

Sura 70: Al-Ma'arij (The Ways of Ascent)

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

Verses 1 to 44:

1. *A questioner asked about the imminent torment,*
2. *For the disbelievers, which none can repel,*
3. *From God, Lord of the Ways of Ascent.*
4. *The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a Day the measure of which is fifty thousand years.*
5. *But persevere (Muhammad) graciously.*
6. *They see that (Day) indeed as a far-off (event).*
7. *But We see it (quite) near.*
8. *The Day when the sky will be like molten brass,*
9. *And the mountains will be like wool,*
10. *And no close friend will ask his close friend.*
11. *Though they will be put in sight of each other, the criminal wishes he would be able to redeem himself from the torment of that Day by (sacrificing) his children,*
12. *And his spouse, and his brother,*
13. *And his kindred who sheltered him,*
14. *And everyone on earth, if that would deliver him.*
15. *By no means, it is the raging fire.*
16. *It strips away the skin;*
17. *Inviting him who turned his back and fled,*
18. *And hoarded (wealth) and withheld it.*
19. *Truly humankind was created anxious.*
20. *Fretful when evil touches him.*
21. *And niggardly when good reaches him;*
22. *Except those who pray*
23. *And who remain constant at their prayer.*
24. *And in whose wealth there is a fixed portion,*
25. *For the beggar and the destitute;*
26. *And those who believe in the Day of Judgment.*
27. *And those who fear the torment of their Lord;*
28. *Indeed, the torment of their Lord is not that from which one is safe;*
29. *And those who guard their chastity,*
30. *Except with their wives, and those whom their right hands possess, for they are not to be blamed.*
31. *But those who trespass beyond this are transgressors;*
32. *And those who keep their pledges and their covenant;*
33. *And those who are upright in their testimonies;*
34. *And those who strictly guard their prayer.*
35. *These will dwell in gardens, honored.*
36. *But what is the matter with those who disbelieve that they hasten on around you,*
37. *From the right and from the left, in crowds?*

38. *Does every man of them long to enter the Garden of Bliss?*
39. *By no means, We have created them from what they know.*
40. *I swear by the Lord of every sunrise and every sunset that We are certainly able,*
41. *To replace them by better than them. And we are not to be overcome.*
42. *So leave them to wallow in vain talk, until they encounter that Day of theirs which they have been promised;*
43. *The Day when they will emerge from the tombs in a rush, as though they were hurrying towards a target.*
44. *Their eyes lowered in dejection, ignominy covering them. This is the Day which they were promised. (70: 1 – 44)*

This is an episode in the slow healing process which the Quran used to deal with the ailments which afflicted the human soul in the age of ignorance. It was one of the battles which were part of the long struggle by the Quran to change the hearts of people and to remove the rust that accumulated on them during the long ages of ignorance. The main issue that the Sura deals with is the inevitability of the Hereafter and the torment that the disbelievers should expect.

The concept of the Hereafter was one of the most difficult concepts for the idolaters of Mecca to grasp and accept. Their reaction to the concept, when it was mentioned to them, was a mixture of amazement, denial, and resistance. They challenged the Prophet (pbuh) to bring about the Day of Judgment or to tell them when it will happen. The Sura cites one of these challenges. Someone came to the Prophet (pbuh) and asked him about the Hereafter, *“A questioner asked about the imminent torment, for the disbelievers.”* The verses continued to emphasize the inevitability of the torment in the Hereafter. Such torment will be inescapable and it will be inflicted by the Lord of the Ways of Ascent, *“none can repel, from God, Lord of the Ways of Ascent.”*

“The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a Day the measure of which is fifty thousand years.” The Day of Judgment will be a long day. On that Day the angels and Gabriel (pbuh) will ascend. The objective of highlighting the ascension of the angels and Gabriel (pbuh) is to draw the attention to the importance of that day. The way the angels ascend, the duties that they perform, or where will they be ascending are all parts of the unseen. The length of the day mentioned in the verse could be the literal length; or it could be a figure of speech to highlight the facts mentioned in the following verses, *“But persevere (Muhammad) graciously. They see that (Day) indeed as a far-off (event). But We see it (quite) near.”* Gracious perseverance is the kind of perseverance that a confident person who accepts God’s decrees with content should exercise.

The following verses describe some of the characteristics of this day, *“The Day when the sky will be like molten brass, and the mountains will be like wool.”* This indicates that on this Day there will be cosmic changes that will change the characteristics of the universe as we know it.

“And no close friend will ask his close friend, though they will be put in sight of each other, the criminal wishes he would be able to redeem himself from the torment of that Day by (sacrificing) his children, and his spouse, and his brother, and his kindred who sheltered him, and everyone

on earth, if that would deliver him.” Everyone will be busy with his own affairs. No one will care about the other. The criminal will wish if he could sacrifice anyone to redeem himself.

But he will not be able to do so, and he will have to meet his doom, *“By no means, it is the raging fire.”* It is a very terrifying scene indeed. This fire will, *“strip away the skin.”* It is a live fire that will invite him who, *“turned his back and fled, and hoarded (wealth) and withheld it.”* The emphasis in this Sura, as well as in the previous Sura, on helping the needy and avoiding niggardliness indicates that the prevalent atmosphere in Mecca at that time was an atmosphere where people were competing together to amass wealth. The rich were concerned with getting more wealth and the poor were forgotten. No one was concerned about the poor and the needy. Social injustice and exploitation of the poor were the dominant features of the society. The Quran continued the fight to change this.

