

The Life of This World

H A R U N Y A H Y A

Our universe is perfectly orderly. Countless billions of stars and galaxies move in their separate orbits yet in total harmony. Galaxies consisting of almost 300 billion stars flow through each other and, to everyone's astonishment, during this gigantic transition no collisions occur. Such order cannot be attributed to coincidence. What is more, the velocities of objects in the universe are beyond the limits of man's imagination. The physical dimensions of outer space are enormous when compared to the measurements we employ on earth. Stars and planets, with masses of billions or trillions of tons, and galaxies, with sizes that can only be grasped with the help of mathematical formulae, all whirl along their particular paths in space at incredible velocities.

For instance, the earth rotates about its axis so that points on its surface move at an average velocity of about 1,670 km an hour. The mean linear velocity of the earth in its orbit around the sun is 108,000 km an hour. These figures, however, only relate to the earth. We encounter tremendously larger figures when we examine dimensions beyond the solar system. In the universe, as systems increase in size, velocities also increase. The solar system revolves around the centre of the galaxy at 720,000 km an hour. The velocity of the Milky Way itself, comprising some 200 billion stars, is 950,000 km an hour. This continual movement is inconceivable. The earth, together with the solar system, each year moves 500 million kilometers away from its location of the previous year.

There is an incredible equilibrium within all this dynamic movement and it reveals that life on earth is based on a very delicate balance. Very slight, even millimetric variations in the orbit of heavenly bodies could result in very serious consequences. Some could be so detrimental that life on earth would become impossible. In such systems in which there is both great equilibrium and tremendous velocities, gigantic accidents may happen at any time. However, the fact that we lead our lives in an ordinary way on this planet makes us forget about the dangers existing in the universe at large. The present order of the universe with the almost negligible number of collisions, of which we know, simply makes us think that a perfect, stable and secure environment surrounds us.

People do not reflect very much upon such matters. That is why they never discern the extraordinary web of interlocking conditions that makes life possible on earth nor do they apprehend that understanding the real aim of their lives is so important. They live without even wondering how this vast yet delicate equilibrium ever came to be.

Nevertheless, man is endowed with the capacity to think. Without contemplating one's surroundings conscientiously and wisely, one can never see the reality or have the slightest idea why the world is created and who it is who makes this great order move with such perfect rhythms.

One who ponders these questions and grasps their importance comes face to face with an inescapable fact: the universe we live in is created by a Creator, whose existence and attributes are revealed in everything that exists. The earth, a tiny spot in the universe, is created to serve a significant purpose. Nothing occurs purposelessly in the flow of our lives. The Creator, revealing His attributes, His might and wisdom throughout the universe, did not leave man alone but invested him with a significant purpose.

The reason why man exists on earth is recounted by Allah in the Qur'an as follows:

He Who created death and life, that He may try which of you is best in deed: and He is the Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving. (Surat al-Mulk: 2)

Verily We created Man from a drop of mingled sperm, in order to try him: So We gave him (the gifts) of hearing and sight. (Surat al-Insan: 2)

In the Qur'an, Allah further makes it clear that nothing is purposeless: Not for (idle) sport did We create the heavens and the earth and all that is between them! If it had been Our wish to take (just) a pastime, We could have found it in Our presence, if We would do (such a thing)! (Surat al-Anbiya: 16-17)

THE SECRET OF THE WORLD

Allah indicates the purpose of man in the following verse:

That which is on earth We have made but as a glittering show for the earth, in order that We may test them – as to which of them are best in conduct. (Surat al-Kahf: 7)

In doing so, Allah expects man to remain His devoted servant all through his life. In other words, the world is a place where those who fear Allah and those who are ungrateful to Allah are distinguished from each other. The good and the evil, the perfect and the flawed are side by side in this "setting". Man is being tested in many ways. In the end, the believers will be separated from the disbelievers and attain the Paradise. In the Qur'an it is described thus: We did test those before them, and Allah will certainly know those who are true from those who are false. (Surat al-'Ankabut: 2-3)

