thus all phases of the Divine message, from early history, are linked together. The path it follows and the goals it aims to achieve

are the same. With this final message, the Muslim community comes into existence, assuming the leadership of mankind and setting a model of how the Divine faith functions in human life.

The present verses describe the distinctive qualities of this community that make it a community apart. Although these verses were revealed in Makkah, long before the establishment of the Muslim state in Madīnah, we note that one of these qualities is that its affairs are conducted on the basis of mutual consultation. This suggests that consultation is more deeply ingrained in the life of the Muslim community than its being the basis of its political system. It is, thus, an essential quality of the Muslim community. It then had to be carried further to the state, which is a natural progression from that of Muslim community. Another quality to be noted is that Muslims defend themselves when they come under oppression. Yet the order given to the Muslims in Makkah was that they should endure with patience and not retaliate. It was only after they migrated to Madīnah that a different order was given to them and permission to fight was granted: *"Permission to fight is given to those against whom war is waged, because they have been wronged. Most certainly, God has the power to grant them victory."* (22: 39) That this quality is mentioned in Makkan verses suggests that self defence against oppression is a permanent right of the Muslim community, while the instruction to remain patient and not to retaliate pertained to an exceptional and particular situation during the early period. The quality is mentioned here because an outline of the essential qualities of the Muslim community is given. Hence, this quality could not be overlooked, even though retaliation in self defence was not as then permitted.

The fact that these qualities are mentioned in this Makkan *sūrah*, long before the Muslim community had assumed practical leadership should be reflected upon. These qualities must be fulfilled by the Muslim community before it is fit to assume practical leadership. What are these qualities, and what value do they have in human life as a whole?

These qualities are: faith, placing our trust in God alone, refraining completely from grave sin and indecency, forgiving when angry, responding to God, attending regularly to prayer, conducting our affairs

through proper consultation, giving generously in charity, resisting oppression, forgiving other people, putting things right and remaining patient in adversity. We need to reflect a little on each of these qualities in the order they occur in the *sūrah*.

The *sūrah* sets before us the Divine standard of values, showing us which of these are transitory and which are enduring and inalterable. Muslims will, thus, have a clear vision, one free of confusion. This standard is outlined first as a prelude to the qualities of the Muslim community: "*Whatever you are given is but for the enjoyment of life in this world, but that which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36)

There are plenty of attractive and pleasant things in the life of this world: offspring, wealth, desires and their fulfilment, high social standing, power, as well as other things to enjoy. These are granted by God as part of His bounty that is unattached to people's behaviour in this life, but He adds blessing to those who are obedient to Him, even though their share is little, and denies such blessing to sinners even though their share is great indeed. Yet none of this is permanent or enduring. It is all short-lived; it neither raises nor lowers anyone's standing. Nothing of it reflects anyone's position with God, or provides an indication of His pleasure or displeasure with anyone. It is all a fleeting enjoyment. "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring.*" (Verse 36) It is better in essence and longer lasting. Compared to what is with God, all life enjoyments are trifling and short-lived. Its maximum duration is the life of the individual or the life of humanity. Both are no more than a fleeting moment in God's measure.

Having established this true fact, the *sūrah* outlines the qualities of the believers who are destined to enjoy the enduring blessings God has in store for them. The first of these qualities is faith: "*That which is with God is much better and more enduring. [It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) To believe is to recognize the first and basic truth without which man cannot know for certain anything in the universe. It is through believing in God that we begin to understand that the universe is created by Him. This is essential so that we know how to deal with the universe and learn about the laws that operate in it. We can then bring our lives into

harmony with the universe, so as not to deviate from its laws. Such harmony will impart ease and comfort in our lives. We will then move, together with the universe, in a way that submits to God and seeks His acceptance. This quality is necessary for every human being, but it is most essential for the Muslim community that seeks to lead humanity.

Faith also imparts reassurance and confidence, and dispels doubt, worry, fear and despair. These are necessary throughout our life journey, but they are all the more essential for the leader who charts the way ahead.

What faith gives to man is to free him from the pressures of personal desire, interest and gain. With faith, man's heart looks up to a goal that lies beyond his own soul. He realizes that he has no say in the course the Divine message takes; it is, after all, a message from God, while he is simply a worker employed by God. This realization is extremely important to the person who is in a position of leadership so that he does not allow despair to creep in should people turn away from him or should he suffer persecution. This realization also acts as a safeguard so that he does not become arrogant should he gain power. In every situation, he remains no more than a worker.

