

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Surah Al-Balad

The City · Makki · 20 ayat — reflections on surah 90 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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Surah Al-Balad

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البلد — Al-Balad, “The City”. Surah 90 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 20 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/90/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Man is created amid toil, yet given eyes, tongue, and two clear paths; the surah urges him to climb the steep road of freeing slaves, feeding the hungry orphan and needy, and joining the people of faith, patience, and mercy.

Al-Balad swears by the sacred city of Mecca and declares that the human being was created amid toil and struggle, never the ease he imagines. It challenges the man who boasts of squandering great wealth and thinks no one sees him: did We not give him two eyes, a tongue and two lips, and point out to him the two paths of good and evil? Yet he did not attempt the steep ascent, the hard climb of freeing a slave, feeding on a day of hunger an orphaned relative or a destitute in the dust, and being of those who believe and counsel one another to patience and mercy. Such are the companions of the right hand; those who reject the signs are the companions of the left, over whom a closed-in fire waits.

TWO

Its themes

- Life created in toil
- The illusion of self-sufficiency
- The gift of faculties
- The two paths
- The steep ascent of good works
- Freeing and feeding the weak

THREE

Key verses

Verily We have created man into toil and struggle.

Qur'an 90:4

"We created man in toil," a frank word that names struggle as the condition of this life, not a sign that something has gone wrong.

And shown him the two highways?

Qur'an 90:10

Having given us faculties, He guided us to the two ways; the choice between good and evil is not hidden but plainly shown.

But he hath made no haste on the path that is steep.

Qur'an 90:11

"But he has not attempted the steep ascent," the gentle rebuke that goodness is uphill and most never begin the climb.

(It is:) freeing the bondman;

Qur'an 90:13

The ascent starts with freeing a neck from bondage; the surah makes liberating the oppressed the first rung of real virtue.

Then will he be of those who believe, and enjoin patience, (constancy, and self-restraint), and enjoin deeds of kindness and compassion.

Qur'an 90:17

Beyond charity, it names mutual counsel to patience and mercy, so faith is lived in community, holding one another to the good.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Balad — “The City” — is a Makkan surah of twenty verses, named for the oath by which it opens: by this city, meaning Makka, the sacred sanctuary and the Prophet's own home. It is an early Makkan surah that reflects on the hardship woven into human life and on the truly demanding path that most people decline to climb.

The surah's character is bracing and morally serious. It refuses the comfortable illusion that a person can simply enjoy his strength and wealth and answer to no one. Its emotional core is the image of a steep uphill road — al-‘aqabah — that leads to salvation, and the honest admission that the human being, for all his boasting, has not even attempted it. The tone is a challenge more than a lament: it names the hard climb, itemises exactly what it consists of, and dares the listener to make the ascent.

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens (90:1–4) with an oath by Makka — “and you are a free dweller in this city” — and by a parent and what he begets, to affirm: “We have certainly created man in toil (kabad).” The very framing is pointed: God swears by the sacred city that is the Prophet's home, and by the mystery of generation, to establish that human life is fundamentally laborious, made amid struggle from the womb to the grave.

It then confronts human arrogance (90:5–7): “Does he think that no one has power over him? He says, ‘I have squandered abundant wealth.’ Does he think that no one saw him?” The boaster imagines himself unaccountable and even brags about how much he spent — perhaps in rivalry or show — while forgetting that God witnessed every coin. Against this the surah lists God's gifts (90:8–10): “Did We not make for him two eyes, and a tongue and two lips, and guide him to the two highways?” — the two clear ways of good and evil. Man was equipped and shown the road; he has no excuse.

Then comes the heart of the surah (90:11–18): “But he has not attempted the steep path. And what will make you know what the steep path is? It is the freeing of a slave, or feeding on a day of severe hunger an orphan of near kinship or a poor person in the dust — and then to be of those who believe and counsel one another to patience and counsel one another to mercy. Those are the companions of the right.” The climb is defined concretely as liberation, feeding the hungry, faith, and mutual encouragement in patience and compassion. It closes (90:19–20) with the other party: “But those who disbelieved in Our signs — they are the companions of the left; over them will be fire closed in.”

The major themes, in depth

The first theme is that human life is created in toil. The word *kabad* denotes hardship, strain, the labour that attends existence from the pangs of birth onward. The surah states this not to depress but to correct — the man who imagines he can coast through life untroubled and unaccountable is

contradicting the very design of his being. Life is effortful; the only choice is whether to spend that unavoidable effort on the descending road of self-indulgence or the ascending road of virtue. Ibn ‘Āshūr notes that swearing by the sacred city before this truth links the toil of life to a sacred purpose: struggle is not meaningless suffering but the arena of a test.

The second theme is accountability against the illusion of independence. The boaster of 90:5–7 makes two errors: he thinks “no one has power over him,” and he thinks “no one saw him.” The surah answers both by inventory — the eyes, the tongue, the lips, the guidance to the two ways are all gifts, and a being so thoroughly given to cannot be self-made or unwatched. The mention of squandered wealth is telling: he is proud of consuming, not of giving, and even his generosity, if any, was for display. The surah relocates his pride: what he thinks proves his independence actually proves his indebtedness, for every faculty he used was lent to him.

The third theme is al-‘aqabah — the steep path — as the definition of a life worth living. Strikingly, when the surah spells out the demanding climb, it does not name grand feats of asceticism. It names social mercy: freeing the enslaved, feeding the hungry on the day hunger bites hardest, and prioritising the orphaned relative and the poor person “in the dust.” To this it adds faith and the communal work of urging one another to patience and mercy (90:17). The steep path, then, is the hard road of self-forgetful compassion joined to belief — hard precisely because it runs against the grain of the wealth-loving self diagnosed earlier. Al-Sa’dī observes that these deeds are called an ascent because the lower self, which loves ease and

possession, resists them; every act of liberation and feeding is a step uphill against one's own gravity. Those who make the climb are "companions of the right"; those who deny are shut into a closed fire, an image of the total enclosure that answers a life closed to others' needs.

Points of reflection

The surah reframes hardship. If we were created in toil, then struggle is not a sign that life has gone wrong; it is the ordinary condition, and the meaningful question is which direction we point our unavoidable effort. This can quietly comfort — you were never promised ease — and quietly challenge — so spend the strain well.

It also gives generosity a demanding definition. It is easy to feel charitable in comfort; the surah specifies feeding "on a day of severe hunger," giving precisely when giving costs, and reaching first for the orphan of one's own kin and the poor person no one else notices. The steep path is measured not by how we give when it is easy but by whether we climb when it is hard.

Above all, the surah asks a single sobering question: have I even attempted the ascent? It is possible to spend a whole comfortable life on the downhill road, never once trying the climb, and imagine oneself fine. The surah's gift is to name the road, itemise its steps, and put the invitation plainly — freedom for the bound, food for the hungry, faith, and a community that holds one another to patience and mercy. The companions of the right are simply those who started walking up.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Accept that a worthy life is uphill; expecting toil frees you to climb rather than resent the effort.
2. Spend your faculties and wealth on the steep deeds, freeing the trapped and feeding the hungry, especially kin and the destitute.
3. Bind yourself to others in patience and mercy; the companions of the right are a community, not lone strivers.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim, al-Sa'di, Taysir al-Karim al-Rahman, Amin Ahsan Islahi, Tadabbur-i-Qur'an. 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/.