

It was a great surprise indeed. Joseph announces it, reminding them in general terms of what they did to him and his brother out of impulsive ignorance. He stops at that, adding only an acknowledgement of God's grace to him and his brother, making it clear that it was all the result of fearing God, being patient in adversity, and divine justice. In their turn, they remember vividly what they did to Joseph. They are deeply ashamed of their deeds, particularly as they stand before him acknowledging his kindness after their cruelty, his compassion after the harm they caused him. Hence they acknowledge the disparity between their two attitudes, saying: *"By God! Most certainly has God raised you high above us, and we were indeed sinners."* (Verse 91)

A Long Awaited Piece of Good News

They also acknowledged what they realized to be aspects of God's grace bestowed on Joseph, giving him high position, and qualities of forbearance, piety and benevolence. Joseph replied to their acknowledgement of guilt with charitable forgiveness that ended the need for them to feel ashamed of themselves. This shows that Joseph came through his trial with affluence and power as successfully as he came through the earlier trials with hardship and imprisonment.

Joseph is very charitable to his brothers. He replies to their statement by waiving all reproach: *"None shall reproach you today. May God forgive you. He is indeed the Most Merciful of those who show mercy."* (Verse 52) He thus shows that the events of the past have left no lingering bitterness in him. He prays to God to forgive his brothers and turns the conversation to matters that need attention, such as his father whose sorrow was unabated, and whose eyes had become white with grief. Joseph wants to speed up the process of giving him the good news and to meet him as soon as possible. Most urgent of all, he wanted to remove his distress and to help him regain his strength and his eyesight. Hence he tells his brothers: *"Now go and take this shirt of mine and lay it over my father's face, and he will recover his sight. Then come back to me with all your family."* (Verse 93)

How did Joseph know that his father would regain his eyesight once he received his lost son's scent? That is part of what God had taught him. Sudden surprise may produce miraculous effects. Besides, why should there not be a miracle when both Joseph and Jacob are prophets whom God had chosen to be His messengers?

From now on, the narrative takes us from one surprise to another, until it concludes with the realization of the young Joseph's dream which he related to his father at the opening of the *sūrah*.

"As the caravan set out, their father said [to the people around him]: I feel the breath of Joseph, though you will not believe me." (Verse 94) Smelling Joseph's breath! Anything is

easier to believe than this. No one could even think Joseph was alive after all those long years, and that his smell would be recognized by someone weakened by old age. Hence he qualifies his statement by saying that they will think he has gone crazy. If they had only credited him with what was his due, they would have believed that he really felt the smell of his long departed son.

How could Jacob smell Joseph's breath as soon as the caravan departed? And from which place of departure? Some commentators on the Qur'ān say that he sensed the scent from Joseph's shirt right from the point of the caravan's departure from Egypt. But there is no evidence to support this. It is reasonable to say that the Qur'ānic statement refers to the caravan's crossing a certain point in the land of Kanaan, heading towards Jacob's quarters. We do not say this to deny that a miracle could happen to a prophet like Jacob involving a prophet like Joseph. All that we propose is to limit ourselves to the exact meaning of the text, unless it is further explained by an authentic *ḥadīth*. We do not have such a report in this case, and the Qur'ānic statement itself does not support what the commentators say.

Those who were with Jacob did not have the same position with their Lord, and they could not smell Joseph's shirt. Hence they say to him: *"By God! You are still lost in your old illusions."* (Verse 95) They describe all Jacob's feelings about Joseph's return as mere illusions. To them Joseph had gone the way of no return.

But the great surprise is realized, followed by another surprise: *"But when the bearer of good news arrived [with Joseph's shirt], he laid it over his face; and he regained his sight."* (Verse 96) The first surprise relates to the shirt, which is evidence of Joseph's existence and that Jacob would soon meet him. The other surprise is that of Jacob recovering his eyesight after he lost it as a result of his enduring grief. At this point Jacob refers to the fact that he has true knowledge imparted to him by God. He mentioned this to them earlier, but they could not understand him. *"He said: 'Did I not say to you that I know from God something that you do not know?'"* (Verse 96)

Jacob's sons said: *"Father, pray to God to forgive us our sins, for we were sinners indeed."* (Verse 97) We notice here that Jacob still held something in his heart against his sons. He had not yet fully forgiven them. Yet he promises to pray to God to forgive them after he had a chance to recover. His reply suggests that. *"He said: 'I shall pray to God to forgive you. He is certainly Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.'"* (Verse 98) That he promises to pray for their forgiveness at a future point in time comes from a heart that has been hurt.

