

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All Praises to Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful

12th Taraweeh, Ramadan 1446 Hijri

Summary of Verses 16:90-18:74

Sura Nahl (Bee) (Verses 16:90-128)

Without Divine Guidance we will all be lost. With Divine Guidance, we will find the Straight Path. There are things we must do and things we must not. Both – doing good and shunning the bad - are important for our physical and spiritual well-being. Justice, good deeds, and compassion should become innate to our nature while indecency, intolerance, arrogance, anger, and blaming kismet should become antithetical to our nature. This is what *Ihsan* means, excellence in everything we do. Verse (16:90) is known as *Ayat al-Ihsan* and points to six principles, three of which command justice, kindness and being charitable and compassionate toward relatives, while the remaining three principles forbid immorality, bad conduct, and oppression. *“Allah commands justice, good deeds, compassion toward kith and kin, keeping away from shameful deeds and exercising restraint. He instructs you so that you may receive admonition.”* (16:90)

(*Ihsan* implies good manners and morals. According to the Quran, these do's and don'ts constitute good manners:

Do not advise or exhort others to engage in good conduct while not practicing it yourself (2:44). Do not cancel your charity by reminders of your generosity (2:264). Spend in charity, whether in prosperity or adversity, restrain anger and forgive (3:134). Be lenient toward those under you and consult with them when making decisions (3:159). Do not devour one another's possessions wrongfully; instead, let there be trade and transactions based on mutual goodwill (4:29). Return a courteous greeting

with a greeting even more courteous (4:86). Do not call someone a disbeliever (4:94). Strive to make peace between husband and wife (4:128). Be just, even if it means taking a stand against yourself or your relatives (4:135). Do not sit with those who mock religion unless they change the subject (4:140). Do not let the hatred of others toward you cause you to be unjust toward them (5:8). Keep your promises (5:89). Do not ask unnecessary questions or questions beyond your ken (5:101). Do not insult the false gods of others (6:108). Do not come near the property of orphans except to improve it (6:152). If the enemy wants peace, you too should seek peace (8:61). Honor your treaties with the agreed-upon terms and conditions (9:4). Do not undermine the contributions of others (9:79). Preach to others politely and eloquently and not stridently or arrogantly (16:125). Be proportionate in your retaliations if you must retaliate (16:126). Always be kind to parents (17:23). Do not be extravagant (17:26). If unable to materially help the needy, at least speak kindly to them (17:28). Speak gently, even to leaders of disbelief (20:44). Feed the poor (22:36). Avoid vain and boastful talk (23:3). Keep your trusts and promises (23:8). Do not accuse others of immorality without proof (24:4). Think well of others (24:12). Do not engage in or spread gossip (24:15). Do not slander (24:16). Forgive others, as you would want Allah to forgive you (24:22). Those who can, should spend on those less fortunate (24:22). Do not enter homes other than your own without permission and leave quietly if refused entry (24:27-28). Walk humbly and speak nicely even to those who annoy or provoke you (25:63). Neither be miserly nor extravagant but be in the middle of these two extremes (25:67). Do not boast about or exult in your wealth (28:76). Do not turn away from people in arrogance (31:18). Be moderate in your pace and lower your voice (31:19). Respond to evil with good which has the potential to transform enemies into friends (41:34). Verify information before acting upon it (49:6). Make peace between fighting

groups with justice and fairness (49:9). Do not insult, defame or laugh at others. Do not engage in sarcasm or call each other by offensive or demeaning names. Do not make fun of others (49:11). Do not backbite. It's a grievous sin. Avoid suspicion of others (49:12). Make room for others at gatherings (58:11). Seek only Allah's pleasure without expecting or hoping for any praise or reward from people who maybe beneficiaries of your charity or good work (76:9). Do not ignore the humble and the vulnerable when you are in the company of the wealthy and the powerful (80:10)).

