

## Part 16 Surah 19 Maryam Verses 1-15

*Kaf. Ha. Ya. `Ayn. Sad. (1) This is an account of the grace which your Lord bestowed on His servant Zachariah: (2) when he called out to his Lord in the secrecy of his heart, (3) he prayed: 'My Lord! Feeble have become my bones, and my head glistens with grey hair. But never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered. (4) Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone, for my wife is barren. Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your grace, a successor (5) who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob; and make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased.' (6) 'Zachariah! We bring you the happy news of [the birth of] a son whose name shall be John. Never have We given this name to anyone before him.' (7) [Zachariah] said: 'My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am well advanced in years?' (8) He said: 'Thus it is. Your Lord says, "This is easy for Me; even as I had earlier created you when you were nothing."' (9) [Zachariah] said: 'My Lord! Give me a sign.' He replied: 'Your sign will be that for full three nights [and days] you will not speak to people.' (10) He then came out to his people from the sanctuary and signified to them [by gesture] to extol God's limitless glory by day and by night. (11) [To his son We said]: 'John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength.' We granted him wisdom while he was still a youth, (12) as well as, by Our grace, compassion and purity; and he was [always] righteous, (13) and kind to his parents. Never was he haughty or rebellious. (14) So peace was upon him on the day he was born, and on the day of his death, and will be on the day when he shall be raised to life again. (15)*

### 1 – 6 A Passionate Prayer Answered

*"Kaf. Ha. Ya. `Ayn. Sad." (1) These are separate letters of the Arabic alphabet. A number of surahs begin with such separate letters which we explain as being some of the letters used in the composition of the Qur'ān. Yet the Qur'ān has its unique, inimitable style, the like of which human beings can never produce, despite the fact that the same letters and words are available to them. They simply cannot devise any construction that even remotely approaches the style employed by the divine power that produced this Qur'ān.*

Having mentioned these letters, the surah immediately begins the first story of Zachariah and John, in which compassion provides both the central idea and the overall atmosphere. Hence grace is mentioned at the outset: *"This is an account of the grace which your Lord bestowed on His servant Zachariah."* (2) The story begins with a scene of earnest supplication by Zachariah in total secrecy:

*when he called out to his Lord in the secrecy of his heart, (3) he prayed: 'My Lord! Feeble have become my bones, and my head glistens with grey hair. But never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered. (4) Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone, for my wife is barren. Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your grace, a successor (5) who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob; and make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased.' (6)*

concern. As for his hope, he requested that God grant him a successor who would properly manage and look after the heritage of Jacob's household, i.e. his ancestors: *"Bestow, then, upon me, out of Your grace, a successor (5) who will be my heir as well as an heir of the House of Jacob..."* (6)" Zachariah, a God-fearing prophet, does not forget to specify what he hopes this successor would be like: *"And make him, my Lord, one with whom You are pleased."* (6) He should not be arrogant, tyrannical, or greedy. He should be one who is content with what God gives him. Such contentedness should furthermore spread a sense of ease and happiness all round.

### 7 – 11 A Child Is Born Against All Probability

The moment of truth comes: the prayer is answered, bringing with it God's grace and acceptance. It is the Lord Himself that calls out to His servant from His sublime presence: *"Zachariah!"* He immediately gives him the good news: *"We bring you the happy news of [the birth of] a son..."* (7)" He bestows on him further kindness, by choosing for him the name of that son: *"Whose name shall be John..."* (7)" This is a special name, not previously given to anyone: *"Never have We given this name to anyone before him."* (7)"

This is but an example of God's grace as it is given in abundance to His servant whose secret supplication was passionate, and which clearly expressed his fears and hopes. Zachariah's prayer was motivated by fear that his heirs would not be able to look after the heritage of the true faith properly. He feared that they would not fulfil the trust in a way that earns God's pleasure. Hence, God bestowed on him what corresponded to his good intention. Zachariah, who was deeply involved in his supplication, passionately expressing his desire and urging his case, was suddenly alerted by this speedy answer to his prayer. The reality stares him in the face: he is well advanced in years, his bones feeble, his hair completely grey, and his wife barren, having given him no child when he was in his prime. How is he to have a child of his own? He wants to be reassured and to know the means by which God will give him this son: *"My Lord! How can I have a son when my wife is barren, and I am well advanced in years?"* (8)

He is facing the reality, as well as God's promise. He certainly trusts that God's promise will be fulfilled. He only wants reassurance and to know how, considering his circumstances, the fulfilment will take place. That would give him much needed reassurance. It is a perfectly normal condition in a situation like that faced by the noble and God-fearing prophet, Zachariah. Needless to say, he was only a human being who cannot ignore the reality. Hence, he would love to know how God will reverse it.

The answer to all his enquiries is straightforward. It is all perfectly easy for God to accomplish. God reminds him of something that he knows well, namely his own

He is alone, addressing his appeal to God, away from watching eyes and listening ears. He wants to lay his troubled heart open before his Lord, recounting his worries. He addresses Him as if he were speaking to someone who is very close, without even using the Arabic address article, *Yd*. Needless to say, his Lord hears and sees, without the need to be addressed or called upon. But a person troubled by worries finds comfort in vocalizing his concern. Most Gracious as He is, God knows this to be part of human nature. Hence, He likes that His servants pray to Him, making a clean breast of all that worries them: *"Your Lord says: Pray to Me and I will answer you."* (40: 60) When they do, they find relief from their heavy burden. They are reassured because they have assigned such burdens to the One who is more able and powerful. They feel that they are in contact with the Most Merciful who will not disappoint anyone who appeals to Him and relies on Him.

