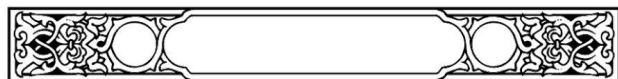


Surah 103

Al-`Asr

Makkan

3 verses



IN THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE COM-
PASSIONATE, THE MERCIFUL

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

[1] By the Time.¹

وَالْعَصْرِ ﴿١﴾

[2] Surely man is in certain loss.²

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ ﴿٢﴾

[3] Save for those who believe, do righteous deeds, counsel one another to (follow) the Truth,³ and counsel one another to be patient (and persevering).⁴

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ
وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ ﴿٣﴾

1. Popular opinion, as well as that coming from Ibn `Abbas is that `asr in this context signifies Time through the Ages. However, commentators such as Qatadah and Maqatil have said that the allusion is to afternoon (Ibn Kathir).

2. At the individual's level the implication is that Time is one's capital. If it is wasted away, all is gone. There is no way his situation can be turned into a profitable one. It is similar to the closing time of a market. If one hasn't done business and made profit before it closes down, what is he going to place in the hands of his wife

when he returns home? It is reported of a certain earlier scholar that he said: "I saw a hawker in the market-square selling ice. He was crying out: 'People. Be kind upon him whose capital is melting away.' I said to myself: 'By the Time! Surely man is in utter loss'" (Razi).

3. Qatadah and Hasan have said that *al-Haq* (translated as 'truth' above) alludes to the Book of Allah (Ibn Jarir).

4. Tabarani has reported that when two Companions of the Prophet met, the last thing they would do before saying *salam* and parting company was to recite this chapter.

To the above, Sayyid adds his remark: "This was indicative of a pledge to accept this doctrine fully, to preserve faith and remain steadfast. It was a mutual compact to remain good elements in an Islamic society established according to that doctrine and to preserve the foundation of this society."

Imām Shafe`i has said that this *surah* should suffice the people if they ponder over its meaning (Ibn Kathir).

Summary:

"This short *surah* of three verses outlines a complete system for human life based on the Islamic viewpoint. It defines, in the clearest and most concise form, the basic concept of faith in the context of its comprehensive reality. In a few words, the whole Islamic constitution is covered and, in fact, the nation of Islam is described in its essential qualities and its message in one verse only: the third. This is the eloquence of which Allah alone is capable.

The great fact which this *surah* affirms is simply that throughout the history of man there has been one worthwhile and trustworthy path - that which the *surah* indicates and describes. All other paths lead only to loss and ruin. As it says in outline, that path is, first, the adoption of

faith, followed up with good deeds and exhortation to follow the truth and to steadfastness.

What does the adoption of faith then signify? We shall not give here its juristic definition. Instead, we shall describe its nature and its importance in human life. Faith is the characteristic by which the minute, transient, human being attains closeness to the Absolute and Everlasting Originator of the universe and all that exists in it. He, thus, establishes a link with the whole world, which springs from that One Origin, with the laws governing it and with the powers and potentialities created in it. As a result, he breaks away from the narrow boundaries of his trivial self to the broadness of the universe, from his inadequate power to the immensity of the unknown universal energies, and from the limits of his short life to the "Eternity" that Allah alone comprehends. This proximity grants the human being a certain power, limitless scope and freedom. It endows him with great enjoyment of life, its beauty and its constituents with whose "souls" he lives in mutual friendship. Thus, life becomes a pleasant journey for mankind everywhere and at all times. From this everlasting happiness, delightful joy and true, intimate, understanding of

life and all creation are derived. This is the invaluable gain, to lack which is an immeasurable loss.

The qualities of faith are also precisely those of sublime and dignified humanity, such as the worship of one God which elevates man above servitude to others and establishes, within him, the truth of the equality of all men, so that he neither yields nor bows down his head to any but the One, the Absolute. The result is that man will enjoy true liberty, which radiates from within his conscience, following his realization of the fact that there is only one power and one Lord in this world. This liberation is spontaneously developed from such an awareness, for it is the only logical sequence.

Godliness is the second quality of dignified humanity. This quality determines for man the source from which he derives his concepts, values, criteria, considerations, doctrines, laws and whatever brings him into relation with Allah, the world at large and with human beings. Thus, equity and justice replace personal desires and self-interest. This strengthens the believer's realization of the value of his way of life and keeps him above ignorant concepts, values and interests and, above all, strictly mundane

values. This is so even when the believer is the only one of his kind. For he counters these features with those which he derives directly from Allah and which, therefore, rank highest in value and are the most sound and the most deserving of devotion and esteem.

