

This Worldly Life versus the Best Return (An explanation of Quran 3:14 – 18) (part 1 of 2)



The Quran is the book that Muslims believe to be the direct and literal words of God and it is God's greatest gift to humanity. It is a book like no other book; it is not a history book or a story book or a scientific manual but it does contain all of those genres. The Quran and its amazing ability to speak to the heart of any human being is a beautiful phenomenon. It seems to understand a person's inner most thoughts and can even answer questions only half formulated by the reader. In the second verse of the second chapter of the Quran, God describes the Quran by calling it a book whereof there is no doubt, guidance to those who are pious, righteous, and fear God (Quran 2:2). A person asks or even thinks the question and Quran offers guidance. Come with me on a journey of discovery it seems to say. It beckons the reader to delve deeply into the heart of humanity and see the world through God's eyes.

In this article we are going to examine and discuss five verses from the third chapter of the Quran. This chapter is called 'The Family of Imran' (*Aali Imran*). Quran tells us that Imran is the father of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This whole family which includes Prophet Zachariah and the man Christians know as John the Baptist, is one held in high regard. This chapter speaks particularly to the Christians and exhorts them to worship One God, however contained in this chapter are some beautiful pieces of prose that describe the nature of humankind. And who is better to describe and give us an insight into our complicated nature other than our Creator – God?

The following verses begin by describing our desire to be surrounded by beauty and our natural inclination to gather worldly things, hold on to them and take pleasure in them. They then remind us that life everlasting in Paradise is worth more than this world and all that is in it and then also show us how we can achieve this ultimate goal.

Beautified for people is the love of that which they desire – of women and sons, heaped-up sums of gold and silver, fine branded horses, cattle and well-tilled land. This is the

pleasure of the present world's life, but God has with Him the best return (Paradise).

Say, "Shall I inform you of something better than that? For those who fear God will be gardens in the presence of their Lord beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally, and purified spouses and approval from God. And God is Seeing (i.e. aware) of (His) slaves."

Those who say: "Our Lord! We have indeed believed, so forgive us our sins and save us from the punishment of the Fire."

(They are) those who are patient, those who are true (in Faith, words, and deeds), and obedient with sincere devotion in worship. Those who spend (in the way of God) and those who pray and beg God's Pardon in the last hours of the night.

God bears witness that none has the right to be worshipped but He, and the angels, and those having knowledge (also give this witness); (He always) maintains His creation in Justice. None has the right to be worshipped but He, the All-Mighty, the All-Wise. (Quran 3:14 – 18)

The first sentence tells us that God has filled the earth with beauty and that he has deliberately beautified those things which we desire, those things we naturally covet. This life is a delight. There are many traditions from the life of Prophet Muhammad that testify to this.

Life is a delight, and the best delight is a righteous wife. [1]

Indeed the world is moist and green, and Allah has made you succeeding generations in it to watch how you will act, so beware of the world... [2]

Women and fragrance have been made dear to my affections, but prayer was made the sweetness of my eyes. [3]

No one will enter Paradise who has an atom's weight of arrogance in his heart." A man said, "What if a man likes his clothes to look good and his shoes to look good?" He said, "Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Arrogance means denying the truth and looking down on people." [4]

3:14 Beautified for people is the love of that which they desire – of women and sons, heaped-up sums of gold and silver, fine branded horses, cattle and well-tilled land. This is the pleasure of the present world's life, but God has with Him the best return (Paradise).

Here God reminds us that it is perfectly natural to desire the good things that He has provided for us. Not only is it natural but it is acceptable to find joy in the delights of this life, provided you remember that the joys of this

world fade and its delights are perishable. Life on earth can be filled with beauty, our surroundings can be magnificent, weather can give us a sense of awe and the things we love can make us feel happy. However God asks us to remember that this life is fleeting and tells us that the return or Paradise is better.

This is emphasized in **Quran 57:20. Know that the life of this world is only play and amusement, pomp and mutual boasting among you, and rivalry in respect of wealth and children. (It is) as the likeness of vegetation after rain, thereof the growth is pleasing to the tiller; afterwards it dries up and you see it turning yellow; then it becomes straw...**

We desire a partner of the opposite sex and a family but must remember that the loving and wanting to please our family might sometimes lead us to commit sins. The pursuit of wealth is a perfectly natural and admirable thing especially if we want to spend that wealth on being kind to family, friends, or neighbors, and by doing various acts of righteousness and obedience.

However if the pursuit of wealth results in arrogance and domineering behaviour towards those less wealthy it is no longer admirable but a cause of sin. It is interesting to note that God does not mention that human beings desire just gold and silver alone but that we desire heaped up or hoarded amounts of wealth, indicating our desire to accumulate more and more wealth. This desire is deep within us and we must take care to control it rather than let it control us.

Do not let your innate love of beautiful things distance you from God. There is a place for the good things in this world, they were created for us to enjoy but they must stay in their place, they should not be raised above obedience to God. Prophet Muhammad also reminded us of this when he compared the life of this world to a place in Paradise. He said, "A place in Paradise the size of the space found between a bow and the attached string is better than the whole earth on which the sun rises and sets."^[5]

We will continue our discussion, beginning with verse 3:15 in part 2.

Footnotes:

^[1] *Saheeh Muslim*

^[2] *Saheeh Muslim*

^[3] *Imam Ahmad*

^[4] *Saheeh Muslim*

^[5] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

In verse 15, God reminds us of the worth of this life as compared to the Hereafter. This life may have many wonderful things however what is waiting for those who are pious and remember Him is like nothing one can ever imagine.

3:15 Say, "Shall I inform you of something better than that? For those who fear God will be gardens in the presence of their Lord beneath which rivers flow, wherein they abide eternally, and purified spouses and approval from God. And God is Seeing (i.e. aware) of (His) slaves."

