

Surah al-Ma^ʿarij (70)

سورة المعارج

'The Paths of Ascension'

The surah derives its name from the prominence within it of the word *ma^ʿarij*, meaning 'places of ascension', of rising and going up. Like the other Makkan surahs it deals with matters of faith, except its opening which was sent down at Madinah. As Surah al-Haqqah concluded with a warning to the disbelievers, so this surah opens on a similar theme.

In fact, the reason for the descent of the opening part of this surah, as given in a narration from Imam al-S^hadiq, *peace be upon him*, is that when the Messenger of Allah appointed Imam Ali, as his successor on the day of Ghadir Khum, saying, '**He whose patron (mawla) I am, then Ali is (also) his patron**', and this news had spread throughout the land. The Messenger was approached by one Nu^ʿman ibn al-Har^{ith} al-Fihri, who asked him: 'O Messenger of Allah! you commanded us from Allah that we declare there is no god but Allah and that you are the Messenger of Allah, and you commanded us to the *jihad*, the *haji*, the fast, the prayer and the *zaka*, and we accepted.'

'Then you were not satisfied until you appointed this lad – meaning Imam Ali, who was about 33 – and you said '**He whose patron I am, then Ali is his patron.**' Now, is this from you, or is it a command from Allah?'

At that the Messenger said, '**By Allah other than whom there is no god, it is from Allah.**' Then Nu^ʿman turned away, saying, 'O Allah! if that is the truth from Thee, then rain down upon us stones from the sky!' So Allah stoned him with a stone that hit him on the head and killed him. Then Allah sent down the ayah, **A questioner asked about an occurring chastisement ...** [End of narration].

This affair is also indicated by His word: *And when they say, 'O Allah, if that is the truth from you then rain stones from the sky upon us, or present us with a painful chastisement.'* [8: 33].

By the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the name of Allah, ... The beginning is by the name of Allah so that it be a blessed beginning that will arrive at goodness.

... the Compassionate, the Merciful. He bestows mercy by rectifying the shortcomings in His servants' religion, world and hereafter. For whereas the mercy and compassion in other than Him, glory be to Him, is a quality of the heart that moves a person towards goodness, while His mercy is the bestowal of goodness.

A questioner asked about an occurring chastisement, (1)

سَأَلَ سَائِلٌ بِعَذَابٍ وَاقِعٍ ﴿١﴾

That is, a demander demanded and sought chastisement; and you have learned that it was Nu^ʿman al-Fihri. Yet it is probable that the meaning is more general and includes the disbelievers who sought the advancement of the chastisement in mockery.

For the disbelievers, there is none to repel it, (2)

لِّلْكَافِرِينَ لَيْسَ لَهُ دَافِعٌ ﴿٢﴾

The chastisement is for the disbelievers, and will happen to them whether they seek it or not. There is none can prevent it.

From Allah, Holder of the paths of ascension; (3)

مِنَ اللَّهِ ذِي الْمَعَارِجِ ﴿٣﴾

The chastisement is from Allah, glory be to Him, who possesses the *ma^ʿarij*, 'the paths of ascension'. Perhaps the meaning is the skies or heavens that are the pathways of ascension for the angels and the souls of the believers. It is accordingly an indication of the loftiness of His status, glory be to Him; for when He intends a thing there is no other way. It must happen.

Thereupon the extent of the height of these pathways is explained, so that it not be imagined that their height is such that the mind of man is familiar with it:

The angels and the Spirit ascend unto Him in a day, whose amount is fifty thousand years. (4)

تَعْرُجُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَالرُّوحُ إِلَيْهِ فِي يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُ
خَمْسِينَ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ ﴿٤﴾

The angels and the Spirit ... ‘The Spirit’, *al-ruh*} means the great angel [Gabriel].

... *ascend unto Him* ... The ascension is to that place set by Him, glory be to Him, as the source of His commands and an area for honouring Him, just as He has set the ‘House of Allah’, the *Ka’bah*, that He has set as a proxy for attention towards Him, as Allah is untainted by location.

... *in a day, whose amount is fifty thousand years.* To ascend from the earth by that path to the place where the ultimate honours are bestowed takes a day, the length of which is fifty thousand of our earthly years.

The phrase has another likely meaning: that the ascension to His honouring will take place on the day of resurrection, the length of which is fifty thousand years. So the ayah indicates either the distance from the earth of the honouring place, or the length of the day of resurrection. Narrations support both interpretations.

So be restrained, a graceful restraining: (5)

فَاصْبِرْ صَبْرًا جَمِيلًا ﴿٥﴾

The address, in the singular, is to the Messenger; *may Allah bless him and his family.* He was not to despair and was not to be disturbed by the harshness, taunts and belying of the disbelievers.