In order to have an understanding of the essence of this test, one needs to have a deep understanding of one's Creator whose existence and attributes are revealed in everything that exists. He is the Creator, the Possessor of infinite power, knowledge, and wisdom. He is Allah, the Creator, the Maker, the Bestower of Forms. To Him belong the most beautiful names: whatever is in the heavens and on earth, declare His glory: and He is the Exalted in might, the Wise. (Surat al-Hashr: 24)

Allah created man from clay, endowed him with many features, and bestowed many favors upon him. Nobody acquires the traits of seeing, hearing, walking or breathing by himself. Moreover, these complex systems were placed in his body in the womb before he was born and when he was without any ability to perceive the outer world.

Given all these traits, what is expected of man is to be a servant of Allah. However, as Allah makes clear in the Qur'an, the majority of people are "wrongdoers" and "ungrateful" to their Creator, for they refuse submission to Allah. They suppose that life is long and that they possess the individual strength to survive.

That is why their purpose is to "make the most of their lives while they last". They forget death and the hereafter. They endeavor to enjoy life and to attain better living standards. Allah explains the attachment of these people to this life in the following verse:

As to these, they love the fleeting life, and put away behind them a day (that will be) hard. (Surat al-Insan: 27)

Disbelievers endeavor to taste all the pleasures of this life. Yet, as the verse implies, life passes very quickly. This is the crucial point that the majority of people fail to remember. Let us think about an example to further clarify the subject.



In the Qur'an, the last remaining authentic revelation which guides humanity to the true path, Allah repeatedly reminds us of the temporary nature of this world, summoning us to clarity of mind and consciousness. Indeed, wherever we live, we are all vulnerable to the devastating effects of this world, a self-explanatory phenomenon for people who observe life and the happenings around us. This is also true of all the attractions surrounding us. The pictures in this page are each a demonstration of this fact. Any corner of the world, no matter how impressive, will be exposed to unavoidable deterioration in a few decades, sometimes in even shorter periods of time than one would have ever expected.

A Few Seconds or a Few Hours?

Think about a typical holiday: after months of hard work, you have your two weeks' vacation and arrive at your favorite holiday resort after an exhausting eight hours' ride. The lobby is crowded with holidaymakers like you. You even notice familiar faces and greet them. The weather is warm and you do not want to miss one moment enjoying the sunshine and the calm sea, so without losing any time, you find your room, put on your swimsuit and hurry to the beach. At last, you are in the crystal-clear water, but suddenly you are startled by a voice: "Wake up, you will be late for work!"



You find these words nonsense. For a moment, you cannot grasp what is happening; there is an incomprehensible discrepancy between what you see and hear. When you open your eyes and find yourself in your bedroom, the fact that it was all a dream astonishes you greatly. You cannot keep yourself from expressing this astonishment: "I rode eight hours to reach there. Despite the freezing cold outside here today, I felt the sunshine there in my dream. I felt water splashing on my face."

Everything on earth is destined to perish. This is the real nature of worldly life...

The eight hours' drive to the resort, the time you waited in the lobby, in short everything related to your vacation was actually a dream of a few seconds. Though indistinguishable from real life, what you experienced in a genuine way was merely a dream.

This suggests that we may well be awoken from life on earth just as we are awoken from dream. Then, disbelievers will express exactly the same type of astonishment. In the course of their lives, they could not liberate themselves from the misperception that their lives would be long. Yet, at the time when they will be recreated, they will comprehend that the period of time which appears to have been a lifetime of sixty or seventy years was as if it were merely a few seconds' duration. Allah relates this fact in the Qur'an:

He will say: "What number of years did you stay on earth?" They will say: "We stayed a day or part of a day: but ask those who keep account." He will say: "You stayed not but a little, if you had only known!" (Surat al-Muminun: 112-114)

