

Wrongdoers, Yet Forgiven

These people wonder that God will bring them back to life after their death, yet it is their being amazed that is indeed amazing. They even ask that their punishment be hastened instead of asking that they be given God's guidance and praying for His grace: *"They ask you to hasten evil rather than good."* (Verse 6)

Just as they do not look at the universe around them and do not contemplate its multitude of signs, they do not look at the fate of those communities before them. Those communities adopted the same attitude, precipitating God's punishment, and it came fast upon them, making of them a lesson to any future community: *"They ask you to hasten evil rather than good, although exemplary punishments have indeed come to pass before their time."* (Verse 6) They are unaware even of the fate of their own past generations which carry an effective lesson for those who wish to learn. *"Your Lord always extends forgiveness to people despite their wrongdoing."* (Verse 6) He bestows His mercy on them even if they commit injustice and wrongdoing, allowing them time to reconsider their position. He allows them a chance to repent so that He will forgive them. But those who persist with their evil and wrongdoing, and remain unwilling to enter the gate of forgiveness, will find that God's punishment is severe indeed. *"Your Lord is certainly severe in retribution."* (Verse 6)

At this instance, the *sūrah* puts God's forgiveness ahead of His punishment to contrast it with those who pray for punishment rather than God's guidance. This demonstrates the great gulf between the goodness that God wants for them and the evil they seek for themselves.

It speaks volumes of how misguided, blind and abject they are. They certainly deserve the fire.

The *sūrah* then moves on to wonder at these people who are unable to see all the signs in the universe, each of which is a miracle on its own. They ask the Prophet for a miraculous sign. But what will they do with such a sign when the universe around them is full of signs pointing to the Creator. *"Yet the unbelievers say: 'Why has no miraculous sign been bestowed on him by his Lord?' But you are only a warner. Every community have [their] guide."* (Verse 7) They demand a miracle when miracles are neither of the Prophet's own making nor part of his business. It is God who decides, in His wisdom, whether it is necessary. *'But you are only a warner,'* who invites people to consider and reflect, warning them of the consequence of stubborn refusal to see the facts. This is the same task given to every messenger sent before him. God has sent these messengers to their peoples so that they might guide them to the right path: *"Every community have [their] guide."* (Verse 7) As for miraculous signs, these are God's own affair.

God's Limitless Knowledge

Now the *sūrah* enters a totally different realm, that of human souls and feelings and other creatures.

God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure. He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High. It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command. Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts. When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them. (Verses 8-11)

We are overwhelmed with the effect of these fine touches in the scene drawn before our eyes and the music that is characteristic of the mode of expression. We are infinitely surprised as we imagine how penetrating God's knowledge is, and to what depth it goes. How He is fully aware of every pregnancy in every womb, the secrets in people's hearts, the stealthy who move under the cover of darkness, those who walk in open daylight, and whatever any creature says in public or private. All of these are known to Him as if each one is followed by a ray of His knowledge, and by protectors who count their thoughts and intentions. The whole scene fills us with awe. So much so that we seek refuge with God, appealing for His protection. A believer knows that God's knowledge encompasses everything, but that total concept does not afford the same breadth of feeling as the details given here in such a beautiful image.

No abstract concept or unqualified true statement comes near to the Qur'ānic description of God's absolute knowledge: "*God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure.*" (Verse 8) Our imagination starts to follow every female in this whole universe: every female in rural and urban areas, amongst nomadic tribes and city dwellers, in houses, caves, shanty towns and forests. We then consider that God follows every pregnancy carried in every womb, and knows every drop of blood that moves in or out of all these wombs.

No abstraction or generalization compares to the statement that follows: "*It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day. Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command.*" (Verses 10-11) Here our

imagination follows every whisperer and open speaker, as well as everyone who moves about under the cover of darkness or who walks in open daylight anywhere in this great universe. We imagine God's knowledge following every individual from the front and from behind, recording every little detail at any time of the night or day.

