

to hide behind the pretence that they were Muslims. They felt that this would enable them to scheme in secret against Islam. This false story was one of their worst schemes which was so successful that some Muslims were deceived and a few of them, like Ḥamnah bint Jahsh, Ḥassān ibn Thābit and Miṣṭah ibn Athāthah repeated the story. The real culprits, however, were the band headed by `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy, a canny schemer who operated behind the scene, saying nothing in public that might have incriminated him. He simply whispered into the ears of those whom he trusted never to testify against him. The plan was so subtle that the false rumours continued to circulate for a whole month in Madīnah, the purest society on earth at that time.

The Qur'ānic passage opens with stating this fact so as to make clear the enormity of the event and the fact that it was perpetrated by a group of people intent on wicked scheming against Islam. The *sūrah*, however, quickly reassures the Muslim community that the eventual outcome of the event will not harm them: *"Do not regard it as bad for you; indeed it is good for you."* (Verse 11)

It was indeed good because it exposed those who schemed against Islam, targeting the Prophet and his family. It also showed the Muslim community the importance of prohibiting the accusation of adultery, and prescribing a severe punishment for such false accusations.' The event also clearly showed the dangers that threatened the Muslim community if people were to casually accuse chaste female believers who might behave unwittingly. For once this begins, it never stops. Indeed, it can increase at such a scale that it eventually touches the most noble of leadership. The result is that the Muslim community loses all values that provide protection against such a state of affairs. Moreover, it is good for the Muslim community that God outlines how best to deal with such an affair.

As for the pain suffered by the Prophet, his household and the Muslim community in general, it is all part of the test they had to go through in order to learn through experience.

Those who were involved in circulating and repeating the false story will bear their fair share of sin, according to what they did or said: *"Each one of them shall bear what he has earned of sin."* (Verse 11) Each will be taken to account by God for what they perpetrated. This is indeed vile because it is a sin that incurs punishment both in this world and in the life to come. Furthermore, *"awesome suffering awaits the one who took on himself the lead among them,"* to suite his role in this ghastly business.

The one 'who took the lead' and masterminded the whole affair was `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the chief of the hypocrites who was consistently the worst schemer against Islam. He knew how to choose his moment which could have had devastating effects, had not God foiled all his schemes. In His grace, God preserved His faith, protected His Messenger and looked after the Muslim community. One

report suggests that when Ṣafwān ibn al-Mu`aṭṭal, leading `Ā'ishah's howdah, passed by him and a group of his people, `Abdullāh ibn Ubayy asked: 'Who was that?' People said: "Ā'ishah." He said: 'By God! She has not been safe from him, nor was he safe from her.' He further exclaimed: 'Your Prophet's wife has passed the night with a man until the morning, then he comes leading her!'

This was a wicked remark which he repeated in various ways, circulating it through his band of hypocrites. They employed such wicked means that Madīnah was full of this incredible story for a whole month, despite all indications and evidence that confirmed its falsehood. Yet many were the Muslims who spoke about it in a casual manner when it should have been dismissed right away.

Two Steps for Proof

How could all this have happened in that particular community? Even today, we are surprised that such a flimsy fabrication could have circulated in that Muslim community, producing far-reaching effects and causing much pain to the noblest people on earth.

The whole episode was a battle fought by God's Messenger (peace be upon him), the Muslim community and Islam. It perhaps was the greatest battle fought by the Prophet. He emerged from it victorious, having controlled his great anguish, maintained his dignity and endured it all patiently. Not a word did he utter to indicate weakness or impatience. Yet he was experiencing the worst pain he ever endured in his life. He further recognized that the risks to which Islam was exposed as a result of this falsehood were among the worst it had to face at any time.

Yet had the Muslims then searched in their own hearts, they would have found the right answer. Had they applied simple natural logic, they would have been rightly guided. The Qur'ān directs all Muslims to follow this proper approach when they face such difficulties. It is the first step in arriving at the right conclusion: "*When you heard it, why did not the believers, men and women, think the best of themselves, and say: This is a blatant falsehood.*" (Verse 12)

