

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

*All Praises to Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful*

13<sup>th</sup> Taraweeh, Ramadan 1446 Hijri

Summary of Verses 18:75-21:50

Sura Al-Kahf (The Cave) (Verses 18:75-110)

*(The story of Musa (AS) and the wise man continues from the 12<sup>th</sup> Taraweeh summary)*

The wise man again reminds Musa (AS) of his promise of patience and Musa apologizes.

And yet, if we think about it, prophet Musa's reactions were aligned with the teaching of Islam, which is that when we see someone doing something wrong, we must protest it, even if we are unable to stop it with our hands.

The sage was also right. His knowledge of the future, which Allah had blessed him with and which guided him to do what he did, was beyond Musa's ken.

The two incidents perplexed Musa because he could not understand or justify the seemingly cruel and senseless acts the sage had committed. The third incident is different. Here the roles are reversed in that Musa wanted to exact some sort of revenge whereas the sage took the moral high ground of doing good despite confronting the indifference and hostility of the people of the town to their thirst and hunger.

*"So they moved on until they came to the people of a town. They asked them for food, but the people refused to give them hospitality. There they found a wall ready to collapse, so the man set it right. Moses protested, "If you wanted, you could have demanded a fee for this." (18:77)*

The wise man tells Musa after the third incident: *"This is the parting between me and you. I will inform you of the interpretation of that about which you could not have patience. (18:78)*

He then reveals the reasons behind his mysterious actions. He damaged the boat to save it and the people on it from a cruel king. He killed the boy because he was faithless and wicked and would have tormented his righteous parents if he had continued to live. *"As for the youth, his parents were people of faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude to Allah."* (18:80) This seemed even crueler than scuttling a boat but the sage knew, blessed with the knowledge that Allah gave him, that the youth could be a potential parricide. Notice the use of the word "we." Even though the wise man's summary capital punishment of the youth could come across as an unjustifiably cruel act, the word "we" suggests perhaps that he was not acting on his own but inspired by a Higher Authority to remove a public scourge.

*"And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure for them, and their father had been righteous. So your Lord intended that they reach maturity and extract their treasure, as a mercy from your Lord. And I did it not of my own accord. That is the interpretation of that about which you could not have patience."* (18:82)

So what is the '*rush'd*' here and are the lessons? Perhaps it is that we cannot judge the intentions of others, no matter how knowledgeable or spiritually advanced we may consider ourselves to be, that even if the transcendent reality that lies beneath manifest reality is beyond our ken to fathom, we must never cease in our quest for knowledge, and that while life offers us a profusion of perspectives, we must reverently acknowledge that the ultimate Truth resides with Allah alone.

Unfortunately, all kinds of exotic stories have grown around the unnamed sage, whether he was a prophet or not, and such. This is an example of our inability to appreciate the essence of Quranic verses, focusing, instead, on tall tales that have no sanctity in the Divine Book. We should be on guard against such misguided tendencies.

In the allegory of Zul-Qarnain, we learn that worldly life, power, and affluence need not conflict with spirituality as long as we remain conscious of Allah and gratefully acknowledge His blessings. *"They said: 'O Zul-Qarnain! The Gog and Magog (also referred to in 21:96) do great mischief on earth. Shall we render you a tribute so that you might erect a barrier between us and them?' He said: 'The power in which my Lord has established me is better than tribute. Help me, therefore, with strength and labor. I will erect a strong barrier between you and them.'"* (18:94-95)

Unlike the rich man and his gardens, Zul-Qarnain is aware that man's work is ephemeral, and that time will eventually reduce all work to dust. When the barrier is built and the Gog and the Magog are unable to scale it or dig through it, Zul-Qarnain said: *"This is a mercy from my Lord. But when the promise of my Lord comes to pass, He will make it into dust, and the promise of my Lord is true."* (18:98) The truly wise know that only the active consciousness of Allah (SWT) can save us from the despair of afflictions and the arrogance of success.

