

Surah al-Fajr (89)

'The Dawn'

سورة الفجر

This surah owes its name to the prominence within it of the word *al-fajr*, 'the dawn'. Like the other Makkan surahs it deals with the principles of belief. As Surah al-Ghashiyah concluded with an account of the chastisement in the hereafter of those who turn away, this surah opens with an account of their chastisement in the world,

By the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

By the name of Allah ... Beginning by the name of He in whose hand are all things. He is the point of origin and the point of return. Is there anything more worthy of beginning by, than the name of Allah, the Most High?

... the Compassionate, the Merciful, He who by His mercy bestows on all creatures.

By the dawn, (1)

وَالْفَجْرِ ﴿١﴾

An oath by the dawn, the break of day preceding sunrise, when light begins to appear in the eastern sky from about an hour and a half before sunrise [depending on the geographical location].

And ten nights, (2)

وَلَيَالٍ عَشْرٍ ﴿٢﴾

An oath by the ten nights of the month of Hajj (*Dhil-Hijjah*), according to what has been stated in the commentaries. It seems that the oath is by the goodness these events occasion, for the dawn occasions light, while the ten nights are the occasion of worship and obedience.

And the even and the odd, (3)

وَالشَّفَعِ وَالْوَتْرِ ﴿٣﴾

'The even' is given for *al-shaf'*, which is the name of a two-unit prayer that is part of the night-prayer (*shlat al-layl*), while the odd is given for *al-witr*, which is a single-unit prayer that is the final part of the night-prayer. Alternatively it is narrated that *al-shaf'* means the eighth of the month *Dhil-Hijjah* – known as the day of Tarwiyah – and *al-witr* the ninth – known as the day 'Arafah.

And the night when it journeys on; (4)

وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَسْرِ ﴿٤﴾

That is, by the night when it passes on. The object of this oath is not made explicit, but is implied by the words 'Have thou not seen ...' (below). It is: 'Indeed We shall punish the disbelievers.'

Is there in that an oath for the holder of reason? (5)

هَلْ فِي ذَلِكَ قَسَمٌ لِذِي حَجْرٍ ﴿٥﴾

'That' refers to the oaths given in the preceding *aya*ḩ. The question form denotes censure and rebuke, meaning: 'How do you not confirm this word after these oaths.' Reason is given for *hijr*, which is a noun meaning something forbidden, but is also one of the names of reason (*'aql*), on account of how reason forbids whoever has it from doing whatever is unsuitable for him.

Have thou not seen how thy Lord dealt with 'Ad (6)

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِعَادٍ ﴿٦﴾

That is, do thou not know, O Messenger, or O listener, what thy Lord did to the tribe of 'Ad.

Of Iram, holder of the pillars? (7)

إِرَمَ ذَاتِ الْعِمَادِ ﴿٧﴾

Iram is the place in which the ʿaḍ built their splendid buildings. There were two peoples who went by the name of ʿaḍ, one of whom were the ʿaḍ of Iram. This is the people meant in the verse, which clarifies the meaning of the previous verse. By pillars (*ʿimaḍ*) is meant their columned buildings; although the word is also used figuratively, to signify strength and importance.

It is said that one Shidaḍ, of the tribe of ʿaḍ, was a powerful ruler with a vast realm who disbelieved in God. So when he heard about the paradise and its descriptions, he announced that he would build such a place on the earth. And he built it at Iram. What he built was magnificent and beautiful, having palaces and gardens with luxurious furnishings. But when he and his people and troops went to occupy it, Allah destroyed them all. He sent a terrible cry and they were all destroyed.

Whose like had not been created in the lands.
(8)

الَّتِي لَمْ يُخْلَقْ مِثْلُهَا فِي الْبِلَادِ ﴿٨﴾

Whose like had not been created ... That is, the like of the tribe of ʿaḍ had not been created before, in terms of power and wealth and suchlike; or the like of Iram had not been created before, in terms of magnificence, splendour and beauty.

... *in the lands* (*al-bilāḍ*): it would appear that what is meant is that such had not been created in those times, rather than generally applying to all times.

And Thamud, who cut through rock for the valley? (9)

وَتَمُودَ الَّذِينَ جَابُوا الصَّخْرَ بِالْوَادِ ﴿٩﴾

That is, have you not seen how your Lord treated the Thamud, the tribe of the Prophet Ṣāḥih; *peace be upon him*. They quarried rock from the mountains and brought it to the Qara valley in which they lived, and built with it houses made of stone.