That would have been much better. Muslims should think well of themselves and realize that they are highly unlikely to sink so low. Their Prophet's pure wife and their brother who fought for Islam, laying down his life, belonged to them as a community. Hence, to think well of them was the better course of action. What is unbecoming of all Muslims is unbecoming of the Prophet's wife and of his Companion who was known as a good person. This is indeed what was done by Abū Ayyūb, Khālid ibn Zayd al-Anṣārī and his wife. According to Ibn Ishāq, Abū Ayyūb was asked by his wife: "Have you heard what people are saying about `Ā'ishah?" He replied: "Yes, I have, and it is all lies. Would you have done that, Umm Ayyūb?" She

said: "No, by God! I would not." He said: "And by God, `Ā'ishah is better than you." A different report is given by al-Zamakhsharī in his commentary on the Qur'ān, suggesting that it was Abū Ayyūb who asked his wife: "Have you heard what is being said?" In reply, she asked him: "Had you been in Ṣafwān's place, would you have thought ill of the Prophet's wife?" He said: "Certainly not." She said: "And if I were in `Ā'ishah's place, I would never be unfaithful to the Prophet. Yet `Ā'ishah is better than me, and Ṣafwān is better than you."

Both reports suggest that some Muslims at least searched their own hearts and ruled out the possibility that the false story suggested. They dismissed any notion that `Ā'ishah or the Prophet's Companion could have committed such a grave sin and been unfaithful to the Prophet, and recognized how utterly flimsy the basis of the whole accusation was. This is the first step in the approach the Qur'ān outlines for dealing with such matters; it seeks evidence from within people's consciences. The second step is to produce material evidence: *"Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it? Since they have not produced witnesses, then in the sight of God, they were certainly liars."* (Verse 13)

This blatant fabrication targeted the highest position in the Muslim community and the purest people. Hence, it should not have been allowed to circulate casually without supporting evidence. Hence the requirement: *"Why did they not produce four witnesses to prove it?"* (Verse 13) They certainly did not produce any witnesses. Hence, they were, in God's judgement, liars. God never alters His verdict or modifies His decision. Thus, this description of those people as liars remains always true of them, and they cannot escape it in any situation.

Thus we have two steps in the Islamic approach: searching in our own hearts and basing our decision on firm and clear evidence. But the Muslim community at the time overlooked both steps, allowing the liars to speak ill of the Prophet and his honour. This was serious indeed and it could have landed the Muslim community in serious trouble, had it not been for God's grace. Hence, God warns the Muslims never to fall into such a trap again: *"Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, in this world and in the life to come, awesome suffering would indeed have afflicted you on account of what you indulged in."* (Verse 14)

When Falsehood Circulates

God wanted this to be a very hard lesson for the fledgling Muslim community, but in His compassion He did not inflict any punishment on them. The offence itself merited stiff punishment because of the pain it caused the Prophet, his wife, close friend and his other Companion of whom he knew nothing but good. It also merited a punishment equal to the evil that circulated within the Muslim community,

violating all its sacred values, and equal to the hypocrites' wickedness whose scheme aimed to undermine Islam by raising doubts about God, the Prophet and the Muslim community itself. This continued for a whole month which was a time of doubt, worry and confusion. But God's grace was forthcoming, and He bestowed His mercy on those who were in error after having learnt their bitter lesson.

The *sūrah* gives us a picture of the period, when standards and values were placed on the wrong footing, and the community lost sight of its principles: *"You took it up with your tongues and uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge, thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed."* (Verse 15) The picture painted here is one of recklessness and irresponsibility, showing little care for even the most serious of matters.

"You took it up with your tongues." (Verse 15) One tongue picks it up from another paying little heed to what is being said. There was an utter lack of proper examination of the report, as though people repeated it without ever thinking of its significance. You *"uttered with your mouths something of which you have no knowledge."* (Verse 15) It is just like that: a mouth utterance without thought or consideration. Mere idle talk uttered and circulated even before it is understood. They thought it a light matter, although it was an accusation against God's Messenger's personal honour, causing him, his wife and household great pain. It was an accusation against Abū Bakr's family which suffered no similar trouble even in pre-Islamic days when moral values were of little importance. This false story also accused another Companion of the Prophet who laid his life down for the defence of Islam. It further had negative implications concerning the care God took of His Messenger. Yet, still they circulated the false rumour *"thinking it a light matter whereas in God's sight it is grave indeed."* (Verse 15) Nothing could be described as grave in God's sight unless it is so serious that it shakes firm mountains and disturbs the heavens and earth.

