

Surah al-Saff (61)
'The (Battle) Ranks'

سورة الصف

The surah derives its name from the prominence within it of the word *saff*, meaning a battle rank or ranks. Like the other Madinan surahs it contains matters pertaining to the Islamic order, as well as matters of faith. And while surah al-Mumtahannah concluded on the topic of cutting friendship ties with the disbelievers, this surah opens on the topic of fighting against them.

By the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the name of Allah, ... We seek help through the name of the God to whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth; and is there one there more worthy than Him of our seeking help from him? Indeed He is Allah, in whose hand are all things, and who helps those who seek His help.

... the Compassionate, the Merciful. He who bestows mercy and fulfils the shortcomings, and He is the best of those from whom help is sought.

Whatever is in the heavens and that in the earth glorifies to Allah; and He is the Mighty, the Wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ
الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

Whatever is in the heavens and that in the earth glorifies to Allah; ... The meaning is not limited to the heavens and the earth and everything that they contain, but includes all creation. This ayah is repeated at the beginning of other surahs and here in this surah for emphasis and to imprint it firmly in the mind, for the glorifying of the creation – whether in the existential sense or the perceptual sense – is a thing strange to the mind and so it needs to be emphasised and consolidated.

... And He is the Mighty ... He is dominant in His sovereignty.

... the Wise. He does everything according to beneficence and wisdom, meaning the placing of things in their proper place.

The circumstance of this revelation was that a group of believers used to say that when they met the enemy they would not flee and would not return from them, until the day of 'Uhud, when they fled. Thereupon these ayat were sent down:

O ye who believe, why do ye say what ye do not? (2)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لِمَ تَقُولُونَ مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٢﴾

The question form conveys criticism, for speech without action is worse than silence without action, just as action without speech is better than action with speech, except when speech is for the purpose of encouragement and suchlike. It is said that in regard to actions people are in four categories: those who speak and act, those who speak without acting, those who neither speak nor act, and those who act without speaking about it. The fourth is the best, the worst is the second, and the first is better than the third.

It is most loathsome in the sight of Allah that ye say what ye do not. (3)

كَبُرَ مَقْتًا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَنْ تَقُولُوا مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٣﴾

Speech unmatched by action is grievously loathsome to Allah, glory be to Him.

Indeed Allah loves those who fight in His path in ranks, as if they are a compact edifice. (4)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِهِ صَفًّا كَأَنَّهُمْ
بُنْيَانٌ مَرْصُورٌ ﴿٤﴾

Indeed Allah loves those who fight in His path ... It means those who fight to exalt His word and in seeking His satisfaction with them, in the disciplined condition of them being:

... **in ranks**, ... That is, without disorder and without divisiveness.

... **as if they are a compact edifice**. They are so firm that they are like a compact, solid structure, like a wall. It is narrated that Muslims said, 'If only we knew the dearest action in the view of Allah we would dispense all our wealth and our lives in performing it.' And so the ayah '*Indeed Allah loves those...*' was sent down. Then, after the day of 'Uḥūd and they turned back, Allah sent down the ayah '*...why do ye say...*'.

The theme then turns to warn the Muslims against being like the companions of Moses, peace be upon him, who troubled him after knowing that he was a Messenger from Allah, the Exalted, for they refrained from war and thus vexed the Messenger and disobeyed his command:

And when Moses said to his people, 'O my people! Why do ye vex me, when ye have known that I am Allah's Messenger unto ye?' So when they swerved, Allah swerved their hearts; and Allah guides not the perverse people. (5)

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِقَوْمِهِ ۖ يَنْقُومِ لِمَ تَوَدُّونَنِي وَقَدْ تَعْلَمُونَ أَنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ۖ فَلَمَّا زَاغُوا أَزَاغَ اللَّهُ قُلُوبَهُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقِينَ ﴿٥﴾

And when Moses said to his people, 'O my people, why do ye vex me, ... Moses' people, the sons of Israel, severely tried Moses by their actions, such as their worshipping the calf, and their saying, '*Go thou and thy Lord, and fight them.*'

... **when ye have surely known that I am Allah's Messenger ...** 'Surely' is given for *qad*, which is emphatic, though normally in the same grammatical context it implies proximity in time. And it is possible that here it is used in the normal sense, in that even the likelihood that he was a Messenger should have been enough to prevent them from annoying him.