A Happy Family Reunion

The *sūrah* gives us yet another surprise. Leaving out all details about this last trip, it moves directly to a highly charged final scene. We pick up our commentary with

the family approaching its appointed meeting with Joseph its long departed son. *"When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.' And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true. He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers. My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes. He is All-Knowing, truly Wise."* (Verses 99-100)

It is certainly a most powerful scene. Long years have passed with all that they carried of despair and lost hope, pain and distress, longing and grief, and also an urgent, silent plea for reunion. Long hard years of a test that is not easy to pass. After all that we have this powerful scene, with its intensity of feeling, pleasure, happiness and emotion. It is a final scene that is closely connected to the opening one in the story. The opening scene is long gone, but the final one is now taking place. Between the two, Joseph remembers God, never allowing himself to forget Him: *"When they all presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to himself saying: 'Enter Egypt in peace, if it so pleases God.'"* (Verse 99)

He also remembers his earlier dream, realizing that it is now fulfilled as he raises his parents to sit on the couch where he normally sits while his brothers prostrate themselves before him. In his dream he had seen eleven stars as well as the sun and the moon prostrating themselves before him. Hence he sees its fulfilment in the scene that now took place before him: *"And he raised his parents to the highest place of honour, and they fell down on their knees, prostrating themselves before him. He said: 'Father, this is the real meaning of my dream of long ago. My Lord has made it come true."* (Verse 100)

He then speaks of the grace God has bestowed on him: *"He has been gracious to me, releasing me from prison, and bringing you all from the desert after Satan had sown discord between me and my brothers."* (Verse 100) He moves on to emphasize that God accomplishes His will as He pleases: *"My Lord is gracious in whatever way He wishes."* (Verse 100) He achieves His purpose with grace, while people are totally unaware of how His designs are accomplished. Joseph follows this by making the same statement his father did when he told him about his dream at the beginning of the *sūrah*: *"He is All-Knowing, truly Wise."* (Verse 100) This brings harmony between the beginning and the end, even in the way thoughts are expressed.

Before the curtains are drawn over this last emotional scene, we find Joseph pulling himself away from the overwhelming pleasure of family reunion, and also from the pleasant security of high position and real authority to glorify his Lord and express his gratitude to Him. All that he prays for at this moment is that he should die as a person who surrenders himself to God and to be grouped with the righteous: *"My Lord, You have given me power and imparted to me some understanding of the real*

meaning of statements. Originator of the heavens and the earth! You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come. Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.” (Verse 101)

“My Lord, You have given me power.” (Verse 101) You have given me all that comes with a position of power: real authority, high standing, great respect and wealth. All these are blessings given in this world. And You have “*imparted to me some understanding of the real meaning of statements.*” (Verse 101) This gives me a real understanding of where events lead and how statements and dreams are interpreted. This is a blessing of knowledge. I remember the grace You have bestowed on me and the blessings You have granted me. “*Originator of the heavens and the earth!*” (Verse 101) You have created them all by Your design and will. You remain in full control of them all, and of all creatures that take their abode in them. “*You are my guardian in this world and in the life to come.*” (Verse 101) It is You alone who gives real support.

My Lord, all that is Your blessing, and everything testifies to Your power. My Lord, I am not appealing to You to give me power, health or wealth. My appeal is for something that is much more valuable, and much longer lasting: “*Let me die as one who has surrendered himself to You, and admit me among the righteous.*” (Verse 101)

This ending removes all notions of power and position, and the happiness of meeting long missed family members. The final scene thus appears to be one in which a true servant of God appeals to Him in all humility, requesting Him to enable him to maintain his faith until He gathers him to Himself, and admits him among His righteous servants. This represents the total and perfect success in all tests and trials.

