

Sura 68: Al-Qalam (The Pen)

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

Verses 1 to 52:

1. *Nun. By the pen and that which they write.*
2. *By the Blessing of your Lord, you are not mad.*
3. *And most surely you will have an unfailing reward.*
4. *And you are of a great moral character.*
5. *And you will see and they will see*
6. *Which of you is afflicted with madness.*
7. *Indeed, your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path; and He knows best those who are guided.*
8. *Therefore, do not obey the deniers.*
9. *They wish that you would compromise, so that they may compromise.*
10. *Do not yield to any contemptible swearer,*
11. *A slanderer, going about with calumnies,*
12. *Hinderer of good, transgressor, and sinful;*
13. *Cruel, and above all of this, an imposter;*
14. *Because he is a possessor of wealth and children.*
15. *When Our revelations are recited to him, he says, "Mere fables of former people."*
16. *We shall brand him on the nose.*
17. *Indeed, We have tried them as We tried the people of the garden, when they vowed that they would harvest its fruits the next morning,*
18. *And made no allowance (for the will of God);*
19. *Then there came on the (garden) a visitation from your Lord, (which swept away) all around, while they were asleep.*
20. *So the (garden) became, by the morning, like a dark and desolate spot, (whose fruits had been gathered).*
21. *As the morning broke they called out, one to another,*
22. *Saying, "Go early to your field if you are you going to harvest (the fruits)."*
23. *So they went off, saying one to another in low tones,*
24. *"No needy man shall enter it today."*
25. *And in the morning they went, bent on their purpose.*
26. *But when they saw the (garden), they said, "We have surely lost our way.*
27. *No, indeed we have been deprived."*
28. *The best among them said, "I said to you, 'Why you do not glorify (God)?'"*
29. *They said, "Glory to our Lord. Verily we have been wrongdoers."*
30. *Then they turned, one against another, in reproach.*
31. *They said, "Alas for us, we have indeed transgressed.*
32. *It may be that our Lord will give us in exchange a better (garden) than this; for we do turn to Him (in repentance)."*
33. *Such was the torment. And verily the torment of the Hereafter is greater if they did but know.*
34. *Verily, for those who remain conscious of God are Gardens of bliss with their Lord.*
35. *Shall We then treat those who submit the same way We treat the guilty?*
36. *What is the matter with you? How do you judge?*

37. *Or do you have a Scripture, from which you learn,*
38. *That you shall indeed have all that you choose?*
39. *Or do you have a covenant on oath from Us, reaching to the Day of Judgment, that you shall have whatever you shall demand?*
40. *Ask them, which of them will vouch for that?*
41. *Or do they have other gods? Then let them bring their other gods if they are truthful.*
42. *On the day when the shin will be exposed, and they will be invited to prostrate, but they will be unable.*
43. *Their eyes will be downcast; ignominy will cover them. And they used to be invited to prostration while they were sound.*
44. *Leave Me (to deal) with those who deny this statement. We shall lead them on by steps from where they do not know.*
45. *I will grant them respite, truly My scheme is firm.*
46. *Or do you ask them for a reward, so that they are burdened with debt?*
47. *Or do they have (knowledge) of the unseen, so they can write it down?*
48. *So persevere waiting for the command of your Lord, and be not like the companion of the fish, when he cried out in agony.*
49. *Had not the Blessing from his Lord reached him, he would indeed have been cast off on the naked shore, while he was despised.*
50. *But his Lord chose him and placed him among the righteous.*
51. *And indeed, those who disbelieve would almost smite you with their eyes when they hear the reminder, and they say, "Most surely he is mad."*
52. *But it is only a reminder to the worlds. (68: 1-52)*

We cannot ascertain the time of revelation of this Sura. In the chronological order of revelation, it has been narrated that this Sura occupies the second place after Surat Al-‘Alaq (Chapter 96). However, based on the topic discussed in the Sura, we tend to believe that it has been revealed after the Prophet (PBUH) started to call openly to Islam which only happened after a period of three years from the start of the revelation. Some narrations indicated that verses 17 to 33 and 42 to 50 were revealed in Medina, but we think that this is farfetched. We believe that the whole Sura was revealed in Mecca. It should be noted that the first few verses and the last few verses deal with one issue: the insolent response of the idolaters of Mecca to the call of Islam.

