

## SŪRAH 48

# Al-Fath

(Victory)

## Prologue

This *sūrah* belongs to the Madinan period, revealed as it was shortly after the signing of the peace treaty at al-Ḥudaybiyah in year 6 of the Islamic calendar. It comments on the events leading to the momentous signing of this treaty as also describes the situation in which the Muslim community found itself at that time. Between the revelation of this *sūrah* and *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad, which precedes it in the Qur'ānic order, there was a lapse of three years which witnessed developments that had far-reaching effects on the life of the Muslim community in Madīnah. These involved changes in the attitudes of both the Muslim community and its opponents, and even greater changes in the Muslim community's psychological and mental framework. In this respect, it became far more mature in its understanding and implementing of faith.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* and its message, however, we need to review the major event that was the signing of the peace treaty so as to understand the circumstances then prevailing as the Muslim community received this new revelation.

The Prophet saw himself in a dream entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah together with his Companions, some of them having shaven their heads and some with their hair cut short. The unbelievers in Makkah had prevented them entry into Makkah since their migration

to Madīnah. They did not even allow them entry during the four sacred months that all Arabs honoured in the pre-Islamic period, laying down their arms and regarding fighting during these times as a great enormity. Entry into Makkah during these four months was free for all, in perfect safety. Even people involved in vengeance killings would meet in peace at this time. A man would come across the killer of his father or brother without raising a finger against him, or trying to prevent his entry into the Sacred Mosque. Nevertheless, the idolaters in Makkah violated their well-established traditions, preventing the Prophet and the Muslims from entering Makkah throughout the six years that followed their migration to Madīnah. In year 6, the Prophet had this dream and reported it to his Companions who were delighted with it, realizing that a dream by a prophet would certainly come true.

For further information about these events we will mainly rely on the report given by Ibn Hishām as this is more detailed than most and also provides a fuller picture. It is also generally in agreement with reports in the two *Ḥadīth* anthologies of Imām al-Bukhārī and Imām Aḥmad, as well as the summary given by Ibn Ḥazm in his book *Jawāmi' al-Sīrah*, and with reports by other scholars.<sup>1</sup>

The Prophet announced to his Companions and to the Arabian tribes around Madīnah that he intended to visit Makkah to honour the Ka'bah and to worship there. He invited them all to join him. Most of the Arabian tribes which had not yet accepted Islam were highly reluctant to join this peaceful expedition because they feared that the Quraysh were bound to resist the Muslims and prevent them from entering Makkah. If the Quraysh were determined to stop the Muslims, an armed conflict might erupt. Hence, those Arabian tribes wanted to stay out of it. The Muslims, however, were very glad to join the Prophet, who marched at the head of some 1,400 of his followers.<sup>2</sup>

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1. I am quoting here my own version of the events. It is faithful to the report by Ibn Hishām, omitting only a few details that a reader who is unfamiliar with historical Arabic reports written more than 1,000 years ago would find difficult, and adding a few explanatory sentences. I do not, however, divert from the narrative as given by the author. – Editor's note.

2. Salahi, Adil, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 2002, p. 497.

The Prophet, however, marched on until he arrived at a place called Ghadīr al-Ashṭāṭ where Bishr ibn Sufyān gave him his report that the Quraysh were mobilizing and seeking the help of others to fight him and prevent him from entering Makkah.<sup>3</sup>

The Prophet was distressed at this report. He said: "How ill-advised is the Quraysh! What would they lose if they were to leave me alone addressing my message to the rest of Arabia? If those Arabs were to kill me, the Quraysh would have what they wish. If I am to be the victorious, they must either accept Islam without having suffered any losses, or fight me with their forces intact. What do they think? By God, I will continue to strive for the message God has given me until it is triumphant or I die."

Reflecting on the new situation after he had learnt that the Quraysh were preparing for armed conflict, the Prophet decided to try to avoid such an eventuality. Hence, he asked whether anyone in his camp was able to lead them through a route which took them away from the Quraysh, so that they could avoid an armed conflict with their advance force. A man from the tribe of Aslam came forward and led them through a very rough route which was very hard for the Muslims. Eventually, they found themselves in an open area which was easy to cross. The Prophet commanded them to take the right-hand route until they finally arrived at the plain of al-Hudaybiyah, to the south of Makkah, which was only a day's walk from the Holy City.

### **A Declaration of Peace**

Suddenly, the Prophet's she-camel sat down. People shouted at her to make her rise again, but she would not move. Some people suggested that she refused to go forward. The Prophet told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. He said: "She is held back for the same reason which held back the elephant." This was a reference to an incident which took place nearly 60 years earlier

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3. Ibid., p. 499.

when Abrahah, the ruler of the Yemen, was riding an elephant at the head of a large force, whose aim was to destroy the Ka'bah. Shortly before arriving in Makkah, the elephant sat still and would not move forward; it was ready to go back. Shortly afterwards, Abrahah's army was attacked by birds which threw stones at the army and destroyed it. The story is mentioned in a short *sūrah* of the Qur'an entitled, The Elephant, and which may be translated as follows: *"In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. Are you not aware how your Lord dealt with people of the Elephant? Did He not utterly confound their treacherous plan, and send against them flocks of birds, which pelted them with stones of sand and clay? Thus He made them like stalks of devoured leaves."* (105: 1-5)

The Prophet then declared: "By Him Who holds my soul in His hand, I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today which helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." He then ordered his Companions to encamp.

The place was almost dry, with only one well with very little water. The Companions of the Prophet economized on water as much as they could, but the well soon dried up. When they were very thirsty, they complained to the Prophet. He came to the well, sat next to it and asked for a pail to be brought to him with whatever quantity of water they could find. He took some water in his hand, rinsed his mouth and prayed to God. He then asked his Companions to pour the water back into the well and told them to leave the well for a while. Some reports also suggest that the Prophet took an arrow from his bag and asked his Companions to throw it into the well. Soon the well was full of water and provided all the water the Muslims needed to drink, perform ablutions and give to their camels and other animals. They suffered no shortage of water until they departed.

### Successive Emissaries

When the Quraysh realized that the Prophet had managed to evade their advance forces and that he was encamped at al-Hudaybiyah,

they decided to send a messenger to him. They were also aware that should they succeed in stopping Muḥammad from entering Makkah, when he had come with no purpose other than to visit the Sacred Mosque, their action would not go unquestioned by the other Arabs. Their prestige was derived from the fact that they were custodians of the Sacred House and that they prevented no one from worshipping there. The first emissary they sent was Budayl ibn Waraqā' of the tribe of Khuzā'ah, who went with a group of his fellow tribesmen. The tribe of Khuzā'ah was always sympathetic towards the Prophet. Some of its men had embraced Islam, but even those who had not were far from hostile to the message of Islam. Budayl spoke to the Prophet and told him that the Quraysh were determined to prevent him from entering Makkah. The Prophet assured him that he had no intention of fighting anyone. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah and to demonstrate the Muslims' recognition of its sanctity. The Prophet's comment on the Quraysh's attitude was given in these words: "The Quraysh are now in such a state that they can think only of war. I am prepared to agree a truce with them, if they so desire. I ask them only to leave me alone to speak to people. If I am successful and other people follow me, then the choice is theirs to do likewise. If they refuse, they will have preserved their strength. If they are determined to stop me, I swear by God that I will fight them over this cause of mine until I die, and even then they cannot prevent what God wills."

Budayl went back to the Quraysh and said to them: "We have come to you after seeing this man and hearing what he says. Would you like to hear what he told us?" Some of them shouted: "We do not wish to hear anything he says." Some wiser people requested him to report what he had heard. When he finished his report, he pleaded with them, saying that they were rash in their attitude because Muḥammad did not intend to fight them. He wanted only to visit the Ka'bah.

The Quraysh leaders were not persuaded to moderate their attitude. They said: "Even if he does not want to fight, he will never be allowed to enter Makkah against our will. No one shall say that we allowed that to happen."

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥafs to speak to the Prophet, and he came back with the same message as Budayl. The third envoy the Quraysh sent was al-Ḥulays ibn 'Alqamah, the leader of the Ḥabshī tribe. When the Prophet saw him coming from a distance, he said to his Companions: "This is a man who belongs to a religious community. Drive the sacrificial animals towards him so that he may see them." When al-Ḥulays saw the sacrificial animals, he returned to the Quraysh without speaking to the Prophet, because he realized that there should have been no cause for contention. He advised the Quraysh to leave Muḥammad alone and allow him to worship at the Ka'bah. They spoke harshly to him and told him to leave them alone. Al-Ḥulays was angered by the Quraysh's attitude, but they were not to be persuaded by any argument.

### **The Fourth Envoy**

Having rejected the advice of all three envoys to allow Muḥammad to enter Makkah and worship at the Ka'bah, the Quraysh decided to send a fourth emissary. None of the existing reports throws any light on the reasons which made the Quraysh feel that sending another envoy to speak to the Prophet would bring about any change in the situation. It is not known what the Quraysh hoped to achieve by sending these envoys when it was not prepared to listen to their advice. Perhaps it was all a mark of the Quraysh's confusion. On the other hand, it may have been an exercise in self-justification. The Quraysh might have wanted to be able to say that they tried all they could to reach accommodation with Muḥammad. Be that as it may, the man the Quraysh chose this time was 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd, a leader of the tribe of Thaqīf, which lived in the town of Ṭā'if. 'Urwah, however, wanted first to make sure that on his return he would not receive the same harsh treatment as the other envoys the Quraysh sent, should he come back with advice the Quraysh might not like. He, therefore, addressed the people of the Quraysh: "I have noted what sort of abuse you have poured on the heads of those you have sent to Muḥammad. You know that to me you are

parents and that I am your son. When I heard of your trouble, I gathered those of my people who obeyed my orders and have come to give you support." The Quraysh answered: "This is certainly true, and we have no doubts about you." When he sat down to speak to the Prophet, he said:

Muhammad, I have left your people mobilizing their forces. They are swearing that they will never let you reach the Sacred House until you have overwhelmed them. Should there be a fight between you and them, you are faced with one of two eventualities: either you conquer your own people – and we have never heard of any man who has conquered his own people or your soldiers will let you down. Have you gathered this mob to smash your own people? It is the Quraysh you are fighting, and the Quraysh have mobilized even their women and children, and are now in a very determined mood, pledging to God that you will never enter their city. My feeling is that you will be in a very difficult situation tomorrow, when this mob let you down. I certainly recognize no one among them and cannot see that any one of them comes from a respectable background.

At this moment Abū Bakr interrupted him and told him to be more respectful.

As he talked to the Prophet, 'Urwah kept trying to hold the Prophet's beard, following the Arabian habit which indicated a sincere desire to maintain good relations. Al-Mughīrah ibn Shu'bah, a Muslim nephew of 'Urwah, was standing behind the Prophet, holding his sword in his hand and wearing his shield. Every time 'Urwah raised his hand to touch the Prophet's beard, al-Mughīrah hit him with the bottom of his sword on his hand and said: "Keep your hand off the Prophet's face before it is chopped off." 'Urwah did not recognize him, but when he persisted, 'Urwah said: "Confound you – how ill-mannered you are." The Prophet smiled at this demonstration of his Companion's love and respect for him.

'Urwah tried his best to weaken the Prophet's determination to enter Makkah, raising before him the prospect of defeat and counselling him against causing a military conflict. The Prophet assured him that he wanted nothing more than to pay a visit to the Ka'bah in the same way as anyone else could visit it to worship, and was not prevented from so doing. After all, the Ka'bah did not belong to the Quraysh; they were only its custodians and as such they had no right to prevent anyone from worshipping there.

'Urwah did not fail to notice the Muslims' respect for the Prophet. When he went back to the Quraysh he advised them:

People of the Quraysh, I have seen the Khosroe, the Persian Emperor, and the Caesar of the Byzantine Empire and Negus of Abyssinia, in their respective kingdoms. I swear that I have never seen a king enjoying among his people a similar position to that of Muḥammad among his Companions. They do not fix their eyes when they look at him; they do not raise their voices when they speak to him. He does not need to give more than a signal to any one of them for that man to do what he is bid. I have looked at those people and I have seen that they do not care what may happen to them if they are able to protect their master. Make up your minds. He has made a proposal to you and I counsel you to conclude a peace agreement with him, and to accept his offer. I am giving you my sincere advice and I certainly fear that you will not be able to overcome him.

The Quraysh, however did not like 'Urwah's opinion and were not willing to consider the idea of peace. 'Urwah, therefore, left them with his people and returned to Ṭā'if.

Thus, every envoy the Quraysh sent returned and counselled them to moderate their attitude and allow the Muslims to offer their worship at the Ka'bah. None, however, was able to persuade the Quraysh that its hard-line did not serve its own interest. Motivated by pride and anger, the Quraysh was determined not to give in, whatever the cost.



The Muslims, on the other hand, did not wish to overrun Makkah. That course would result in more bloodshed and a fight against their own people. They stayed calm, hoping that some solution to the problem could still be found.

One report suggests that the Quraysh sent a small force of 40 or 50 men, giving them orders to go around the Muslims' camp and try to take one of the Prophet's Companions prisoner. As it turned out, they were taken prisoner themselves and were brought before the Prophet. He, however, pardoned them and set them free. God mentions in the Qur'ān that He has bestowed calmness on His Messenger and the believers and caused them to abide by the rules of faith and piety. That is the attitude which best becomes them.

### **The Prophet's Envoy**

Considering the situation and the fact that he had received four emissaries from the Quraysh without any sign that the Quraysh were mellowing their opposition to the Muslims' entry to Makkah, the Prophet thought it might be useful to bring some pressure to bear on the Quraysh. He therefore decided to send them an envoy to assure them that his objective was only to worship at the Ka'bah, not to pick a fight with anyone. The envoy was Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah of the tribe of Khuza'ah. As soon as Kharrāsh arrived in Makkah, however, his camel was wounded by the Quraysh people, who also wanted to kill him. He was saved by the Habshī tribe, whose chief al-Hulays was one of the Quraysh's envoys to the Prophet. The treatment Kharrāsh received was against the age-honoured traditions of diplomacy, which gave immunity to messengers and envoys. The Prophet, however, did not wish to allow this incident to be an obstacle in his attempt to reach a peaceful solution to the problem. He therefore overlooked the matter and concentrated on maintaining contact with the Quraysh. He thought that sending a more prominent figure from among his Companions might be more useful.

The Prophet first thought of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb as a suitable messenger. 'Umar, however, pointed out that his own clan, Banī

'Adīy, no longer had any influence in Makkah. No one would protect him should he come to any harm. He suggested that 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān of the Umayyad branch of the Quraysh was better placed to act as the Prophet's ambassador.

Despite the fact that 'Uthmān's clan was very influential in Makkah, he had to go under the protection of his own cousin, Abān ibn Sa'īd ibn al-Āṣ. Enjoying that protection, he was able to deliver his message, speak to the Quraysh elders and explain to them that the Muslims had come for the purpose of worship only and had no other intention. It was better for the Quraysh, 'Uthmān argued, that they should be seen by the Arabs as faithful to their charge as custodians of the Sacred House. The Quraysh, however, were adamant in their hard-line attitude. The only concession 'Uthmān could get from the Quraysh was that they allowed him to do the *ṭawāf* should he so desire. He made it clear to them that under the circumstances, he would not do so until the Prophet had done his own *ṭawāf*.

'Uthmān's discussions with the Quraysh leaders were prolonged and he was in Makkah for three days. Moreover, he was apparently able to contact some people from among the Quraysh who had adopted Islam and remained in Makkah, keeping the fact of their conversion to Islam a secret. Apparently there were quite a few of these people, who yearned for the day when they would be able to declare their stand and enjoy freedom of faith. 'Uthmān carried a message from the Prophet to them telling them that victory would be coming soon. They were greatly encouraged by that message and requested 'Uthmān to give the Prophet their respects and to tell him, on their behalf, that they believed that God, Who had enabled him to encamp at al-Ḥudaybiyah, was able to open the gates of Makkah for him.

Some reports suggest that 'Uthmān was arrested by the Quraysh when it discovered that he had made these contacts with the Qurayshi Muslims. Indeed, a rumour began to spread that 'Uthmān was killed. It did not take long before this rumour was heard in the Muslim camp. 'Uthmān's prolonged absence could only lend credence to that rumour. Receiving no indication to the contrary,

the Prophet concluded that the report of 'Uthmān's death was correct. The treatment which was meted out to his first envoy, Kharrāsh ibn Umayyah, served as supporting evidence. He felt that the situation had reached a stage where tolerance could only be counter-productive.

### A Pledge to Fight and Die

Deeply hurt and very sad, the Prophet felt that by killing 'Uthmān, his Companion and envoy, the Quraysh had closed the door on all efforts which aimed at reaching a peaceful settlement. The other alternative was the one which he had tried hard to avoid: namely, war. He called on his Companions to give him a pledge to fight the Quraysh to the bitter end. He was standing underneath a tree when he requested that pledge, and his Companions rushed to give him what he asked of them. Every one of them pledged that he would fight and never flee from battle even if that meant his own death. The Prophet was pleased with his Companions' responses. He also made a pledge on behalf of 'Uthmān: "'Uthmān is on a mission given him by God and His Messenger. I, therefore, make a pledge on his behalf." He clasped his hands together and said: "This is for 'Uthmān." In comment on this pledge, the Qur'ān says: *"God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise."* (48: 18–19)

That pledge is known in Islamic history books as Bay'at al-Ridwān, or 'the pledge earning God's pleasure', in view of the clear statement that God was pleased with those who took part in it. Indeed, the pledge warmed the Prophet's heart, since it was yet another demonstration that his Companions were always prepared to render whatever sacrifice they were called upon to make in defence of the cause of Islam. Those Companions of the Prophet realized that numerically the Quraysh were far superior to them. Besides, when they started their journey, they did not bring their

war equipment with them. War was completely absent from their minds. None of them wore body armour or carried it with him. They carried only the minimum armament which was absolutely necessary for travelling in the desert of Arabia: their swords in their sheaths. Their pledge meant, in effect, that they were determined to face the far superior strength of the Quraysh, on the Quraysh's own ground with swords only, leaving no room for withdrawal or escape. They were fully aware of what they had pledged to do. When they were subsequently asked about the terms of their pledge and what it entailed, their answer was: 'Death'. Such a pledge, readily given and sincerely meant, would definitely earn God's pleasure, as those people had definitely earned it. Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh, a Companion of the Prophet who took part in that pledge, said: "The Prophet (peace be upon him) told us on the day of al-Ḥudaybiyah: You are the best people on earth."

We should stress here a small but significant point about that tree beneath which the pledge was given. The tree was subsequently cut down and the place where it used to stand was forgotten. This is certainly good for Islam. Had it survived, people who are quick to give exaggerated significance to places and to things associated with historical events might have raised a monument in its place or built a mosque or some other building on that site and made it a shrine to visit. Islam does not recognize the sanctity of any such place or object. Had it been allowed to survive, the tree might have acquired, with the passage of time, more significance than the event which took place beneath it. The tree, however, is immaterial, while the pledge itself remains a lesson for every Muslim.

Shortly after the pledge was made, 'Uthmān arrived to give the Prophet an account of his mission. His arrival took the heat off the situation. The Prophet was very pleased to see him alive but was not happy to learn of the Quraysh's adamant attitude. He reflected on the situation, trying to assess the choices open to him.

The Quraysh, on the other hand, heard of the pledge given by the Muslims to the Prophet. Their chiefs were engaged in high level consultations. They realized that the Muslims' pledge meant that their determination to achieve their purpose was not

in doubt. Past experience suggested that should the two sides be engaged in a military conflict, the outcome might very well be a victory for the Muslims, despite their relatively small numbers and poor equipment. That the Muslims could always be relied upon to fight hard and well and not to weaken in the face of adversity was something not to be doubted. Now that they had given the Prophet such a clear commitment to fight to the bitter end, the Muslims would not just go away. Moreover, the Quraysh might not have been fully convinced that they acted within their rights when they tried to prevent the Muslims from worshipping at the Ka'bah. Their motives were nothing more than pride of position and conceit. Hence, the Quraysh realized that they must think seriously of the consequences, especially if the military conflict went against them.

### **A Delegation for Peace**

Some wiser men among the Quraysh must have suggested that achieving a peaceful settlement might preserve the Quraysh's dignity better than war, even if the war ended in its favour. The views of its earlier envoys – particularly those of al-Hulays of the Ḥabshī tribe and 'Urwah ibn Mas'ūd of the Thaqīf – began to appear highly valid. Moreover, should the Quraysh push matters to the point of flare-up, their action might mean a fight near the Sacred House and in the sacred month. This would, in effect, be setting a precedent which was certain to do more harm than good to the Quraysh. Hence the arguments for moderation suddenly began to appear much weightier. A delegation headed by Suhayl ibn 'Amr was, therefore, dispatched to negotiate the terms of a peace settlement with the Prophet.

The Prophet received Suhayl ibn 'Amr and his delegation well. He instructed his Companions to show their sacrificial animals and to raise their voices with phrases expressing the fact that they had come only in response to God's call to honour the Sacred House.

The talks between the two sides were not easy. Despite the fact that the Prophet was keen to achieve a peace settlement, the

negotiations had to deal with several issues of substance. The topics included: the Prophet's visit to the Sacred House; the Quraysh's determination not to seem to have given in to force; the possibility of agreeing a long term truce between the two sides, putting an end to their frequent military clashes; the sort of relations which should exist between the two sides; and the freedom of each side to make political moves on the wider horizon of the whole of Arabia.

There was, however, no reason to prolong the discussions. The Prophet accepted all the Quraysh's conditions readily. It was Suhayl ibn 'Amr who took a long time in his presentation of each of those conditions and what each of them entailed. Indeed, the Quraysh side were surprised that all their conditions were accepted by the Prophet without too much trouble. It was necessary, however, to write the agreement down and to have it signed by representatives of both sides.

### **Unease in the Muslim Camp**

The Prophet's attitude caused a stir in the Muslim camp. They were not used to seeing the Prophet taking such a very soft attitude. It was also surprising for the Quraysh negotiators themselves. Not only did the Prophet accept all the terms the Quraysh stipulated, he did not consult his Companions in the matter, contrary to his normal practice. Moreover, the terms of the peace agreement were extremely surprising to the Muslims, because they tended to cast the Muslim side as much weaker than the Quraysh. To the Muslims, accepting such terms was neither useful nor necessary. Some of them could not hide their dissatisfaction. This is epitomized by the attitude of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. When the terms of the peace agreement were finalized and were about to be written down, 'Umar came to Abū Bakr and said: "Abū Bakr, is he not God's Messenger?" Abū Bakr answered in the affirmative. 'Umar again asked: "Are we not the Muslims?" When Abū Bakr gave the same answer, 'Umar went on: "Are they not the idolaters?" Abū Bakr again answered: "Yes." 'Umar then asked him: "Why then should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" Abū Bakr

answered with a piece of advice, saying to his questioner: "Follow him whatever he does, 'Umar. I believe that he is God's Messenger." But 'Umar was still perturbed and said: "And I too believe that he is God's Messenger."

'Umar's argument was that since what separated the two sides was really a single issue – right against wrong, faith against lack of faith – those who were on the side of right and truth must not give in to those who championed the cause of wrong and falsehood. The believers must never accept any sort of humiliation when it came to matters relating to faith. Indeed, they should always show pride in their religion. Hence, 'Umar was not to be deterred. He went to the Prophet and put to him the same questions: "Are you not God's Messenger? Are we not the Muslims? Are they not the idolaters?" To all these questions, the Prophet answered in the affirmative. The final question 'Umar put was again the same: "Why, then, should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?"

The Prophet's answer provided the clue to his attitude: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." The Prophet was indeed following Divine orders which he must have received at that time.

The Prophet then called in 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib to write down the peace agreement so that it might be signed by both sides. Again, Suhayl ibn 'Amr showed maximum rigidity, while the Prophet showed complete flexibility.

The Prophet told 'Alī to write: "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Beneficent." Suhayl interrupted: "I do not know this. Write down: 'In your name, Our Lord'." The Prophet told 'Alī to write the phrase Suhayl proposed. He continued with his dictation: "These are the terms of the peace agreement negotiated between Muḥammad, God's Messenger, and Suhayl ibn 'Amr." Again, Suhayl interrupted: "Had I accepted that you are God's Messenger, I would not have fought you. You have to write down your name and your father's name." The Prophet accepted Suhayl's point and revised his dictation, telling 'Alī to write:

These are the terms of the peace agreed by Muḥammad ibn 'Abdullāh and Suhayl ibn 'Amr.

- Both have agreed to a complete truce for a period of ten years, during which all people will enjoy peace and security and will not attack one another.
- Moreover, if anyone from the Quraysh joins Muḥammad without permission from his guardian or chief, he shall be returned to the Quraysh.
- If anyone from those in the camp of Muḥammad joins the Quraysh, they are not required to return him.
- Both sides agree that they harbour good intentions towards each other.
- No theft or treachery shall be condoned.
- Whoever wishes to enter into an alliance with Muḥammad may do so, and whoever wants to enter into an alliance with the Quraysh may do so.
- It is further agreed that you, Muḥammad, shall return home this year without entering Makkah. At the end of one year, we shall evacuate Makkah for you so that you may enter it with your followers to stay for three days only. You shall carry only the armament necessary for a traveller – namely, your swords in their sheaths. You shall not carry any other arms.

### **A Hard Test of Muslim Intentions**

These were the terms of the peace agreement. When they were written down, witnesses from both sides were asked to sign the document. At that moment, something happened to test the patience of the believers and to give them another opportunity to prove the strength of their faith. A man from Makkah arrived in handcuffs and with his legs in chains. He was being kept prisoner there because he was a Muslim. This man was none other than Suhayl's own son, Abū Jandal. It was his father who imprisoned



him and fastened his shackles. Nevertheless, he had been able to escape and to take an unfamiliar route through the mountains surrounding Makkah until he arrived at al-Hudaybiyah. When the Muslims saw him, they were very glad that he had escaped and gave him a fine reception.

While the peace agreement was being written down, Suhayl was too busy to notice anything. When it was finished, Suhayl looked up and saw his son among the Muslims. He went up to him, hit him in the face and took him by the collar. Abū Jandal cried aloud: "My fellow Muslims, am I to be returned to the unbelievers to try to turn me away from my faith?" Those words were very painful to the Muslims, some of whom started to cry.

Suhayl ibn 'Amr, however, was unmoved. He said to God's Messenger: "This is the first person whose case I take up. You must return him to me." The Prophet referred to the fact that Abū Jandal arrived before the agreement was completed: "We have not finished drawing up the document yet." Suhayl said: "Then I have not agreed any terms with you whatsoever." The Prophet pleaded: "Then allow me him."

Suhayl said that he would not. Mikraz, another member of the Quraysh delegation, said that they should allow Muḥammad to have Abū Jandal. The father was adamant and refused all appeals to let his son join the Muslims. He went even further and began to hit his son with a thorny branch of a tree. The Prophet again pleaded with him to let his son go, or at least not to torture him. But Suhayl would accept nothing. Some of Suhayl's friends, however, extended their protection to Abū Jandal and his father stopped hitting him. The Prophet explained to Abū Jandal his inability to help him, speaking to him in a loud voice so that he could hear: "Abū Jandal, be patient and endure your situation for God's sake. He will certainly provide for you and those who are suffering with you a way out of your hardship. We have made a peace agreement with those people, giving them a pledge by God that we will be faithful to the terms of our agreement. We shall not violate our pledges."

## Kill Your Father

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb was again outraged by the situation. He could not understand why the Muslims should accept such humiliating terms or stand idle when a brother of theirs was subjected to harsh treatment for no reason other than the fact that he believed in God and His Messenger. As Abū Jandal was being led away, 'Umar went up to him and walked by his side. He spoke to him: "Be patient, Abū Jandal. These people are unbelievers. They are worthless. The blood of anyone of them is no more precious than the blood of a dog."

As he was walking by Abū Jandal's side and talking to him, he continued to move the handle of his sword towards Abū Jandal, hoping that Abū Jandal would take 'Umar's sword and kill his father. Abū Jandal either did not wish to kill his father or did not understand or notice 'Umar's gesture. He submitted to his fortune until God would help him get his release. He was led away in his shackles and chains. As the Muslims looked at him, their hearts were full of agony because they were unable to help him.

When the document detailing the peace terms was written down, the Prophet asked a number of his Companions to witness the agreement, in addition to witnesses from the Quraysh side. The Muslim witnesses were Abū Bakr, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn 'Awf, Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Maḥmūd ibn Maslamah and 'Abdullāh ibn Suhayl, another son of the chief Quraysh negotiator himself. Mikraz ibn Ḥaṣṣ and Ḥuwayṭib ibn 'Abd al-'Uzzā were the Quraysh witnesses. When the witnessing was finally done, the Quraysh delegation went home.

This peace was supposed to last for ten years. Very few Muslims were able to bring themselves to accept it without experiencing a feeling of unease. What added to their bitterness was the fact that the terms of the agreement meant that they had to go back home without being able to fulfil their purpose of worshipping at the Ka'bah. It should be remembered that the Prophet and his Companions were in *iḥrām*, the state of consecration, having left Madīnah in order to perform the 'Umrah. They were first prevented

from entering Makkah by the declared intention of the Quraysh to use force to stop them. Now they were prevented by the terms of the agreement which they signed with the Quraysh. They were, in effect, in the position of a *muḥṣar*, a person who sets out from home to do his pilgrimage or 'Umrah but is unable to reach his destination owing to some reason beyond his control. God declares in the Qur'ān that such a person can release himself from *iḥrām* by slaughtering a sheep or some other sacrificial animal at the point where he cannot continue his journey.

### **Cancellation of Intended Worship**

The Prophet said to his Companions: "Slaughter your animals and shave and release yourselves from *iḥrām*." No one showed any sign of willingness to comply with this order. The Prophet repeated his command three times and still no one was willing to do as he was told. The Prophet was very angry indeed. He went into his tent where Umm Salamah, his wife who accompanied him on this expedition, was waiting. She immediately noticed how angry he was. She asked him the reason why and he answered: "The Muslims are ruining themselves. I have given them a command and they have not obeyed." He explained to her how his Companions received his orders with indifference and how not one of them was willing to obey. She tried to pacify him: "Messenger of God, do not blame them. They have been under great pressure because of all the trouble you have taken to achieve this peace settlement and because they now realize that they have to take the long way home without achieving their purpose." She then gave him a very sound piece of advice: she told him to go out and slaughter his own sacrificial animals and shave, without speaking to any one of them. The Prophet acted on his wife's advice and went out and slaughtered his camels. He then called someone to shave his head. When his Companions witnessed what he did, they rushed to do likewise. Some of them helped others to shave and they were extremely unhappy with themselves for not responding to the Prophet's orders in the first place.