The first crop of Muslims accepted the faith in a way that remarkably influenced their mentality, morality and behaviour. Prior to Islam, the meaning of faith had been greatly weakened so that it no longer influenced people's morality and behaviour. Islam brought about a new model of faith, one that was alive and influential, enabling that community of believers to assume the task of leadership entrusted to it. Syed Abū'l Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī writes about the effects of this character-moulding faith:

Once the Gordian knot of disbelief had been cut, it was easy to unfasten the other knots that bound them. And once the Prophet had opened their hearts to Islam, he did not have to struggle at each step to make them reject Wrong and accept Right. They entered into the new faith with heart and soul and submitted themselves without demur to what the Prophet decreed...

Thus, when they had attained to the highest pinnacle of moral development and become proof against the inducements of Satan and of their own baser self, when they had learned to prefer the future good to the immediate good and had been transformed into lovers of the Hereafter even while living in this world, when neither poverty could be a barrier in their path nor could riches make them vain, when they had become meek, yet unbending before power, and when they had come to be the dispensers of justice among men even though it might go against themselves, their own kith and kin, God made the whole world subservient to them and appointed them the Defenders of the Faith.³

He also elaborates on the effect of faith on people's morality:

During the pre-Islamic era people generally worshipped inanimate objects which could neither help nor grant their petitions and had, in fact, been created merely to serve their needs. Hence, there was no real moral enthusiasm, no genuine spirituality in their religions. The God of their conception was an artisan who had retired into a corner after finishing His job. They believed that He had bequeathed His kingdom to those whom He had adorned with the mantle of Divinity and now it was they who controlled the affairs of the universe. They lacked any spiritual understanding of God. They did not know of Him as the Creator of the universe, and any awareness was akin to the knowledge of an historian who, when he is asked who constructed a certain building, replies that it was built by such and such a king, but the mention of the king's name neither inspires awe in his heart, nor makes any solemn impression on his mind. They had no intimate consciousness of the Divine attributes and, consequently, their hearts did not bear the imprint of God's glory and love...

3. Nadwī, Abū'l Hasan 'Alī, *Islam and the World*, Leicester, 2005, pp. 41–42.

– Originally written in Arabic, this book has been heavily edited in its English version. I chose to include all quotations from it as they appear in its English version rather than provide a new translation that is more faithful to the original text. – Editor's note.

The Muslims in general and the Arabs in particular rejected this vague and sickly religiousness and attained a Faith which was at once intense and profound and which permeated through every fibre of their existence. They pledged their Faith in God Who has Excellent Attributes, Who is the Most Exalted, the Most Magnificent and the Master of the Day of Judgement. Says the Holy Qur'ān: *"God is He besides Whom there is no other god; The Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace [and Perfection], the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme; Glory to God [High is He] above the partners they attribute to Him. He is the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms and Colours. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names; Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory: and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise."* (59: 23-24)

He is the God Who is the Creator and the Preserver of the universe, Who rewards with paradise and chastises with hell, Who swells or shrinks the subsistence of whomsoever He likes, Who is the Knower of all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and Who knows the stealth of the eyes and the secrets of the hearts, and is the embodiment of beauty and sublimity, strength and splendour, perfection and beneficence.

This solemn conviction produced a miraculous transformation among the early followers of Islam. Whoever affirmed his faith in the One Transcendent God and testified to '*Lā ilāha illallāh*'⁴ experienced a sudden change in himself. The innermost recesses of his soul were lit up with the sublime radiance of God-consciousness, the spirit and the flesh in him ceased to be the enemies of one another; he achieved equilibrium within himself and extraordinary feats of courage, endurance and faith were performed by the believer.

This faith was a wonderful source of moral training. It generated among its followers an amazing strength of will, self-criticism

4. This phrase means, 'there is no deity other than God'. It is the first half of the declaration anyone who wishes to be a Muslim must make. The other half is, 'Muḥammad is God's messenger.' – Editor's note.

and justice, as nothing can help overcome the inducements of the self so successfully as living faith in the Omnipresence of God.