... **unto ye?** ... It means sent in order to guide them.

... **So when they swerved ...** They swerved from the truth by continuing to annoy him, as is the nature of the Jews.

... **Allah swerved their hearts; ...** That is, He left them to themselves and denied them His hidden graces, until their hearts went further astray. Attributing their swerving to Him, glory be to Him, is because when He deserts a person that person is drawn by the desires, which lead him to swerve.

... **and Allah guides not the perverse people.** When a people depart from obedience to Allah, glory be to Him, after the signs and proof, and in that sense are perverse (*fasiqin*), He leaves them to themselves and no more bestows upon them His hidden graces.

And the Jews acted the same way with Jesus the son of Mary, peace be upon them: they vexed him after he had brought them the clear proofs:

And when Jesus the son of Mary said, 'O sons of Israel, indeed I am Allah's Messenger unto ye, confirming the Torah before me and giving glad tidings of a Messenger who shall come after me – His name is Ahmad.' So when he came to them with the clarifications, they said, 'This is clear sorcery.' (6)

وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدٌ ۖ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالُوا هَذَا سِحْرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٦﴾

And when Jesus the son of Mary said, ... It means: 'And recount, O Messenger, when Jesus the son of Mary said ...' The Qur'an normally calls him Jesus the son of Mary (Maryam), *peace be upon them*, so as to deny his being the son of Allah.

... **O sons of Israel, ...** It means the Jews.

... **indeed I am Allah's Messenger unto ye, ...** I am raised to guide ye.

... **confirming the Torah before me and giving glad tidings of a Messenger** ... He gave them the glad tidings of a Messenger from Allah, Exalted be He.

... **who shall come after me – His name is Ahmad** ... That is, our Prophet, Muhammad, *may Allah bless him and his family*. The distinguished Muhammad Sādiq Fakhr al-Islam, who was an eminent Christian scholar [of the city of Urumiyah, died circa 1315 H, 1897 CE] and then became a Muslim, recounts in his book *Anis al-A'lam*, [volume 5, pp 139-210] a lengthy account on this topic, and explains that the name *parakletos* [which has been taken for *perikletos*] was an explanatory rendering of 'Ahmad' which exists in their books. [Ahmad is another name of the prophet Muhammad; both are derived from the Arabic word meaning the Praised One – *perikletos* in Greek.] And it was usual for the Prophets to confirm their predecessors and give the tidings of their successors, for they were brothers all sent by Allah, glory be to Him, to clarify a single path – differences in detail were due to the particular conditions of their ages and locations.

... **So when he** ... It means Jesus, or the Messenger, Ahmad, *may Allah bless him and his family*.

... **came to them with the clarifications**, ... It means the clear proofs.

... **they said, 'This is clear sorcery.'** ... They disbelieved while claiming that the clear proofs were manifest sorcery. Now, if the pronoun 'he' refers to Jesus, then this is in line with the Jews repudiating Moses a liar, and if it refers to the Messenger of Allah then the ayah concerns all three missions, and how the followers of the two previous religions received the Messenger of Allah about whom they had received the glad tidings.

And who is more wrongful than he who forges the lie on Allah, while he is called to Islam?

And Allah guides not the wrongful people. (7)

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَىٰ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ وَهُوَ يُدْعَىٰ إِلَى

الْإِسْلَامِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الظَّالِمِينَ ﴿٧﴾

And who is more wrongful than he who forges the lie on Allah ... It means: who is a more serious wrongdoer than the person who devises a lie about Allah, and calls His word sorcery, and His Messenger a lying sorcerer?

... **while he is called to Islam?** ... He invents such lies simply because he is called to Islam, wherein lies his salvation in the world and the hereafter.

... **And Allah guides not the wrongful people.** It means that He keeps His hidden graces from those who treat themselves wrongfully through disbelief and stubborn disavowal after having seen the light and the guidance, and who, after having been clearly shown the path, fail to travel it.

