

Sura 88: Al-Ghashiya (The Overwhelming Event)

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

Verses 1 to 26:

1. *Has the story of the overwhelming event reached you?*
2. *On that Day some faces will be downcast,*
3. *Toiling, weary,*
4. *Scorched by burning fire,*
5. *Given to drink from a boiling spring,*
6. *No food will there be for them except thorns,*
7. *Which will neither nourish nor satisfy hunger.*
8. *On that Day other faces will be radiant,*
9. *Pleased with their endeavor,*
10. *In a lofty Garden,*
11. *Where they will hear no vain talk,*
12. *Wherein is a flowing spring,*
13. *Wherein are raised couches,*
14. *And goblets set at hand.*
15. *And cushions set in a row,*
16. *And carpets spread out.*
17. *Do they not look at the camels, how they are created?*
18. *And at the sky, how it is raised high?*
19. *And at the mountains, how they are firmly fixed?*
20. *And at the earth, how it is spread out?*
21. *Therefore, remind them, you are only a reminder.*
22. *You are not a controller over them.*
23. *But if any turns away and disbelieves;*
24. *God will punish him with the greatest torment.*
25. *Surely to Us is their return,*
26. *And upon Us rests their reckoning.*

This Sura has been revealed in Mecca. Hawwa suggests that the Sura is composed of two sections. The first section is comprised of the first sixteen verses; and the second section is comprised of verses seventeen to twenty-six. The first section describes the torment that the disbelievers should expect on the Day of Judgment; and the bliss that the believers will enjoy on that Day. The second section, discusses the signs of the power of God and it also clarifies the role of the Prophet (PBUH).

This Sura has a deep calm rhythm that induces people to think, reflect, and hope. It also evokes feelings of fear and apprehension of the reckoning on the Day of Reckoning. It takes the human heart on two tours; one around the Hereafter, its vast universe and its impressive scenes; the other is around the signs of God in the vast universe exposed to everyone to see. At the end it reminds people with the limitless power of God and the inevitability of the reckoning.

“Has the story of the overwhelming event reached you?” The Sura starts with this rhetorical question to bring the hearts back to God, to remind them with His signs, and to remind them of the inevitability of the reckoning. The Day of Judgment is given a new description, the overwhelming event. This is the calamity that will overwhelm the people with its horror. The question is addressed in the first place to the Prophet (PBUH) but it is also addressed to anyone who recites the Qur’an or listens to it being recited.

“On that Day some faces will be downcast, toiling, weary, scorched by burning fire, given to drink from a boiling spring, no food will there be for them except thorns, which will neither nourish nor satisfy hunger.” The Sura starts with the description of the scenes of torment, which is more fitting to the title. On that Day, some faces will look humiliated and exhausted. They worked hard but they only ended with a great loss. They worked hard for the benefit of the worldly life and did not work for the sake of God. They did not achieve happiness in the worldly life and they lost the reward in the Hereafter. They will be burnt in Hell, drinking boiling water and eating thorns or fruits from a tree that grows in Hell. It is obvious that we have no way of perceiving the nature of the torment in the Hereafter. However, these descriptions give us an idea that the torment in the Hereafter is beyond our imagination. It is a torment that combines humiliation, weakness, disappointment, and sorts of physical agony.

On the other side, we find a description of the bliss, *“On that Day other faces will be radiant, pleased with their endeavor, in a lofty Garden, where they will hear no vain talk, wherein is a flowing spring, wherein are raised couches, and goblets set at hand, and cushions set in a row, and carpets spread out.”* Here are faces which are radiant with the light of bliss, pleased with their endeavors, and enjoying what they received. They will be in a lofty garden, lofty in its place and lofty in its rank. They will not listen to vain talk. They will have a flowing spring. They will be resting on high couches, drinking from goblets within easy reach. They will be reclining on cushions. These are all signs of affluence and comfort that people are familiar with. They are only mentioned to give the people a taste of the pleasures of paradise.

“Do they not look at the camels, how they are created? And at the sky, how it is raised high? And at the mountains, how they are firmly fixed? And at the earth, how it is spread out?” These four short verses cite examples of the environment that the Arabs were familiar with. In addition, they describe some of the examples of God’s creation. The verses invite people to reflect on the miracle behind each of these creations.

The Sura concludes by an address to the Prophet (PBUH) defining his mission, *“Therefore, remind them, you are only a reminder. You are not a controller over them.”* The Prophet’s (PBUH) task was to remind. He should remind people of the Hereafter using God’s signs in the universe. The Prophet (PBUH) was not sent as a controller or keeper over people. He could not control the hearts of people. Only God can control people’s hearts. God will punish those who will turn away, *“But if any turns away and disbelieves; God will punish him with the greatest torment. Surely to Us is their return, and upon Us rests their reckoning.”* Certainly they will all return to God and He will reward each one appropriately.

Religion cannot be enforced by authority, power, or force. Religion is a personal choice. That choice will be judged by God on the Day of Judgement.