

Part 18 Surah 23 Al-Mu'minin Verses 57-77

By contrast, the believers are always on the alert, taking necessary precautions: *Truly, those who stand in reverent awe of their Lord, (57) and who believe in their Lord's revelations, (58) and who do not associate any partners with their Lord, (59) and who give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return: (60) these vie with one another in doing good works, and they are the ones who are foremost in them. (61)*

Here we see how faith affects hearts, imparting to them a special kind of refinement, sensitivity and aspiration to attain perfection. They are the ones who consider the consequences of their actions.

They are always ready and willing to do their duties.

We see that believers are always in awe of their Lord, God-fearing, believing in His revelations and His signs, attributing no share of Godhead to anyone other than Him, fulfilling the duties He requires of them. Beyond all this, they *'give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe, knowing that to their Lord they shall certainly return: (60)'* This is a manifestation of their feeling that they actually fall short of what they should do. It is true that they have done their utmost, but they consider it far from adequate.

'A'ishah reports that she asked the Prophet about this verse, saying: "Does the expression those *'who give away whatever they have to give with their hearts filled with awe... (60)'* refer to people who may steal, commit adultery and drink intoxicants but fear God?" He said: "No. It refers to a person who offers prayers, fasts, gives away to charity and at the same time fears God." [Related by al-Tirmidhi]

A believer senses God's care and feels His favours with his every and heartbeat. Hence, he thinks that whatever he offers of and good action is too little by comparison. At the same time, every grain in a believer feels God's greatness and power. With all his faculties he perceives how God regulates everything around him. Hence, he stands in awe of Him. He dreads meeting God, for fear of having fallen short of fulfilling his duties towards Him, or not having given Him what is due to Him of worship and gratitude.

It is these people who vie with one another in doing what is good. They are the ones who hasten to do good deeds, and are in the lead among those who do good. Their watchful eyes, alert hearts and minds prompt them to do what is required of them. Theirs is a totally different situation from the others who are lost in ignorance, thinking that God's blessings are given to them because they are favored. They are no better than game animals rushing towards bait. Such people are everywhere: they are overwhelmed with what they are given of life's comforts, distracted from their duties, full of their own importance. But then they only wake up to their fate when it is too late.

recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, (66) revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night." (67) It is as though what was being

recited was a danger or a calamity you needed to avoid. You were too proud to submit to the truth. Indeed, you compounded your insolence, adding insult to injury, speaking ill of the Prophet and his message, but you, nevertheless, are willing to spend hours in idle chit-chat.

It was common practice for them to use obscene language when they gathered in circles around the Ka'bah, close to the idols they worshipped. Now the Qur'an paints for them a scene of when they are called to account for their indulgence, showing them raising their voices with cries for help. It is at this point that they are reminded of what they do now in their circles, as though both take place at the same time. This is a familiar method of the Qur'an, frequently depicting the Day of Judgement as though it were actually occurring at that precise moment.

In their hostility towards the Prophet and with their disparaging remarks about him and the Qur'an in their gatherings, the unbelievers represent an ignorant arrogance that is blinded to the truth. With such blind ignorance, the truth becomes the subject of derision and ridicule. Such people are encountered no matter what the time or place. Yet the state of ignorance that prevailed in Arabia at the time when the Islamic message was revealed serves as an example of similar past and future situations where ignorance prevails.

The Line the Truth Follows

Having shown the unbelievers this scene of reproach in the hereafter, the Surah takes them back to this world, questioning them about their attitude: what stops them from accepting what they are told by God's Messenger, whom they know to be a man of trust? What doubts do they have to prevent them from following divine guidance? Why do they turn away from it, ridiculing it when it represents the absolute truth?

Have they, then, never tried to understand this word [of God]? Or has there come to them something that never came to their forefathers of old? (68) Or do they not recognize their Messenger, and so they deny him? (69) Or do they say that there is in him a touch of madness? Nay, he has brought them the truth; and the truth do most of them detest. (70) Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption. Nay, We have given them all that brings them glory. Yet from this their glory they turn away. (71) Or do you ask of them any recompense? But the recompense given by your Lord is best, since He is the best of providers. (72) Most certainly, you call them to a straight path. (73) But those who will not believe in the life to come are bound to deviate from the right path. (74)

The message Muhammad, God's Messenger, preached could not be rejected by anyone who looks at it carefully, using his reason. It is a model of beauty, perfection,

Will They Not Reflect?