Perhaps the most intriguing of Zul-Qarnain's encounters was with the people *"for whom We had provided no covering protection against the sun."* (18:90) Did he try to bring "modernity" to them, teach them how to attain a "higher standard of living?" No, *"... He left them as they were"* (18:91) so as not to disrupt their peace and harmony. Zul-Qarnain used technology to save people against the Gog and the Magog but left these primitive, innocent

people unclothed as they were, balancing progress with tradition and deriving strength from the past without being anchored to it. The example of Zul-Qarnain teaches Muslims to face modernity by balancing the traditional and the modern world. Who are these Muslims? They are those who don't dwell in the past but derive strength, courage, hope, honor, compassion, and sacrifice from it to improve the present and the future. They understand the power of tradition and the lessons of history to illuminate the present and the future without abandoning *Ijtihad*, the practice of independent thinking and reasoning.

(There is another profound lesson we can draw from the example of Zul-Qarnain: religion and science are complementary rather than contradictory. Yes, there will always be secularists and rationalists who view religion as an albatross around civilization's neck, and there will always be theologians who rail at science as something that has driven meaning from life. But Zul-Qarnain showed that such a dichotomy was foolish and absurd. He is deeply spiritual, always acknowledging Allah's mercy and expressing gratitude to Him for his good work. At the same time, he uses his God-given gifts in science and technology to help people overcome their difficulties. He finds no separation between reason and religion. Science deals with factual aspects of the natural world and religion with transcendent questions of meaning and purpose. One deals with the "how" and the other with the "why." Both can work in concert to enrich our material and spiritual lives. There are theologians in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and other faiths who find in the theory of evolution evidence of God's glorious self-disclosure, and many scientists whose research leads them to ask the deeper questions of life – "Why are we here? Why do we suffer?" lies outside the realm of science. The unexplored region between faith and reason, between the sacred and the secular, is an invocation for people with open minds to seek spiritual and scientific truths. They see no conflict in acknowledging that the

universe is a fertile wonder and mystery that may transcend their comprehension. Can wildflowers of insight not bloom if scientists and spiritualists nurture this unexplored region with humor and humility?)

There is a deep connection between *ilm* (knowledge) and *taqwa* (mindfulness of Allah at all times, reflected in good deeds). One without the other is weak. If a person only knows what is intellectually right without anything in his heart motivating him to perform good deeds, his knowledge will not benefit him. Conversely, a false sense of *taqwa* without *ilm* can be futile. This is stated in verse (18:103-104): *"Say, (O Prophet), 'Shall we inform you of those who will lose the most in terms of their deeds? Those whose efforts have been wasted in this life while they thought they were acquiring good by their works.'"*

The virtues and rewards of good deeds are made clear: *"Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds, their abode will be the Gardens of Paradise, wherein they abide eternally. They will not desire any change from it ..."* (18:107-108)

In this life, we are in a constant state of seeking and longing, but all such quests will come to an end and an unimaginably better life will begin for those blessed with *Jannatul Firdous*.

We aspire to meet our Creator in a state of hope and grace. The concluding verse of Sura Kahf indicates not only the human qualities of the Prophet (s.a.w) but also how best to meet the Creator: *"Say: 'I am but a man like yourselves. The inspiration has come to me, that Your God is One God. Whoever expects to meet his Lord, let him do righteous deeds, and in the worship of his Lord, admit no one as partner.'"* (18:110)

(Sura Maryam is a Makki Sura)

Sura Maryam (Mary) (Verses 19:1-98)

(Context: Maryam is the only woman mentioned by name in the Quran. Three prophets of 'Bani Israel' – Zakariya, his son Yahya, and Isa (AS) – whose lifetimes overlapped - are mentioned in this Sura, as they are also mentioned in Sura al-Imran revealed in Madinah (3:35-41). Isa (AS) is the last prophet of 'Bani Israel'. 'Bani Israel' means 'Children of Israel.' The Hebrew word 'Israel' translates to 'Abdullah' in Arabic, which means 'Servant of Allah.' It was the title given to Prophet Yaqub, son of prophet Ishaq, one of the two sons of prophet Ibrahim, the other being prophet Ismail.)