In His infinite mercy, Allah promises believers rewards according to the best of their actions. He repeats this most generous promise in successive verses: *"What is with you must vanish: what is with Allah will endure. And We will certainly bestow, on those who patiently persevere, their reward according to the best of their actions. Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has faith, surely to him We will give a new life, a life that is good and pure and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions."* (16:96-97)

Reciting verses of the Quran is a noble act that requires a particular mindset and etiquette: *"When you read the Quran, seek Allah's protection from Shaitan the rejected one. No authority has he over those who believe and put their trust in their Lord. His (Shaitan's) authority is only over those who take him as patron and who join partners with Allah."* (16:98-100) In other words, before reciting any verse of the Quran, we should say *"Auzu Billahi Minash Shaitanir Rajeem."* (I seek refuge with Allah from Shaitan, the cursed.)

Yet, as flawed and fallible human beings, we may sometime succumb to Shaitan's temptations due to ignorance. *"Those who do wrong in ignorance*

but who thereafter repent and make amends, Your Lord, after all this, forgives often and is most merciful.” (16:119)

Prophet Ibrahim’s (AS) example is held up as a model: *“Ibrahim was indeed exemplary, devoutly obedient to Allah and true in faith, and he joined not gods with Allah. He showed his gratitude for the favors of Allah, who chose him and guided him to a Straight Way. And We gave him good in this world, and in the Hereafter, he will be in the ranks of the righteous. So We have taught you the inspired message, ‘Follow the ways of Ibrahim, the True in Faith, and he joined not gods with Allah.’” (16:120-123)*

Religious preaching or *dawa* cannot be strident: *“Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is rightly guided.” (16:125)* Aggressive or manipulative preaching is worse than not preaching. Islam promotes the middle way, which is also the persuasive and eloquent way. Zealots have no place in Islam.

This leads naturally to the question of who is favored by Allah. The Quranic answer: *“Indeed, Allah is with those who restrain themselves by shunning evil, and those who do good.” (16:128)*

(Sura Isra is a Makki Sura)

Sura Isra (The Night Journey) (Verses 17:1-111)

The Sura opens with the Prophet’s (s.a.w) mystical experience of the “Night Journey” (al-Isra) to Jerusalem and the subsequent “Ascension” (Mi’raj) to heaven. *“Glory to Allah Who did take His servant for a journey by night from the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque, whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who*

hears and sees all things." (17:1)

(Mi'raj is also mentioned in Sura Najm (53:1-18))

Sometimes we desire the bad and reject the good due to a lack of patience.

"Man prays for evil as fervently as he prays for good, for man is given to haste." (17:11) The wise among us have patience. They do not place their desires above Allah's command. They receive Allah's favors with gratitude and accept any setback with patience and pray to be rightly guided in their hopes and needs. On the other hand, haste, or impatience, not only leads to bad decisions but also increases our appetite for the vile and the vulgar.

(Note that verses 17:23-39 can be read as commentaries on Allah's commands and prohibitions as stated in Sura Anam, verses 6:151-153).

In the worship of Allah, we must not allow any partners, for shirk is the most grievous of sins. Kindness toward parents comes after the worship of our One Sustainer. *"Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honor. And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility, and say: 'My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy like the way they cherished me in childhood.'* Your Lord knows best what is in your hearts. *If you do deeds of righteousness, surely He is Most Forgiving to those who turn to Him in repentance again and again."* (17:23-24)

Kindness toward people and fair dealings in commerce can help believers attain a high status in the Hereafter. *"And render to the kindred their due rights, as also to those in want and to the wayfarer. But squander not your wealth in the manner of a spendthrift. Surely wasters are companions of the Shaitan, and the Shaitan is to his Lord most ungrateful. And even if you have to turn away from them in seeking mercy that you expect from your Lord, yet speak to them a word of kindness."* (17:26-28)

We must seek a middle way between extravagance and miserliness: *"Make not your hand tied to your neck, nor stretch it forth to its utmost reach so that you become blameworthy and destitute. Surely your Lord provides sustenance in abundance for whom He pleases, and He restricts it for whom He pleases, for He is certainly All-Aware and All-Seeing of His servants."* (17:29-30)