Zachariah complains to his Lord that his bones have become feeble, and when bones are feeble, the whole body is weak. After all, the bones are the stiffest part of the body. They form the skeleton which the muscles flesh up. He also complains that his head glistens with grey hair. The Qur'ānic expression here, *ishta'ala al-ra'su shaybā*, shows the greyness of hair like a fire being ignited, and the man's head covered with this fire, so as to leave no black hair. Both feeble bones and grey hair signify old age and the weakness associated with it. It is this weakness that is the subject matter of Zachariah's complaint as he presents his case, and his hopes, to his Lord.

He then makes a clear acknowledgement: *"Never, my Lord, has my prayer to You remained unanswered."* (4) He is used to having his prayers answered. He was not disappointed when he prayed to Him in his time of strength and vigour. Now in his old age and weakness, the need for his prayers to be answered is even more pressing.

Having presented his case, expressed his fears and hopes, he makes his request. The point is that he fears that those who will succeed him might not be up to looking after his heritage properly. Being one of the major prophets of the Children of Israel, Zachariah's heritage involved serving God's cause as well as looking after the people of his household. One of those was Mary whose upbringing was entrusted to him. She served in the sanctuary which he managed. Again his property, which he managed properly and spent on only good purposes, was among his concerns. His worry was that those who succeeded him might not follow the course he had charted, perhaps because he knew them not to be up to that task. *"Now, I fear [what] my kinsmen [will do] after I am gone..."* (5)"

What added to his worries was the fact that he was childless: *"For my wife is barren..."* (5)" She had given him no child to bring up and prepare as a successor. This was his

bringing into existence. This is something to be considered by every living creature. It applies to everything in this universe: *"He said: Thus it is. Your Lord says, 'This is easy for Me; even as I had earlier created you when you were nothing.'"* (9)

With regard to creation, there is nothing to be classified as easy or difficult in as far as God is concerned. In all cases of creation, whether it is something large or small, trivial or gigantic, the method is the same: it is only a matter of God willing that thing to be and it comes into existence. It is God who makes a barren woman childless, and an old man unable to procreate. He is certainly able to reverse this situation, removing the cause of a woman's barrenness and renewing a man's ability to cause his wife to conceive. By human standards, this is easier than initiating life in the first place. But with God, everything is easy, whether it involves origination or rebirth.

Nevertheless, Zachariah's eagerness to be reassured motivates him to ask for a sign indicating the realization of the happy news he was given. The sign God gave him was most fitting to the general atmosphere of his prayer and how it was answered. This sign gives him a further way to thank, glorify and praise God for giving him a son in his old age. He was to isolate himself from all worldly concerns for three days and live in direct contact with God. His speech would be normal when he glorified God, but he would not be able to utter a word of normal human speech. Yet he would remain in sound health, no illness affecting him. *"He replied: Your sign will be that for full three nights [and days] you will not speak to people."* (10)

This was exactly what took place: *"He then came out to his people from the sanctuary and signified to them [by gesture] to extol God's limitless glory by day and by night."* (11) He wanted them to live in the same mental condition he was in, to feel God's grace at its most abounding, and to give thanks for the grace He had bestowed on Zachariah, and on them.

### 12 – 15 John: A Prophet in His Own Right

The surah now leaves Zachariah in complete silence dealing with other people and his glorification and praise of God. As that scene closes, the surah reveals a new one in which we see John, the child given to Zachariah, as fully grown. It is his Lord who calls out to him from on high: *"John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength..."* (12)" This follows the Qur'ānic method of highlighting only the most important events, portraying images that are full of life and vigour.

Before we have even a single word about John himself, his account commences with an address from on high. It portrays an awesome scene giving us a good idea of John's position. It also shows us how God responded to Zachariah's prayers when he requested an heir who would fulfil the trust that he himself had been fulfilling,

as it related both to faith and kin. Thus the first scene in which John is involved is the one where he is elected to bear the highest responsibility: *"John! Hold fast to the book with [all your] strength.... (12)"* The book referred to here is the Torah, given to Moses. All the Israelite prophets were charged with its preservation and implementation. They were also given the task of educating people in the Torah, so that they would know what was lawful to them and what was unlawful. John inherited his father Zachariah. He is here told to rise to the task and fulfil his trust with all his resolve and strength. He must never weaken or slacken. He should never abdicate his responsibilities.

The surah tells us what John was given to equip him for the great tasks he was assigned: *"We granted him wisdom while he was still a youth (12), as well as, by Our grace, compassion and purity; and he was [always] righteous." (13)* These were indeed the qualifications that suited him for his task. They provided great help in the fulfilment of his duties. Now let us look closer at these qualifications.

God granted him wisdom in his youth, which made him unique in his personality, as he was unique in his birth and name. Wisdom is normally acquired as one grows in years, but in John's case, God granted him this in his early years.

God also granted him compassion as a special gift implanted in his very nature. He did not have to train or persuade himself to be compassionate. Such compassion is necessary for a prophet who takes care of people's hearts and souls, trying always to set them on the course of goodness with ease.

John was further granted purity and cleanliness of heart and practice. Thus, he was able to counter the effects of other people's hard natures and wickedness and so help them grow in purity.

The other quality that served John well was his righteousness. He keenly sensed his close tie with God, and knew that He was not only watching him but with him in all situations, public or private. That completes the qualities that John was given to qualify him for his task. They were given to him when he was still in his youth, so that he could inherit his father, who had appealed to God to give him an heir.

Thus the account of John is brought to its conclusion with two verses highlighting the fact that he was *"kind to his parents. Never was he haughty or rebellious. (14) So peace was upon him on the day he was born, and on the day of his death, and will be on the day when he shall be raised to life again." (15)* As we see in this short passage, the line he followed throughout his life was clearly laid out. No further details of the story of Zachariah requesting a son, nor of that son John could have provided anything extra in as much as the lessons we can draw are concerned. Hence it is brought to a close.