If anyone succumbed to evil or negative urges and fell into error, even unobserved, he would immediately confess to the Prophet and undergo the severest punishment willingly to save himself from Divine displeasure.⁵

Virtues such as honesty and trustworthiness developed in the early Muslims as the natural fruits of a sense of living belief in the Omnipresence of the Absolute God. Even when alone and unnoticed, or in any other situation wherein they could easily transgress the bounds of religious conduct, fear of God kept the Muslims under rigid control.⁶

The unruly Arabs, who were so lawless in their ways, surrendered themselves so absolutely to the guidance of the Faith that it was impossible for them to infringe the Divine law. They accepted the Sovereignty of God in its fullest sense. In peace and in war, in joy and in sorrow, in every relationship of life, at each turn of affairs and in the minutest details of their concerns they looked to His guidance and help and carried out His commands without the slightest demur.⁷

Qualities of the Faithful

Such is the effect of true belief in God to which the *sūrah* refers. To place one's complete trust in God is something such a belief entails, but the Qur'ān gives prominence to this quality: "*[It shall be given] to those who believe and place their trust in their Lord.*" (Verse 36) In the Arabic text, the inversion mode is used so as to make the sentence read, 'in their Lord they place their trust.' This implies that they do not place their trust in anyone other than God. This is indeed the first practical manifestation of believing in God's oneness. A believer knows God's attributes, believes in them all and is certain that no one does

5. Nadwī, *ibid.*, pp. 42–44.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

anything unless He wills and nothing occurs without His sanction. Hence, his trust in God is complete. Everything he does or refrains from doing is aimed at winning His pleasure. Such a feeling is necessary for everyone. It enables man to stand with his head raised high, feeling inner certainty, reassured, fearing no one, able to withstand adversity, full of contentment in times of ease. Yet this feeling is far more necessary to a leader who is eager to fulfil his responsibilities.

“Who shun grave sins and gross indecencies.” (Verse 37) Purity of heart which ensures that behaviour is free of grave sin and indecency is a product of sound faith. It is also a necessary requirement for wise leadership. No one can maintain purity of heart and then indulge in grave sins and gross indecencies. A heart that lacks purity is totally unsuitable for leadership: its guiding light is obliterated by sin. Faith heightened the sensitivity of the first generation of Muslims enabling them to attain the standards described by Nadwi. It qualified them to provide a leadership of unprecedented and unequalled qualities. They remain the model to be emulated by later generations.

God is fully aware of man's weaknesses. Therefore, He has set the mark that qualifies people for the position of leadership at shunning grave sins and gross indecencies, not ordinary ones. His grace ensures that minor sins will be overlooked. This is an act of grace that He bestows on us which should arouse our feeling of humility before Him.

“And who, when angered, will forgive.” (Verse 37) This quality, mentioned immediately after the implicit reference to God's forgiveness of man's errors and sins, encourages an attitude of mutual forbearance and forgiveness between people. It highlights a characteristic of believers which makes them forgive when something angers them. Again we see the Islamic approach to human weakness. It does not require man to do anything beyond what he is capable of. God knows that anger is a natural human reaction and that it is not always bad. Feeling angry at something committed against God, faith, truth or justice is commendable and can bring about good results. Therefore, Islam does not forbid anger or consider it a sin. It recognizes it as a natural feeling, thus preventing conflict between man's religion and nature. However, it takes man by the hand to help him overcome his anger, encouraging him to pardon and forbear. It further makes such forgiveness one of

the important qualities of believers. It is well established that the Prophet was never angry at anything related to his own person. His anger, when it occurred, was only for God's sake and was overpowering. Yet such a high standard was set by Muḥammad (peace be upon him) who attained a high standard of greatness. Hence, God does not make this a standard that believers should attain to, but rather sets it as an ideal to strive for. What they are required to do is to forbear and forgive when angry, rising above the desire to retaliate, as long as this remains within the personal sphere.

"Who respond to their Lord." (Verse 38) They remove all impediments that prevent such response. These impediments are within the human soul, created by one's desires, aspirations and ambitions. When all these impediments are removed, man finds the way to God smooth and wide open. His response is then free of any restraint or impediment.

The type of response is then shown in detail. The first aspect is that believers *"attend regularly to their prayer."* (Verse 38) Prayer is given great importance in Islam. It comes second only to the first rule of faith, which is the declaration of one's belief in God's oneness and in Muḥammad as God's messenger. Prayer provides the bond between man and his Lord, and gives a practical example of human equality, with worshippers standing shoulder to shoulder in rows, with no distinction whatsoever between them.