The *sūrah's* opening description of the miraculous features to be found in the open universe are no greater and no more profound than the present verses which examine the deeper secrets of the human soul, or the far reaches of the world beyond the reach of human perception. Both sets of signs are of equal magnificence. Let us now reflect on some of the finer aspects of these verses: *"God knows what every female bears, and by how much the wombs may fall short [in gestation], and by how much they may increase. With Him everything has its definite measure."* (Verse 8)

When God's knowledge is described as total with regard to increase and decrease in gestation, this is followed by a statement saying that with God everything comes according to a clear and definite measure. So harmony is evident between the term, 'measure', and the notion of increase and decrease or falling short. Furthermore, the two situations of wombs falling short and increasing provide contrast, which is characteristic of the whole of this *sūrah*.

"He knows all that lies beyond the reach of human perception and all that anyone may witness. He is the Great One, the Most High." (Verse 9) The two attributes mentioned here, 'the Great One' and 'the Most High', have definite impressions that they impart, but which are so difficult to describe in words. There is nothing created that does not have some shortcoming that keeps it within finite limits. Anything of God's creation, whether action or matter, which people describe as great indeed, begins to shrink once God is mentioned. The same applies to the other attribute, 'the Most High'. Have I said anything at all? No. Nor has any other commentator on the Qur'an who has reflected on these two attributes, 'the Great One, the Most High'.

"It is all alike [to Him] whether any of you speaks in secret or aloud, whether he seeks to hide under the cover of the night or walks openly in the light of day." (Verse 10) The contrast is very clear in this verse. But the arresting point is the use of the Arabic word, *sārib*, which is translated as 'walking openly'. Its implication suggesting almost the opposite impression of its meaning. The shade it casts is akin to stealth or something hiding, while it means 'going or moving in the open'. Motion here is the intended feature as contrasted with using the dark night for cover. This shows that both the fine sound of the word and its shades are the cause of its use, so that the general atmosphere remains undisturbed.

"Each has guardian angels before him and behind him, who watch him by God's command." (Verse 11) The guardians that follow every human being, recording every

little detail, including thoughts, feelings and whims are not described or defined in any way here, except in so far as they fulfil this task 'by God's command'. Hence, further description is pointless. We cannot say who they are, or what they are like, or how they watch, or where they are placed. We do not want to take away any of the awesome effect that the verse generates. The description is meant to give a cryptic impression. Anyone who appreciates fine style would hesitate long before trying to spoil this ambiguity by trying to explain what is better left unexplained.

"Indeed God does not change a people's conditions unless they first change what is in their hearts." (Verse 11) He sends His angels to watch them all the time, monitoring any changes they may introduce within themselves or in their way of living, and determines what He does with them on that basis. He does not change any grace, luxury or position of respect, or indeed any hardship or position of humiliation or weakness, until people have changed their actions, feelings and conditions. The change then fits what they themselves have changed. But God knows what they do or change even before they do it themselves, but the consequences of their action take place after they have done it.

This lays a great responsibility on human beings. It is God's will that makes what He does with them dependent on what they themselves do. His laws operate on the basis of how they tackle these laws through their actions. The statement here is very clear, allowing no other interpretation. But it also signifies the position of honour God grants human beings as He has made them and their actions the means to implement God's will with regard to their own position, status and welfare.

Having established this principle, the *sūrah* highlights God's changing the situation of any particular community for the worse. The gist of the first statement indicates that they have changed for the worse, and as a result God has willed them to suffer misfortune: *"When God wills people to suffer some misfortune, none can avert it. Besides Him, they have none to protect them."* (Verse 11) The *sūrah* stresses this aspect rather than the opposite because it fits here with those who hasten evil rather than good. When that was mentioned forgiveness was stated first so that people's lack of awareness of the truth was highlighted. Here, only the evil alternative is mentioned so as to serve as a warning. If, by their actions, they deserve God's punishment, then it is inevitable; it will not be averted. No support will rescue them from it.