Not all of the Muslims at al-Ḥudaybiyah shaved their heads: some of them just cut their hair. The Prophet said: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." Some of his Companions said: "Messenger of God, what about those who have cut their hair?" He answered by repeating the same prayer: "May God have mercy on those who have shaved." The same question about those who had cut their hair was put to him, but he answered by repeating the same prayer a third time. Once more, he was asked about the other group and the Prophet included them in his prayers, saying: "And those who have cut their hair." When he was asked the reason for repeating his prayers for mercy to the shavers three times before he included the other group, he answered: "They have entertained no doubt."<sup>4</sup>

Al-Zuhrī reports: "The Prophet then began his journey home. On the way back to Madīnah, the Prophet received new revelations – the *sūrah* entitled *al-Fath*, or Victory. Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Mujaṃmi' ibn Hārithah, an Anṣārī who had learnt the Qur'ān: "We were with the Prophet at al-Ḥudaybiyah. When we were on the way back, we noticed that people were agitating their camels. People began to ask what was going on. They learnt that the Prophet received a new revelation. We approached him feeling very apprehensive. We saw the Prophet on his camel at Kīrā' al-Ghamīm. When people assembled, he read to them the *Sūrah al-Fath*, starting with, '*We have granted you a glorious victory.*' One of his Companions asked him: 'Is it a victory, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Yes indeed. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, it is a grand victory.'"

Imām Aḥmad relates a report by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "We were with God's Messenger on an expedition. I asked him about something three times, but he did not reply to me. I thought that I had done badly. I mounted my camel and went ahead, apprehensive that something might be revealed to the Prophet concerning me. Soon someone called me by name. I went back to the Prophet fearing what might have been revealed. The Prophet said to me: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me

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4. Ibid., pp. 500–516.

last night, and it is much dearer to me than the whole world and all it contains: *'We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future.'*" (Also related by al-Bukhārī, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī quoting Imām Mālik.)

### The General Atmosphere

Such was the atmosphere in the Muslim community prior to the revelation of this *sūrah*. The Prophet was certain of what God had inspired him. Therefore, he allowed himself no say in the drift of events other than what such divine inspiration pointed to. He referred to this inspiration at every point and before taking any step. Neither the unbelievers nor pressure by his Companions, who were infuriated by the unbelievers' hostility, would make him change his course. Eventually, God put tranquillity in the Muslims' hearts and they were reassured, accepting without hesitation what the Prophet told them, just like their brethren who never entertained any doubt in the first place. The prime example of these was Abū Bakr whose reassurance was never in doubt, not even for a brief moment.

Hence the opening of the *sūrah* gives the Prophet happy news that greatly delights his heart: *"We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support."* (Verses 1–3) The opening also refers to the tranquillity granted to the believers, acknowledging that they were true believers and promising them forgiveness of sins, reward and support from on high: *"It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph."* (Verses 4–5) By contrast, their enemies, hypocrites and idolaters alike, incur God's displeasure and suffering in the life to come: *"God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and*

*they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination."* (Verse 6)

The *sūrah* also notes the pledge the believers gave to the Prophet, considering it a pledge to God. Thus, it establishes a direct relation between the believers and their Lord, the Eternal: *"We have sent you [Muhammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment, but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward."* (Verses 8–10)

Before completing the discussion of the believers' attitude at al-Ḥudaybiyah, the *sūrah* refers, within the context of unkept pledges, to the desert Arabs who stayed behind and did not join the Prophet on this expedition. It shows their excuses to be unfounded and exposes their ill thoughts about God and their expectation that the Prophet and his Companions would encounter disaster. It directs the Prophet as to the attitude he should adopt towards them in future. The style here emphasizes the believers' strength and the weakness of those who stayed behind. It makes it clear that the Muslims would soon be able to make rich war gains, all of which would be covered by those who were too slow to join the Prophet on this expedition: *"The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with*

*you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (Verses 11-16)*

Within the same context, the *sūrah* tells us about those who have genuine excuses, justifying their staying behind. These are they who have some disability or illness that prevents their participation in war: *"No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish."* (Verse 17)

The *sūrah* turns again to the believers, their thoughts and attitudes. It refers to them in a way that is full of honour and acceptance, delighting them with good news of what was soon to happen, praising their firm belief and readiness to sacrifice themselves for God's cause. We see here that God puts this select group of people under His direct care, bestowing on them His goodly acceptance and strengthening them in their noble attitude. He tells them in person that He in His glory was a witness with them as they offered their pledges at a particular spot, under the tree. He was certainly aware of their inner thoughts and feelings, was pleased with them and ensured that they would soon achieve victory that would yield great gains, relating this to God's law that operates throughout the universe. This is indeed a great and remarkable event witnessed by the whole universe: *"God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. Were the unbelievers to fight you,*

*they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way."* (Verses 18–23)

The *sūrah* reminds the believers of God's grace as He stopped their enemies who were intent upon fighting them, denouncing those same enemies who prevented their entry into the Sacred Mosque, and refusing to allow their sacrificial animals to reach their place of slaughter. It reveals to them God's wisdom as He stopped conflict that year, and His grace in making what happened acceptable to them, bestowing tranquillity on them. All this was for a purpose unknown to them but known to God. It was the much better and greater prospect of bringing Makkah into the Islamic fold and making Islam prevail over all religions. All this was according to God's design and by His will: *"It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness."* (Verses 24–28)

The *sūrah* concludes with an outline highlighting the special characteristics of this select group of humanity, the Prophet's Companions. It refers to their description in the Torah and the Gospel and emphasizes God's promise to them of forgiveness of their sins and



granting them rich reward: *"Muhammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah and the Gospel: they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward."* (Verse 29)

Thus the *sūrah* gives a full image of the situation that led to its revelation. It does not relate the events in their chronological order, but highlights the lessons that must be learnt, linking individual events to their permanent rules, and special attitudes to the overall universal system. As always in the Qur'ān, it is hearts and minds that are addressed in a highly inspiring way.

### **A Community Attains Maturity**

Looking at the *sūrah* as a whole and comparing it to the one that precedes it in the Qur'ānic order reveals the profound change in the general attitude of the Muslim community over the three years we believe to have separated the revelation of these two *sūrahs*. We realize the effects the Qur'ān had on that community and how it benefited by the careful education the Prophet imparted to it, enabling it to assume its unique position and play its unparalleled role in human history.

It is clear from the general ambience of this *sūrah* and the feelings it generates that the Muslim community had attained maturity, achieved a coherently high standard of faith, become reassured about its duties and no longer needed strong incentives in order to discharge such duties that required sacrificing life and property. It now needed a restraining influence so that it could look at things calmly and accept the decision of the Highest Leadership of the Islamic message to observe a temporary truce in its confrontation with the enemy.

No longer does the Muslim community need a directive of the type: *"Therefore, do not lose heart or sue for peace. It is you who have the upper hand, and God is with you. He will never let your deeds go to waste."* (47: 35)

or an admonition like: *"You are called upon to give in God's cause, but some among you will turn out to be niggardly. Whoever is niggardly [in God's cause] is niggardly towards himself. God is the source of all wealth, whereas you are the ones in need. If you turn away, He will substitute other people for you, and they will not be like you."* (47: 38) Nor was there any more need to provide incentives to fight for God's cause by speaking about the nobility of martyrdom and the great honour God grants to martyrs. We do not have here any exposition of the purpose of putting the Muslim community to the test by imposing a duty to fight for God's cause, as we have in the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad: *"Had God so willed, He could have punished them Himself, but it is His will that He tests you all by means of one another. And as for those who are slain in God's cause, never will He let their deeds go to waste. He will grant them guidance, and bring them to a happy state, and will admit them to the Garden He has already made known to them."* (47: 4-6)

By contrast, the discourse in the present *sūrah* highlights the tranquillity God placed in the believers' hearts, or bestowed on them, to restrain them from being over zealous. It also reassures them that what took place was by God's command, referring to the Prophet's wisdom as he opted for a lenient and conciliatory approach. It speaks of God's pleasure with those who offered their pledges to the Prophet under the tree, and paints at the end a bright picture of the Muslim community under the Prophet's leadership.

The *sūrah* certainly speaks of the need to fulfil the pledges given to the Prophet and threatens those who go back on their pledges: *"Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward."* (Verse 10) Clearly the reference here is one of honour to those giving their pledges to the Prophet, emphasizing the seriousness of the pledge. Reference to breaking such pledges occurs in respect of the desert Arabs who stayed behind. The same consideration applies to the hypocrites, men and women. This reference in the *sūrah* is made in passing, indicating the weakness of this group as compared with the entire Muslim community which had purged its ranks and attained maturity. This reference is very quick, unlike what we have in

the preceding *sūrah*, Muḥammad, where the discussion of the hypocrites and their Jewish allies occupies a large part of it. This is yet another development in the external attitude of the Muslim community, one that is in harmony with the developments taking place within it.

There is also in the *sūrah* clear evidence of the strength of the Muslim community in relation to the strength of the unbelievers. This is evident in the *sūrah* as a whole and in specific verses. Other verses point out that further victories were to be achieved, making those who stayed behind eager to join the Muslims in order to share the promised war gains. The reference to the fact that Islam would prevail over all other religions is also indicative of the increasing strength of the Muslim community in the period separating the revelation of these two *sūrahs* that occur consecutively in the Qur'ānic order.

There was, then, a clear change in people's hearts, the overall condition of the Muslim community and the situation it was facing. This change can easily be recognized when we follow the events during the Prophet's lifetime as discussed in the Qur'ān. The change reflects the effects of the Qur'ānic approach to the type of education the Muslim community should undergo and the method the Prophet followed in effecting that education. That happy community of the Prophet's Companions was unique in history. However, the change has a telling lesson for those who are in the position of leadership of human communities. They must never become fed up with human weakness, or with what may linger on of past habits, influences of social environment, worldly desire and lack of motivation. All these may have strong effects at first, but persistence, patience and a wise approach ensure steady progress. Moreover, tests and experience are bound to produce their effects when they are utilized to reinforce educational efforts. Gradually, weaknesses dwindle and disappear and believers begin to aspire to higher horizons. They are able to see the superb light emanating from on High. In God's Messenger we have a great shining example to follow. In the Qur'ān we have guidance about the right path to take.

# A Victory in the Making

## Al-Fath (Victory)

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

We have granted you a glorious  
victory, (1)

so that God may forgive you  
all your faults, past and future,  
bestow upon you the full measure  
of His blessings and guide you on  
a straight way. (2)

God will certainly grant you His  
mighty support. (3)

It is He who sent down tranquillity  
into the hearts of the believers, so  
that they may grow more firm in  
their faith. To God belongs all  
the forces of the heavens and the  
earth; He is indeed All-Knowing,  
Wise. (4)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

إِنَّا فَتَحْنَا لَكَ فَتْحًا مُبِينًا ﴿١﴾

لِيَغْفِرَ لَكَ اللَّهُ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِنْ ذَنْبِكَ  
وَمَا تَأَخَّرَ وَبَشِّرْهُ بِبَرَكَاتِهِ وَعِظْهُ  
وَيَهْدِكَ صِرَاطًا مُسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢﴾

وَيَنْصُرَكَ اللَّهُ نَصْرًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٣﴾

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ السَّكِينَةَ فِي قُلُوبِ  
الْمُؤْمِنِينَ لِيَزِيدَهُمْ إِيمَانًا مَعَ إِيمَانِهِمْ  
وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ  
وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٤﴾

He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (5)

God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. (6)

To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise. (7)

We have sent you [Muhammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner (8)

so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. (9)

لِيَدْخُلَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ  
تَجْرَى مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا  
وَيُكَفِّرُ عَنْهُمْ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ وَكَانَ  
ذَلِكَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ فَوْزًا عَظِيمًا ﴿٥﴾

وَيُعَذِّبُ الْمُنَافِقِينَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتِ  
وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ وَالْمُشْرِكَاتِ الظَّالِمِينَ  
بِاللَّهِ ظَنُّ السَّوْءِ عَلَيْهِمْ دَائِرَةُ السَّوْءِ  
وَغَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَنَهُمْ وَأَعَدَّ  
لَهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ وَمَاءً مَصِيرًا ﴿٦﴾

وَلِلَّهِ جُنُودُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَكَانَ  
اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿٧﴾

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ شَهِيدًا وَمُبَشِّرًا  
وَنَذِيرًا ﴿٨﴾

لِتُؤْمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَتُعَزِّرُوهُ  
وَتُوْقِرُوهُ وَتُسَبِّحُوهُ بُكْرَةً  
وَأَصِيلًا ﴿٩﴾

Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward. (10)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ  
اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ فَمَنْ نَكَثَ  
فَإِنَّمَا يَنْكُثُ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ أَوْفَى  
بِمَا عَاهَدَ عَلَيْهِ اللَّهُ فَمُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا  
عَظِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' (11)

سَيَقُولُ لَكَ الْمُخَلَّفُونَ مِنَ الْأَعْرَابِ  
شَغَلَتْنَا أَمْوَالُنَا وَأَهْلُونَا فَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَنَا  
يَقُولُونَ يَا لَيْسَ بِنَا أَلَيْسَ بِنَا  
قُلْ فَمَنْ يَمْلِكُ لَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ شَيْئًا إِنْ  
أَرَادَ بِكُمْ ضَرًّا أَوْ أَرَادَ بِكُمْ نَفْعًا بَلْ كَانَ  
اللَّهُ يَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرًا ﴿١١﴾

No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. (12)

بَلْ ظَنَنْتُمْ أَنْ لَنْ يَنْقَلِبَ الرَّسُولُ  
وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَى أَهْلِيهِمْ أَبَدًا وَزَيْنَ  
ذَلِكَ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ وَظَنَنْتُمْ ظُرُوبَ  
السَّوْءِ وَكُنْتُمْ قَوْمًا بُورًا ﴿١٢﴾

As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. (13)

وَمَنْ لَمْ يُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ فَإِنَّا  
أَعْتَدْنَا لِلْكَافِرِينَ سَعِيرًا ﴿١٣﴾

To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. (14)

When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. (15)

Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering." (16)

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish. (17)

وَلِلَّهِ مُلْكُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ يَعْفِرُ  
لِمَن يَشَاءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَن يَشَاءُ وَكَانَ  
اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ﴿١٤﴾

سَيَقُولُ الْمُخَلَّفُونَ إِذَا انطَلَقْتُمْ  
إِلَى مَعَانِرِنَا خُذُوا هَٰذَا زُرُونَا نَتَّبِعْكُمْ  
يُرِيدُونَ أَن يُبَدِّلُوا كَلِمَ اللَّهِ قُل لَّنْ  
تَتَّبِعُونَا كَذَلِكُمْ قَالَكُمُ اللَّهُ مِن  
قَبْلُ فَسَيَقُولُونَ بَلْ تَحْسُدُونَنَا بَلْ كَانُوا  
لَا يَفْقَهُونَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿١٥﴾

قُلِ لِلْمُخَلَّفِينَ مِنَ الْأَعْرَابِ مَسْئُودَةٌ  
إِلَىٰ قَوْمٍ أُولَىٰ بِأَنفُسِكُمْ فَذَرُونَهُمْ  
أَوْ يَسْلَمُوا فَإِن يَظْهَرُوا بِكُمْ اللَّهُ أَجْرًا  
حَسَنًا وَإِن تَوَلَّوْا كَمَا تَوَلَّيْتُمْ مِن  
قَبْلُ يُعَذِّبْكُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٦﴾

لَيْسَ عَلَى الْأَعْمَىٰ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى  
الْأَعْرَجِ حَرَجٌ وَلَا عَلَى الْمَرِيضِ حَرَجٌ  
وَمَن يَطِيعِ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ يُدْخِلْهُ جَنَّاتٍ  
تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ وَمَن يَتَوَلَّ  
يُعَذِّبْهُ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿١٧﴾

## A Different Concept of Victory

*We have granted you a glorious victory, so that God may forgive you all your faults, past and future, bestow upon you the full measure of His blessings and guide you on a straight way. God will certainly grant you His mighty support. (Verses 1–3)*

The *sūrah* opens with a statement about the great favours bestowed by God on His Messenger, comprising glorious victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessing and assured guidance. Together, these favours are granted as a reward for complete, unshakeable trust in God's inspiration and directive, as well as a willing submission to His guidance. The Prophet demonstrated absolute trust, leaving no room whatsoever for his own judgement. He had a dream and proceeded to take action on its basis. His she-camel refused to move and people cried out that she had refused to go forward. He told them that such a refusal was not in her nature. "She is held back for the same reason as the elephant was held back. I shall respond favourably to any proposal the Quraysh puts to me today that helps establish good relations and guarantees respect to God's sanctuaries." 'Umar asked him: "Why should we accept humiliation in matters of our faith?" His answer was simple, emphasizing his unwavering trust in God's wisdom: "I am God's servant and Messenger. I shall not disobey Him and He will never abandon me." By contrast, when it is rumoured that 'Uthmān was killed, he showed complete resolve and determination: "We shall not depart until we have fought these people." He called on people to pledge their loyalty. In turn, they gave him their pledges that brought lasting benefits to all who did so.

Such was the victory. Beside it too there was another victory embodied in the peace agreement at al-Ḥudaybiyah, to be followed by numerous other victories taking different forms.

It was a victory in advocating God's message. Al-Zuhrī<sup>5</sup> says: "This victory was the greatest achieved so far in the history of Islam. Battles were fought when armies met in the battlefield. With this peace

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5. A prominent scholar of the second generation after the Prophet's Companions. He was the first to work on a *Ḥadīth* anthology, instructed to do so by Caliph 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. He died in 124 AH, 743 CE. – Editor's note.



agreement, war was at an end and people were able to talk to each other in safety. They met and discussed all issues. People with any degree of understanding who were approached about Islam soon declared themselves Muslims. In those two years, i.e. between the signing of the al-Hudaybiyah Treaty and the fall of Makkah, the number of Muslims doubled or became even greater."

Ibn Hishām says: "The evidence in support of the above statement by al-Zuhrī is found in the fact that the Prophet's Companions at al-Hudaybiyah were 1,400, but when he marched to Makkah two years later,<sup>6</sup> he was at the head of an army of 10,000." Among those who became Muslim were Khālid ibn al-Walid and 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ.

It was also a great victory on the ground. The Muslim community no longer faced danger from the Quraysh. Therefore, the Prophet was now free to address the problem represented by the Jews in Arabia. After the removal of the Jewish tribes of Qaynuqā', al-Nadīr and Qurayzah from Madīnah, following their repeated violations of their friendship agreement with the Muslim community, the Jewish threat came from Khaybar and its fortresses. From there, the Jews could easily make the road to Syria unsafe. Khaybar and all its fortresses fell to the Muslims a short while later, and the Muslims were able to take great war gains which the Prophet divided exclusively among those who accompanied him at al-Hudaybiyah.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Hudaybiyah Treaty was a decisive victory in the confrontation between the Muslims in Madīnah and the Quraysh in Makkah, supported by all the unbelievers in Arabia. In his biography of the Prophet, Muḥammad 'Izzat Darwazah rightly says:

Undoubtedly, this peace agreement described in the Qur'ān as a 'glorious victory' amply deserves this description. Indeed it is one of the most decisive and greatest events during the Prophet's lifetime and in Islamic history generally, consolidating the Muslim

6. The Prophet marched to Makkah when the Quraysh flagrantly breached the peace treaty. Makkah fell to Islam with very little fighting. – Editor's note.

7. The only exception was that the Prophet included with them those who came back from Abyssinia and joined him at Khaybar when the battle was over. He considered these to have been on an expedition advocating the Islamic message throughout their 15 years stay in Abyssinia. – Editor's note.

state. For the first time the Quraysh recognized the Prophet and the Muslim state, treating them on an equal footing. It was keen to avoid military confrontation, preferring to peacefully turn them away from their purpose of entering Makkah. Twice before, the Quraysh tried to invade Madīnah, and the second of these attempts took place only one year earlier. At the time, the Quraysh and other confederate tribes raised a great force avowing to exterminate Islam and the Muslims. When the Quraysh launched this attack, the Muslims in Madīnah went through an extremely hard time as, numerically, they were no match for the attacking forces. The new development leading to the signing of the peace treaty had a marked effect on the Arabs; up until then they had looked upon the Quraysh as the master in Arabia and were strongly influenced by its opposition to Islam. Indeed, when the Prophet embarked on his trip to Makkah, the desert Arabs believed that he would not return safely. The hypocrites in Madīnah were of similar views. Taking all this into consideration, we realize the great importance of this victory.

Subsequent events confirmed the wisdom of the Prophet's action, which was endorsed by the Qur'ān. These events highlighted the great material, moral, political, military and religious benefits that accrued to the Muslim community as a result of this peace agreement. They were now looked upon as the most important power in Arabia; the desert Arabs who stayed away from Islam came forward apologizing for their earlier stance, while the hypocrites could hardly raise a voice. Arab delegations came to Madīnah from distant parts pledging loyalty to the Prophet. Subsequently too, the Prophet was able to smash the strength of the Jews in Khaybar and their other villages on the road to Syria. He was able to send delegations to distant parts, such as Najd, Yemen and al-Balqā'. Only two years later, he was able to conquer Makkah peacefully, putting an end to the long drawn out conflict with the Quraysh. It was then that Islam achieved its final victory in Arabia, and people flocked to Islam in large numbers.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Darwazah, Muḥammad 'Izzat, *Sīrat al-Rasūl: Šuwar Muqtabasah min al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, Vol. 2, pp. 292–293.

Furthermore, the signing of the peace treaty at al-Hudaybiyah was a great victory in a different sense: it was a conquest of hearts and minds, epitomized by the pledge given by the Prophet's Companions that earned them God's pleasure as specifically mentioned in the *sūrah*. It is this conquest that made them worthy of the image drawn of them in the last verse of the *sūrah*. In the history of the divine message, this was a great victory that must be given its true value as we look at how it influenced the turn of events in subsequent years.

The Prophet was delighted with the revelation of this *sūrah*. He was overjoyed with the great favours God bestowed on him and his Companions: the victory, complete forgiveness, perfect blessings, guidance on a straight way and God's acceptance of the believers and His beautiful description of them in the *sūrah*. He said: "A *sūrah* has been revealed to me tonight, and it is much dearer to me than all that the sun overlooks put together." In another version, he is reported to have said: "A *sūrah* was revealed to me last night which is dearer to me than the whole world and all that it contains." He was keen to express his gratitude to God, and his thanksgiving took the form of long, voluntary prayers, described by his wife, 'Ā'ishah, as follows: "When the Prophet prayed, he would stand up until his feet swelled." She said to him: "Messenger of God! Will you continue to do this when God has forgiven you all your sins, past and future?" He replied: "Should I not, then, be a grateful servant of God?" [Related by Muslim.]

### A Medley of Emotions

The first three verses of the *sūrah* were specifically addressed to the Prophet. The *sūrah* goes on to describe the great favours God bestowed on the Muslim community as He gave them such a victory, adding tranquillity to their hearts, and promising further favours in the life to come:

*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith. To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise. He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which*

*running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph. (Verses 4–5)*

Tranquillity, or *sakīnah* in Arabic, is a word with pleasant connotations. When a heart is blessed with it, it generates reassurance, trust, comfort, dignity and a ready acceptance of God's will.

The believers experienced conflicting emotions during this encounter. They were looking forward to the fulfilment of the Prophet's dream of entering the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, realizing that a prophet's dream always came true. They had then to endure a stand-off with the Quraysh, followed by the Prophet's acceptance to return without visiting the Sacred Mosque that year, even though they had entered into the state of consecration required for that Mosque's entry and had marked their animals for sacrifice following the completion of their worship at the Sacred Mosque. All of this was, therefore, very hard for them to swallow. In addition to what we have already quoted in recording the developments at al-Ḥudaybiyah, 'Umar is also reported to have gone to Abū Bakr and said in reference to the Prophet: "Did he not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" Abū Bakr, whose heart echoed the Prophet's own heartbeats, replied: "Did he say that you would do so this year?" 'Umar answered in the negative. Abū Bakr said: "Then you will visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." 'Umar left Abū Bakr and went straight to the Prophet asking: "Did you not tell us that we would be visiting the Sacred Mosque and perform *ṭawāf* around it?" The Prophet said: "I certainly did; but did I say that you would be doing that this year?" 'Umar again answered in the negative. The Prophet then said: "You will most certainly visit it and do your *ṭawāf* there." This gives us a picture of the feelings the Muslims experienced during the stand-off with the Quraysh.

The believers found other conditions imposed by the Quraysh to be totally unfair. Specifically, they found unacceptable the condition that the Prophet should return to the Quraysh anyone from among them who came to him, declaring himself a Muslim, without being given the prior permission of his father or guardian. They were also totally displeased when the Quraysh delegation objected to the mention of God's name, *al-Rahmān*, or the Lord of Grace, and with their objection to the Prophet's position as God's Messenger being included in the document.

It is reported that 'Alī, who was writing the document, refused to erase this reference, as requested by the Quraysh representative, Suhayl ibn 'Amr. In fact, the Prophet himself rubbed it out, saying: "My Lord! You know that I am Your Messenger."

The Muslims' dedication and enthusiasm to fight the unbelievers were total, as evidenced by the fact that they all pledged themselves to it. Yet the confrontation ended peacefully, requiring them to turn back and go home. Understandably, this was not easy for them to accept. We sense this in their reluctance to slaughter their sacrifices and shave their heads, indicating the end of their rituals. Indeed, the Prophet had to issue his command to them three times, and this to those who were always quick to put his every order into effect. Furthermore, 'Urwah, the fourth emissary of the Quraysh, reported on this to the Quraysh when he returned to give them his advice. As we have noted already, so great was the feeling among the Muslims that they did not slaughter their sacrifices, nor shave their heads until they saw the Prophet doing so himself. Only his action spurred them to follow suit; such was the state of their bewilderment.

The Muslims had travelled from Madīnah intending to perform 'Umrah. The thought of fighting was not in their minds. Neither mentally nor practically were they prepared for war. They were surprised to see the Quraysh taking such an adamant stance against them, and they were greatly upset when they heard the news that 'Uthmān had been killed. To the Muslims, it was totally unexpected for the Quraysh to send some of its men to aim arrows and stone missiles at their camp. Therefore, when the Prophet, upon hearing of 'Uthmān's assassination, decided to fight the Quraysh and asked his Companions to give him their pledges in support, every single one of them did so. This did not, however, diminish their surprise to find themselves in a situation totally different from what they hoped to do. Such feelings were only a part of what they experienced. Moreover, they were heavily outnumbered, amounting to 1,400 pilgrims, while the Quraysh were in their own city, supported by desert Arabs and other idolaters.

When we consider all these aspects, we better understand the meaning and the effect of the Qur'ānic statement: "*It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers.*" (Verse 4) We can imagine

the situation as though we are present there, and feel the comfort of this tranquillity and the peace it generated in the believers' hearts. God was fully aware that the feelings they experienced were motivated by faith. They were keen to defend their faith and fight for it. They did not look for any personal glory. Therefore, He bestowed His blessings on them, giving them such tranquillity, *"so that they may grow more firm in their faith."* (Verse 4) Reassurance is of a higher rank than passion and enthusiasm. It carries with it a combination of trust, conviction and absence of worry.

The *sūrah* also indicates that military victory was in no way difficult. On the contrary, it was easy, had God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to gratify the believers' wishes. At His command there are countless forces that cannot be overcome. They would have ensured victory for the Muslims at His bidding, whenever He wished: *"To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed All-Knowing, Wise."* (Verse 4) Indeed everything moves as determined by God in His wisdom. It was through His knowledge and wisdom that He *"sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers, so that they may grow more firm in their faith."* (Verse 4) He will thus bring about what He has decided to give them: victory and blessings: *"He will admit the believers, both men and women, into gardens through which running waters flow, there to abide, and He will forgive them their bad deeds. That is, in God's sight, a great triumph."* (Verse 5)

If in God's sight this is a great triumph, then it is indeed a great one. It was so for those who achieved it, giving it its right measure. The believers were delighted with what God granted them. Having listened to the opening of the *sūrah*, learning about the favours God bestowed on His Messenger, they were looking forward to their own share, asking about it. When they were told of it, they were delighted and reassured.

The *sūrah* then tells them of another aspect of God's wisdom in letting events develop in the way they did; namely, requiting the unbelievers and the hypocrites for their actions:

*God will also inflict suffering on the hypocrites and the polytheists, men and women, who harbour evil thoughts about God. Evil encompasses them from all sides, and they incur God's anger. He has rejected them and has prepared for them hell, an evil destination. To God belongs all*

*the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise.*  
(Verses 6–7)

These verses group together the hypocrites and the idolaters, men and women, highlighting their common characteristic of harbouring evil thoughts about God, having no trust in His forthcoming help to the believers. The *sūrah* makes clear that they are all encompassed by evil and cannot depart from its circle. They incur God's anger and, therefore, they are expelled from His mercy. Evil will be their end. In fact, hypocrisy is in no way less than idolatry; indeed it is more contemptible. The harm the hypocrites do to the Muslim community is no less than what the idolaters do, although the two types are different in nature and physical aspects.

The *sūrah* makes harbouring evil thoughts about God the distinctive feature of the hypocrites and the unbelievers. A believer always thinks well of God, expecting what is good in all situations, good and bad. He believes that God will bring him good in both conditions. The fact is that a believer's heart always looks up to God, whose grace and favours never cease. When we establish the bond of faith with God, we realize this fact and appreciate it. The hypocrites and the unbelievers, by contrast, have no bond with God. They have no feeling of this concept, which, in turn, leads them to entertain evil thoughts about Him, casting only a superficial look at things and judging situations by appearances. Thus, they expect only evil to befall them and to befall the believers whenever appearances so suggest. They have no idea of God's power, control of things and events, or His subtle and elaborate planning.

The verse groups together all types of enemies of Islam, describing their position with God and what He has prepared for them, adding a comment pointing to God's power and wisdom: "*To God belongs all the forces of the heavens and the earth; He is indeed Almighty, Wise.*" (Verse 7) Nothing of their situation escapes God, and nothing is too hard for Him.

## **The Promise and the Reward**

Again the *sūrah* addresses the Prophet, pointing out his role and its objective. It tells the believers about their duty towards God after having



received His message. It makes clear to them that the pledges they gave to the Prophet were indeed pledges given to God. Solemn indeed is a pledge made to God. Furthermore, this imparts to the pledge given to the Prophet even greater honour:

*We have sent you [Muhammad] as a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner so that you [people] may believe in God and His Messenger, support Him, honour Him and extol His limitless glory morning and evening. Those who pledge their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands. He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment; but to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward. (Verses 8–10)*

God's Messenger, (peace be upon him), is a witness who will testify that he has delivered the message entrusted to him to mankind, and he will speak of the reception people gave him. He will state that some people believed and accepted the faith while others rejected it denying its truth, and others still were hypocrites. Some did well and others did badly. He will give his testimony just as he delivered his message. He bears the good news of forgiveness and acceptance by God, as well as a good reward from Him to the believers. He also warns against the ill fate that awaits the unbelievers, hypocrites and evildoers, as they all incur God's anger.

Such is the Prophet's role. Addressing the believers, the *sūrah* makes clear to them the purpose of God's message: it is to believe in God and His Messenger, and to fulfil the tasks and duties of faith. Thus, they support God by implementing His law, and they honour Him in their hearts as they feel His majesty. They also extol His glory and praise Him at both ends of the day, which means in effect the whole day. What is meant here is that in their hearts and minds they feel their bond with God at all times. This is the result of faith which the believers will receive because God sent His Messenger and assigned to him his role outlined in the verse: "*a witness, a bearer of good news and a warner*". (Verse 8)

The Prophet came to them to establish their bond with God, and to solemnize a pledge they give to Him that continues even though the Prophet is no longer with them. When he stretches his hand out to accept their pledges, he is doing so on God's behalf: "*Those who pledge*



*their allegiance to you are actually pledging their allegiance to God: God's hand is over their hands.*" (Verse 10) This is an awesome description. When any of them put his hand in the Prophet's to give his pledge, he realized that God was there present, accepting the pledge, and that His hand also embraced their hands. How awesome and majestic.