Perhaps this is the reason why prayer is immediately followed, in this instance, by the quality of consultation within the Muslim community, giving it precedence over the payment of *zakāt* which is normally mentioned together with prayer. Thus, believers *"conduct their affairs by mutual consultation."* (Verse 38) As it is phrased, the statement makes consultation a characteristic that pervades every aspect of their lives. As we have already said, this is a Makkan statement made long before the establishment of the Islamic state. This means that this quality is characteristic of the Muslim community in all situations, even though no state or government had as then been established. In fact, the state is only a natural by-product of the Muslim community and its intrinsic qualities. The Muslim community incorporates the state and together they ensure the implementation of the Islamic code of life both at individual and society levels.

For this reason, consultation was an early quality of the Muslim community and applied to a far greater area than the political arena. It is an essential aspect of Islamic life and a distinctive quality of the community entrusted with the role of leading mankind. Needless to say, it is a fundamental quality of sound leadership.

The way to conduct consultation is left for every generation and environment to decide. It is not cast in a rigid form that must always be followed. No Islamic system is outlined in a text that must be literally followed or set in a particular model that cannot be modified. They are first and foremost a product of a process that begins with the truth of faith taking root in man's heart so as to mould his thought and behaviour. Discussion about the details of an Islamic system while giving little attention to the truth of faith that gives rise to them is a futile exercise. What we are saying here may appear to anyone who is unaware of the truth of Islamic faith a theoretical discourse without firm basis. To suppose so is certainly wrong. A careful examination of its pure concepts of belief will show that Islam contains psychological and intellectual facts that have a profound effect on man, preparing the way to the rise of certain systems and situations in human society. The Qur'ānic and *Hadīth* texts then indicate the form that such systems and situations should take. Thus, the texts do not initiate the systems, but merely organize them. For any Islamic system to be established and functioning, it is necessary that a Muslim community should be in existence in which faith is actively working. Otherwise, no form is good enough to produce a system that can be described as Islamic. When a Muslim community is truly in existence, where people feel the truth of faith deep in their hearts, the Islamic system will naturally develop, taking a shape and form that suits that particular community, its environment and circumstances, working within the framework of the basic Islamic principles and effectively implementing them.

"And give generously out of what We have provided for them." (Verse 38) This is again a requirement that preceded the determination of the different rates of *zakāt*, according to the type of property held. These rates were set in the second year after the Prophet migrated to Madīnah where he established the first Islamic state. However, the idea of allocating a portion of what God has given us to be spent in what

serves the Islamic cause came in the early stages of the life of the Muslim community. It goes back to the early days of its inception.

For Islam to be properly advocated it is necessary that Muslims should be ready to allocate money for its cause. This purges their hearts of greed and helps them rise above the instinctive desire to own. It demonstrates their reliance on God and what He has for them. All these are necessary for faith to be complete and firmly rooted. Moreover, it is necessary for the Muslim society. To advocate Islam is to be committed to strive for its cause. It is imperative that the community should demonstrate complete solidarity in such striving, whatever the outcome. At times, such solidarity needs to be complete, leaving no one any property that is considered his own. An example of this took place in the early days of Islam, when the Makkan Muslims migrated to Madīnah where they were given warm hospitality. When their situation became less acute, a permanent *zakāt* system was put in place. Be that as it may, the very concept of spending for the cause is an essential quality of the Muslim community.

"And who, when oppressed, defend themselves." (Verse 39) As we stated earlier, that this quality is mentioned in a Makkan *sūrah* is significant. It means that rising against oppression and injustice is in the very nature of a community that is moulded to be the best among human communities. It enjoins what is right and fair, forbids what is wrong, and ensures that right and justice are implemented in human life. It is an honourable community that derives its honour from God: *"All honour belongs to God, and to His messenger and those who believe [in God]."* (63: 8)

In the early history of Islam, there was a period, when the Muslim community was still in Makkah, during which the Muslims were ordered not to fight, but to concentrate on attending to prayer and paying *zakāt*. This, however, was due to certain local reasons and to achieve a particular disciplinary objective that was especially relevant to the first Muslim Arab community. It should be emphasized that this was a temporary measure that does not contradict the essential qualities of the Muslim community.