6

One Message to Mankind

That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they [i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes. (102)

Yet however strongly you may desire it, most people will not believe. (103)

You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God's reminder to all mankind. (104)

Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them. (105)

And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him. (106)

Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God's punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware. (107)

ذَٰلِكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهِ إِلَيْكَ وَمَا
كُنْتَ لَدَيْهِمْ إِذْ أَجْمَعُوا أَمْرَهُمْ وَهُمْ
مَمْكُورُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

وَمَا أَكْثَرُ النَّاسِ وَلَوْ حَرَصْتَ بِمُؤْمِنِينَ
﴿١٠٣﴾

وَمَا تَسْأَلُهُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ ۗ إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا
ذِكْرٌ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٠٤﴾

وَكَأَيِّن مِّنْ آيَةٍ فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ
يَمُرُّونَ عَلَيْهَا وَهُمْ عَنْهَا مُعْرِضُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

وَمَا يُؤْمِنُ أَكْثَرُهُمْ بِاللَّهِ إِلَّا وَهُمْ
مُشْرِكُونَ ﴿١٠٦﴾

أَفَأَمِنُوا أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ غَشِيَةٌ مِّنْ عَذَابِ اللَّهِ
أَوْ تَأْتِيَهُمُ السَّاعَةُ بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا
يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿١٠٧﴾

Say: 'This is my way. I call [all mankind] to God on the basis of sure knowledge, I and all those who follow me. Limitless is God in His glory. I am not one of those who associate partners with Him.' (108)

Even before your time, We only sent [as messengers] men to whom We gave Our revelations, choosing them from among their people. Have they not travelled the land and seen what was the end of those [unbelievers] who lived before them? Better indeed is the life to come for those who remain God-fearing. Will you not, then, use your reason? (109)

When at length [Our] messengers lost all hope and thought that they were denied, Our help came to them, saving those whom We willed [to be saved]. Never can Our [mighty] punishment be averted from people who are guilty. (110)

Indeed their stories give a lesson to those who are endowed with understanding. This [revelation] could not possibly be an invented discourse. It is a confirmation of earlier revelations, an explanation of all things, as well as guidance and mercy for people who believe. (111)

قُلْ هَذِهِ سَبِيلِي أَدْعُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ عَلَى
بَصِيرَةٍ أَنَا وَمَنِ اتَّبَعَنِي وَسُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ وَمَا
أَنَا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٠٨﴾

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوحِي
إِلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَى أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي
الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ
الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَدَارُ الْآخِرَةِ خَيْرٌ
لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٠٩﴾

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا اسْتَيْسَسَ الرُّسُلُ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُمْ قَدْ
كُذِّبُوا جَاءَهُمْ نَصْرُنَا فَنُجِّى مَنْ نَشَاءُ
وَلَا يُرَدُّ بَأْسُنَا عَنِ الْقَوْمِ الْمُجْرِمِينَ ﴿١١٠﴾

لَقَدْ كَانَ فِي قَصَصِهِمْ عِبْرَةٌ لِأُولِي
الْأَلْبَابِ ۗ مَا كَانَ حَدِيثًا يُفْتَرَىٰ
وَلَكِنْ تَصْدِيقَ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ
وَتَفْصِيلَ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً
لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١١١﴾

Overview

Having narrated Joseph's story in detail, the *sūrah* now begins commenting on it, pointing out some fundamental issues. To clarify these, it touches on certain aspects that are clearly apparent in the expanse of the universe around us, and others that are deep in the human soul, or relevant to former nations and communities, or which

belong to the realm that lies beyond the reach of human perception. We will discuss these as they occur in this final passage, pointing out at the outset that they are ordered with a specific objective in mind.

