

Part 27 Surah 52 Al-Tur Verses 1-16

By Mount Sinai; (1) by a scripture inscribed (2) on unrolled parchment; (3) by the much-visited House; (4) by the vault raised high; (5) by the swelling sea; (6) your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. (7) Nothing can stop it. (8) On the day when the sky will shake and reel, (9) and the mountains will move away. (10) Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, (11) who idly play with vain trifles. (12) On that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell, (13) (and told:) 'This is the fire you used to deny! (14) So is this sorcery, or do you not see? (15) Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done.' (16)

1 – 10 No Way Out

These short verses use varied rhyming endings and a measured cadence which they maintain. In the Arabic text, they begin with a verse with just one word. Then the verses combine two words, then add more words until we have the last verse in this section of 12 words, yet the same powerful note is maintained.

The first verse reads in Arabic as Wat-Tur, translated here as *By Mount Sinai*; (1). The Arabic word, Tur, means a mountain with trees. Here, it most probably refers to the mountain mentioned in the Qur'an, in Moses' story where he received the tablets. The overall ambience is one of sacred objects stated in an oath by God confirming that something momentous will certainly take place.

The scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment refers, most probably, to the book of Moses which was written for him on the tablets. This reading fits well with the mention of Mount Sinai in the first verse. However, some scholars say that the reference is to the 'imperishable tablet' in heaven, as this fits with what follows, referring to the much visited House and the vault raised high. This again is a clearly possible meaning.

The much-visited House may refer to the Ka 'bah although it is more likely that it refers to a house in heaven where the angels worship. An authentic hadith giving details of the Prophet's night journey to heaven quotes him as saying: "Then I was taken up to the much-visited House. Seventy thousand enter it every day and they do not return to it. It is the last thing they have to do..." [Related by al-Bukhari and Muslim.] The Prophets statement means that the angels perform tawaf around this House, just as people do around the Ka'bah.

According to most scholars, the vault raised high refers to the sky. As he gave this explanation, Sufyan quoted the verse that says: "*We have set up the sky as a well-secured canopy.*" (21: 32)

The swelling sea means that it is full. This is the most appropriate thing to put together in a scene that depicts the sky. It is open, vast and full, which makes it a

glorious and awesome sign that fits well with the other scenes making up the oath that confirms a great event. The adjective masjur, translated here as swelling, may also mean set alight. In another surah we have a verse that says: "*When the seas are set alight.*" (81:6) The phrase may also refer to some other creature.

God states an oath by these great creatures to confirm a great event. This opening makes us ready to receive it, fully aware that it is momentous:

"*Your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. (7) Nothing can stop it.*" (8)

It is certain to happen. No one can stop it from happening. By their very sound, these two verses give the feeling that there is absolutely no question about its taking place. Furthermore, it overwhelms people: none can evade it. When a person receives this decisive note directly, without impediment, he feels its effect penetrate deep inside him. A report mentions that 'Umar went out one night to learn about people's conditions. As he passed by one house, he overheard someone reading this surah in prayer. When he read these two verses, he said: 'By God, the Lord of the Ka'bah, this is indeed a true oath.'

He dismounted, leaned against a wall listening for a while. He then went home, feeling unwell. For a month, people continued to visit him, enquiring about his health, but no one knew his ailment.

'Umar knew this surah, having listened to it and read it many times before. Indeed, he listened to it as the Prophet used to read it in prayer. 'Umar was a learned person who was quick to appreciate such lessons. This time, however, his heart and feelings were ready recipients. Therefore, the message, powerful and focused as it is, was readily received by him, having a profound effect. It is as if 'Umar received these verses directly from their original source, just like the Prophet's heart did, but whereas the Prophet's heart was specially prepared to receive what God revealed to him, others do not have such abilities. Hence, when anyone experiences such a moment and receives some verses in this way, that person is bound to feel as 'Umar did.

These opening notes are followed by a fearful scene: "*On the day when the sky will shake and reel, (9) and the mountains will move away.*" (10) We have here two images that leave us shaken, bewildered: the sky that looks to us so firm and powerfully built is shaking and reeling, like high sea waves, and solid mountains slide away easily, lacking any firm base to stabilize them. It must be something extremely awesome that leaves the sky and the mountains in such chaos. So what will its effect on man be, a small and weak creature in the midst of a stupendous event?

11 – 16 Playing with Vain Trifles

In the midst of all this, the surah hurls on those who deny the truth of the divine message something more serious and frightening; namely, a prayer hastening their punishment by the Almighty: "*Woe on that day to those who deny the truth, (11) who idly play with vain trifles.*" (12)

Needless to say, a prayer by God means a sentence that is impossible to avoid, certain to come to pass, on that fearful day when the sky shakes and reels and the mountains slip away. All these terrible aspects thus confirm one another and overwhelm the deniers of truth who continue to play with vain trifles.