Hawwa points out some similarities between this Sura and other Suras in the Quran. Each one of the three Suras Sad, Qaf, and Nun starts with one letter: Sad, Qaf, and Nun, respectively. The three Suras also have similar ending. The last verse in the three Suras refers to the Qur’an as a reminder. Surat Sad ends by the verse, *“It is but a reminder to all people. And you shall certainly know the truth of it after a while.”* Surat Qaf ends with verse, *“therefore remind by the Quran whoever fears My threat.”* Surat Nun ends with verse, *“But it is only a reminder to the worlds.”* However, the main theme of each Sura is different.

“Nun. By the pen and that which they write,” God makes an oath with the letter “Nun,” the pen, and writing. It is clear that the three are closely related. The oath emphasizes the importance of these tools in learning. This oath was made at a time when the Arabs were mostly illiterate; few of them were able to read and write. It was meant to prepare this nation for the role that God wanted it to play. The oath emphasizes two facts, *“by the Blessing of your Lord, you are not mad.”* It emphasizes the fact that Muhammad (PBUH) has been blessed by the grace of his Lord and he is not a mad man as the idolaters claimed. The tone of the address is endearing, *“your*

Lord.” It is amazing how these people could make such a claim about the Prophet (PBUH). They have known him all his life. They used to admire his wisdom, his honesty, and his integrity. They called him, “The honest, the trustworthy.”

God promised him a perpetual reward, “*And most surely you will have an unfailing reward,*” and He also bestowed on him the greatest honor, “*And you are of a great moral character.*” This was a rank bestowed on Muhammad (PBUH) alone. No one else earned this highest honor. The verse also emphasizes the importance of moral characters for humankind. Ethical behavior is an integral and clear component of Islam. The Prophet (PBUH) has been quoted to have said, “I was sent to perfect the ethical behavior.”

God then reassured His Messenger (PBUH) about the future of the message, “*And you will see and they will see, which of you is afflicted with madness. Indeed, your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path; and He knows best those who are guided.*” These verses warn the idolaters and reassure the believers and the Prophet (PBUH). The verses promise to expose the reality regarding the claim of the disbelievers, because God knows everything.

The following verses expose the tactics of the idolaters in fighting the Prophet (PBUH), “*Therefore, do not obey the deniers. They wish that you would compromise, so that they may compromise.*” They wanted to reach a compromise with the Prophet (PBUH). No believer can compromise regarding his faith. One cannot pick and choose the components of the doctrine. The doctrine has to be accepted as a whole. There are several narrations which described the details of the deals that the idolaters offered the Prophet (PBUH) which would make Islam acceptable to them. However, the Prophet (PBUH) stood firm and never compromised the faith. He did not accept any of these compromises. Even when he and the believers were besieged in Mecca and persecuted by the idolaters, they remained steadfast in their position. Several stories have been narrated about the different strategies which were adopted by the idolaters of Quraish to force the Prophet (PBUH) to compromise. Sometimes they threatened to kill him and sometimes they promised him honor and wealth. When the Prophet’s (PBUH) uncle Abu Taleb tried to mediate between him and the chiefs of Quraish, the Prophet (PBUH) has been quoted to have said, “My uncle, even if they were able to place the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left hand so that I stop calling people to Islam, I would not do it.” His uncle was so impressed with the sincerity and steadfastness of his nephew, he told the Prophet (PBUH) to continue on his path and continued to offer his protection to the Prophet (PBUH).