The few following verses focus on the nature of the human being, *“Truly humankind was created anxious; fretful when evil touches him; and niggardly when good reaches him.”* The Quran paints a very accurate image of the human being when his heart becomes devoid of faith. Such a person will be anxious and impatient. He will be fretful when an affliction touches him. Sadness will overwhelm him and he will see no end for the adversity that afflicted him. He will think that his suffering will continue forever. He has no support to rely upon. He does not understand the dynamics of the provision and how it is controlled by God. Similarly, when he is blessed by bounties, he thinks that he earned these bounties as a result of his own work. He does not show gratitude for the Provider. He will hoard the wealth which God gave him for fear of losing it if he spends some of it in helping the poor. He is unhappy whether he is in a state of affliction or in a state of affluence.

The believers are saved from this destiny, *“except those who pray.”* They are secure in their faith, safe in their reliance on God. The believers persevere when they are afflicted; and they show gratitude when they are blessed. The traits of those believers are then listed. They are, *“constant at their prayer.”* Prayer is one of the pillars of Islam; it is a sign of faith, and it is a medium for communication with God. It is an expression of the ultimate submission to God. The constancy in prayer indicates the continuous connection between the believer and God. They assign a portion of their wealth to help those who ask and those who are needy, *“and in whose wealth there is a fixed portion, for the beggar and the destitute.”* Most probably this refers to the poor-dues (Zakat). Or it may refer to the general concept of charity. These people have dedicated part of their money over and beyond the prescribed obligatory poor-dues to combat the niggardliness of their souls and to express their gratitude for the blessings of God.

They, *“believe in the Day of Judgment.”* This trait is directly related to the main subject of the Sura. In the meantime, it describes one of the essential traits of the believer; believing in the Day of Judgment is an integral component of faith. It has a direct impact on the life style of people. A person who believes in the Day of Judgment considers the Hereafter as an extension to this life, while the person who rejects the Day of Judgment focuses only on this life. These two will adopt different life styles. The former will base his calculations on the gain and loss in the two lives, while the latter will only be concerned about the gain and loss in this life.

Another level of faith that goes beyond believing in the Day of Judgment is the fear of displeasing God, *“and those who fear the torment of their Lord. Indeed, the torment of their Lord is not that from which one is safe.”* That implies that the person measures everything he does using one standard; the standard of pleasing God.

They, *“guard their chastity, except with their wives, and those whom their right hands possess, for they are not to be blamed. But those who trespass beyond this are transgressors.”* This guarantees the moral purity of the individual and the community. Islam wants to build communities based on moral purity and ethical cleanliness. Such communities require that intimate relationships between the sexes are conducted within an acceptable framework and not left to uncontrolled desires and whims. These relationships should not be considered as means for the satisfaction of animal urges only. The verse mentions marriage as an institution within which these relations can be practiced. A reference is made also to relationships with slave girls. At the time of advent of Islam, slavery was a well-established institution in the world. However, Islam abolished all ways of acquiring slaves except for those obtained as captives of war. This was dictated by the necessity to treat others the way they would treat Muslims.

They, *“keep their pledges and their covenant.”* This is one of the most important ethical characteristics of Muslims. The most important covenant that a believer should keep is the covenant with God. Islam emphasized the importance of keeping covenants and honoring pledges. Keeping covenants and honoring pledges is the only way to build a safe and secure society. Islam attached the trait of breaking covenants and dishonoring pledges to the hypocrites and the disbelievers.

They are, *“upright in their testimonies.”* Testimonies are an important tool in the Islamic judicial system. That is why it is an important trait for the believer.

The traits of the believers started with the trait of establishing the prayer and ends with the trait of being attentive in the prayer, *“and those who strictly guard their prayer.”* This includes performing the prayers on time and being careful in fulfilling the prayer in the proper form and content with adequate humbleness.

The reward for the believers who have acquired these traits is then enunciated, *“These will dwell in gardens, honored.”*

The narrative then turns to explore one of the scenes in Mecca. The scene describes those who used to go to listen to the Prophet (pbuh) without having the true intention of following guidance, *“But what is the matter with those who disbelieve that they hasten on around you, from the right and from the left, in crowds?”* The verse alludes to their curiosity about what the Prophet (pbuh) was saying and it questioned their intention. Did they think that this curiosity is sufficient for them to attain salvation? *“Does every man of them long to enter the Garden of Bliss?”* A definite answer was then given, *“By no means, We have created them from what they know.”* They were created from a drop of a sperm like everyone else. So, they should not expect to be treated differently. They should remember that God can replace them any time He pleases, *“I swear by the Lord of every sunrise and every sunset that We are certainly able, to replace them by better than them. And we are not to be overcome.”*

So let them, *“wallow in vain talk, until they encounter that Day of theirs which they have been promised. The Day when they will emerge from the tombs in a rush, as though they were hurrying towards a target. Their eyes lowered in dejection, ignominy covering them. This is the Day which they were promised.”* The verses carry a dire warning for the disbelievers. They describe their situation on the Day of Resurrection, when they will get what they were promised.