Rizq and sustenance come from Allah. *"Kill not your children for fear of want. We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Surely the killing of them is a great sin."* (17:31)

Adultery is forbidden for believers. *"Nor come close to adultery, for it is an indecent deed and an evil way."* (17:32)

We must respect the sanctity of life: *"Nor take life, which Allah has made sacred, except for just cause. And if anyone is wrongfully slain, We have given the heir authority to demand justice (life or life) or to forgive, but let him not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life ..."* (17:33)

Just as the sanctity of life must be upheld, so must the properties of orphans: *"Do not approach the property orphans except to improve it, until the orphan attains the age of full strength, and fulfill all commitment, for each commitment will be taken into account on the Day of Judgment."* (17:34)

Fairness in transactions is critical: *"Give full measure when you measure and weigh with a balance that is straight. That is the most fitting and the most advantageous in the final determination."* (17:35) In our time, such fairness translates to giving what is due to employees and service providers and to people who work for us to earn their livelihood.

Accountability in everything we do points to the foundational fairness and justice of our faith: *"And pursue not that of which you have no knowledge,*

for surely the hearing, the sight, the heart will all be questioned. Nor walk on earth with insolence and arrogance, for you cannot split the earth, nor will your stature reach the mountains in height. Of all such things, the evil is hateful in the sight of your Lord." (17:36-37)

In summary: *"These are among the parts of wisdom that your Lord has revealed to you. Do not set up any other god with Allah, in case you are thrown into hell, blameworthy and rejected."* (17:39)

One of the most common and flagrant sins we commit is the sin of the tongue. Allah instructs us thus: *"Say to My servants that they should only say those things that are best ..."* (17:53) (Imagine how much stress and bitterness we can avoid if we only say about others what is good about them, or remain silent if we cannot say anything good, as the prophet (s.a.w) instructed.)

Time and again, we are reminded of the importance of prayers: *"Establish regular prayers at the sun's decline until the darkness of the night, and the prayer and recitation at dawn, for the prayer and recitation at dawn carry their special testimony."* (17:78) (Scholars agree that verse 78 implicitly contains a command for the five daily prayers.)

The term '*Qiyam-ul-Layl*' literally means to 'stand during the night.' It is a voluntary prayer offered between the time of the Isha and the Fajr prayers. As indicated in Sura Muzzammil (Sura number 73), the preferred time for offering *Qiyam-ul-Layl* prayer is either in the last third of the night before sunrise or in the last half of the night, or even in the last two-thirds of the night. *Qiyam-ul-Layl* prayer, which gains even greater significance during the month of Ramadan, is mentioned in this Sura as well: *"And as for the night, keep awake a part of it as an additional prayer for you so that your Lord may raise you to a station of praise and glory."* (17:79)

There is healing and mercy in the Quran for believers: *"And We sent down the Quran as a healing and mercy for the believers."* (17:82)

(While the entire Quran is a source of healing for believers, six specific verses address healing and are referred to as *Ayat Ash-Shifa* or the Verses of Healing. One of these verses is (17:82). The remaining five are:

"And (Allah) shall heal the breast of the believers." (9:14)

"O Humanity! There has come to you a guidance from your Lord and a healing for the diseases in your hearts, and for those who believe a guidance and a mercy." (10:57)

"There issues from within the bodies of the bee a drink of varying colors wherein is healing for mankind." (16:69)

"And when I am ill, it is He alone who cures me." (26:80)

"And declare (O Muhammad) that (the Quran) is a guidance and healing for the believers." (41:44))

What is the 'Spirit' (Ar-Ruh)? (The Arabic word '*ruh*' appears 17 times in the Quran) *"They ask you concerning the Spirit. Say, 'The Spirit is by the Command of my Lord. And whatever knowledge you have been given of that is little.'"* (17:85)