This image puts an end to any thought anyone might have had about retracting their pledge. Should the Prophet disappear in person, God Himself will never disappear. It is He who accepts this pledge, watches its fulfilment and gives its reward. *"He who breaks his pledge does so to his own detriment."* (Verse 10) Whatever pledge is made between God and any of His servants is richly profitable to God's servant. It is he who will profit by God's favours, while God is in no need of anyone. Therefore, when anyone breaks his pledge with God, he is the loser. Furthermore, he exposes himself to God's anger and punishment, because God loves those who are true to their promises and dislikes those who deliberately break them. *"But to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him, God will grant a rich reward."* (Verse 10) No details are given here of the reward; it is merely described as rich, or great, as is the literal meaning of the Arabic adjective *'azīm* used here. This reward is rich by God's measure and value which we who dwell in this limited space of the earth can never imagine.

## The Ones Left Behind

Having established the true nature of the pledge and referred to thoughts of breaking or honouring it, the *sūrah* now speaks of the desert Arabs who were left behind. They refused to accompany the Prophet on this expedition, entertaining no good thoughts about God, expecting defeat for the believers who were going to the Quraysh's own land, when it was the Quraysh that had attacked Madīnah twice over a short period of time.<sup>9</sup> The *sūrah* tells the Prophet of what excuses the desert Arabs would employ when they see him returning safely together with his Companions. They would realize that the treaty he

9. The original text says that the two attacks occurred in two successive years, i.e. within one year or a little more of each other. The fact is that the first, the Battle of Uhud, took place in Shawwal, the 10th month of year 3, while the second, the Encounter of the Moat, occurred towards the end of year 5, which means that two full years separated them. — Editor's note.

had concluded with the Quraysh signified that the latter had climbed down. No matter how harsh its conditions may appear, the Quraysh now treated Muḥammad (peace be upon him) and his followers as its equal, with whom it sought peace rather than confrontation. The *sūrah* also details the true reasons why these desert Arabs stayed behind, exposing their reality to the Prophet and the believers. It tells the Prophet of the rich war gains the Muslims would shortly achieve, and that these same Arabs would try to accompany them on their next encounter in order to receive a share of those. The *sūrah* tells the Prophet what he should say to them when this takes place. He must not allow them to be part of that expedition, which was certain to end in his favour. Only those present at al-Ḥudaybiyah would be permitted to accompany him. He was also to tell those Arabs left behind that they would be called upon to join the Muslims when they needed to fight other people known for their great war prowess. If they truly wanted to join the Muslim camp, they should join the Muslim army on that day, whatever outcome God may give them. If they obeyed, they would receive rich reward. If they turned away, as they did once before, they would be made to endure a painful suffering:

*The desert Arabs who stayed behind will say to you, 'Our property and our families kept us busy; do then ask God to forgive us.' Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say: 'Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.' No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness. As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful. When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: "Let us come with you." They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: "You shall not come with us. God has already said so." They will then say: "You begrudge us [our share]." How little they understand. Say to*

*the desert Arabs who stayed behind: "You will be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering."* (Verses 11–16)

The Qur'ān does not merely reply to the excuses of those who stayed behind; it uses the occasion to treat minds and souls, identifying the points of weakness and deviation in order to treat them effectively. It then states those values that are true and permanent, as well as the proper basis on which to base attitudes and behaviour.

Those Arabs who stayed behind belonged to the tribes of Ghifār, Muzaynah, Ashja', Aslam and others who lived in the area close to Madīnah. They tried to excuse themselves, saying: "*Our property and our families kept us busy.*" (Verse 11) This is no excuse. People will always have families and property. If having these is a good excuse to exempt anyone from their duties towards their faith, no one would ever fulfil such duties. They also asked the Prophet: "*do then ask God to forgive us.*" (Verse 11) Even when they say this, they are not serious: "*Thus they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts.*" (Verse 11) The reply given them stresses the truth of God's will that cannot be stopped or prevented by bravery in war or its avoidance. They are all subject to God's power, and He is fully aware of all things. His will controls everything as He determines: "*Say: Who, then, can avert from you anything that God might have willed, whether it be His will to harm you or to confer a benefit on you? No! God is fully aware of what you do.*" (Verse 11)

The question implies the instruction to submit to God's will and to obey His orders without hesitation. No hesitation will ever prevent harm or delay benefit. Excuses are no use, because nothing escapes God's knowledge and nothing affects the requital He decides on the basis of His perfect knowledge. This is a fitting directive, using the appropriate moment in order to heighten its effect.

"*No! You thought that the Messenger and the believers would never return to their families and this thought seemed pleasing to your hearts. You entertained such evil thoughts because you have always been devoid of goodness.*" (Verse 12) Thus they are shown the truth of their attitude. Their true thoughts and intentions, which they thought were concealed,

are placed before their very eyes. They thought that the Prophet and his Companions were going to their death, and that they would never return to their families in Madinah. They said of the Prophet: 'Is he going to fight those who attacked him in his home city and killed his Companions?' They allowed no room for the care God takes of those of His servants who are dedicated to His cause. Moreover, since they lacked motivation based on faith, they could not feel the importance of duty and that a duty must be fulfilled, regardless of the cost. Nor did they realize that obedience to the Prophet must not be based on any thought of gain or loss. It must be fulfilled as a duty, regardless of the outcome.

The thoughts they had seemed pleasing to their hearts. They could not see any other possibility. Their ill thoughts about God derived from the fact that their hearts had always been devoid of goodness. The *sūrah* uses a single Arabic word, *būr*, for the phrase 'devoid of goodness'. This word is normally used to describe a dead land where no plant can grow. The same applies to these Arab's hearts, as also to them generally. Their hearts are lifeless, yield nothing good. How else would a human heart be when it harbours no good thought of God, having severed its bond with Him? It must be *būr*, lifeless, heading for nothing good.

### The True Balance

Such do people think of the Muslim community. However, it is only people like those desert Arabs who have severed their bond with God, their hearts devoid of goodness, who view the Muslim community as being on the verge of eradication, heavily outnumbered by the forces of evil and deviation. They look at the limited numbers of the advocates of Islam, or their poor artillery, or their low position in society and conclude that they will inevitably be defeated. Like the desert Arabs of old, such people avoid every association with the believers, looking only for their own safety. God, however, will ensure that such ill thoughts inevitably end in failure, and will change positions as only He knows how, to set the true balance. It is He who holds this balance in His mighty hand, lowering some people and raising others above them. The hypocrites who harbour evil thoughts about God, throughout all places and generations, can never understand how this is done.

The true balance is that of faith. Therefore, those Arabs are referred to it. The *sūrah* outlines the general rule of rewarding people in accordance with this balance, highlighting the possibility of receiving God's grace. They are thus encouraged to take the opportunity available to them now in order to benefit by God's forgiveness and to enjoy His grace: *"As for those who will not believe in God and His Messenger, We have prepared a blazing fire for the unbelievers. To God belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will. God is much-forgiving, ever merciful."* (Verses 13–14)

They used to cite their families and property as the reasons why they stayed behind. Of what benefit will their families and property be to them when they are thrown in the blazing fire, which has been prepared for them if they continue to deny God and His Messenger? These verses show such people the two options available to them and they are invited to choose one. Then it is God who issues the promise and the warning to them. To Him belongs the heavens and the earth and all in between them. It is He who can extend forgiveness and inflict punishment, as He chooses.

God rewards people according to their deeds, but His will is free, unrestricted by anything. This truth is established here so that it is accepted by all. There is no conflict between it and the fact that people's reward is based on their actions, because this is the basis that God has willed to choose.

Nevertheless, God's forgiveness and mercy is close at hand. Let anyone who so wishes benefit by it, before the suffering befalls those who refuse to believe in God and His Messenger in accordance with His will.

## **Fine Prospects**

The *sūrah* then shows a glimpse of the prospects God has in store for the believers, contrary to all the unbelievers' thoughts. This is done in such a way that suggests that it is all going to happen soon: *"When you set forth on a course that promises war gains, those who previously stayed behind will say: 'Let us come with you.' They thus seek to alter God's words. Say: 'You shall not come with us. God has already said so.' They will then say: 'You begrudge us [our share].' How little they understand."* (Verse 15)

Most commentators on the Qur'ān take this verse to refer to the conquest of Khaybar. This may be so, but the statement also gives clear impressions that do not necessarily relate to Khaybar. It suggests that the Muslims would soon achieve an easy victory. Those who previously stayed behind would realize that it would be so and hence they ask to join the Muslims. Perhaps what makes Qur'ānic commentators specify Khaybar is that this occurred soon after al-Ḥudaybiyah. Indeed, it took place in the first month of year 7, less than two months after the signing of the treaty, and it brought the Muslims rich war gains. Khaybar was the last Jewish stronghold in the Arabian Peninsula. It was here that some of the Jews of al-Naḍir and Qurayzah had sought refuge after they were ordered out of Madīnah.

Commentators are almost unanimous that God promised those who give the Prophet their pledges at al-Ḥudaybiyah would have the war gains achieved at Khaybar, all for themselves, with no share for anyone else. I have not found any text to support this view, which may though be based on what actually happened. When the Prophet marched on Khaybar, he did not allow anyone to join him other than those who had taken part at al-Ḥudaybiyah.

Be that as it may, God instructed the Prophet to refuse permission to those who had previously stayed behind, assuming that they even offered to join the Muslim army. Specifically, he was to say that their participation would be contrary to God's orders. He also told the Prophet that when they were refused such permission, they would say: "*You begrudge us*", and want to deprive us of our legitimate share of any war gains. What they say thus betrays their lack of understanding of God's purpose. It is fitting that those who are eager to share in the booty be deprived of it, while those who are dedicated to God's cause, obeying His orders, should enjoy His grace and be the ones to enjoy the war gains He grants the Muslim community. They were the ones who had obeyed when they expected nothing other than a hard fight.

God further instructed the Prophet to tell them that they would be called upon to fight against people known for their war prowess, and that the fight would continue until this enemy had been subdued. Should those who formerly stayed behind pass this test, they will still receive their reward, but if they continue to disobey they will have failed what is their final test: "*Say to the desert Arabs who stayed behind: 'You will*

*be called upon to fight against a people of great prowess in war: you will have to fight them unless they surrender. If you obey, God will reward you well; but if you turn away as you have done before, He will inflict on you painful suffering.*" (Verse 16)

Reports differ as to the identity of this military might, and to whether this would occur during the Prophet's lifetime or after he passed away. It is most likely, however that it happened during his lifetime so as to further test the Arabs in the surrounding areas of Madīnah. What is important here is to note the Qur'ānic method of education, and how hearts and souls are treated by Qur'ānic directives and practical tests. We see this clearly in the way the inner thoughts of those who stayed behind were exposed before their very own eyes to the believers. We also see it in the way true values and the principles of proper behaviour are pointed out to them.

Since the test makes it a duty binding on everyone to join the Muslim army, God identifies those with real excuses who are exempt from so joining, without their being subject to any punishment: *"No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger shall be admitted by Him into gardens through which running waters flow; but the one who turns away will He severely punish."* (Verse 17) A person who is blind or lame has a permanent disability exempting him from military engagement. A person who is sick has a temporary excuse, one that extends until he has recovered full health.

Ultimately, it is all a question of obedience or disobedience. It is a mental attitude, not a technical situation. Those who obey God and His Messenger will be rewarded by admittance into heaven. Those who turn away will receive painful suffering. Anyone can put the hardship of striving for God's cause in the balance against the comfort of staying behind and what it entails. He may then make his own choice.



## People's Pledges and God's Promises

God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, (18)

لَقَدْ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ  
إِذْ يُبَايِعُونَكَ تَحْتَ الشَّجَرَةِ فَعَلِمَ  
مَا فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ فَأَنْزَلَ السَّكِينَةَ عَلَيْهِمْ  
وَأَثَبَهُمْ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿١٨﴾

and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. (19)

وَمَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً يَأْخُذُونَهَا وَكَانَ اللَّهُ  
عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٩﴾

God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. (20)

وَعَدَكُمْ اللَّهُ مَغَانِمَ كَثِيرَةً  
تَأْخُذُونَهَا فَعَجَّلَ لَكُمْ هَذِهِ وَكَفَّ  
أَيْدِيَ النَّاسِ عَنْكُمْ وَلِتَكُونَ آيَةً  
لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَيَهْدِيَكُمْ صِرَاطًا  
مُسْتَقِيمًا ﴿٢٠﴾



There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. (21)

وَأُخْرَى لَمْ تَقْدِرُوا عَلَيْهَا قَدْ أَحَاطَ  
اللَّهُ بِهَا وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ  
شَيْءٍ قَدِيرًا ﴿٢١﴾

Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. (22)

وَلَوْ قَاتَلَكُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوَلَّوْا الْأَدْبَارَ ثُمَّ  
لَا يَجِدُونَ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا ﴿٢٢﴾

Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way. (23)

سُنَّةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلُ  
وَلَنْ تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا ﴿٢٣﴾

It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. (24)

وَهُوَ الَّذِي كَفَّ أَيْدِيَهُمْ عَنْكُمْ  
وَأَيْدِيَكُمْ عَنْهُمْ بِطَنِ مَكَّةَ مِنْ  
بَعْدِ أَنْ أَظْفَرَكُمْ عَلَيْهِمْ وَكَانَ  
اللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرًا ﴿٢٤﴾

They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt.

هُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَصَدُّوكُمْ عَنِ  
الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ وَالْهَدْيِ مَعْكُوفًا أَنْ  
يَبْلُغَ مَحَلَّهُ وَلَوْلَا رِجَالٌ مُؤْمِنُونَ  
وَنِسَاءٌ مُؤْمِنَاتٌ لَمْ تَعْلَمُوهُمْ أَنْ  
تَطُؤُوهُمْ فَتُصِيبَكُمْ مِنْهُمْ مَعَرَّةٌ بِغَيْرِ

God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. (25)

عَلِمَ لِيَدْخُلَ اللَّهُ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ مَنْ  
يَشَاءُ لَوْ تَزَيَّلُوا لَعَذَّبْنَا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا  
مِنْهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا ﴿٢٥﴾

The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things. (26)

إِذْ جَعَلَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ  
الْعَمِيَّةَ حِمِيَّةً لِّلْأَعْيَانَةِ فَاَنزَلَ اللَّهُ  
سَكِينَةً عَلَى رَسُولِهِ وَعَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ  
وَأَلْزَمَهُمْ كَلِمَةَ التَّقْوَى وَكَانُوا  
أَحَقَّ بِهَا وَأَهْلُهَا وَكَانَ اللَّهُ بِكُلِّ  
شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴿٢٦﴾

God has shown the truth in His Messenger's true vision: most certainly you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God so wills, in full security, with your heads shaved or your hair cut short, without fear. God knew what you did not, and He granted you, besides this, a speedy victory. (27)

لَقَدْ صَدَقَ اللَّهُ رَسُولَهُ الرُّؤْيَا بِالْحَقِّ  
لَتَدْخُلَنَّ الْمَسْجِدَ الْحَرَامَ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ  
ءَامِنِينَ مُحَلِّقِينَ رُءُوسَكُمْ وَمُقَصِّرِينَ  
لَا تَخَافُونَ فَعَلِمَ مَا لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا فَجَعَلَ  
مِنْ دُونِ ذَلِكَ فَتْحًا قَرِيبًا ﴿٢٧﴾

It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness. (28)

هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِالْهُدَى  
وَدِينِ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ  
وَكُنِيَ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا ﴿٢٨﴾

Muḥammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward. (29)

مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ أَشِدَّاءُ  
عَلَى الْكُفَّارِ رُحَمَاءُ بَيْنَهُمْ تَرَاهُمْ رُكَّعًا  
سُجَّدًا يَسْتَغْفِرُونَ فَضْلًا مِنَ اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانًا  
سِيمَاهُمْ فِي وُجُوهِهِمْ مِنْ أَثَرِ السُّجُودِ  
ذَلِكَ مَثَلُهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَمَثَلُهُمْ فِي  
الْإِنْجِيلِ كَزَرْعٍ أَخْرَجَ شَطْطَهُ فَكَازَرَهُ  
فَاسْتَفَلَظَ فَمَا يَسْتَوِي عَلَى سُوقِهِ  
يُعِجِبُ الزُّرَّاعَ لِيَغِيظَ بِهِمُ الْكُفَّارَ  
وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا  
الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا  
عَظِيمًا ﴿٢٩﴾

## Overview

This part of the *sūrah* speaks only about and with the believers, with that unique and happy group of them who gave their pledges and commitments to the Prophet under the tree, in the presence of God, the witness who solemnized that pledge placing His hand over theirs. That elite group heard God's words revealed to His Messenger: "God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory." (Verse 18) They also listened to the Prophet as he said to them: "You are today the best people on earth." [Related by al-Bukhārī on the authority of Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh.]

What we have here is a discourse about this select group as God speaks to His Messenger. We also have God's words to this select group, giving them the happy news of forthcoming war gains and conquests. God also speaks about the care He took of them, protecting them from their enemies, during this trip and what He will do for them in future, assuring them of victory by means of the laws He has set in operation, which never fail. He strongly condemns the enemies of the Muslim community, explains the wisdom behind choosing peace this time, confirming the truth of the Prophet's dream about visiting the Sacred Mosque. He assures the Muslims that they will enter it in safety, fearing nothing, and that His faith will prevail over all religions on earth.

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse describing this community of believers, the Prophet's Companions, adding their descriptions to be found in the Torah and the Gospels, as well as His promise of forgiveness of their sins and granting them a great reward.

## A Unique Event

*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory, and with many war gains for them to take. God is Almighty, Wise. (Verses 18–19)*

Today, fourteen hundred years after the event, I am trying to visualize the great moment when the universe witnessed the divine announcement from on high addressed by God Almighty to His trusted Messenger concerning the Muslim community. I want to see the whole universe at that great moment and its conscience as it responds to this most generous announcement, speaking of a group of people at a particular spot in this universe. I want to feel how those extremely happy people felt when they heard, with their own ears, that God was speaking about them, telling them that He was well pleased with them, defining the place where they were and what they had done in order to earn His pleasure: "*when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree.*" (Verse

18) They heard it all from the Prophet who never said anything but the truth, delivering it as a special message from God Almighty.

O my God! How did they – those happy people – receive that divine communication at that ecstatic moment? It is a communication that points to every single one of them and says, “to you in person God is saying that He was well pleased with you as you pledged your allegiance under the tree. He was aware of your inner feelings and He bestowed tranquillity on you.”

When we read or hear God's statement: “*God is the Patron of the believers,*” (2: 257) or, “*God is with those who are patient,*” (2: 153) we may feel happy and reassured, hoping that we may be included among such. Those people, however, heard that God was speaking about them personally and individually, telling each of them that He was well pleased with them, knowing what was in their hearts. That is great indeed!

“*God was indeed well pleased with the believers when they pledged their allegiance to you under the tree. He knew what was in their hearts and so He sent down tranquillity upon them, and rewarded them with a speedy victory.*” (Verse 18) He knew that the passion they felt in their hearts was for their faith, not for their ego or for personal glory. He knew that their pledges were sincere, and that they were seriously restraining themselves so that they would stand behind the Prophet in all sincerity, obeying his orders, accepting any adversity with patience. Therefore, “*He sent down tranquillity upon them.*” We almost see this tranquillity being lowered calmly and with dignity, pouring an air of peace and reassurance on those hearts that were full of enthusiasm for direct action.

God also “*rewarded them with a speedy victory.*” (Verse 18) This peace treaty, coupled with the circumstances leading to it, was indeed a victory, heralding many more. The conquest of Khaybar, which most commentators cite as the one promised here, may indeed have been one of these. “*And with many war gains for them to take.*” (Verse 19) If the victory meant here is that of Khaybar, then the war gains would be with the victory itself. However, if the victory mentioned refers to the peace treaty itself, then the promised war gains would come later. Indeed, the peace treaty left the Muslims free to achieve victory on several fronts.

“*God is Almighty, Wise.*” (Verse 19) This comment fits well with the preceding verses. God's pleasure, the victory and the promise of war

gains are all indicative of God's might, control, elaborate planning and wisdom.

### As God Speaks

Now the *sūrah* addresses the believers themselves, speaking to them of the peace treaty, or victory, to which they resigned themselves:

*God has promised you [people] many war gains that you shall achieve. He has hastened this gain for you and He has held back the hands of hostile people from you, so that this may become a sign for the believers. He will guide you on a straight way. There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things. (Verses 20–21)*

This is an announcement of happy things to happen, given by God to the believers who accept it as certain. They realize that God has prepared for them numerous gains and they lived afterwards to see this true promise fulfilled in the best way. God says to them here that He has hastened this one, which may be a reference to al-Ḥudaybiyah, as stated by Ibn 'Abbās, to emphasize its being a victory, as indeed it was, or it may be a reference to Khaybar, as Mujāhid says, since Khaybar produced the first war gains after al-Ḥudaybiyah. The first view is perhaps much weightier.

God also granted them a favour when He restrained the hands of hostile forces. He indeed held back the hands of the Quraysh, as well as other hostile groups who were waiting for a chance to attack the Muslims. Their opponents outnumbered them by far, but the believers were true to their pledges, fulfilling their duties. Therefore, God rewarded them by restraining and holding back their enemies' hands.

"So that this may become a sign for the believers." (Verse 20) This encounter, which they disliked at first, feeling it to be too much of a demand, is described by God as a great sign, which will enable them to see the results of what He has planned for them and how they will be rewarded for obeying the Prophet and submitting to His will. Thus, they will come to realize that it is great, bringing them much benefit, and they will be doubly reassured.

*"He will guide you on a straight way."* (Verse 20) This is again a reward for your obedience and true allegiance. Thus, they will have a combination of war gains and guidance on a straight way, giving them all that is good. All this comes about as a result of something they initially disliked. God, thus, teaches them that what He chooses for them is the best thing. This also trains them to show absolute obedience.

God also tells them of other favours He will grant them. There will be more war gains: these they are unable to secure by virtue of their own forces, but which God will let them have by cause of His power and planning: *"There are still other gains to come, which are still beyond your power. God has full control over them. God has power over all things."* (Verse 21)

Again, reports differ as to what these gains refer to: is it to the conquest of Makkah? Or to Khaybar? Or is it the victories secured against the Byzantine and Persian Empires? Or does it refer to all other conquests achieved by the Muslim community after al-Ḥudaybiyah? Most probably, the *sūrah* refers here to the conquest of Makkah, which followed the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah and resulted from it. The peace treaty lasted only two years. Thereafter the unbelievers violated it, and God facilitated Makkah's conquest for the Muslims, with hardly any fighting. It was Makkah that had continued to present great difficulties for the Muslim community in Madinah. It had attacked them twice, and was able to turn them away from the Sacred Mosque when they tried to visit it prior to signing the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah. God, however, overwhelmed Makkah with His power, handing it over to the Muslims without fighting: *"God has power over all things."* (Verse 21) This was, then, an implicit piece of happy news. It was left undefined because at the time when the *sūrah* was revealed, it still belonged to the future, which is part of the realm that lies beyond human perception. Hence, God gives them this hint to reassure them and help them to look forward to what may be coming their way.

In line with the reference to the present war gains and the future ones they await, the *sūrah* clearly tells the Muslims that they will be victorious. The signing of the peace treaty was in no way due to their weakness, or because the unbelievers were too strong for them. Instead, it was meant to happen for a definite purpose God wanted to achieve. Had

the unbelievers fought them, they would have been crushed. Such is the rule whenever the believers and unbelievers meet in a decisive battle:

*Were the unbelievers to fight you, they would have turned their back in flight. They shall find none to protect or support them. Such was God's way which operated in the past; and never will you find any change in God's way. (Verses 22–23)*

Thus, victory for the believers and defeat of their enemies are part of the universal law God has set in operation. It is unchangeable. This is bound to give the believers immense confidence and reassurance. They know that God's law will never fail to operate. It may be delayed for some time, for reasons that are closely related to the adherence of the believers to the way God wants them to adhere, or for reasons that bring about the conditions that lead to victory for the believers against the unbelievers. There may be other reasons known to God for such delay, but God's law will continue to operate, without fail: "*Never will you find any change in God's way.*" (Verse 23)

God also reminds them of His favour when he stayed the unbelievers' hands from the Muslims, and stayed the Muslims' hands after they had gained victory over their attackers. This refers to an incident when about 40 of the unbelievers tried to launch an offensive. They were taken prisoner, but the Prophet pardoned them:

*It is He who, in the valley of Makkah, stayed their hands from you, and your hands from them, after He gave you the advantage over them. God sees all that you do. (Verse 24)*

This was an event the addressees witnessed, but God mentions it in this way to refer every move and every happening to His direct planning. They, thus, feel how God's hand directs everything for them, guides their footsteps and their feelings. They will then unhesitatingly surrender themselves to Him. They will be absolutely certain that everything is in God's hand, and that His choice is the best. They move according to His will in everything they choose or refuse. He wants only what is best for them. When they surrender to Him, every good thing comes their way easily and without delay. He sees them and knows the ins and outs



of their situation. What He chooses for them is based on His perfect knowledge. He will not let anything they deserve escape them: "*God sees all that you do.*" (Verse 24)

## Exposing the Unbelievers

The *sūrah* then tells the believers about their opponents' position in God's sight. It explains how God considers the unbelievers' actions as they turn the believers away from His Sacred House, and how He looks at the believers in a totally different way from these others:

*They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice. Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt... God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering. The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance. Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well. God has full knowledge of all things.* (Verses 25–26)

According to God's measure, they are truly unbelievers, deserving this repugnant description: "*They were the ones who disbelieved.*" (Verse 25) This is recorded against them as if they are the only ones in this class, confirmed in disbelief. Hence, they deserve to be disliked by God who hates unbelief and unbelievers. Their other obnoxious deed of turning the believers away from the Sacred Mosque and forbidding the sacrificial animals from reaching their destination is also recorded: "*They were the ones who disbelieved, and who debarred you from the Sacred Mosque and prevented your offering from reaching its place of sacrifice.*" (Verse 25)

This amounted to gross misconduct according to Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions; it was gross according to all religions known in the Arabian Peninsula since the time of Abraham, their great ancestor.

Restraining the believers from fighting them was not, then, out of compassion or because their fault was small. It was for a different purpose which God explains to the believers: *"Had it not been for the fact that there were among them believing men and women unknown to you and whom you might have unwittingly trampled underfoot, and on whose account you would have unwittingly incurred guilt..."* (Verse 25) There were a number of Muslims in Makkah who could not migrate to Madīnah because of their weak position, and did not declare their acceptance of Islam for fear of persecution by the unbelievers. Had the Muslims attacked Makkah and a fight taken place, the Muslims might have killed some of these since they did not know who they were. This would have meant Muslims killing Muslims; a situation that must be avoided. Moreover, the Muslims would have had to pay blood money to their families when it became known that they were Muslim.

Besides, God knew that among the unbelievers who prevented the Muslims' entry into the Sacred Mosque were some who would be good believers, and who would earn God's mercy. Had these two groups been separated from the rest of the unbelievers, God would have allowed the Muslims to attack and He would have punished the unbelievers severely: *"God will admit to His grace whomever He wills. Had they stood apart, We would have inflicted on the unbelievers among them truly painful suffering."* (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* then provides a further description of the unbelievers, showing their inner feelings after it has given an account of their apparent deeds: *"The unbelievers fanned fury in their hearts, the fury of ignorance."* (Verse 26) This was not a passion for a particular faith or code of living, but rather a fury of arrogance and rigidity. This same fury led them to oppose the entry of the Prophet and his Companions to the Sacred Mosque, as also prevented the sacrificial animals from reaching their place of sacrifice. They were thus in breach of every tradition and religion. That they were prepared to commit such a breach had everything to do with their standing among all the Arab tribes so that it could not be said that Muḥammad entered Makkah in spite of them. Because of such ignorant passion, they perpetrated this gross offence against all tradition and all religion. They were prepared to violate the sanctity of the Sacred Mosque, which gave them their own

special position in Arabia, as well as the sanctity of the sacred months, which was observed under Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Their fury and ignorance was clearly apparent in their harsh response to everyone who suggested that they pursue a line of compromise, criticizing their plan to prevent Muhammad and his Companions from entering the Mosque. This fury again manifested itself in the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn Amr's objection to include in the treaty God's attributes, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful, or the Prophet's status as God's Messenger. Such a hardened attitude could only have been the result of fury, ignorance and arrogance.

God left them to their fury and ignorance because He knew their adamant refusal to submit to the truth. At the same time, He protected the believers from entertaining such passion, giving them instead feelings of tranquillity and piety: *"Meanwhile, God sent down tranquillity on His Messenger and on the believers, and made the word of piety binding on them. They were most worthy of it and deserved it well."* (Verse 26) Calm tranquillity and piety are fine qualities suited to a believing heart which feels its bond with God, reassured by it. A person with such qualities always places his trust in God, and watches God in everything he says or does. Such a person does not behave arrogantly, nor do they let personal anger get the better of them. Instead, they are only motivated to anger in support of their faith and for God's sake. Therefore, if they are ordered to calm down, they willingly obey.

Therefore, the believers were most worthy and deserving of the word of piety. This is yet another point on which they are commended by God, who favoured them with the tranquillity He bestowed on them. This is all an honour given to them by the One who knows them well: *"God has full knowledge of all things."* (Verse 26)

### **The Prophet's True Vision**

We have already learnt that some of the Prophet's Companions on this trip, who were delighted with his dream knowing that prophets' dreams always come true, found it hard that his dream should not be fulfilled that year, and that they would be prevented entry to the Sacred Mosque. God assured them, however, that the Prophet's dream was true

Muḥammad ibn Maslamah went ahead with horses and arms until he arrived at Marr al-Zahrān, about one day's travel, by camel, from Makkah. There he found a few men from the Quraysh who were greatly worried at what they saw. They thought that he was about to attack Makkah in violation of the peace treaty, which stipulated that there would be no war between the two sides for ten years. When the Prophet encamped at Marr al-Zahrān where he could see the idols placed in the Sacred Mosque, he sent all the Muslims' arms, including bows, arrows and spears to a place called Baṭn Ya'juj. He then marched towards Makkah with his Companions having only their swords in their sheaths, as he had promised the people of Makkah.

The Quraysh then sent Mikraz ibn Ḥaṣṣ at the head of a delegation to the Prophet. They said to him: "Muḥammad, we have never known you to break a promise ever since you were a young child." He asked why they were saying this. They replied: "You are trying to enter the city carrying all your arms; spears, bows and arrows." The Prophet said: "I am not going to carry arms into the city. We have sent them to Baṭn Ya'juj." Mikraz ibn Ḥaṣṣ then replied: "This is more like what we know of your faithfulness."

Many of the Quraysh nobility left Makkah and went into the surrounding mountains; this because they did not wish to look at the Muslims as they arrived at the city for worship. Indeed, the very sight infuriated them. The rest of the Makkans were either out in the streets or on rooftops looking at the Prophet and his Companions as they entered repeating their phrases that declared their submission to God. The Prophet was riding his she-camel, al-Qaṣwā', which he rode the previous year. His Companion, 'Abdullāh ibn Rawāḥah, held the she-camel's rein and guided its march.

