

Muhammad

Madinan Period

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate

[1] Allah has caused the works of those who disbelieve and hinder people from the way of Allah to go to waste.

[2] As for those who attained to faith and did righteous works and believed in what was revealed to Muhammad – which indeed is the Truth from their Lord - Allah has remitted their evil deeds and has set their condition right.

[3] That is because those who disbelieved followed falsehood whereas those who believed followed the Truth that came to them from their Lord. Thus does Allah set forth to people parables showing their true state.

[4] When you meet the unbelievers (in battle), smite their necks until you have crushed them, then bind your captives firmly; thereafter (you are entitled to) set them free, either by an act of grace, or against ransom, until the war ends.¹ That is for you to do. If Allah had so willed, He would have Himself exacted retribution from them. (But He did not do so) that He may test some of you by means of others.² As for those who are slain in the way of Allah, He shall never let their works go to waste.

1. The actual words of this verse as well as the context of their occurrence indicate that the verse was revealed during the period when sanction had been given for fighting but before it actually took place. The words "when you meet the unbelievers (in battle)..." imply that the battle had not yet taken place and the Muslims are being directed as to what to do when it does take place. If the encounter were to take place, the Muslims are required to focus their attention on totally destroying the enemy's fighting prowess. Once that task had been accomplished, they may free the prisoners of war either by taking ransom from them or exchanging them for the Muslim prisoners held by the unbelievers. Additionally, they were required to treat such prisoners with due kindness while they are in their custody or release them gratuitously if that was deemed suitable.

2. That is, if Allah had only wanted to suppress the votaries of falsehood, He was in no need of their help. He could have achieved this in the twinkling of an eye by means of an earthquake or a tempest. But He had a different purpose in mind: He wanted the devotees of the Truth to enter into conflict with the worshippers of falsehood and strive against them, This in order that the qualities possessed by the two groups would manifest themselves fully in the course of the test to which they would be put. This would then establish the rank and position to which each of them was entitled in consideration of character and conduct.

[5] He will guide them³ and set their condition right

[6] and will admit them to Paradise with which He has acquainted them.

[7] Believers, if you aid Allah, He will come to your aid⁴ and will plant your feet firmly.

[8] As to those who disbelieve, perdition lies in store for them and Allah has reduced their works to nought.

3. *That is, guide them to Paradise.*

4. *"If you aid Allah" means to participate in the effort to exalt the Word of God and the Truth.*

[9] That was because they were averse to what Allah had revealed; so He let their works go to waste.

[10] Have they not journeyed through the land to see the end of those who went before them? Allah utterly destroyed them. These unbelievers are doomed to the same end.⁵

[11] That is because Allah is the Protector of the believers whereas the unbelievers have none to protect them.

[12] Allah shall admit those who believe and do righteous works to the Gardens beneath which rivers flow. As for the unbelievers, they enjoy the pleasures of this transient life and eat as cattle eat. The Fire shall be their resort.

[13] (O Prophet), how many are the cities that had greater power than your city that drove you out?⁶ We destroyed them and there was none to protect them.

[14] Then, can he, who is on a Clear Guidance from His Lord, be like him whose evil deeds have been embellished to him, and who pursued their lusts?

[15] Here is the parable of Paradise which the God-fearing have been promised: in it shall be rivers of incorruptible water, rivers of milk unchanging in taste, and rivers of wine, a delight to those that drink; and rivers of pure honey.⁷ In it they will have every kind of fruit as well as forgiveness from their Lord. Can such be like those who will abide in the Fire and will be given a boiling water to drink that will tear their bowels apart?

5. *This can have two meanings: [1] The devastation that overtook the unbelievers of the past was about to overtake the unbelievers who were unwilling to accept the Prophet Muhammad's Message. [2] The doom of the unbelievers will not be confined to chastisement in this world but will rather extend to the Hereafter.*

6. *This alludes to Makkah where the Quraysh persecuted the believers to such an extent that the Prophet (peace be on him) was virtually forced to emigrate.*

7. *What is stated here has been explained in the Hadith. The milk served to the people of Paradise will not have been extracted from the udders of cattle; the wine will not have been obtained by fermenting fruit; and the honey will not have been derived from the nectar of bees. These will rather flow as natural springs flow.*

[16] Among them some give ear to you. But no sooner do they leave your presence than they ask those endowed with knowledge: "What is it that he said just now?"⁸ Such are those whose hearts Allah has sealed and who pursue their lusts.

[17] As for those who were led to the Guidance, Allah increases them in their guidance and causes them to grow in God-fearing.

[18] Are they waiting, then, for anything else than the Last Hour to suddenly come upon them? Already some of its tokens have come. But when it does actually come upon them, where will any time be left for them to take heed?

8. This is said in regard to the unbelievers, hypocrites and the People of the Book who refused to believe. They used to seat themselves in the gatherings around the Prophet (peace be on him). They also listened with others when the Prophet (peace be on him) taught people or when the verses of the Qur'an were recited. However, since they were instinctively disinclined to the substance of his teachings, their listening to what was taught was of no consequence and when they departed from those gatherings they would ask one another what is it that the Prophet (peace be on him) said.

[19] Know, therefore, (O Prophet), that there is no god but Allah, and ask forgiveness for your shortcomings and also for (the shortcomings of) believing men and believing women.⁹ Allah knows the places where you move about and where you dwell.