Whether it be ten years or a hundred, man will eventually realize the shortness of his life as the verse above relates. This is just like the case of a man who wakes up from dream bitterly witnessing the vanishing of all images of a nice, long holiday, suddenly realising that it had merely been a dream of a few seconds' length. Similarly, the shortness of life will most strike man when all else about his life is forgotten. Allah enjoins careful attention to this fact in the following verse of the Qur'an: On the day that the hour (of reckoning) will be established, the transgressors will swear that they tarried not but an hour: thus were they used to being deluded! (Surat or- Rum: 55)

No less than those who live for a few hours or a few days, those who live for seventy years also have a limited time in this world... Something limited is bound to end one day. Be life eighty or a hundred years long, each day brings man closer to that predestined day. Man, in reality, experiences this fact throughout the course of his life. No matter how long-term a plan he devises for himself, one day he attains that specific time when he will accomplish his goal. Every precious objective or thing deemed a turning point in one's life soon turns out merely to have been a passing whim.

Think of a boy, for instance, who recently entered high school. Typically, he cannot wait for the day on which he will graduate. He looks forward to it with unrestrained eagerness. Yet soon he finds himself enrolling in college. At this stage of his life, he does not even recall the long years of high school. He already has other things on his mind; he wants to take advantage of these precious years to ease his fears for the future. Hence, he makes numerous plans. Before long, he becomes busy arranging his forthcoming wedding, a very special occasion that he eagerly awaits. Yet time passes faster than he expected and he leaves many years behind him and finds himself a man supporting a family. By the time he becomes a grandfather, an old man now in declining health, he faintly recalls the events from which he derived pleasure as a young man. Grim memories do fade. The troubles that obsessed him as a young man interest him no more. Only a few images of his life unfurl before his eyes. The appointed time approaches. The time left is very limited; a few years, months or possibly even just days. The classic story of man, without exception, ends here with a funeral service, immediate family members, close friends and relatives attending. The reality is that no man is immune to this end.

Nevertheless, from the beginning of history, Allah has instructed man about the temporary nature of this world and described the Hereafter, his real and eternal residence. Many details pertaining to paradise and hell are depicted in the revelations of Allah. Despite this fact, man tends to forget this essential truth and tries to invest all his efforts in this life, even though it is short and temporary. However only those who assume a rational approach to life are summoned to clarity of mind and consciousness and realize that this life is not worth anything compared to the eternal one. That is why man's objective in life is only to attain paradise, an eternal place of Allah's benevolence and enduring abundance. Seeking the contentment of Allah with true faith is the only way to obtain it. However, those who try not to think about the unavoidable end of this world, and who lead a life in keeping with such an attitude surely deserve eternal punishment.

Allah in the Qur'an relates the awful end that will meet these people:

One day He will gather them together: (It will be) as if they had tarried but an hour of a day: they will recognize each other: assuredly those will be lost who denied the meeting with Allah and refused to receive true guidance. (Surah Yunus: 45)

Therefore patiently persevere, as did (all) Messengers of inflexible purpose; and be in no haste about the (disbelievers). On the Day that they see the (punishment) promised them, (it will be) as if they had not tarried more than an hour in a single day. (Yours is but) to proclaim the Message: but shall any be destroyed except those who transgress? (Surat al-Ahqaf: 35)

UNBRIDLED AMBITION

Earlier in this book, we mentioned that the time an ordinary man spends in this world is as short as "the blink of an eye". Yet, no matter what a man possesses in life, he does not attain real contentment unless he has faith in Allah and keeps himself occupied with His remembrance.

From the time he begins to become an adult he craves wealth, power or status. To one's astonishment however, he has limited resources to satisfy these cravings; there is no chance whatsoever to possess everything he desires. Neither wealth, nor success nor any form of prosperity, however, will placate his ambitions. Regardless of social status or gender, people's lives are most often limited to six or seven decades only. Upon the termination of this period, death renders all worldly tastes and joys meaningless.

