

after Adam's story, as though it constitutes a part of it. It is declared there in heaven at the conclusion of the story. It is, then, final, determined long ago, admitting no cancellation or amendment.

"He who follows My guidance will not go astray, nor will he suffer misery." (Verse 123) When human beings follow divine guidance, they are immune from going astray and suffering misery. Both eventualities however exist, but God protects those of His servants who follow His guidance from them. Misery is attendant on following error, even though a person has all the pleasures the world can give. Indeed, such pleasures are part of his misery both in this life and in the life to come. For every forbidden pleasure is succeeded by pain and negative consequences. When human beings stray from God's guidance, they sink into worry, confusion and instability. They swing from one extreme to the other. Misery will always be the result of such worry and confusion, even though a person enjoys all the riches life can give. But the ultimate misery is that suffered in the hereafter. However, those who follow God's guidance are protected from error and misery in this earthly life. This compensates them for their lost Paradise until they return to it on the appointed day.

"But he who turns away from My message shall have a straitened life and We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection." (Verse 124) When human life severs its links with God, depriving itself of His abundant grace, it becomes straitened, even though it may be materially affluent. It is a type of stress attendant on being isolated from God and the reassurance of His mercy. It is a stress that demonstrates itself in worry, doubt and confusion; holding tight to what one owns and fearing unexpected loss; coveting all manner of comfort and pleasure; nurturing aspirations and ambitions, etc. People do not feel true reassurance except when they place their trust in God, holding tight to their bond with Him. The reassurance generated by faith in God adds much to life's dimensions in length, breadth, depth and expanse. Without such reassurance, life is nothing but a continuous misery and is far harder than what man suffers through poverty and deprivation.

"We shall raise him up blind on the Day of Resurrection." (Verse 124) This is the same type of going astray as that which man went through in the life of this world. It comes by way of recompense for his turning away from God's message in this first life. Hence, he asks: *"Lord, why have You raised me up blind, while I was endowed with sight?"* (Verse 125) The answer is not long coming: *"Thus it is.. Our revelations were brought to you, but you were oblivious to them. So today shall you be consigned to oblivion. For thus shall We reward him who transgresses and does not believe in his Lord's revelations. Indeed the suffering in the life to come shall be most severe and most enduring."* (Verses 126-127)

Anyone who turns his back on God's message certainly transgresses. He walks away from the guidance brought to him by God's Messenger when it is the richest

blessing and the most valuable resource. He transgresses as he turns his sight to objects he was not meant to look at, yet remains oblivious to God's revelations. It is not surprising that he lives a straitened life. Moreover, on the Day of Resurrection he will be raised up blind.

We note here how the wording and the images drawn provide complementary and contrasting scenes: the fall from heaven is followed by misery and going astray. It contrasts with the return to heaven where one is free from all such misery. A life of ease contrasts with a straitened life, and guidance contrasts with blindness. All this comes by way of comment on Adam's story, which is the story of all mankind. It starts and ends in heaven, as we saw earlier in *Sūrah 7, The Heights*. However the scenes here are different. In each case, they fit the general emphasis of the *sūrah* in which they are drawn.

The Lessons of History

The *sūrah* now moves us along to look at how earlier communities met their fate, which is much closer to us than the Day of Judgement. Moreover, we can see their destruction and what is left of them with our own eyes, while we cannot see resurrection.

Can they not see how many generations We have destroyed before their time? They walk about in the very places where they dwelt. In this there are signs for men of wisdom. Now, were it not for a decree from your Lord already gone forth, setting a term, their destruction would have been inescapable. (Verses 128-129)

When we look with our eyes and minds at the fate of earlier communities; when we look closely at the lands where they lived and prospered; when we imagine their dwellings and how they became empty with no one living in them; when we stretch our imagination to see them walking through their lands, going here and there, moving along, taking rest, looking to their futures, dealing with their worries, and then open our eyes to see nothing but emptiness, we realize that we are at the edge of a precipice that threatens to engulf us like it did earlier communities. We know that the great power that overwhelmed earlier generations is able to overwhelm the present ones as well. We understand then the meaning of the warning given to us, because the lesson is there for us to see. How come, then, that people do not recognize divine guidance when the fate of earlier generations provides every guiding indication to anyone who has a mind to use: *"In this there are signs for people of wisdom."* (Verse 128)

Divine wisdom has willed that God will not eliminate them by a calamity that befalls them in this present world. This is the reason why they do not meet a similar

fate. This is a situation God has decreed, giving them respite up to a term appointed for them. Otherwise they too would have been punished for their rejection of the truth: *"Now, were it not for a decree from your Lord already gone forth, setting a term, their destruction would have been inescapable."* (Verse 129)

The Way to Contentment

We mentioned that the unbelievers had been given respite. They will have their term, but they have definitely not been abandoned. The Prophet is told not to pay much attention to them or to the luxuries and comforts they have been given in this life. All this is a test for them. What God has given him of His blessings is much better and greater. He is to remain patient and steadfast:

Hence, bear with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory and praise Him before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and extol His glory, too, during the hours of the night as well as during the hours of the day, so that you may attain a state of contentment. Do not turn your eyes covetously towards whatever splendour of this world's life We have allowed many of them to enjoy in order that We may test them thereby. Whatever provisions your Lord may give are indeed better and longer lasting. Enjoin prayer on your people, and be diligent in its observance. We do not ask you for any provisions. It is We who provide for you. The future belongs to the God-fearing. (Verses 130-132)

The Prophet is instructed to bear with patience whatever the unbelievers say. He is not to answer their blasphemy, rejection or ridicule. *He* should be neither distressed by what they say, nor grieved at what may await them. He is to turn to his Lord, glorifying Him before sunrise and sunset: early with the fresh breath of dawn as life awakens, and late as everything begins to cool down when the sun is about to set and the whole universe seems to close its eyes, ready to sleep. He is to glorify God and praise Him intermittently through the day and the night, so as to keep his link with Him throughout.

