



STRIKING EXAMPLES

The Parables of the Qur'an

The amthal of the Qur'an, the examples Allah strikes, and what each one asks of your heart

Before you begin

This is not a summary. It is an invitation to sit with the examples Allah strikes in the Qur'an, one image at a time, the kindled fire and the splitting rock and the good word like a good tree, and to let each picture turn slowly until you see your own heart in it.

Each chapter is retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's *Striking Examples From the Qur'an*, with every Qur'anic verse taken from its canonical translation and verified via quran.ai. Allah Himself says He strikes these examples so that people might reflect; every chapter reaches back toward the surah the image comes from and the article of faith it tests. Read one slowly.

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Contents

WHY ALLAH DRAWS PICTURES

Why Allah strikes examples	5
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FAITH AND ITS COUNTERFEIT

Fanning the flames	19
Rain and thunder	36
Hearts of stone	49
Empty cries	67

WHAT YOUR GIVING BECOMES

Charity's harvest	82
Barren and fertile ground	97
Blazing whirlwinds	112
Touched by the devil	126

SIGNS FOR THE SEEING

Adam and Jesus	141
Biting wind	155
Lured by devils	169
Walking in light	186
Narrowed chests	204

WHEN THE SOUL GOES ASTRAY

Panting dogs	220
Stray cattle	237
Depths of desperation	253

Lustrous land ————— 268

EVERYTHING THAT FADES

Reaching for water ————— 283

Fading foam ————— 299

A mound of ash ————— 316

THE GOOD WORD AND THE BAD

Firm roots and high branches ————— 332

Uprooted ————— 347

A firm word ————— 362

TWO MEN, AND THE TRUTH BETWEEN THEM

Enslaved ————— 377

Dead weight ————— 389

Unravelled yarn ————— 402

Why Allah strikes examples

An introduction to the amthal, the pictures Allah draws in the Qur'an

We do not say that a teacher strikes an example. We say she gives one, offers one, maybe draws one on the board. A judge, though, strikes. He brings the gavel down on the wood and the whole room, which a moment ago was loud with cross-talk, falls silent. Order. Something is about to be said that no one in that room can afford to miss. And when Allah turns to this way of teaching in the Qur'an, the word He chooses, again and again, is the judge's word, not the teacher's. He does not give an example. He strikes one.

This is the first night of a slow walk through the examples Allah strikes in His Book, the amthal, retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an. Twenty-seven days lie ahead of us, twenty-seven pictures, and like any patient teacher he does not begin with the first of them. He begins with a question that changes how you will read every one that follows: why are there examples at all? Why would the Lord of the worlds, who could simply state the lesson and be done, reach instead for a mosquito, a fly, a man bent over a fire in the dark? Sit with that before the first picture comes. The answer turns out to be an answer about love.

Not given, but struck

Start with the strangeness of the word itself, because the whole series grows out of it. To strike something, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is to make a sudden, sharp, unexpected sound that seizes attention before the mind has time to decide whether to give it. Rap your knuckles hard on a desk in the middle of a quiet hall and every head turns at once. People stop mid-sentence. What was that? In a classroom the teacher does not strike an example, but he will strike the desk, and the dozing room jolts awake. In a courtroom the proceedings dissolve into noise, the lawyer says something, the witness says something, and the room forgets itself and starts talking all at once, and the judge has only one tool to gather it back. He strikes. Order. Order. The sound is built to do one thing: pull a wandering attention back to the centre of the room, because now something fundamental is about to be said.

So when Allah strikes an example in the Qur'an, He is not merely adding a piece of information to a flow of information. The speech is already moving. The listener has already been listening, sometimes for pages. The lesson is already underway. And then, at exactly the chosen moment, He strikes, and an image lands. Nouman Ali Khan reaches for the homely phrases we use for this: the final nail, the icing on the cake, the last turn of the key. This, he says, is one of Allah's own methods in the Book. He will lay out something important, something built of many parts, the kind of thing a heart can easily lose track of, and then He will tie all of those parts together into a single picture, struck at the end like a nail driven

flush, so that the whole weight of what came before is now held in one image you will not be able to forget.

He makes the point with the smallest of human examples, the kind we all live. Ramadan arrives and the household needs its shopping done, and someone is sent off with a list: get this, and this, and this, and this, and this. By the third item the mind is already pleading, just text it to me. A long string of separate instructions is almost designed to be dropped, and the more of them there are, the more certain it is that one will slip. That, he says, is the human problem the example was made to solve. Allah does not hand the heart a list of loose lessons and trust it to hold them. He ties them together and strikes them as one picture, and a picture, unlike a list, stays.

He is not shy to draw you a mosquito

There is something to make peace with before any of these pictures arrive, and Allah names it Himself, plainly, near the start of the longest surah in the Book:

Indeed, Allāh is not timid to present an example - that of a mosquito or what is smaller than it. And those who have believed know that it is the truth from their Lord. But as for those who disbelieve, they say, "What did Allāh intend by this as an example?" He misleads many thereby and guides many thereby. And He misleads not except the defiantly disobedient,

QUR'AN 2:26

Read what Allah is telling us about His own teaching. He will not shrink from the smallest, humblest, least dignified picture if that picture carries the lesson home. A mosquito. Or something smaller still. The believer looks at that little image and looks straight through it to the truth on the other side, and says, yes, this is from my Lord. The one who has already decided to scoff looks at the very same image and finds in it only an excuse: what kind of God talks about insects? What is this supposed to mean? And so a single example, one picture struck once, guides one heart and hardens another. The mosquito did nothing. The difference was never in the image. It was in what each person carried to it.

This is why the pictures ahead will be so ordinary, and why their smallness is not a flaw in them but a mercy in them. A man struggling to light a fire. A dog left panting. A rock that water splits. A handful of grain that multiplies. A woman who unspins the thread she spun. Do not wait through these days for something grander to descend, some image vast enough to feel worthy of God. The

whole genius of the method is that Allah is reaching for something already lying in your hand, something you have seen a hundred times and never thought twice about, and turning it, with one strike, into a verse you will carry for the rest of your life. He is not too high to draw you a mosquito. That is precisely how near He has come to teach you.

An example is something you already know

Here is the quiet engine underneath all of them, and it is easy to miss because it sounds so obvious once it is said. An example, Nouman Ali Khan stresses, only works if you already know the thing it is made of. The example is never the new lesson. It is always the familiar object Allah borrows to carry the new lesson across, from a place you cannot yet see into a place you already live, so that the lesson arrives already feeling like something you own. If the picture itself needed explaining, it would not be an example. Its whole power is that it is old news to you, and the truth riding on it is not.

He tells a small story on himself to fix it, and it is worth slowing down for, because it is exactly what an example does to a lesson. As a young man in New York, newly serious about praying his five prayers, he ran into a problem that sounds almost too simple to be a problem: he could not work out the qibla, because he genuinely did not know which way was which. This was before the days of opening an app, and in any case, as he notes wryly, the apps at the Haram itself have a habit of pointing you confidently toward

America. The old way was to read the sun, but he was hemmed in by the tall buildings of the city, where you rarely catch a clean sunrise or sunset, and in the cloudy months you cannot read a shadow at all. He knew only that the qibla was somewhere to the east, northeast, and he had no idea where east, northeast actually was.

