

Surah Balad, Chapter 90

(The City)

Number of Verses: 20

[Contents of this Surah](#)

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

In The Name of Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful

The Surah, in spite of its brevity, contains some thought provoking ideas:

In the first part of the Surah, after mentioning some meaningful oaths, this fact is pointed out that Man's life, in this world, is always full of toil and struggle which prepares him to be able to face troubles and difficulties and therefore, he should not expect absolute tranquility and comfort in the present world; that which is possible only in the next life.

In the next part of this Surah, a few of the greatest divine bounties created for Man are enumerated and then, discussion is given showing his ingratitude.

In the last part of the Surah, people are divided into two groups: the people of the Right Hand and the people of the Left Hand. Then, some characteristics of the good deeds of the first group and their final fate are stated and are compared to the destiny of the opposite group; the Unbelievers and sinners.

The senses derived from the verses of this Surah are decisive and vigorous, the statements are short and categorical and the words are extremely effective and explicit. The form and content of the verses show that the Surah is one of the Meccan ones.

The Virtue in Studying Surah Balad

Regarding the virtue in studying the Surah, the holy Prophet (S) is narrated to have said:

*"He who studies it, Allah will make him safe from His wrath on the Day of Judgement."*¹

A tradition from Imam Sadiq (as) says:

*"He who recites Surah Balad in his obligatory prayers will be known as a good-doer in this world, and in the Next World he will be considered among those who have rank and privilege with Allah, and he will be of the friends and companions of the prophets, martyrs, and the pious men."*²

Surah Balad, Verses 1-7

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

In The Name of Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful

لَا أُقْسِمُ بِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ

وَأَنْتَ حِلٌّ بِهَذَا الْبَلَدِ

وَوَالِدٍ وَمَا وَلَدٍ

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي كَبَدٍ

أَيَحْسَبُ أَنْ لَنْ يَقْدِرَ عَلَيْهِ أَحَدٌ

يَقُولُ أَهْلَكْتُ مَا لَا لُبَدًا

أَيَحْسَبُ أَنْ لَمْ يَرَهُ أَحَدٌ

1. ***"Nay! I swear by this city (Mecca)"***

2. ***"And you are an inhabitant of this city,"***
3. ***"And by the begetter and whom he begot,"***
4. ***"Certainly We have created man to be in distress."***
5. ***"Does he think that no one has power over him?"***
6. ***"He says: I have squandered wealth abundant!"***
7. ***"Does he think that no one, sees him?"***

By This Sacred City!

It is the style of the Qur'an when stating facts of very great importance, to often begin with oaths. These oaths, themselves, evoke thought and intelligence in Man.

Here, too, in order to state the fact that Man's life, in the present world, is always associated with toil and struggle, it begins with a new oath and says:

***"Nay! I swear by this city (Mecca),"
"And you are an inhabitant of this city".***

Mecca is not directly mentioned in these verses, but regarding the Surah, on the one hand, which is Meccan, and the extraordinary importance of this sacred city, on the other hand, it is clear that it is in reference to Mecca. The consensus of commentators concur.

Of course, the holiness and greatness of Mecca requires that Allah makes oath to it. The first center of monotheism and worship to the Lord has been built here and great prophets have circumambulated it.

But the verse:

"And you are an inhabitant of this city"

contains a new matter. It says that this city is so highly sacred and holy because of the Prophet (S), and his blessed existence in it, that it deserves to be sworn to.

The fact is that the spiritual value of land is due to the value of those who dwell there. The pagans should not think that the Qur'an has made worthy this land and made oath to it because it is their home or that it is the central place of their idols. Nay, it is not so. The value of this city, besides its special historical background, is for the sake of the blessed existence, in it, of Muhammad (S); Allah's unique servant.

