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Surah An-Nahl

The Bee · Makki · 128 ayat — reflections on surah 16 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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Surah An-Nahl

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النحل — An-Nahl, "The Bee". Surah 16 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 128 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/16/.

ONE

The surah in brief

A survey of Allah's innumerable blessings across creation, sustenance, and guidance, calling people to gratitude, tawhid, and just, gracious conduct, and closing with a call to wisdom in inviting to Him.

An-Nahl is often called the Surah of Blessings, an-Ni'am, for its dense catalog of favors — rain and pasture, cattle and their yields, the sea and its adornments, mountains and stars for guidance, and the honeybee inspired to produce a healing drink. Each gift is offered as evidence for the one Giver and as a summons to gratitude rather than idolatry. It answers those who deny resurrection and mock the message, contrasting the thankful with the ungrateful, and it contains the verse the scholars called the most comprehensive command to virtue: justice, excellence, and giving to kin. It closes by teaching the very manner of calling to Allah — with wisdom, fair exhortation, and gracious argument — and by commanding patience whose reward is with Allah.

TWO

Its themes

- Countless blessings and gratitude
- Tawhid from the natural world
- Justice, ihsan, and kinship
- The good life for the righteous
- The method of da'wah
- Patience and forbearance

THREE

Key verses

Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin, and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion: He instructs you, that ye may receive admonition.

Qur'an 16:90

'Allah commands justice, excellence (ihsan), and giving to relatives, and forbids indecency, wrong, and oppression' — a verse Ibn Mas'ud called the most comprehensive in the Qur'an for good and evil. Use it as a compass: pursue its three commands and flee its three prohibitions.

Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, verily, to him will We 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.

Qur'an 16:97

Whoever does righteousness, male or female, while believing, Allah will grant a good life (hayah tayyibah) and reward beyond their deeds. Reflect that the 'good life' is a quality of contentment and light in the heart, not merely outward ease.

Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.

Qur'an 16:125

Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful exhortation, and debate in the best manner — the how of da'wah is itself commanded. Reflect that harshness can repel from a truth that gentleness would have carried home.

If ye would count up the favours of Allah, never would ye be able to number them: for Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

Qur'an 16:18

'If you should count the favors of Allah, you could not enumerate them' — the same humbling truth as in Ibrahim, set here amid the surah's flood of gifts. Reflect on a single blessing closely and feel how it already exceeds your thanks.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context and character

An-Nahl, 'The Bee,' is a Makkan surah — the bulk of it revealed in Mecca, with a number of its closing verses widely held to be Madani, including the counsel on responding to injury and the reference to those who emigrated after being persecuted (16:41, 16:126). It is one of the longest Meccan surahs, and it is known in the tradition as Surat al-Ni'am, 'the Surah of Blessings,' because so much of it is a sustained catalogue of Allah's favours to humankind, marshalled as proof of His oneness and as a summons to gratitude.

It takes its name from the bee, to whom Allah 'revealed' — inspired — the instinct to build its dwellings and draw nourishment from every fruit, producing from within it a drink of varied colours in which there is healing for people (16:68–69). That small creature, guided by a wisdom it did not author, stands as a sign of the vast, ordered generosity the surah describes on every scale, from the rain and the cattle to the sun, moon, and stars.

The character of the surah is expansive and warm in its listing of blessings, and firm in the demand it draws from them: since every good thing you have is from Allah (16:53), worship Him alone and thank Him. Interwoven with the blessings are answers to the deniers, warnings of the reckoning, and, near the end, the great verse of justice and excellence that the tradition calls the most comprehensive command in the Qur'an.

How the surah unfolds

It opens with a jolt: 'The command of Allah is coming, so do not seek to hasten it' (16:1) — a reply to the deniers who mockingly demanded the Judgement — before affirming that He sends down the angels with the spirit of revelation to warn that there is no god but He (16:2). Then the surah launches its long enumeration of favours. He created the heavens and the earth in truth; He made the cattle, in which are warmth and food and beauty (16:5–8); He sends down rain that gives you drink and grows your crops, and He made the night and day, the sun and moon and stars subservient to you (16:10–16).

The refrain that keeps sounding is a question: is the One who creates like those who create nothing? (16:17). The idols the deniers worship are dead, not living, and cannot even sense when they will be raised (16:20–21), while the true God knows what they conceal and what they reveal. The surah contrasts the fate of the arrogant deniers at death with the good greeting the God-fearing receive from the angels — 'peace be upon you; enter the Garden for what you used to do' (16:32).