A friend solved it in a sentence, by reaching for the one thing he did know cold. You live in Queens. You can walk this whole city without a map. So wherever you are, stand toward Queens, and now you are facing east. Downtown is on your right, and down is south. Uptown is on your left, and up is north. New Jersey is behind you, and that is west. That was all it took. One familiar thing, the shape of his own city, and a problem he could not solve became a problem he could not get wrong. And the part that proves the point: years later, praying somewhere else entirely, in Texas or Louisiana, with the sun now plainly visible and no buildings in the way, he would still find his direction by picturing himself standing toward Queens. The familiar image had become permanent furniture in his mind, summoned again and again, long after the streets it described were a thousand miles away. That, he says, is what an example does. It takes something that felt complicated, anchors it to something you already carry, and hands you a lesson you will never again have to relearn.

Every example paints a scene

If there is one thread to carry into every single day that follows, it is this, and Nouman Ali Khan names it as the common feature of them all: every example in the Qur'an paints a scene. Not a definition. A picture, and usually a moving one, a small clip you can re-play behind your eyes. The ancients might have called it a painting; in our terms it is closer to a few seconds of film. Tomorrow the scene will be a figure alone in the dark of the desert, cold and frightened, rubbing sticks or stones together, desperate to coax up a flame before the night and whatever moves in it close over him. You will be able to see it. And once you can see it, you can hold the lesson, because each piece of the scene will quietly hand back one of the lessons that came before it. The picture becomes the memory, and the memory becomes the teaching, permanently.

He gives one more scene to show how it works, and it is one of the most devastating little pictures in the Book:

O people, an example is presented, so listen to it. Indeed, those you invoke besides Allāh will never create [as much as] a fly, even if they gathered together for it [i.e., that purpose]. And if the fly should steal from them a [tiny] thing, they could not recover it from him. Weak are the pursuer and pursued.

QUR'AN 22:73

Watch the scene he draws out of it. People would bring their idols their reverence in the most physical way: they would pour out blood before them, lay down milk, set flowers upon them, leave food as an offering, light candles around them. And all of that, the blood and the milk and the food, draws one thing. It draws flies. Now imagine you wandered in as a stranger and, seeing a fine glass of milk set before the idol, reached out to help yourself. You might be beaten for it. You might be killed. You cannot touch that. It is sacred, set apart, untouchable, reserved for the god of stone. But the fly does not know the rules and does not care for them. It drifts in, decides the offering looks good, helps itself, and lifts off again, and the worshipper is left flapping his hands, pleading, that is not for you, leave it, please, stop, while the god he has come to beg from cannot lift a wing to defend its own dinner from an insect.

You could, Nouman Ali Khan says, debate that idol's worshippers for an hour. You could take apart the history of the religion, its theology, its philosophy, the whole architecture of its argument. Or you could simply remember the fly. The image settles in one second what the argument labours at for an hour, because the verse has already pronounced the verdict the scene was built to deliver: weak are the pursuer and the pursued. Weak the one who seeks, weak the thing he seeks. That is the gift of an example. It does not ask you to win a debate. It asks you only to keep a picture.

Struck rarely, and always on purpose

It would be a mistake to imagine these pictures scattered loosely across every page, and a second mistake to think them careless flourishes. Allah is sparing with them, and exact:

And these examples We present to the people, but none will understand them except those of knowledge.

QUR'AN 29:43

Nouman Ali Khan draws attention to how deliberately they are rationed. Al-Baqarah is the longest surah in the entire Qur'an, and on the first night of this series the worshippers had just heard the whole of its opening section recited, a long stretch of revelation, and across all of it they had met only two examples. Two. The rest was not parable; it was the steady flow of the text, lesson upon lesson, the speech simply continuing. The examples are not the weather of the Book, happening everywhere. They are placed, struck at the precise points where a heart most needs the lesson pinned down so it cannot wander off. Their rarity is part of their weight. When one comes, it is because this, here, is something you must not be allowed to forget.

And then notice the second half of the verse, because it turns the whole thing toward you. The examples are struck for the people, all of them, held up in the open where anyone might look. But understanding them is another matter; that, the verse says, belongs to those of knowledge. The picture is offered to everyone equally.

Whether it opens, whether it gives up the lesson folded inside it, depends entirely on whether you are willing to stop and actually think about it, or whether you will glance at it and walk on. The mosquito guided one heart and hardened another, and the difference was never the mosquito. The same picture is held up to a whole room. It opens only for the one who sits with it.

The mark of a teacher who loves the student

Now Nouman Ali Khan brings it to the place the whole introduction has been climbing toward, and he gets there through a memory everyone in the room already has. You have all sat in a classroom. You all know, without needing it explained, the difference between an ordinary teacher and a great one. The ordinary teacher states the concept, names the date of the test, and leaves the rest to you. He reads from the book. He says it once. The exam is on Friday; the rest is your problem. The great teacher does something else entirely. He is teaching, and he sees the confusion settle on your face, and he stops. Hold on, let me give you an example. And when that one does not quite land, here is another. And then, leaning in: when this comes up on the test, picture this, walk through it in your head, and you will know how to solve it.

Here is the observation he wants you to carry, the hinge of the entire night. The example never benefits the teacher. The teacher already knows the material; he does not need the picture, he could simply name the concept and move on. The example exists for one reason and one reason only, and it is the student. It is the mark,

every time, of the teacher who actually cares whether you pass, the one who takes care over the curriculum and even more care over the examples, because he knows that for this particular student, on this particular point, the right picture might save their whole year. A teacher who gives you example after example, drill after drill, is a teacher who has decided your success matters to him.

Then he turns it where it has been pointing all along. Allah knows all things. He has no need of examples, none, not for His own sake; there is nothing about a mosquito or a fly or a fire in the dark that Allah requires explained to Him. The one who needs the example is the one who needs to understand, and that is us. And so Nouman Ali Khan draws the conclusion the whole series rests on, beautiful in its plainness: the Qur'an is not Allah merely informing you. It is not even Allah merely guiding you, or merely handing down wisdom from a height. It is Allah teaching you, the way only a teacher who genuinely wants you to pass would ever teach, choosing each picture with care because He means for it to work, for you. Telling someone a thing and teaching someone a thing are not the same act, and the difference between them is love. That these examples exist at all is a sign of how much the One who needs nothing wanted you, specifically, to understand.

What this example asks of our hearts

It would be easy to take a night like this one as throat-clearing, a few preliminaries to get through before the real pictures begin to-

morrow. That would be to walk past the question it has quietly set down in front of you. Strip the introduction to what it actually asks, and you will never open one of these examples, or the Qur'an itself, the same way again.

It asks you, first, to sit up when an example is struck. The word is the judge's word, not the teacher's, and it was chosen on purpose. When one of these pictures appears in the Book, something essential is being driven home at exactly that point, like a nail hammered flush at the end of the plank. They are rationed, struck rarely and never by accident, placed precisely where a heart most needs the lesson held in place. So when you meet one in your reading, do not let it slide past as a pretty turn of phrase. Stop. The gavel has come down. This, here, is something you are not meant to forget.