One who is prone to unbridled desires always finds himself incurably "dissatisfied". At every stage of life, this dissatisfaction is always there, while the causes change according to time and conditions. The will to satisfy these desires can make some people indulge in almost anything. He may be so committed to his desires that he is willing to face every consequence, even if it means losing the love of immediate family or being an outcast. Yet by the time he accomplishes his goal, the "magic" disappears. He loses all interest in his accomplished purpose. Moreover, not being content with this accomplishment, he immediately starts to seek another and makes every effort to attain it until he at last achieves it in turn.

Having unbridled ambition is the typical characteristic of a disbeliever. This trait remains with him until he dies. He never feels satisfied with what he possesses. That is because he simply wants everything for his own selfish greed and not to obtain the contentment of Allah. Likewise, everything people possess and toil to possess is a reason for boasting, and people become heedless of Allah's limits. Surely, Allah will not allow one who is so rebellious against Him to have peace of mind in this world. Allah says in the Qur'anic verse:

Those who believe and whose hearts find satisfaction in the remembrance of Allah: for, without doubt, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find satisfaction. (Surat ar-Ra'd: 28)

A DECEPTIVE WORLD

Countless examples of the perfection of the creation surround man all over the world: gorgeous landscapes, millions of different kinds of plants, the blue sky, clouds heavy with rain, or the human body – a perfect organism full of complex systems. These are all breathtaking examples of creation, reflection on which provides deep insight.

Seeing a butterfly displaying its wings, the marvelously intricate patterns of which are statements of its identity, is an experience never to be forgotten. The feathers of a bird's head, so fine and lustrous that they look like rich black velvet, or the attractive colors and scent of a flower are all amazing to the human soul.

Everyone, almost without exception, appreciates a beautiful face. Opulent mansions, gold-plated fixtures and luxury cars for some people are the most cherished possessions. Man craves many other things in life, yet the beauty of whatever we possess is destined to perish in time.

A fruit gradually darkens and finally decays from the moment it is plucked from its branch. The scent of flowers fills our rooms only for a limited period. Soon, their colors fade and they wither away. The prettiest face wrinkles after a few decades: the effect of years on skin and the greying of hairs make that pretty face no different from those of other elderly people. No trace remains of the healthy complexion or ruddy cheeks of a teenager after the passage of years. Buildings need renovation, automobiles become old-fashioned and, even worse, rusty. In brief, everything surrounding us is subject to the ravages of time. This seems to be a "natural process" for some. However, this conveys a clear message: "Nothing is immune to the effects of time."

Above all, every plant, animal, and human being in the world – that is to say, every living thing – is mortal. The fact that the world population does not shrink over the centuries – due to births – should not make us ignore the fact of death.

Yet as an unbridled passion, the spell of possessions and wealth influences man greatly. The lust for possessions unwittingly captures him. However, one point should be grasped: Allah is the sole Owner of everything. Living things remain alive as long as He wills and they die when He decrees their death.

Allah calls upon man to reflect on this in the following verse:

The likeness of the life of the present is as the rain which We send down from the skies: by its mingling arises the produce of the earth – which provides food for men and animals: (It grows) till the earth is clad with its golden ornaments and is decked out (in beauty): the people to whom it belongs think they have all powers of disposal over it: There reaches it Our command by night or by day, and We make it like a harvest clean-mown, as if it had not flourished only the day before! Thus do We explain the Signs in detail for those who reflect. (Surah Yunus: 24)

In this verse, it is shown that everything on this earth deemed nice and beautiful will lose its beauty one day. Moreover, they will all disappear from the surface of this earth. This is a very important point to ponder since Allah informs us that He gives such examples "for those who think". As an intelligent being, what is expected from man is to think and to take lessons from events and finally to set rational objectives for his life. "Thought" and "comprehension" are the unique traits of man; without these traits man lacks his most distinctive features and becomes lower than the animals. Animals also lead lives which are similar in many respects to human lives: they breathe, breed, and, one day, die. Animals never think why and how they are born, or that they will die one day. It is very natural that they do not engage in an effort to comprehend the real objective of this life; they are not expected to think about the purpose of their creation or about the Creator.