Thus the Prophet's dream came true and God's promise was fulfilled. The following year witnessed the fall of Makkah to Islam, and the divine faith came to reign in Makkah, then throughout the rest of Arabia. Then God's other promise and the other piece of good news were fulfilled: *"It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it prevail over all religions. Sufficient is God as a witness."* (Verse 28) The religion of truth prevailed, and not only in the Arabian Peninsula. Within half a century it prevailed across much of

the inhabited parts of the earth. It subdued the entire Persian Empire and took over much of the Byzantine Empire. It marched as far as India and China before moving into Malaysia, southern Asia and Indonesia. In the sixth and seventh centuries, these areas constituted most of the then known world.

This true religion continues to prevail over all religions, even after its political retreat from much of the areas it moved into, particularly in Europe and the major islands in the Mediterranean. It prevails even though the power of its people is very weak compared to the new powers that have recently emerged in the East and the West. Indeed, as a religion, Islam prevails over all else. It carries within itself and in its nature the elements of its strength. It moves forward, supported by neither sword nor gun drawn by its people. Its advance is due only to its inherent harmony with human nature and the natural laws of the universe, and to the fact that it satisfies, with perfect ease, the requirements of mind and soul, progress and civilization, regardless of whether people live in tents or in skyscrapers.

Any religious person who looks objectively at Islam is bound to recognise the soundness and inherent strength of this religion. Nor can they help but recognise its ability to lead humanity with wisdom and to answer its progressive needs in an easy and straightforward way: *"Sufficient is God as a witness."* (Verse 28)

We see, then, that God's promise was fulfilled in the immediate, political form, before one century had elapsed after the Prophet's mission. God's promise continues to be fulfilled in its substantive form, as Islam prevails over all other religions. In fact, it is the only religion that continues to act and lead in all situations. Perhaps only the Muslims do not understand this truth. Other people know it and take it into account as they draw up their policies and programmes.

## The Muslim Community

The *sūrah* concludes with a verse that paints a superb picture of the community of the Prophet's Companions, adding God's commendation of that unique and happy group of people who earned His pleasure and who were also informed of that fact:

*Muhammad is God's Messenger; and those who are with him are firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another. You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer, seeking favour with God and His good pleasure. They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah. And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot, strengthens it, grows thick and stands firm on its stem, delighting the sowers. Through them God will enrage the unbelievers. To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward. (Verse 29)*

This is a remarkable picture drawn by the superior style of the Qur'ān. It includes several snapshots depicting the group's main conditions, both subtle and clearly apparent. One shot portrays their attitude to the unbelievers and to one another. Thus, they are "*firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another.*" Another shows them as they are in worship: "*You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer.*" Yet a third image reveals what preoccupies their minds and characterizes their feelings: "*seeking favour with God and His good pleasure.*" A fourth shot focuses on the apparent effect worship has on their faces as they dedicate all to God: "*They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations. This is how they are pictured in the Torah.*" A number of additional quick images tell us how they are described in the Gospels: "*They are like a seed that brings forth its shoot; strengthens it; grows thick; stands firm on its stem; delights the sowers; through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*"

The verse begins by confirming the Prophet's status, denied by the Quraysh negotiator, Suhayl ibn 'Amr, and the unbelievers he represented at the time: "*Muhammad is God's Messenger.*" The verse then goes on to paint its beautiful picture in the unique Qur'ānic style.

Needless to say, the believers go through different conditions and situations during their lifetimes. However, the images shown in the verse concentrate on their permanent features, highlighting these so that they serve as the main lines in the overall picture. The selection of these particular images clearly shows that God wants to bestow honour on this happy community. This is reflected right from the very first image

that depicts them as: *"firm and unyielding towards the unbelievers, full of mercy towards one another."* They take such a firm and unyielding attitude towards the unbelievers, despite the fact that those unbelievers included their parents, siblings, kinsfolk and friends. However, they severed all these relations with the unbelievers. They are at the same time full of mercy towards one another, when their only bond is brotherhood in faith. This means that in both conditions of unyielding firmness and flowing mercy the determining factor is faith. There is absolutely no personal consideration. Their feelings, emotions, behaviour and bonds are based on faith alone, making them hostile to its opponents, compassionate towards their fellow believers. They discard all selfish thoughts and make their bond with God the only one to which they attach any value.

Again God's wish to honour this community is clearly apparent in making prominent their condition as they worship: *"You can see them bowing down, prostrating in prayer."* The way this is portrayed suggests that this is their permanent condition, one that we see whenever we look at them. In fact, bowing and prostration represent the condition of worship, which is the core feature of their personality. Therefore, it is expressed in a way that makes it permanent during their time, as if they spent their whole lives bowing and prostrating.

The same applies to the third image, which concentrates on their inner thoughts and feelings: *"seeking favour with God and His good pleasure."* Such are their permanent feelings and what always preoccupies them. All they aspire for is God's favour and earning His pleasure.

The fourth image focuses on how apparent worship and inner feelings are reflected in their appearances: *"They bear on their faces the marks of their prostrations."* Their faces shine with transparent clarity and the warmth that worship imparts. This is not a reference to the dark mark associated with prayer that appears on the foreheads of some people, as people may wrongly think when they hear the words, *'the marks of their prostration.'* What this expression refers to is the mark of worship, which is symbolized here by prostration as it expresses submission to God in the clearest form. The mark of this submission is seen on their faces; in other words there is no trace of pride, arrogance or selfishness. Instead, what is reflected is noble humility, purity and a serenity that adds to the shine on a believer's face.

This bright overall picture contains nothing new. It is also painted in the Torah as God gave the world the news of the emergence of this community of the Prophet's Companions.

The Gospels give another picture of Muḥammad and his community, describing them as "*And in the Gospels, they are like a seed that brings forth its shoot.*" It is a fertile seed that sends forth its shoot which does not weaken the stalk. On the contrary, it "*strengthens it*", or the shoot may be strengthened by the stalk. Thus the plant "*grows thick*", and its stem acquires strength and structure. The plant now "*stands firm on its stem*", upright, neither bending nor crooked. This is how the plant looks, but what feeling does it give to farmers who can immediately distinguish a fine plant that is bound to yield fruit? It gives them a feeling of pleasure: "*delighting the sowers*". A variant reading of this phrase puts the delighted onlookers in the singular, '*delighting the sower*,' which in this case refers to the Prophet, as he was the one that looked after the seeds until they harvested a noble and delightful community that was unique in history. The unbelievers experience a different feeling as they look on: "*Through them God will enrage the unbelievers.*" Sending such a feeling of rage into the unbelievers' hearts is clearly intended. It suggests that the planting was by God or by His Messenger, so as to yield a harvest that accomplishes God's purpose in enraging His enemies.

Again this picture is nothing new. It was painted before Muḥammad and his Companions began to walk the earth, in the Gospels as they herald the happy event of God sending Muḥammad with His final message.

Thus does God record in His book the qualities of this select group of the Prophet's Companions, so that it will be recognized by all creation. It remains the ideal and the role model for future generations, as the standard of faith they should emulate.

In addition to all this honour, God gives them a promise of forgiveness for their sins and a supreme reward: "*To those of them who believe and do righteous deeds God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward.*" The promise is given in such general terms after highlighting their special features so as to make them the first to whom the general description applies. The honour granted them is more than enough for anyone, but God's favours and bounty are limitless, unending. Therefore, they are granted forgiveness and a rich reward.



Once more I try today, fourteen centuries after the event, to visualize the beaming faces and rejoicing hearts of those people as they received this great honour and promise bestowed on them by God. I try to see them as they look at their own picture painted by God in His book. I look at them as they are on their way back from al-Hudaybiyah, when this *sūrah* was revealed and relayed to them; how they reflected on it, and how it touched their hearts and souls. I see them looking at one another, with each one seeing in his brother the mark of the grace he himself feels. I try again and again to live with them a moment of this splendid festival they experienced, but how can one who was not present there share all that, except from afar? It can only be by a special favour of God's grace, bringing close that which is indeed far. Lord! You know that I aspire to a special gift of this unique favour.



## SŪRAH 49

# Al-Hujurāt

(Compartments)

## Prologue

This *sūrah*, composed of no more than 18 verses, is majestic, indeed superior. It includes a number of basic facts of faith, Islamic law and human existence. It opens up before our hearts and minds wide horizons and gives rise to a host of important thoughts. It refers to systems of formation and organization, principles of education and upbringing, fundamentals of legislation and essential directives which could take a hundred times its length. It puts before our eyes two great issues for reflection and deliberation.

The first thing that appears to us when we read this *sūrah* is that it lays down, almost independently, a complete sketch of a noble world, free of anything that may be described as unbecoming. It outlines the principles, concepts and approaches that form the foundation of this world, ensuring first that it comes into being, and then its continuity. This world derives its *raison d'être* from God, looks up to God and is fit to be attributed to God. It is a world that combines purity of intention and feeling with a keen sense of propriety in what it says, feels and thinks. It maintains a high standard of morality and good manners in its dealings with God, His Messenger, its own affairs and interaction with others. This sense of morality penetrates into its deepest thoughts and manifests itself in its actions.

At the same time it has laws and regulations that ensure its continuity. These laws and regulations are based on its morality, emanate from it and fit with it. Thus this world benefits from such consistency of deep reality and surface appearance, the compatibility of its laws and feelings, the equilibrium between motives and checks, and the harmony between feelings and actions as it turns to God, appealing to Him. Hence, the existence and continuity of this noble and pure world are not left either to fine feelings and a sensitive conscience or to law and legislation. Nor are the establishment and maintenance of this world left to either the feelings and efforts of the individual or to the measures and systems of the state. Indeed, both individual and state have to work side by side, so that their efforts and duties complement each other in perfect harmony.

This world observes a certain code of behaviour with God and His Messenger, one that requires that everyone realizes his or her limits in relation to their Lord, and in relation to the Messenger who conveys His message: *“Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all.”* (Verse 1) Thus a servant of God does not precipitate His orders or prohibitions; nor does he or she suggest to Him any judgement or ruling. They neither exceed the limits of what God orders or prohibits, nor show that they have a will or an opinion independent from those of their Creator. This code is motivated by an attitude that combines fearing God with being modest and observing appropriate values in dealing with Him. Believers also observe special values when they address God's Messenger [peace be upon him]: *“Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.”* (Verses 2–5)

This noble world sets a well-defined approach for verifying what people may say or do, determining their accuracy before making any

judgement. This approach relies on fearing God and putting all matters to God's Messenger, without precipitating his judgement or suggesting to him what he has neither ordered nor recommended: *"Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise."* (Verses 6–8)

This noble world has its own rules and practical measures in sorting out any differences, conflicts and excesses that may occur within it, realizing that unless these are properly dealt with, they may undermine its very structure. Hence, it sets out certain procedures for dealing with them based on three main criteria: (1) that all believers are brethren; (2) that justice and peace must be maintained, and (3) that all believers are God-fearing and their goal is to earn God's pleasure and mercy. *"If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy."* (Verses 9–10)

Moreover, certain moral values apply in shaping the feelings of people in this world towards one another and in their behaviour towards each other. *"Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you deface one another, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers."* (Verse 11)

It is a world with healthy feelings, guaranteed rights, where people's integrity is valued in both their presence and absence. No one is

condemned on suspicion. None seeks to publicize another's shortcomings. People's safety, security, integrity and freedom are fully respected by all. *"Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful."* (Verse 12)

In this noble world a complete concept of mankind's unity, despite its divergent races and communities, prevails. A single standard of evaluation, free of prejudice and error, applies to all people. *"Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware."* (Verse 13)

Having presented these fundamental concepts that ensures this noble world maintains a high standard of purity, the *sūrah* embarks on drawing an outline of the faith by which believers are called upon to establish this world. Indeed, it is by their quality of faith that they are required to rise to the task and see to its fulfilment. This is the quality that distinguishes them from others and motivates them to respond and submit. They are addressed by their quality of having faith, 'Believers!' Anyone who is so addressed by God will be so embarrassed not to give the right response. It is an address that makes any duty, hard and demanding as it may be, easy to fulfil. Indeed hearts will be all too eager to listen and respond: *"The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything."* (Verses 14-16)

Before it closes, the *sūrah* shows how great the favour God has bestowed on humanity is. It is the gift of faith with which God favours

people according to what He knows of what they deserve. *“They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: ‘Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.’ God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.”* (Verses 17–18)

The second very important thing that appears clearly to us when we read the *sūrah* and review the actual events leading to its revelation is the great and unwavering effort, represented by Qur’ānic verses and the Prophet’s directives, to establish and educate the first Muslim community. Indeed it is the community that represents that noble world, providing a practical model of it. Thus, it is no longer a mere ideal that lingers in people’s dreams and imaginations.

This community, which existed during a certain period of history, did not come into existence suddenly or by chance. It did not owe its existence to a sudden change in the nature of all things. Instead, it went through a process of natural and slow growth, like a great tree that stretches its roots deep into the earth and spreads its branches wide into the air. It took the necessary time to complete its growth and benefited from steady and consistent effort to ensure that growth. Patient care, penetrating insight, careful motivation, steady encouragement and far-sighted strengthening were also provided. Moreover, it needed to go through hard and testing experiences and to learn important lessons from such experiences. In all this we see the kind of care God took of that community. He in His wisdom chose to fulfil a great trust, thus bringing His will to pass. Yet that community had its own virtues and potentials that only needed to be brought into full play. All this worked together to bring about such remarkable light in human history and to start, in reality, a situation that seems closer to an imaginary world.



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

Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. (1)

Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. (2)

Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. (3)

Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. (4)

If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful. (5)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَقْدُمُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ يَدْءِي اللَّهُ  
وَرَسُولَهُ وَأَقْعُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَرْفَعُوا أَصْوَاتَكُمْ  
فَوْقَ صَوْتِ النَّبِيِّ وَلَا تَجْهَرُوا لَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ  
كَجَهْرِ بَعْضِكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ أَن تَحْبَطَ  
أَعْمَالُكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٢﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَغْضُّونَ أَصْوَاتَهُمْ عِنْدَ رَسُولِ  
اللَّهِ أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ امْتَحَنَ اللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ  
لِلنَّفَاقِ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ ﴿٣﴾

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَدَّٰؤُنَكَ مِن وَّرَآءِ الْحُجُرَاتِ  
أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿٤﴾

وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ صَبَرُوا حَتَّى تَخْرُجَ إِلَيْهِمْ لَكَانَ  
خَيْرًا لَهُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿٥﴾

Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. (6)

And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. (7)

[All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise. (8)

If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. (9)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِن جَاءَكُمْ فَاسِقٌ  
بِنَبَأٍ فَتَبَيَّنُوا أَن تُصِيبُوا قَوْمًا بِمَجهَلَةٍ  
فَتُصْحِرُوا عَلَى مَا فَعَلْتُمْ تَلَذِينَ ﴿٦﴾

وَأَعْلَمُوا أَن فِيكُمْ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ لَوْ يُطِيعُكُمْ  
فِي كَثِيرٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْرِ لَعَنِتُمْ وَلَئِن لَّا  
كُنَّا لَأَيمَنُ وَرَزَيْنَهُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ وَكَرَّهَ  
إِلَيْكُمْ الْكُفْرَ وَالْفُسُوقَ وَالْإِعْصِيَاءَ  
أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الرَّاكِدُونَ ﴿٧﴾

فَضْلًا مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَنِعْمَةً وَاللَّهُ  
عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٨﴾

وَلِإِن طَائِفَتَانِ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ اقْتَتَلُوا  
فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَهُمَا فَإِن بَغَتْ إِحْدَاهُمَا  
عَلَى الْأُخْرَىٰ فَفَقِّتْلُوا الَّتِي بَغَتْ حَتَّىٰ تَقَىٰءَ  
إِلَىٰ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ فَإِن فَاءَتْ فَأَصْلِحُوا  
بَيْنَهُمَا بِالْعَدْلِ وَأَقْسِطُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ  
الْمُقْسِطِينَ ﴿٩﴾



All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy. (10)

Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers. (11)

Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful. (12)

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ أَخَوَيْكُمْ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا يَسْخَرُونَ مِنْ قَوْمٍ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَكُونُوا خَيْرًا مِنْهُمْ وَلَا نِسَاءً مِنْ نِسَاءِ عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَكُنَّ خَيْرًا مِنْهُنَّ وَلَا تَلْمِزُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ وَلَا تَنَابَزُوا بِالْأَلْقَابِ بِئْسَ الْإِسْمُ الْفُسُوقُ بَعْدَ الْإِيمَانِ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَتُبْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ ﴿١١﴾

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اجْتَنِبُوا كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ الظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا وَلَا يَغْتَبِ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَنْ يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٢﴾

Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware. (13)

يٰۤاَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اِنَّا خَلَقْنٰكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ  
وَاُنْثٰى وَجَعَلْنٰكُمْ شُعُوْبًا وَّقَبَاۤىِٕلَ  
لِتَعَارَفُوْۤا اِنَّ اَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللّٰهِ  
اَتْقٰىكُمْ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ عَلِيْمٌ خَبِيْرٌ ﴿١٣﴾

The Bedouin say: "We have attained to faith." Say [to them]: "Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful." (14)

قَالَتِ الْاَعْرَابُ ؕ اَمَّا قُلْ لَّمْ تُؤْمِنُوْا  
وَلٰكِنْ قُوْلُوْا اَسْلَمْنَا وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ  
الْاِيْمَنُ فِيْ قُلُوْبِكُمْ وَاِنْ تُطِيعُوْا اللّٰهَ  
وَرَسُوْلَهُ ۖ لَا يَلْبِسْكُمْۢ بَۛثًا مِّنْ اَعْمَالِكُمْ  
شَيْۢءًا اِنَّ اللّٰهَ غَفُوْرٌ رَّحِيْمٌ ﴿١٤﴾

True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. (15)

اِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُوْنَ الَّذِيْنَ اٰمَنُوْا بِاللّٰهِ  
وَرَسُوْلِهِ ۚ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَرْتَابُوْا وَجَاهَدُوْا  
بِاَمْوَالِهِمْ وَاَنْفُسِهِمْ فِيْ سَبِيْلِ اللّٰهِ  
اُولٰٓئِكَ هُمُ الصّٰدِقُوْنَ ﴿١٥﴾

Say: "Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything." (16)

قُلْ اَتَعْلَمُوْنَ اَنَّ اللّٰهَ يَدِيْنُكُمْ وَاللّٰهُ  
يَعْلَمُ مَا فِى السَّمٰوٰتِ وَمَا فِى الْاَرْضِ  
وَاللّٰهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْۢءٍ عَلِيْمٌ ﴿١٦﴾

They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: "Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth." (17)

يَمْنُونَ عَلَيْكَ أَنْ أَسْلَمُوا قُلْ لَا تَمْنُوا عَلَيَّ  
إِسْلَامَكُمْ بَلِ اللَّهُ يَمْنُنُ عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْ هَدَاكُمْ  
لِلْإِيمَانِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do. (18)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ  
وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ يَمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

### Refining Rough Manners

*Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all. Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them. Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful. (Verses 1-5)*

The *sūrah* starts with this first loving address that aims to alert hearts: "Believers!" It is an address by God to those who believe in Him, touching their hearts by highlighting the bond they have with Him, making them aware that they belong to Him, carry His mark, do His bidding and are His soldiers. They realize that they are in this world for a purpose He wants to accomplish. If He has made faith appealing to them and seem beautiful in their eyes, as part of His favour, it behoves them to stand

where He wants them to be, awaiting His orders and judgement. They should be glad to do His bidding in full submission to Him: *"Believers! Do not behave presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. Have fear of God: God hears all and knows all."* (Verse 1)

Believers, do not make any suggestion to God or His Messenger, concerning any of your affairs or of life in general. Do not presume to have a say in any matter before God has stated, through His Messenger, what He wants concerning it. Do not attempt to judge any matter unless you first refer to what God and His Messenger say.

Qatādah says: "It has been reported that some people used to say: 'If there was some revelation concerning such and such,' or, 'If it could thus be true.' God disliked such suggestions." Al-'Awfi says: "They were told not to start speaking in his presence." Mujāhid says: "The verse orders believers not to precipitate what the Prophet might say. They must wait until God made His judgement clear through His Messenger." Al-Dhahḥāk says: "Do not make a judgement on any question relating to your faith without waiting for the judgement of God and His Messenger." Ibn 'Abbās is reported to have said: "Do not say anything that is not in line with the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*."

Thus, we see that it is all a question of a psychological attitude defining the standards to be observed in relation to God and His Messenger, and the process by which instructions are received and carried out. This is an essential part of how Islamic law is enacted and implemented. It is all based on an essential God-fearing quality and its reinforcement. This quality stems from the awareness that God hears all and knows all. Furthermore, this all-embracing truth is incorporated into one single, short verse.

The believers applied this standard to their relationship with their Lord and His Messenger. None of them would ever presume to suggest anything to God or His Messenger. None would voice an opinion unless God's Messenger asked him to do so. None would make a judgement concerning any matter without first referring to what God and His Messenger said about it.

Imām Aḥmad, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah relate that the Prophet asked Mu'ādh when he appointed him Governor of Yemen: "How will you judge?" Mu'ādh said: "According to God's book." The

Prophet asked: "What if you do not find in it what you need?" Mu'adh answered: "Then according to the Sunnah of God's Messenger." Again the Prophet asked: "And if you do not find something relevant in that?" Mu'adh replied: "In this case, I will exercise my judgement as best as I can." The Prophet put his hand on Mu'adh's chest and said: "Praise be to God for guiding the messenger of God's Messenger to what pleases His Messenger." After the revelation of this verse, the Prophet might ask his Companions about their day and the places they had been to, but even then, they would hesitate to give an answer other than: "God and His Messenger know best." They feared that a direct answer might be treated as presumption in the presence of God and His Messenger.

### When Speaking to the Prophet

In a *ḥadīth* reported by Abū Bakarah Nafi' ibn al-Hārith mentions that during his pilgrimage, the Prophet asked his Companions: "Which month is this?" We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' He was silent until we thought that he would give it a different name. But he said: 'Is it not Dhū'l-Hijjah?' We said: 'Yes.' He then asked: 'Which city is this?' We said: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Again, he was silent until we thought that he would call it by a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the sanctified city?' We said: 'Yes, indeed.' So he went on and asked: 'What day is today?' We replied: 'God and His Messenger know best.' Once more he remained silent until we thought that he would give it a different name, but then he said: 'Is it not the day of sacrifice?' We answered in the affirmative..." This is, then, an example of the standard the Prophet's Companions achieved in their God-fearing manners when they heard this instruction coupled with the order to maintain their fear of God, who hears all and knows all.

The second aspect of good manners concerned the Prophet's Companions' own discourse with him and the respect they should feel and show. This was to be observed in how they spoke to him and in the level of their voices. This was how they should manifest their respect for the Prophet as they sat with him. As God drew their attention to this requirement, He addressed them by that quality they loved to have and warned them that violation of His orders might bring grievous

consequences in its wake: *"Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it."* (Verse 2)

This kindly address coupled with its awesome warning had their profound effect on the Prophet's Companions. Al-Bukhārī reports that Abū Mulaykah said: "The two goodly ones, Abū Bakr and 'Umar [may God be pleased with them], were in a perilous situation, as they raised their voices in the presence of the Prophet. When the delegation of the Tamīm tribe arrived [in the ninth year of the Islamic calendar] one of them suggested al-Aqrā' ibn Hābis [to be appointed as their chief], while the other suggested another man. [One reporter says that he does not remember the name of this second man, while another reporter mentions that he was al-Qa'qā' ibn Ma'bad.] Abū Bakr said to 'Umar: 'You merely want to oppose me.' The other replied: 'I do not wish to oppose you.' They were soon speaking loudly. The verse was revealed saying: *'Believers! Do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you would speak loudly to one another, lest all your deeds should come to nothing without your perceiving it.'* (Verse 2) Ibn al-Zubayr says that after its revelation 'Umar would hardly use an audible voice when he spoke to the Prophet until the Prophet asked him to speak up. It is also reported that when this verse was revealed, Abū Bakr said to the Prophet: 'God's Messenger, I will only speak to you in a whisper.'

Imām Aḥmad relates on the authority of Anas ibn Mālīk that when this verse was revealed, Thābit ibn Qays, a man with a high-pitched voice thought: "I was the one who raised his voice in the presence of God's Messenger. I am destined to hell, because my deeds have come to waste." He stayed at home depressed. The Prophet noticed his absence and asked about him. Some people went to him and told him that the Prophet had asked about his absence. He said to them: "I am the one who raised his voice above the voice of the Prophet and spoke loudly to him. All my deeds are wasted. I am destined to hell." They went to the Prophet informing him of what Thābit had said. The Prophet said: "No. He certainly belongs to heaven." Anas says: "We subsequently saw him walking among us, knowing that he was certain to go to heaven."

Thus they felt a tremor in their hearts as they listened to this endearing address and its stern warning. Hence, they observed a high standard of fine manners in the Prophet's presence for fear that their deeds would come to nothing.

God praises their piety and lowered voices when they are with the Prophet in an unusual expression: *"Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are the ones whose hearts God has tested for piety. Forgiveness and a rich reward await them."* (Verse 3) Piety that manifests itself in a God-fearing attitude is a great gift God grants to certain hearts He chooses after initially testing them. It is thus implanted only in hearts that are suited to it, having first proven their merit. Those who lower their voices in the presence of God's Messenger are they who have proven themselves in a test of hearts. They are the ones who fear God, a quality that earns them forgiveness and a rich reward from God.

Here, then, is a tempting invitation that follows a stern warning. Both are part of how God educated and prepared his chosen servants for the great task that first generation of Muslims undertook.

It is reported that 'Umar heard two people speaking loudly in the Prophet's Mosque. He went to them and said: "Do you realize where you are? Where do you come from?" They said to him: "We come from Ṭā'if." He said: "Had you been from Madīnah, I would have had you soundly bearen."

Islamic scholars, having realized the extent of this injunction, state that it is reprehensible to raise one's voice near the Prophet's grave in the same way as it was reprehensible to do so in his presence. In this way, Muslims demonstrate their respect for the Prophet in all situations.

The ninth year of the Islamic calendar is called 'The year of delegations' because delegations from all over Arabia arrived in Madīnah to embrace Islam and pledge their loyalty to the Prophet. The *sūrah* refers to an incident that took place that year when the delegation of Tamīm arrived. These were unrefined Bedouins. They shouted to the Prophet from outside his wives' apartments that were situated next to the mosque: "Muḥammad, come out and speak to us!" The Prophet disliked their uncivilized manner. Hence, the next verse of the *sūrah* was revealed: *"Those who call out to you from without your private apartments are for the most part people who do not use their reason. If they had the patience*

*to wait until you went out to them, it would be for their own good. Still, God is much forgiving, merciful.”* (Verses 4–5)

Thus does God describe most of them as being without reason. He censures their calling out to the Prophet in a way that is contrary to the sort of respect that should be shown to God's Messenger, the leader and educator of the community of believers. He explains to them that it better behaved them to wait patiently until the Prophet came out to them of his own accord. Furthermore, the *sūrah* highlights to them the value of repentance, making it clear that they should seek God's forgiveness and pray to Him to bestow His mercy on them.

Muslims have shown their awareness of this high standard of refinement, extending it to every teacher and scholar. They would not disturb their teachers or impose themselves on them until they came out or called them in. Abū 'Ubayd, a pious and reliable scholar of *Ḥadīth*, says: "I never knocked at the door of any scholar, but waited patiently until he came out in his own good time."

### **Making Sure Before Taking Action**

*Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action. And know that God's Messenger is among you. Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm. But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise.* (Verses 6–8)

The first address in the *sūrah* defines the leadership and the source from which to receive orders. The second establishes the standards of manners and respect to be maintained in dealing with this leadership. Both serve as the basis for all legislations and directives that follow in the *sūrah*. It is imperative for the source and the leadership to be well defined so that directives and instructions be given their true value and



so that they are properly obeyed. Hence, the third address explains to the believers how to receive news and reports and the need to verify their reliability. *"Believers! If any evildoer comes to you with a piece of news, make sure of it first, lest you should wrong others unwittingly and then regret your action."* (Verse 6)

The verse specifically mentions the evildoer because he is more likely to lie. It is important that suspicion should not be widely spread in the Muslim community. If every report is doubted, the system of gathering intelligence and information becomes paralyzed. In a Muslim community, individuals are normally treated as trustworthy, and the information they bring is considered reliable. An evildoer is treated differently: his information is not accepted until it is verified. Thus, the community steers a middle way between accepting and rejecting the information relayed to it. The community does not rush into action on the basis of a report given by someone whose behaviour leaves much to be desired. Such rash action might lead to committing a wrong against other people, and subsequent regret. Furthermore, such rash action may incur God's displeasure and put the community in a position of committing an injustice.

A number of commentators on the Qur'ān mention that this verse specifically referred to al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah ibn Abū Mu'ayt when the Prophet sent him to collect *zakāt* from the tribe of al-Muṣṭalaq. Ibn Kathīr quotes a report by Mujāhid and Qatādah, stating: "God's Messenger sent al-Walīd ibn 'Uqbah to al-Muṣṭalaq tribe to collect their *zakāt* and they paid it to him. When he returned he reported to the Prophet that the tribe was raising a force to attack the Muslims. [In his report, Qatādah also states that al-Walīd added that the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe had renounced the Islamic faith.] The Prophet then sent Khālīd ibn al-Walīd to them, ordering him to make sure of the information before taking any action. Khālīd so went out to them arriving at night and sending out a number of soldiers to gather information. When they returned, they reported to him that the tribe were adhering to their Islamic faith and that they heard the call to prayer and saw people praying. In the morning, Khālīd made his appearance at the tribe's quarters and saw what pleased him. He then returned to the Prophet and reported all this to him. Thereafter, this verse was then revealed."

Qatādah says that the Prophet used to say afterwards: "Verification complies with God's orders, while haste comes from Satan."

The import of this verse is general, making it clear that checking the accuracy of reports given by suspect people is necessary. On the other hand, a report by a God-fearing person is taken as correct, because this is the normal state of affairs in the Muslim community. A report by an evildoer is the exception, not the norm. Indeed, accepting reports by God-fearing people is part of proper verification and checking. To make doubt the norm, applicable to all sources and reports, is contrary to the principle of trust that is basic to the Muslim community. Furthermore, it could easily cause disruption in its life. Islam allows life to run its normal course while putting in place certain controls that guarantee its protection. Here we see how this operates in practice.