It asks you, next, not to be too proud for a small picture. The images ahead are humble, deliberately so, a mosquito, a fly, a man and a fire, and that humility is the mercy in them, not a poverty in them. Allah is not too high to draw you something tiny; that is precisely how close He has bent down to teach you, reaching for the ordinary thing already in your hand. The believer looked at the mosquito and saw the truth in it; the scoffer looked at the same mosquito and saw only an insult. The picture decided nothing. What each one carried to it decided everything. So the question is not whether the example is grand enough for God. The question is what you are willing to bring to it.

And it asks, in the end, the only question that was ever really being asked tonight, which is not about the examples at all. It is about you. Allah, who needs nothing, has chosen to teach you the way a teacher who loves his student teaches, drawing you picture after picture so that the lessons your life depends on would be the kind that stay. The examples are scenes, made to be replayed; an example is something you already know, made permanent furniture in your mind, summoned long after the lesson was first learned. All of that is laid in your hand as a gift. The only thing left undecided is what you will do with it. Will you be the student who studies the picture, walks through it, carries it into the exam of an ordinary day, and finds his own face looking back out of it? Or the one who hears it, nods, and shelves it, and wakes tomorrow unchanged? Tomorrow the first picture is struck: a man alone in the dark, fighting to light a fire. Come to it the way a good student comes to his Teacher, low and hungry to understand, with the one prayer Allah Himself placed on the tongue of His final Messenger ﷺ for exactly this:

So high [above all] is Allāh, the Sovereign, the Truth. And, [O Muḥammad], do not hasten with [recitation of] the Qur'ān before its revelation is completed to you, and say, "My Lord, increase me in knowledge."

QUR'AN 20:114

So take one thing from this first night down into the days ahead. When the next example is struck, stop and sit with it instead of

reading on. Refuse to be too proud for the small picture, and look through it for the truth it carries. And ask of every scene Allah draws not what happened, but what it is asking of you, until each one becomes a mirror and not a museum piece. That is how a heart learns, in attention, in humility, in the willingness to be taught by the One who needs nothing and still drew you a picture. May Allah, who strikes examples for us though He has no need of them, open our hearts to the pictures He drew with such care, let not one of them pass before our eyes without changing something inside, and increase us in knowledge that brings us nearer to Him. Rabbi zidni ilma. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 1. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Fanning the flames

The one who kindled a fire, and was left in the dark

Picture a man alone in the desert at night. The sun is long gone, the cold has settled into his bones, and the dark around him is the kind that hides everything, a wolf, a cliff edge, a stranger, anything. He has no city to walk back to and no lamp to carry. So he kneels over a little pile of sticks and stones and works at them, striking, blowing, coaxing, until at last a spark catches and holds, and a flame leaps up and throws its light across the whole stretch of sand. For one breath the world is visible again. He can see where he is. He can see where to go. And then, in the next breath, the light is gone, and he is left standing in a darkness somehow deeper than the one he started in, his eyes useless, unable to see his own hand.

That is the first example Allah strikes in the longest surah of the Qur'an. And before Nouman Ali Khan lets us look at the fire at all, he sits us down with the people it was struck for, because an image only lands once you know the lesson it was carved to carry. This is the portrait of the hypocrite, and to understand why it had to be a man kindling a fire in the open dark, you first have to understand who that man is, and why he is the most dangerous figure in the whole story.

The enemy you cannot see coming

The opening of Surah al-Baqarah does something quiet and deliberate: it sorts all of humanity into three groups. There are the believers, named first and described with tenderness. There are those who have shut the door on faith entirely, the open rejecters. And then there is a third group, and it is this third group that the Qur'an lingers over, because it is the one that does the most damage. These are the people who say the words of faith with their tongues while their hearts are somewhere else entirely.

And of the people are some who say, "We believe in Allah and the Last Day," but they are not believers.

QUR'AN 2:8

Nouman Ali Khan draws out why this group, and not the open enemy, gets the heaviest treatment. An enemy outside your walls is, in a strange way, a manageable thing. You can see him. You know where he stands and what he wants, and you can brace for him, plan against him, post a guard. But the enemy who walks in through the front gate saying we believe just like you do, who sits at your table and prays in your row and then works quietly against everything you are building, that one you cannot brace for. He can demoralise you, divide you, drain your strength from the inside in ways you will not even notice until it is too late, precisely because he has told you he is one of you. The open foe wounds the body. This one poisons the well.

And here he makes a connection that the very first listeners would have felt in their bones, because the Qur'an keeps doing something with the story of Musa, peace be upon him. It lays his life over the life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, like two transparency slides set on one projector so their images overlap on the wall. In Makkah the Prophet ﷺ faced Quraysh, the enemy outside the walls, who could not explain away what he brought and so settled on calling it magic, exactly as Pharaoh had stood against Musa, peace be upon him, the outside enemy of his day. That is why the story of Musa and Pharaoh fills so much of the Makkan Qur'an: the Companions reading it were not only hearing about an old prophet and an old tyrant, they were seeing their own struggle laid on top of it, the two pictures fused into one.

But Musa's story, Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, has two halves, and you can divide them by water. There is the part before the sea, when his enemy was Pharaoh outside; and there is the part after the sea, when the hardest trouble came from within his own people, the ones he had been sent to save, who questioned him and undermined him and caused him real pain once they were a free nation out in the wilderness. The life of the Prophet ﷺ runs the same shape, split by his own crossing, the migration to Madinah. Before it, the enemy was outside. After it, in Madinah, the gravest danger became the hypocrites within. So the Madani Qur'an, mirroring the second half of Musa's life, turns its attention to hypocrisy again and again, and to the Children of Israel who gave their prophet so much grief. This example, the fire in the

dark, is the opening shot of that long and painful subject. The believers are being shown the true followers of Musa, peace be upon him; the open rejecters of Makkah, those who once rejected him; and the hypocrites, that inner sabotage Musa knew so well. None of it, the Companions were being told, is new. It has all played out before.

The portrait drawn before the picture

Allah does not strike the image cold. Before the fire is lit, He draws the people of it in plain, unsparing words, and each line tightens the knot a little further. They imagine they are deceiving Allah and the believers, and the Qur'an answers that they deceive no one but themselves, and do not even realise it. There is a sickness in their hearts, and rather than healing it grows. Told to stop spreading corruption, they protest that they are the reformers, the peace-makers, the ones looking out for the public good. Nouman Ali Khan paints their politics with a familiar brush: they were the ones forever saying, but isn't Islam about peace, why go to war, can't we negotiate, they are still our brothers, all the while making quiet deals behind the Prophet's ﷺ back and undermining the very community they claimed to serve. They dressed sabotage in the language of public service.

Then comes the line that cuts deepest. When they are urged to believe sincerely, the way the true believers believe, they sneer. Should we believe, they ask, like the fools believe? And who are these fools in their mouths? The Companions. The very people

who walked away from home and wealth and family for the sake of Allah, who arrived in Madinah with nothing, living off the generosity of strangers. A man left his whole house, his whole business, his whole life behind and came with empty hands and a family to feed, and the hypocrite looked at him and called it stupidity, a burden on the rest of them. That, Nouman Ali Khan notes, is how far gone a heart can be: shown a role model, the healthy soul feels a pull to be better, but the truly sick soul goes on the offensive and mocks the very thing it should be reaching for.