The heart of the surah returns to the blessings with fresh wonder — the bee and its healing honey (16:68–69), the milk drawn pure from between refuse and blood (16:66), the fruits from which people take sustenance and drink, the shelter and garments and homes Allah has provided (16:80–81). Woven through are proofs of resurrection, parables contrasting the helpless slave with the free giver and the mute dependent with the one who commands justice (16:75–76), and rebukes of those who assign daughters to Allah while resenting them for themselves (16:57–59). The famished argument of the idolaters

— 'had Allah willed, we would not have worshipped anything besides Him' — is answered by pointing to the clear duty of the messengers to convey (16:35–36).

As the surah turns toward its close it delivers the verse Ibn Mas'ud called the most comprehensive in the Qur'an: 'Allah commands justice, excellence, and giving to relatives, and forbids immorality, wrongdoing, and oppression; He admonishes you that you may take heed' (16:90). It warns against breaking oaths and selling the covenant of Allah cheaply, upholds the good life promised to the righteous believer (16:97), and gives the manners of da'wah: call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and argue in the best manner (16:125). It ends by permitting a measured response to injury while praising the higher road: 'if you punish, punish with the like of what you were afflicted with; but if you are patient, it is better for the patient' (16:126) — and it closes by telling the Prophet that his patience is only by Allah, so let him not grieve over the deniers (16:127–128).

The major themes, in depth

Blessings as the proof of the one God. The surah's method is to overwhelm the reader with gifts and then ask the obvious question. Cattle that clothe and feed and carry you, rain that revives dead land, milk drawn pure through a wondrous process, honey that heals, the day for work and the night for rest, the stars for guidance — 'and if you tried to count the favours of Allah, you could not number them' (16:18). From this flood the surah draws a single conclusion: 'whatever blessing you have is from Allah' (16:53), so the God who alone gives is the

God who alone deserves worship and thanks. Al-Sa'di reads the whole surah as an argument that ingratitude to such a Benefactor is the height of injustice.

The bee as a sign of guided wisdom. The bee is given pride of place, and the commentators dwell on the marvel: an insect 'inspired' to build with geometric precision, to forage across distances, and to produce a substance that is at once food and medicine — 'in it is healing for people' (16:69). It is a portrait in miniature of the whole surah's claim: creation runs on a wisdom its creatures did not devise, pointing back to the Wise One who inspired it. The tradition also read the bee's discipline and its yielding of pure sweetness as a moral emblem of the believer.

The comprehensive command: justice, excellence, and generosity. Verse 16:90 is treated in the tradition as a summary of the whole of morality — it is recited in the Friday sermon across the Muslim world for that reason. It commands 'adl (justice, giving each their due), ihsan (going beyond the minimum to genuine excellence and beauty in conduct), and care for kin, and forbids the three great categories of sin: shameful deeds, wrongdoing, and transgression. The commentators note how it moves from the baseline of fairness to the summit of excellence, describing a whole ethic in a single verse.

Da'wah and patience under injury. As it closes, the surah lays down the manners of calling to Allah — with wisdom, with fine and gentle exhortation, and with argument in the most beautiful way (16:125) — and the manners of enduring wrong. It permits proportionate retaliation but immediately commends the

higher path of patience, and it grounds that patience in Allah: 'be patient, and your patience is only through Allah' (16:127). The surah thus binds the invitation to the truth to a character of gentleness, fairness, and forbearance.

Points of reflection

An-Nahl retrains the eye to see an ordinary day as saturated with gifts — the water we drink, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the rest of the night, the light of morning — and to trace every one of them back to a single Giver (16:53). Gratitude, in this surah, is not politeness but the truthful response to reality, and its absence is a kind of blindness to what is plainly before us.

The bee offers a quiet model for the believer: to take in only what is wholesome, to work with discipline in an order larger than oneself, and to leave behind something pure and healing for others. The reflective reader is invited to make his own life, like the bee's, a source of benefit that points others back to Allah.

And in its closing verses the surah hands us a whole ethic to carry. Live by justice and reach for ihsan (16:90); invite others to the good with wisdom and gentleness rather than harshness (16:125); and when wronged, know that patience is the better road and that even our forbearance is a gift from Allah (16:126–127). To live by An-Nahl is to be a grateful, just, gentle, and patient servant of the God whose favours can never be counted.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Let 16:90 govern your conduct: justice, excellence, generosity to kin — and away from all oppression.
2. Seek the 'good life' through faith and righteous action, not through accumulation.
3. Match the truth of your message with beauty in how you deliver it.
4. Cultivate gratitude by contemplating even one favor until its weight humbles you.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, al-Sa'di, al-Qurtubi, al-Tabari. A summary is not a tafsir: for the verse-by-verse treatment go to the works themselves, or to the close studies at deen2u.com/tadabbur/.