### Making Life Too Hard

It appears that some Muslims wanted to take immediate action when they heard the first news reported by al-Walid ibn 'Uqbah. They advised the Prophet to immediately punish the al-Muṣṭalaq tribe. In doing so, they were motivated by a keen desire to ensure the status of Islam and to act against those who refused to pay *zakāt*. The next verse reminds them of the great blessing they had, namely the Prophet's presence in their midst. They should appreciate this blessing and be always mindful of its importance: "*And know that God's Messenger is among you.*" (Verse 7)

This is a reality that we can very easily imagine because it actually happened. However, when we reflect on it, we see that it is superior, beyond imagination. Is it easy to imagine a continuous, dynamic contact between heaven and earth, witnessed by all, whereby heaven speaks to people on earth about their public and private affairs, correcting their errors one by one, and giving them advice about their most intimate affairs? Any one of them might do or say something, or even entertain a thought, and yet heaven is aware of it all. What happens next is that God informs His Messenger of what has taken place and directs him to do or say whatever is necessary about it. This is something so great that it might not be fully appreciated by some of those present at the time. Hence, they are reminded of it in this particular way: "*And know*

*that God's Messenger is among you.*" (Verse 7) In other words, be aware of this fact and give it its due importance.

One outcome of this new-found knowledge is that they must not act presumptuously in the presence of God and His Messenger. The Qur'ān, however, puts this even more lucidly and forcefully, telling the Muslims that what God's Messenger decides on any matter, on the basis of God's revelation or inspiration, is good for them as it combines ease and mercy. Had God's Messenger obeyed all their thoughts, they would have found matters far more difficult. God is more aware than them of what is of benefit to them. His Messenger represents mercy in everything he chooses for them: *"Were he to comply with your inclinations in many a case, you would surely come to harm."* (Verse 7) This implies that they should leave all their affairs in the hands of God and His Messenger. They should submit fully, surrendering themselves to God's will, implementing His orders as they receive them, and suggesting nothing to God's Messenger.

The *sūrah* then draws their attention to the grace of faith He guided them to, making their hearts warm to it as He revealed its beauty and benefit such that they would love it dearly. He has also made unbelief, wrongdoing and sin hateful to them. All this is part of God's grace which He bestows on them: *"But God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience to God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course. [All this is indeed part of] God's bounty and favour. God is all-knowing, truly wise."* (Verses 7–8)

That God should select certain individuals from among His servants and grant them all this represents His immeasurable bounty and grace. Indeed, all other types of grace and bounty, including that which brings people into existence and gives them life, seem to dwindle by comparison to what faith represents. Later in the *sūrah* we will look in detail at God's words: *"It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth."* (Verse 17)

What is particularly significant here is that they are reminded that it is God who has willed that they should have all this bounty. It is He who has rid their hearts of all the evil of unbelief, wrongdoing and sin. It is He who willed that they should follow the right course, bestowing

on them His favours and bounty. All this He does in His wisdom and full knowledge of the truth. Again stating this truth implies that they should submit themselves to God's direction and planning, trusting that it is always for their own good. They should stop making suggestions and rushing hastily into what they consider to be good, before God has made His choice for them. God's Messenger takes them by the hand to gain all this goodness.

Man is hasty, but he is unaware of the likely consequences of his precipitate action. Man may also make suggestions concerning his own or other people's affairs, without knowing whether his suggestions will bring benefit or cause harm: "*Yet man prays for evil as eagerly as he prays for good. Truly man is ever hasty.*" (17: 11) If man would only submit himself to God, accepting what God chooses for him, knowing that God's choice is better, more compassionate and beneficial for him than what he may choose for himself, he would be much more comfortable. He would complete this short journey on this planet with ease and contentment. But this is also an aspect of God's grace which He grants to whomever He wills.

### **Fighting Between Muslim Believers**

*If two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them. But then, if one of the two goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's commandment; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably with them. Indeed, God loves those who act equitably. All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy. (Verses 9–10)*

This is a practical rule to protect the community of believers from strife resulting from excesses and hard feelings. This rule is given immediately after the requirement to verify the reports given by evildoers, making sure that the believers do not rush into action that may be counterproductive. Whether this verse was revealed in consequence

of a particular case, as some reports suggest, or whether it was merely initiating a piece of legislation to outline what the Muslim community should do in such cases, it nonetheless provides a general and highly effective rule that stamps out strife and ensures solidarity within the Muslim community. It also establishes justice, rightness and fairness. All this is based on believers being God-fearing and their hope that He will bestow His grace on a community that deals with justice and works for reconciliation.

The Qur'ān either supposes or confronts the possibility of two groups of believers taking up arms against each other, yet it accepts that both are believers, even though one of them, or indeed both of them, may be in the wrong. It requires the Muslim community, other than the two fighting groups, to work for reconciliation between the two. But if one of them acts wrongfully, refusing to give up what it has no right to claim, or indeed if both act wrongfully, refusing reconciliation or refusing to abide by God's law over that which they dispute, then the believers must fight those who act wrongfully until they revert to God's commandment. The commandment at issue here is the ending of strife and conflict between believers and accepting God's judgement over anything contentious. Should those acting wrongfully revert to God's commandment, then the believers should establish reconciliation based on strict justice and equity, in obedience of God and seeking His pleasure: "*God loves those who act equitably.*" (Verse 9)

This judgement is followed by a touch that aims to bring out genuine feelings of brotherhood among believers. It is the bond that unites them after they have fallen out. They are also reminded of the need to always be God-fearing, suggesting that this is the only way to earn His grace. "*All believers are but brothers. Hence, make peace between your two brothers, and remain God-fearing, so that you may receive [God's] mercy.*" (Verse 10)

The correlation of this is that love, peace, cooperation and unity are the essential characteristics of a Muslim community. Conflict and fighting are exceptions that must be dealt with as soon as they occur in order to bring about reconciliation and peace. For this end, it is permissible for other Muslims to fight those of their brethren who act

wrongfully towards others; this so as to bring them back into the fold and restore the proper situation. This is certainly a tough and decisive measure.

This rule also provides that no wounded man in such battles may be finished off, and no captive may be killed. Those who lay down their arms and flee the battlefield cannot be pursued. Furthermore, the property of the group in the wrong may not be looted. The purpose of fighting them is not to finish them off, but rather to bring them back into line with the rest of the Muslim community.

In the right order of things, all Muslims of the world should have one leader. Once a pledge of loyalty is given to a leader to rule over the Muslim community as a whole, and another person claims such leadership for himself, this claimant should be killed. He and his supporters are considered rebels whom believers should fight alongside their leader. It was on this basis that Imām 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib fought those who rebelled in the battles of the Camel and Ṣiffīn. Many of the Prophet's distinguished Companions fought alongside him. However, a small number including Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqāṣ, Muḥammad ibn Maslamah, Usāmah ibn Zayd and 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar chose not to engage in the battle, either because they could not determine which side was right or because, as al-Jaṣṣāṣ says, they felt that Imām 'Alī had clear superiority and hence their absence would not affect the result. The first probability is clearly the stronger, especially as this is borne out by some of their reported statements. Ibn 'Umar, for example, is reported to have expressed regret for not fighting alongside 'Alī.

This proper state of affairs, whereby the Muslims have only one leader, should be the norm in all situations, including those exceptional situations when two or more political rulers are in power in different and separate Muslim areas. It is the duty of Muslims to fight on the side of the single ruler against the group acting wrongfully, if they rebel against his authority, or if one group acts wrongfully towards another group without rebelling against the Muslim ruler *per se*. It is also the duty of Muslims to fight such rebels if they affiliate themselves to a political ruler in a situation where more than one Muslim ruler is in power. All Muslims must close ranks and stand against those acting wrongfully

until they revert to God's commandment. In this way, this text remains operational in all situations.

It is clear that this system, based on arbitration and fighting the group in the wrong until they revert to God's commandment, precedes all human attempts in this regard. Moreover, it is free of all the flaws and shortcomings inherent in defective human endeavours. Moreover, it incorporates qualities of purity, honesty and absolute justice. The arbitration that it calls for is based on operating God's orders, which are equitable, free of any prejudice and defect. Alas for mankind! They look on, but go away limping and stumbling when the clear, paved and straight way beckons to them.

### **No Ridicule, Defamation or Insult**

*Believers! No men shall deride other men: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. And neither shall you defame yourselves, nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed. Those who do not repent are indeed wrongdoers. (Verse 11)*

The human society Islam establishes in the light of Qur'ānic guidance operates a high standard of manners. Every individual in this society has his or her integrity, which may not be compromised. Indeed, it is part of the integrity of the whole community. To slander anyone is to slander oneself, because the whole community is a single entity and its integrity is one.

In this verse, the Qur'ān again addresses the believers by their most beloved description, "*Believers*". It forbids that one group should deride another, be they men deriding other men, or women deriding other women. For how can they know whether or not the ones they deride enjoy a better status with God?

The way this order is expressed suggests that the apparent values that men or women may consider important may not be those that

give people their real status. There are other values, which people may not know about. These are known to God who operates them in fairness. A rich man may deride a poor one. Similarly, those who are strong, enjoying good health, intelligence, children and support, may deride those who are less fortunate than themselves, such as those who are weak, handicapped, simple-minded, childless or orphans without support. A woman who sees herself as pretty, young, perfectly shaped, or rich may deride another for being ugly, old, misshaped, or poor. But none of these earthly values is of any importance as a criterion of high status. In God's sight, people are raised in rank on the basis of totally different values.

The Qur'ān, however, does not stop at implying this. It works on the sentiment of brotherhood in faith, reminding the believers that they descend from a single soul. Whoever defames anyone actually defames all. Hence, the Qur'ān says: "*Neither shall you defame yourselves.*" (Verse 11) It should be mentioned that the word the Qur'ān uses for defaming, *talmizū*, has a particular resonance that imparts a feeling that also has a physical effect.

Part of derision and defamation is to call others names that they dislike, or feel to be meant as ridicule. It is the right of a believer not to be called by a name that he or she dislikes, or feels to suggest disrespect. Moreover, Islamic standards require a believer not to call a brother or a sister by such a name that gives them pain. The Prophet changed the names or nicknames of some of his Companions because he felt, with his refined sense and compassionate heart, that they could bring ridicule or pain to the people concerned.

Having outlined the true values in God's measure, and appealed to feelings of brotherhood and of belonging to one soul, the *sūrah* now reaches out to the believers' sense of faith, warning them that they will lose this noble quality if they indulge in derision and ridicule: "*Nor insult one another by [opprobrious] epithets. Ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness [to be used of one] after he has believed.*" (Verse 11) To indulge in this is akin to renouncing faith after one has believed. The *sūrah* goes even further than this by threatening to consider this an act of wrongdoing, something that is often expressed in the Qur'ān as being synonymous with associating partners with God. "*Those who do*



*not repent are indeed wrongdoers.”* (Verse 11) Thus, the *sūrah* establishes the rules for refined manners in a noble community.

### **No Suspicion or Backbiting**

*Believers! Avoid suspicion as much as possible, for, some such suspicion is a sin. And do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it. And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful.* (Verse 12)

This verse establishes yet another fence in this noble society, protecting the integrity and freedom of individuals, while at the same time teaching people how to cleanse their feelings and consciences. Following the pattern of the *sūrah*, it begins with the endearing address, “*Believers*”. It follows this by issuing an order to avoid most suspicion, so that they do not leave themselves open to thoughts of doubt about others. It justifies this order by saying that some suspicion is sinful. Since the prohibition applies to most suspicion and the rule is that some suspicion is sinful, then the verse implies that all negative suspicion should be avoided, because no one knows which part of his or her doubts are sinful.

Thus the Qur’ān purges a Muslim’s inner conscience so that it is not contaminated with evil suspicion and consequently incurs sin. It leaves it clean, free of doubt, entertaining only friendly and affectionate thoughts towards one’s brethren. In this way it steers society away from suspicion so that the community enjoys reassurance and is not marred by worry and apprehension. Life in a community where ill thoughts have no place is both serene and comfortable.

Islam does not, however, stop at this point in educating people’s hearts and souls. The verse we are looking at establishes a principle that applies to people’s dealings with each other. It protects the rights of those who live in its pure society so that they are not punished or tried on the basis of suspicion. Indeed, suspicion does not even form a proper basis for interrogating people or investigating their affairs. The Prophet is quoted as saying: “If you have doubts, do not investigate.” [Related by al-Ṭabarānī.] What this means is that people remain innocent, enjoying

all their rights, freedom and status until it is absolutely clear that they have committed some offence. It is not sufficient just to suspect them of having committed something so they are then pursued with the aim of establishing whether they are guilty or not.

This verse shows us the limit to which Islam goes in protecting people's freedom, integrity, rights and status. How does this compare with what even the best democratic countries boast of with regard to protecting human rights? This standard, which the Qur'ān sets for believers, is far superior indeed. Moreover, Islam achieves this in real life, after it establishes it in people's hearts and consciences.

The verse moves on to lay down another principle that provides social guarantees: *"And do not spy on one another."* (Verse 12) Spying may be an action that follows immediately on entertaining suspicion. On the other hand, it may be an independent action that seeks to look at other people's faults and errors. The Qur'ān opposes spying because it is morally base. It aims to purge people's hearts from sinking into this vile pursuit in order to keep up its high moral standards.

Yet the order goes beyond this. It states an essential principle of the Islamic social system and its legislative measures. People are entitled to have their freedom and integrity respected. These should not be violated or encroached upon in any way.

In an Islamic society people enjoy a high standard of values. They enjoy security in their lives, homes and personal affairs. Nothing whatsoever justifies any violation of these. Indeed, the investigation of a crime does not provide, in the Islamic system, justification for spying on people. We take people by their appearances, and no one is entitled to delve into others' affairs. Indeed, people may not be taken to task except for what is evident of their offences. No one may suspect, anticipate or even know that others are secretly committing some violation and resort to spying on them so as to establish this as a fact or to catch them red-handed. All that may be done against such people is that they be put to trial when they actually commit a crime.

Some people said to 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd, a learned scholar and a Companion of the Prophet: "We saw this man with his beard dripping wine." He said: "We have been forbidden to spy. If we see something

evident, we act on it.” [Related by Abū Dāwūd.] Mujāhid says: “Do not spy on one another. Take people on the basis of what is apparent and do not look into what God has left concealed.”

Imām Aḥmad quotes Dujayn, a clerk employed by ‘Uqbah, saying: “I said to ‘Uqbah that we have neighbours who drink and I want to call the police to take them to account.” He said to me: “Do not do that. What you should do is to advise and warn them.” Dujayn did this but his neighbours persisted in their prohibited ways. So he said to ‘Uqbah again: “I have warned them, but they will not desist. I am calling the police.” ‘Uqbah said to him: “Do not do that. I heard the Prophet say: ‘Whoever keeps to himself a fault of another believer is like one who rescues a girl buried alive.’” [Also related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā’ī.]

Abū Dāwūd quotes Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān as saying: “I heard the Prophet saying: ‘If you pursue people’s faults you corrupt them, or almost corrupt them’.” Abū al-Dardā’, a learned Companion of the Prophet, said: “This is a word Mu‘āwiyah has heard from the Prophet, and God has enabled him to benefit by it.”

Thus was the divine order implemented in practical life. It did not stop at being a form of practical education to purge hearts and consciences. It became like a fence protecting people’s rights, freedom and sanctity, so that they could not be touched under any pretext. Far superior is this level to any achieved today, 1,400 years later, even by those societies which respect human rights and freedom most.

Next comes the order that forbids backbiting. This is given in such a way that it provides a graphic description of the disgusting nature of this action: “*Nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Surely you would loathe it.*” (Verse 12) The order tells Muslims that they must not backbite. It then paints a scene that fills even the most insensitive of people with disgust, showing someone eating his dead brother’s flesh. It immediately declares that they have, of course, a very strong and natural aversion to such behaviour. Hence, they also have a strong aversion against backbiting.

Following all these prohibitions against suspicion, spying and backbiting, the *sūrah* awakens believers’ God-fearing instinct, inviting

anyone who has committed any of these unlawful acts to hasten and repent in the hope of God's mercy: *"And remain God-fearing. God is certainly the One who accepts repentance, and He is merciful."* (Verse 12)

Once again we say that this text is meant in practice to be like a high boundary protecting people's sanctity and integrity. It provides Muslims with a profound sense of morality. The Prophet follows the Qur'ān's example in making backbiting appear so disgusting. Abū Hurayrah reports that the Prophet was asked to define backbiting. He said: "To say about your brother something he dislikes." Someone asked: "Suppose that what I say is true of my brother." The Prophet answered: "If you say what is true, you are guilty of backbiting; but if it is untrue, you are guilty of wilful defamation." [Related by al-Tirmidhī who states that it is authentic.]

Ā'ishah reports that she said to the Prophet: "It is enough that Ṣafīyyah [another wife of the Prophet] is so and so [referring to the fact that she is short]." The Prophet said to her: "You have said a word that would contaminate the entire volume of seawater." She added that she imitated someone to him, but he said: "I would rather not imitate anyone, even if I would get so and so for it." [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Anas ibn Mālīk quotes the Prophet as saying: "When I was taken on my ascension to heaven, I passed by people with copper nails, scratching their faces and chests. I said: 'Gabriel, who are these?' He said: 'These are the ones who eat the flesh of others and detract from their honour.'" [Related by Abū Dāwūd.]

Mā'iz and the Ghāmidī woman confessed to the Prophet that they had committed adultery, insisting that the Prophet should administer the mandatory punishment to cleanse them. Hence he ordered that they be stoned. The Prophet subsequently heard one man say to another: "Have you seen this man whose offence God has concealed? Yet he insisted on being punished until he was stoned like a dog." The Prophet marched on with his Companions and soon passed by a dead donkey. He asked for the two men, and when they came forward, he said to them: "Get down and eat of this." Shocked, the two men said: "May God forgive you, Messenger of God! Is this something to be eaten?" He said: "What you said about your brother a short while ago is even more disgusting

than eating of this. By Him who holds my soul in His hand, he is now in heaven being bathed in its waters." [Related by Ibn Kathīr in his commentary on the Qur'ān.]

With such consistent treatment the Muslim community was purged and attained its high standard. It became like a dream that came true, a model to be followed and relished.

### **The Brotherhood of Mankind**

Having addressed the believers in such a way as to elevate them to a superior level of refined manners and morality, the *sūrah* then addresses all mankind, of all races, colours and communities, reminding them that they all share one origin. One standard applies to them all: it is the same one that elevates the Muslim community to its superior level of unparalleled purity.

*Mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Truly, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most genuinely God-fearing. God is all-knowing, all-aware.*  
(Verse 13)

All of you people, who present such different races and colours, communities and tribes, come from one origin. Hence, you should not divide into groups or fall out with each other and so waste your energy.

Mankind! You are being called by the One who created you out of a male and a female to inform you of the purpose of making you into nations and tribes. It is not so that you stir up conflict and enmity. It is rather for the purpose of getting to know one another and living peacefully together. Differences of language, colour, temperament, manners, talents and abilities do not lead to conflict and strife. In fact, they make for cooperation so that all tasks are fulfilled and all needs met. Colour, race, language, homeland and similar factors are of no importance in God's sight. There is only one criterion to determine people's worth: "*The noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is*

*most genuinely God-fearing.*" (Verse 13) Noble indeed is the one who is noble in God's sight. He gives you your value on the basis of His perfect knowledge and His awareness of values and measures: "*God is all-knowing, all-aware.*" (Verse 13) Thus all dividing factors and values are discounted leaving only one measure and one value by which all mankind are tested.

Thus all reasons for conflict and quarrel on earth disappear, all considerations coveted by human beings lose their value. In their place, an important and distinctly clear reason for friendship and cooperation looms large: that is, God's Lordship of all and the fact that He has created all mankind from the same origin. A single banner is raised so that all compete to line up under it. That is the banner of fearing God alone. This is the banner raised by Islam in order to save humanity from the evil consequences of fanatic bonds of race, homeland, tribe, clan, family, etc. All these belong to the world of ignorance, or *Jāhiliyyah*, although they may take up different names, colours and fashions. In essence, though, they are ties of ignorance that have nothing to do with Islam.

Islam has fought ignorant fanaticism in all its forms and shapes so as to establish its world system under God's banner alone. In Islam, banners of nationality and race have neither place nor value. The Prophet said: "All of you descend from Adam, and Adam was created out of clay. Those people who seek pride in their ancestry should desist, or else God will bring them as low as beetles, or even lower." [Related by al-Bazzār on the authority of Hudhayfah.] Referring to the bonds valued in pre-Islamic days, the Prophet said: "Leave these altogether, because they stink." [Related by Muslim.]

This is the foundation of Islamic society: a human and global society. Humanity may stretch all its imagination and exert its best efforts to achieve even one aspect of it, but it fails because it does not follow the clear and straight road leading to it, as defined by God, and because it does not raise God's banner which unites us all.

## **The Meaning of True Faith**

As the *sūrah* draws to its end, it fittingly explains the truth of faith in reply to those Bedouins who claimed to be believers when they did not

even understand the nature of faith. This also serves as a reply to those who tried to press their acceptance of Islam as a favour they thought they did for the Prophet. In essence, they do not appreciate that it is only through God's favour that people believe.

*The Bedouin say: 'We have attained to faith.' Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, 'We have submitted ourselves', for true faith has not entered your hearts. But if you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste. God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful.' True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word. Say: 'Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.' They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: 'Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.' God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do. (Verses 14–18)*

The first of these verses is said to have been revealed in relation to the Bedouins of the Asad tribe who, as soon as they accepted Islam, boasted saying, 'We have attained to faith.' They even counted this as a favour they performed for the Prophet. They said to him: "Messenger of God! We have become Muslims. Other Arabs have fought you, but we have not." God wanted to show them the truth of what was in their hearts when they said this, stating that they only embraced Islam in submission while the truth of faith had not touched their hearts or souls. "Say [to them]: 'Believers you are not. Rather say, "We have submitted ourselves", for true faith has not entered your hearts.'" (Verse 14)

Nevertheless, God's grace has dictated that they will be rewarded for every good action they do, letting nothing go to waste. Even the outward manifestation of Islam, which has not yet penetrated into people's hearts to become genuine faith, is sufficient to make their

good deeds count and be recorded. Thus, their deeds are not wasted like those of unbelievers. No part of their reward is wasted as long as they continue to obey: *"If you truly pay heed to God and His Messenger, He will let nothing of your deeds go to waste."* (Verse 14) This is because God is quick to grant forgiveness and bestow His mercy. He accepts from His servant the first step and rewards him for submission and obedience while waiting until faith settles in his heart: *"God is indeed much-forgiving, merciful."* (Verse 14)

God then explains to them the nature of genuine belief: *"True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt, and who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and their lives. Those are the ones who are true to their word."* (Verse 15)

True faith, then, means that deep in one's heart one believes in God and His Messenger, admitting no doubt or faltering. It is a solid, unshaken belief that allows no hesitation or oscillation. Moreover, it is a belief that motivates people to strive hard for God's cause, sacrificing their possessions and their lives. When a person's heart experiences the beauty of this belief and has the reassurance bred by such experience, he or she will take the necessary action to establish its meaning beyond their own hearts and souls, i.e. in real human life. They want to bring about union and harmony between the truth of faith they feel in their hearts and what takes place in the world around them. They simply will not tolerate any discordance between faith and practice, because such discordance jars at every moment. Hence, striving for God's cause, laying down one's life and possessions in order to achieve its goals. It is, then, a self-motivated action that aims to transfer the bright and enlightened image one sees in one's heart into practical human life. The rift between a believer and the worldly life around him based on *jāhiliyyah* is an inherent rift caused by the fact that a believer cannot lead a life of double standards, one based on faith and the other on people's practices. Similarly, he cannot give up his sound and beautiful concept of faith in favour of a practical model that is deficient, ugly and deviant. Hence, a confrontation with ignorance, or *jāhiliyyah*, is inevitable, until it gives up and adopts the light of faith.



*"Those are the ones who are true to their word."* (Verse 15) They are true in their faith, and true to their claims that they are believers. Unless those feelings in a believer's heart are a reality, bringing tangible effects into practical life, faith remains theoretical.

We need to reflect a little on the precautionary note in this verse: *"True believers are only those who have believed in God and His Messenger, and never then entertained any doubt."* (Verse 15) This point about never entertaining doubt is not a merely additional clause. It points to a real experience and provides treatment for a condition that may arise even after one has truly believed. The way this is phrased is significant, *'and never then entertained any doubt.'* A similar precautionary note is seen in the verse that says: *"Those who say, 'Our Lord is God,' and then steadfastly pursue the right way..."* (41: 30) The need to entertain no doubt and the need for the steadfast pursuit of the right way points to what a believing soul may experience under severe pressure and testing hardship. Doubt or hesitation may creep in. A believer may have to deal with severely testing times and calamities that shake the very foundation of his world. Hence, the one who remains steadfast, entertaining no doubt and pursuing the right way in all situations is the one who deserves high rank with God.

Putting the fact in this way alerts believers' hearts to the slips and risks in their way. This enables them to take precautions, prepare themselves to withstand any hardship that comes their way, and maintain their course even in the face of the most adverse circumstances.

The *sūrah* continues its address to the Bedouins, telling them that God knows what is in their hearts. Furthermore, He can tell them what they harbour in their minds, without waiting for them to tell Him:

*Say: Do you, perchance, want to inform God of your faith, when God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? Indeed, God has full knowledge of everything.* (Verse 16)

Man may profess to have knowledge, yet he neither knows nor understands himself or his feelings. The human mind does not know how it works because it cannot monitor its own working. When the mind monitors itself, it stops working naturally, and thus it has nothing

to monitor. When it performs its natural work, the human mind cannot at the same time do any monitoring. Hence it is unable to know its own nature or how it functions. Yet it is his mind that man boasts of, giving it a superior status.

*“God knows all that is in the heavens and earth.”* (Verse 16) His is a perfect knowledge that comprehends the very nature of everything in the heavens and the earth. His knowledge is not based on appearances and effects, but on a perfect knowledge of the nature of things that is independent of time and free of any limitation. Moreover, *“God has full knowledge of everything.”* (Verse 16) This encompasses the entire universe and everything in it.

### God's Real Favour

Having explained the true nature of faith, the *sūrah* then addresses the Prophet, referring to those Bedouins and how they asserted that they had done the Prophet a favour by accepting Islam. This very action is clear evidence that the nature of faith had not yet penetrated their hearts. They had not yet experienced the beauty of faith:

*They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: ‘Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth.’* (Verse 17)

This answer clearly tells them that they cannot hold this as a favour and that if they truly believe, then they owe a great favour to God who has guided them to it.

We should reflect on this answer, because it highlights a very important fact, one that most people, including some believers, overlook. Faith is the supreme favour God grants to anyone of His servants on earth. It is indeed greater than man's very existence, which is a favour God grants to man in the first place. It is also superior to what relates to existence, such as the provision of sustenance, health and adornment. It is the favour that gives human existence a distinctive entity, and assigns to man a great role in the system of the universe.

The first thing that faith gives man, when it settles firmly in his heart, is a broader vision of the universe, how it relates to him, and his role in it; an accurate criterion with which to know the essence of values, people and events; genuine reassurance as he embarks on his journey through this planet up to the time when he meets his Lord; a friendly relation with everything around him in the universe; a warm, interactive relationship with God who has created him and the universe; a feeling that he is honoured and that he is fulfilling an important role to please God and to bring goodness to this universe and to all who live in it. A manifestation of this broad vision is that man breaks out of the narrow confinements of his own small and weak entity to function on the stage of the universe, with all its inherent forces and secrets.

In relation to his own kind, man is an individual of a humanity that goes back to a single origin, which, in the first place, acquired its distinction from God's spirit which was breathed into this creature made of clay so as to bring him into contact with the divine light. This is a light that is not confined to a heaven or earth, has neither a beginning nor an end, and knows no limit of time or place. It is this free factor that has made man what he is. It is enough that this concept is properly appreciated by man in order that he begins to have a better appreciation of his position of honour and to feel this light, even as he walks on earth. His heart will then certainly have wings of light to carry him to the original source of light that gives his life its distinctive character.

In as far as his affiliation is concerned, he, as an individual, belongs to the single community of believers that stretches over the centuries, forming a noble procession led by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and their brethren prophets [peace be upon them all]. When this fact is fully appreciated by anyone, they feel themselves to be a branch of a great tree with deep roots and widely stretching boughs. This feeling gives believers a different taste of life, one that imparts to it a sense of nobility.

Man's vision thus becomes even broader so as to transcend his own entity, his community and the human race as a whole. He begins to see this whole existence as it originates with God, from the breathing of whose spirit he has become a man. His faith then tells him that this universe is a living entity, composed of countless other living entities.

Everything in this universe, including the universe itself, has a spirit. Like his own spirit, all these spirits turn to their Creator with prayer, glorification, praise, submission and obedience. Thus, in this universe, a believer feels himself to be an inseparable part of a complete whole. He belongs to his Creator, his soul turns to Him and he eventually returns to Him. Thus, he feels himself to be bigger and greater than his own limited world. He is bigger in relation to his vision of this great universe. He thus feels befriended by all the spirits around him, and beyond that befriended by God who looks after him. He then feels himself able to have a bond with this universe and to grow in stature in relation to it. He can do many things, initiate great events, influence and be influenced by all around him, and can derive strength from the Supreme Power that initiated him as well as all forces and powers in the universe. That is the Power that never weakens, shrinks or disappears.

### **All For a Definite Purpose**

From this broad vision a believer derives new standards and criteria to evaluate things, events, people, concerns, values and goals. He recognizes his true role in the universe and his task in this life. He looks at himself as a manifestation of God's will who sets him on his course to bring about whatever end He has determined. Thus, a believer continues his life on earth with clear vision, steady step and easy conscience. This knowledge gives believers what they feel of serenity, reassurance and delight with what takes place around them, including what happens to them. They have true answers to their questions: Where have they come from, and why? Where are they going, and what will they find there? They know that they are in this life for a particular purpose, and that whatever happens to them serves to bring about that purpose. They know that this life is the testing ground for the life to come; that they will be required for every action they do, major or minor, and that they have not been created in vain, will not be abandoned or left to travel alone.

When we have such knowledge, all worries, doubts and feelings of insecurity disappear. After all, they are due to ignorance, on the part of those expressing or experiencing them, of our origin and destiny,

unawareness of what lies ahead in our way, and lack of trust in the purpose behind our existence and life journey. We will have no more feelings like those described by 'Umar al-Khayyām who says:

Into this universe and *why* not knowing  
 Nor, *whence*, like willy-nilly flowing;  
 And out of it as wind along the waste,  
 I know not *wither*, willy-nilly blowing.

Believers know that they wear the garment of life by God's will, and that God runs the universe, conducting all its affairs, with wisdom and knowledge. They also know that the hand that made them wear this garment is much wiser and more compassionate than they. Hence, there is no need to consult others, because they could not give a sound opinion like that which belongs to the Owner of that hand who knows all and sees all. They know that they are given this garment of life to wear in order to fulfil a certain role in the universe, being influenced by, and leaving their own influence on all things in it. This role is harmonious with all the other roles assigned to all other creatures from the beginning of life to its end.

Thus believers know why they have come to this life and to where they are heading. They do not experience any loss as they try to understand. They complete their journey, fulfilling their role, with trust and reassurance. They may even attain a higher degree of faith that enables them to carry on with their journey and the fulfilment of their role, with delight and happiness, feeling the great bounty God has given them. This is the bounty of life, or its garment, given to them by God, the most generous, the compassionate. This is the bounty of their role, which they fulfil regardless of what they may encounter of hardship, until they return to their Lord.

Similarly, feelings like those I myself experienced during a period of loss and worry also disappear. That was before I began to live 'In the Shade of the Qur'ān', when God took me by the hand and placed me under His blessed care. These were feelings that my tired soul imparted at the time to the entire universe and I expressed those feelings in poetry saying:

The universe stood there, not knowing which way it should go;  
And why, and where, if at all, it should go;  
It is all a waste, a child's play, and an aimless effort;  
And it ends up in a masked destiny that gives no satisfaction.