And worst of all, the double game. In public, meeting the believers, they say of course, we are with you, we believe too. In private, back among their own circle, they say we were only joking, our real loyalty is with you, we just play along with them. And the Qur'an exposes the whole hidden conversation, and then answers their mockery with a pattern that will matter enormously in a moment:

[But] Allah mocks them and prolongs them in their transgression [while] they wander blindly.

QUR'AN 2:15

Hold onto the shape of that. They mock, and it is Allah who mocks them. They scheme to deceive, and it is they who are deceived. Every time they make a move, Allah answers it in kind. They are left to stumble on in their rebellion, wandering blind, the blindness not of the eyes but of the heart, so complete that they do not even

know they are blind. They thought themselves the clever ones, the political operators too sharp to be caught, and the deepest irony of the passage is that the only people in the room who could not see the joke were themselves. Remember that pattern, their move and Allah's response, because it is the single key that will unlock the strangest words in the whole parable.

The fire in the dark

Now, at last, the picture.

Their example is that of one who kindled a fire, but when it illuminated what was around him, Allah took away their light and left them in darkness [so] they could not see.

QUR'AN 2:17

Before he traces the image, Nouman Ali Khan pauses on the weight of a single word. The Arabs did not use the word mathal, likeness, for any ordinary comparison. They saved it for an image so apt, so perfectly carved, that it became a coined saying, a proverb passed down unchanged across generations, the kind of phrase you are not permitted to reword because its power is in its exact wording. Their own great sayings were called by this name. So when Allah opens with mathaluhum, their likeness is, He is not offering a casual illustration. He is striking the kind of image that is built to echo forever, a picture so precise it will keep teaching as long as there are people to hear it.

And the precision is everywhere, starting with the choice of a fire. You do not kindle a fire in the middle of a city; nobody crouches in a busy street striking sparks. A fire is what you build when you are lost in the open, far from shelter, exposed to the cold and the dark and whatever moves in it. To the Arabs this was not a poetic flourish lifted from a book. It was last Tuesday. They were desert people, not the citizens of Rome with their paved roads and street lamps, not the Persians or the Chinese with their great cities; for them, being stranded in the wilderness, coaxing a flame from a few sticks, was an ordinary memory. The image landed in their chests the way a story about running out of fuel on an empty road lands in ours: immediate, lived, theirs. Allah chose an image these particular people could not hold at arm's length.

So the man kneels in the dark and works at his fire, and it catches, and it lights up everything around him. He has what he was desperate for. The cold has an answer, the dark has an answer, the lost have a direction. And anyone else out there in that night, anyone shivering in the same dark, would naturally move toward that light to share its warmth. The flame is struck. The whole landscape stands revealed. And then the verse turns, and everything we expected is overturned.

From fire to light

There is a quieter thread running inside the word fire, and Nouman Ali Khan pulls on it gently. There was one other man in the Qur'an who set out across the dark desert and tried to kindle a flame:

Musa, peace be upon him. His family was cold, the night had closed in, and he could not get a fire going, and then in the distance he saw one already burning and went toward it, hoping for warmth and for someone who could point him the way. What he found there was not a campfire. It was the voice of his Lord, the beginning of revelation, guidance itself.

So watch the words of the parable closely, Nouman Ali Khan says. It speaks of a man who kindled a fire, *nar*, and then says Allah took away their light, *nur*. The man set out for fire; what was really on offer was light. The two words sit a hair apart in the Arabic and a world apart in meaning, and the verse moves from one to the other deliberately. You go looking for a little heat to survive the night. What you are actually being handed, if you will take it, is guidance.

Which raises the question of who this fire-kindler is, and here Nouman Ali Khan tells us honestly that there is more than one way the verse has been read. One reading sees the kindler as the Israelites, or the people of Madinah, both of them straining for six hundred years or for a single anxious generation to find the leader, the final prophet, who would end their troubles and light their way. Another reading, and this is the one he leans toward, sees the kindler as the Prophet ﷺ himself. Before the Qur'an came, he withdrew to the cave above Makkah, troubled by a world drowning in its own wrongs, the kind of grief that settles on anyone who tries to help and watches the problems outrun every effort. You patch one wound and ten more open. The chart of your help climbs slowly while the chart of the harm climbs faster, and the hopeless-

ness creeps in. The Prophet ﷺ was up on that mountain searching for an answer to all of it, and one imagines him kindling a fire to pass the cold nights there. And then Jibril came, and brought the Qur'an, the revelation the Book itself calls light.

There is one more touch in the wording that Nouman Ali Khan will not let slip by, and it is beautiful. The word for how the fire lit its surroundings, *ada'at*, is not the cool, gentle word for light. It is a word with heat in it, the kind of light that burns, like the blaze of the desert sun that makes everything mercilessly, perfectly visible. And that, he says, is exactly right, because the light of revelation did not come only as comfort. It came with warning in it, with intensity and weight, the way the desert sun reveals every detail without softening anything. The fire was struck. The whole world around it stood lit in a heat that left nothing hidden. The gift was burning right there in the dark, meant for everyone close enough to feel it.

Why Allah says He took their light

And then the strangest turn in the entire parable. The fire is burning. The surroundings are lit. The Prophet ﷺ is there, the Qur'an is there, the warmth is real and present. And Allah says He took away their light and left them in darkness. But nothing has gone out. The fire is still burning. So how can Allah say He took it, as though He were the one who walked off into the night carrying the flame away?

Picture it the way Nouman Ali Khan asks us to. We are all out in that dark desert, lost, hoping. One man finally lights a fire, and the natural thing, the human thing, is for everyone to draw near it. The believers do. But the hypocrites back away. They say, no thank you, we are fine where we are, we can see it from here, we do not need to get that close, we might get burned. They keep their safe distance. And even when they do show up at the edge of the light, they come only for appearances, only to be seen, and then slip back to say in private that they were never really part of it. They are the ones who moved. They are the ones who walked away from the flame. So why does the verse not simply say, the light came and they walked away from it? Why does it say Allah took their light?

Here the pattern from before becomes the key. They make a move, and Allah responds. They mocked, and Allah mocked them. They schemed to deceive, and Allah let them deceive only themselves. And now they back away from the light, and Allah responds in kind: He takes their light by letting them go, by allowing them to drift off into the very distance they chose for themselves. It is not that He picked up the fire and left. It is that He left them to their own leaving. He honoured the distance they insisted on, and let them walk into the dark they preferred.

And look, Nouman Ali Khan urges, at whose light it was. Allah says their light, the light meant for them. Of all the people on the earth, these were brought nearer to it than anyone alive. Allah Himself had arranged the nearness; He brought the Prophet ﷺ to Makkah,

brought him to Madinah, set him down among these exact people so that they, more than the Romans or the Persians or anyone else in the world, would be within arm's reach of the light. This was a gift handed specifically to them, a privilege withheld from entire empires. And they went blind to it. The light was theirs, and they could not see it, and the verse says they were left not in darkness but in darkneses, layered, deepening, each step away from the flame a deeper black than the last, drifting steadily toward those whose hearts had already been sealed shut.