And coin for them the similitude of the life of the world as water which We send down from the sky, and the vegetation of the earth mingled with it and then became dry twigs that the winds scatter. Allah is able to do all things.

(Surat al-Kahf: 45)



However, man is responsible to Allah for building consciousness of Allah through pondering on and being mindful of His orders. Furthermore, he is expected to comprehend that this world exists only for a limited period. Those who truly comprehend these facts will seek Allah's guidance and illumination by engaging in good deeds.

Otherwise, man meets suffering both in this world and the Hereafter. He becomes wealthy, but never attains happiness. Beauty and fame usually entail misfortune rather than a joyous life. A celebrity, for instance, who one day basks in the adulation of his fans later battles severe health problems, and one day dies alone in a small hotel room with no-one caring for him.

QUR'ANIC EXAMPLES OF THE DECEPTION OF THE WORLD

Allah repeatedly emphasizes in the Qur'an that this is just a "world where all pleasures are doomed to perish". Allah tells the stories of those societies and men and women of the past who rejoiced in their wealth, fame or social status yet met disastrous ends. That is exactly what happened to the two men related in Surat al-Kahf:

Set forth to them the parable of two men: for one of them We provided two gardens of grape-vines and surrounded them with date-palms; in between the two We placed corn-fields.

Each of those gardens brought forth its produce, and failed not in the least therein: in the midst of them We caused a river to flow. (Abundant) was the produce this man had: he said to his companion, in the course of a mutual argument: "more wealth have I than you, and more honor and power in (my following of) men."

He went into his garden in a state (of mind) unjust to his soul: He said, "I deem not that this will ever perish, nor do I deem that the Hour (of Judgement) will (ever) come: Even if I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find (there) something better in exchange."

His companion said to him, in the course of the argument with him: "Do you deny Him Who created you out of dust, then out of a sperm-drop, then fashioned you into a man? But (I think) for my part that He is Allah, my Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. Why did you not, as you went into your garden, say: 'Allah's will (be done)! There is no power but with Allah!' If you see me less than you in wealth and sons, 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."

So his fruits (and enjoyment) were encompassed (with ruin), 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 had never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher!" Nor had he numbers to help him against Allah, nor was he able to deliver himself.

There, the (only) protection comes from Allah, the True One. He is the Best to reward, and the Best to give success. Set forth to them the similitude of the life of this world: It is like the rain which we send down from the skies; the earth's vegetation absorbs it, but soon it becomes dry stubble, which the winds scatter: it is (only) Allah who prevails over all things. 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) hopes. (Surat al-Kahf: 32-46)

Boasting about one's possessions causes a person to be ridiculous. This is the unvarying law of Allah. Wealth and power are given as a gift by Allah and can, at any time, be taken away. The story of "the people of paradise" which is recounted in the Qur'an is another example of this:

Verily We have tried them as We tried the people of the garden, when they resolved to gather the fruits of the (garden) in the morning but made no reservation, ("if it be Allah's Will"). Then there came on the (garden) a visitation from your Lord, (which swept away) all around, while they were asleep.

So the (garden) became, by the morning, like a dark and desolate spot (whose fruit had been gathered).

As the morning broke, they called out, one to another, "Go you to your tilt (betimes) in the morning, if you would gather the fruits." So they departed, conversing in secret low tones, (saying) "Let not a single indigent person break in upon you into the (garden) this day." And they opened the morning, strong in an (unjust) resolve. But when they saw the (garden), they said: "We have surely lost our way: Indeed we are shut out (of the fruits of our labor)!" Said one of them, more just (than the rest): "Did I not say to you, 'Why not glorify (Allah)?'" They said: "Glory to our Lord! Verily we have been doing wrong!" Then they turned one against another, in reproach. Then some of them advanced against others, blaming each other. They said: "Alas for us! We have indeed transgressed! It may be that our Lord will give us in exchange a better (garden) than this: for we do turn to Him (in repentance)!"