And Pharaoh, having the stakes? (10)

وَفِرْعَوْنَ ذِي الْأَوْتَادِ ﴿١٠﴾

It is said that stakes (*awtaḍ*) would be driven through the bodies of those he considered criminals, and they would be left there until dead. The Pharaoh who is meant is the Pharaoh of the time of Moses, *peace be upon him*. In these *ayaḥ* Allah, glory be to Him, has chosen as examples the strongest nations of their time, so as to explain that because they were insolent and opposed the commands of Allah, glory be to Him, He destroyed them, and all their power did not benefit them in the least, and that the disbelievers of the time of the Prophet, the Messenger of Allah – far weaker than those cited – would share the some fate if they persisted in their arrogance and disbelief.

Those who transgressed in the lands, (11)

الَّذِينَ طَعَوْا فِي الْبِلَادِ ﴿١١﴾

That is, they opposed their Prophets, and acted in disbelief and sin.

And increased in them corruption; (12)

فَاكْتَرُوا فِيهَا الْفَسَادَ ﴿١٢﴾

That is, they increased corruption in their cities with murder and debauchery and suchlike.

So thy Lord poured upon them the lash of chastisement. (13)

فَصَبَّ عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّكَ سَوْطَ عَذَابٍ ﴿١٣﴾

Here the chastisement is expressed as a lash on account of the severity of pain that a lash inflicts. 'Poured' (*ṣabbā*) is used on account of how a lash, being supple, comes into contact with the body by degrees, resembling the effect of pouring, which also makes contact by degrees. The elegance of this expression is clear.

Indeed thy Lord is at the vantage-point. (14)

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِبِالْمِرْصَادِ ﴿١٤﴾

The address is in the singular. 'The vantage-point' is given for *al-mirshad*, meaning a place where a man keeps watch on another, or an opposing force, without being seen himself. This is a metonymy suggestive of the fact that God, glory be to Him, is aware of mankind; so whoever disbelieves and works evil is watched by God, for nothing escapes Him.

The human being rebels in this way – such that this becomes his fate – when he is not guided by the guidance of Allah, the Most High.

***But the human, when his Lord tries him by honouring him and blessing him, says, 'My Lord has honoured me.'* (15)**

فَأَمَّا الْإِنْسَانُ إِذَا مَا ابْتَلَيْنَاهُ رَبُّهُ فَأَكْرَمَهُ وَنَعَّمَهُ فَيَقُولُ
رَبِّيَ أَكْرَمَنِ ﴿١٥﴾

'The human' in this verse means he who is not guided by the light of faith. When he is tested with the lightest of tests, still he fails his test. Allah gives him a noble, honourable position along with plentiful abundance, so as to test him and see whether he lives up to the responsibilities of wealth and position or not. But he exhilarates at it and considers it a fitting reward for himself, and that he deserves what has been given to him. He becomes conceited and considers that God has chosen him for such blessings, losing sight of the fact that they are a test for him.

***But when He tries him by limiting his provision, he says 'My Lord scorns me.'* (16)**

وَأَمَّا إِذَا مَا ابْتَلَيْنَاهُ فَقَدَرَ عَلَيْهِ رِزْقَهُ فَيَقُولُ رَبِّي أَهْنَنِ ﴿١٦﴾

When Allah, glory be to Him, tests him with poverty and hardship and straitens his provision, the human takes it amiss and imagines that Allah is slighting him, and does not perceive it as a test. This is in contrast to the believer, who sees every condition that comes to him as a trial and a test; he fears wealth and plenty as it may cause him to be disobedient and not be thankful, while he is not saddened by poverty for he counts it as a test that will, if he is patient and steadfast, raise his station.

Nay, but ye honour not the orphan, (17)

كَلَّا بَلْ لَا تُكْرِمُونَ الْيَتِيمَ ﴿١٧﴾

Nay, the affair is not as this person supposes. The provision of bounties is not a sign of honour; while poverty is not a sign of Allah's disfavour; but rather all such conditions are for the purpose of examination. But they are ignorant of the logic of bestowing and withholding, heedless of the fact that it is all for the purpose of testing them. Thus it is that they do not perform the obligatory deeds of giving, not even to the orphan. The obligation of poverty, that is to say patience, forbearance, is not mentioned since the discussion is directed at the wealthy amongst the people, who resembled the ^cAd, the Thamud and the Pharaoh.