There were, indeed, particular reasons behind this choice of a peaceful and patient approach during the Makkan period. One was that the

persecution the Muslims suffered at the time was not because of any recognisable authority holding sway in Arabian society. Instead, the tribal structure then pertaining made it rather loose politically and socially. Hence, a Muslim who belonged to a family of distinction could come to harm only at the hands of other members of his own family. No one else dared take any measure against him. A collective assault on a Muslim individual or on Muslims generally was a rare event. In addition, masters could torture or otherwise pain their slaves and weaker tribal elements if they chose to adopt Islam. Over time many of these were bought and set free by Muslims, and thus largely became immune to persecution. Furthermore, the Prophet did not wish to see a battle flaring up in every home between a Muslim and his family who had not as yet accepted Islam. It was, thus, a question of trying to soften hearts rather than harden them.

Another reason behind this peaceful approach was that the social environment encouraged support to anyone who was unjustly wronged or physically harmed. By being patient in adversity and holding to their faith despite persecution, Muslims could benefit by such support. This is what actually happened when the Hashimite clan, to which the Prophet belonged, were subjected to a social and economic boycott. The natural Arabian sense of justice rebelled against this wrongful boycott, enforcing its abrogation, despite the fact that it was originally solemnized by a written agreement which was then hung inside the Ka'bah.

Yet another reason was that resort to force and the use of arms was a characteristic of the Arabian social environment. People were always on edge, with little to enforce discipline. To ensure proper balance in the Muslim personality, this tendency needed to be restrained. People needed to rein in their feelings by setting themselves definite goals. It was also necessary that they should get used to being patient, despite adversity, and that they could control themselves and their actions. It was also necessary to make them feel that their every whim, desire and gain were secondary to their faith. Therefore, the requirement that they should remain patient in such adversity was consistent with the system that sought to educate them and bring about proper balance in their Islamic character.

It was for these and similar reasons that a policy of peaceful coexistence and perseverance was followed during the Makkān period, while the permanent nature of the Muslim community based on self defence when oppressed was also clearly stated: *"And who, when oppressed, defend themselves."* (Verse 39) This rule is further confirmed as a permanent aspect of human life: *"An evil deed is requited by an evil like it."* (Verse 40) Thus, justice requires that an evil act should be answered with an act of similar nature. Otherwise, evil would be left to triumph and expand; there would be no force to check it.

Forgiveness is encouraged so that believers seek reward from God and at the same time purge themselves of the desire to retaliate; this also ensures that society does not harbour grudges: *"But the one who forgives and puts things right will have his reward with God."* (Verse 40) This is indeed an exception from the rule. It should be borne in mind that forgiveness can only be exercised by one who is able to requite evil with its like. It is only in such a case that forgiveness brings its desired results in both the perpetrator and the person who is wronged. When the perpetrator realizes that he has been pardoned out of the goodness of the other person, and not because of any weakness or inability to retaliate, he feels ashamed and appreciates that his opponent has scored a moral victory. Similarly, a strong person who forgives feels that he has the higher moral ground. Thus, forgiveness is better for both parties. This, however, does not apply in the case of weakness and inability to retaliate. Indeed, forgiveness does not exist in such a situation; it only encourages the aggressor and brings further humiliation to those wronged.

"He does not love wrongdoers." (Verse 40) This statement reconfirms the rule that an evil act is requited by a similar one. It also implies that one should not exceed the wrong done when repelling evil.

We then have another confirmation, which is more detailed: *"However, no blame attaches to those who defend themselves after having been wronged. Blame attaches only to those who oppress other people and transgress in the land against all right. For such, there is painful suffering in store."* (Verses 41–42) A wronged person who retaliates against injustice, repays an evil act with its like, and who makes sure not to transgress his limits, is simply exercising his legitimate right. Hence, no blame attaches to him. No one should prevent him from exacting

justice. The ones to be stopped are those who oppress and encroach on others. Human life cannot be set on a right basis while injustice continues unchecked and its perpetrators go about freely, fearing no consequence. God warns all perpetrators of injustice that they will be severely punished, but people must also rise against those responsible and prevent them from committing further injustice.

The *sūrah* again refers to the need for self restraint, patience in adversity and forgiveness in personal cases, when such forgiveness is exercised as an act of magnanimity taken from a position of strength and ability to retaliate: "*As for the one who is patient in adversity and forgives; this requires the exercise of a truly strong resolve.*" (Verse 43)

When we take these verses and similar texts together, we clearly see how they ensure balance between the two directions. They want a Muslim to be free of grudge, anger, weakness, servility, as also of injustice and oppression. A Muslim should always seek God's pleasure, aware that patience is his mainstay as he continues his life journey.