Islam ensures that its followers' hearts are always alert. This is an alertness generated by faith right from the moment it settles in a person's heart. It neither defies human power, nor is too hard for man to sustain. It is a question of sensitivity enhanced by a believer's bond with God and his watchfulness in all situations, guarding against sin. It is perfectly within people's power when the light of faith shines in their hearts: *"We do not charge a soul with more than it can bear. We have a record that speaks the truth. None shall be wronged." (62)*

God has established people's duties as He knows their inclinations and abilities. He will hold them to account on the basis of what they do within their ability. He neither charges them with what they cannot bear, nor dismisses any little thing they do. All their deeds are documented in a *"record that speaks the truth, ... (62)"* highlighting it in its full value. Needless to say, God is precise in His reckoning.

People, however, tend to overlook the truth because their hearts are not touched by its invigorating light. Hence, they remain preoccupied with petty concerns, lost in a perpetual maze. They are only awakened when faced with inevitable doom, looking at the suffering that awaits them and enduring a humiliatingly and strong reproach:

Nay, their hearts are blind to all this. But apart from all that, they have deeds which they will continue to commit. (63) Then, when We shall have overwhelmed with suffering those of them that live in luxury, they cry out in belated supplication. (64) [But they will be told:] Do not cry out this day, for from Us you shall receive no help. (65) Time and again were My revelations recited to you, but every time you would turn about on your heels, (66) revelling in your arrogance, and talking senselessly far into the night. (67)

Thus, the reason for their headlong pursuit of worldly affairs is nothing like being burdened with what they cannot bear. It is simply that their hearts are blinded, unable to see the truth as clearly stated in the Qur'an.

They are wont to follow a line different from the course charted by the Qur'an: *"They have deeds which they will continue to commit." (63)*

The Surah then paints a picture of their being awakened by a sudden calamity: *"When We shall have overwhelmed with suffering those of them that live in luxury, they cry out in belated supplication." (64)* People who live in luxury are indeed the ones who are most preoccupied with life's comforts, totally oblivious to what lies ahead. Now they find themselves suddenly overtaken by suffering, and they cry out for mercy, making a passionate appeal for it to be lifted. It is a picture that contrasts with the life of luxury and arrogance they lead in this world. Hence, they receive a strong reproach: *"Do not cry out this day, for from Us you shall receive no help." (65)* The scene is described as though it is taking place now. They are strongly reproached, made certain of having no support, and reminded of what they used to do in life: *"Time and again were My revelations*

consistency and attraction. It fits with human nature, addresses people's minds and hearts, outlines a course to elevate human life, and lays down a fine constitution to follow and a perfect code of justice. It also includes what answers the needs of human nature and what helps its development and advancement. *"Have they, then, never tried to understand this word [of God]?... (68)"* This is, then, the secret behind their attitude.

"Or has there come to them something that never came to their forefathers of old?" (68) If so, it would have been strange for them and for their forefathers that a messenger came to call on them to believe in God's oneness. But the history of divine messages proves that messengers followed one another, and all of them preached the same message advocated by Muhammad, God's last Messenger.

"Or do they not recognize their Messenger, and so they deny him?" (69) Could this have been the reason for their insolent rejection? Yet they knew their Messenger well. They knew his birth and ancestry. They also knew his character, honesty and integrity. Long before he received his message, they nicknamed him *alamin*, which means 'the trustworthy'.

"Or do they say that there is in him a touch of madness?... (70)" Some of the lowest in their ranks used to say this about him, knowing full well that he was the wisest and most reasonable person among them. They never knew him slip once. None of such possibilities had any foundation whatsoever. The fact is that most of them hated the truth because it deprived them of their false values and contradicted their desires and preferences: *"Nay, he has brought them the truth; and the truth do most of them detest." (70)*

The truth cannot be subservient to personal desires and preferences. For it is on the basis of truth that the universe is sustained, life flourishes and the laws of nature function: *"Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption... (71)"*

The truth is unique and consistent, while desires are numerous and changing. It is on the basis of the unique truth that the whole universe moves along the course that ensures its existence. Thus, its laws are not made to deviate or change in order to accommodate fleeting desires. Had the universe been subject to such changing or sudden desires it would have become corrupted. Indeed, human life, values, standards and systems would also have become corrupted. They would have staggered to and fro, in response to anger, pleasure, hatred, caprice, fear, laziness, activity, reaction and influence. But the physical universe and its progress towards its goal requires consistency and reliability as well as the following of a clearly charted course that is subject to no modification or deviation.