The birth of Isa, son of Maryam, is preceded by the birth of Yahya, son of Zakaria. Both are extraordinary events. Allah is the originator of the laws of cause and effect and therefore, is not bound by these laws. He says "Be" and it "Is." An example: Zakariya asks his Lord in anguish how he can have a son in old age, and Allah responds: "... *That is easy for me. I did indeed create you before when you were nothing!*" (19:9)

When childbirth drives Maryam to the trunk of a palm tree and she cries out in pain, "*a voice cried to her from beneath the palm tree: 'Grieve not! For your Lord has provided a rivulet beneath you.'*" (19:24)

What follows next is profoundly instructive: "*And shake towards yourself the trunk of the palm tree. It will let fall fresh ripe dates upon you.*" (19:25)

Even a woman in labor is instructed to make an effort to get what she needs. If we desire Allah's Grace and wish to achieve our goals, we must make some effort, no matter how small or insignificant it may appear to be.

In defending his mother's innocence and integrity, Prophet Isa (AS) emphasizes his human nature and his gratitude toward One true God: *"He said: 'I am indeed a servant of Allah. He has given me revelation and made me a prophet. He has blessed me wherever I go and has commanded me to observe prayer and give charity for as long as I live. He has made me kind to my mother, not overbearing or haughty. So, peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life again!'"* (19:30-33)

The story of Prophet Ibrahim (AS) and his many encounters with idol-worshippers show the long struggle between Islam and polytheism. Ibrahim (AS) pleads with his father on four separate occasions to abandon paganism, but the father threatens to stone him. He cuts himself off from his father and his people to seek solace with his Lord. In return, Allah rewards him: *"... We bestowed on him Ishaq and Yaqub, and each one of them We made a prophet."* (19:49)

Other prophets are mentioned - Musa, Harun, Ismail, Idris - who enjoined prayer and charity and the Truth to their people: *"Those were some of the prophets on whom Allah bestowed His Grace, of the children of Adam, and of those whom We carried in the Ark with Noah, and of the children of Ibrahim and Israel whom We guided and chose. Whenever the Signs of Allah, the Most Gracious, were rehearsed to them, they would fall down in prostration and be in tears."* (19:58)

One striking aspect of Sura Maryam is that, of its 98 verses, 72 of them end with the same two Arabic letters that have the sound of 'ya', producing a mesmerizing rhythm. Another is the occurrence of the word 'Rahman' (Most Kind and Loving) a total of 16 times:

- *"She said, 'I seek the Rahman's protection from you if you are really God-fearing.'" (19:18)*
- *"So eat and drink and rejoice, and should you meet anyone, say, 'I have today vowed to the Rahman that I shall not speak with anyone.'" (19:26)*
- *"O my father, do not worship Shaitan, for he has rebelled against Allah, the Rahman." (19:44) (Pleading of Ibrahim (AS))*
- *"O my father, I fear a scourge will fall upon you from Allah, the Rahman." (19:45)*
- *"... Whenever the revelations of the Rahman are recited to them, they fall prostrating and weeping." (19:58)*
- *"Gardens of eternity which the Rahman has promised His servants ..." (19:61)*
- *"From each group, We shall drag out those most rebellious against the Rahman." (19:69)*
- *"Say, 'whoever goes astray, the Rahman will bear long with them ...'" (19:75)*
- *"Has he been made aware of the unknown? Or has the Rahman given him a promise?" (19:78)*
- *"The day when We shall gather the righteous in multitudes before the Rahman." (19:85)*
- *"None shall have the benefit of intercession except those with permission from the Rahman." (19:87)*
- *"They said, 'The Rahman has begotten a son!'" (19:88)*
- *"That they should ascribe a son to the Rahman ..." (19:91)*
- *"... when it does not become the Rahman to beget a son." (19:92)*
- *"All that is in the heavens and on the earth shall return to the Rahman in submission." (19:93)*