Together, these qualities which believers should have impart a distinctive character to the Muslim community, the community that is assigned the task of leading mankind.

What Price for a Second Chance?

Having outlined the qualities of believers who have ample and more lasting reward from God, the *sūrah* paints the opposite picture of those who go astray and inflict injustice. They will inevitably suffer humiliation:

He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him. When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance. The believers will then say: 'The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection.' Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward. (Verses 44–46)

What God wills is certain to take place. No one can change a course God has determined. Hence, *"He whom God lets go astray will have no one else to protect him."* (Verse 44) When God knows, on the basis of a person's true attitude and actions that he deserves to be left astray, His word that this person be left to follow his own devices will be done. He will then have no one to save him from error or its ultimate results, or to assist in its retraction: *"When the wrongdoers come face to face with the suffering [awaiting them], you will see them exclaiming, 'Is there any way of return?' You shall see them brought before the fire, disgraced and humiliated, looking with a furtive glance."* (Verses 44–45)

In this present world, the wrongdoers are normally arrogant, despotic and transgressors. Hence, their highlighted aspect on the Day of Judgement is that of humiliation. They see the suffering awaiting them and their pride crumbles. Subdued, they will meekly ask: *"Is there any way of return?"* It is a question that combines eagerness and despair of any chance to save themselves. They are made to see the fire and they look at it in disgrace and utter humiliation. They cannot lift their eyes; therefore, they cast only a furtive glance.

It will be clear then that the believers are the ones who state the truth: *"The believers will then say: The true losers are the ones who have forfeited themselves and their kindred on this Day of Resurrection."* (Verse 45) They are the ones who have lost everything, standing there humbly asking for a second chance that will not be given. The final comment on this image explains the outcome for those brought before the fire: *"Indeed the wrongdoers will fall into long-lasting suffering. No protector whatever will they have to help them against God. He whom God lets go astray shall find no way forward."* (Verses 45–46) No support will be forthcoming as the final word has been said and all ways are sealed.

When Response is Slow Coming

Now the *sūrah* addresses those who stubbornly opposed the Prophet's message with an order to respond to their Lord before such a fate comes upon them, all of a sudden, when they will be without support. A directive to the Prophet is added instructing him to turn away from

them if they persist in their rejection. His task though is only to deliver his message; he is not responsible for anyone:

Respond to your Lord before there comes, by God's will, a day that cannot be put off. There shall be no refuge for you on that day, nor shall you be able to deny your sins. If they turn away, We have not sent you to be their keeper. Your only duty is to deliver the message [entrusted to you]. When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude. (Verses 47–48)

Having made the warning and the directive abundantly clear, these verses portray the nature of the one who opposes the Divine message and stubbornly refuses to submit to its truth. He is fickle, wildly rejoicing when he is granted something of God's grace and panicking in the face of adversity. In such a situation, man often transgresses all bounds and shows no gratitude for what he is given: "*When We give man a taste of Our grace, he rejoices in it, but if misfortune befalls him on account of what he has done with his own hands, he is bereft of gratitude.*" (Verse 48)

By way of comment on this, the *sūrah* makes absolutely clear that whatever happiness or misfortune, affluence or scarcity befalls man is determined by God. It is very strange therefore for someone, who reacts in this way to blessings and misfortune, to turn away from God when He holds all the strings affecting his life:

To God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth. He creates what He will. He grants female offspring to whomever He will, and male to whomever He will; or gives both male and female to whomever He will, and causes whomever He will to be barren. He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power. (Verses 49–50)

Offspring is an aspect of what man is given or denied. It is something very dear to man. Since human nature is very sensitive to procreation, looking at it from this angle is more effective. The *sūrah* spoke earlier of man's provisions and how they are given in plentiful or scant measure.

Offspring is a different aspect of what God provides man with. It is no different from money, however, in the way it is granted.

These verses begin by stating that everything in the heavens and earth belongs to God alone. This introduction fits with every detail that follows this statement of general ownership. The same is true of the succeeding sentence: "*He creates what He will.*" (Verse 49) This emphasizes the effect the verse aims to generate, directing man, who loves every good thing, to turn to God who creates everything that man loves and dislikes.