There is also another commentary which says: 'We do not swear by this sacred city when they treated you disrespectfully and bid that your life, wealth and honour be free and permissible for all. '

This is a terrible disgrace to the pagans of Quraish who considered themselves the servitors and protectors of the temple of Mecca and respected it so highly that if a murderer of their father were seen

there, he would be left safe. It is said that even those who took the bark of the trees of Mecca with them were safe because of this respect. Ironically, in showing this kind of respect they did not observe these customs and traditions regarding the Prophet (S)

Why did the pagans hurt him and his companions with every kind of torment that they could, so that they even counted the slaying of them lawful?

This commentary is also narrated in a tradition from Imam Sadiq (as).[3](#)

"And by the begetter and whom he begot".

To answer the question of who is the parent and who is the child, different commentaries have been cited:

1. The father is Abraham and the child is Ismail. Referring to the oath in the previous verse made to the city of Mecca, and we do know that Abraham and his son were the founders of Kaaba and Mecca, this commentary seems very appropriate; in particular, that the pagan Arabs maintained an extraordinary importance for Abraham and his son and they were very proud of them. Many of them have claimed that they have descended from Abraham.
2. The begetter is Adam and whom he begot is his children.
3. The meaning is Adam and all of the Prophets who came from his descendents.
4. It is an oath to any father and child because the process of human reproduction and its survival throughout history is one of the most wonderful things in the creation to which Allah has sworn.

To gather, these four commentaries, together, is not impossible, but the first one seems the most fitting.

Then, the attention is paid to a thing which is the final purpose of these oaths:

"Certainly We have created man to be in distress."

The term /kabad/, as Tabarsi cites in Majma'-al-Bayan, originally means 'intensity'.

But, as Raqib cites in Mufradat, the word /kabad/ means 'a disease in the liver of a person'. and so, it is used for any trouble and misery. Whatever the root of this word might be, its present use means trouble and misery.

Yes, from the early moments of life, even as a foetus in the womb, Man passes through different, difficult stages with pain and toil until the time he is born, and even from then on; during his childhood, the period of his adolescence, and the most difficult times, his mature years, he is always faced with many kinds of trouble and misery. This is the nature of the present world. Those who have other expectations, about this world, other than that there is pain and toil, here are wrong.

The lives of the prophets and saints of Allah, who have been the best of all creatures, have been full of diverse difficulties and painful situations. When the world has been like this for them, then, the status of others is clear.

We may see some people or some societies which have no apparent trouble and seem to live in ease. It is either because of our insufficient information about them, and when we approach them and study their outwardly comfortable lives, we see the depth of their pain and suffering; or their comfortable situation exists for a short time or in an exceptional period, but, however, it does not change the general law of the world.

"Does he think that no one has power over him?"

The verse denotes that the life of Man, which is mixed with pain and toil, is an evidence that he has no power.

But, Man is proud and commits any sin and crime as if he were quite safe and were out of the limits of Allah's punishment. When he gains power, he neglects all the laws of Allah and disobeys Him, totally. Does he really think that he can escape from the grips of divine punishment? What a great error!

It is also probable that the objective point of the verse is directed toward the rich people who thought no one could take their wealth from them.

Also, it has been cited that the objective point is of those who thought that they will never be questioned about their deeds. The scope of the concept, of the verse, is so vast and wide that it may cover all of these commentaries, combined.

Some have said that the above verse is about a man from the tribe of Jamh by the name of Abul-Asad. He was so powerful that when he sat on a piece of leather and ten men tried to take the leather out from under him they failed. Sometimes the leather might have been torn to pieces, but he would remain sitting. [4](#)

In any case, the verse pointing to these arrogant people does not limit the generality of its meaning.

Then, on the same theme, it continues stating:

"He says: I have squandered wealth abundant!"

The verse is about those of whom when they were told to spend some money on good deeds, they would respond, boastfully, that they had spent much in that way; but they had spent nothing; and if they had given something to anyone it had been for personal intentions and hypocritical aims.

Some have said that the verse refers to the ones who had spent much wealth on enmity against Islam and the holy Prophet (S) and for the plots against Islam, and for this they boasted.