- *"The Rahman shall bestow love on those who believe and do good works."* (19:96)

(According to Muslim scholars, the word '*Rahman*' (Beneficent) is unique to Allah, that is, it is reserved for Allah alone. If a Muslim, for example, is named '*Abdur Rahman*,' we have to call him by his full name '*Abdur Rahman*,' and not '*Rahman*,' which is wrong. '*Rahim*,' on the other hand, is one of the attributes of Allah (Compassionate/Merciful) that can be shared. So calling someone '*Rahim*' is okay.)

(Sura Ta-Ha is a Makki Sura)

Sura Ta-Ha (Verses 20:1-135)

The theme of this Sura is the guidance Allah has offered humankind through His prophets. Most of the verses refer to Prophet Musa (AS) and emphasize that the fundamental truths inherent in all revealed religions are the same.

The Sura begins with Allah assuring His prophet (s.a.w) that *"We have not sent down the Quran to you to be a reason for your distress but only as an admonition from Him Who created the Heavens and the earth ..."* (20:2-3)

Then the story of prophet Musa begins, a story suffused with symbolism and spirituality: *"Has the story of Musa reached you? Behold, he saw a fire, so he said to his family, 'you wait, I perceive a fire. Perhaps I can bring you some burning brand or some guidance at the fire.' But when he came to the fire, he was called, 'O Musa, Indeed I am your Lord. Take off your shoes. You are in the sacred valley of Tuwa. I have chosen you. Listen, then, to the inspiration. Indeed, I am Allah. There is no god but Me. So serve only Me. And establish regular prayer for My remembrance. Surely the Hour is coming. I have kept it hidden for every soul, to receive its reward by the measure of its endeavor. Therefore, do not let those who do not believe and*

*follow their own lusts divert you from your mission, lest you perish."*  
(20:9-16)

This transcendent encounter is followed by Allah (SWT) showing Musa some of His miracles. The ensuing dialogue points to the deeper truth that lies beneath what may appear mundane to us.

*"And what is that in your right hand, O Musa?"* (20:17)

Allah is All-Knowing, so surely He knows the answer. Even we can surmise that Musa is probably right-handed and as a shepherd, carries a staff to help keep his flock organized and fed. But we must remember that when the Divine Teacher asks seemingly ordinary questions, they open portals in reflective minds revealing profound insights.

*"He (Musa) said: 'This is my stick, whereon I lean, and wherewith I beat down branches for my sheep, and wherein I find other uses.' (Allah) said: 'Cast it down, O Musa!' He (Musa) cast it down, and behold! It was a snake, moving swiftly. Allah said: 'Grasp it, and fear not, We shall return it to its former state. And press your hand to your side. It will come forth white and shining, without any disease, that We may show you some of Our Signs.'" (20:18-23)*

What was an ordinary stick in Musa's hand manifests itself as another reality by Allah's command. Allah meets us at our level as an expression of His sublime empathy, helping us to peer beyond the literal into the transcendental. He helps us connect the exterior with the interior, the empirical with the eternal, when we sense in our minds, hearts and bodies His All-Encompassing Knowledge and Power.

Allah commands Musa to take on his new mission as a prophet:

*"Go to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed all bounds."* (20:24)

Musa asks for more help from his Creator: *"O my Lord! Expand my breast, ease my task for me, and remove the impediment from my speech, so they understand what I say. And give me a helper from my family, Harun, my brother. Add to my strength through him, and make him share my task, that we may continuously celebrate Your praise, for You are Ever Seeing."* (20:25-35)