Today, however, I know that, by God's grace, there is no aimless effort or wasted action, because every action and every effort will have its fruits and gain its reward. That same destiny will also give great satisfaction, because it is left to the One who is most just, most merciful. I also feel today, by the grace of God, that the universe never stands in that miserable position, because the soul of the universe believes in its Lord, turns to Him in glorification and praise. The universe operates in accordance with the law God has set for it, obedient, contented and submissive.

This is a great gain in the realm of feeling and thought, in the physical world of body and mind, as well as in the practical world of action and mutual influence.

Besides, faith is a great motivating force. When it is settled in a person's heart, it begins to work, fulfil itself and bring about perfect harmony between its inner image and its appearance. It takes control over all human motivations and harnesses them along the way. This is the secret of the strength of faith in the human soul and the power one gains through faith. It is the secret underlying the miracles faith has achieved in this world, and continues to achieve every day: miracles that change the whole appearance of life from one day to another. It is faith that motivates both the individual and the community to sacrifice their lives on earth in order to gain success in the greater and everlasting life to come. Furthermore, it is faith that gives an ordinary individual, with little or no support, the means to stand up to oppressive forces and to both temptation and persecution. All these forces are easily vanquished when they face the motivating power of faith in the heart of a single believer. It is not the individual that achieves success over all these forces; it is the great power that derives from the spirit of faith which is akin to a powerfully flowing and inexhaustible spring.

The miracles achieved through faith in the life of the individual and the community do not rely on mysterious myth, vision or superstition.

Instead, they are the result of well-defined causes and well-established rules. Faith is holistic: it is the force that establishes the relationship between man and the apparent and subtle forces in the universe, giving his soul trust and reassurance. It also gives the believer the ability to confront worldly powers and situations with the strength of one who is certain of victory, trusting to God's help. It makes it clear to the individual believer his relations with other people, events and situations, outlining for him his direction, way and goal. It harnesses all his strengths and potentials to direct them all to a clear goal, so that he moves towards it with force, confidence and reassurance.

What makes faith doubly powerful is that it operates along the same line that the universe follows in its deep and surface parts. Indeed, all the powers that work in the universe follow a direction set by faith. Thus, as they move along their way, believers meet these powers in their great march to give the truth its victory over falsehood, no matter how powerful the latter may appear.

God certainly tells the truth as He says: *"They think that they have bestowed a favour upon you by having embraced Islam. Say: Do not count your embrace of Islam a favour to me. It is indeed God who bestows a favour upon you by showing you the way to faith, if you are men of truth."* (Verse 17) Indeed faith is the supreme favour that can only be granted by God the Bounteous to whomever He knows to be deserving of it.

God certainly tells the truth! Does anyone who has had the privilege of knowing all these facts, meanings and feelings, experienced them to the full and lived through them in this present world ever feel that he has missed out on anything? Conversely, what does the one who misses out on all these gain, even though he may live in comfort and luxury? He may eat as he pleases, but animals also eat, although animals are better off because by their nature they submit to their Lord and turn towards their Creator.

*God certainly knows the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth; and God sees all that you do.* (Verse 18)

The One who knows all that is hidden in the heavens and the earth also knows what is hidden in people's innermost souls. He knows people's

feelings and sees what they do. He does not derive His knowledge from the words they say, but from the feelings they harbour in their hearts and the actions that confirm their feelings.

Thus we come to the conclusion of this *sūrah*, comprising 18 verses, but delineating the features of a noble and pure world, outlining great truths and establishing them in people's inner consciences.





## SŪRAH 50

# Qāf

## Prologue

The Prophet used to read this *sūrah* when he delivered a sermon on 'Īd occasions and before Friday prayers, making it the theme and the content of his speech for large audiences. It is certainly a momentous *sūrah*, outlining fundamental facts, using a strong rhythm, powerful expressions, clearly-delineated images, highlighted connotations and emphatic verse endings. It addresses our hearts and minds from all angles putting before us the truth that we are always under God's watchful eye, from birth to death, and then to the time of resurrection, gathering and reckoning. This is an ever-present watch of man at all times, losing nothing and overlooking nothing. Every breath, fleeting thought and feeling is known; every uttered word is recorded; every move is monitored. This complete watch accounts for thoughts and actions alike; nothing escapes it, and nothing is hidden from it. It monitors secret whispers in the same way as it records what is done in broad daylight.

All these are well-known facts. However, the *sūrah* outlines them here in a way that shows them to be totally new, with surprising effects that combine apprehension with wonder. It shakes us powerfully alerting us to a momentous event, about which we have thus far been oblivious. It uses images of life, death, decay and subsequent resurrection. It touches

on our expectations of life after death. It refers to a host of universal truths in the heavens and earth, water and plants, fruits ripening individually and in clusters. It all “*serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*” (Verse 8)

It is very difficult to give a summary of this *sūrah*, as also list its main points, or outline the ideas discussed and the images portrayed in any manner of speech other than their original Qur'ānic style and expression. Therefore, we will proceed straightaway to our discussion of the *sūrah*, praying for God's help.



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

Qāf. By the glorious Qur'ān. (1)

But the unbelievers deem it  
strange that a warner from among  
themselves should have come to  
them and they say: 'This is indeed  
most strange! (2)

When we have died and become  
dust...? Such a return to life is too  
far-fetched.' (3)

We know very well what the  
earth takes away from them. We  
have an unfailing, comprehensive  
record. (4)

Yet they deny the truth when it  
comes to them; and so they are in  
a state of confusion. (5)

Do they nor look at the sky above  
them: how We have built it and  
adorned it, leaving no flaws in  
it. (6)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

ق وَالْقُرْآنِ الْمَجِيدِ ①

بَلْ عَجِبُوا أَنْ جَاءَهُمْ مُنْذِرٌ مِنْهُمْ فَقَالَ  
الْكَافِرُونَ هَذَا شَيْءٌ عَجِيبٌ ②

أَوَدَامِنَّا وَكُنَّا رُءُوبًا ذَٰلِكَ رَجْعٌ بَعِيدٌ ③

فَدَعَلْنَا مَا نَنْقُصُ الْأَرْضُ مِنْهُمْ وَعِنْدَنَا  
كِتَابٌ حَفِيفٌ ④

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا بِالْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ فَهُمْ  
فِي أَمْرٍ مَرِيعٍ ⑤

أَفَلَا يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ فَوْقَهُمْ كَيْفَ  
بَنَيْنَاهَا وَزَيَّنَّاهَا وَمَا لَهَا مِنْ فُرُوجٍ ⑥

We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it, (7)

وَالْأَرْضَ مَدَدْنَاهَا وَأَلْقَيْنَا فِيهَا رَوَاسِيَ  
وَأَنْبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ ۖ يَهْبِيجُ ﴿٧﴾

so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God. (8)

بَصِيرَةً ۚ وَذِكْرَىٰ لِكُلِّ عَبْدٍ مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٨﴾

We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, (9)

وَنَزَّلْنَا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً مُّبَارَكًا فَأَنْبَتْنَا  
بِهِ جَنَّاتٍ وَحَبَّ الْحَصِيدِ ﴿٩﴾

and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, (10)

وَالنَّخْلَ بَاسِقَاتٍ لِّمَا طَلَعَ نَضِيدٌ ﴿١٠﴾

providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead. (11)

رِزْقًا لِلْعِبَادِ ۚ وَأَحْيَيْنَا بِهِ بَلَدَةً مَيِّتَةً  
كَذَٰلِكَ الْخُرُوجُ ﴿١١﴾

Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, (12)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَأَصْحَابُ  
الرَّسِّ وَثَمُودُ ﴿١٢﴾

‘Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, (13)

وَعَادُ وَفِرْعَوْنُ وَإِخْوَانُ لُوطٍ ﴿١٣﴾

the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. (14)

وَأَصْحَابُ الْأَيْكَةِ وَقَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ ۚ كُلٌّ كَذَّبَ  
الرُّسُلَ ۖ هَٰذَا وَعِيدٌ ﴿١٤﴾

Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation. (15)

It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; (16)

with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, (17)

every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher. (18)

The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: 'This is what you tried to escape.' (19)

The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' (20)

Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. (21)

'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' (22)

أَفَعْيَيْنَا بِالْخَلْقِ الْأَوَّلِ بَلْ هُمْ فِي لَبْسٍ مِّنْ خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ ﴿١٥﴾

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنسَانَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِ نَفْسُهُ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ ﴿١٦﴾

إِذْ بَنَيْنَا السَّمْعَيْنِ عَنِ الْيَمِينِ وَعَنِ الشِّمَالِ قَعِيدٌ ﴿١٧﴾

مَا يَلْفِظُ مِنْ قَوْلٍ إِلَّا لَدَيْهِ رَقِيبٌ عَتِيدٌ ﴿١٨﴾

وَجَاءَتْ سَكْرَةُ الْمَوْتِ بِالْحَقِّ ذَلِكَ مَا كُنْتَ مِنْهُ تَحِيدُ ﴿١٩﴾

وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ ذَلِكَ يَوْمُ الْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٠﴾

وَجَاءَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّعَهَا سَاقٍ وَشَهِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾

لَقَدْ كُنْتَ فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنْكَ غِطَاءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ الْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

And his companion will say:  
'Here is what I have recorded.'  
(23)

وَقَالَ قَرِينُهُ هَذَا مَا لَدَىٰ عَيْنِي ﴿٢٣﴾

'Cast into hell every hardened  
unbeliever, (24)

الَّذِينَ فِي جَهَنَّمَ كُلٌّ كَقَارِعِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

everyone who hindered good,  
was a sinful aggressor, fomenter  
of doubt, (25)

مَنَاعَ لِلْخَيْرِ مُعْتَدٍ مُّرِيبٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

who set up another deity  
alongside God. Cast him into  
severe suffering.' (26)

الَّذِي جَعَلَ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ فَأَلْفِيَاهُ فِي  
الْعَذَابِ الشَّدِيدِ ﴿٢٦﴾

His companion will say: 'Our  
Lord! I did not make him  
transgress. He had already gone  
far astray.' (27)

قَالَ قَرِينُهُ رَبَّنَا مَا أَطْغَيْتُهُ، وَلَكِنْ كَانَ  
فِي ضَلَالٍ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

God will say: 'Do not argue in My  
presence, for I had forewarned  
you. (28)

قَالَ لَا تَخْصِمُوهُ لَدَىٰ وَقَدْ قَدَّمْتُ  
إِلَيْكُمْ بِالْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٨﴾

My word will not be altered; but  
never do I do the least wrong to  
My creatures.' (29)

مَا يَبْدُلُ الْقَوْلُ لَدَىٰ وَمَا أَنَا بِظَالِمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٢٩﴾

On that day We will ask hell, 'Are  
you full?' and it will reply, 'Are  
there no more?' (30)

يَوْمَ نَقُولُ لِيَجْهَنَّمَ هَلْ أَمْتَلَأَتْ وَنَقُولُ  
هَلْ مِنْ مَّزِيدٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

And paradise will be brought  
close to the righteous and will no  
longer be distant: (31)

وَأَرْزَقَتْ الْجَنَّةُ الْمُتَّقِينَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٣١﴾

'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, (32)

who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. (33)

Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' (34)

There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them. (35)

How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. (36)

In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. (37)

We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. (38)

هَذَا مَا تُوعَدُونَ لِكُلِّ أَوَّابٍ حَفِيفٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

مَنْ خَشِيَ الرَّحْمَنَ الْغَيْبَ وَجَاءَ بِقَلْبٍ مُنِيبٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

أَدْخُلُوهَا بِسَلَامٍ ذَلِكَ يَوْمُ الْخُلُودِ ﴿٣٤﴾

لَهُمْ مَا يَشَاءُونَ فِيهَا وَلَدَيْنَا مَزِيدٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُمْ مِنْ قَرْنٍ هُمْ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُمْ بَطْشًا فَنَقَّبُوا فِي الْبِلَادِ هَلْ مِنْ مَحِيصٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَذِكْرًا لِمَنْ كَانَ لَهُ قَلْبٌ أَوْ أَلْقَى السَّمْعَ وَهُوَ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٣٧﴾

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ وَمَا مَسَّنَا مِنْ لُغُوبٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; (39)

فَاصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَسَبِّحْ  
بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ قَبْلَ طُلُوعِ الشَّمْسِ  
وَقَبْلَ الْغُرُوبِ ﴿٣٩﴾

and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. (40)

وَمِنَ اللَّيْلِ فَسَبِّحْهُ وَأَدْبَرَ الشُّجُورِ ﴿٤٠﴾

And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, (41)

وَأَسْمِعْ يَوْمَ يُنَادِي الْمُنَادِ مِنْ مَّكَانٍ  
قَرِيبٍ ﴿٤١﴾

the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. (42)

يَوْمَ يَسْمَعُونَ الصَّيْحَةَ بِالْحَقِّ ذَٰلِكَ  
يَوْمُ الْخُرُوجِ ﴿٤٢﴾

It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. (43)

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي وَنُمِيتُ وَإِلَيْنَا الْمَصِيرُ ﴿٤٣﴾

On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. (44)

يَوْمَ تَشَقَّقُ الْأَرْضُ عَنْهُمْ سِرَاعًا  
ذَٰلِكَ حَشْرٌ عَلَيْنَا يَسِيرٌ ﴿٤٤﴾

We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'an, those who fear My warning. (45)

نَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَ وَمَا أَنْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ بِجَبَّارٍ  
فَذَكِّرْ بِالْقُرْآنِ أَنْ مَنِ يَخَافُ وَعِيدِ ﴿٤٥﴾



## Truth and Denial

In its initial section, comprising the first 15 verses, the *sūrah* speaks about resurrection and its denial by the unbelievers who wonder that it should even be mentioned, let alone asserted. The Qur'ān, however, not only addresses their denial of the truth of resurrection, it also aims to put their deviant minds back on the right track. It tries first to awaken their hearts, alerting them to contemplation of the great truths that are clearly manifest in the universe. It does not engage them in any intellectual argument about resurrection; instead, it tries to bring life into their hearts and minds so that they can reflect. It puts before them the truth that is clearly evident in everything around them so that they will respond. This method is especially effective and is one that should be carefully studied by advocates of the divine message.

The *sūrah* begins with an oath by the letter *Qāf* and by the glorious Qur'ān, which is composed of letters like *Qāf*. In fact, this is the first letter of the word 'Qur'ān'. The *sūrah* does not mention the subject matter of the oath, leaving it as a way to open the door to whatever the *sūrah* wants to say. Thus, the oath serves to alert us to the fact that what comes afterwards is momentous. This is indeed what is intended, as the *sūrah* immediately moves away from the oath using the conjunction *bal*, which has no English equivalent.<sup>1</sup> It now begins to discuss their amazement at what God's Messenger and the Qur'ān say about the dead being brought back to life: "*But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.'*" (Verses 2–3)

They think it strange that someone from among themselves should warn them when this is indeed the very thing that human nature easily accepts. It is most natural that God should have chosen one of them to deliver His message for he was someone who could readily share their feelings, speak their language, take part in their activities, be amongst them through their lives, appreciate their motives as also recognize their

1. Some translators use the word *nay* to render the Arabic conjunction *bal*, but this is rather unsatisfactory in most cases as *nay* has connotations of negation. Here we have used the term 'but', though admittedly this too is inadequate. – Editor's note.

abilities and limits. Such a person is the best one to warn them against what may happen should they persist in their erring ways, to teach them how to change course, and to outline the duties that they have to fulfil. He would be the first to discharge these duties.

They felt it strange, however, to have such a message delivered in the first place, and were particularly amazed that this Messenger should speak to them about their being raised from the dead. Resurrection is central to the Islamic faith; indeed, it is the foundation on which all requirements of Islam are based. Every Muslim is required to support the truth against falsehood and uphold goodness against evil. A Muslim needs to make everything he does in life an act of worship, by ensuring that whatever he does aims to win God's acceptance and serve His cause. All action must be rewarded, and reward might not be forthcoming during our life's journey on earth. It is thus deferred until the final reckoning is done. This means that another world is needed. Hence resurrection, so as to face the reckoning in the next world. Should this fundamental principle of a second life disappear from a person's mindset, that person cannot form a clear concept of Islam and so cannot follow it.

Those people in Makkah, however, did not look at the question in this light at all. They were too naïve to understand the true nature of life and death, or to visualize God's power. Hence they said: "*When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.*" (Verse 3) Thus, to them, it was a question of improbability of life after death when people's bodies have decomposed and turned to dust. Yet, since life takes place in the first place, why is it improbable for it to occur again. Moreover, this miracle of life occurs before their very eyes at every moment. It is there around them throughout the universe. It is to this that the Qur'ān draws their attention in this *sūrah*.

Before we continue with what the *sūrah* says about the universe and the images of life it portrays we need to reflect a little on the fact that people perish. This is pointed out by the unbelievers as they say: "*When we have died and become dust...?*" So people die and perish. Whoever reads what those unbelievers say will look at himself and people living in his vicinity and imagine how death occurs. In fact, he will begin to feel how he will turn to nothing when he is still alive, walking on earth.

Nothing shakes a person's heart like death, and nothing fills him with dread like perishing. The *sūrah*'s comment strengthens this effect as it describes the earth eating them little by little: "*We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record.*" (Verse 4) The phraseology of this comment shows the earth as a living thing that swallows, little by little, their buried bodies in a steady progressive action asserting that God knows what the earth swallows and that it is all recorded. Nothing is lost even though they may die and perish. As for putting life back into this dust that remains from their bodies, this is merely a repeat of what had happened before and what continues to happen in endless processes of bringing forth life anew.

We see how the *sūrah* makes successive touches to soften hearts, readying them to receive what follows before addressing the main issue.

The *sūrah* then describes the state of mind that gives rise to their flimsy objections. They have denied the truth, which made the earth under their feet move. In this way they are completely unstable: "*Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion.*" (Verse 5) This is a telling image. The truth is the solid point where a believer stands, giving him a firm step as he walks on solid ground. Everything around him that is contrary to the truth is unstable, confused and lacking substance. Whoever steps outside the truth is bound to slip into such confusion and so lose stability. He is without reassurance, ever in a state of confusion. When someone moves away from the truth, he is pulled in all directions by different desires and motives, afflicted by doubt, hesitant, moving once to the right and once to the left. He has no solid basis, no safe refuge.

As the *sūrah* prepares to discuss their objections to resurrection, it touches on further aspects of this fundamental truth as it appears in the structure of the universe. It invites them to look at the heavens, the earth, mountains, rain, palm trees, gardens and plants. The style employed here is in full harmony with the magnificence of the solid truth: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it.*" (Verse 6)

The sky represents a page in the book of the universe, testifying to the truth they had abandoned. Do they not see its lofty and firm

structure, its adorned beauty and flawless freedom? Needless to say, stability, beauty and perfection are clear features common to both the sky and the truth. Hence they come in for special emphasis here, as do the facts that the sky is well built, adorned and is without holes and cracks in its structure.

Likewise, the earth is a page from the same book of the universe: "*We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it.*" (Verse 7) The wide spread of the earth, the firm mountains placed on it and the delectable plants that grow on it also project the same features of firmness, stability and beauty already associated with the sky.

Now that this universal image has been drawn, the *sūrah* touches their hearts directing them to reflect on the purpose of creation: "*so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Thus curtains are removed, insight is sharpened and hearts and souls are alerted to reflect on the origination, wisdom and harmony apparent in the universe. Such a reminder is especially useful to those who wish to turn to God.

This link between the human heart and the inspiration of the endless, beautiful universe is indeed what gives opening the book of the universe and contemplating it the effect it has on our hearts and the value it attaches to our lives. The Qur'ān establishes this link between knowledge and the man who has it. Yet this link is precisely that which is ignored by contemporary research methods that are often called 'scientific'. This also inevitably leads to a severance of the bond between people and the world they live in. Mankind is a part of the universe, and its life can only flourish when their hearts beat to the tune of the universe. Every new piece of knowledge about a star, a planet, a special characteristic or feature of a plant or an animal, or a feature of the universe as a whole and what it contains of animate or inanimate objects should be transformed into a message to the human heart that increases man's pleasant familiarity with the world around him. Thus are the bonds of friendship between human beings and other creatures strengthened, and the sense of unity that applies to all confirmed. This, in turn, stresses the oneness of God, the Creator of the universe and all it contains. Any knowledge, research

or scientific discipline that does not lead to this objective is incomplete, false or useless.

This universe is the open book of the truth, readable in all languages and by all methods. A simple person living in a hut or a tent can browse through it as easily as can a highly educated palace dweller, each according to their abilities, and each discovering that they have access to the truth through it. The book of the universe is open at all times: "*So that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Modern science, however, blocks this reminder, severs this link between the human heart and the universe. Why? Because it is controlled by people who have been blinded by the falsehood called the 'scientific method', a method that does not acknowledge a link between the universe and all the creatures living in it.

The approach based on faith does not take away anything of the results of the 'scientific method' in understanding individual facts. Indeed, it adds a link connecting these individual facts and relating them to the great truths. It is faith that establishes a bond between the human heart and the laws and facts of the universe, allowing them to play an inspiring tune to man's feelings and life. They are no longer cold facts that open up nothing of their beautiful secrets. It is the approach based on faith therefore that should direct studies and research.

The *sūrah* continues to present the pages of truth in the book of the universe, in preparation for tackling the question of resurrection: "*We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verses 9–11)

The water sent down from the sky is a great sign, sending life into hearts before it quickens dead land. It imparts a special feeling to all. It is not only children that rainfall delights; sensitive adults also experience a similar feeling of awe. The rain is described here as '*rich in blessings*', and a means by which to produce fruits and fields of grain, as well as palm trees of great beauty: "*And tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates.*" The description of the fruits these trees bear is intended to highlight this beautiful aspect, emphasizing harmony with the overpowering and

beautiful truth the universe presents. A touch on human feelings is added within the context of the rain and what it brings about of plant life: "*providing sustenance suitable for people.*" It is God who gives this sustenance, from the time it sends forth its shoots until it gives its yield. He is the Master and they, the servants, remain oblivious of their duty to appreciate and show gratitude.

At this point, the final goal is identified. "*Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verse 11) It is a continuing process, one that is familiar to them. However, they overlook it and this before they have even arrived at their objections. Yet resurrection is as simple as the shoot springing out of dead land after it has been quickened with rain. This is stated now, after a host of inspiring notes played for the human heart. Thus hearts are addressed by the Creator of hearts.

### A Glance at History

The *sūrah* now opens some pages of the book of human history, speaking of the fate of past communities who argued about resurrection in the same way as did the Arab unbelievers, and who similarly denied God's messages. As a result, they incurred God's inevitable punishment:

*Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, 'Ad, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.*  
(Verses 12–15)

Al-Rass signifies a well over which there is no built wall, and the dales signifies an area thick with trees. The people of the wooded dales most probably refer to Shu'ayb's people. We have no information about the people of al-Rass other than this reference here and a similar one in *Sūrah al-Furqān*, (25: 38) The same applies to the people of Tubba', a title used by the Yemeni kings of the Himyar dynasty. The other peoples mentioned in this short passage are known to anyone who reads the Qur'ān.

The purpose of this quick reference to these peoples is certainly not to give any detailed information about them. It is only a reminder of the fate of earlier disbelieving communities. What is worth noting is that the verse mentions that each denied 'God's messengers', in the plural. This emphasizes the unity of the divine message as all messengers preached the same faith. Thus, whoever denies anyone of God's messengers actually denies them all, because he rejects the same message delivered by them all. Gods' messengers are brothers forming one community. They are like a tree with roots stretching far back into time. Each branch of that tree projects all its essential qualities, giving an image of the whole. Therefore, whoever cuts a branch actually cuts the tree and all its branches. Therefore, God's warnings came true and those communities suffered the fates known to listeners.

Having stated the fates of all these communities, the *sūrah* again picks up the question of resurrection, asking: "*Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.*" (Verse 15) The first creation is there before their eyes; therefore, the question needs no answer. However, because they do not look at the evidence presented by this first creation, they are in doubt about the second. What can be said about one who denies the truth when such irrefutable evidence is placed before his very own eyes?

## A Journey Through Life

The second part of the *sūrah* continues with the theme of resurrection. It seeks to treat those hearts that deny resurrection from a new angle, but makes some frightening statements. It speaks about the accurate monitoring to which reference has been made in the Prologue. It presents clear images of this monitoring, followed by images of man in the throes of death, then we see the opening of records and the reckoning before we are shown hell opening to receive those destined for it. Whenever a new group of them are thrown into it, it asks whether it can have some more. This is contrasted by the scene of heaven and the honour and favours bestowed on its dwellers.

It is a single journey that begins with birth, goes through death and ends with resurrection and deed reckoning. It is a continuous, uninterrupted



journey, charting the only way we must travel. Throughout the journey we are in God's hands and under His careful watch. We cannot escape. When we realize this, our hearts are filled with awe and apprehension. How else should we feel realizing that we are in the hands of the Almighty who knows our innermost thoughts and who overlooks nothing?

When any of us thinks that the authorities, with all their intelligence and reporters, are after us, following our footsteps, we are perturbed and agitated. We lose our patience and our balance. No matter how widespread and far-reaching the intelligence apparatus is, any of us, however, can escape its attention once we close our door or our mouths. By contrast, God's watchful eye is with us wherever we may be. He monitors what is in our minds and knows all our secrets. What then should we feel, when we realize that we are under such watch, subject to the Almighty's power?

### Every Little Secret

*It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher. (Verses 16–18)*

The first clause in these verses, '*it is We who have created man*', indicates its message. A person who makes a machine is the one who best knows how it is put together and how it functions. Its maker did not create it, because he is not the one who originated the material used in its making; he is only the one who designed and manufactured it. How does this compare with the Creator who originates all things? Man is made by God's hand, and God knows every little detail about him. Hence He says: "*We know what his soul whispers to him.*" (Verse 16) Thus man realizes that his inner thoughts are laid open. Nothing is hidden. Even the whispers of his soul, secret as these may be, are known to God, in preparation for the Day of Reckoning, which people often deny.

"*We are closer to him than his jugular vein.*" (Verse 16) Closer than the vein that transports his blood! This expression clearly describes the



hand in control and the direct watch. When man imagines this fact, he is bound to experience a shiver down his spine. If man really understood the import of this statement, he would not dare say a single word that does not please God. He would not even allow a fleeting thought that is contrary to what is acceptable to God. This statement is sufficient to make man careful, always alert.

The *sūrah* makes the control even stricter, showing man throughout his life as being under the ever-present watch of two angels, on his right and left, who record every move he makes, every word he says and every thought he entertains: *"with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher."* (Verses 17–18) We do not know how these two angels record what they monitor. We need not in any case indulge in conjecture. Our attitude towards information that relates to the world beyond our perception is to accept it as it stands, believing in its import without seeking to know more. Such knowledge, were we to gain it, would not be of any use to us. In fact, it remains outside human experience.

In our own world, we have come to know some means of recording that could have never been thought possible by our forefathers. Magnetic and video tapes record movement and voice and reproduce them for radio, cinema and television.<sup>2</sup> All this happens within our own human environment. Hence, there is no need to try to assign to the angels a method of recording based on our own human experience, which may be totally irrelevant to their realm of which we know only what God has told us.

It is enough that we should appreciate this fact, expressed here in a vivid picture, and feel when we are about to make any movement or utter a word that, to our right and left, there are two watchguards taking note of whatever we do or say, entering it in our record which will be presented to God who overlooks nothing. This is a fact, even though we may not understand how it is done. There is no doubt that it takes place, in some form. God has told us about it so that we take it

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2. The author wrote this in the late 1950s, when CDs and DVDs were still beyond people's imagination. – Editor's note.

into account, but also so we do not waste time and effort in trying to determine how it is done.

Such was the method adopted by people who benefited by the Qur'ān and by the Prophet's directives concerning the facts it speaks of. They took to heart what it said and acted on its basis. In a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Alqamah on the authority of Bilāl ibn al-Hārith, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "A man may say a word that is pleasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will credit him with His pleasure for it until the Day when he meets Him. Another man may say a word that is displeasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will record against him His displeasure for it until the Day when he meets Him." 'Alqamah commented: "Many are the words I refrained from saying on account of this *ḥadīth*." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.] It is reported that when Imām Aḥmad was in the throes of death, he moaned in pain. It was said to him that even moans are recorded. He then stopped moaning until he died. In this way, such people practically lived the facts the Qur'ān tells us about.

### As Life Draws to an End

That was the page of life, which is followed in man's book by the page of approaching death: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: This is what you tried to escape.*" (Verse 19) There is nothing man tries to escape more than death. He even tries to banish the thought of death from his mind. Yet how can he do so when death is a seeker that never stops. It continues its steady march, and never misses its appointed time. The mere mention of '*the stupor of death*' sends a shiver into brave hearts. Yet as the scene is shown, it is said to him: "*This is what you tried to escape.*" The mere sound makes him shudder when he is still full of life. How about if it is said when he is in the throes of death? It is authentically reported that when death was approaching the Prophet, he wiped sweat off his face and said: "All glory be to God! Death has its stupor!" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] He said this, even though he had chosen to be in God's company, longing to see Him. So how about ordinary mortals?

It is noteworthy that truth itself is mentioned here: “*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth.*” (Verse 19) This suggests that a human being sees the whole truth as he is about to die. The truth appears to him fully exposed. He sees what he did not know, and what he used to deny. It is, now too late for anything that may benefit him. It is too late for repentance, belief or the mending of ways. The unbelievers denied this very truth and their denial caused them confusion. Now that they realize all this, it is too late for them to do anything about it.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the shock of resurrection and the fearsome reckoning:

*The trumpet will be blown: ‘This is the day [you were] warned of.’ Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. ‘Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.’ And his companion will say: ‘Here is what I have recorded.’ ‘Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomentor of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.’ His companion will say: ‘Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.’ God will say: ‘Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.’ (Verses 20–29)*

It is sufficient to put this scene before our eyes, for thereafter we will spend the rest of our lives in awe and anticipation. The Prophet is quoted as saying: “‘How can I feel happy when I know that the one assigned to blow the Trumpet has lifted it to his mouth, lowering his forehead and awaiting permission.’ The people listening asked him: ‘What should we say, Messenger of God?’ He replied: ‘Say: We seek none other than God; He is the best protector.’ They all said it.” [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]

“*Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness.*” (Verse 21) It is the soul, every single one, that is held to account, and it is the one who receives the outcome. It comes with two assigned to it: one driving it on and the other to bear witness. These may be the ones who recorded everything a person does throughout life, which is more probable, but they may also be different entities. The

scene is akin to that of taking someone to trial, but this trial is before the Almighty.

In this extremely difficult situation, the person is told: "*Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.*" (Verse 22) There is nothing to blur your eyesight now. You can see clearly. This is the appointed time you ignored, the position you have not reckoned with, the end you did not expect. You can look all around you for your sight is now sharp indeed. At this point, his companion, which is most probably a reference to the witness who recorded all his actions, comes forward and says: "*Here is what I have recorded.*" (Verse 23)

The *sūrah* says nothing about examining the record. Instead, it states the divine verdict as it is given to the two angels: the one leading the person and the witness. They are told: "*Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.*" (Verses 24–26) These descriptions make the situation even more critical, for they show that the Almighty is displeased. They are all negative descriptions that deserve increased punishment. They are followed by His repeating the order, which needs no emphasis anyway: "*Cast him into severe suffering,*" indicating the unbeliever's position in hell.