How Thunder Glorifies God

The *sūrah* now takes us on another round to a different but related stage. Here we see natural scenes and human feelings mixed in a perfect harmony of picture and effect. The whole image casts an atmosphere of awe, apprehension, expectation and appeal. We are on our guard as we watch, and the verses here produce a profound

effect on us: *"It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope, and originates the heavy clouds. And the thunder extols His limitless glory and praises Him, and so do the angels, in awe of Him. He hurls the thunderbolts to smite with them whom He wills. Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise. To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error. To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening. Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?' Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'"* (Verses 12-16)

Lightning, thunder and clouds are well-known phenomena, and so are thunderbolts which occasionally accompany them. They have their clear effect on people, whether they know much about their nature or not. The *sūrah* includes here the scenes of all these phenomena, adding to them others that speak of the angels, shadows, glorification of God, prostration to Him, fear and hope, as well as a true prayer and one that remains unanswered. It also adds another picture of a thirsty person who seeks water, stretches his hands to it, and opens his mouth to receive even a drop. These images are gathered here neither haphazardly nor by coincidence. Each one imparts its effect on the whole scene, adding an air of awe and expectation, fear and hope, a prayer full of expectation and anxiety. These feelings are all brought in to depict God's power, for He alone has power over all forces, and causes benefit and harm to all. They serve to emphasize the fact that He has no partner and to warn against associating any such partners with Him.

"It is He who displays before you the lightning, giving rise to both fear and hope." (Verse 12) This phenomenon which you see with your eyes is initiated by the nature that He has given the universe. It is He who has moulded this nature and given it its characteristics. One aspect of it is lightning which you see in accordance with the natural laws He has set in place. You are filled with fear as a result, because, by nature, it shakes people and has a strong effect on them. The real worry is that it becomes a thunderbolt. It may herald devastating floods. At the same time people hope that it brings benefit, as it may be followed by rain that quickens barren land, and it may cause dry rivers and streams to flow again.

Again it is He who *"originates the heavy clouds."* (Verse 12) These clouds are heavy with the water they bear. It is God who has devised the laws of nature and set them

in operation. In accordance with these laws, clouds form and rain falls. Had He created the universe in a different fashion, there would have been no clouds and no rain. The fact that we know how clouds form and gather, and how rain falls, does not detract from the importance or magnificence of this phenomenon. It works in a universal setting that has been put into place by none other than God, and according to certain laws that control that setting. None other than God has had a part in devising or operating these laws. The universe has not created itself, nor has it devised its own laws.

Thunder is the third aspect of the rainy atmosphere. This loud, explosive and resounding noise is a result of the laws of the universe set into operation by God. Whatever we may say about the nature or causes of thunder, it is a consequence of what God has set in the universe. It is a hymn of praise and glorification of the Power that has devised this whole system. Every fine and perfected product praises its Maker through what it reflects of His fine and perfect creation. However, the immediate and direct meaning of the term, 'glorify', may be the one intended here. This means that the thunder actually '*extols His limitless glory and praises Him.*' (Verse 13) If so, it is part of what God has chosen not to reveal to mankind. People have to accept this and believe in it as it is stated by God. After all, people only know very little about the world around them and even about themselves.

The fact that glorification and praise of God by thunder is mentioned here follows the established pattern which we frequently encounter in the Qur'ān. This imparts qualities and aspects of life to silent cosmic scenes, so that they participate in the action, and their action fits perfectly with the overall scene. The scene drawn here shows living things in a natural setting, and includes angels glorifying God, being in awe of Him, an earnest prayer to God, and also invocation of partners, as well as the person stretching out his hands to the water bidding it to reach his mouth, but it will not. Amidst this picture of prayer and worship, thunder is depicted as a living entity, using its distinctive sound to glorify God and pray to Him.

This image of fear, prayer, heavy clouds, lightning and thunder is completed with the mention of thunderbolts hurled by God to hit whomever He wills. Thunderbolts are also a natural phenomenon. These God hurls at those who have changed their situation for the worse, and when He decides not to give them any more chances, knowing that such chances will not produce any change in them.

A Call Without Response

What is most amazing is that in the midst of this terrifying atmosphere of lightning, thunder and thunderbolts, and in the midst of glorification of God by thunder and by the angels, and the uproar of furious tempests, some human noises

are raised to argue about the One who controls all these forces, giving them their natural characteristics which can easily drown all argument: *"Yet they stubbornly argue about God. His might is both stern and wise."* (Verse 13) Their ineffective voices are thus lost in this great and awesome scene whereby prayer and supplication resound like thunder and thunderbolts. Furthermore, these phenomena confirm the presence of God, about whose existence they argue. They also confirm His oneness, and that to Him alone all praises and glorification should be addressed by even the greatest creature in the universe, and the angels who stand in awe of Him. What effect then could the faint voices of such human beings have in their argument about God, the Almighty, the Wise?