Such is the punishment (in this life); but greater is the punishment in the Hereafter, if only they knew! (Surat al-Qalam: 17-33)

The attentive eye immediately recognizes from these verses that Allah does not give examples of atheists in this story. The ones in question here are exactly those who believe in Allah but whose hearts have become insensitive towards His remembrance and who are ungrateful to their Creator. They take pride in possessing what Allah gives them as favors, and totally forget that these possessions are only resources to be used in His way. Typically, they affirm the existence and power of Allah; however, their hearts are full of pride, ambition and selfishness.

The story of Qarun, one of the people of Moses, is narrated in the Qur'an as an example of the archetypal wealthy worldly character. Both Qarun and those who yearn for his status and wealth are so-called believers who cast their religion away for possessions and thus lose the blessed eternal life, whose loss is eternal deprivation:

Qarun was doubtless of the people of Moses but he acted insolently towards them: such were the treasures We had bestowed on him that their very keys would have been a burden to a body of strong men, behold, his people said to him: "Exult not, for Allah love not those who exult (in riches). But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on you, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget your portion in this world: but do good, as Allah has been good to you, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for Allah loves not those who do mischief." He said: "This has been given to me because of a certain knowledge which I have." Did he not know that Allah had destroyed, before him, (whole) generations, which were superior to him in strength and greater in the amount (of riches) they had collected? But the wicked are not called (immediately) to account for their sins.

So he went forth among his people in the (pride of his worldly) glitter. Said those whose aim is the life of this world: "Oh! That we had the like of what Qarun has! For he is truly a lord of mighty good fortune!" But those who had been granted (true) knowledge said: "Alas for you! The reward of Allah (in the Hereafter) is best for those who believe and work righteousness: but this none shall attain, save those who steadfastly persevere (in good)." Then We caused the earth to swallow up him and his house; and he had not (the least little) party to help him against Allah, nor could he defend himself. And those who had envied his position the day before began to say on the morrow: "Ah! It is indeed Allah who enlarges the provision or restricts it, to any of His slaves He pleases! Had it not been that Allah was gracious to us, He could have caused the earth to swallow us up! Ah! Those who reject Allah will assuredly never prosper." That home of the hereafter We shall give to those who intend not high-handedness or mischief on earth: and the end is (best) for the righteous.

Anyone who does a good action will get something better. As for anyone who does a bad action, those who have done bad actions will only be repaid for what they did. (Surat al-Qasas: 76-84)

The main misdeed of Qarun was to see himself as a separate being apart from and independent of Allah. Indeed, as the verse suggests, he did not deny the existence of Allah, but simply assumed that he – due to his superior traits – deserved the power and wealth bestowed on him by Allah. However, all people in the world are servants of Allah and their possessions are not given to them simply because they deserve them. Everything given to man is the favor of Allah. If he is aware of this fact, man will not become ungrateful and spoilt towards his Creator due to the riches in his possessions. He will only feel grateful and show this gratitude by his good manners towards Allah. This is certainly the best and most honorable way of showing one's gratitude to Allah. On the other hand, Qarun and those who aspire to be like Qarun realize the wicked deeds they engage in only when a disaster falls upon them. After all the harm that befalls them, if they persist and still revolt against Allah, they are utterly ruined. Their end will be unavoidable: the Hell, an evil place in which to remain!

Know you (all), that the life of this world is but play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting and multiplying (in rivalry) among yourselves, riches and children. Here is a similitude: How rain and the growth which it brings forth delight (the hearts of) the tillers; soon it withers; you will see it grow yellow; then it becomes dry and crumbles away. But in the Hereafter is a Penalty severe (for the devotees of wrong). And Forgiveness from Allah and (His) Good Pleasure (for the devotees of Allah). And what is the life of this world, but goods and chattels of deception? (Surat al-Hadid: 20)

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