This scares his companion who, thinking that his long association with the condemned person may reflect on him, hastens to dissociate himself from his doings: "*His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.'*" (Verse 27) The reference here may be to a different companion who submitted the records. This may be the devil who, throughout his life, tried to tempt him away from the truth. Now he tries to shirk his responsibility, asserting that the man was already far astray and, as such, accepted the tempting offer to go even further astray. There are other instances in the Qur'an that tell us that the evil companion disowns the human one. Yet the first possibility we mentioned is also probable. The companion referred to in this verse could be the same angel who kept the record, but the hardship of the situation on the Day of Judgement makes him hasten to state his own

innocence even when he is truly innocent. He simply wants to prove that despite his long association with this miserable creature, he had no influence on his deeds. When an innocent person hastens to prove his truth-telling, this reveals much about the difficulty of the situation.

A final order is now issued to stop all argument: *"God will say: Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures."* (Verses 28–29) The occasion is not one for contention. Warnings were issued earlier, stating the nature of requital for every action. Everything has been recorded, and it is on the basis of this record that requital and reward are determined. No one is unjustly dealt with, for the one who looks into people's cases and determines their fate is the faultless arbiter.

Thus the fearsome scene of reckoning, with all its hardship, is thus ended, but the overall scene continues, with the *sūrah* revealing a more fearful aspect of it: *"On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?'"* (Verse 30) The whole scene is one of dialogue. Therefore, hell is portrayed here in the same way, with a question put to it and an answer given. This reveals something that is both amazing and awesome. We see every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, who was a sinful aggressor, a fomenter of doubt being thrown into hell where they pile up in great numbers. Then hell is asked whether it has had its full. Its reply is that of an unsatiated glutton: *"Are there no more?"* How frightening!

A contrasting image is drawn on the other side: it is pleasant, calm and friendly. Heaven is shown drawing near to the righteous such that they can see it for themselves. An honourable welcome awaits them:

*And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: 'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.* (Verses 31–35)

Honour is shown with every word and move. Paradise is brought near so that they do not trouble themselves about going to it. The bliss of being accepted by God is extended to them there: *"This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion."* It is those who are on high that state their qualities. Thus they realize that this is how they appear in God's records. Then they are admitted to heaven, in peace, a place from which they will not be turned out: *"Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins."* An announcement is made on high, noting their position and making it clear that their share with God is unlimited: *"There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them."* Whatever they may wish for will remain less than what is prepared for them. Since 'more' is given by their Lord, it must be limitless.

### An Easy Resurrection

The final part of the *sūrah* sounds like the final beat of a tune, as it repeats its strongest notes to an even faster time. It includes a glimpse of history and the fate of earlier unbelievers, an image from the open book of the universe and a new scene from the Day of Judgement, all coupled with a serious and inspiring directive:

*How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is*

*We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.* (Verses 36–45)

Although all these points have come under discussion earlier in the *sūrah*, they are repeated in conclusion with a new rhythm and added effect. They are noted here with more emphasis and greater speed. Thus they carry here a different effect from that produced by their more detailed discussion earlier. This is characteristic of the Qur'ānic style.

The *sūrah* stated earlier: "Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, 'Ad, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': They all disbelieved their messengers, and therefore My warnings came true." (Verses 12–14) Here at the end the *sūrah* says: "How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? they wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge." (Verse 36) It is a reference to the same fact, but in its new image it looks different. Then the *sūrah* adds the turn of time as generations followed generations, wandering through the lands. However, they remain within God's grasp from which no one can escape. A further comment is added to give it a more serious effect: "In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees." (Verse 37)

There is indeed a reminder in the fate suffered by earlier communities for anyone with a heart to consider. A person who is not reminded by this is one whose heart is dead, or who has always been without a feeling heart. Indeed, in order to have due admonition, it is sufficient that a person should listen attentively. The story will undoubtedly have its telling effect. This is certain, because the human soul is very sensitive to the fate suffered by earlier peoples. Even the slightest degree of sensitivity is enough to bring back memories and inspiring images of such situations.

Earlier, the *sūrah* opened pages from the book of the universe, stating: "Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned

*it, leaving no flaws in it. We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it.*" (Verses 6–7) Now at the end of the *sūrah*, it says: "*We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us.*" (Verse 38) Thus it adds here a further touch, making it clear that the creation of everything in the universe, including the heavens and the earth, presented no difficulty for God. Compared with this, bringing the dead back to life is only a small matter.

A comment is then added, providing further shades and inspiration: "*Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer.*" (Verses 39–40) The rising and setting of the sun, and the spreading of the night after sunset, are all phenomena closely interlinked with the heavens and the earth. The *sūrah* delineates the bond between them, the glorification and praising of God and the prostrating of ourselves before Him. Within the same context, the *sūrah* also gives the instruction to bear patiently with whatever the unbelievers deny about resurrection and their refusal to believe in God's ability to bring creatures back to life. Thus a new aura of God's glorification, worship and patience is given to the same points repeated here. As this is all linked to aspects of the universe, these feelings are enhanced within a believer's heart whenever he looks at the skies or the earth, at every sunrise and approach of night, and whenever he prostrates himself before God.

A further touch is added to this portrait of the universe. The Prophet is instructed to have patience and to perform all this glorification and worship while remaining on the alert, expecting the great event that may come at any moment of the night or day. Only those who are totally oblivious of the truth will pay no attention to it. It is the event that provides the central theme of the *sūrah*: "*And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verses 41–44)



What we have here is a new scene depicting that most difficult day. When the first reference to it is made in the *sūrah*, it is shown differently: *"The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness..."* (Verses 20–21) Here the blowing of the trumpet is referred to as a 'mighty blast'. It gives us a picture of how they will rush out as the earth is rent asunder all around them. This includes all those countless creatures of all generations, arising from graves they may have been buried in for a very long time. They are all ripped open, bringing up what remains of bones, dust, and lost cells in the earth. None except God knows their whereabouts. This, then, is an amazing image, one that the human mind can barely imagine.

Having drawn this bustling and inspirational scene, the *sūrah* states the truth which they deny and argue about: *"It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return."* (Verse 43) *"That gathering will be easy for Us."* (Verse 44) This is the most suitable time to state this truth.

The *sūrah* finally reassures the Prophet so that he is not troubled by the unbelievers' denials of this truth and the arguments they make in disputing it: *"We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning."* (Verse 45)

It is sufficient for you to reassure yourselves that *"We are fully aware of what they say."* This is indeed an implicit warning of the consequences of this knowledge, which are bound to be terrible for them. *"You are not one to use coercion with them."* You cannot force them to believe in God. You have no power over them. That power belongs to God alone. *"Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning."* (Verse 45) The Qur'ān shakes people's hearts. No heart that is alert and sensitive will ever reject the truths presented in the Qur'ān in its unique, remarkable style.

When a *sūrah* like this is presented, the matter does not require any mighty being to force people into submission to faith. The Qur'ān has far greater power than all tyrants could possess. A *sūrah* like this can easily produce on people's hearts an effect far more powerful than their whips. Whatever God says is the absolute truth.

## SŪRAH 51

# Al-Dhāriyāt

(The Scattering Winds)

## Prologue

This *sūrah* has a special character. It begins by mentioning four forces that work by God's command, using ambiguous terms which give us an initial impression that we are being introduced to things wrapped in secrecy. God Almighty makes an oath by these four forces to emphasize a certain matter: "*By those that scatter far and wide; by those that are heavily laden; by those that speed along with gentle ease; by those that distribute by command; that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come.*" (Verses 1–6)

The words used in this opening for those four forces mentioned in the oath, i.e. *al-dhāriyāt*, *al-ḥāmilāt*, *al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt*, are not usually used to refer to immediately recognized objects. They invite questions and requests for explanation. Indeed, their very sounds impart this feeling of ambiguity, which is perhaps intended so as to give the *sūrah* its particular aura.

The first oath is hardly stated when it is followed by a second. God states this oath "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say.*" (Verses 7–8) What you say is inconsistent, based on conjecture, not fact.

With this particular opening and by its general drift, the *sūrah* sets itself a particular objective, which is the establishment of a bond between

the human heart and the sky, or rather what lies beyond the reach of human perception and known only to God. The human heart will thus become free of the constraints of this world, unchained by anything that prevents it from being dedicated to God's service. It will then be ready to move unhindered towards Him: "*Flee, then, to God.*" (Verse 50) This would fulfil God's purpose of creation: "*I have not created the jinn and mankind for any end other than they may worship Me.*" (Verse 56)

Since preoccupation with one's livelihood and what the future may bring with regard to it is one of the hardest of these hindrances, the *sūrah* takes particular care to free man of it, and to reassure him so that his heart turns to God, free of earthly chains. References to this point are found in several places in the *sūrah*. For example, explicit references include: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22) and "*God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty.*" (Verse 58) Other references are implicit, as in the verse describing the attitude of the righteous towards money. They "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) Likewise, the *sūrah* describes Abraham's hospitality and the welcome he gave to his guests, or rather the angels he thought to be his guests. When they greeted him, he went straight to his household and brought a fat calf, yet prior to their arrival at his doorstep, they were total strangers to him.

It is all, then, about freeing one's mind from the shackles of life on earth and earning one's living, so that one looks up to heaven, yearning for its bliss, eager to earn God's pleasure and seeking His acceptance. This is the focus of all the issues the *sūrah* raises. This explains the reason for its rather ambiguous start followed by an oath by the sky and the subsequent references made to it.

Thus we see in the picture the *sūrah* draws early on the main characteristics of those who are God-fearing: dedication to God, worship at night, sacrifice of money, assigning a portion of it to the poor and the deprived: "*The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verses 15–19)

To achieve the same purpose, the *sūrah* directs our attentions to God's signs on earth and within ourselves, while also emphasizing that provisions are given by heaven. We must not, therefore, give undue importance to its immediate means on earth: *"On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised."* (Verses 20–22)

The same may be said about the reference to the building of the skies with ample space, while the earth has been made easy for people to traverse, and to the fact that all creatures are created in pairs. All this leads to the all-important advice that we should all turn to God paying full heed to the warnings given by His Messenger: *"We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning."* (Verses 47–50)

The *sūrah* concludes with a statement reiterating the same message, making clear the purpose of creating humans and *jinn*, and their major roles in life: *"I have not created the jinn and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty."* (Verses 56–58)

Thus the *sūrah* plays on the same theme throughout, using different tunes but maintaining the same beat, directing man's heart to look to the sky.

The *sūrah* includes quick references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the 'Ād, the Thamūd and Noah's people. In its account of Abraham, the *sūrah* makes a quick reference to money, as well as the realm beyond our perception when he is given the happy news of the birth of a son to be endowed with knowledge. He and his wife are given this child when they could have never expected it. In the other stories, the reference is mainly to the fact that God's promise always comes true, just as it is emphatically stated at the beginning: *"That which you are promised is true indeed."* (Verse 5) Another reference to this is made at the conclusion, where the unbelievers are issued with a clear warning: *"The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it."* (Verse 59) This comes after the statement that

implies that generations of unbelievers seem to have recommended to each other that they reject God's messengers: "*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds.*" (Verses 52–53)

Thus the historical accounts in the *sūrah* are closely related to its main theme, namely, pure and complete heart devotion to God, freeing it from all hindrances, strengthening its bond with heaven, first by faith and then by removing obstacles that prevent man from flying to that open horizon.



**Al-Dhāriyāt**  
(The Scattering Winds)

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

By the winds that scatter far and  
wide; (1)

by those [clouds] that are heavily  
laden; (2)

by those that speed along with  
gentle ease; (3)

by those that distribute by  
command; (4)

that which you are promised is  
true indeed, (5)

and, for certain, judgement is  
bound to come. (6)

By the sky and its starry pathways  
(7)

you people are at variance in what  
you say, (8)

abandoned by whoever wishes to  
turn away. (9)



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَالَّذَارِيَّتِ ذَرَوَا ①

فَالْحَمِيْلَاتِ وَقَرَا ②

فَالْجَارِيَّتِ يُسْرَا ③

فَالْمَقْسِمَاتِ أَمْرَا ④

إِنَّمَا تَوْعَدُونَ بَعْدَ ⑤

وَلَئِنْ الْبَينَ لَوَاقٍ ⑥

وَالسَّمَاءِ ذَاتِ الْجَبَلِ ⑦

إِن كُنتُمْ لِفَوَاقٍ خَلِيفٍ ⑧

يُؤْفِكُ عَنْهُ مَنْ أَفَكَ ⑨

Perish the ones given to blind guessing (10)

قُلِ الْخِرَاصُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. (11)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي غَمْرٍ وَسَاهُونَ ﴿١١﴾

They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' (12)

يَسْأَلُونَ أَيَّانَ يَوْمَ الدِّينِ ﴿١٢﴾

That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. (13)

يَوْمَ هُمْ عَلَى النَّارِ يُفْتَنُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten. (14)

ذُوقُوا فِتْنَتَكُمْ هَذَا الَّذِي كُنتُمْ بِهِ  
تَسْعَى لُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. (15)

إِنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ وَعُيُونٍ ﴿١٥﴾

They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. (16)

يُحِبُّونَ مَا آتَاهُمُ رَبُّهُمْ مِنْهُمْ لَوْ أَنَّهُمْ  
كَانُوا قَبْلَ ذَلِكَ مُحْسِنِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

They would sleep but little at night, (17)

كَانُوا قَلِيلًا مِنَ اللَّيْلِ مَا يَهْجَعُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, (18)

وَبِالْأَسْحَارِ هُمْ يَسْتَغْفِرُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived. (19)

وَفِي أَمْوَالِهِمْ حَقٌّ لِلْسَّائِلِ وَالْمَحْرُومِ ﴿١٩﴾

On earth there are signs for those  
with sure faith, (20)

وَفِي الْأَرْضِ آيَاتٌ لِلْمُوقِنِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾

and in yourselves too: can you  
not see? (21)

وَفِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

And in the sky is your sustenance  
and all that you are promised.  
(22)

وَفِي السَّمَاءِ رِزْقُكُمْ وَمَا تُوعَدُونَ ﴿٢٢﴾

By the Lord of the heavens and  
the earth, all this is the very truth,  
just as true as you are endowed  
with speech. (23)

فَوَرَبِّ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ إِنَّهُ لَحَقٌّ مِّثْلَ  
مَا أَنَّكُمْ تَنْطِقُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

Have you heard the story of  
Abraham's honoured guests?  
(24)

هَلْ أُنَبِّئُكَ حَدِيثَ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ  
الْمُكْرَمِينَ ﴿٢٤﴾

They went in to see him and bade  
him peace. He answered, 'Peace,'  
[and added to himself] 'These are  
strangers.' (25)

إِذْ دَخَلُوا عَلَيْهِ فَقَالُوا سَلَامًا قَالَ سَلَامٌ  
فَرَأَوْهُ مُتَوَكِّفًا ﴿٢٥﴾

He turned quickly to his house-  
hold and brought out a fat calf.  
(26)

فَرَأَى إِلَى آلِهِ فَطَحَّ بِكَبْشٍ زَكَاةً  
مُسَرَّحًا ﴿٢٦﴾

He placed it before them, saying:  
'Will you not eat?' (27)

فَقَرَّمَهُمْ بِيَمِينِهِمْ قَالُوا لَا تَأْكُلُوهَا  
فَإِنَّهَا كُفْرٌ ﴿٢٧﴾



He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. (28)

His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' (29)

Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' (30)

Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' (31)

They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, (32)

to bring down on them stones of clay, (33)

marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. (34)

We brought out such believers as were there; (35)

but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. (36)

فَأَوْحَسَ مِنْهُمْ خِيفَةً قَالُوا لَا تَخَفْ  
وَبَشَّرُوهُ بِغُلَامٍ عَلِيمٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

فَأَقْبَلَتْ امْرَأَتُهُ فِي صَرَّةٍ فَصَكَّتْ وَجْهَهَا  
وَقَالَتْ عَجُوزٌ عَقِيمٌ ﴿٢٩﴾

قَالُوا كَذَلِكَ قَالَ رَبُّكَ إِنَّهُ هُوَ  
الْعَزِيمُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿٣٠﴾

قَالَ فَمَا خَطْبُكُمْ أَيُّهَا الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

قَالُوا إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَى قَوْمٍ مُّجْرِمِينَ ﴿٣٢﴾

لِنُرْسِلَ عَلَيْهِمْ حِجَابًا مِنْ طِينٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

مُسَوَّمَةً عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لِلْمُسْرِفِينَ ﴿٣٤﴾

فَأَخْرَجْنَا مَنْ كَانَ فِيهَا مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٣٥﴾

فَمَا وَجَدْنَا فِيهَا غَيْرَ بَيْتٍ مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

We left there a sign for those who  
fear the grievous suffering. (37)

وَرَكَّافِيهَا آيَةً لِلَّذِينَ يَخَافُونَ  
الْعَذَابَ الْأَلِيمَ ﴿٣٧﴾

In Moses, too, there is a sign: We  
sent him to Pharaoh with clear  
authority; (38)

وَفِي مُوسَى إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَاهُ إِلَىٰ فِرْعَوْنَ  
بِسُلْطَانٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

but Pharaoh turned away in the  
pride of his power and said [of  
Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or  
maybe a madman.' (39)

فَتَوَلَّىٰ بِرُكْبِهِ وَقَالَ سِحْرٌ أَوْ يَجْنُونُ ﴿٣٩﴾

We seized him and his hosts, and  
cast them all into the sea: he was  
the one to blame. (40)

فَأَخَذَتْهُ وَجُودُهُ فَنَبَذْنَاهُمْ فِي الْيَمِّ  
وَهُوَ مَلِيمٌ ﴿٤٠﴾

In the 'Ad there is another sign:  
We let loose against them a life-  
destroying wind (41)

وَفِي عَادٍ إِذْ أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمُ الرِّيحَ الْعَقِيمَ ﴿٤١﴾

which reduced to dust everything  
it came upon. (42)

مَا لَذُرْمُنْ شَيْءٌ أَنْتَ عَلَيْهِ إِلَّا جَعَلْتَهُ  
كَالْرَمِيمِ ﴿٤٢﴾

And in Thamūd, too, when they  
were told: 'You can enjoy your life  
for a while,' (43)

وَفِي ثَمُودَ إِذْ قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَمَتَّعُوا حَتَّىٰ  
حِينٍ ﴿٤٣﴾

but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. (44)

فَعْتَوْا عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِمْ فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ الصَّاعِقَةُ  
وَهُمْ يَنْظُرُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves. (45)

فَمَا اسْتَطَعُوا مِنْ قِيَامٍ وَمَا كَانُوا  
مُنتَصِرِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾

And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil. (46)

وَقَوْمُ نُوحٍ مِنْ قَبْلُ إِنَّهُمْ كَانُوا  
قَوْمًا فَاسِقِينَ ﴿٤٦﴾

We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; (47)

وَالسَّمَاءَ بَنَيْنَاهَا بِأَيْدٍ وَإِنَّا لَمُوسِعُونَ ﴿٤٧﴾

and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! (48)

وَالْأَرْضَ فَرَشْنَاهَا فَنِعْمَ الْمُهَيَّوُونَ ﴿٤٨﴾

All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. (49)

وَمِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَا زَوْجَيْنِ  
لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; (50)

فِرُّوا إِلَى اللَّهِ إِنِّي لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥٠﴾

and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning! (51)

وَلَا تَجْعَلُوا مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا آخَرَ إِنِّي  
لَكُم مِّنْهُ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٥١﴾

Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' (52)

Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. (53)

Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; (54)

and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe. (55)

I have not created the *jinn* and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. (56)

No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. (57)

God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty. (58)

The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. (59)

كَذَلِكَ مَا أَتَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِم مِّن رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا قَالُوا سَاحِرٌ أَوْ مُجُنُّونٌ ﴿٥٢﴾

أَتَرَاصَوَابَهُ بَلْ هُم قَوْمٌ طَاغُونَ ﴿٥٣﴾

فَقُولْ عَنْهُمْ مَّا أَنتَ بِمَلُومٌ ﴿٥٤﴾

وَذَكِّرْ فَإِنَّ الذِّكْرَ يُنْفَعُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٥٥﴾

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ ﴿٥٦﴾

مَا أُرِيدُ مِنْهُمْ مِن رِّزْقٍ وَمَا أُرِيدُ أَن يُطْعَمُونِ ﴿٥٧﴾

إِنَّ اللَّهَ هُوَ الرَّزَّاقُ ذُو الْقُوَّةِ الْمَتِينُ ﴿٥٨﴾

فَإِنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا ذُنُوبًا مِّثْلَ ذُنُوبِ أَصْحَابِهِمْ فَلَا يَسْتَعْجِلُونَ ﴿٥٩﴾

Woe betide the unbelievers on  
the day they have been promised.  
(60)

قَوْلٌ لِلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ يَوْمِهِمُ  
الَّذِي يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٦٠﴾

## A True Promise

*By those that scatter far and wide; By those that are heavily laden;  
By those that speed along with gentle ease; By those that distribute  
by command; That which you are promised is true indeed, and, for  
certain, judgement is bound to come. (Verses 1–6)*

The *sūrah* begins with a quick beat, using ambiguous phrases to imply that it is talking about a serious matter that deserves our full attention. Inevitably though, the four ambiguous words used in the first four verses – *al-dhāriyāt*, *al-ḥāmilāt*, *al-jāriyāt* and *al-muqassimāt* – have made people ask questions, even in the very early days of Islam, as they sought further explanation. In this respect, Ibn Kathīr reports:

‘Alī was on the pulpit in Kufah one day when he said: ‘If you have any query about a verse in the Qur’ān or a ḥadīth by the Prophet, I will give you an answer.’ Ibn al-Kawwā’ asked him the meaning of *al-dhāriyāt*, [those that scatter], and he answered, ‘the winds’. Then he said: ‘What about *al-ḥāmilāt* [those heavily laden]?’ Alī answered, ‘the clouds’. The man then asked about *al-jāriyāt* [those that speed along], and Alī’s answer was, ‘the ships’. The man asked: ‘What about *al-muqassimāt* [those that distribute]?’ Alī said, ‘the angels’.<sup>1</sup>

Ṣabīḡ ibn ‘Isl al-Tamīmī asked ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb about these words and his reply was the same as above. ‘Umar felt, however, that al-Tamīmī was asking only for argument’s sake, thereby hinting at the ambiguity. By way of reprimand for his behaviour, ‘Umar banned him from future social gatherings. Subsequently, Ṣabīḡ al-Tamīmī repented

1. Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, Dār el-Ma’rifah, Beirut, 1987, Vol. 4, p. 248.

and swore most seriously that he no longer entertained any of his earlier doubts. This report suggests that the ambiguity contained in these words encouraged those who tried to raise doubts about the Qur'ān, making such words the point of their questioning. The same explanation of these words was given by Ibn 'Abbās, Ibn 'Umar, Mujāhid, Sa'īd ibn Jubayr, al-Ḥasan, Qatādah, al-Suddī and many others.

God states an oath by the winds that move and scatter things such as dust, grain, pollen, clouds and other material known or unknown to us; by the clouds carrying water and driven by God Almighty to wherever He pleases; by the ships that easily float on water making use of the characteristics God has given to water, shipping and the whole universe, and by the angels carrying God's commands and delivering them as He pleases, giving details as to what matters they are concerned with.

The winds, the clouds, the ships and the angels are all God's creatures which He uses as a means to implement His will with regard to the universe and His servants. By using them in His oath, He draws attention to them and what they signify. In this way we are able to reflect on how God initiates these creatures, sets them in operation and uses them to fulfil what He wishes to be fulfilled. Mentioning them in this way invites our minds to think about the secrets they embody so that we look to their Creator. They may also, in some way, relate to the issue of sustenance, preoccupation with which the *sūrah* wants to free us from. The winds, the clouds and the ships have a definite connection with sustenance. Moreover, sustenance is one of the things that the angels distribute by God's command. Thus, we clearly see the relation between this opening and one of the main topics of the *sūrah*.

God states an oath by these four types of creation, confirming that *"that which you are promised is true indeed, and, for certain, judgement is bound to come."* (Verses 5–6) God has promised mankind that He will reward their good actions with what is better, and that He will requite their bad deeds with what is bad. If He delays holding them to account during their lives on earth, He will not ignore doing so in the life to come, where all reckoning and accounting will inevitably take place: *"For certain, judgement is bound to come."* (Verse 6) The promise is undoubtedly true, and will be fulfilled in either life. He has also

promised people that their sustenance, in plenty or limited measure, is guaranteed. Again His promise in this matter is true.

God's promise to mankind is sure to be realized in the way and at the time He chooses. This needs no oath from Him. However, He makes this oath by these four types of His creation to draw attention to them, as they clearly point to His power and planning. When we contemplate these entities we have a clearer impression of the truth of God's promise and, therefore, our accountability for our deeds will inevitably take place. By their very nature, these entities suggest that life is not the result of idle play, accident or blind coincidence. Indeed, the oath leads us to view them as proofs of the divine message.

### Differences and Blind Guessing

The same may be said about the second oath: "*By the sky and its starry pathways you people are at variance in what you say, abandoned by whoever wishes to turn away.*" (Verses 7–9) This oath is by the sky that is perfectly built, with pathways that are carefully interconnected, like the links of a chain. This may be one form clouds take as they gather in the sky, looking like a watery or sandy surface during or after a windy period. On the other hand, this description may be true of the permanent order of orbits that are perfectly coordinated and probably interconnected.

This oath, by the perfectly arranged sky, confirms that the unbelievers are at variance in what they say and believe. Their stand is shaky, lacking roots and foundations. People may abandon belief at will, or stick to it if they wish. There is no general agreement or coordination as to its validity. The situation is one of perpetual confusion and worry. Such is falsehood: shifting grounds and a maze without markings or light. It is always shifting like a desert sand, lacking firm basis and accurate measure. When people agree on some aspect of faith, they soon diverge and find themselves in dispute. Their confusion is seen even more clearly when it is shown against the background of the sky, which is perfectly ordered and coordinated.

The *sūrah* goes on to state that the unbelievers are deluded about the major question of the life to come. Their opinions are without a firm or true basis. They argue and dispute about a clear question of truth.

It then goes on to portray the Day of Judgement in such a way as they can actually see it:

*Perish the ones given to blind guessing who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth. They ask: 'When will this Day of Judgement come?' That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire. Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.* (Verses 10–14)

Such people indulge in blind guessing. It is God who invokes their killing. How terrible! Needless to say, such an invocation is a firm sentence, one that is certain to be enforced. “*Perish the ones given to blind guessing.*” (Verse 10) Further clarification of their identity is added: “*who are steeped in error, heedless of the truth.*” (Verse 11) They are so steeped in delusion and falsehood that they are unable to wake themselves up. The *sūrah* shows them to be totally unaware of anything around them, as if they are excessively drunk. They cannot see for themselves something that is very clear to anyone with a sound mind. “*They ask: When will this Day of Judgement come?*” (Verse 12) It is not a question that seeks information; rather, it is an expression of doubt and denial. Therefore, the *sūrah* shows them their position on that day which they claim to be highly improbable: “*That will be a day when they will be sorely tried by the fire.*” (Verse 13) They will burn in the fire just as some metals are exposed to fire to determine their make up. This burning is coupled with strong remonstrations: “*Taste this your trial! This is what you were keen to hasten.*” (Verse 14) A quick scene showing their miserable end is the most fitting answer to their question that sought no information. This powerful scene of their end contrasts with the state of confusion that plagues their lives. Moreover, it confirms that God’s invocation of their deaths is fulfilled in a most terrible way.

### At the Opposite End

Next, a contrasting image is drawn. This depicts a different group, reassured in their certainty, eager to do what is good without boasting about it, fully awake at night when they volunteer their night worship:



*The God-fearing will be amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them; for they were keen to do good. They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn, and would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived. (Verses 15–19)*

This group are fully alert, sensitive to the fact that God watches them and, therefore, they carefully watch their own behaviour. These will be placed "*amid gardens and springs. They will happily receive what their Lord will grant them.*" (Verses 15–16) God grants them blessings in abundance as a reward for what they do in this their first life, worshipping Him as if they see Him and realizing that He sees them: "*for they were keen to do good.*" (Verse 16) Their desire to excel is portrayed in a splendid image: "*They would sleep but little at night, and would pray for forgiveness at the time of dawn,*" (Verses 17–18) They are the ones who stay up at night when others are fast asleep. They turn to their Lord, appealing to Him to forgive them their sins. They sleep but little during the night, preferring to address their Lord and enjoy the pleasure of being in close contact with Him, when no one else is aware of that contact.

Al-Ḥasan says in commenting on the verse, "*They would sleep but little at night*": "They offered voluntary night worship, sleeping only a little and extending their worship until the late hours, shortly before dawn, when they would pray for forgiveness." Qatādah quotes al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment after reading this verse: "They slept only for a short while at night. I am not one to which this verse applies." Al-Ḥasan al-Basrī cites al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays's comment: "I tried to compare my work to that of the people of heaven and I discovered that those people are ahead of us by a long way. We cannot aspire to what they achieved, sleeping but little at night. I then tried to compare my work to that of the people of hell and I found out that those are devoid of goodness, denying God's revelations and His messengers, refusing to believe in resurrection after death. I concluded that the best among us are those who mix good deeds with bad ones."

A man said to Zayd ibn Aslam that he felt that this quality of spending much of the night in voluntary worship does not apply to their

generation who only spend a little of the night time in such worship. Zayd said to him: "Blessed is the one who sleeps when he is sleepy and remains God-fearing when awake."

This is a standard to which a number of the *Tābi'in* generation that immediately followed the Prophet's Companions, known for their firm belief and piety, aspired to. They felt that they were well below it. It is the standard only achieved by the elite God has chosen and who have been shown the way to achieve it.

This is their situation with regard to their relations with God. As for their relations with people and their attitude to money, these people are of the type that is keen to do good: they "*would give a rightful share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verse 19) They not only give a share of what they have to those who ask for help and the one who is too shy to ask and thus remains deprived of help, but they make that a rightful share, committing themselves to it as though they are duty bound to do so even though it is voluntary.

This point fits well with the treatment of the issue of possessions and earnings in the *sūrah*, as it helps to free the believer's heart of the shackles of personal greed and their preoccupation with livelihood. It also serves to prepare us for the next section of the *sūrah*.

## Signs Galore

*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see? And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised. By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*  
(Verses 20–23)

These verses turn our attentions to the countless signs testifying to God's oneness, both on earth and within ourselves. They also guide us to look to heaven for our means of sustenance, as it is all measured. They finish with a great oath by God Himself, the Lord of the heavens and earth, confirming that the message given to them from Him is absolutely true.

*"On earth there are signs for those with sure faith, and in yourselves too: can you not see?"* (Verses 20–21) The earth on which we live is a great exhibition of God's signs and marvels. Until now, mankind has only been able to see a little of these marvels, even though we discover each day something new and remarkable. Likewise, there is a similarly breathtaking exhibition that takes place within us, within the human soul with its marvellous secrets that mirror those of the universe. These two short verses refer to these two great exhibitions, opening their gates wide for anyone who wishes to look and have faith. Such a person will, as a result, fill his life with pleasure and enjoyment, profound lessons and a wealth of true knowledge.