Indeed they see it as distant, (6)

إِنَّهُمْ يَرَوْنَهُ بَعِيدًا ﴿٦﴾

Indeed they ... That is, the disbelievers.

... *see it as distant,* They see that day, the day of resurrection – according to the second interpretation – or the chastisement, as distant, and so they engage in disbelief and disobedience.

While we see it as near. (7)

وَنَزَلْنَاهُ قَرِيبًا ﴿٧﴾

That is: We know it is near; for everything in the future is near, even if the intervening period is lengthy by human reckoning.

The flow then turns to clarify the nature of that time of chastisement, or of the time of that day:

The day when the sky will be like molten copper, (8)

يَوْمَ تَكُونُ السَّمَاوَاتُ كَالذَّلْحَلِ ﴿٨﴾

To afflict thereby the offenders amongst mankind.

And the mountains will be like wool, (9)

وَتَكُونُ الْجِبَالُ كَالْعِهْنِ ﴿٩﴾

Like carded, fluffed up wool; reduced to dust the mountains will glide through the air just like wool.

And no boon-companion will ask of a boon-companion (10)

وَلَا يَسْأَلُ حَمِيمٌ حَمِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

No friend will have time for another; everyone that day will be occupied with their pressing concerns.

As they are shown them – the offender will love to be redeemed from the chastisement of that day by his sons, (11)

يُبْصِرُوهُمْ يُبْذُ الْمَجْرِمُ لَوْ يَفْتَدِي مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمِئِذٍ
بِئْتِيهِ ﴿١١﴾

As they are shown them – Some of the friends will be shown others but will not ask them how they are. ‘They are shown them’ is given for *yubassarunahum*, implying that they are forced to see: they do not wish to see their friends, but their eyes fall on them regardless of their intention.

... **the offender will love to be redeemed from the chastisement of that day by his sons!** Yes, the disobedient will wish that he could be redeemed from the chastisement of that awful day at the price of his own sons, the dearest of all people to him, so that they would suffer the chastisement in his place.

And his consort and his brother, (12)

وَصَاحِبَتِهِ وَأَخِيهِ ﴿١٢﴾

That is, he would love to redeem himself by giving his wife for the chastisement, and give his brother just to save himself.

And his kin who sheltered him, (13)

وَقَصِيْبَاتِهِ الَّتِي تُؤْوِيهِ ﴿١٣﴾

And redeem himself at the price of his kin, his close relatives, who supported him and sheltered him in times of difficulty.

And whosoever is in the earth, all of them, that it save him. (14)

وَمَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ يُنْجِيهِ ﴿١٤﴾

He would like to substitute for himself every creature, so that this ransom might save him.

Would such a ransom benefit him, were we to assume him capable of it?

Nay; indeed it is a flame, (15)

كَلَّا إِنَّهَا لَأَنْفٌ لَظَىٰ ﴿١٥﴾

Nay; ... That is, nothing will benefit and nothing will save him.

... **indeed it is a flame**, The fire of hell is pure flame (*ladha*). It means that the offender is for the flames and nothing can save him.

Snatching away at the extremities, (16)

نَزَاعَةً لِّلشَّوْىِ ۚ ﴿١٦﴾

‘Snatching away’ is given for *nazzaṣah*, meaning that the flame greatly overtakes the surface area leaving aside no skin and no flesh. ‘The extremities’ is given for *al-shawa* from the verb *shawa* meaning to roast, as it is the extremities that are roasted by fire.

Calling out ‘he who turned around and turned back, (17)

تَدْعُوا مِّنْ أَدْبَرَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

The fire shall itself call, in the roar and blast of its flames, ‘he who turned around from the truth – that is, put their back to the truth so as to turn away, and turned back from the religion’

‘And amassed and hoarded’ (18)

وَجَمَعَ فَأَوْعَىٰ ﴿١٨﴾

‘And gathered property and wealth and secured it in a hoard, such as in a chest or suchlike, and did not dispense it in obedience to Allah.’

Indeed the human is created avaricious, (19)

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا ﴿١٩﴾

‘Avaricious’ is given for *haluṣ*, meaning to be extreme in greed (*hirs*).

The Most High then defines the voracious by His word:

When the adverse visits him, fretful, (20)

إِذَا مَسَّهُ الشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا ﴿٢٠﴾

When he is subjected to adverse things such as poverty, illness, danger and suchlike, he becomes impatient and fretful, rather than being restrained and looking forward to the relief.

