

Part 9 Surah 7 Al-Aaraf Verses 199-203

When and Where to Seek Refuge

Make due allowance for man's nature, and enjoin the doing of what is right; and turn away from those who choose to remain ignorant. (199)

If a prompting from Satan stirs you up, seek refuge with God; He hears all and knows all. (200)

If those who are God-fearing experience a tempting thought from Satan, they bethink themselves [of God]; and they begin to see things clearly. (201)

The first directive given in this passage is to make allowances for the weaknesses of human beings and accept what is decent and easy from them. The Prophet is instructed not to require perfection or expect a very high standard of morality. He should overlook their shortfalls and weaknesses. But all that applies in personal matters, not in questions of faith or religious duties. There can be no overlooking of the essentials of faith or Islamic law. Forbearance can apply in business and personal dealings. Such forbearance is the appropriate attitude to be shown by those who are strong towards people who are weak.

God's Messenger (peace be upon him) is a guide and a teacher. Hence, forbearance and forgiveness are appropriate qualities for him. Indeed, these were distinctive qualities of the Prophet Muhammad. He never showed anger over personal matters. But if something related to the faith made him angry, then his anger was feared by all. All advocates of the divine faith are required to follow the Prophet's suit. An advocate of the divine message, who inevitably deals with human beings, must be kind and easy, but without being negligent.

"Enjoin the doing of what is right..." (199) This order applies to everything that is clearly good and generally accepted as such by honest people with sound, uncorrupted nature. When people get used to doing what is good, they become ready to do it voluntarily, feeling that it is no burden. Nothing stops people from doing what is good like rigidity and complication particularly in the early days of being aware of their religious duties. In the early stages, they should be given duties that are easy and common to all so that they get used to responding properly. This enables people to get ready for what requires more effort and approach it without difficulty.

"And turn away from those who choose to remain ignorant." (199) As used here, ignorance may be understood as the opposite of wisdom, or the opposite of knowledge.

darkness and turning to God gives them light. When people equip themselves with following divine guidance, Satan can have no power over them.

The Means for Clear Insight

The God-fearing, then, remind themselves of God whenever they experience an evil thought that may tempt them away from the right path *"If those who are God-fearing experience a tempting thought from Satan, they bethink themselves [of God]; and they begin to see things clearly." (201)*. But this is given as a side issue that intervenes between the divine order to the Prophet to turn away from ignorant people and an explanation of who and what motivates them to adopt ignorance which determines all their behaviour. When the attitude of the God-fearing has been explained, the *surah* goes back to explaining the motivation of the ignorant:

"Their [evil] brethren try to draw them into error with unceasing determination. (202) When you do not bring them a sign, they say: 'Why do you not seek to have one?' Say: 'I only follow what is revealed to me by my Lord: this [revelation] is a means of clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and grace for people who will believe.'" (203)

Their brethren who try to sink them deeper into error are the satans from among the *jinn*. They may well be the satans of human beings as well. These satans never tire of driving them deeper into error. Hence they continue to act in folly, unaware of where they are being led.

The unbelievers were very persistent in demanding miracles from God's Messenger (peace be upon him). The *surah* quotes here some of their statements that betray their ignorance of the nature of God's message and the role of His Messenger: *"When you do not bring them a sign, they say: 'Why do you not seek to have one?... (203)'"* They suggest to the Prophet that he should pray to God to give them a miracle, or they even suggest to him that he himself should perform a miracle. To them, he should be able to do so, since he claims to be a Prophet.

This shows that they do not understand the Prophet's role. They certainly could not appreciate his humble attitude towards his Lord, nor that he only takes what God gives him. He does not suggest approaches or measures to his Lord, nor does he initiate matters at his own behest. God orders him to explain this to them:

"Say: 'I only follow what is revealed to me by my Lord...' (203)'"

Both meanings are closely related. Turning away from them is just to ignore them and show how petty all their ignorant actions are. One must not enter into any argument with them because that is a waste of time. Ignoring them altogether may get them to revise their attitude and soften their hearts. Argument, on the other hand, may lead to polarization and stubbornness. Even if it does not soften their hearts, they remain isolated from anyone who is good at heart. The latter will realize that the advocates of the divine message are forbearing, unwilling to enter into a slanging match while ignorant people continue with their stupid attitude. Every advocate of faith should realize the importance of this divine directive, because God knows what influences people and what may get through to them.

But God's Messenger is a human being. He may be infuriated by people's ignorance and stupidity. If he can deal with such a situation, it may be too much for his followers. When a person is too angry, Satan might find a chance to stir him up. In such a situation, he is commanded to seek refuge with God so that he will cool down and forestall Satan's design: *"If a prompting from Satan stirs you up, seek refuge with God; He hears all and knows all." (200)* This final remark states that God hears whatever the ignorant people say and all the stupidities they may utter, and He knows what the advocates of the faith may experience as a result. That should be enough to set people's hearts at ease. It is sufficient that God hears all and knows all. When we know that God is aware of everything that happens to us, what else do we need?