Qur'ānic texts are phrased in such a way as to make them relevant for all times, environments and situations. They can give every person, every mind and every understanding a wealth of knowledge that each is perfectly able to handle. As man's knowledge increases, his faculties of understanding develop, his experience broadens, and as he becomes more aware of the secrets of the universe and of his own self, he receives more of the import of the Qur'ānic texts. As the Prophet declares: "the Qur'ān is a book of endless marvels. It remains new no matter how repeatedly it is read." The Prophet who said this was the man on whom the Qur'ān was bestowed from on high and who understood its secrets and lived them fully. His description was based on the most direct and personal of experiences.

Those who were the first to listen to the Qur'ān saw of God's signs on earth and in themselves their share, according to their knowledge, experience and inspiration. Every succeeding generation also received their shares according to whatever further knowledge and experience they had accumulated. We, in our turn, have our own share in line with our increased knowledge in different fields, and with what we have been able to discover of the secrets of the universe. Those who come after us will also find a share kept for them of secrets yet unknown to man, in both the earth and within the human soul. These two exhibitions will remain, to the end of time, majestic, full of new wonders.

This planet earth was made ready to support life in a way that is almost unique in what we know of this great universe, with its unlimited number of planets and stars. What we know of these, which is only a

fraction of what we do not know, includes millions of galaxies, each of which contains hundreds of millions of stars, as well as planets, which are satellites of these stars. Yet out of such countless numbers, the earth uniquely seems to be the only one suited for this type of life. Should any of the many special characteristics of the earth change or be disturbed, life as we know it will become impossible on earth. If the earth's size changes so that it becomes larger or smaller, or if a change affects the position of the earth in relation to the sun, or the sun's size or level of heat, or the angle of the earth's axis, or its rotation in place, or the speed of its movement in its orbit, or the size of the moon, or its distance from it, or the proportion of sea to dry land, etc. no life on earth would be possible. Is this not a great sign, or a multitude of signs, for us to contemplate?

Consider also the endless variety of foods stored in the earth for all creatures that live on it, fly in its atmosphere, swim its waters, hide in its caves, and who disappear underground. Some types of food are simple, others are complex and sophisticated. They are available in all types and shapes to meet the endless needs of endless numbers and types of creatures. Such a great variety of food, including what may be inside the earth, or in its atmosphere, or growing on its surface, or may come from the sun or other worlds beyond, is given in due measure and proportion in accordance with the divine will that created the earth and made it a cradle for this type of life, equipping it with all that is needed.

Consider further the scenes of what the earth presents, wherever you look or move. There are no end of wonderful scenes: flat grounds and lowlands, hills and valleys, lakes and seas, rivers and streams, vineyards and fields of grains and date-palms of different varieties, etc. Every one of these scenes undergoes change by the creative hand whose inventiveness never stops. We pass by any of these in the dry season and capture a certain essence of it, and then we pass by again in the rainy season to find a totally different essence. It presents a third image at the time of growth and yet another totally different one at harvest time. Yet it is all in the same spot, unable to move an inch.

Then consider the creatures that live on earth: plants, animals, birds, fish, reptiles and insects. We need not mention mankind because the *sūrah* gives it special focus. We cannot give a figure for the number of

kinds and species of these creatures, let alone give accurate figures of their individual populations. Every kind is a community of its own; each individual is a great wonder: every animal, bird, reptile, worm and shoot. Indeed, the wonder extends further to every petal of a flower and every stalk in a leaf. Each presents a great exhibition with endless marvels. In this way, the *sūrah* alerts human minds to reflect and contemplate so that they appreciate and enjoy these wonders throughout their lives' journey.

Yet none truly appreciates these wonders and enjoys these pleasures except one whose heart carries the certainty of faith: "*On earth there are signs for those with sure faith.*" (Verse 20) It is only such certainty that brings the heart alive so that it sees, understands and appreciates the creating power behind them. Without such certainty, all remains cold and hollow, speechless and lifeless, while the heart remains unresponsive. Many are those who pass through this great open exhibition with closed eyes and hearts. They neither feel its life force nor understand its language, and all because they are devoid of that certainty of faith. Some may be reputable scientists, but "*they only know the outer surface of this world's life.*" (30: 7) The truth beyond the outer surface remains closed to them, because hearts can only open to receive the truth of existence by the key of faith and can only see it in the light of certainty.

## Man: A World of Wonders

The other wonder that walks on earth is mentioned in the next verse: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) Man is indeed the greatest wonder, or miracle on earth, although he is often oblivious to his own real status and to the secret wonders in his own constitution. He is a great wonder in his outer and inner self; his body and soul. When man begins to think about himself, he always finds some great wonder to contemplate: the way his organs are made, their distribution in his body, their functions and the way they perform those functions; how food is digested and assimilated; the process of breathing; blood circulation; the neurological system; the glands and what they produce to ensure physical growth and keep the body functioning, as also the perfect coordination,

harmony and cooperation between all these systems. Every wonderful aspect encompasses many other wonders. Indeed, in every organ and part of an organ there is an amazing wonder.

Then there are the secrets of man's soul and its known and unknown abilities: how he understands, retains and retrieves information. Where are information and images stored and how? How and where are such images, scenes and visions printed, and how are they retrieved? In all this, we are speaking about abilities known to us. What is unknown is even greater. We see occasional glimpses of these during moments of great inspiration, pointing to what is beyond our current reach.

Consider also the bewildering nature of human procreation: one cell carries the entire treasure of characteristics of the human race, as well as the special characteristics of both parents and nearer grandparents. Where are all these characteristics stored within the single microscopic cell? How does it recognize, by itself, its long history and represent it so accurately, eventually culminating in reproducing this amazing creature called man?

A short pause at the moment when a newborn starts its life on earth, separating from its mother and starting its own independent life, allowing its heart and lungs to function and begin life is enough to leave us speechless. It is enough to give us an overwhelming feeling of faith. A similar pause for reflection on the moment when a newborn begins to use its tongue to utter its first sounds, syllables, words and then phrases, indeed reflection on the mechanics of speech, the vocalization through the tongue and the larynx, gives us the feeling that we are looking at a great miracle, one that we tend to take for granted because of its familiarity. Yet on reflection we can appreciate the truth that this great wonder could only have come from God. Indeed every small aspect of the creature that is man is a miracle that leaves us absolutely amazed: *"And in yourselves too: can you not see?"* (Verse 21)

Every individual human being is a world of its own; a mirror reflecting the whole universe in a special and unique image that is not repeated at any moment in history. There is no parallel for any one person in the entire human race, whether in shape, features, mind, faculties, spirit, feelings or even in the way the universe is reflected in that person's mind.

In this divine museum that includes millions of millions of individuals, each one is a unique sample that can never be repeated in the same way as fingerprints are unrepeated throughout human history.

Many of the wonders of the human race are open for all to see: "*And in yourselves too: can you not see?*" (Verse 21) What we see of these wonders point to that which we cannot see. These wonders cannot be listed in a book. Indeed, what we know of them will take volumes to explain and what is unknown to us is much greater than what we know. The Qur'ān does not attempt to enumerate them. It simply uses this touch to alert our hearts to this great divine show, which is presented before our very eyes and minds. Thus we go through our journey on earth reflecting and contemplating, deriving immense pleasure from looking carefully at this wonderful creature that lies within ourselves.

Furthermore, we gain much pleasure from looking carefully at people's faces, features, movements and habits, provided that such a look is cast through the eyes of one who acknowledges his position as a servant of God, taking a round in an exhibition of the greatest Creator's work. How about one who spends a lifetime in such pleasant exercise? With a pointer like this, the Qur'ān creates man anew, giving him a new faculty of perception, a new pleasant life and an enjoyment that is unparalleled by anything else on earth.

It is this level of reflection and contemplation that the Qur'ān wants us to achieve. Faith is what gives our hearts such a treasure and opens for us this superior enjoyment while we are still here on earth.

### **An Oath to Confirm the Truth**

After the two exhibitions of the earth and man, the *sūrah* presents a third from the world above, where our perceptions cannot reach. It is there that our shares of provisions and livelihood are determined: "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised.*" (Verse 22)

This is a remarkable touch. The means of livelihood and provisions are all on earth. Man works hard and expects to receive his share as a result of his work. The Qur'ān, however, turns man's attention to the sky, to heaven, to God. It is there that shares are determined. The earth itself, and all its means of provisions, are signs for those who have certainty

of faith, pointing to God so that we ask Him for His bounty. Thus do we get rid of worldly burdens, personal greed and the immediate means of income so that these do not become a barrier preventing us from looking up to God who has created all such means.

Every believer understands this statement properly, realizing that it does not mean that one should abandon one's livelihood. He knows that God has assigned to man the task of building life on earth. He understands that it means that man must not make it the focus of his attention. He should work on earth whilst looking up to heaven. He should use the means of his livelihood, realizing that they are not what brings him his provisions. These provisions are assigned to him in heaven, and what God has promised is certain to be fulfilled. Thus his heart breaks the shackles of the immediate concerns about his livelihood, finding in them signs pointing to their Creator. Man thus revives his bond with heaven while standing firmly on the earth. This is what God wants for man, whom He created from clay, then breathed in him of His own spirit, to make him nobler than most of His creation. Faith is the means that puts man in the best situation, because it returns him to that state of pure nature God gave him, before it was affected by deviation and corruption.

Having touched on these three great signs: the earth, man and heaven, God states an oath by Himself, in His glory, that all this discourse is absolutely true: "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" (Verse 23) That humans speak is a fact they acknowledge. They entertain no doubt whatsoever about it. Likewise, this discourse is absolutely true. God tells only the absolute truth.

Al-Aṣma'ī, a famous literary figure who lived in the later part of the second century of the Islamic calendar, reports the following anecdote which is quoted by al-Zamakhsharī in his commentary on the Qur'ān, *Al-Kashshāf*. We quote it here as it is interesting and relevant to our discussion.

I came out of the main mosque in Basrah and I saw a Bedouin riding a young camel. He asked me to which tribe I belonged, and I told him that I was from Asma'. He asked where I had come from



and I said, 'From a place where the words of the Lord of Grace are recited.' He said: 'Then recite to me.' I began reading the *sūrah* entitled 'The Scattering Winds'. When I read the verse saying, "*And in the sky is your sustenance and all that you are promised,*" he said, 'This is enough.' He immediately slaughtered his she-camel and distributed its meat to all the people around, then he broke his sword and bow, and left. When I subsequently went on pilgrimage with Caliph al-Rashīd and as I was doing *ṭawāf* around the Ka'bah, I heard someone with a sharp voice calling me. I looked around and I saw the Bedouin having grown thinner and paler. He greeted me and asked me to recite to him the same *sūrah* again. When I reached the same verse, he said, 'We have found God's promise to be true.' Then he asked me what came after that verse. I read the next verse, "*By the Lord of the heavens and the earth, all this is the very truth, just as true as you are endowed with speech.*" He cried aloud, 'Limitless is God in His glory! Who has angered the Almighty to make Him swear? They would not believe His words so that He would say an oath!' He repeated this three times and then passed away.<sup>2</sup>

This may or may not be a true story, but it reminds us that this oath by God is awesome. It is an oath by God Himself and by His main attribute, 'the Lord of the heavens and earth', which adds to the certainty of the truth that is the subject of this oath. It is true, and it does not need an oath to make it so.

## Abraham and the Angels

So far we have looked at the first part of the *sūrah*. The second part includes brief references to the stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, the 'Ād Prophet Hud's people, the Thamūd Prophet Ṣāliḥ's people, and Noah's people. This part closely relates to what preceded it in the *sūrah* and to what follows.

*Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests? They went in to see him and bade him peace. He answered, 'Peace,' [and added*

2. Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, Dār al-Fikr, (n.d.), Vol. 4, p. 17.

*to himself] 'These are strangers.' He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf. He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?' He then became apprehensive of them, but they said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge. His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!' Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.' Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin, to bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds. We brought out such believers as were there; but We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house. We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering. (Verses 24–37)*

These verses speak of a sign or signs in the history of the divine message, just like those signs in the earth and in man to which the *sūrah* referred. It also refers to a promise or promises that are fulfilled, just like the promises the *sūrah* mentioned earlier.

It begins its reference to Abraham by the question: "*Have you heard the story of Abraham's honoured guests?*" (Verse 24) This style is used to prepare our minds for what comes next. It describes Abraham's guests as 'honoured', either because they are so in God's sight, or because of how Abraham paid honour to them as we soon learn. Abraham's hospitality appears very clearly from the first moment his guests arrived. Once they greeted him and received his reply, and despite the fact that they are total strangers, he immediately goes to his wife telling her to prepare food. He provides a large quantity of food, sufficient for scores of people: "*He turned quickly to his household and brought out a fat calf.*" (Verse 26) According to some reports, there were only three guests, which means that a shoulder of that calf would have been sufficient to give them a good meal.

"*He placed it before them, saying: 'Will you not eat?'*" (Verse 27) He asked this question after he saw that their hands did not touch the food and it looked as if they would not eat the meal that had been provided.

"He then became apprehensive of them," either because a stranger who refuses to eat his host's food appears treacherous and causes an element of apprehension, or because he noticed something odd about them. Therefore, they revealed their identity, reassuring him and giving him the good news they had brought him: "*They said: 'Do not be afraid.' They gave him the good news of [the birth of] a son who would be endowed with knowledge.*" (Verse 28) This was the happy news of Isaac's birth.

"*His wife then came in with a loud cry, struck her face, and said: 'A barren old woman!'*" (Verse 29) She overheard the good news, was stunned and surprised. She could not stop herself from crying out in amazement. In the habitual reaction of women, she slapped herself on both cheeks and said: "*A barren old woman!*" This was a further expression of her surprise given she was elderly, and had been barren throughout her life. Stunned by this totally unexpected piece of news, she forgot that those bringing the good news were angels. Therefore, the angels reminded her of the basic truth that there is no limit to God's power, and that He determines everything on the basis of perfect wisdom and absolute knowledge: "*Replied they: 'Thus will it be. This is what your Lord said. He is the Wise, the All-Knowing.'*" (Verse 30)

Everything will come into existence once the command, 'Be', is given. God said it, so what can prevent His order from being fulfilled? Familiar habits limit our imagination and understanding. Therefore, we are surprised when we see something running counter to what is familiar. Yet God's will is free, unrestricted by anything that may be familiar to man in his small world. It creates whatever He wills, without limitation.

When Abraham realized who his guests were, he asked them about the mission they had been sent to accomplish: "*Said Abraham: 'What is your errand, messengers?' They replied: 'We have been sent to a people lost in sin.'*" (Verses 31–32) These were Lot's people as explained in other *sūrah*s. Those angels would "*bring down on them stones of clay, marked as from your Lord for those who transgressed all bounds.*" (Verses 33–34)

These stones of clay, marked or made ready by God for those who transgress the bounds, like Lot's people who transgressed the bounds of human nature, truth and religion, may well be stones from a volcanic eruption brought out from deep inside the earth. In this respect, they

are 'from your Lord,' aimed, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, against any transgressors He has marked. Thus, they are determined in time and place according to His absolute knowledge and His will. There is nothing to prevent their being aimed, within the framework of His will and laws, by angels. Do we know the exact nature of God's angels? Do we know the nature of their relation to the universe and its inhabitants? Do we truly know the nature of the universal powers to which we give names according to what we may see of their characteristics? Why should we question the news given to us by God, saying that He sent some of these forces at a certain point of time, to aim some powers in a particular form, against certain people, at a certain place? How can we question such news when all our knowledge consists of some theories and supposed interpretations concerning what appears to us of these powers and forces? Their reality remains far removed from us. Let these stones be volcanic resulting from an eruption nearby, or some other such stones. What difference does it make? Both are the same in His hand, as He has made both and the secret is known to Him. He may reveal that secret when and if He so wishes.

"We brought out such believers as were there," to protect and save them. "But We did not find there any who had surrendered themselves to Us apart from a single house." (Verse 36) Those were Lot's family, as reported in other *sūrah*s, and they were all saved except his wife who perished with her people. "We left there a sign for those who fear the grievous suffering." (Verse 37) Those who fear are the ones who see the sign, understand it and benefit from it. The others are blind, unable to see God's signs on earth, within themselves or in the events of history.

## Moses and Earlier Communities

Another sign is cited from the history of Moses. A brief reference to this is made within the context of the signs from the history of God's messengers:

*In Moses, too, there is a sign: We sent him to Pharaoh with clear authority; but Pharaoh turned away in the pride of his power and*

*said [of Moses]: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame. (Verses 38–40)*

The clear authority God gave to Moses was his powerful argument and irrefutable proof, as well as that people were in awe of his presence. Yet Pharaoh turned away, proud of his power, and rejected the clear truth and the decisive proof. When Moses showed him the miraculous signs God had given him, Pharaoh said that Moses was 'a sorcerer or a madman'. This confirms that miracles will not guide a heart that is not prepared to believe. They cannot silence a voice that insists on repeating fabrications.

The *sūrah* does not give details of Moses' story. It proceeds straight to its conclusion: "*We seized him and his hosts, and cast them all into the sea: he was the one to blame.*" (Verse 40) Pharaoh certainly deserved all blame because of his transgression and rejection of God's message. The phraseology here clearly indicates God's direct action in seizing Pharaoh and his army and casting them into the sea. This is deliberately highlighted as it fits with the exhibition of God's signs on earth, in man and throughout history.

*In the 'Ad there is another sign: We let loose against them a life-destroying wind which reduced to dust everything it came upon. (Verses 41–42)*

The wind is described in Arabic as *'aqīm*, which literally means 'sterile'. It is given this description because, unlike what they expected, it did not bring them water and life. Rather, it destroyed life and brought about death and total destruction. It left everything it came upon like a dead thing, reduced to dust.

Wind is one of the forces God has set in the universe, and one of God's troops which are known only to Him. He sends it, in accordance with His will and the laws He sets in operation, in a particular form, at an appointed time, bringing either destruction or life to whomever He wills. In such a situation there is no room for the naïve objection

voiced by some people who say that the wind blows according to a universal system and travels here or there as other natural forces and factors determine. The One who makes it blow and travel according to a certain system, forces and factors is the One who sends it against whom He wills at the time He chooses. He is able to send it as He wills within the system and factors He has put in place. No doubt or objection can be voiced.

*And in Thamūd, too, when they were told: 'You can enjoy your life for a while,' but they insolently defied their Lord's commandment. So, the thunderbolt struck them while they were helplessly looking on. They were unable even to rise; nor could they defend themselves.*  
(Verses 43-45)

The statement referring to what was said to them, "*You can enjoy your life for a while,*" may be a reference to their being given a period of three days after they killed the she-camel, which was a sign given to them by God. This is mentioned in another *sūrah*, when their prophet, Ṣālih, said to them: "*You have just three more days to enjoy life in your homes.*" (11: 65) It could also refer to the fact that they had their time of life and enjoyed it from the time the divine message was given to them to the time when they slew the she-camel. They clearly disobeyed God and deserved His punishment.

What was said about the stones aimed at Lot's people and the wind sent against the 'Ād is also applicable to the thunderbolt that struck the Thamūd. All of these are universal forces that work in accordance with God's will and His laws. He sends them against whomever He decides within these laws and they fulfil the role assigned to them by God like any of His other troops.

*"And the people of Noah before them: they too were people lost in evil."*  
(Verse 46) This is just a quick reference, with no details or explanations. It is added as if to say, 'remember Noah's people.' This reference is followed by one to the skies and how they are built. Both are among God's signs, one from the universe and one from history. The *sūrah* puts them together, so joining its second and third parts.

## Creatures in Pairs

*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse; and We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it! All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought. Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!*  
(Verses 47–51)

These verses take us back to the great universal exhibition the *sūrah* presented in its opening, providing here yet another image the Qur'ān puts before our eyes and minds. Further references are added to God's signs, linking that provided by Noah and his people with that of the heavens, the earth and other creatures. This culminates with a call to mankind to flee to their Lord, submitting themselves to Him and associating no partners with Him.

"*We built the skies with power; and We gave it a vast expanse.*" (Verse 47) Power is the clearest element in the solid, firm and well-coordinated structure of the 'skies', whatever we take the term to mean: the orbits of the different stars and planets, any of the star clusters we normally call a galaxy which includes many millions of stars, a stratum of the huge space in which planets and stars are scattered, or any other of its many meanings. Vastness is another clearly recognizable element. These millions of huge stars are no more than small particles floating in the great expanse that is the universe.

This reference to the skies may also imply a pointer to the stores of sustenance, which were stated earlier in the *sūrah* to be in the sky. However, in the earlier reference it is merely a symbol indicating what is with God. Yet the Qur'ānic expression gives deliberate connotations so as to leave a clear impression on people's minds.

The same applies to the reference to the earth and its being spread out: "*And We spread out the earth: how well have We prepared it!*" (Verse 48) As we explained before, God has made this earth to be a cradle for human life. That the earth has been spread out indicates that it serves as a cradle equipped with all that is necessary to support and enable life to flourish.

*"All things We have created in pairs, so that you may take thought."* (Verse 49) This is a fascinating truth that reveals the basic rule common to all creation on earth, and possibly in the universe. As it stands, the statement does not limit the '*in pairs*' rule to the earth. It is clearly seen among living creatures, but the phrase, '*all things*', also includes inanimate objects. Hence, the statement means that both animate and inanimate things are created in pairs.

This statement was presented to people 14 centuries ago, when even the thought that living things, let alone inanimate objects, are all made in pairs was totally unknown. When we remember this we find the statement itself becomes amazing, as it presents such a universal fact to people at such an early time. Moreover, this statement confirms that recent scientific research is heading towards confirmation of this truth. Indeed, it has almost established that the whole universe is made of atoms, which contain a dual electric charge, positive and negative.<sup>3</sup>

These verses referring to the great universe, the width of the earth and the system of creation all culminate in a call on people to flee to God, the Creator of all, shedding all that shackles their souls, acknowledging His absolute unity: *"Flee, then, to God! I am sent by Him to give you clear warning; and do not associate partners with Him: I am sent by Him to give you clear warning!"* (Verses 50–51) Use of the word *flee*, here is very significant. It points to the burdens, shackles and handcuffs that restrain people, pulling them towards the earth and its material life, preventing free movement and ensuring they are always restrained. Most cogent among these are the restraints of earning one's livelihood, maintaining one's income and preoccupation with improving one's lot. Therefore, the call to shed all these and flee to God, alone, without partners, is very powerful. It reminds people, twice in succession, that they have no excuse for not doing so: *"I am sent by Him to give you clear warning."* (Verses 50–51)

It is as if the mention of the signs seen everywhere in the heavens, earth and among creatures is a continuation of the signs given to God's

3. The author wrote this in the late 1950s. Recent scientific research has moved further, looking at sub-atomic particles, the string theory, etc. These again confirm what is stated here that every thing is created in pairs. God certainly tells the truth. – Editor's note.



messengers. Next we have a comment on the references to earlier messengers mentioned in the *sūrah*:

*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.' Have they, perchance, handed down this legacy to one another? No! They are people who transgress all bounds. Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame; and go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe. (Verses 52–55)*

It is the same nature common to all unbelievers. They all give the same response to the divine message: “*Thus whenever a messenger came to those that lived before them, they also said: 'He is but a sorcerer, or maybe a madman.'*” (Verse 52) This is exactly what the Arab unbelievers said. It is as if one generation of unbelievers handed down such a legacy to the next in a continuing process. Needless to say, there was no such handing down. It is all in the nature of transgression and unbelief whereby present unbelievers and their predecessors are brought together.

The natural result of this repeated stand is that the Prophet should not pay any attention to what the unbelievers say. He is not responsible for them as they choose to remain in error. He has spared no effort in trying to get them to follow divine guidance: “*Turn, then, away from them: you shall incur no blame.*” (Verse 54) His only task is to remind people and to continue to give them reminders, no matter how persistent they are in their rejection of the truth: “*And go on reminding all. Such a reminder will benefit those who believe.*” (Verse 55) Such reminders will not benefit hardened unbelievers. Yet the task assigned to God's messengers is to give such reminders. It is not within their ability to ensure that people follow proper guidance. That is outside their remit. It is God alone who gives guidance.

## **The Purpose of Creation**

The last note in the *sūrah* explains the meaning of fleeing to God and shedding all burdens and encumbrances in order to fulfil the mission for which He created people:

*I have not created the jinn and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me. No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty. (Verses 56–58)*

This short statement embodies one of the greatest universal truths. Indeed, to fully understand this truth it is necessary for human life on earth to be set on the right track. This applies in equal measure to the life of the individual, the community and all humanity throughout history. Understanding this truth opens up a whole host of concepts and meanings. The first point in this truth is that there is a clear objective for the existence of humans and *jinn* on earth. This objective is represented in a task: whoever fulfils it achieves the objective of his existence, and whoever neglects it leads a life without purpose or objective. He who neglects it thus breaks away from the law that applied to him when he came into existence, and he ends in utter loss. This task which binds humans and *jinn* to the law of the universe is worship or servitude to God. Thus, there will be a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Man's life is thus set aright on this basis.

We then begin to see the other side of this great truth, realizing that the concept of worship must be much broader and more comprehensive than attending to worship rituals. Neither humans nor *jinn* spend their lives in worship rituals. Indeed, God does not require them to do so. On the contrary, He requires them to fulfil other tasks which take up most of their time. We do not know anything about the sort of duties God requires of the *jinn*, but we know the extent of what God requires of man. This is clearly stated in the Qur'ān, as God says: "*Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing a vicegerent on earth.'*" (2: 30) Being in charge of the earth is then the main function of human beings. This requires the exercise of different activities and the use of different talents in order to build human life on earth, after getting to know its resources and potentials. In doing so, man puts in effect God's will to use and develop the earth so as to ensure steady progress. Man's vicegerency also involves the implementation of God's law so that human society can be set on the proper foundation, one that is in harmony with the law governing the universe.

All this makes it absolutely clear that worship, which is the objective of human existence, or rather man's first duty, has a much broader sense than the mere observance of rituals. Indeed the entire concept of vicegerency is incorporated into the idea of worship, which must be reflected in two major ways. The first is that the concept of man's servitude to God should be well established in our hearts. This so that we fully realize that there is only a servant who worships and a Lord who is worshipped. Beyond this there is nothing: it is just the One Lord and all others are His servants, to whom they offer their worship. The second is that every thought, every action and every life affair must be addressed purely to God, seeking His acceptance. Every feeling other than that of submission to God and worshipping Him should be discarded.

When these two concepts are fully absorbed, the meaning of worship is fully realized. Thus, ordinary actions in man's life become like worship rituals; rituals like building human life on earth, striving for God's cause, ensuring patience in adversity and accepting God's will are all aspects of worship, fulfilling the main objective for which humans and *jinn* have been created. They are all a translation of submission to the overall law that governs the universe, which is submission and servitude to God, and to no one else.

Thus man will live on earth feeling that he is there to fulfil a task assigned to him by God, for a period of time. This task is to obey God and worship Him, without having any interest or objective in all this other than obedience of God. The reward for such obedience man finds within himself in the form of pleasant reassurance and satisfaction with his lot, as well as deep gratification from earning God's acceptance. He will then find greater reward in the life to come where he will receive honour and far-reaching blessings.

He will then have truly fled to God, discarding all worldly burdens, attractions and distractions and claimed his full freedom. He will have established his position in the general system of the universe as a servant of God who created him for His worship. He will have fulfilled the purpose of his existence. As we have said: an essential requirement of worship, in its proper and full sense, is that man should fulfil the duties of his position that places him in charge of the earth. He should achieve the best results he can in discharging his duties, while at the same

time look for no personal benefit. No worldly attraction should tempt him to change course. What he must realize is that when he fulfils his mission of building human life on earth, to the best standard he can, he is not doing so for himself or his position; he is doing it in order to put into effect the concept of worship and to flee to God from all worldly burdens and attractions.

A correlative of this is that man should evaluate deeds and actions on the basis of their motives, not their results. Let the outcome be as it may, man should not concern himself with it. He is only concerned with fulfilling his duty of worship when he does anything. His reward is not based on the outcome of his actions, but on the worship he fulfils in performing them.

This means that man's attitude to duties, responsibilities and actions will totally change. He will look only to the worship aspect involved in them all. When he fulfils this aspect, his objective is met, let the outcome be what it may. The outcome is not part of his responsibility. It is determined by God's will. Man himself, his efforts, intentions and actions are part of God's will.

When man offloads any concern about the outcome of his efforts and feels that his reward is guaranteed, as long as his motive for action fulfils the concept of worship, his heart will be free of the sort of aspirations that make people compete and quarrel over life's prizes. On the one side, he exerts his best efforts to fulfil his mission and discharge his duties on earth, and, on the other, he looks for no gain as a result of his efforts. What he achieves is solely to fulfil the concept of worship, not to make any personal gain.

The Qur'ān strengthens this feeling, letting man overcome his concerns about his livelihood and his selfish desires. Everybody's livelihood is guaranteed by God. Needless to say, He needs neither sustenance nor food from them when He asks them to spend some of their money on those who are in need: *"No sustenance do I require of them, nor do I require that they should feed Me. God is indeed the Provider of all sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Ever Mighty."* (Verses 57–58) What this means in effect is that a believer's incentive to work and exert his best efforts in discharging his duties of building human life on earth is not to earn a livelihood; his incentive is to fulfil the meaning of worship,

which requires him to exert his best efforts. Thus his mind is focused on the fulfilment of the worship concept in doing whatever he is doing. He is free of concerns about the results of this effort. These are, then, noble feelings, which can only exist within such a noble concept.

It is true that humanity does not understand or appreciate these feelings. This is because humanity has not lived with the guidance of the Qur'ān, as the first generation of Muslims did, nor has it derived its life value from the Islamic constitution.

When man rises to this sublime level of worship, or servitude to God, and maintains it, he will disdain any resort to foul means in order to achieve a noble end, even when this end is none other than to achieve victory for God's message. Foul means will, for one thing, destroy the noble meaning of worship. For another, a believer is not concerned with achieving goals. He is only concerned with the fulfilment of his duty. Goals and ends are left to God to determine in accordance with His will.

Moreover, a servant of God who attends to his worship in this way will enjoy ease of conscience, reassurance and a happy state in all situations, whether he sees the outcome of his efforts or not, and whether they bring the results he hoped for or not. He has done his duty and made sure of his reward once he has fulfilled the concept of worship in his work. The outcome is outside his remit. He knows that he is a servant of God. Therefore, in his feelings and appeals, he does not exceed the limits of a servant. He knows that God is the Lord. Therefore, he does not encroach on what belongs to the Lord. He thus earns God's acceptance and He is happy with what God gives him.

Thus do we understand some aspects of this great truth stated in a single short verse: *"I have not created the jinn and mankind to any end other than they may worship Me."* (Verse 56) This truth is great indeed; it can change how people live when it takes hold of their hearts.

In the light of this great truth, the *sūrah* concludes with a warning to the wrongdoers who hasten the fulfilment of God's warnings: *"The wrongdoers shall have their share [of evil] like their predecessors. Let them not ask Me to hasten it. Woe betide the unbelievers on the day they have been promised."* (Verses 59–60)