And urge not the feeding of the poor, (18)

وَلَا تَحْضُرُونَ عَلَى طَعَامِ الْمَسْكِينِ ﴿١٨﴾

That is, you do not urge each other to feed your poor.

And ye eat the inheritance, devouring it whole, (19)

وَتَأْكُلُونَ الْوَرَثَ أَكْلًا لَّمًّا ﴿١٩﴾

That is, ye do so without observing the rights of the deceased from inheritance, the right of Allah, or the rights of other relatives entitled to it. Women, children and the weak were all excluded from inheritance, and received nothing. This shows the disbelievers' inordinate desire for wealth, and their viewing it not as a means of trial and examination, but as a sign of the divine favour upon them.

And ye love wealth with an ardent love. (20)

وَتُحِبُّونَ الْمَالَ حُبًّا جَمًّا ﴿٢٠﴾

That is, they loved wealth with a love that was intense and abounding, and so would not spend it in any of the obligatory or desirable ways; as is the way with those who do not believe in Allah and the day of resurrection, and do not see wealth as a test of whether they obey the command of Allah.

Nay, when the earth is flattened; flat, flat, (21)

كَلَّا إِذَا دُكَّتِ الْأَرْضُ دَكًّا دَكًّا ﴿٢١﴾

Nay, the affair is not as you suppose without there being a consequence for your present deeds. For whoever sees himself as honoured by Allah belittles the performance of the duties required by his station and affairs. But the day will come when the earth is flattened, and everything is ground into dust upon its surface – the mountains, hills and everything built upon it – and all will be perfectly flat.

And thy Lord comes, and the angels, in rows, in rows, (22)

وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا ﴿٢٢﴾

That is, the order (*amr*) of your Lord will come. Just as kings in the world appear in all their majesty and glory, on the resurrection day all majesty and glory will be that of Allah, glory be to Him, and He will appear in all His glory, but as Allah is above and free of material substance, that which will appear are the effects of His glory. The angels will come that day arrayed in row after row, rank after rank, file after file.

And hell will be brought that day, the day when the human remembers; but how will remembrance be for him? (23)

وَجِئْنَا بِيَوْمَيْدٍ يُجَهَنَّمُ^ع يَوْمَيْدٍ يَتَذَكَّرُ الْإِنْسَانُ وَأَنَّى لَهُ
الذِّكْرَىٰ ﴿٢٣﴾

That is, the fires of hell will be dragged to the raising-ground after being held ready for the disbelievers and the sinners at some distance. Then will man remember: he will be admonished and will fear and be guided [to recognise the truth];

... ***but how will remembrance be for him?*** But how will the remembrance benefit him? For the time when remembering is of benefit will have expired. That day is the day of recompense, not of deeds.

He says: 'O would that I had sent ahead for my life!' (24)

يَقُولُ يَلَيْتَنِي قَدَّمْتُ لِحَيَاتِي ﴿٢٤﴾

That is, the sinful man will wish that he had sent good deeds ahead of himself for his eternal life. But his wishing will not benefit him.

That day, no one chastises as His chastisement, (25)

فَيَوْمَئِذٍ لَا يُعَذِّبُ عَذَابُهُ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٥﴾

That is, none can chastise like the chastisement of Allah, for His chastisement is not like the chastisements of people, some of others, but entirely different.

And no one binds as His binding. (26)

وَلَا يُوثِقُ وَثَاقَهُ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٦﴾

On that day He will bind in a way no other can bind.

The believer is then addressed, in His word:

O thou the confident soul! (27)

يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ﴿٢٧﴾

That is, untroubled by the terror of that day, on account of its faith and good deeds while in the world.

Return to thy Lord, content, and contented, (28)

ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَةً ﴿٢٨﴾

That is: return to His rewards, while you are in the condition of being pleased and content with Allah, glory be to Him, and while you are pleasing to Him and He is content with you on account of your faith and deeds.

So enter amongst My servants, (29)

فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي ﴿٢٩﴾

That is: enter the ranks of My servants.

And enter My garden. (30)

وَادْخُلِي جَنَّتِي ﴿٣٠﴾

You are in My contentment and in My paradise. It seems that the address is made to the 'soul' (*nafs*) as a mode of conveying honour, in that it is the soul that bears the troubles of the body; and it is appropriate, therefore, that it is the soul that is rewarded.