This description applies in the first place to the pagan Arabs, their primitive beliefs, insupportable concepts and their way of life which the Qur'an describes in several places. It is all trifling play, nothing serious. They play like one hanging around in the middle of a lake, not aiming to reach the shore. Yet the description equally applies to anyone who leads their life on the basis of any concept other than the Islamic one. We cannot appreciate this unless we examine well known human concepts, as reflected in beliefs, legends or philosophies, and compare these with the Islamic concept of human existence in particular and the existence of the universe generally. All concepts, even those advanced by famous philosophers seem to be no more than children's attempts to arrive at the truth as compared with the simple, profound and powerful truth as expressed by Islam and the Qur'an. This Islamic concept puts its address directly to human nature, free of exertion or complexity. Human nature immediately responds because what is presented to it fits perfectly with the profound truth inherent in it. It explains its relation to the universe, as well as the relation between the universe and its Creator.

As I read theories and concepts advanced by different philosophers, I often wonder at the strenuous efforts they exert to explain the existence of the universe and its relations. They appear like a child attempting to solve an extremely complex mathematical problem. I look at the clear, simple, easy and natural approach the Qur'an presents, which is free of crookedness and complexity. This is only to be expected for the Qur'anic explanation of the universe is stated by the Creator of the universe. Philosophers' attempts are the product of small parts of the universe trying to explain its whole.

The result of such miserable attempts is a foregone conclusion. When compared to the mature, sound and holistic concept the Qur'an puts forward, they seem to be a medley of confusion, absurdity and child's play. Yet some people abandon the Qur'anic picture and adopt those confused attempts!

A person may be influenced by some imperfect or deviant human attempt to explain life, human existence and the universe, and he will be confused as a result. He may then listen to a few verses of the Qur'an addressing the subject he is struggling with and he will find comfort, enlightenment and a steady measure. There he will find that everything falls into place, where facts are stable, held in position. He will then be reassured by the clear truth presented by the Qur'an. All confusion and worry will have disappeared.

People also appear to be playing with vain trifles when their concerns in life are compared to those Islam puts before people's minds, calling on them to implement these in their lives. A Muslim will look at the absurdity of such concerns. He will also look at those who indulge in them and who value them as great universal truths as simply absurd. Indeed, he looks at such people as a young girl looks at her doll, treating it as if it were a human being and talking to it as if it could share her thoughts.

Islam elevates people's concerns in as much as it elevates their concept of human existence and man's role in the universe. Furthermore, it provides clear and truthful answers to the questions everyone asks: Where have I come from, and why? Where do I go to when my term here is over?

The Islamic answers to these questions define the true concept of existence. Man is not a unique kind of creature. He comes from where all creatures do, and he shares with them the reasons for their existence. He goes to where the Creator, in His infinite wisdom, determines. This means that the answers Islam provides for man's questions also give man a complete explanation of the universe, the interrelation between its inhabitants, its relation with man, and the bond between them all and the Creator of all.

This explanation positively reflects on human concerns in life, elevating them. Therefore, a Muslim tends to think that other people's concerns are too trivial when compared with his preoccupation and the fulfilment of his major role in life. A Muslim's life is large because it is attached to the discharge of a great mission, one that relates to the existence of the universe and has a bearing on it. It is too precious to be wasted in trivialities.

The surah issues a serious warning about what happens to those who play with vain trifles "*on that day they will be irresistibly thrust into the fire of hell.*" (13) This is a violent image. The surah uses the Arabic word da' 'an, which signifies being pushed hard from behind. This suits those who spend their lives playing with trifles, unconcerned with what takes place around them. Hence, they are driven and pushed in the back until

they stand at the edge of hell's fire, where they are told: *"This is the fire you used to deny."* (14)

At this point of utter distress, being pushed hard in the back and facing the fire in front, the unbelievers are faced with a strong rebuke that refers to their earlier denials: *"So is this sorcery, or do you not see?"* (15) They used to label the Qur'an as sorcery. Is the fire they are now facing also sorcery? Or is it the frightening truth? Or is it that they do not see the fire of hell in the same way as they could not see the truth of the Qur'an?

When this sarcastic rebuke is over, they are made to despair of any relief for their distress: *"Burn in it! It will be the same whether you bear it with or without patience. You are being requited for what you have done."* (16) Nothing is more painful to one who has to face such a calamity than to know that bearing it with patience is the same as showing no patience at all. It will continue unabated and cannot be evaded in any way. Their suffering will be the same whether they panic or take things in their stride. Furthermore, it will continue regardless of what they do now. This suffering is the requital for what they have already done. Hence it cannot be altered.