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THE
HOLY QURAN

ENGLISH TAFSEER
CHAPTER 90
SURAH AL-BALAD

COMMENTARY & EXPLANATORY

By
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CHAPTER

090

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Introduction and Summary

This is an early Makkan revelation, and refers to the mystic relation (by divine sanction) of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) with the city of Makkah.

He was born in that City, which had already been sacred for ages before. He was nurtured in that City and had (to use a modern phrase) the freedom of that City, belonging, as he did, to the noble family which held the government of its sacred precincts in its hands.

But he was an orphan, and orphans in his day had a poor time. But his mind was turned things divine. He protested against the prevailing idolatry and sin, and his parent City persecuted him and cast him out.

He made another City, *yathrib*, his own: it became the *Madinah al Nabi*, the City of Prophet, and it has ever since been called Madinah. We can speak of Madinah as the Prophet's child.

But the Prophet ever cherished in his heart the love of his parent City of Makkah, and in the fullness of time was received in triumph there. He purified it from all idols and abominations, reestablished the worship of the One True God, overthrew the purse-proud selfish autocracy, restored the sway of the righteous (people of the Right Hand), the liberty of the slave, and the rights of the poor and downtrodden. What a wonderful career centering round a City? It becomes a symbol of the world's spiritual history.

C.270 (The running Commentary, in Rhythmic Prose)

The Prophet's own City persecuted him.

Honoured by his nativity, it sought to slay him:

Yet he loved it and purged it of all that was wrong.

What toil and struggle did it not involve?

Man is made for toil and struggle:

Let him not boast of ease and wealth.

He will be called to account for all his doings.

Let him use his God-given faculties, and tread

The steep path that leads to Heaven's Heights:

The steps thereto are love, unselfish love,

Given freely to Allah's creatures---all those

In need---and Faith in Allah, and Patience

Joined with self-restraint and kindness.

Thus only can we reach the ranks

Of the blest Companions of the Right Hand!

لَا أُقْسِمُ بِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ (١)

1. I do call to witness this City --

C6130. The appeal to the close ties between the holy Prophet and his parent City of Makkah has been explained in the Introduction to this Surah.

It is a symbol of man's own history. Man is born for toil and struggle, and this is the substantive proposition in verse 4 below, which this appeal leads up to.

وَأَنْتَ حَلٌّ ...

2. And thou art a freeman ...

C6131. Hillun: an inhabitant, a man with lawful rights, a man freed from such obligations as would attach to a stranger to the city, a freeman in a wider sense than the technical sense to which the word is restricted in modern usage.

The Prophet should have been honoured in his native city. He was actually being persecuted. He should have been loved, as a parent loves a child. Actually his life was being sought, and those who believed in him were under a ban. But time was to show that he was to come triumphant to his native city after having made Madinah sacred by his life and work.

... بِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ (٢)

... of this City --

وَوَالِدٍ وَمَا وَلَدَ (٣)

3. And (the mystic ties of) Parent and Child --

C6132. A parent loves a child: ordinarily the father is proud and the mother, in spite of her birth-pains, experiences supreme joy when the child is born. But in abnormal circumstances there may be misunderstanding, even hatred between parent and child. So Makkah cast

out her most glorious son, but it was only for a time. Makkah was sound at heart; only her power had been usurped by an ignorant autocracy which passed away, and Makkah was to receive back her glory at the hands of the son whom she had rejected but whom she welcomed back later. And Makkah retains for all time her sacred character as the centre of Islam.

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي كَبَدٍ (٤)

4. Verily We have created Man into toil and struggle.

C6133.

Cf. "Man is born unto troubles as the sparks fly upward" (Job, 5:7);

"For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief" (Ecclesiastes, ii. 23).

Man's life is full of sorrow and vexation; but our text has a different shade of meaning: man is born to strive and struggle; and if he suffers from hardships, he must exercise patience, for Allah will make his way smooth for him (65:7; 94:5-6).

On the other hand no man should boast of worldly goods or worldly prosperity (see verses 5-7 below).

أَيَحْسَبُ أَنْ لَنْ يَقْدِرَ عَلَيْهِ أَحَدٌ (٥)

5. Thinketh he, that none hath power over him?

C6134. See the end of last note.

If a man has wealth, influence, or power, he should not behave as if it is to last for ever, or as if he has no responsibility for his acts and can do what he likes. All his gifts and advantages are given to him for trial. Allah, Who bestowed them on him, can take them away, and will do so if man fails in his trial.

يَقُولُ أَهْلَكْتُ مَالًا لُبَدًا (٦)

6. He may say (boastfully): "Wealth have I squandered in abundance!"

C6135. The man who feels no responsibility and thinks that he can do what he likes in life forgets his

responsibility to Allah. He boasts of his wealth and scatters it about, thinking that he can thus purchase the support of the world. For a time he may. But a rude awakening must come soon, for he bases his hopes on unsubstantial things. Or if he spends his substance on self-indulgence, he is weakening himself and putting himself into snares that must destroy him.