[20] The believers¹⁰ used to say: "Why is a *surah* (that would ordain fighting) not revealed?" But when a definitive *surah* was revealed wherein fighting was mentioned, you saw that those in whose hearts there was a sickness looked at you as though they were about to faint at the approach of death. Pity on them!

[21] (They keep affirming their) obedience and saying good words. But when a course of action was clearly determined, it would have been better for them if they had proved true to Allah.

[22] Now, if you were to turn away, what else can be expected but that you will work corruption in the land and fly at each other's throats?¹¹

9. One of the morals taught by Islam is that even if one does all one can in God's servitude and worship, one should still feel all along that this falls short of what the Lord required one to do. One should, therefore, be ever prone to recognise one's shortcomings and beseech God to forgive any dereliction of duty he owed Him, This is the underlying spirit of the prayer taught by God: "... and ask forgiveness for your shortcomings..."

10. This shows that sincere Muslims were eager that fighting be ordained. On the other hand, however, there were those who had joined the ranks of Muslims only ostensibly but were in fact not imbued with faith. For them, the injunction to fight was viewed as something that only imperilled their lives.

11. The people concerned are hereby being told that if they shirked from defending Islam and failed to stake their lives and possessions for the sake of the reformatory revolution that the Prophet (peace be on him) and his Companions were striving to bring about, then this would have very tragic consequences. If they failed, the people of Arabia would be thrown back to the conditions prevailing in the pre-Islamic Age of Ignorance when for centuries people slit each other's throats and God's earth was filled with injustice and evil-doing.

[23] It is these upon whom Allah has laid His curse: so He made them deaf and deprived them of their sight.

[24] Do they, then, not reflect on the Qur'an? Or are there locks on their hearts?

[25] Certainly those who have turned their backs on the True Guidance after it became manifest to them, Satan has embellished their ways for them and has buoyed them up with false hopes.

[26] This, because they said to those who are averse to the faith that Allah has revealed: "In some matters we shall obey you."¹² Allah has full knowledge of their secret parleys.

[27] But how will they fare when angels will take their souls at death and will carry them, striking their faces and backs?

[28] That is because they have followed a way that angered Allah, and have been averse to His good pleasure. So He reduced all their works to nought.¹³

12. This refers to those who professed faith and were considered part of the Muslim body-politic, but who nevertheless continued to collaborate with Islam's enemies. Such people even promised Islam's enemies that in some matters they would follow them.

13. The word "works" here signifies the works they performed in their state of submission to Allah, Their Prayers, fasting, paying Zakah, and all other acts of worship and good deeds were reckoned as righteous acts. In their case, however, these "righteous acts" were rendered void. This because they were bereft of sincerity and loyalty to God, to Islam, and to the Muslim community despite their profession to be Muslims. The fact of the matter was that despite their professed loyalty to Islam and the Muslim body-politic, they conspired with Islam's enemies for trivial worldly gain. Furthermore, as soon as there was any occasion to engage in struggle for God's sake, they took whatever possible precautionary measures they could so as to keep themselves immune from such a risk.

[29] Or do they, in whose hearts there is a sickness, believe that Allah will not bring their failings to light?

[30] If We were to so will, We could have shown them to you so that you would recognise them by their faces, and you would certainly know them by the manner of their speech. Allah knows all your deeds.

[31] We shall certainly test you until We know those of you who truly strive and remain steadfast, and will ascertain about you.

[32] Those who disbelieved and barred others from Allah's Way and opposed the Messenger after the True Guidance had become manifest to them, they shall not be able to cause Allah the least harm; rather, Allah will reduce all their works to nought.

[33] Believers, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and do not cause your works to be nullified.¹⁴

[34] Verily Allah shall not forgive those who disbelieved and barred others from Allah's Way and clung to their unbelief until their death.

14. In other words, a person's deeds can be beneficial and yield good results only if he fully obeys God and His Prophet (peace be on him), But were he to deviate from this commitment to obey God and His Prophet, he loses his claim to be rewarded for what were ostensibly good deeds.

[35] So, be not faint-hearted and do not cry for peace.¹⁵ You shall prevail. Allah is with you and will not bring your works to nought.

[36] The life of this world is but sport and amusement. If you believe and are God-fearing, He will grant you your reward, and will not ask you for your possessions.¹⁶

[37] If He were to ask you for your possessions and press you (in that regard), you would have grown niggardly, and Allah would have brought your failings to light.

[38] Behold, you are those who are called upon to spend in Allah's Way, but some of you are niggardly. Whoever is niggardly is in fact niggardly to himself. For Allah is All-Sufficient, whereas it is you who are in need of Him. If you turn away, He will replace you by a people other than you, and they will not be like you.

*15. The significance of the situational context in which this directive was given needs to be borne in mind. It was revealed when the Muslims consisted of no more than a few hundred **Muhajirun** and **Ansar** who lived in the small town of Madinah. These upholders of Islam were confronted on the one hand by the powerful Quraysh and on the other by the unbelievers and polytheists of the whole of Arabia. Even in these difficult circumstances the believers are being told not to be faint-hearted or seek peace with their enemies. On the contrary, they should prepare themselves to risk their very lives to encounter their foes.*

16. God is self-sufficient, possessed of ample resources. If God asks the believers to spend in God's cause He does so for their benefit rather than His Own.