They wish to put out the light of Allah with their mouths; but Allah will fulfil His light, even though the disbelievers may detest. (8)

يُرِيدُونَ لِيُطْفِئُوا نُورَ اللَّهِ بِأَفْوَاهِهِمْ وَاللَّهُ مُتِمُّ نُورِهِ ۖ وَلَوْ

كَرِهَ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴿٨﴾

They ... It means those disbelievers who were contemporary to the revelation and the Messenger of Allah.

... **wish to put out the light of Allah** ... That is, His Messenger and his path, which are called a light as they illuminate the dark alleyways of life by the programmes that lead to bliss and to arrival at the destination; like one who carries a torch on a dark night so as not to bump into anything, and to safely reach the place at which he wishes to arrive.

... **with their mouths;** ... They imagined they would be able to extinguish the light of Islam through their calling it lies and their creating confusion through mockery.

... **and Allah will complete His light,** ... He shall make His religion triumphant. When a light is extinguished its perpetuation through time is over. But when it is not extinguished it grows and finally lights up everywhere forever.

... **even though the disbelievers may detest.** They are averse to the perpetuation of His light and its illuminating the world.

(It is) He who sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth so as to make it manifest over all religion, even though the polytheists may detest. (9)

هُوَ الَّذِي أَرْسَلَ رَسُولَهُ بِأَهْدَىٰ وَيُذِينَ الْحَقِّ لِيُظْهِرَهُ عَلَى
الدِّينِ كُلِّهِ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْمُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٩﴾

(It is) He who sent His Messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth... Allah, glory be to Him, dispatched His Messenger, Muhammad, *may Allah bless him and his family*, with guidance for mankind for their eternal bliss, and with the religion of Islam.

... **so as to make it manifest over all religion,** ... The reason for the dispatch was in order to make that religion triumph over all religions. Islam is triumphant over all other religions in two ways: first, in reason and proof, in which it has been triumphant since the time of the Messenger *may Allah bless him and his family*; and second, in dominance and authority, and that will be in the time of the Imam Mahdi, *peace be upon him*.

Amir-al-Mu'minin (the Commander of the Believers) was once asked about this ayah and whether Islam was yet manifest. He said, 'Definitely not! By Him in whose hand is my soul, not until there is no village without it being declared there morning and night that 'there is no god but Allah'.

... **even though the polytheists may detest.** He shall exalt His religion despite the pride of those who set up partners with Allah.

O ye who believe, shall I point ye to a transaction that will save ye from a painful chastisement? (10)

يٰۤاَيُّهَا الَّذِيْنَ ءَامَنُوْا هَلْ اَدْلٰكُمْ عَلٰى تَحْرِۜرٍ تَنْجِيْكُمْ مِّنْ
عَذَابِ الْيَمِّ ﴿١٠﴾

O ye who believe, ... The address is to the believers, even though the sense is general, as it is the believers who will benefit from it by implementing it.

... **shall I point ye** ... It means: do ye wish Me to guide ye.

... **to a transaction that will save ye from a painful chastisement?** Is any transaction better than that which saves a person from the chastisement of the fire?

Then the Almighty outlines that transaction, which returns the highest gains:

Ye believing in Allah and His Messenger and ye striving in the path of Allah with your wealth and your lives. That is better for ye, were ye knowing. (11)

تَوَّٰمِنُوْنَ بِاللّٰهِ وَرَسُوْلِهِۦ وَتُجَاهِدُوْنَ فِيْ سَبِيْلِ اللّٰهِ بِاَمْوَالِكُمْ
وَاَنْفُسِكُمْ ذٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ اِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُوْنَ ﴿١١﴾

Ye believing in Allah... The belief in the God and His oneness.

... **and His Messenger** ... It means confirmation of what he brought, and belief here means real, deep belief. So there is no discord here with the address being made to 'ye who believe' just as in the ayah 'O ye who believe, believe in Allah and His Messenger and the Book ...' [4: 136]

... **and ye striving in the path of Allah** ... It means that we exert ourselves with the effort, which includes fighting in His path, to exalt the word of Allah.

... **with your wealth** ... It means expending one's wealth for His sake.

... **and your lives** ... Holding them cheap for Him, even when it means giving them and being killed in His path.

... **That is better for ye,** ... Faith and striving, each in its own place, are better than polytheism, which leads a person to the fire and punishment.