A matter of such seriousness should have made people shudder just on hearing it. They should have been reluctant even to refer to it, and certainly been unwilling to accept it as a subject of conversation. They should have looked to God to protect His Messenger. Such falsehood should have been cast aside immediately: *"If only when you heard it you said: 'It is not right for us to speak of this. All glory belongs to You! This is a monstrous slander.'"* (Verse 16)

When the matter has thus been clarified, and those early Muslims were taken aback by the enormity of the affair and their role in it, they were given a very stern warning for the future: *"God admonishes you lest you ever revert to the like of this, if you are truly believers."* (Verse 17)

The warning comes in the form of an admonition so as to be educative, choosing the time when the Muslim community is at its most receptive. But the admonition

carries at the same time an implicit warning, and attaches their being believers to the heeding of this warning. Believers cannot retain their faith if they revert to the same type of action after they have been shown its enormity and after they have been given such a warning.

“And God makes plain to you His revelations.” (Verse 18) He has certainly shown the story to be plainly false, exposing the scheming behind it. He has also made plain the errors involved in this matter. *“God is All-Knowing, Wise.”* He knows motives, intentions, objectives, thoughts and feelings. His method of bringing out the best in people and providing proper restrictions and controls to set the community’s life right testifies to His wisdom.

Further Warnings, More Grace

The *sūrah* further elaborates its comments on this falsehood and its effects, repeating its warning against anything that may be of a similar nature. It reminds the Muslims of God’s grace and mercy, warning those who falsely accuse chaste women of committing indecency that they expose themselves to God’s punishment in the life to come. It also purges people’s hearts of the remaining effects of this confrontation, frees them of earthly restrictions and restores their purity. This is clearly reflected in Abū Bakr’s attitude to Miṣṭah ibn Athāthah, his relative who was involved in repeating the story.

“Those who love that gross indecency should spread among the believers shall be visited with grievous suffering both in this world and in the life to come. God knows, but you do not know.” (Verse 19) The ones who accused chaste women of adultery, particularly those who made their accusations against the Prophet’s own family, really aimed to undermine the values of goodness, chastity and fidelity, so as to make it easier for people to commit adultery by implying that it was common practice. When people begin to think of it in this light, it will be practised more frequently.

This is the reason for describing the false accusers of chaste women as people who love to spread indecency among the believers. Hence they are warned against a very severe suffering both in this life and in the life to come.

It is an aspect of the Qur’ānic method of educating the Muslim community and a measure of prevention based on perfect knowledge of how people react and formulate their attitudes, feelings and lines of action. Hence, the comment at the end of the verse asserts: *“God knows, but you do not know.”* Who knows the human heart better than the One who created it? Who can provide humanity with a better code of living than the One who originated it? Who sees what is concealed as well as what is left in the open, and whose knowledge encompasses all things and situations?

Once again the *sūrah* reminds the believers of the grace God bestows on them: *"Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, and that God is Compassionate, Merciful. ...!"* (Verse 20)

The mistake committed was grave indeed, and its evil was about to engulf the whole Muslim community, but God's grace, mercy and care prevented this evil. Hence, God reminds them of this, time after time, as He aims this to be an edifying lesson. When they realized the extent of the matter that could have engulfed them all, had it not been for God's grace and mercy, they were told that what they did was indeed following in Satan's footsteps. They must not fall into this trap, since Satan is their avowed enemy, ever since the beginning of human life. Again they are warned against what this may entail in their life: *"Believers! Do not follow Satan's footsteps, for he who follows Satan's footsteps will only enjoin what is shameful and wrong. Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, none of you would have ever been pure. It is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity. God is All-Hearing, All-Knowing."* (Verse 21)

Nothing but a terrible fate awaits the believers if they take just one step with Satan. They should steer away from him altogether and follow a different way. The very thought of following Satan is repugnant to believers. Hence, drawing it in this way and holding it in front of them should make them always alert. *"He who follows Satan's footsteps will only enjoin what is shameful and wrong."* (Verse 21) This false story is a stark and gruesome example of how Satan leads believers to something evil.

Man is weak, susceptible to desires and whims which may leave him stained, unless he benefits by God's grace when he turns to Him and follows His guidance: *"Were it not for God's favour upon you and His grace, none of you would have ever been pure. It is God who causes whomever He wills to grow in purity."* (Verse 21) When God's light shines in a believer's heart, it purifies it. It is only through God's favours and grace that people grow in purity. Since God knows all and hears all, He certainly knows the ones who deserve to be purified and who are genuinely good. It is these that He helps to grow in purity.