As an evidence, a tradition says that in the battle of Khandaq when Hazrat Ali (as) invited 'Amr-ibn-i-'Abdud to Islam he protested thus:

"What about that which I have spent, abundantly from my wealth, against you?" [5](#)

Some have also said that the verse points to some of the chiefs of Quraish such as one of the worst enemies of the Prophet (S). Harith-ibn-'Amir, who had committed a sin and asked the Prophet (S) what he should do about it and Hazrat ordered him to pay atonement, then he replied:

"From the day I became a Muslim I have squandered wealth abundant". [6](#)

It is of no consequence whether all of these three commentaries are combined, though the first one is more fitting with the next verse.

The term

/ahlakta/ 'I have squandered'

denotes that he has, indeed, wasted his wealth, but has not gained anything beneficial.

The term /lubad/ means 'a dense crowd or thing' and. here it means 'much wealth'.

"Does he think that no one see him?"

He does not pay attention to the fact that Allah not only sees the deeds he has done in private and in public, but He also knows all that goes through his mind and what he keeps hidden in the depth of his heart or what he intends to do in the future. Is it possible for the infinite Creator Who knows everything not to be able to see or know about a single thing? These neglectful people think that they are out of the scope of His constant watch, but it is because of their own ignorance.

Yes, Allah knows where they have obtained their wealth and how and for what purpose they have used it.

A tradition is narrated by Ibn-Abbas that the Prophet (S) said:

"(On Dooms Day) no servant can walk forth unless he is asked about four things:

1) about his lifetime and how he spent it,

2) about his wealth and where he gathered it from and what he spent it for,

3) about his deeds and what he has done, and

4) about his love for us; the Ahlul-Bait". [7](#)

In short, how can Man be proud of his wealth and boast that he is powerful while all his life is spent in pain and toil, and if he has some wealth it can disappear in one day and if he has strength it can be removed by a fever?

Furthermore, how can a person claim that he has spent much wealth for the sake of Allah when He knows his intentions? Allah knows both the source of that unlawful wealth and how he spent it hypocritically and grudgingly.

Surah Balad, Verses 8–10

أَلَمْ نَجْعَلْ لَهُ عَيْنَيْنِ

وَلِسَانًا وَشَفَتَيْنِ

وَهَدَيْنَاهُ النَّجْدَيْنِ

8. "Have We not made for him two eyes?"

9. "And a tongue and two lips?"

10. "And showed him the two ways (of good and evil)?"

The Gifts of Eyes, Tongue and Guidance!

In the former verses the discussion was about the pride and negligence of neglectful Man, but in the following verses, a part of the greatest material and spiritual gifts of Allah to Man is described, in order to break his pride and negligence, on the one hand, and to make him think about the Creator of these gifts and on the other hand; for stirring the sense of gratitude inside his soul, which sends him forth to the knowledge of Allah.

"Have We not made for him two eyes?"

"And a tongue and two lip?"

"And showed him the two ways (of good and evil)?"

Thus, in these short sentences, three great material gifts and a great spiritual gift, all which are from the most important divine gifts, are pointed out. The gifts of eyes, tongue and lips are on one side, and the gift of knowledge and guidance is on the other side.

(It should be noted that the term /najd/ originally means 'an open highway' and here /najdayn/, in contrast with /tihamah/ 'low land', is to be understood as 'the two highways of good and evil').

For the importance of the above gifts it is enough to know that the eyes are the most important means by which to communicate with the outside world. The wonder of the eyes is such that makes Man humiliate himself in front of the Creator of them.

Each of the seven parts of the eye; the sclerotic cornea, choroid, iris, dermoid, aqueous humor, vitreous humor, and retina has a wonderful, special and delicate structure in which the laws of light and mirrors, physically and chemically, are so precisely coordinated that the most modern cameras are worthless in comparison to them.

In fact if there were nothing in the world except Man and of all parts of his body only his eye was studied, its wonders would be enough to recognize the greatness of the knowledge and power of Allah.