Further details are given of what God may grant or withhold. He may grant female offspring to anyone. The Arabs addressed for the first time by the Qur'ān used to dislike females. He also grants male children to anyone He chooses. Alternatively, He may give offspring of both kinds to anyone. The fourth situation is that He may deny offspring altogether, making people barren. What is important to remember is that all these situations are determined by God's will. None interferes in His decision which is based on His perfect knowledge and executed by His power: "*He is All-Knowing, infinite in His power.*" (Verse 50)

Methods of Revelation

As it draws to its conclusion, the *sūrah* picks up its main theme again, which is the truth of revelation and message. It now speaks of the nature of this contact between God and His chosen servants and how it is done. It asserts that such contact has actually taken place with the last messenger, Muḥammad (peace be upon him). This last contact has a definite objective God wishes to accomplish, namely, providing guidance along a straight path to whoever chooses to be guided:

It is not granted to any human being that God should speak to him except through revelation or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger to reveal by His command what He will. He is exalted, wise. Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muḥammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a

light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (Verses 51–53)

The first of these verses makes it abundantly clear that no man is ever spoken to by God face to face. 'Ā'ishah is quoted as saying: "Whoever claims that Muḥammad has seen his Lord is delivering a very grave falsehood." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] God speaks to people in one of three ways. First, by 'revelation', which is given directly and the recipient knows that it comes from God. Secondly, 'from behind a veil', as God spoke to Moses whose request to see God was denied. In fact, he was unable to stand firm when God's glory was revealed to the mountain. The relevant Qur'ānic report states: "*When Moses came for Our appointment and his Lord spoke to him, he said: 'My Lord, show Yourself to me, so that I may look at You.'* Said [God]: '*You shall not see Me. But look upon the mountain; if it remains firm in its place, then, only then, you shall see Me.'* When his Lord revealed His glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down. Moses fell down senseless. When he came to himself, he said: '*Limitless You are in Your glory. To You I turn in repentance. I am the first to truly believe in You.*'" (7: 143)

The third form of address is that God sends a messenger, who is an angel, 'to reveal by His command what He will.' This takes different forms, which the Prophet explained as follows:

1. The angel would impart to him something he recognized within himself, without seeing the angel. The Prophet said: 'The Holy Spirit has imparted to me that no soul will ever die until it has had whatever provisions assigned to it. Therefore, remain God-fearing and moderate your requests.'
2. The angel would come to the Prophet in the form of a man who spoke to him and made sure that he understood what was being said to him.
3. The angel would give him the revelation in a way that sounded like a bell ringing in his ear. This was the hardest form for the

Prophet. He would be perspiring even on a very cold day. If he was riding a camel, his camel would fall to the ground. Once he received revelation in this way when he was seated, with his thigh next to that of Zayd ibn Thābit who felt then that his bone was almost broken.

4. The Prophet would see the angel in the angel's own form, giving him whatever God bid him give. This happened to him twice as mentioned in verses 7 and 13 of *Sūrah* 53, The Star.⁸

Such were the different forms of contact and revelation. "*He is Exalted, Wise.*" (Verse 51) He bestows His revelation from on high, to whomever He chooses, according to His wisdom.

The Nature of Revelation

At this point I have to say that whenever I read a Qur'ānic verse or a statement by the Prophet that mentions revelation, I feel a shudder as I try to think how it happened. How does such contact take place between the One who is eternal, having no defined space in time or place, who encompasses everything and has nothing that bears any resemblance to Him, and an ordinary mortal? And how is such contact then represented in words, sentences and meanings? How can a mortal receive God's eternal word which is totally unlike what we know? How this, and how that? I then say to myself: why should I ask when I cannot imagine things beyond my limited space within the world of mortals? The truth is that this took place and was given a form which I can now recognize within my immediate world.

Yet the shudder remains. Prophethood is something great indeed. Similarly, the moment when an ordinary man receives revelation from on high is indeed very great. My reader, can you feel it with me? Are you, like me, trying to imagine it; imagine this revelation coming from 'there'? Am I saying, there? No! there is no such thing as 'there'. Revelation comes from no place, time, space, direction or situation. It

8. Ibn al-Qayyim, *Zād al-Ma'ād*, Beirut, 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 78–80.

comes from the Absolute, the Infinite, the Eternal, from God Almighty. It is addressed to a mortal: it is true that the recipient is a Prophet and a messenger, but he remains confined to the limited world of mortals. It is such a wonderful and miraculous contact which can only be made a reality by God who alone knows how it becomes reality. My reader, do you appreciate the feelings I am trying to portray in such disjointed sentences? Indeed, I do not know what I am saying about what I experience in the depths of my heart as I try to contemplate this great event, which is miraculous in both nature and form. It took place on numerous occasions during the lifetime of God's messenger. Several people saw some aspects of it with their own eyes.