Such glorification is urged on the Prophet, and all his followers, *"so that you may attain a state of contentment."* (Verse 130) When we glorify God, we have a direct link with Him, and the person who maintains such a link is contented, reassured. He is in a state of contentment as everything around him feels content; and he is reassured because he knows that, with God's help, he is safe and secure. Thus, contentedness is the fruit of worship and God's glorification. In itself, it is a reward that is generated within one's heart.

So the Prophet is instructed to turn his face to God offering his worship. He is further instructed: *"Do not turn your eyes covetously towards whatever splendour of this*

world's life We have allowed many of them to enjoy" (Verse 131) There is plenty of splendour in this life which may appear very tempting. There are luxuries, pleasures, wealth, children, high position and power. But all this is merely a 'flower', to use the exact word of the Qur'ān; and like a flower, all this splendour will fade within a very brief period. Hence, they are given all this splendour to enjoy "*in order that We may test them thereby.*" (Verse 131) Thus, their true metal will be known by the way they use what God has favoured them with of the splendour of this life. But then they must realize that at the end of the day, "*whatever provisions your Lord may give are indeed better and longer lasting.*" (Verse 131) This refers to what the believers are given in the life to come. These provisions are for enjoyment, not a test. They have no special lure to turn people away from what is better. They are the better provision and they are everlasting.

We must not understand this verse as encouraging self-denial or disdain for the comforts of this life. It is rather an encouragement to hold on to true and lasting values, to maintain one's ties with God and be contented. This is the best way to resist the temptation of the splendour and attractions of this life. When we maintain such values, we are free to rise above the lure of false temptations, splendid as they may appear.

"Enjoin prayer on your people." (Verse 132) The first duty of a Muslim is to make his home a Muslim home, enjoining his family to attend to their prayers so that they all maintain their ties with God. Thus, they are united in their approach to life. Life in a home where all members turn to God for worship is certainly a happy one.

"And be diligent in its observance." (Verse 132) Be diligent so that you offer your prayers complete and its effect becomes a reality. Prayer restrains man from loathsome deeds and indecency. This is its true effect. To attain the level where prayer provides such restraint requires diligence in its observance. Unless we reach the stage that our prayer yields this fruit, it remains a mere sequence of phrases and movements.

Prayer and worship generally are duties assigned to the Prophet and believers. God does not gain anything by them. He is in need of no one: "*We do not ask you for any provisions. It is We who provide for you.*" (Verse 132) Worship nurtures God-consciousness within the worshipper. Hence, "*the future belongs to the God-fearing.*" (Verse 132) It is man who benefits by prayer, both in this life and in the life to come. He offers his worship to God and he enjoys, as a result, a state of contentment. He is comfortable, reassured. Furthermore, he ultimately receives a much greater reward in the hereafter. As for God, He needs nothing from anyone.

As the *sūrah* draws to its close, it refers again to those people who, enjoying position and power, reject God's revelations and demand that the Prophet deliver a

miracle. They make such demands even after the Prophet has given them the Qur'ān which explains in all clarity what previous messages from God were like.

"They say: 'Why does he not bring us a sign from his Lord?' Has there not come to them a clear evidence of the truth in the earlier scriptures?" (Verse 133) They need no physical miracle. Hence, their demands betray their arrogance. The Qur'ān is more than sufficient as proof. It links the new message with God's previous messages, uniting them all and clarifying what was left in general terms in previous messages.

God has given those who deny the truth everything they need to recognize the truth and believe in it when He sent them His last Messenger: *"Had We destroyed them with a calamity before his coming, they would have said, 'Our Lord, if only You had sent us a Messenger, we would have followed Your revelations rather than be humiliated and disgraced.'"* (Verse 134)

At the time when this verse was recited, they had been neither humiliated nor disgraced. The verse describes their inevitable end which will bring them humiliation and disgrace. It may be that they will then say: *'Our Lord, if only You had sent us a Messenger.'* Now a Messenger is sent to them and they have no excuse to justify their rejection.

As the *sūrah* describes their end, the Prophet is commanded to leave them alone, without grieving for them. He should announce to them that he will await the end, and let them await it as they wish: *"Say: Everyone is hopefully waiting; so wait, if you will. You will certainly come to know who has followed the even path, and who has been rightly guided."* (Verse 135)

Thus the *sūrah* ends. It started with assuring the Prophet that the Qur'ān was not revealed to him to cause him any distress. It defined the role of the Qur'ān as *'an admonition to the God-fearing.'* (Verse 3) The end is in full harmony with the beginning. It provides a reminder and an admonition for those who may benefit thereby. As the Prophet conveyed his message complete, the only thing that remains is to await the end, which is determined by God.