The *surah* takes a different approach in order to emphasize to the advocates of faith that they should face all situations with resigned acceptance, and they should remember God when they are angry so that Satan will not be able to get the better of them: *"If those who are God-fearing experience a tempting thought from Satan, they bethink themselves [of God]; and they begin to see things clearly." (201)*

This short verse is highly inspiring, pointing out some profound facts within the human soul. This is made possible only through the unique Qur'anic style. The way the verse is concluded adds new meanings to its beginning, which are not indicated by the opening words. The conclusion, *"and they begin to see things clearly,"* suggests that Satan's thoughts can cause people to be blind, unable to see anything clearly. But fearing God and guarding against incurring His anger keeps hearts alert and reminds them of God's guidance. When they are so reminded, they begin to see things clearly. A tempting thought from Satan is, then, a cause of blindness while the remembrance of God is a cause of opening eyes and hearts. Satan's thoughts send people into

I am not one to suggest to Him or to invent matters. I only have what is revealed to me, and I only do what I am commanded. For their part, they could only think of those impostors who claimed to be prophets in every period of ignorance. Hence, their demands.

The Prophet is also commanded to explain to them the nature of the Qur'an that has been revealed to him. If they would only consider the plain guidance that is contained in the Qur'an, they would certainly stop making foolish requests for signs and miracles: *"This [revelation] is a means of clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and grace for people who will believe." (203)* It provides clear insight and it is an aspect of overflowing blessings and grace. But that is the case only for those who believe and avail themselves of its unending blessing.

In their ignorance, the Arabs at the time of the Prophet turned away from the Qur'an and sought to have a physical miracle like the ones given to earlier prophets. Those earlier prophets preached the divine message when humanity was still in its infancy, and were sent to certain communities, not to mankind as a whole. Their miracles could serve their purpose only at the time and place they were given, and could be appreciated only by those who witnessed them. What can be said about later generations and nations?

No physical miracle can be as superb or miraculous as the Qur'an, no matter what type of miracle people required. Besides, it gives its message to all mankind in all generations till the end of time.

Given the importance the Arabs attached to fine, literary style, which was a source of pride for them, the artistic expression of the Qur'an was perhaps the most immediately apparent aspect of its miraculous nature. But the Qur'an remains a book of surpassing excellence, posing a challenge that defies human ability. God challenged the Arabs then, and the challenge continues today, to produce anything similar to it. Human beings who have the gift of fine expression and appreciate the depth of human ability in this field are the ones who can best recognize that the Qur'anic style is uniquely superb, refined, outstanding. This applies to all people with a natural taste for fine speech, whether they believe in Islam or not. The challenge is based on objective criteria that challenge believers and unbelievers alike. In their ignorance, the elders of the Quraysh found themselves utterly powerless when faced with the Qur'an. They hated such a position but they could not help it. The same thing is experienced today and will continue to be experienced by everyone who adopts the same attitude.

Beyond that great secret of this unique book and its excellence, there remains its overpowering attraction to human nature, once it is allowed to put its address freely to people. Even those who are hardened in their opposition to the Qur'an often find its logic too powerful. They cannot but recognize its truth when they listen to it.

Many are those who speak out with eloquence. They may express principles, doctrines, ideas and philosophies of all sorts. But the Qur'an has a unique and overpowering appeal to human nature in everything that it says. The elders of the Quraysh used to say to their followers, and indeed to themselves: "Do not listen to this Qur'an, but cut short its reciting with boozing and laughter, so that you may gain the upper hand." (41: 26) They did so because they felt that the Qur'anic logic was irresistible. Many of those in power today try to turn people away from the Qur'an, offering them instead their own ideas. But in spite of all this, the Qur'an remains overpowering. Whenever a verse or passage of the Qur'an is quoted in the context of human speech, it stands out by its rhythm and logic, appealing directly to the hearts of its audience. The rest of human speech that might have been finely composed seems, by comparison, of little use.

But beyond all this, the subject matter of the Qur'an remains its outstanding strength.

A few pages in this book cannot aspire to give justice to explaining the subject matter of the Qur'an. Whatever we may say here is too little. Besides, how much can we say in a few pages? We can possibly give a brief outline, but a fair treatment takes volumes.

The Undeniable Appeal of the Qur'an

The fact is that the Qur'an has a remarkable method in presenting the truth of existence to human nature. It appeals to it as a whole, yet it addresses every one of its aspects in every single context. It goes through every opening in human nature, deals with all its thoughts and feelings.

The Qur'anic method is also remarkable as it tackles the main issues of existence, revealing certain aspects of it which are readily acknowledged both by human nature and the human intellect. They respond to these and formulate their clear vision on them. It also answers the needs of human nature, releases its potentials and puts it on the right course.

In all these areas a careful student of the Qur'an is bound to find an amazing wealth of statements and directives that are comprehensive, profound, rich and truthful.

Not once did I find myself in need of a single statement from outside the Qur'an, concerning any of these fundamental issues, with the exception of God's Messenger's *hadiths*. These may be collectively described as an explanatory memorandum of the Qur'an. Indeed, no other statement, correct though it may be, will appear of much value compared to what a careful student finds in this remarkable book.