أَيَحْسَبُ أَنْ لَمْ يَرَهُ أَحَدٌ (٧)

7. Thinketh he that none beholdeth him?

C6136. Allah watches him, and sees all his acts and motives, and all the secret springs of his follies. But lest he should think the higher forces too remote for him, let him look within himself and use the faculties which Allah has given him.

See the next verses following.

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلْ لَهُ عَيْنَيْنِ (٨)

8. Have We not made for him a pair of eyes? --

وَلِسَانًا ...

9. And a tongue,

C6137. The eyes give us the faculty of seeing, and may be taken in both the literal and the metaphorical sense. In the same way the tongue gives us the faculty of tasting in both senses. Along with the lips, it also enables us to speak, to ask for information and seek guidance, and to celebrate the praises of Allah.

... وَشَفَتَيْنِ (٩)

and a pair of lips? --

وَهَدَيْنَاهُ النَّجْدَيْنِ (١٠)

10. And shown him the two highways?

C6138. The two highways of life are:

1. the steep and difficult path of virtue, which is further described in the verses following, and
2. the easy path of vice, and the rejection of Allah, referred to in verses 19-20 below.

Allah has given us not only the faculties implied in the eyes, the tongue, and the lips, but has also given us the judgment by which we can choose our way; and He has sent us Teachers and Guides, with Revelation, to show us the right and difficult way.

فَلَا افْتَحَمَّ الْعَقَبَةَ (١١)

11. But he hath made no haste on the path that is steep.

C6139. In spite of the faculties with which Allah has endowed man and the guidance which He has given him, man has been remiss. By no means has he been eager to follow the steep and difficult path which is for his own spiritual good.

Cf. Matt. 7:14: "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto live, and few there be that find it".

وَمَا أُذْرَاكَ مَا الْعَقَبَةَ (١٢)

12. And what will explain to thee the path that is steep? --

فَأَنْتَ رَقَبَةٌ (١٣)

13. (It is:) freeing the bondman;

C6140. The difficult path of virtue is defined as the path of charity or unselfish love, and three specific instances are given for our understanding: viz.

1. freeing the bondman,
2. feeding the orphan, and
3. feeding the indigent down in the dust.

As regards the bondman, we are to understand not only a reference to legal slavery, but other kinds of slavery which flourish especially in advanced societies.

There is political slavery, industrial slavery, and social slavery.

There is the slavery of conventions, of ignorance, and of superstition.

There is slavery to wealth or passions or power.

The good man tries to liberate men and women from all kinds of slavery, often at great danger to himself. But he begins by first liberating himself. (R).

أَوْ إِطْعَامٌ فِي يَوْمٍ ذِي مَسْغَبَةٍ (١٤)

14. Or the giving of food in a day of privation...

C6141. Feed those who need it, both literally and figuratively; but do so especially when there is privation or famine, literal or figurative, i.e., when or where the sources of sustenance, physical, moral, or spiritual, are cut off.

يَتِيمًا ذَا مَقْرَبَةٍ (١٥)

15. To the orphan with claims of relationship,

C6142. All orphans should be fed and helped. But ordinary orphans will come under the indigent in verse 16 below.

The orphans related to us have a special claim on us. They should be near and dear to us, and if charity begins at home, they have the first claim on us.

أَوْ مِسْكِينًا ذَا مَتْرَبَةٍ (١٦)

16. Or to the indigent (down) in the dust.

C6143. Persons down in the dust can only be helped from motives of pure charity, because nothing can be expected of them-neither praise nor advertisement nor any other advantage to the helper. Such help is help indeed. But there may be various degrees, and the help will be suited to the needs.

ثُمَّ كَانَ ...

17. Then will he be...

C6144. Such practical charity and love will be the acid test of Faith and the teaching of all virtues.

The virtues are summed up under the names of Patience (the Arabic word includes constancy and self-restraint) and compassionate kindness. Not only will they be the test by which the sincerity of their Faith will be judged; they will be the fruit which their Faith will constantly produce.

... مِنَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْمَرْحَمَةِ (١٧)

... of those who believe, and enjoin patience, (constancy, and self-restraint), and enjoin deeds of kindness and compassion.

أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ (١٨)

18. Such are the Companions of the Right Hand.

C6145. Cf. 56:27-40, also n. 5223.

They will be those who achieve salvation.

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِنَا هُمْ أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ (١٩)

19. But those who reject Our Signs, they are the (unhappy) companions of the Left Hand.

C6146. Cf. 56:41-56, also n. 5223.

They will be the unfortunate ones enveloped in the Fire of lasting Penalty, heaped over them and all round them.

عَلَيْهِمْ نَارٌ مُّؤَصَّدَةٌ (٢٠)

20. On them will be Fire Vaulted over (all round).