Turning Away from True Faith

Joseph's story was not one that the Arabian people among whom Muḥammad lived all his life used to relate. It includes certain secrets of which neither he nor his people were aware. In fact those secrets were known only to the people who lived through its events and took part in them. These had long gone. At the opening of the *sūrah*, God tells the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him): *"In revealing this Qur'ān We relate to you the best of narratives. Before it you were among those who are unaware [of revelation]."* (Verse 3) Now after the story has been told in full, the comment provided here is closely linked to its opening: *"That is an account which We have now revealed to you, speaking of things that have been beyond your perception. You were not present when they [i.e. Joseph's brothers] resolved upon their plans and completed their schemes."* (Verse 102)

That story, with all its intricate details, belongs to what is beyond your knowledge and perception. It is We who reveal it to you. The fact that it is a revelation from God is clearly seen in the fact that you could not have come to know of it by any other means. In so far as you are concerned, it has been something beyond the reach of your perception. You were not present with Joseph's brothers when they indulged in their consultations to which reference was made in different parts of the *sūrah*. Nor were you with them when they indulged in their scheming against Joseph, and against their father. Nor were you present with them after Joseph had detained his younger brother, when they were involved in earnest discussion, which involved some planning and scheming. This is also a reference to the scheming of the aristocrat women against Joseph, and of the people of the court who imprisoned him. All this scheming was not witnessed by the Prophet. It is a part of the revelation bestowed on him from on high and confirmed yet again in the revelation of this *sūrah*, which also confirms other issues of faith illustrated throughout the narrative.

The truth of revelation, the stories that it contains, the various aspects that move listeners' hearts should be sufficient to make people believe in the truth of the Qur'ān. They have seen the Prophet, known his character and personality, and listened to what he had to say. Yet most of them did not believe. They pass by the various signs that are everywhere in the expanse of the universe, without paying much attention to them or understanding their message. They are just like one who turns his face away so that he does not see what is in front of him. What are they waiting for, when it is a fact that God's punishment may overtake them when they

are unaware? *"Yet however strongly you may desire it, most people will not believe. You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God's reminder to all mankind. Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them. And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him. Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God's punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware."* (Verses 103-107)

The Prophet was very keen that his people should believe, because he knew that his message contained everything that was good and he loved dearly that they should have that good in full. Moreover, he wanted to spare them the hardship that is bound to engulf unbelievers in this world and the punishment of the hereafter. However, God, who knows human nature and how people think and react, tells him that his desire will not lead the majority of unbelievers to faith. That is because they turn away from the numerous signs that are in the universe around them, staring them in the face. Their attitude takes them away from faith, making them unable to benefit from all these signs.

The Prophet is in no need of their positive response to faith. He does not seek any wages for providing them with guidance. In fact their attitude, turning away from these signs is very singular, considering that they are freely given to them. They are not asked to give anything in return: *"You ask no recompense from them for it. It is but God's reminder to all mankind."* (Verse 104) You are reminding them of God's signs and messages, directing their eyes and minds to them. In fact these signs and messages are available to all mankind. They are not given specially to a particular community, race or tribe. No price is sought in return, so that rich people have an advantage over the poor. No condition is attached to them, so that those who are able to meet it would be favoured. They are a reminder for all mankind. Everyone can benefit from them without difficulty. *"Yet many are the signs in the heavens and the earth which they pass by, paying no heed to them."* (Verse 105)

The signs that point to God's existence, oneness and power are numerous, placed everywhere in the universe. They are held out in the heavens and the earth for all to see. They pass by them morning and evening, day and night. They almost speak to people, inviting them to reflect and contemplate. They are directly in front of all people, addressing their hearts and minds. Yet they prefer not to see them or listen to their messages. They turn a deaf ear and a sealed heart to their profound message.

It is sufficient to contemplate a sunrise or sunset for a moment, or to reflect on the shade and how it gently increases or decreases, or to look at the mighty sea, or gushing fountain. Reflect, if you will, on a growing plant, an emerging bud, a glowing flower and mature harvest. Or look at a bird flying as though it is swimming in the air, a fish swimming in water, worms that travel in the soil, ants going ceaselessly about their work. Contemplate the countless number of species and

communities of animals and insects. Only a moment of reflection in the depth of night or the great hassle of day, with the human mind receptive to the message given by life and existence is sufficient to make us shudder with awe and respond positively, recognizing the truth of God's oneness. Alas, most people pass by these signs, paying no heed to them and taking no notice of the message they all impart. Hence, the majority of people do not believe.