For those who obey God and remember Him often, the ultimate reward will be everlasting gardens beneath which rivers flow. There will be rivers of milk and of honey, rivers of water so pure and delightful it will be like nothing that a person can imagine. Not only that, it will last forever. The enjoyment will not end. Prophet Muhammad adds to God's description when he says, "It would be called out, 'For you there is everlasting health, and you will never be sick. For you there is everlasting life, and you will never die. For you there is perpetual youth, and you will never get old. And for you there is everlasting bliss, and you will never be in want.'" [\[1\]](#)

At this point we understand that although God has provided us with a most wondrous and beautiful abode here on earth it is far from perfect. We are burned by the sun's harsh rays even as it warms and nourishes us, bugs can ruin our enjoyment in natural environments sometimes with lethal bites or by spreading diseases, natural disasters transform stunning vistas into ruin and decay and of course humankind itself is responsible for destroying our most beautiful habitat. This is not going to happen in Paradise. Our serenity is everlasting, beautiful remains beautiful. In addition to this we are provided with purified spouses. We are companions for each other, there is no death and there are no worldly conditions such as menstruation or defecation.

Thus we ask ourselves, who is it that deserves this blissful life everlasting? God answers our thoughts.

3:16 Those who say: "Our Lord! We have indeed believed, so forgive us our sins and save us from the punishment of the Fire."

Those who have believed in One God and submitted themselves to Him are the ones who deserve this everlasting blissful life, the believers. They desire very much to be a part of this wonderful and awe inspiring life everlasting and God describes their actions in more detail so that there can be no room for doubt. If a person desires to live forever in Paradise then that person must strive hard to please God. Verse 17 further describes what sort of people will be saved from the punishment of the Fire.

3:17 (They are) those who are patient, those who are true (in Faith, words, and deeds), and obedient with sincere devotion in worship. Those

who spend (in the way of God) and those who pray and beg God's Pardon in the last hours of the night.

These are the believers who are patient. Ibn Qayyim explained^[2] that having patience means having the ability to stop ourselves from despairing, to refrain from complaining, and to control ourselves in times of sadness and worry. Prophet Muhammad's son in law Ali ibn Abi Talib defined patience as "seeking God's help".^[3]

Their other attributes include being faithful and obedient; they follow the laws and commandments of God with sincerity and to the best of their ability. They remember God and are grateful. **"Therefore, remember Me (by praying, glorifying, etc.). I will remember you, and be grateful to Me (for My countless Favours on you) and never be ungrateful to Me."** (Quran 2:152). They spend from their wealth on family members, neighbors and strangers. They are kind, help the destitute, and comfort the needy. And among those deserving of life everlasting are those who pray in the last part of the night.

Prophet Muhammad tried to instill in us, his followers, the benefits and desirability of praying in the last part of the night. He said, **"The Lord descends every night to the lowest heaven when one-third of the night remains and says: 'Who will call upon Me, that I may answer Him? Who will ask of Me, that I may give him? Who will seek My forgiveness, that I may forgive him?'"**^[4]

If you read this chapter of Quran from the beginning you will notice that God starts it off by reminding us that there is no God but He. He says, **"...La ilaha illa Huwa (none has the right to be worshipped but He), Al-Hayyul-Qayyum (the Ever Living, the One Who sustains and protects all that exists)"** (Quran 3:2). And now just a few verses later he reminds us again.

3:18 God bears witness that none has the right to be worshipped but He, and the angels, and those having knowledge (also give this witness); (He always) maintains His creation in Justice. None has the right to be worshipped but He, the All-Mighty, the All-Wise.

There is no god worthy of worship except He. There is no authority worthy of obedience except He. Here at verse 18 God Himself bears witness that there is no god but He. Just as there is nothing greater than God there is no statement truer than this one. None has the right to be worshipped but He. This is the crux of the matter, the essence of Islam. There is One God and He alone deserves worship. In the early days of Islam and of course in the 21st century there are many people who believe in God the Creator, but set up partners with Him or rivals to Him.

**"And there is none co-equal or comparable unto Him."
(Quran 112:4)**

"Do they associate with Him those who create nothing and they are [themselves] created? No help can they give them, nor can they help themselves." (Quran 7:191-192)

"He is the First (nothing is before Him) and the Last (nothing is after Him), the Most High (nothing is above Him) and the Most Near (nothing is nearer than Him). And He is the All-Knower of everything." (Quran 57:3)

This is an important point to know and to understand. The angels also bear witness to this truth, so do the people of knowledge. The people of knowledge know with certainty that God is One and Only. In this verse God has mentioned the people of knowledge with Himself and with the angels thus we are able to understand that seeking knowledge and teaching the truth is very important.

Next God reminds us that He maintains His creation with justice. **"We sent Our Messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the Book and the Measure in order to establish justice among the people..." (Quran 57:25).** God is fair and equitable and the Arabic word used in verse 18 is *qist*. It is usually translated as justice but does in fact encompass not only justice but also equity and balance. Do you wonder why we are just the right distance from the sun? A little closer and we would burn up, a little further away and we would freeze. God maintains His creation with justice, with balance.

Imagine the precision and timing that allows the world and all that is in it to function. Complex systems run perfectly. God concludes by repeating the phrase, **"None has the right to be worshipped but He, the All Mighty, the All Wise."**

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Muslim*

[2] *Ibn Qayyim al Jawziyyah*, 1997, Patience and gratitude, English translation, United Kingdom, Ta Ha Publishers.

[3] *Ibid*. P12

[4] *Saheeh Muslim , Saheeh Al-Bukhari*