For this is a law woven through all of creation, and Nouman Ali Khan makes it plain with the simplest of examples. Blindfold your eyes and keep them covered for six months, and when you finally pull the cloth away you will not see; the faculty, unused, is gone. Bind your legs tightly and lie still for six months, and they will not carry you when you try to stand. This is the design Allah set into the world: a gift unused is a gift withdrawn. Refuse the ability to see His light, to feel its warmth, to draw near it, refuse it enough times, and the very capacity to receive it is quietly taken away. So a man could sit an arm's length from the Prophet ﷺ, could hear the Qur'an recited in the Prophet's own voice, and feel nothing at all, stone deaf in his heart to the most beautiful sound a human ear has ever been offered, because he had already spent his light. He had let the faculty die. The light kept burning, brighter than any other light in history, and the one thing a person needs to benefit from a great brightness is eyes that still work, and his no longer did.

Deaf, dumb, blind, and the order that explains it

After a parable that ends in darkness and a man who cannot see, you would expect the next word to be blind. It is the obvious word; the picture just closed on blindness. But Allah does not begin with blind. He says, in this order:

Deaf, dumb and blind - so they will not return [to the right path].

QUR'AN 2:18

Nouman Ali Khan calls this order one of the most remarkable things in the whole passage, and once he explains it you cannot unsee it. The parable used fire as its image of light, but the verse has now peeled the image away and is speaking about reality, and in reality, true light is not a thing you see. Spiritual light is a thing you hear. The Qur'an is called light, over and over, and yet the Qur'an is not looked at. It is recited. It is listened to. The ultimate light, in the world of the spirit, is the light that enters through the ear. So the collapse cannot begin with the eyes. It begins where the light actually enters, and that is why the first word is deaf.

Deaf: they refuse to listen to the word of Allah. That is the first crime, and the easiest to understand. Then dumb, and here Nouman Ali Khan reaches into a quiet truth about the human body. A person who cannot hear properly never learns to speak properly, because you cannot reproduce sounds you have never clearly taken in; the hearing problem becomes a speaking problem. So in

the realm of the spirit too: having shut the word of Allah out of their ears, they can no longer speak the truth with their tongues. And then, only then, blind, refusing at last to see what is by now blazingly, undeniably lit. The order is not a random list of three defects. It is the anatomy of how a heart goes dark, traced backward to its root. Blindness does not come first. It comes last, and it is born from the refusal to listen and the refusal to speak.

And Nouman Ali Khan brings this straight out of the seventh century and into the glare of our own lives, because the disease has only found faster carriers. In every age there have been influencers and followers; the technology is new but the dynamic is ancient, the crowd that wants to dress like the admired one, ride what the admired one rides, believe what the admired one believes. And the influencer, sitting closest to the light with the most access to the truth, hears something true and stays silent, because to say it aloud would cost the following, the contract, the next deal, the brand. Better to change the subject. Better to pretend not to have heard. They will not listen, and then they will not speak. The follower, in turn, surrenders his own mind: if my favourite did not endorse it, I will not accept it; if I agreed with that truth out loud, my whole circle would turn on me, strip my membership, lock me out, so I had better stay quiet and pretend I see nothing either. Deaf, then dumb, then blind, repeating itself in feeds and group chats exactly as it repeated itself in the streets of Madinah. You can watch a person say something on a screen that no honest soul could believe, and wonder how anyone could be so

blind, and the answer, every time, is upstream: it began when they stopped listening, and it hardened when they would not speak.

What this example asks of our hearts

And now the picture turns, the way every example in this series finally turns, away from them and toward us. Because this was never only a portrait of a long-dead faction in Madinah. It is a mirror, and Nouman Ali Khan will not let us set it down before we have looked into it honestly.

Here is what the mirror shows. Being near Islam is not the same as being in it. You can be inside the masjid, surrounded by the sound of the Qur'an, raised in a Muslim home, closer to the light than the overwhelming majority of human beings who have ever lived, and still be the man with the spent eyes who feels nothing while it pours over him. The light passing through you and warming nothing. This is the warning aimed with terrible precision at the near, at the comfortable, at exactly the kind of person who would read a chapter like this one. Nearness was never the gift. Allah did not give these people the Prophet ﷺ in their city as a reward in itself; the gift was in receiving him, in drawing close to the flame and letting it do its work. Proximity is not faith. The shahada on a hypocrite's tongue, we believe in Allah and the Last Day, was the very phrase the Qur'an pulled apart, because the words are not the thing; the heart behind them is the thing. True faith is not standing beside the fire so others can see you there. It is worship lit from within, the kind that burns whether or not a single human being is

watching, the worship the Prophet ﷺ called ihsan, to serve Allah as though you see Him, knowing that even when you do not see Him, He, the Watcher, sees you, and sees the darkness the hypocrite chooses, and sees the warmth in the heart of the one who draws near. And a gift unused, by the law Allah wove into everything, is slowly, quietly withdrawn.

Notice one more thing in the image, because Nouman Ali Khan ends on it and it is bracing. The one who kindles the fire is usually a single person, alone, while the crowd keeps its distance. To carry the light has a way of making you the odd one out, the strange one, even, he says, among Muslims. He has met girls in Muslim countries, in Muslim families, mocked by their own classmates and relatives for wanting to cover, for slipping off to pray in the corner during the break, isolated and called extreme for the simple act of reaching toward the light in a place that should have celebrated it. To go toward the one with the fire is almost never to go toward what is popular. Blindness, by comparison, is convenient. It costs nothing to stay where it is dark; you offend no one, you risk nothing, you keep your seat at the table. Lighting the fire is work. Following it is work. Staying blind is easy, and that is precisely its danger.

And yet, look at how the verse ends, because everything turns on it. After the darkness, after the deafness and the muteness and the blindness, after it has sounded for the whole parable as though Allah simply seized the light and walked away, the closing words are not Allah will not give the light back. The closing words are so

they will not return. They are the ones who walked off. They are the ones who chose the distance. The door home was never locked from the outside; they simply will not come back through it. And if the door was never locked for them, then it is not locked for you tonight, whatever distance you have let open up between yourself and the light. The faculty can be exercised again before it is fully gone. The heart can be turned back toward the warmth. The whole tragedy of the hypocrite is that the way back was always open and he would not take it, and the whole mercy held out to you in the same verse is that it is open still.

So do not let the gift go unused while there is still time and still light. Listen to the Qur'an as though you are hearing it for the first time, because in the world of the spirit, light comes first through the ears, and a heart that listens has not yet gone dark. Speak the truth your conscience already knows, even when the room will punish you for it, because the refusal to speak is the second step into the blindness. And keep drawing near, keep choosing the fire over the comfortable dark, and keep coming back to it every time you drift, because the door of return is the one thing in this whole grave parable that Allah left standing open. O Allah, do not let our hearts swerve after You have guided them; do not let us grow blind beside Your light or deaf to Your words; keep us near the fire and able to feel its warmth; and make us of those who, every time they drift, turn back. Ameen.