Bearing this in mind, Islam considers legislation for human life to be part of the universal law, formulated by the same hand that conducts the affairs of the universe and establishes coherence between all its parts.

Human beings are part of the universe and subject to its law. Hence, it is only fitting that the One who legislates for the entire universe should also legislate for human life. When this is done, human life is no longer subjected to personal desires and preferences. Thus, it is immune to corruption: *"Had the truth been in accord with their desires, the heavens and the earth, together with all that lives in them, would surely have been in utter corruption. (71)"*

The community addressed by Islam should be keen to follow its truth, not only because it is the truth, but also because it represents its glory. Without Islam, it would have had no place in history: *"Nay, We have given them all that brings them glory. Yet from this their glory they turn away." (71)* The Arabs were ignored throughout history until they were given the message of Islam. Since then, this community continued to be glorious as long as it adhered to Islam. Its position on the world stage, however, gradually shrank when it abandoned Islam, until it reached its present low depth. It will not recover its glory until it reverts to its true, guiding light.

The Surah resumes its questioning of their attitude and the doubts that may be the cause for their refusal to believe in the Messenger: *"Or do you ask of them any recompense?... (72)"* Had you demanded any wages from them, such a request might be their cause for refusal. The fact is that you seek nothing from them, because *"the recompense given by your Lord is best, since He is the best of providers." (72)* What could a prophet seek from human beings, poor and needy as they are, when he has access to God's inexhaustible favors? Indeed, what would a prophet's followers hope to gain of this world's comforts when they seek what may be provided by God who grants everything people have? The fact is that when a human heart is in touch with God, this whole universe, with all that it contains, dwindles into insignificance. You only seek to guide them to the best method: *"Most certainly, you call them to a straight path";* a path that brings them into line with the law that governs their nature. It bonds them with the rest of the universe, guiding them straight, without deviation, to God, the Creator of all.

Yet, like everyone else who does not believe in the life to come, these people deviate from the perfect way: *"But those who will not believe in the life to come are bound to deviate from the right path." (74)* Had they been well guided, they would have reflected on the stages of their existence, because such reflection is bound to lead to belief in the hereafter, when perfection and absolute justice are attainable. The life to come is merely a stage in the line God has charted for all existence.

Inspiring Signs

These unbelievers are people who have lost their way and no longer benefit from the tests to which they are exposed, be they tests of plenty and affluence or those of hardship. Hence, when they are tested with favour *"they think that by all the wealth and offspring We provide for them (55) We hasten to them all that is good" (56)* Even if they are tested with difficulty and hardship, their hearts are not softened, nor are their consciences awakened. They do not turn back to God, appealing to Him to remove their hardship. They remain in such a condition until, on the Day of Judgement, they are visited with an even greater suffering. Then they will be truly desperate and bewildered.

Even were We to show them mercy and remove whatever distress might afflict them, they would still persist in their overweening arrogance, blindly stumbling to and fro. (75) Indeed, We took them to task, but they neither humbled themselves before their Lord, nor do they submissively entreat [Him]. (76) Yet when We open before them a gate of truly severe suffering, they will plunge in despair. (77)

These are common features among such people. They are hard hearted, oblivious of their duties to God, and they deny the hereafter. The idolaters who opposed the Prophet when he delivered his message were of the same type.

Showing humility at a time of hardship, and turning to God, entreating Him and recognizing Him as the only refuge and resort are indicative of a change of heart and a returning to faith. A heart which establishes such links with God is bound to soften. Reflection and remembrance then provide protection against further slips and errors. Thus, hardship brings about real benefit. But the person who persists in arrogance is a lost case, without hope. He is left to his destiny when he will be overwhelmed with suffering in the life to come. He will then plunge into despair, finding neither refuge nor support.