This is due to the practical nature of these statements. It is also the result of long reflection on, and study of, how these topics are tackled. Yet I am not attempting to praise this book. Who am I, and who are human beings to add anything to God's book by their praise?

This book, the Qur'an, was the source of knowledge, education and proper moulding of a unique generation of human beings that was never repeated in human history. That was the generation of the Prophet's companions who brought about a greatly profound development in human history that has not yet been properly studied.

This Book was responsible, by God's will, for this great miracle in human history. All supernatural miracles that testified to earlier divine messages appear small in comparison to this miracle that was practised in a human society. Indeed, that generation was an unparalleled historic phenomenon.

The society that was formed for the first time by their generation survived for more than one thousand years. It was governed by the law stated in this book and firmly based on its standards, values and directives. That very society was a human miracle. We have only to compare it to other human societies which, as a result of human material progress, surpassed it in material abilities, but could not come near to it in human civilization.

Nowadays, in modern *jahiliyyah* societies, people seek to satisfy their own needs as well as the needs of their communities in isolation of the Qur'an. People in ignorant Arabia used to require miracles other than the Qur'an. Their naive outlook, profound ignorance and their various interests prevented the old Arabs from appreciating the great miracle represented by this remarkable book.

The people of contemporary *jahiliyyah* have different obstacles preventing them from appreciating the miracle of the Qur'an. These include the arrogance derived from their superior material knowledge, their

We cannot but marvel at the unique Qur'anic approach as it takes human nature by the hand and moves up with it gently, step by step, yet with much energy and clarity of vision. It takes it to a sublime height, giving it true knowledge, definite response, firm reassurance, consistency of action and a clear and relaxed awareness of the fundamental truths of existence.

The Qur'anic approach is unparalleled as it appeals to human nature from angles where no response could have been imagined to come. Yet we find human nature ready with its positive response. The fact is the One who has revealed the Qur'an is the Creator of man who knows His creation. He is closer to man than his jugular vein.

So far for the approach, but what about the subject matter the Qur'an tackles? Here we find ourselves looking at an expanse that no words can adequately describe: "Say: 'If the sea were ink for my Lord's words, the sea would surely dry up before my Lord's words are exhausted, even though we were to add to it another sea to replenish it.'" (18: 109) "If all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea were ink, with seven more seas yet added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is almighty, wise." (31: 27)

The present author spent, by God's grace, twenty-five years with this Book as his companion, studying carefully the fundamental facts it addresses and the way it tackles various aspects of human knowledge. He has been reading at the same time what human beings have attempted to reveal in some of these aspects. He could see the great wealth and openness of the Qur'an compared to the attempts of human beings. Compared to the great ocean of the Qur'an, these attempts are no more than small, isolated lakes, tiny pools or even stagnant pits.

Take, if you will, the Qur'an's holistic approach to existence, its nature, truth, aspects, origin, secrets and hidden things, as well as what it contains of living entities and potential life. Human philosophy tackles some of these aspects.

Reflect also on how the Qur'an takes man as a complete entity, and explains his origin, potentials, fields of action, moulding, reactions and responses, as well as his different modes and inner self. Biology, psychology, sociology, education and religious studies address certain aspects of these. Consider also the unique Qur'anic approach to the system of human life, its practical activities, areas of collaboration, renewed human needs and how these should be organized. Social, economic and political theories and doctrines may address some of these.

sophisticated organization of human life, its apparent progress and maturity, which all come naturally with the accumulation of experience of one generation after another and with more complex and sophisticated needs. But they are also prevented from appreciating the Qur'an by the die-hard Zionist and imperialist opposition that has continued to scheme and plot against this faith and its revealed message for fourteen centuries. They continue with their unceasing attempts to divert Muslims away from the Qur'an and its directives. This is because the Zionists and the imperialists have learnt through long experience that they cannot be a match for the Muslims as long as they adhere to the Qur'an in the same way as the first generation of Muslims did. It is not sufficient that Muslims continue to pay lip service to the Qur'an while they conduct their lives in a fashion that is in conflict with it. Such scheming continues today with more resolve and wickedness. The final outcome of this scheming is the sort of societies in which people who claim to be Muslims live today, when they cannot be truly Muslims unless they implement Islamic law. We see the outcome of this scheming in various attempts all over the world to remove every trace of Islam, putting in place of the Qur'an some other sort of constitution, giving it the status of ultimate arbiter in all disputes and on all issues of life. True Muslims refer only to God's book in all such matters.

The Qur'an is ignored today by its people who know it only as hymns to be chanted and charms to be worn. They have been diverted away from it for centuries and driven deep into a state of *jahiliyyah* that corrupts minds and hearts.

The people of old *jahiliyyah* used to divert the masses away from the Qur'an, demanding physical miracles. The people of modern *jahiliyyah* try to divert the masses away from the Qur'an by putting in its place a false bible which they promote through all mass media and information channels. Yet it is the Qur'an that is described in these words by God who knows all:

"This [revelation] is a means of clear insight from your Lord, and a guidance and grace for people who will believe." (203)

It is then a means of clear insight, providing true guidance and abounding grace and blessings for true believers "grace for people who will believe." (203). It is only those who truly believe that find all this in the Qur'an.