[Who say], "Our Lord, let not our hearts deviate after You have guided us and grant us from Yourself mercy. Indeed, You are the Bestower.

QUR'AN 3:8

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 2. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Rain and thunder

Caught in the storm, frozen between the flashes of light

Picture someone out in the open at night, far from any wall or roof, when the sky breaks. Not a soft rain, the kind you walk through on the way home, but a downpour that comes in sheets, that turns the dark into something solid you have to push against. The thunder is so loud it swallows every other sound, so that even if the person screamed, no one would hear it over the pounding of the water. And the only light in all of it is the lightning, which does not warm and does not guide. It stuns. A white flash tears across the sky and is gone, and the eyes are left worse off than the dark had left them. The person stands there, soaked through, drowning where they stand, jamming their fingers into their ears against the noise, unable to go forward and unable to get out.

That is the second example Allah strikes at the very opening of al-Baqarah, set right beside the man with the fire from the day before. This is the third of our twenty-seven, retold from Nouman Ali Khan's reading of the amthal, the striking examples of the Qur'an. And the unsettling thing about this storm, the thing that turns the whole scene over and makes it ache, is what the rain turns out to be.

Two pictures, set side by side

Allah does not strike these two examples at random, one after the other. Nouman Ali Khan reads the pairing as deliberate, and the reason becomes clear the moment you hold both images in the mind at once. The first example was a single human being kindling a fire in the middle of a dark night, a person striking a spark. This second one is not a person at all. It is weather. It is something pouring down out of the sky onto everyone below, whether they asked for it or not.

He sees in that difference a whole event being described in two frames. One example holds up the messenger, the human being who carried a light into a world that had forgotten what light was. The other holds up the message itself, the thing that came down from above and fell on a whole people like weather. Set them together and you are looking at the entire moment Islam began: a Prophet ﷺ raised up in a forgotten corner of the earth, striking a flame in the dark, and a revelation descending on him and on his city like a storm no one could pretend not to notice.

And this, he points out, is exactly how the Qur'an talks about itself across its pages. Two images recur again and again for the guidance of Allah: light, and rain. Light, because the believer follows it the way a hundred lost travellers in the desert at night follow the one man among them who carries a torch. You are not lighting a fire to sit beside it and have a meal, he says; you light it because you need to know where to put your feet, and once it is lit, everyone who cannot see is trusting the one who can. And rain, be-

cause the Qur'an descends from the sky the way rain does, and gives life to dead hearts the way rain gives life to dead earth, and is pure in itself and a thing that purifies whatever it touches, exactly as water is. Hold both pictures together, the fire and the storm, and you are holding the way revelation describes its own nature.

The same rain that gives life can drown

Here is the turn that makes this parable hard to shake. If rain is the Qur'an, and rain everywhere else in the Book is mercy, then why is the rain in this one scene a horror? Why darkness, why thunder, why a flood a person cannot survive, when across the rest of the Qur'an the coming of rain is the very picture of Allah's kindness to His creation?

Nouman Ali Khan answers it with a question of his own, and the question disarms you. Is rain a mercy from Allah? Yes, of course. Is the wind a mercy? Is the warmth of the sun a mercy? All of them, without exception, are gifts. And yet it was rain that rose up and drowned the people of Nuh, peace be upon him, and wind that was sent against another nation until it left them like hollow trunks. The very same gift, the exact same blessing, becomes the instrument of ruin the moment a heart turns away from the One who sent it. So the Qur'an, he says, is precisely like this. It is never a neutral thing sitting quietly in the room. It will be the case that argues for you on the Day of Judgement, or the case that argues against you. It is your single greatest blessing, or it is your heaviest torment. There is no third option. For the heart that receives it, the

downpour is life pouring down out of heaven. For the heart in this parable, the very same water is a flood that closes over their head.

And he draws out where this happened in history, because the image is not abstract. The Qur'an came down in the valley of Makkah, verse after verse after verse, until it was like a flood filling the low ground. Whether you welcomed it or fought it, you heard it; it was coming down on the city in such volume you could not get away from it. Some people were like good soil: the water sank in, reached the seed, and life grew. Others were like packed, lifeless ground with nothing alive inside it. The same water hit them and simply could not enter, so it gathered and turned to froth on the surface, the kind of foam a flood lifts up and carries off and discards. Two soils, one rain. The difference was never in the rain.

The storm, in Allah's words

Now look closely at the very first word Allah chooses for this rain, because Nouman Ali Khan stops on it and it changes how you read the whole scene. The word is sayyib. It does not mean just any downpour. In Arabic, he notes, it carries the sense of rain that comes down in exactly the right, beneficial measure, the amount that does good, the rain a farmer would pray for. Mercy is folded into the very sound of the word. And Allah places that word here, in a scene of pure terror, on water that has become a thing of dread. The rain that was meant to be precisely enough to give life is, for this person, precisely enough to destroy them. Read it again

and feel the irony in it: the gift has not changed in the slightest. What changed is the one standing underneath it.

Or [it is] like a rainstorm from the sky within which is darkness, thunder and lightning. They put their fingers in their ears against the thunderclaps in dread of death. But Allah is encompassing of the disbelievers.

QUR'AN 2:19

And watch what they do with their hands, because the wording is exact and merciless. The thunderclaps are so violent that they ram their fingers into their ears. Nouman Ali Khan points out that the Arabic does not say they put their fingertips in; it names the fingers themselves, the whole length of them, pressed in. The sound is so unbearable that the small thing is not enough, so they keep pushing, past the point of comfort, past the point where it begins to hurt, anything to shut the noise out, and even then it does not work. Some passages of revelation, he says, land hard even on a heart that has decided not to believe. So the scene quietly turns a question back on the one inside it. If you are so certain this is nothing, a fairy tale, an empty old story, then why does it rattle you this badly? Why are you covering your ears? You do not brace yourself against a tale you find harmless. You brace against a truth you cannot afford to hear.

Frozen between the flashes

Now the picture moves, and the movement is the most haunting part of all. The lightning is so harsh it almost tears the sight out of their eyes, the way a camera flash in a pitch-black room leaves you blind for a second afterward, the way someone snapping on every light while you are asleep makes you throw a hand across your face. And in that strobing dark, here is the rhythm of their entire life, set down in a single line: when the lightning flashes, they snatch a step forward; when the darkness closes back over them, they freeze where they stand. A flash, a step. Darkness, a stop. Forward only when forced, then rooted to the spot again the moment the pressure lifts.

The lightning almost snatches away their sight. Every time it lights [the way] for them, they walk therein; but when darkness comes over them, they stand [still]. And if Allah had willed, He could have taken away their hearing and their sight. Indeed, Allah is over all things competent.