As they argue about God, they attribute partners to Him and appeal to those alleged partners, when the prayer of truth belongs only to Him. Every other prayer is of no use, bringing only hardship to those who utter it: *"To Him is due the prayer aiming at the Truth. Those whom people invoke beside God cannot respond to them in any way. They are just like a man who stretches his open hands towards water, [hoping] that it will come to his mouth; but it will never reach it. The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error."* (Verse 14)

The scene here is very much alive, vivid, expressing an eager appeal. It shows that only one prayer is a true prayer, and it is answered. It is the prayer which is addressed to God, expressing trust in Him and dependence on Him, seeking His help, mercy and guidance. All other prayers are false and futile. Do you not see what happens to those who address their prayers to false deities whom they claim to be God's partners? Here is one of them, very thirsty, seeking water and stretching his hands towards it, with an open mouth which sends an earnest prayer, asking for the water to reach his mouth, but it never does in spite of his efforts. The same applies to the prayer of those who disbelieve in God's oneness, and pray to alleged partners: *"The prayer of those without faith is nothing but wandering in grievous error."* (Verse 14) But in what situation is this thirsty, earnestly appealing person deprived of even a drop of water? It is in an atmosphere charged with lightning, thunder and clouds heavy with rain. No wonder! These, like all other natural phenomena, operate according to God's orders.

At a time when such people associate partners with God, appealing to them for help, we see that everything in the universe submits to God's will, operating in accordance with the laws He has set. Whoever of them believes in God willingly submits to Him in total obedience, and whoever disbelieves submits by force. No one is able to challenge God's will, or to live outside the domain of the laws He has set in operation: *"To God prostrate themselves, willingly or unwillingly, all those who are in the heavens and on earth, as do their very shadows, morning and evening."* (Verse 15)

Because the general atmosphere here is one of prayer and supplication, the *sūrah*

expresses the notion of submission to God's will by the act of prostration, which is the clearest symbol of submission. It says that all creatures in the heavens and the earth prostrate themselves before God, but it adds that their shadows also do the same. They submit in the morning and also at the setting of the day when rays are broken and shadows are at their tallest. Thus the person and the shadow share in the prostration, submission and obedience. That is a fact, because shadows do what the persons themselves do. This fact adds its own connotations to the image painted. In effect, we see a double prostration, of both people and shadows. In fact the whole universe with all creatures and their shadows kneel down in submission before God, either willingly through faith or unwillingly. Yet those who are dumb still ascribe partners to God. How strange!

Unequal Contrasts

At this point the *sūrah* reverts to sarcastic questioning. In the general atmosphere the *sūrah* generates, showing the whole universe and all creatures in it submitting to God's will, voluntarily or by force, the only fitting response to anyone who persists in disbelief is that of ridicule and derision.

Say: 'Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?' Say: [It is] God.' *Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?'* *Say: Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light? Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'* (Verse 16)

An instruction is given to the Prophet to put this question to them: "Who is the Lord of the heavens and the earth?" (Verse 16) But the question does not invite an answer, because the *sūrah* has already answered it. It is asked here simply so that they may listen to the answer as it is being said, just as they have already seen it with their eyes. "Say: [It is] God." (Verse 16) Then the Prophet is further instructed to put another question to them: "Say: 'Why, then, do you take for your protectors, instead of Him, others who have no power to cause either benefit or harm even to themselves?'" Now the question is put to them by way of a denunciation of their actions, because they have already chosen different protectors.

Yet they are still to be questioned in spite of the fact that the whole matter is as clear as the difference between truth and falsehood, or the blind and the seeing, or light and darkness. This reference to the blind and the seeing is a reference to themselves and to believers, because it is only their blindness that prevents them

from seeing the clear truth felt by all creatures in the heavens and the earth. Similarly, the reference to light and darkness is a reference to their situation and that of believers. What prevents them from seeing the manifest truth is the darkness that totally covers them. *"Say: 'Can the blind and the seeing be deemed equal? Or is the depth of darkness equal to light?' Or do they assign to God partners that have created the like of His creation, so that both creations appear to them to be similar? Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'"* (Verse 16)

Is it possible that these partners whom they associate with God have created something similar to God's creation, and as a result they cannot distinguish between God's creation and that of the alleged partners? If this were the case, they would have some justification in acknowledging such partners who have the power to create. After all, creation is an attribute which earns the creator the right to be worshipped. Without such ability to create, there is no justification for worshipping any alleged partner of God. In fact, they deserve all this bitter ridicule. They see that all things have been created by God, and they realize that their alleged partners have created nothing, and cannot create anything, because they themselves are creatures. Nevertheless the unbelievers worship them and submit to them without justification. This is the lowest depth to which human intellect can sink.

