

Sūrah 90: al-Balad

Period of Revelation

Its subject matter and style resemble those of the earliest Sūrahs revealed at Makkah, but it contains a pointer which indicates that it was sent down in the period when the disbelievers of Makkah had resolved to oppose the Prophet, and made it lawful for themselves to commit tyranny and excess against him.

Theme and Subject Matter

In this Sūrah a vast subject has been compressed into a few brief sentences, and it is a miracle of the Qur'ān that a complete ideology of life which could hardly be explained in a thick volume has been abridged most effectively in brief sentences of this short Sūrah. Its theme is to explain the true position of man in the world and of the world in relation to man and to tell that God has shown to man both the highways of good and evil, has also provided for him the means to judge and see and follow them, and now it rests upon man's own effort and judgment whether he chooses the path of virtue and reaches felicity or adopts the path of vice and meets with doom.

First, the city of Makkah and the hardships being faced therein by the Prophet and the state of the children of Adam have been cited as a witness to the truth that this world is not a place of rest and ease for man, where he might have been born to enjoy life, but here he has been created into toil and struggle. If this theme is read with verse 39 of Sūrah an-Najm (Laisa lil insani illa ma saa: there is nothing for man but what he has striven for), it becomes plain that in this world the future of man depends on his toil and struggle, effort and striving.

After this, man's misunderstanding that he is all in all in this world and that there is no superior power to watch what he does and to call him to account, has been refuted.

Then, taking one of the many moral concepts of ignorance held by man, as an example, it has been pointed out what wrong criteria of merit and greatness he has proposed for himself in the world. The person who for ostentation and display squanders heaps of wealth, not only himself prides upon his extravagances but the people also admire him for it enthusiastically, whereas the Being Who is watching over his deeds, sees by what methods he obtained the wealth and in what ways and with what motives and intention he spent it.

Then God says: We have given man the means of knowledge and the faculties of thinking and understanding and opened up before him both the highways of virtue and vice: one way leads down to moral depravity, and it is an easy way pleasing for the self; the other way leads up to moral heights, which is steep like an uphill road, for scaling which man has to exercise self-restraint. It is man's weakness that he prefers slipping down into the abyss to scaling the cliff.

Then, God has explained what the steep road is by following which man can ascend to the heights. It is that he should give up spending for ostentation, display and pride and should spend his wealth to help the orphans and the needy, should believe in God and His Religion and joining the company of believers, should participate in the construction of a society which should fulfill the demands of virtue and righteousness patiently and should be compassionate to the people. The end of those who follow this way is that they would become worthy of God's mercies. On the contrary, the end of those who follow the wrong way, is the fire of Hell from which there is no escape.

Sūrah 90: al-Balad¹⁷⁹²

In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate,
the Most Merciful

1. I swear by this city, [i.e., Makkah] -
2. And you, [O Muhammad], are free of restriction in this city -
3. And [by] the father¹⁷⁹³ and that which was born [of him],
4. We have certainly created man into hardship.
5. Does he think that never will anyone overcome him?
6. He says, "I have spent wealth in abundance."
7. Does he think that no one has seen him?
8. Have We not made for him two eyes?
9. And a tongue and two lips?
10. And have shown him the two ways?¹⁷⁹⁴
11. But he has not broken through the difficult pass.¹⁷⁹⁵
12. And what can make you know what is [breaking through] the difficult pass?
13. It is the freeing of a slave
14. Or feeding on a day of severe hunger
15. An orphan of near relationship
16. Or a needy person in misery
17. And then being among those who believed and advised one another to patience and advised one another to compassion.
18. Those are the companions of the right.¹⁷⁹⁶
19. But they who disbelieved in Our signs - those are the companions of the left.¹⁷⁹⁷
20. Over them will be fire closed in.¹⁷⁹⁸

¹⁷⁹² *Al-Balad*: The City.

¹⁷⁹³ Said to be Adam.

¹⁷⁹⁴ Of good and evil.

¹⁷⁹⁵ i.e., the steep incline or obstacle. In other words, he has not spent in the cause of God but only boasts of spending in front of others.

¹⁷⁹⁶ Or "the companions of good fortune," i.e., those who receive their records in their right hands and proceed to Paradise.

¹⁷⁹⁷ Or "the companions of ill fortune," i.e., those who receive their records in their left hands and proceed to Hell.

¹⁷⁹⁸ The cover over Hell will be sealed and locked, containing its fire and its inhabitants.