Next, the tongue is referred to, which is the most important means of speech and speech itself is the most important means of communication for human beings. It is with language that humans are able to convey the experience and information of one nation to another, or from one generation to another one. If it were not so, Man could never develop so well in knowledge, science, and civilization both in material and spiritual affairs.

Then, the lips are mentioned. They have an effective function in speech because many sounds and phonemes, in language, are produced by the lips. Besides, the lips are useful in eating foods, preserving the moisture of the mouth, and drinking water.

If they were not so, the function of eating and drinking would be difficult for Man, and even his face, with water flowing out of his mouth and the absence of some phonemes in his speech, would be in a disgraceful state.

We know that the first steps in learning many facts are doubled with the help of eyesight and language.

Therefore, the gifts of reasoning and guidance, which are natural and intellectual, are pointed out. The verse can even cover 'religious guidance' which is introduced by prophets and Saints.

In fact, Allah has given us eyesight and the light; i.e. guidance to use them which enables us to discover what is right and what is wrong and to know them and then we choose between them, ourselves. Thus, if we go the wrong way and stray we deserve the fruits of our decision.

The sentence:

"And showed him the two ways (of good and evil)",

besides stating Man's free will, regarding. 'his way' denotes that going the right way is not free from difficulties and toil, as even climbing the high lands has some difficulties, doing wrong has some troubles, too. So, Man should try to choose the right way.

It is Man, himself, who chooses the way for which he can use his eyes and tongue in a lawful direction or an unlawful one and then, follows the good way or the evil one.

That is why the Prophet (S), in a tradition has said:

"Allah told mankind:

'O children of Adam! If your tongue wants to make you commit sin, I have supplied you with two lips to control it, and if your eyes are going to attract you to something unlawful, two eyelids are with you; close them!'" [8](#)

Thus, Allah has given Man the means of controlling these gifts which is one of the great blessings that He has bestowed on him.

It is noteworthy that in the above verses, when speaking of the tongue, the lips are mentioned but, in talking about the eyes, eyelids are not referred to. Apparently, it is for two reasons: the first is that the function of the lips in eating, drinking and speaking is more important than the function of the eyelids with the eyes; and the second is that the ability to control the tongue is more effective than that of the eyes.

Surah Balad, Verses 11-20

فَلَا افْتَحَمَّ الْعَقَبَةَ

وَمَا أُدْرَاكَ مَا الْعَقَبَةُ

فَكَ رَقَبَةً

أَوْ إِطْعَامٌ فِي يَوْمٍ ذِي مَسْغَبَةٍ

يَتِيمًا ذَا مَقْرَبَةٍ

أَوْ مِسْكِينًا ذَا مَتْرَبَةٍ

ثُمَّ كَانَ مِنَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْمَرْحَمَةِ

أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ

وَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِنَا هُمْ أَصْحَابُ الْمَشْأَمَةِ

عَلَيْهِمْ نَارٌ مُّؤَصَّدَةٌ

11. ***"But he would not attempt the uphill road,"***
12. ***"And what will make you comprehend what the uphill road is?"***
13. ***"(It is) freeing of a slave (or a captive)"***
14. ***"Or the feeding on a day of hunger,"***
15. ***"Of an orphan near of kin,"***
16. ***"Or to the indigent (down) in the dust."***
17. ***"Then will he be of those who believe, and enjoin on each other to patience, and enjoin on each other mercy."***
18. ***"These are the people of the Right Hand."***
19. ***"And those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the people of the Left Hand."***
20. ***"On them shall be afire closed over."***

An Arduous Uphill Climb!

After mentioning some great gifts, in the previous verses, which are given to Man, the ungrateful persons who, having all the means of felicity, have not taken its path, are blamed in the following verses:

"But he would not attempt the uphill road,"

The term

/'aqabah/ 'the uphill road'

is commented on in the next verses.

"And what will make you comprehend what the uphill road is?"