QUR'AN 2:20

Nouman Ali Khan reads those flashes of lightning as the moments the truth becomes, for an instant, undeniable. Every time Islam was proven right in front of these people, a victory that should have gone the other way and did not, a sign too clear to argue with, the light flashed and they edged forward half a step, with no choice in it. And then the moment passed. The certainty faded. The dark settled back in, and they stopped again, sinking back into

the comfortable blindness they preferred. He gives the example of the year the Prophet ﷺ set out for the pilgrimage and the doubters in Madinah were quietly delighted, certain he would be killed on the way and their problem would solve itself; and then he returned, alive and victorious, and a fresh light flashed across their sky, and they were forced to inch one more grudging step forward, only to stop again when the next stretch of darkness came. Every victory of the faith was, to them, not a joy but a glare they wanted to look away from.

And he sharpens the picture with one more image the Qur'an itself gives elsewhere, of a person who worships Allah on the very edge of a cliff. Picture that, he says. You are inching along the rim of a cliff in the storm. The footing is not laid out for you; you go from one rock to the next, testing each one. The lightning flashes and shows you the next stone, so you hop to it, and then you are stuck, unable to see the way on, unable to stay where you are, because the rain is rising around your feet and the rocks are starting to give. That is the believer who is barely believing, moving only when cornered, stalling the instant he can, with the flood climbing past his ankles the whole time.

Why the Qur'an feels like a slap

But why would revelation feel like a storm at all? Why should the word of Allah ever land on a person as a thing to flinch from rather than a thing to run toward? Nouman Ali Khan gives an answer that turns the parable inward on every one of us. The Qur'an, he says,

is a mirror. And if you are doing ugly things, a mirror is not a pleasant thing to stand in front of. None of us enjoys being shown exactly where we are wrong; we bristle the moment a husband or a wife or a friend points out a fault, even gently, even truthfully. So a person who will not change but cannot get away from the Qur'an experiences every single ayah as a finger pointed straight at them. The honest believer hears a verse and lets it correct him, the way you straighten your collar in a mirror. This other heart hears the very same verse and feels only the sting of being seen.

He has watched it up close, and his examples are uncomfortably familiar. There is the relative at every single gathering who, the moment faith comes up, has to start in: this part makes no sense, that part is a contradiction, what about this, what about that. Not because they are searching for an answer, but because the agitation inside them has to come out somewhere, and the table is where it spills. There is the person who leaves the faith and yet cannot simply leave it in peace, who needs an audience and a microphone, who has to build the channel and write the articles and assemble the case, look at this, look at this, look at this, because some part of them needs another human being to say you are right, so that they can finally quiet the thing inside that still knows. He puts it bluntly: when a person of any other religion stops believing, they tend to just move on with their life. The one wrestling this hard, who cannot let it go, who keeps circling back to attack it, is showing you, without meaning to, that something deep in them recognises whose word this is. That churning is the storm. The

rain is pouring, the dark is total, and every drop stings, because down underneath everything they recognise exactly Whose speech this is, and they can neither make their peace with it nor get out from under it.

The mercy hidden in the harshness

Now lay the two parables side by side one last time, because the difference between how they end is the entire point, and it is where the storm quietly turns from terror toward hope. The fire was struck for those whose hearts Allah had sealed, and it ended in a verdict with no road back. Set the words next to each other.

Deaf, dumb and blind - so they will not return [to the right path].

QUR'AN 2:18

That is a closed door. Deaf, mute, blind, and they will not come back. But this storm, struck for the hypocrites, does not end that way at all. Allah does not say He has taken their hearing and their sight. He says, and if He had willed, He could have. Which means, Nouman Ali Khan presses us to notice, that He has not. Not yet. The door that slammed shut on the first group is still standing open for this one.

Catch the mercy folded into that, he urges, and trace it back a few verses, to where Allah first described these same people. Of the

hypocrites He did not say their hearts were sealed. He said something different.

In their hearts is disease, so Allah has increased their disease; and for them is a painful punishment because they [habitually] used to lie.

QUR'AN 2:10

A disease, he says, is not the same as a sealed heart. A sealed heart is final. A disease, however far it has progressed, can still in principle be treated. And the very fact that the storm still terrifies them, that the thunder still makes them flinch, that the lightning still jolts their feet forward even an inch, is itself the proof that they are not finished, because a heart that is truly dead feels nothing at all. He tells of a blunt cardiologist he knows, a doctor who refuses to coddle the patient who will not change his ways: you have about two months, he tells the man, no surgery is going to save you, so frankly, why drag it out, double your bad habits and be done with it. It sounds cruel. It is calculated to be. He says it precisely to frighten the person back from the edge while there is still an edge to come back from. This whole parable, Nouman Ali Khan says, is that kind of warning. You are close to the danger now, it says, dangerously close, but you are still standing, still flinching, still moving, and the one who still flinches at the thunder can still turn and face the One who sends it.

What this example asks of our hearts

So here the storm turns, finally, to face you. Two people are standing under the very same sky, hearing the very same Qur'an, soaked by the very same rain. For one of them, every verse is a flash of light to walk by, a mercy that pulls them one more step out of the dark and toward the destination. For the other, every verse is a thunderclap to cover their ears against, a flood climbing past the ankles, a finger pointed at the one thing they have decided they will not fix. The rain never changed between them. The only thing that differed was the heart standing underneath it.

Which one are you tonight? It is worth sitting with the question honestly, because the honesty is itself the beginning of the cure. When an ayah names something you are doing wrong, when a reminder lands on the exact place that is sore, do you let it move you forward, or do you reach for your fingers and your excuses, change the subject, find the contradiction, walk to a different room? The hypocrite in this storm is not some distant villain to shake your head at. He is anyone who has sat inside the sound of the Qur'an and felt it land as a reprimand instead of a rescue, who steps forward only when he is cornered and settles back into the dark the moment the pressure eases. The mirror in this parable, as in every one of these examples, is turned first at ourselves, never used to point across the room at another person; Allah alone knows who is truly a hypocrite, and the only heart any of us was given to examine is our own.

And take heart, real heart, from where Allah chooses to leave this scene, because He does not slam the door. He holds the storm open and says, in effect, you are not gone yet. The man with the fire heard the verdict, deaf, dumb, blind, they will not return. This one hears something else entirely, that had Allah willed He could have taken their hearing and their sight, and the whole weight of the parable rests on the words He has not. The very fact that the Qur'an can still unsettle you, still sting, still make you flinch, is not a sign that you are far gone. It is the mercy itself. It means the disease has not yet hardened into a seal, and the same rain that feels like a flood tonight is the only water in all the world that gives life. So stop bracing against it. Stop jamming your fingers in your ears. Stand still in the downpour, lift your face, and let it in. O Allah, do not let Your words become a storm we flee from; make the Qur'an a rain that gives our hearts life and not a flood that drowns them, move our feet toward Your light and never away from it, and complete that light for us on the day we will need it most.

O you who have believed, repent to Allah with sincere repentance. Perhaps your Lord will remove from you your misdeeds and admit you into gardens beneath which rivers flow [on] the Day when Allah will not disgrace the Prophet and those who believed with him. Their light will proceed before them and on their right; they will say, "Our Lord, perfect for us our light and forgive us. Indeed, You are over all things competent."