Attaining the Sublime

Within the context of purity, the *sūrah* calls on believers to forgive one another as they love to be forgiven their sins: *"Let not those of you who have been graced with God's favour and ample means resolve by oath not to help those who are near of kin, the needy and those who have left their homes for the sake of God. But let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins? God is indeed Much-Forgiving, Merciful."* (Verse 22)

This verse was revealed in connection with Abū Bakr after the Qur'ān had cleared his daughter, `Ā'ishah the pure, of any misconduct. He realized that Miṣṭah ibn

Athāthah, his relative whom he supported because of his poverty, was among those involved in circulating the false rumour. Therefore, he vowed that he would never do Miṣṭah a good turn in the future. This verse, however, reminds Abū Bakr and the believers that they also commit mistakes and hope for God's forgiveness. Hence, they should forgive one another their mistakes. They must not deprive those who need the support of their generosity, even though the latter might have committed a grave error.

Now we see how one of the souls touched by God's light grows in purity attaining a truly sublime standard. Abū Bakr, who was so deeply hurt by the false rumours targeting his daughter and attempting to disgrace his family, responded to the Qur'ānic call on the believers to forgive those who hurt them. He reflected on the inspiring question, "Do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins?" (Verse 22) And he rose above the pain and injury, and also above the logic that prevailed in his environment. He felt there could only be one answer to that question, and with certainty and contentment he said: "Yes, indeed. I love that God should forgive me." He reinstated the allowance he had been giving Miṣṭah, and vowed anew that he would never stop it in future. His vow replaced his earlier one that he would not give him anything. With such a sublime standard of generosity, Abū Bakr's heart was cleansed of any hard feeling and retained its purity.

The forgiveness of which God reminds the believers is granted only to those who repent of their errors, accusing chaste women of adultery and spreading corruption in the Muslim community. On the other hand, those who, like Ibn Ubayy, deliberately, and out of malice, make such accusations, will have no pardon or forgiveness. Even though they may escape punishment in this world, because no witnesses will testify against them, they will inevitably endure the punishment in the hereafter when no witnesses will be required.

Those who accuse chaste women who may have been unthinkingly careless but remained true believers, shall be rejected by God in this world as well as in the life to come. They shall endure awesome suffering; on the day when their own tongues, hands and feet will testify to what they did. On that day God will pay them in full their just due, and they will come to know that God alone is the Ultimate Truth, absolutely manifest. (Verses 23-25)

The *sūrah* paints their crime in stark colours so as to expose its odious nature. It is an accusation against chaste women believers who go about their lives, totally oblivious to any possibility of accusation. They behave naturally, not thinking that they will be accused of something, simply because they have done nothing wrong. To accuse them of immorality is thus seen to be very serious, betraying the contemptible and mean nature of their accusers. Hence, they are cursed now by God,

and expelled from among those who receive His grace in this present life and in the life to come. The *sūrah* then shows us a fascinating scene: *“On the day when their own tongues, hands and feet will testify to what they did.”* (Verse 24) Thus we see them accusing one another, just as they used to accuse chaste believing women. The contrast is very clear, as is always the case in the Qur’ān.

“On that day God will pay them in full their just due.” (Verse 25) Their deeds will be accurately reckoned and they will be given all that they really deserve. At that time they will be certain of what they used to be in doubt about. *“They will come to know that God alone is the Ultimate Truth, absolutely manifest.”* (Verse 25)

The *sūrah* concludes its comments on this whole story of falsehood by highlighting God’s justice in the way He has given man his nature so as to manifest itself in practice. This is why the corrupt will unite with their like and the good will associate with others of their type. This is how relations are consolidated between husband and wife. Hence, it is absolutely impossible that ʿĀ’ishah could be like what her accusers said of her, because she was destined to be the wife of the best person that ever lived.

“Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men for corrupt women, just as good women are for good men, and good men for good women. These are innocent of all that people may impute to them. Forgiveness and excellent sustenance are in store for them.” (Verse 26) The Prophet dearly loved ʿĀ’ishah. It was inconceivable that God should let His Prophet love her so much unless she was innocent of all guilt, pure and deserving of such a great love.

Good men and women are, by their very nature, *“innocent of all that people may impute to them.”* (Verse 26) False accusations cannot stick to them. *“Forgiveness and excellent sustenance are in store for them.”* (Verse 26) They will be forgiven any mistake they may commit, and they have their reward with God, clearly indicating their high position with Him.