A third quality of faith and dignified humanity is the clarity of the relationship between the Creator and the created: the restricted creature is connected with the Everlasting Truth without any mediator. It supplies man's heart with light, his soul with contentment and gives him confidence and purpose. It eliminates, from his mind, perplexity, fear, anxiety and agitation as well as unlawful haughtiness on earth and unjustifiable tyranny over people. Steadfastness along the path ordained by Allah is the next quality of such humanity. This must be maintained so that good does not occur casually, incidentally or without deliberation, but springs from definite motives and heads towards certain aims. People united for Allah's cause collaborate. Thus, with a single definite purpose and a single distinguished banner, the Muslim community is raised. This is true for all generations that are similarly welded together. Another quality is belief in the dig-

nity of man in the sight of Allah. This heightens man's regard for himself and restrains him from aspiring for a position higher than that which the Creator has defined for him. For man to feel that he is dignified in Allah's sight is the loftiest conception he may attain of himself. Any ideology or concept which abases this valuation and scribes a dishonourable origin to man, separating him from the Highest Society of Allah is, in effect inviting him to abjection and derogation, though it may not say so openly. Hence, the effects of Darwinism, Freudianism and Marxism are among the most horrid disasters human nature has encountered.

For they teach mankind that all abasement and downright animalism are natural phenomena with which we should be familiar and of which we need not be ashamed. Purity of motivation is yet another quality of the dignified humanity established by faith. This directly follows the realization of man's dignity in Allah's sight, His supervision over men's conscience and His knowledge of their innermost undertakings. The normal human being whom the theories of Freud, Karl Marx and their type have not deformed is bashful that another human being may come to know what incidental, unhealthy,

feelings he may have. The believer feels the awesome presence of Allah in his innermost consciousness and his awareness makes him tremble. He, therefore, attends to self-purification and spiritual cleansing. A refined moral sense is the natural fruit of faith in a just, kind, compassionate, generous and forbearing God who abhors evil and loves goodness and who knows the furtive look and the secret thought. From this follows the responsibility of the believer which results from his free will and the comprehensiveness of Allah's supervision over him. It stimulates within him healthy awareness, sensitivity, serenity and foresight. It is a communal responsibility rather than an individual one and it is a responsibility towards all humanity in relation to goodness, pure and simple. The believer feels all these in every action. He achieves a higher degree of self-respect and calculates the results before taking any steps. He is of value in the world and the whole realm of existence and has a role in its smooth running.

The final quality is man's elevation above greed for worldly gains and the choice of Allah's richer, everlasting reward for which all men should strive, as the Qur'an directs them to do and which results in elevation,

purification and cleansing of their souls. Of immense help in this regard is the fact that the believer has a broad scope to move in: between this life and the next and between the heavens and the earth. The elevation of man lessens his anxiety about the results and fruits of his deed. He does good only because it is good and because Allah requires it. It is never his concern whether it leads to further goodness in his own short life time. Allah, for whom he performs the good, never dies nor does He forget nor ignore any of men's deeds.

The reward is not to be received here, for this life is not the last. Thus, the believer acquires the power to continue to perform good deeds sustained by this overwhelming belief. This it is that guarantees that doing good becomes a deliberate way of life and not a casual incident or motiveless event. It is this belief that supplies the believer with the power and the fortitude to face evil, whether manifested in the despotism of a tyrant or in the pressures of Ignorance or in the frailty of his will-power to control his passions which arise primarily from his feeling of the shortness of his life to achieve aims and enjoyments and from his inability to comprehend the deeper results of the good and witness the victory of right

over evil. Faith tackles these feelings radically and perfectly.

Faith is the great root of life from which goodness springs in its various forms and to which all its fruits are bound. What does not spring from faith is a branch cut from a tree: it is bound to fade and perish, it is indeed a devilish production, limited and impermanent! Faith is the axis to which all the fine fabric of life's network is connected. Without it, life is a loose event, wasted through the pursuit of yearnings and fantasies. It is the ideology which collects diversified deeds under a consonant system, following the same route and geared to the same mechanism, possessing a definite motive and a predetermined goal.

Hence, all deeds not stemming from this origin, and not related to that path, are completely disregarded by the Qur'an. Islam is invariably candid over this. In *surah* 14, "Abraham", we read what may be translated as:

The likeness of those who disbelieve in their Lord: their works are like ashes which the wind blows furiously on a .tempestuous day

They have no power over .anything they have earned

In *surah* 24, "Light", we have:

As for those who disbelieve, their deeds are like a mirage in a desert. The thirsty traveler thinks it is water, but when he comes near, he finds that it is nothing.

Now these are clear statements discrediting every deed not related to faith, which, in turn, gives it a motive that is connected with the origin of its existence and an aim that is compatible with the purpose of the world in all creation. This is a logical view of an ideology that attributes all events to Allah. Whoever dissociates himself from Him, vanishes and loses the reality of his existence.