Allah responds to Musa's supplication: *"Granted is your prayer, O Musa!"* (20:36) Allah reminds Musa of the favors He bestowed on him earlier, as when he was saved as a boy after being thrown into a river. Allah then informs Musa that He has prepared him for his prophetic mission and he and his brother are to go and confront Pharaoh. *"But speak to him softly, in the chance that he may heed your warning or fear Me."* (20:44) When Musa still expresses fear, Allah tells him, *"Fear not, for I am with you. I hear and see everything. So, go both of you to him and say, 'Indeed we are messengers sent by your Lord. Send forth, therefore, the children of Israel with us and afflict them not. We have come from your Lord with a Sign, and peace to all who follow the guidance. It has been revealed to us that punishment awaits those who reject and turn away.'"* (20:46-48)

When Musa and Harun delivered the message, *"Pharaoh said, 'Who, then, O Musa, is the Lord of you two?' Musa replied: 'Our Lord is He who gave to each his form, then guidance.'"* (20:49-50)

The stage is set for the battle between Truth and falsehood, between the ephemeral eternal and the eternal.

The profound truth that describes all human beings is this:

*"From the earth We created you, and into it We will return you, and from it We will extract you another time."* (20:55)

Duas are the essence of *ibadah* or worship. We should memorize and frequently recite verse (20:55) - *Minha' Khalaqna'kum Wafi'ha' Nu'eedukum Waminha' Nukhrijukum Ta'ratan Ukhra* - to remind ourselves that we came from the earth, that we will return to the earth, and that we will be raised from the earth on the Day of Judgment.

(It is important to remind ourselves from time to time that some of the good things that happen to us may be the result of Duas that our loved ones, especially parents and grandparents, made for us and that Allah accepted. Such remembrance can also lead to grace and gratitude. As the 18<sup>th</sup>-century author George Eliot wrote: "... for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.")

Prophet Musa's encounter with Pharaoh and his band of magicians offers contrasting and timeless lessons for tyrants and for those who seek guidance with humility. (See (7:109-125) in the 7<sup>th</sup> Taraweeh summary.) As soon as the magicians realized that they were engaged in mere trickery whereas Musa (AS) had brought the Truth from his Lord, the scales fell from their eyes: *"So the magicians fell into prostration. They said, 'We believe in the Lord of Harun and Moses.'"* (20:70)

Not so the arrogant. *"Then Pharaoh pursued them with his forces, but the waters completely overwhelmed them and covered them up. Pharaoh led his people astray instead of leading them aright."* (20:78-79)

The humble recognize the truth when they see it and seek knowledge that will bring them closer to Allah. They say, just as the prophet (s.a.w) was

instructed by Allah to say, "... *O my Lord! Increase me in knowledge.*"  
(20:114)

The battle between good and evil is eternal, but Allah will give victory to the righteous in due time who fight for truth against tyrants whose weapons are injustice and violence: "*Do they see how many generations We have destroyed before them? They can still walk amidst the ruins of their dwellings. Surely in this are signs for people endued with understanding.*"  
(20:128)

The importance of prayer is emphasized: "... *celebrate the praises of your Lord before the rising of the sun and before its setting. Yes, celebrate for part of the hours of the night and at the sides of the day ...*" (20:130)

We are reminded not to strain our eyes with longing for things that others have and not to be swayed by the splendor of the worldly life "*through which We test them*" because "... *the provision of your Lord is better and more enduring.*" (20:131)

A motif that runs through this Sura is the contrast between awareness and forgetfulness. If we know our obligations to Allah, we will be on the Straight Path. If, on the other hand, we forget our obligations and remain heedless of His guidance, we will be easy prey for Shaitan.

(Sura Anbiya is a Makki Sura)

Sura Al-Anbiya (The Prophets) (Verses 21:1-50)

The Quran reminds us often of the stories of the prophets of old who preached the same fundamental truth of Oneness, Uniqueness, and Transcendence of Allah. They illustrate the continuity and intrinsic unity of all revealed religions.

Those who are spiritually empty are asked to ponder the origin of the Universe and use their logic and reason to shed their unbelief: *"Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together as one unit of creation before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe?"* (21:30)

(In referring to the hydrological cycle and its role in sustaining life on earth, the fertility of the soil, the unique properties of fresh and seawater, the course of rivers and the presence underground of springs and aquifers and, most significantly, the aquatic origin of life, the Quran places water at the top of natural phenomena on earth.