Thus the *sūrah* concludes its comments on this serious trial for the Muslim community because it aimed at undermining their trust that the Prophet’s household was absolutely pure and that God would not allow anyone but the most pure to be a member of that household. God wanted this episode to be an edifying lesson for the Muslim community, elevating it to an even more sublime standard.

2

Measures to Preserve Decency

Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates. This is best for you, so that you may take heed. (27)

If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave; and if you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you. God has full knowledge of all that you do. (28)

You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal. (29)

Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do. (30)

And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof.

يَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتًا غَيْرَ
بُيُوتِكُمْ حَتَّىٰ تَسْتَأْذِنُوا وَتُسَلِّمُوا
عَلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

فَإِن لَّمْ تَجِدُوا فِيهَا أَحَدًا فَلَا تَدْخُلُوهَا
حَتَّىٰ يُؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ ۖ وَإِن قِيلَ لَكُمْ
أَرْجِعُوا فَارْجِعُوا ۚ هُوَ أَزْكَىٰ لَكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ
بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٨﴾

لَيْسَ عَلَيْكُمْ جُنَاحٌ أَن تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتًا غَيْرَ
مَسْكُونَةٍ فِيهَا مَتَعٌ لَّكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا
تُبْدُونَ وَمَا تَكْتُمُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

قُلِ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا مِنْ أَبْصَرِهِمْ
وَيَحْفَظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ ۗ إِنَّ
اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾

وَقُلِ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُضْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَرِهِنَّ
وَيَحْفَظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ
إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا

Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms and not display their charms to any but their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are free of physical desire, or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms. Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success. (31)

Marry the single from among you as well as such of your male and female slaves as are virtuous. If they are poor, God will grant them sufficiency out of His bounty. God is Munificent, All-Knowing. (32)

As for those who are unable to marry, let them live in continence until God grants them sufficiency out of His bounty. And if any of your slaves desire to obtain a deed of freedom, write it out for them if you are aware of any good in them; and give them something of the wealth God has given you. Do not force your maids to prostitution when they desire to preserve their chastity, in order to make some worldly gain. If anyone should force them, then after they have been compelled, God will be much forgiving, merciful [to them]. (33)

وَلْيَضْرِبْنَ خُمُرَهُنَّ عَلَىٰ جُيُوبِهِنَّ وَلَا يُبْدِينَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا لِبُعُولَتِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ آبَائِهِنَّ أَوْ أَبْنَاءِهِنَّ أَوْ أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ بَنِي أَخَوَاتِهِنَّ أَوْ نِسَائِهِنَّ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُنَّ أَوِ التَّابِعِينَ غَيْرِ أُولِي الْإِرْبَةِ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ أَوِ الطِّفْلِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يَظْهَرُوا عَلَىٰ عَوْرَاتِ النِّسَاءِ وَلَا يَضْرِبْنَ بَأَرْجُلِهِنَّ لِيُعْلَمَ مَا تَخْفِينَ مِنْ زِينَتِهِنَّ وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

وَأَنْكِحُوا الْأَيْمَىٰ مِنْكُمْ وَالصَّالِحِينَ مِنْ عِبَادِكُمْ وَإِمَائِكُمْ ۚ إِنْ يَكُونُوا فُقَرَاءَ يُغْنِهِمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٣٢﴾

وَلْيَسْتَغْفِرِ الَّذِينَ لَا سِحْدُونَ نِكَاحًا حَتَّىٰ يُغْنِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ ۗ وَالَّذِينَ يَبْتِغُونَ الْكِتَابَ مِمَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ فَكَاتِبُوهُمْ ۚ إِنْ عَلِمْتُمْ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا ۚ وَءَاتُوهُمْ مِنْ مَالِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي ءَاتَاكُمْ ۚ وَلَا تُكْرَهُوا فَتِيَّتِكُمْ عَلَىٰ الْبِغَاءِ ۚ إِنْ أَرَدْنَ تَحَصُّنًا لَبْتَبَغُوا ۚ عَرَضَ الْحَيَوةِ الدُّنْيَا ۚ وَمَنْ يُكْرِهَنَّ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ مِنْ بَعْدِ إِكْرَاهِهِنَّ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٣٣﴾