

Al-Ma'arij [The Ascending Steps] **Makkan Period**

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

[1] A beseecher besought the visitation of chastisement,

[2] (a chastisement meant) for the unbelievers, one which none can avert;

[3] a chastisement from Allah, the Lord of the ascending steps,

[4] by which the angels and the Spirit² ascend to Him² in one Day the duration of which is fifty thousand years.³

[5] So, (O Prophet), persevere with gracious perseverance.⁴

1. The word "Spirit" here denotes Gabriel who is mentioned independently from the angels on account of his eminence.

2. By the nature of things, any statement about ascension to God belongs to the category of ambiguous Qur'anic statements, statements whose meaning cannot be determined precisely. To take this particular case, it is evident that we do not fully know the reality of the angels, nor how they will ascend to God; nor can our minds comprehend what "the ascending steps" are like. Likewise, we cannot even imagine that God lives (literally) in a particular place for the Supreme Being transcends all limitations of time and space.

3. In al-Hajj 22: 47 and al-Sajdah 32: 5, the measure of a day is stated to be a thousand years. But here, in response to an unbeliever's challenging demand that God's chastisement visit them, one day of God's reckoning is stated to measure fifty thousand years. In order to grasp the two statements it is necessary that we relinquish our own, restricted scales of measurement when we speak of time with reference to God. When we speak of a hundred or even 50 years with reference to human beings, that is a fairly long time span. But when we speak of time durations with reference to God, each chunk of time consists of a thousand or even fifty thousand years; and even these figures are for purposes of illustration only.

4. That is, he should exercise the kind of perseverance that befits a dignified and gracious person.

[6] Verily they think that the chastisement is far off,

[7] while We think that it is near at hand.

[8] It shall befall on a Day whereon the sky will become like molten brass,⁵

[9] and the mountains will become like dyed tufts of wool,

[10] and no bosom friend will enquire about any of his bosom friends

[11] although they shall be within sight of one another. The guilty one would fain ransom himself from the torment of that Day by offering his children,

[12] and his spouse and his brother,

[13] and his kinsfolk who had stood by him,

[14] and all persons of the earth, if only he could thus save himself.

[15] By no means! It will be the fierce flame

[16] that will strip off the scalp.

[17] It shall insistently summon him who turned his back and retreated,

[18] and amassed wealth and covetously hoarded it.

[19] Verily man is impatient by nature:⁶

[20] bewailing when evil befalls him,

[21] and tight-fisted when good fortune visits him,

[22] except those that pray,

[23] and are constant in their Prayer;

[24] and those in whose wealth there is a known right

5. That is, the sky will constantly change its colour.

6. The statement that "man is impatient by nature" means that he is naturally predisposed to impatience.

[25] for those that ask and those that are dispossessed,

[26] those who firmly believe in the Day of Recompense,

[27] and fear the chastisement of their Lord –

[28] surely the chastisement of their Lord is a thing none can feel secure from –

[29] and those who guard their private parts,

[30] except in regard to their spouses and those whom their right hands possess, for in regard to them they are not reproachable,

[31] but any who seeks to go beyond that, it is indeed they who are the transgressors,

[32] and those who fulfil their trusts and their covenants,

[33] and those who are upright in their testimonies;

[34] and who take due care of their Prayer:

[35] all these shall live honourably in the Gardens.

[36] But what is the matter with the unbelievers who are hurrying towards you⁷

[37] in crowds, both on the right and on the left?

[38] Does everyone of them wish to enter the Garden of Bliss?

[39] By no means! They know that which We have created them from.

[40] I swear by the Lord of the easts and the Wests⁸ that We have the power

[41] to replace them by others who would be better than they; and We shall certainly not be overpowered.

7. This refers to those unbelievers who, whenever they heard the Prophet (peace be on him) recite the Qur'an or saw him invite people to embrace his teachings, rushed towards him, subjecting him to ridicule and banter.

8. The words "east" and "west" are used in the plural for good reason. Each day the angle of the rise and setting of the sun varies; furthermore, the angles at which it rises and sets in different parts of the earth vary. In this sense, there is not one but many easts; there is not one but many wests.

[42] So leave them to engage in vain talk and to amuse themselves until they come face to face with the Day which they are promised,

[43] the Day on which they will hastily come forth from their graves, as though they were hurrying on to the altars of their deities.

[44] Their eyes will be downcast and disgrace will overwhelm them. Such is the Day that they were promised.