... **were ye knowing.** If we were knowledgeable we would know that faith and combat are better and more beneficial than disbelief and laziness.

When this price is paid and ye do it:

He shall forgive ye your sins and enter ye into gardens, rivers flowing under them, fine dwellings in Gardens of Eternity – that is the magnificent achievement. (12)

يَغْفِرُ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَيُدْخِلُكُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا
الْأَنْهَارُ وَمَسْكِنٍ طَيِّبَةٍ فِي جَنَّاتٍ عَدْنٍ ذَلِكَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ



He shall forgive ye your sins and enter ye into gardens, rivers flowing under them, fine dwellings in Gardens of Eternity ... Allah will forgive you all your previous sins, and He will place you in gardens under the palaces and villas and trees of which flow rivers of honey, water, milk and wine; and He will house you in those gardens within beautiful palaces. Those who get there will be there forever; they will never come out.

... **that is the magnificent achievement.** This forgiveness and entry into the gardens is the grand achievement of attaining salvation, felicity and bliss, above which there is no greater success.

And something else ye love: succour from Allah and a near conquest; and give glad tidings to the believers. (13)

وَأُخْرَى تَحْسِبُونَهَا نَصْرٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَفَتْحٌ قَرِيبٌ وَبَشِيرٌ

الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

And something else ye love: ... That is, in addition to the blessing of the achievement of the garden, in return for belief and struggle there is a desirable blessing in store in the world:

... **succour ...** His aid in defeating the disbelievers.

... **from Allah ...** Assistance from Him sufficient to make His troops victorious over the enemy, even though materially they may be disadvantaged.

... **and a near conquest; ...** It means the liberation of the land. And it was just as He said, glory be to Him, for in a short time they conquered Makkah, Persia, Rome [Eastern Byzantine] and many other territories of the polytheists and disbelievers.

... **and give glad tidings ...** The address is to the Messenger.

... **to the believers.** That is, if they were sincere in the faith and performed the obligation of *jihad*.

O ye who believe, be the succourers of Allah, just as Jesus the son of Mary said to the disciples: 'Who are my succourers unto Allah?' The disciples said, 'We are Allah's succourers!' So a party of the sons of Israel believed and a party disbelieved; so We aided those who believed against their enemies, and they became the manifest. (14)

يَتَأَيُّبُ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُفُّوا أُنصَارَ اللَّهِ كَمَا قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ

مَرْيَمَ لِلْحَوَارِيِّينَ مَنْ أُنصَارِي إِلَى اللَّهِ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ

حَسْبَ أُنصَارُ اللَّهِ فَفَأَيَّدْنَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا عَلَىٰ عَدُوِّهِمْ

وَكَفَرْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ

فَأَصْبَحُوا ظَاهِرِينَ

O ye who believe, be the succourers of Allah, ... Be constantly in His service by establishing His religion, as opposed to the believer who does not prepare himself for the victory, but only implements some of the religious articles.

... **just as Jesus the son of Mary said ...** It means that we should serve Allah in the same way sought by Jesus of his disciples.

... **to the disciples: ...** They were his followers and students.

... **'Who are my succourers unto Allah?'** ... He was asking them who of them would accompany him in that straight journey towards Allah's satisfaction and rewards, that was the implementation of his teachings.

... **The disciples said, 'We are Allah's succourers!'** ... Jesus' address may either have been limited to the disciples and they all answered in the affirmative, or it was made to the general

population, and His word 'said to the bright ones' is on account of how they were the group who responded to his address.

... ***So a party of the sons of Israel believed*** ... It means they believed with real faith, and these were the disciples and those who followed them.

... ***and a party disbelieved;*** ... Either they disbelieved in Jesus or they believed in him but later deviated like those who took to the trinity.

... ***so We aided those who believed against their enemies, and they became the manifest.*** Allah made the true followers of Jesus triumph over their disbelieving enemies in argument and proof, or in numbers and power over them. And just as Allah assisted Jesus' true followers over the Jews and the deviant Christians, so too He shall assist true Islam over other religions and over deviant Islam. Triumph and dominance is termed as manifestation, on account of how the dominant is manifest and the dominated is concealed.