**And when visited by goodness, withholding;
(21)**

وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ الْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا ﴿٢١﴾

When he is subject to the good in life, such as wealth, health, security and status, he is extremely grudging and prevents it reaching the people. He fails to perform the obligatory acts of gratitude in spending freely of his wealth and influence, nor performs the service to the people with his health and security.

Such is human nature and the innate constitution driving him within. However:

Save for the prayers, (22)

إِلَّا الْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

'Prayers' is given for *mushllin*, meaning those who perform the prayer. They connect themselves to Allah, glory be to Him, and raise themselves from the level and temptation of the self or *nafs* through the prayer and performing it, for it is inseparable from belief and the other beautiful qualities.

Those who are constant in their praying; (23)

الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ دَائِمُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

They perform the prayer constantly, for it is the consistent performing of the prayer that reveals to the soul the goodness of the spiritual matters, since the repetition of such performance give rise to the cleansing of the soul; as He has said in a later ayah [#35], 'Those who, they guard their prayer.'

**And those in whose wealth a right is known,
(24)**

وَالَّذِينَ فِي أَمْوَالِهِمْ حَقٌّ مَّعْلُومٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

That is, a portion of their wealth is set aside and given to the poor. It is narrated that by the right known (*haqq maalun*) is meant beneficence other than the *zakaat*, something a man imposes upon himself and separates from his wealth every day or every week.

For the asker and the deprived. (25)

لِلسَّائِلِ وَالْمَحْرُومِ ﴿٢٥﴾

The wealth is given to the person who asks on account of his poverty. And it is given to the deprived (*mahrum*); meaning a person who is poor and without wealth but does not ask people on account of his honour.

And those who confirm the day of requital, (26)

وَالَّذِينَ يُصَدِّقُونَ بِيَوْمِ الدِّينِ ﴿٢٦﴾

That is, they believe in the resurrection and the day of requital. 'Confirm' is given for *yusaddiqun*; perhaps this is to indicate that they heartily confirm all that is to happen on that day.

**And those who are afraid of the chastisement
of their Lord – (27)**

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ مِّنْ عَذَابِ رَبِّهِمْ مُّشْفِقُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

They fear the chastisement of the world and of the hereafter.

**Indeed their Lord's chastisement affords not
security – (28)**

إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّهِمْ غَيْرُ مَأْمُونٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

That is, the future occurrence of His chastisement of the disbelievers and the disobedient is not something to make a person feel secure. So it is not fitting for anyone to feel secure about it and be deceived into persisting on disbelief and sin.

And those who guard their private parts, (29)

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِفُرُوجِهِمْ حَافِظُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

'Guarding them' means not seeing them as permissible for the sinful acts.

Save before their spouses or what their right hands own: for indeed they are blameless. (30)

إِلَّا عَلَىٰ أَزْوَاجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ



The exception before their wives covers the wives before their husbands, of necessity. 'What their right hands own' means bondmaids; ownership is attributed to the right hand as it is the means of acquiring the price with which the bondmaids is purchased. 'Temporary marriage' (*mut'ah*) is included in wives. In these cases there is no blame in using the private parts for the pleasures.

So whosoever reaches for more than that – those, they are the violators. (31)

فَمَنِ اتَّبَعِيَ وَرَاءَ ذَلِكَ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْعَادُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

To seek pleasure in other than what is listed – be it in fornication, homosexuality between men or between women, or masturbation – all is transgression of the right and of the limits of the Divine law, deserving of punishment and chastisement.

And those who are faithful of their trusts and covenants, (32)

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأَمْتِنَتِهِمْ وَعَهْدِهِمْ رَاعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

That is, they neither betray the trusts that are placed with them, nor break their agreements.

And those who are upright in their testimonies, (33)

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ بِشَهَادَتِهِمْ قَائِمُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

When the occasion comes for them to give testimony they give testimony truthfully, not falsely, and they do not flee from giving testimony out of fear or greed.

And those who guard their prayer: (34)

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

It seems that 'guarding' the prayer is performing it properly according to its rules and in the right spirit. And they do so with constancy. Or the earlier ayah (#23, using the term 'constant') is about the optional/recommended prayers (*nawafil*), while this ayah, using the term 'guarding', is about the obligatory prayers, as narrated from Imam al-Baqir, *peace be upon him*.

Those are in gardens, honoured. (35)

أُولَٰئِكَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ مُّكْرَمُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

The believers thus described are in gardens secluded by trees and palaces. They are honoured by Allah, glory be to Him, and His angels, and so are blessed with blessings material and spiritual.