"(It is) freeing of a slave (or a captive)"

"Or the feeding on a day of hunger,"

"Of an orphan near of kin,"

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

Therefore, this arduous uphill road, for which the ungrateful persons have never prepared themselves to pass, is a collection of good deeds and pivots on helping people, especially the poor, and is also a collection of the pure, righteous believers which are mentioned in the following verses.

Truly, regarding the intensive love of most people for wealth, climbing this arduous uphill road is really difficult.

Being a true Muslim and having true Faith are not obtained simply by raw claims and merely stating such.

There are some difficult uphill roads in front of every Muslim believer which he must pass, one after another, and by the help of Allah and under the light of Faith and Sincerity he can succeed.

Some have rendered the term /'aqabah/, here in the sense of 'low desire' and standing against these is called 'the Inner Warfare' as a tradition by the Prophet (S) denotes.

Of course, regarding the interpretation of the verses, themselves, about /'aqabah/ 'uphill road' the meaning of this commentary must be such that the main uphill road is considered 'low desire', and freeing the captives and feeding the indigent are considered as its clear examples.

Some other commentators have said that the meaning of /'aqabah/ is 'an arduous uphill road in the Hereafter'; as a tradition from the Prophet (S) says:

*"There is an arduous uphill road in front of you, those whose load is heavy cannot pass it. I try to lighten your load to enable you to pass that uphill road."*⁹

This tradition from the holy Prophet (S) has not been cited for the commentary of the current verse, but the commentators have applied it to this verse. However, regarding to the commentary clearly expressed in the verses, their application does not seem appropriate.

The objective idea is that the uphill roads of the Hereafter are illustrations of the hard arduous climbs, here in this world and whose paths are subdivisions of the paths of this world.

It is worth noting that the term /iqtahama/ based on /iqtiham/ which originally means 'to undertake a task which is frightful'¹⁰, or 'to enter and pass somewhere with toil and difficulty'¹¹; denotes that passing this uphill road is not an easy thing to accomplish.

This is an emphasis on what was mentioned at the beginning of the Surah:

"Certainly We have created man to be in distress".

That is, both his life and his obedience to Allah are full of difficulties.

It has been narrated that Hazrat Ali (as) has said:

*"Paradise is surrounded by unpleasantness while Hell is surrounded by desires."*¹²

Some points that should be noted, here are:

1. The phrase /fakka raqabah/ seems to mean 'the act of freeing captives'.

2. The term

/masqabah/ 'famine'

is based on /saqab/ 'to suffer from hunger'. So, the words /yaumin thi masqabah/ mean 'on a day of hunger' which emphasize on feeding the needy in the time of famine, drought and the like.

3. The term /maqrabah/ means 'relationship' and it is an emphasis on the orphans of relatives who are close to the person, or else, we should feed all orphans whoever they are, but this shows that we are more responsible for the orphans who are of our kith and kin.

4. The term /matrabah/ is derived from /tarab/ but, originally is from /turab/ which means 'soil' and is used for 'a poor person intimately acquainted with his mother Earth'. This is, again, an emphasis on those types of indigent ones who are more deserving of help but of course all indigent ones should be helped.

In the next verse, to continue commenting on the 'uphill road', it says:

“Then will he be of those who believe, and enjoin (on each other to) patience, and enjoin (on each other) mercy.”

Thus, such believers can pass this arduous uphill road who have both faith and the humane characteristic of self-restraint and enjoining patience along with doing good deeds such as freeing captives and feeding orphans and the indigents.

In other words, these persons are those who have shown strong sincerity in three dimensions of Belief, morals, and action and can be successful in climbing that uphill road.

The term

/thumma/ 'then'

does not always mean 'next in time or order' to indicate that they should feed and help the needy first and then they will believe. But, in these cases, as some commentators have mentioned, it is for priority of rank because, the position of Faith and enjoining patience and compassionate kindness is definitely higher than the value of helping the indigent, or, it is better to say that good deeds originate from Faith and high morals.