(Only Allah is Omniscient, All-Knowing. With that Truth in mind, some commentators use the context of the verses in which the word 'Ar-Ruh' appears in the Quran to suggest that it refers to angel Jibreel, as in verses 16:102, 26:193, 78:38, 97:4. Other commentators suggest that the word 'Ar-Ruh' refers to Allah's Commands and Revelation, as in verses 16:2, 40:15, 42:52. In yet other verses (15:29, 32:9, 66:12) in which Allah 'breathes His spirit' into humans is a metaphor for His endowing humans with life and consciousness, with hearing, sight, feelings and minds, in other words, with a soul. In a holistic sense, therefore, the word 'Ruh' or 'Spirit' suggest an attribute of Allah that He instills in humans to sustain and nourish them. It is a quality that enables humans to distinguish right from wrong, to reflect and to reason, to seek and to strive. According to some

scholars, the 'soul' can also mean the self after death that will be held accountable for how life was lived on earth. It will be transferred back to the resurrected body to communicate with the Creator during the final reckoning. (See 81:7) Thus, the word 'ruh,' either in definite or indefinite form, can take different meanings in context, a sign of the linguistic miracle of the Quran. In contrast, the meaning of the word 'nafs' that occurs 90 times in the Quran literally means 'self' and is often translated as 'ego' or 'psyche.' 'Nafs' often represents the lower or baser instincts, while 'Qalb' (heart) and 'Ruh' (spirit) represent the higher instincts of humans. *"Consider the human self, and how it is formed in accordance with what it is meant to be, and how it is imbued with moral failings as well with the consciousness of Allah. To a happy state shall indeed attain that person who causes the self to grow in purity, and truly lost is that person who buries it in darkness."* (91:7-10))

A remarkable aspect of Sura Isra is the use of the word "Quran." (The word "Quran" appears a total of 69 times in the Quran itself.) "Quran" is cited 11 times in this Sura, more than in any other Sura. These are the 11 verses:

- *Surely this Quran guides to that which is most right and gives glad tidings to believers who do good that they shall have a magnificent reward. (17:9)*
- *We have made plain Our revelations in this Quran so that they (the unbelievers) may take warning ... (17:41)*
- *When you (Muhammad) recite the Quran, We place between you and those who deny the life of the Hereafter a hidden barrier. (17:45)*
- *... and when you mention your Lord, Him alone, in the Quran, they (the unbelievers) turn on their backs, fleeing from the Truth. (17:46)*
- *We have made the vision which We showed you (Muhammad), as well as the Zaqqum tree cursed in the Quran, as a trial for men ... (17:60)*

- ... and the recital of the Quran in morning prayer, for the recital of Quran at dawn is witnessed. (17:78) ("Quran" quoted twice)
- We send down stage by stage the Quran in which is a healing and a mercy for those who believe. (17:82)
- Say, "If the whole of mankind and jinns were to gather together to produce the like of the Quran, they could not produce the like thereof ..." (17:88)
- We have explained to mankind in this Quran every kind of similitude ... (17:89)
- It is a Quran ... that We have revealed in stages ... (17:106)

(Sura Kahf is a Makki Sura)

Sura Al-Kahf (The Cave) (Verses 18:1-74)

This is the Sura that Muslims try to recite every Friday to renew their perspective on life and act on its enduring values. It consists almost entirely of a series of parables and allegories that contrast faith in the Creator with attachment to worldly life.

The story of the Youths (the Sleepers) who lived in a polytheist society and took shelter in a cave illustrates the virtue of abandoning the world for the sake of faith. They prayed, *"Our Lord! Bestow on us Mercy from You and dispose of our affair in the right way!"* (18:10) After many years of sleep, *"We strengthened their hearts. Behold, they stood up and said: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and of the earth. Never shall we call upon any god other than Him. If we did, we should indeed have uttered an enormity.'"* (18:14)

We find in this story an allegory of faith, the subjective and mystical nature of time (discontinuity in time inside the cave and outside), death, resurrection, and spiritual awakening. We also learn that insight into faith is accessible to anyone open to Allah's commands and guidance. The people of

the cave were young and humble. They were not among the most learned in their community or among the wealthiest. Yet Allah's Grace found them because their hearts and minds were in the right place. Their story should inspire us to have confidence in our ability to learn about our faith, discern the Truth and act on it, even if we are not highly educated or claim a large following. The humble and the ordinary are often among the first to be suffused with Allah's Grace.