The Prophet (PBUH) was then commanded not to listen to the rejecters, “*Do not yield to any contemptible swearer, a slanderer, going about with calumnies, hinderer of good, transgressor, and sinful; cruel, and above all of this, an imposter; because he is a possessor of wealth and children. When Our revelations are recited to him, he says, ‘Mere fables of former people.’ We shall brand him on the nose.*” It has been narrated that these verses refer to Al-Waleed ibn Al-Mughirah, one of the chiefs of Quraish. He was aggressively opposing the Prophet (PBUH) and barring people from listening to him.

The verses attach to him nine bad characters.

1. The verses describe him as a liar, he frequently used oaths in his speech to convince people because he knew that people did not trust him.
2. He is contemptible. He has no self-respect.
3. He was a slanderer.
4. He used to go around spreading calumnies.

5. He is a hinderer of good.
6. He was a transgressor.
7. He is an aggressor.
8. He is sinful.
9. He is cruel. He is an imposter.

God gave him wealth and children but he was ungrateful and he rejected the revelations of God when they were recited to him. God promised to punish him severely, *“We shall brand him on the nose.”* The Arabs used the word nose to refer metaphorically to the dignity. They say a person has a high nose in reference to a dignified person. Branding a person on the nose is a threat to humiliate that person. Such statement would have had a tremendous impact on an arrogant person like al-Waleed.

The following verses relate a story, which seems to be familiar to the Arabs at that time. The story is about the consequences of showing ingratitude to God, *“Indeed, We have tried them as We tried the people of the garden, when they vowed that they would harvest its fruits the next morning, And made no allowance (for the will of God); then there came on the (garden) a visitation from your Lord, (which swept away) all around, while they were asleep. So the (garden) became, by the morning, like a dark and desolate spot, (whose fruits had been gathered). As the morning broke they called out, one to another saying, ‘Go early to your field if you are you going to harvest (the fruits).’ So they went off, saying one to another in low tones, ‘No needy man shall enter it today.’ And in the morning they went, bent on their purpose. But when they saw the (garden), they said, ‘We have surely lost our way. No, indeed we have been deprived.’ The best among them said, ‘I said to you, “Why you do not glorify (God)?”’ They said, ‘Glory to our Lord. Verily we have been wrongdoers.’ Then they turned, one against another, in reproach. They said, ‘Alas for us, we have indeed transgressed. It may be that our Lord will give us in exchange a better (garden) than this; for we do turn to Him (in repentance.)’ Such was the torment. And verily the torment of the Hereafter is greater if they did but know.”*

The verses tell the story of a group of young men who inherited a garden. Their father used to give some of its harvest in charity to poor people. When he died the children decided to keep all the harvest for themselves. They decided to go very early in the morning to harvest the fruits before any poor person would approach them for a charity. They decided not to give any of the harvest in charity as was the habit of their father. God destroyed their plants while they were asleep at night. They woke up early in the morning and went surreptitiously to harvest the garden. When they reached the location of their garden, they found a barren land in its place. Their first reaction was that they must have made a mistake and went to a different place. But they soon realized that this was the wreckage of their garden after it has been destroyed. One of them, who seems to be the wisest among them reminded them of something he had told them when they were planning to cut off the poor. He said, *“I said to you, ‘Why you do not glorify (God)?”*” They suddenly realized their fault. They responded, *“Glory to our Lord. Verily we have been wrongdoers.”* They started blaming each other. Then they confessed their sin and asked for forgiveness. This was their punishment in this life, but the torment in the Hereafter is more severe. This was the message sent to the idolaters of Mecca. They were being tested as others were tested before them. On the other hand, those who are conscious of God will be rewarded generously, *“Verily, for those who remain conscious of God are Gardens of bliss with their Lord.”*