The Subtle Corruption of Faith

Yet even the believers among them allow an element of disbelief, in one form or another, to creep into their hearts. True faith requires being constantly alert so that any fleeting thought that Satan tries to sneak into our beliefs, and every worldly value in any action or attitude we take are removed straightaway. To do so is to ensure that we address all our actions to God alone. Pure faith needs a firm decision in the question of who has the supreme influence on people's hearts and actions. This ensures that all submission is to God alone. No one else has any position that requires even partial submission.

"And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him." (Verse 106) They associate some earthly value in the way they consider events, matters and people, or give to something other than God's will or power a role in what brings them harm or benefit. Or they may acknowledge an element of submission to a ruler or master who does not confine himself to God's law alone; or they look up to someone other than God for the fulfilment of their hopes; or address their sacrifice in a way that seeks to win people's admiration; or strive to ensure some benefit or dispel harm but their striving is not done purely for God's sake; or they may allow something to creep into their worship which makes it not purely dedicated to God alone. Hence, the Prophet says: "*Shirk*, i.e. associating partners with God, may be more subtle than the creeping of an ant." [Related by Abū Ya'lā on the authority of Ma'qil ibn Yasār.]

The Prophet's statements give several examples of such subtle idolatry. `Abdullāh ibn `Umar quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whoever swears by something other than God commits idolatry." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.] `Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reports that the Prophet says: "Charms and talismans are marks of idolatry." [Related by Ahmad and Abū Dāwūd.] He also says: "Whoever wears a charm associates partners with God." [Related by Ahmad.] The Prophet also relates a statement attributing it to God in a sacred *ḥadīth*: "I am the least in need of partners. If anyone does something, associating in it someone else with Me, I will abandon him to that partner."

In another *ḥadīth* the Prophet is quoted as saying: "When all generations, past, present and future, are gathered before God on the Day which will undoubtedly

come, an announcement will be made in the following words: 'Whoever associated a partner with God in any action he did for God's sake should seek its reward from someone other than God. For God is the least in need of partners.'"

Imām Ahmad relates that the Prophet warned: "What I fear most for you is little *shirk*." When his Companions asked him to explain what he meant by little *shirk*, he said: "Hypocrisy. When people come with their deeds on the Day of Judgement, God says to them: 'Go to those whom you used to flatter in your first life and seek your reward from them.'"

Such, then, are the subtle forms of associating partners with God. Hence constant alertness is required in order to remove any trace of it so that our faith is true and pure.

On the other hand, there is the clear and apparent form of associating partners with God, which means submission to a being other than God in any matter of this life. This may be in the form of submission to a law other than God's. This is universally accepted. There is also submission to tradition, which may take the form of festivals and other occasions that people may accept without reference to God's orders. People may submit to norms that violate God's orders, as in the case of dress and clothing which reveals what God has ordered to remain covered. What we are talking about here goes beyond submission to a tradition or social custom which people do in flagrant disregard of God's clear orders. That takes their behaviour from the realm of offences committed to make it a belief and a form of submission. This makes it far more serious indeed. Hence God says: "*And most of them do not even believe in God without also associating partners with Him.*" (Verse 106) This applies then to those Arabs whom the Prophet addressed directly and to other generations and communities throughout human life.

Enlightened Advocacy of Divine Faith

Now the question arises: what are those people waiting for when they continue to turn away and pay no heed to all the signs that are present in the universe pointing to God and His oneness? What are they waiting for after they have turned away from God's revelations, for which they have been asked no recompense? "*Do they feel confident that the overwhelming scourge of God's punishment will not fall upon them, or that the Last Hour will not come upon them suddenly, taking them unaware.*" (Verse 107)

This is a powerful touch which is meant to wake them up and shed their negligent attitude, so that they do not suffer its aftermath. The timing of God's punishment is unknown to anyone. It may strike them suddenly, or it may be that the Last Hour is so near, and the Day of Judgement, with all its suffering may come suddenly, taking them unaware. The doors leading to the world beyond are all closed, allowing no eye