In the study of water is the convergence of almost all disciplines of natural sciences. We study its properties as a solvent in chemistry but understanding its molecular shape requires knowledge of quantum physics. Water is a simple molecule that has been extensively studied by scientists for centuries: two hydrogen atoms branching off at a 104.5-degree angle in a V-shape from a central oxygen atom. This unique shape and the remarkable physical and chemical properties (steam, liquid water, and ice) that follow from it have far-reaching consequences. It is the reason why ice is less dense than liquid water and floats, why lakes in winter freeze from the top down (rather than bottom up), enabling aquatic life to survive near the bottom, and why, in general, life has evolved the way it has. From the cycle that nourishes the earth to the protoplasm that is the physical basis of every living cell, water is the essence of life, reflecting both the macrocosm and the microcosm. Recently, scientists have created two new forms of ice under extremes of low temperature and high pressure comprising a jumble of molecules with unique properties that they call amorphous ice. One is the high-density amorphous ice denser than water and the other is the low-density amorphous ice with a density less than water. Amorphous ices are

not found on earth but can exist in outer space, comets, interstellar clouds, and in icy worlds like Europa, a moon of Jupiter. It only goes to show that water, a molecule without which life could not exist, still holds scientific mysteries yet to be discovered.)

Allah will test us by the inevitable encounters we will have with both good and evil in our lives and by the ultimate reality of death. The soul does not die but when it separates from the body at the time of death, the soul too gets a taste of death. (We found this theme also in verse 3:185). The important thing to note is that in our probatory life on earth, both calamities and comforts of life will test us. Sometimes affluence can prove more challenging to our faith than poverty. In all such cases, we need to prove our mettle to Allah, for it is to Him that we must ultimately return. *"Every soul shall have a taste of death. And We test you by evil and by good by way of trial. To Us must you return."* (21:35)

Allah's justice will encompass all actions great and small: *"We shall set up scales of justice for the day of judgment so that not a soul shall be dealt with unjustly in the least. And if there be no more than the weight of mustard seed, We will bring it to account, and enough are We to take account."* (21:47)

Who are the successful ones? *"In the past, we granted to Musa and Harun the criterion for judgment and a Light and a Message for those who would do right (the Muttaqin, that is, those who practice Taqwa). Those who fear their Lord in their most secret thoughts (Yakhshauna, from Khashyat, those who fear the Lord by resisting the whispering of Shaitan), and who hold the Hour of Judgment in awe (Mushfiqun, from Ishfaq, those who are mindful of the consequences of their action on the Day of Judgment.)"* (21:48-49)

(Note the three kinds of positive fear, that is, love for and constant awareness of Allah mentioned in these two verses. First in the hierarchy is *Taqwa*. Next is *Khashyat*. Finally, there is *Ishfaq*. Consider also that many thoughts, good and bad, pass daily through our minds. The quality of these thoughts contributes to the development of good character. We are flawed and fallible human beings and bad thoughts assail us all from time to time. While it is true that we will be held accountable only for our actions and not for our thoughts, the insidious thing about bad thoughts is that they often turn into dark desires. If we don't fight these dark desires, they turn into ambition and then into action. And once we engage in these actions, they become habits and before we know it, the habits have enslaved us! Our lives are reflections of our thoughts, which is why we must try to have wholesome thoughts. So, while the occasional bad thought is a part of the human condition, it is important not to let such thoughts linger but to seek Allah's help in dispelling them by reciting "*Auzu Billahi Minash Shaitwanir Rajeem*." (I seek refuge in Allah from the cursed Shaitan.) With intention and practice, bad thoughts can give way to noble thoughts and eventually to thoughts of Allah's mercy and generosity, leading to the establishment of the Criterion, the Light and the Message in our lives.)

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