The comment at the end of all this ridicule to which no objection is made is: *"Say: 'God is the Creator of all things. He is the One who has power over all things.'"* (Verse 16) This emphasizes the fact that God is the only Creator as He is the One who controls everything, which is the ultimate degree of authority. Thus the issue of attributing partners to God is preceded at the beginning by the prostration of all who are in the heavens and the earth, as well as their shadows, to God, willingly and unwillingly. It concludes by emphasizing that God has power over everything in the heavens and on earth. Recalling also what is mentioned of lightning, thunder, thunderbolts, glorification and praising of God in fear and in hope, we ask: what heart can stand up to all this unless it is blind, living in the depths of darkness until death overtakes it?

Again there are contrasts in the scene here between fear and hope, sudden lightning and heavy clouds, for the heaviness of the clouds not only refers to the rain they carry but also contrasts with the speed of lightning. The contrasts here are also between the fact that thunder glorifies and praises God while the angels do the same, as also between a true prayer and one that goes in vain. Similarly there is a contrast between the heavens and earth, the prostration of all living things willingly and unwillingly, persons and shadows, morning and evening, the seeing and the blind, darkness and light, the overpowering Creator and alleged partners who create nothing and who can cause themselves neither benefit nor harm. The text of the *sūrah* follows the same pattern with clear accuracy and remarkable harmony.

Truth and Falsehood: an Illustration

The *sūrah* moves on to give an example of truth and falsehood, the prayer that is fulfilled and the one that goes with the wind, of quiet goodness and boasting evil. The example provided depicts an aspect of God's power and His elaborate planning of creation: *"He sends down water from the sky, so that riverbeds flow according to their measure, and the torrent bears a swelling foam. Likewise, from what people smelt in the fire to make ornaments or utensils rises similar foam. Thus does God illustrate truth and falsehood. The scum is cast away, while that which is of benefit to mankind abides on earth. Thus does God set forth His parables."* (Verse 17)

The pouring down of water from the sky to make riverbeds flow and swell fits with the general atmosphere drawn in the previous picture of heavy clouds, lightning and thunder. It forms a part of the overall scene of the universe which is set as a background for the issues the *sūrah* tackles. It also testifies to the great power of God, the Almighty. The fact that each river flows according to a measure that fits its capacity and needs also testifies to God's elaborate planning that includes everything God creates. That is one of the main themes of the *sūrah*. However, both are only a framework for the parable God sets for people, drawn from their practical environment which they see at all times, but rarely contemplate.

When water pours from the sky causing the riverbeds to flow, it gathers along the way a swelling foam that floats on the surface as scum which at times is so thick that it forms a screen covering the water. This foam continues to rise and swell, but it is no more than scum. The water flows underneath, tranquil and peaceful, but it is the water that brings life and benefit. The same is seen with metals that are melted in order to make jewellery, as with gold and silver, or to make useful tools or utensils, as with iron or lead. The scum may float on top covering the metal itself, but it is merely scum that brings no benefit to anyone. It soon disappears to leave the pure and useful metal in place.

This is what truth and falsehood are like in this life. Falsehood may rise and swell so as to look in full control, but it is no more than foam or scum. It is soon ignored or cast away as it has no substance. The truth remains quiet and tranquil, to the extent that some people may think that it has disappeared, or died or has been lost, but it is the one which stays firm, like the water bringing life, or the pure metal that is full of benefit. *"Thus does God set forth His parables."* (Verse 17) And thus He determines the eventual outcome of beliefs, advocacy efforts, actions and verbal statements. He is the One who has power over all things, and who determines what happens in the universe and the destiny of all life. He knows what is apparent and what is hidden, truth and falsehood, what remains firm and what vanishes without trace.

Whoever responds to Him will have a fine reward, and whoever turns away will