Faith is a sign of health in a person's nature and soundness in his disposition. It also indicates man's harmony with the nature of the whole universe, and a sign of mutual effect between man and the world around him. His life, as long as his behavior is straightforward, must bring about an orientation which ends up in his adoption of faith because of what this universe itself possesses of signs and testimonies about the absolute power that so created it. Were the contrary the case, something must then be wrong or lacking in the state of the recipient - i.e. the human being - which would be a sign of corruption that only leads to loss and nullifies

any deed which might somehow give an appearance of righteousness.

So extensive and comprehensive, so sublime and beautiful, so happy is the believer's world that the world of the disbelievers around appears to him minute, trivial, low, feeble, ugly and miserable - that is, in a state of ruin and complete loss.

Doing what is righteous is the natural fruit of faith and a spontaneous activity generated at the same time as the reality of faith settles inside the human heart and mind. For faith is a positive and active concept which, once it has pervaded the human conscience, hastens to activate it to the outside world in good deeds. This is the Islamic view of faith. It must be dynamic. If it is not, then it is either phony or non-existent, just as a flower cannot withhold its fragrance which, if present, naturally spreads, or else it is not in the flower at all.

From all this, we recognize the values of faith: dynamism, activity, creativeness and productiveness devoted to Allah's pleasure and not narrowness, negativity or isolation into self. It is not just sincere and innocent intentions, that never develop into actions. This is the distinguishing characteristic of Islam that makes it a creative power in practical life.

All this is logical only as long as faith remains the link with the Divinely ordained path. This path is characterized by perpetual dynamism in the world among people. It is founded according to a specific plan and orientated towards a definite goal. Moreover, faith propels humanity towards implementing that which is good, pure, constructive and utilitarian.

Counseling one another to follow the truth and to steadfastness reveals a picture of Islamic society which has its own very special entity, a unique inter-relationship between its individual members and a single destination and which fully understands its entity as well as its duties. It realizes the essence of its faith and what it has to do of good deeds which include, among other tasks, the leadership of humanity along its own path. To execute this tremendous duty, counseling and exhortation becomes a necessity.

From the meaning and nature of the very word "counsel" appears the loftiest and most magnificent picture of that integrated, coordinated, righteous and enlightened nation or society which caters for right, justice and goodness on this earth. This exactly is how Islam wants the Islamic nation

to be. Mutual counsel aimed at that which is right is a necessity because it is hard always to maintain what is right, bearing in mind that the obstacles in its way are innumerable: egoistic passions and predilections, the false concepts in the environment, and the tyranny, inequity and despotism of some. Hence the mutual exhortation urged here means reminding, encouraging and expressing the unity in aim and destination and equality in responsibility and charge. It also collects the individual efforts into a unified whole and thus increases the feelings of brotherhood in every guardian of truth, that there are others with him to exhort, encourage, support and love him. This is precisely the case with Islam, the righteous way of life whose establishment requires the care of a coordinated, interdependent, self-sufficient and self-supporting community.

Counsel and exhortation to be steadfast are also a necessity because the sustenance of faith and good deeds and catering for right and equity are the hardest tasks ever to carry out. This makes endurance utterly indispensable. Endurance is also necessary when adapting oneself to the Islamic way of life, when confronting others, when afflicted with maltreatment and hardship. Steadfastness is nec-

essary when evil and falsehood triumph. It is necessary for traversing the length of the route, putting up with the slowness of the process of reform, the obscurity of road-posts and the lengthy road leading to the destination.

Exhortation to endurance and steadfastness widens the capacities by inspiring unity of aim and direction and the feeling of togetherness in everyone, equipping them with love, fortitude and determination. It generates vitality in the community where the truth of Islam can survive and through which it is implemented.

Judging by the doctrine which the Qur'an outlines for the life of the successful group which attains salvation, we are gravely shocked to see the loss and the ruin in which humanity finds itself everywhere on this earth today. We are shocked by the frustrations humanity suffers in this present world and by witnessing how humanity turns away, in vain, from the goodness Allah has bestowed upon it. We are the more

distressed by the absence of a righteous and faithful authority to stand up for the Truth. Moreover, the Muslims, or rather people claiming to be Muslims, are the farthest of all from what is good and the most averse to the ideology Allah ordained for their nation and the one route He prescribed for their deliverance from loss and ruin. People, in the very realm where this righteousness took its roots, have deserted the banner Allah raised for them, that of faith, to raise, instead, banners of race which have never done them any good all through their history or given them any reputation either on earth or in the heavens. Islam it was that raised for them the banner totally conforming to Allah's will, flying in His name only and identified with Him alone. Under this banner, the Arabs triumphed, were predominant and gave humanity a righteous, strong, enlightened and successful leadership for the first time in their history and the long history of humanity" (Sayyid). ﷺ