Now, considering that the truth is clear,

So what is with the disbelievers, glaring at thee? (36)

فَمَا لَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا قَبْلَكَ مُهْطِعِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

O Messenger of Allah, what is wrong with the disbelievers and what drives them to do what they do? Glaring is given for *muhtā'in*, meaning to look constantly at a thing without breaking off the stare; which indicates either love or enmity. Here it is the second of these that is intended. The ayah means: what is with the disbelievers that they look at you malignantly with enmity and aggression?

From the right and from the left, in groups? (37)

عَنِ الِّيمِينِ وَعَنِ الشِّمَالِ عِزِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

They would approach the Messenger, group-by-group and gang-by-gang, from his right and his left, while glaring at him. And such is normally the way with people when a reformer appears amongst them: they cleave to each other in groups and stare at him from every direction when he is in a place or passes by a place.

Does each one among them lust to enter a garden of bliss? (38)

أَيُّطْمَعُ كُلُّ امْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَنْ يُدْخَلَ جَنَّةَ نَعِيمٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Do those disbelievers wish to be in a garden of bliss? What a feeble-minded hope they must have, after all their disbelief and stubbornness! After having given vent to their hatred of the Messenger and looked at him with such aggression, do they expect this to have earned them the contentment of Allah, so that He will enter them into His garden?

Nay, We created them from what they know. (39)

كَلَّا إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاهُمْ مِمَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

Nay, ... Nay, they will not enter the garden.

... **We created them from what they know.** Allah created them from an unclean droplet: will whoever is an unclean droplet by origin enter the garden without faith and good deeds? For a thing is measured either by its origins or its actions. Their origin is a dirty droplet, their deeds are disbelief and disobedience, so they are not fit to be entered into the garden.

So I swear not by the Lord of the easts and the wests that We are surely able (40)

فَلَا أَقْسَمُ بِرَبِّ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ إِنَّا لَقَادِرُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

'Not' (*la*) is for negation. The phrase is suggestive of an oath, while it is not an oath – as has been explained. 'Easts' and 'wests' are pluralized on account of how each day the sun rises and sets in a different place.

To substitute them with better than them; and We are not such as to be outrun. (41)

عَلَىٰ أَنْ نُبَدِّلَ خَيْرًا مِنْهُمْ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ ﴿٤١﴾

To substitute them with better than them; ... That is, Allah is in power over them sufficient to destroy them and bring in their place a believing people who would not disobey.

... **and We are not such as to be outrun.** And Allah is not such as to be outrun; no disbeliever can escape Him by running away and putting themselves beyond Him and safe from His chastisement of them, in the way that a worldly ruler can be outrun by a felon who escapes from him and puts himself beyond his punishment.

So leave them to plunge and play, till they meet their day that they are promised: (42)

فَذَرَّهُمْ يُخَوِّضُونَ وَيَلْعَبُونَ حَتَّىٰ يَلْقُوا يَوْمَهُمُ الَّذِي

يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾

The Messenger was to leave those disbelievers to indulge in their vanities and falsehood. 'Plunge' is given for *yakhudhu* meaning to become immersed in water. It is used figuratively for those engaged in falsehood, as if they are immersed in it. And let them play, for play is the doing of things without serious purpose, for the attainment of no end other than the passing of time. Until they meet the day they have been promised, the day of resurrection.

Then He explains that day, glory be to Him, with His word:

The day they leave the tombs speedily, as if they are rushing to their idols, (43)

يَوْمَ تَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ الْأَجْدَاثِ سِرَاعًا كَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَىٰ نُصَبٍ

يُوفُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾

They will be as if in a hurry on account of the terror they are experiencing, for terror makes a person rush towards safety before being caught up in the chastisement. In the world they rushed about so as to observe the festivals of their idolatry, so there too they will rush about after their departure from the graves,

Their gazes humbled, lowliness weighs them down. That is the day that they have been promised. (44)

حَشِيصَةً أَبْصَرُهُمْ تَرَهِقُهُمْ ذِلَّةٌ ذَاكَ الْيَوْمِ الَّذِي كَانُوا

يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

Their gazes humbled ... They will be humbled that day, the signs of their humiliation showing on their faces; for the effects of humiliation appear in the eye. And they will not be able to hold up their gaze that day, in fear and terror.

... lowliness weighs them down ... Lowliness and abasement (*dhilla*) will cover them, for they will be aware of their sins, and that they are to be condemned on their account to the chastisement.

... That is the day that they were promised. They were promised that day while in the world, but they denied it; then they will be delivered to it and discover its chastisement and terror.