‘Ā’ishah witnessed some of these remarkable moments in the history of mankind. She says about one of them: “The Prophet said to me, ‘Ā’ishah! Here is Gabriel presenting his greeting to you.’ I said, ‘Peace be to him, together with God’s mercy.’ The Prophet was seeing what we could not see.” [Related by al-Bukhārī.] Zayd ibn Thābit also witnessed such a great moment as stated earlier. Other companions of the Prophet saw it on many occasions, recognizing the fact as they looked at the Prophet. They left him alone to receive whatever he received. When it was over, he was with them just as he was before.

Then, what sort of special nature distinguishes the human soul that makes this contact with the sublime? What is the element within the human soul that enables it to be the recipient of revelation from on high? This is yet another issue. In what way did the Prophet’s soul, which is a human soul, feel this contact and how did it open its receptive faculties to revelation? How did it feel the universe in those moments when God opened His glory to it, with His words resounding in its every corner?

What care, what grace, what honour are bestowed on man, such a small creature, when God in His glory confers on him what enlightens his way ahead and keeps him on the right track? Such honour appears great indeed when we remember that, compared to God’s kingdom, man looks more insignificant than a mosquito compared to man.

Revelation is indeed a reality, but a sublime one. It appears to rise to a high and distant horizon which our faculties can hardly perceive.

The Guiding Light

Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muhammad] by Our command. You knew neither revelation nor faith, but We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants. You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth. Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return. (Verses 52–53)

It was by means of such contact that revelation was given to the Prophet: “*Thus have We revealed a spirit to you [Muhammad] by Our command.*” (Verse 52) The process was the same as revelation granted to earlier messengers, bringing to the Prophet a ‘spirit’ that gives life to souls, motivating them to act and implement the Divine message. “*You knew neither revelation nor faith.*” (Verse 52) The Qur’ān describes the Prophet’s soul prior to revelation in this way. The Prophet had heard of revelation and faith before, because the Arabs were aware of other communities that had scriptures and believed in a well-defined faith. It is not the mere knowledge of such matters that this statement refers to. The reference here is to how revelation affected the Prophet’s heart and conscience and how he interacted with it. He certainly experienced nothing of this before this spirit was revealed to him by God’s command.

“*But We made it a light, guiding with it whoever We will of Our servants.*” (Verse 52) This is the total nature of the message given through this revelation. It is a light that imparts happiness to those hearts that are guided by it. “*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God.*” (Verses 52–53) Special emphasis is placed here on relating guidance to God’s will, making it clear that He alone grants it only to whom He will on the basis of His own knowledge, shared with no one else. The Prophet is only the means chosen to fulfil God’s will. He does not initiate guidance in people’s hearts. He only delivers God’s message which opens the way to the fulfilment of God’s will.

“*You most certainly give guidance to the straight path, the path of God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth.*” (Verses 52–53) Guidance shows us the path of God, at which point all ways converge, because it leads to the Sovereign who alone has dominion over the

heavens and the earth. Whoever is guided to His path is certain to know the laws that God has set in operation in the universe, bringing their forces into play and providing sustenance to all. Hence, the whole universe turns to its Supreme Owner to whom all shall return: "*Most certainly, to God all things shall in the end return.*" (Verse 53) He will then judge them all. Such is the light God has given so that people will go along the way He has chosen for them; they will return to Him having obeyed His command and benefited by His guidance.

Thus the *sūrah* is brought to its conclusion. It began with a discussion of revelation, which provided its main theme. It stated that revelation started with the early prophets, making it clear that Divine religion is one, outlining the same code and showing the same way. It gives humanity its new leadership represented by the person of Muḥammad (peace be upon him), and in the community that believes in his message. This community is entrusted with the task of guiding people to the straight path leading to God. The *sūrah* also outlines the characteristics of this community which qualify it to provide sound leadership. It is this community that shoulders the trust bestowed from on high by the sublime process of revelation.