Some others have also said that the term /thumma/, here may mean 'next in time', since good deeds are sometimes the cause of Faith and they are especially effective in fixing the basis of high morals, because Man's behavior manifests itself, first, into 'practice' then, into 'mood' and then, into 'habit', and finally, into the form of 'a firm characteristic', and settles in his spirit or nature as a result of that constant

practice.

The term /tawasau/ with the sense of 'enjoin each other to (charity and good deeds)' contains an important point.

It shows that patience and perseverance on the path of obedience to Allah, and the challenge against one's own desires, and also strengthening the principle of compassionate kindness should not occur in the society only in the form of individual behaviour, but it should appear as a common current in the whole society, and all the members of a society should enjoin observing and preserving this principle on each other in order to make their social relationship, in this way, closer and stronger.

Some have said that the term

/sabr/ 'patience'

here means 'to be patient in obeying Allah's command and being studious in practising His instructions'.

And the term

/marhamat/ 'compassionate kindness'

points to 'love shown to the creatures of Allah' and we know that the relation between the Creator and His creatures establishes the foundation of religion. In any event, patience and perseverance are the main causes of any obedience and servitude and also of avoiding sin and rebellion.

After describing these characteristics, the position of the possessors of them are introduced:

"These are the people of the Right Hand."

They are those whose record will be given to their right hand, indicating that their deeds are accepted by Allah.

It is also probable that the term /maymanah/ is derived from another root with the sense of 'grace'. If so, it means that they are merciful and helpful both to themselves and to others in the society.

Then, the contradictory group is pointed out; i.e., those who were not successful in passing the arduous uphill road.

It says:

"And those who disbelieve in Our signs, they are the people of the Left Hand."

This position shows that they do not possess good deeds and their records contain nothing but sin and corruption.

The term /mas'amah/, based on the root /sum/, contrasts with the term /maymanah/. It means that these disbelievers are some ominous people who cause disaster both for themselves and for others in the society. But, since being fortunate or unfortunate, in the Hereafter, is known about people by having their 'record' in their right hand or left hand, some commentators have accepted this idea for it, in particular, that the term /sum/ in Arabic philology refers to 'a tendency to the left'.

In the last verse of this Surah, there is a short, meaningful hint to the punishment of the latter group.

It says:

"On them shall be a fire closed over."

The term /musadah/ is based on /isad/ which means 'to close the door, and secure it'. It is obvious that when a person is shut in a room with hot, stuffy air, he wishes to open the doors and let the fresh air come in; making the room comfortable to live in. With this thought in mind, we may now consider the status of the fervent Hell with all the doors closed. What a suffocating condition it will have! [13](#)

Supplication

O Lord! Save us from such a painful punishment!

O Lord! To pass the uphill roads we have in front of us is not possible save with Your help. Please bestow Your help on us.

O Lord! Please count us among the people of the Right Hand and make us successful to be with the good-doers and the Righteous in the Hereafter.

- [1.](#) Majma'-al-Bayan, vol. 10, p. 490.
- [2.](#) Thawab-al-A'mal narrated from Nur-uth-Thaqalayn, vol. 5, p. 578.
- [3.](#) Majma'-al-Bayan, vol. 10, p. 493.
- [4.](#) Majma'-al-Bayan. vol. 10. p. 493.
- [5.](#) Nur-al-Thaqalayn. vol. 5. p. 580. Tradition 10
- [6.](#) Majma. -al-Bayan. vol. 10. p. 493.
- [7.](#) Majma'-al-Bayan. vol. 10. p. 494. (Also Ruh al-Bayan, vol 10, p 435)
- [8.](#) Nur-uth- Thaqalayn, vol. 5, p. 581.
- [9.](#) Majma'-al-Bayan, vol. 10, p. 495.
- [10.](#) Raqib: Mufradat
- [11.](#) Kashshaf Commentary
- [12.](#) Nahj-ul-Balagha, Sermon 176 (Arabic Version).
- [13.](#) Tafsir, Abulfutuh Razi, vol. 12, p. 97.

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