The Quran addressed the disbelievers directly, *“Shall We then treat those who submit the same way We treat the guilty? What is the matter with you? How do you judge? Or do you have a Scripture, from which you learn, that you shall indeed have all that you choose? Or do you have a covenant on oath from Us, reaching to the Day of Judgment, that you shall have whatever you shall demand? Ask them, which of them will vouch for that? Or do they have other gods? Then let them bring their other gods if they are truthful.”* A rhetorical question was posed to the idolaters, “Is it reasonable that the believers and the disbelievers would be treated similarly?” If that is what they expected, then another question follows: what is the basis for your expectations? The Quran then mocked the idolaters. Did they base their expectations on a scripture that they received before? Or is it their whims that dictated such an expectation? Did they have a covenant with God that guaranteed these expectations? Or do they have other gods? Let them bring their gods if such gods did exist.

Then a warning of what they will see on the Day of Judgment was issued, *“On the day when the shin will be exposed, and they will be invited to prostrate, but they will be unable. Their eyes will be downcast; ignominy will cover them. And they used to be invited to prostration while they were sound.”* The expression, *“the shin will be exposed,”* is a figure of speech which is used to denote a difficult time that will be encountered. This is the difficult time that they will encounter on the Day of Judgment. On that day they will be asked to prostrate but they will be unable to prostrate. They will be humiliated and they will be reminded that this is the punishment which they earned because they rejected guidance to which they were invited during their lifetime.

The warning is repeated, *“Leave Me (to deal) with those who deny this statement.”* Who can withstand God’s punishment? God has a plan for those who rejected guidance, *“We shall lead them on by steps from where they do not know. I will grant them respite, truly My scheme is firm.”* More rhetorical questions were posed. Were they asked to pay for guidance? *“Or do you ask them for a reward, so that they are burdened with debt?”* Or did they know something of the unseen, so that they were not afraid of God’s punishment? *“Or do they have (knowledge) of the unseen, so they can write it down?”*

The verses reassure the Prophet (PBUH) and the believers that they should not be worried about the fight with the disbelievers. God manages the battle between truth and falsehood. The disbelievers are fighting God and He will take care of them. These verses were revealed in the early days of Islam, when Muslims were few and weak, to establish the principle that the disbelievers’ fight is with God. The believers may have a role to play but it is a limited role and its objective is to test the perseverance of the believers.

A command to the Prophet (PBUH) to persevere was then issued, *“So persevere waiting for the command of your Lord, and be not like the companion of the fish, when he cried out in agony. Had not the Blessing from his Lord reached him, he would indeed have been cast off on the naked shore, while he was despised. But his Lord chose him and placed him among the righteous.”* These verses allude to the story of Prophet Jonah (Yunus; PBUH) which has been mentioned in Surat As-Saffat (Chapter 37). Reciting the story here is part of the necessary preparation for Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to enable him to complete his mission. Prophet Jonah (PBUH) was sent by God to a town to guide its people to the straight path. They did not respond to his call quickly enough and he became impatient. He left the town and boarded a ship. The weather turned rough and the sailors needed to lighten the ship’s load. They decided to take lots to find out who should be thrown overboard to lighten the ship’s load. When the lot was cast, it happened to be Prophet Jonah’s (PBUH) turn. He was thrown overboard and a whale

swallowed him. When he was in the belly of the whale he prayed God saying, “*There is no deity but You, glory be to You, I have been indeed a wrongdoer.*” God saved him and commanded the whale to spit him alive. God then chose him and made him one of the righteous. This was a lesson in perseverance given to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The Sura is concluded with an image of the rage which engulfed the disbelievers as they were being invited to Islam. When they looked at the Prophet (PBUH), their looks were full of hate and anger; it could have made him slip and fall. Their words were not less harsh than their looks, “*And indeed, those who disbelieve would almost smite you with their eyes when they hear the reminder, and they say, ‘Most surely he is mad.’*”

But this Quran is only a reminder, “*But it is only a reminder to the worlds.*” One should reflect on the wording, “*a reminder to the worlds.*” The Message from its first day was intended for the whole world. It was not meant to be a local message and later evolved. It was meant to be a universal message since its inception.