In the parable of the rich and the poor man, we find a profound truth: Allah tests us by what He gives us. *"That which is on earth We have made but as a glittering show for it, in order that We may test them, as to which of them are best in conduct."* (18:7)

(There are 6236 verses in the Quran, comprising 77,449 words. The median word – the word that divides the Quran into two halves, the 38,725th word, occurs in verse (18:19) - *Wal Yatallaf*, meaning 'with care and courtesy'.)

Whenever we plan on doing something, from the smallest task to the most demanding, we should invoke the Omnipotence of Allah. *"Nor say of anything 'I shall be sure to do so and so tomorrow, except 'If Allah so wills' ...'"* (18:23-24)

Giving in to the excesses of unchecked desires can make us forget our Creator. Contentment characterizes a believer. *"And keep yourself content with those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His face. And not let your eyes pass beyond them, seeking the pomp and glitter of this life, nor obey any whose heart we have permitted to neglect the remembrance of Us, one who follows his own desires, and his affair has become all excess."* (18:28)

One consequence of following our dark desires is that we devalue time and

fritter it away in meaningless pursuits. Another is that the love of the world veils us from the knowledge of the unseen and prevents us from remembering Allah, without which life loses its meaning and purpose.

Belief and action go together. *"As to those who believe and do good deeds, surely We shall not suffer to perish the reward of any who do a single good deed."* (18:30)

The phrase *"Innal Lazeena A'manu Wa Milus Salihatu ..."* (As to those who believe and do good) occurs 61 times in the Quran. *"Do khayr (do good)"* by itself occurs 12 times. The question arises: What is a 'good deed?' There are two general categories of good deeds: *Huququllah* (acknowledge the rights and the obligations we owe Allah and act on it. Of course, Allah is *al-Ghani*. He is sufficient unto Himself. He doesn't need anything from us. It is for our own good that we need to fulfill our obligations to Him) and *Huququl Ibadah* (the right we owe our fellow humans, including those closest to us, particularly spouses and family members whom we tend to take for granted and deny them the respect they deserve. The rights and respect must extend to all sentient beings.) We all want to be loved, admired and appreciated but if we consistently engage in good deeds, Allah will also instill those feelings in others toward us. We don't need to strive to earn their love and admiration ourselves.

Consider "As to those who believe and do good" from another perspective. The two ideas here are orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right conduct). Unless orthodoxy is backed by orthopraxy, it can lead to hypocrisy. Yes, right conduct should flow from right belief but as complex human beings, we may find belief to be relatively easy but practice and conduct more difficult. This is why we must strive to reflect in our lives the unifying and holistic idea of "believe and do good."

Continuing with the parable of the wealthy and the poor man, the wealthy man thinks his gardens and wealth will last forever, that he is superior to the poor man because *"more wealth have I than you, and more honor and power in my following of men."* (18:34) Surrounded by palm trees, grapevines and cornfields of his garden, he tells himself, *"... I deem not that this will ever perish, nor do I deem that the Hour of Judgment will ever come. Even if I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find there something better in exchange."* (18:35-36)

Notice the words "my Lord." The rich man is a believer but without conviction. But also notice the 4 "I"s in his boasting. It's all "I", "Me", "Mine." In his pride and arrogance, he considers himself self-sufficient. This is both shirk and hubris. Though not explicitly denying Allah, he associates his wealth and garden with Allah. We commit shirk when we attribute our significance to ourselves instead of to Allah. It was the same mentality that doomed the wealthy Qarun (28:78) and the tyrant Pharaoh during prophet Musa's time. Wealth and power tend to blind us spiritually. In affluence, we think we are in control and so Allah gradually recedes from our minds and we fall into ruin.

