

Sura 90: Al-Balad (The City)

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

Verses 1 to 20:

1. *I swear by this city,*
2. *And you are a resident of this city;*
3. *And the father and what he fathered.*
4. *Verily We have created humankind for toil and struggle.*
5. *Does he think that no one has power over him?*
6. *He will say, "I have wasted much wealth."*
7. *Does he think that no one sees him?*
8. *Did We not give him two eyes?*
9. *And a tongue, and a pair of lips?*
10. *And We showed him the two ways?*
11. *But he would not attempt the uphill road,*
12. *And what will explain to you what the uphill road is?*
13. *(It is) freeing a slave;*
14. *Or giving food on a day of hunger,*
15. *To an orphan near of kin,*
16. *Or to a poor man in misery,*
17. *Then he will be of those who believe, and enjoin perseverance, and enjoin deeds of kindness and compassion.*
18. *These are the people of the right hand.*
19. *But those who disbelieve in Our revelations, their place will be on the left hand.*
20. *And the Fire will be closed on them.*

The Sura starts with an oath which emphasizes the holiness of the city of Mecca. God honored His Prophet (PBUH) and made him a resident of this Holy city. The Sacred House is also honored by having the Prophet (PBUH) as a resident in this city. The oath that God makes by the Holy city and the one residing in it amplifies the greatness and the sacredness of the city. This exposes the ugliness of the behavior of the disbelievers in treating the Prophet (PBUH) and the Muslims. The disbelievers claimed that they were the protectors of the Sacred House, but their behavior desecrated the sanctity of the House. They persecuted the Prophet (PBUH) and those who believed with him. The oath by the father and what he fathered is a reference to Prophet Abraham (PBUH) and his son Prophet Ishmael (PBUH). However, the oath can be also a reference to the general process of the propagation of the human race, "*I swear by this city. And you are a resident of this city; and the father and what he fathered.*"

The oath is made to emphasize a fundamental fact in the life of human beings, "*Verily We have created humankind for toil and struggle.*" A life of struggle starts as soon as the first cell is established in the fetus. It tries to establish for itself, by the grace of God, the appropriate conditions for survival and growth. Then it goes through the difficult process of birth; once a person is born a life of struggle starts. Each stage of growth presents new challenges and new difficulties. A mature person struggles hard to earn his living. Some struggle with their muscles,

some with their thoughts, and some with their souls. Some struggle in the way of God and some struggle to satisfy their lusts and desires. Struggle is the nature of life. Those who struggle in the worldly life and go on to face a harder struggle in the Hereafter are the losers. The successful are those who struggle trying to reach God in the worldly life so that when they meet their Lord they will be qualified for a life of comfort in the Hereafter.

The verses challenge some of the claims that humankind makes and which are reflected on his behavior, *“Does he think that no one has power over him? He will say, ‘I have wasted much wealth.’ Does he think that no one sees him?”* This humankind, who has been created to struggle, forgets his nature and becomes deluded with the power, ability and wealth that his Creator bestows on him. He behaves as if he will not be held accountable for what he does. He thinks that no one can overpower him so he commits transgressions, oppression, and fraud. He amasses wealth and commits sins with impunity. When he is asked to give the poor he declines saying, *“I have wasted much wealth.”* Does he not realize that he is being watched?

God bestowed on him great bounties, *“Did We not give him two eyes, and a tongue, and a pair of lips? And We showed him the two ways?”* Humankind becomes deluded with the power he has. He forgets that this power is one of the blessings that God bestowed on him. He is stingy, although his wealth has been bestowed on him by God. God gave him the senses with which he is able to live, and God gave him the ability to differentiate between right and wrong.

This verse uncovers different aspects of human nature. It also establishes the ground for the Islamic Psychological Theory, which we will discuss later in Surat As-Shams (Chapter 91). All these blessings that God bestowed on human kind: eyes that see the signs of God in the universe, a tongue and two lips with which he expresses his thoughts and feelings, and the ability to differentiate between right and wrong; all these blessings did not push him to conquer the obstacle that bars him from entering paradise. This obstacle is the uphill road to paradise, *“But he would not attempt the uphill road, and what will explain to you what the uphill road is? (It is) freeing a slave; or giving food on a day of hunger, to an orphan near of kin, or to a poor man in misery, then he will be of those who believe, and enjoin patience, and enjoin deeds of kindness and compassion. These are the people of the right hand.”* This is the obstacle that prevents humankind from entering paradise. The verse exhorts humankind to overcome this obstacle. Then it details the ways to overcome this obstacle: freeing a slave, feeding a needy person or an orphan, believing in God, and enjoining patience and compassionate and merciful deeds.

This verse was revealed in Mecca when Islam was surrounded by its enemies, having no state power to enforce its rules. Slavery was a well-established institution in the world. Slaves were treated harshly. When slaves like ‘Ammar ibn Yaser (RA) and his family, Belal ibn Rabah (RA), and Suhaib (RA) and others became Muslims, they were tortured by their masters. Buying their freedom was the only practical way of saving them from this torture. Abu Bakr (RA) was one of the first Muslims to buy Muslim slaves their freedom.

Another way that helps humankind overcomes the obstacle to paradise is to feed an orphan relative or a needy person on a day when food is scarce. Freeing slaves and feeding the poor were actions of high priority in Mecca at that time. Then the verse mentions the belief in God,

enjoining perseverance, and enjoining compassionate deeds. These deeds should all go together hand in hand. These verses reflect the importance of the social collective duties of the members of the community. Islam promotes the unity of the community. Islam provides the blue prints for the way of life for a community and for a nation; however, it also stresses the personal responsibility of their individuals. Those who are able to overcome the obstacle are the companions of the right hand. The disbelievers are the companions of the left hand. They will be locked up in Hell fire. *“But those who disbelieve Our revelations, their place will be on the left hand; and the Fire will be closed on them.”*