The wealthy man's companion, the poor man, in contrast, holds firm to his faith: *"He is Allah, My Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord."* (18:38) *"... If you see me less than you in wealth and sons,"* he tells the rich man, *"it may be that my Lord will give me something better than your garden and that He will send on your garden thunderbolts by way of reckoning from heaven, making it but slippery sand. Or the water of the garden will run off underground so that you will never be able to find it."* (18:39-41)

That is precisely what happened. In the blink of an eye, the rich man's gardens lay in ruins *"and he remained twisting and turning his hands over what he had spent on his property, which had now tumbled to pieces to its very foundations, and he could only say, 'Woe is me! Would I that I had never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher!'"* (18:42)

The important question for each one of us is, 'Does that rich man reside in me?' and to remember that *"wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world. But the things that endure - good deeds - are best in the sight of your Lord as rewards, and best as the foundation for hope."* (18:46)

Notice the powerful words "foundation for hope" in verse (18:46). We perform good deeds by the Grace of Allah. They are rewards for our faith, and they become the foundation of our hopes for the highest rewards in the Hereafter. Such hope is based on action, not superficial optimism or wishful thinking. Hope, unlike optimism, is an active state of mind that comes from resolve and commitment, not a passive longing for things to turn out right without any effort on our part.

We also need to recognize the opposite of "foundation for hope:" the crisis of hope. In these turbulent times of stress, anxiety, despair and loss of faith, many of us are suffering from a crisis of hope. We do not believe that things can get better. We do not believe that good deeds will take us anywhere. We have become cynical, suspicious and indifferent. We have developed a nihilistic view of life. But Allah is telling us with certainty that *"the things that endure - good deeds - are best in the sight of your Lord as rewards, and best as the foundation for hope."* As believers, we must replace a crisis of hope with a foundation for hope.

It is also instructive to remember the hadith of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w): "All deeds stop after the death of a person, except three things that continue

to contribute to her/his account of good deeds: a righteous child who makes du'a for the person, an ongoing *sadaqah* or charity that the person created (a school, a hospital and so on), and beneficial knowledge that the person authored and disseminated that continues to benefit humankind after her/his death."

In the story of Prophet Musa (AS) and the unnamed sage, there are several lessons for us to learn. The first is that quest for knowledge and lifelong learning are traits of a believer. *"And remember when Musa said to his assistant, 'I will never give up until I reach the junction of the two seas, even if I travel for ages.'"* (18:60)

What is the "junction of the two seas" that Musa (AS) sought to find when he started out on his journey? it is meaningless to speculate its geographical location and instead focus on the mystical confluence of the seen and the unseen, the manifest and the hidden, the mind's power and the heart's purity.

Who is the unnamed sage? He is one *"on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own Presence."* (18: 65) When Musa meets him after first missing him, he pleads with him: *"I will serve you and in return, you can teach me some of the higher knowledge you have been given."* The crucial word here is '*rushda*,' a word of many meanings: higher knowledge, right guidance, the right path, holistic consciousness, wisdom, sound judgment, and moral integrity. It is '*rushda*' that Musa (AS) seeks from one blessed by Allah (SWT) with it. ('*Rushda*' appears 19 times in the Quran in seven derived forms).

In response to Musa's pleadings to accompany him, the sage says, *"You cannot be patient enough with me, for how can you be patient with what is*

beyond your ken?" (18:67-68). Musa responds: "You will find me patient, Allah willing, and I will not disobey any of your orders." (18:69)

We are reminded of the critical quality of patience necessary for our intellectual and spiritual growth, something that holds true even for prophets. But the story is more complex than that. Consider the first two incidents and Musa's reactions: *"So they set out, but after they had boarded a ship, the man made a hole in it. Moses protested, 'Have you done this to drown its people? You have certainly done a terrible thing!'" (18:71)*

The wise man reminds Musa of his promise of patience and Musa apologizes.

So they proceeded until they came across a boy, and the man killed him. Musa protested, "Have you killed an innocent soul, who killed no one? You have certainly done a horrible thing." (18:74)

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