QUR'AN 66:8

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 3. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Hearts of stone

Harder than the rock that splits and gushes water

Picture a boulder lying out in a dry valley. It is the most unfeeling thing your eye can find. No pulse moves in it, no nerve, nothing to reach. You could shout at it for a lifetime and it would not so much as shiver. And then the rain comes, season upon season, year upon year, until one day, with no warning, that rock simply splits, and clean water comes pouring out of the heart of it. Water that had been hiding inside the whole time, soaking in drop by drop through pores too fine to see, until the stone could no longer hold it and gave way. Some rocks burst open into a rushing river. Some only crack, and let a little water seep out. Some never release a drop, and still, when the ground around them loosens, they come tumbling down the hillside as if even they had somewhere to fall.

Now set that picture beside a human heart. Warm. Beating. Alive in a way no stone will ever be. And imagine that heart watching miracle after miracle pass before it, the impossible made ordinary in front of its own eyes, and not moving an inch. Not splitting. Not cracking. Not falling. Feeling, in the end, less than a rock feels in the rain.

That is the example Allah strikes in this stretch of al-Baqarah, and it is one of the most unsettling images in the whole Qur'an. He says, of a particular people, that their hearts had grown harder

than stone. To feel the full weight of why that comparison stings, you first have to see everything those hearts had already been shown.

Everything they had already seen

For dozens of verses before this one, Allah has been speaking directly to the Children of Israel, calling them to remember. And the list of what they had witnessed is the kind of thing that should settle a question of faith forever. The sea had split down its length and stood up in two walls of water while they walked across the seabed on dry ground, and the tyrant who had enslaved them drowned behind them between those same walls. A cloud had followed them across the open desert like a roof carried over their heads, shading them from a sun that should have killed them, and cooling them. Food had come down ready from the sky, al-mann and as-salwa, their sugars and their protein provided out of nothing, in a wilderness where nothing grew.

And when they were dying of thirst, with no river and no well, Allah told Musa, peace be upon him, to take the same staff that had parted the sea and strike a bare rock with it.

And [recall] when Moses prayed for water for his people, so We said, "Strike with your staff the stone." And there gushed forth from it twelve springs, and every people [i.e., tribe] knew its watering place. "Eat and drink from the provision of Allāh, and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption."

QUR'AN 2:60

Twelve springs out of one stone, one for each of the twelve tribes, every family knowing exactly which water was theirs so that no one would quarrel. Hold onto that picture, because it matters more than it looks like it does. These were a people who had personally watched stone burst open and pour out rivers at the command of God. When the parable of the rocks comes, in a few verses' time, it will be landing on an audience who had seen, with their own eyes, the very thing the parable describes.

These were not, in the language Nouman Ali Khan keeps returning to, a people being asked to believe in the unseen. The Qur'an opens by praising those who believe in the unseen, but the Children of Israel were long past that. They had seen. There was no philosophical doubt left for them to hide behind, no clever argument about whether God exists or whether Musa was truly sent, because the evidence had been stacked in front of them one piece on top of another, overwhelming, undeniable, in their faces. And still, he notes, something was off. Something was missing. All of that proof was not landing where it needed to land.

Then came the strangest sign of all. A man was found murdered, and the tribes began turning on one another, each accusing the other, a single corpse on the verge of igniting a civil war. Allah commanded them, through Musa, to slaughter a cow, and they dragged their feet, mocking the command, demanding specification after specification until it had cost them dearly, asking whether their prophet was joking with them. Finally they slaughtered it, and were told to strike the dead body with a piece of the slain animal. And the corpse sat up, named its killer, fell back dead.

They watched a dead man return to life. With their own eyes. There is no proof of resurrection more total than that, and they had it.

So that you might reason

Now look at the exact words Allah uses to close that account, the verse that sits directly before our parable.

*So We said, "Strike him [i.e., the slain man] with part of it."
Thus does Allāh bring the dead to life, and He shows you
His signs that you might reason.*

QUR'AN 2:73

That you might reason. That is where the verse lands. The dead brought back to life, the signs piled high, all of it aimed, the verse says, at the mind. Understand. Think it through. Work it out.

Nothing was being withheld from their intellect. The case was closed, the evidence complete.

And then comes the very next word, and here Nouman Ali Khan asks you to slow down and feel the shock of it, because the sentence that follows does not say so they understood. It does not say so they believed. It says their hearts became hard. Right there, in the seam between one verse and the next, Allah opens a gap that the entire parable is going to live inside: the gap between the mind and the heart. He has just told us the signs reached the head. And the next thing He tells us is that they never reached the heart.

You can grasp something completely, with total clarity, and still not be moved by it in the slightest. That is the whole unnerving point. The proof did its work on their reasoning and stopped at the door of their hearts, and the door did not open.

The mind convinced, the heart untouched

We like to imagine we are rational creatures. We tell ourselves that once a thing is proven, we will simply act on it, the way a calculator returns an answer the moment you press the key. Fire burns, so you do not put your hand in it. Clean, simple, automatic. But we are not calculators, and Nouman Ali Khan presses hard on exactly this illusion, because our lives are full of evidence against it.

There are lung surgeons who smoke. They have opened up ruined, blackened lungs with their own hands. No one alive understands more precisely what the smoke does to the body than they do, and

at the end of a long day they step outside and light one to calm their nerves. The mind is shouting at them with everything it knows. And the heart says, quietly, just this once, it is fine. And the heart wins. The knowledge was never the problem. It was perfect knowledge, and it changed nothing.

He reaches for the way the Arabs used to speak of it. When a young man falls in love, no counsel reaches him. His worried family brings him to the imam, to a therapist, to a counsellor, to his own grandfather, and at every meeting he nods along, yes, I understand, I understand, and he understands nothing at all, because the advice keeps arriving at his mind and the problem was never in his mind. You cannot fix with the head a thing that is broken in the heart. The address is wrong. The letters never reach the house.

So Allah is exposing a reality about every one of us. Our relationship with the truth was never only a matter of learning it. The heart is a second organ of the soul, as decisive as the mind and more powerful, capable of overriding the mind completely, of shutting the brain down mid-sentence. This is why, Nouman Ali Khan reflects, even in a month set aside for understanding the Qur'an, you still stand and let it be recited over you whether or not you follow every word, and you still recite it yourself even where the meaning escapes you. He is the first to insist that the Qur'an came to be understood, that it is a tragedy to pass through a whole life without one's understanding of it ever deepening. And yet understanding alone was never meant to be the whole of it. Reciting and listening do something to the heart that study by itself cannot do. Our reli-

gion treats both, because we are made of both, and a faith that feeds only the mind has starved exactly the part this verse is warning us about.

Harder than stone

Now the image itself, in the words Allah chose for it.

Then your hearts became hardened after that, being like stones or even harder. For indeed, there are stones from which rivers burst forth, and there are some of them that split open and water comes out, and there are some of them that fall down for fear of Allāh. And Allāh is not unaware of what you do.

QUR'AN 2:74

Their hearts became like stones, Allah says, or even harder than stones. Nouman Ali Khan lingers on that word for harder, ashaddu, because in Arabic shidda is not only intensity. It carries the sense of tying something so tightly that no gap is left anywhere in it. The Qur'an uses the same family of meaning for binding the ropes of a captive fast, with no opening, no slack. He offers an image from his own boyhood: a child who never learned to tie his shoes properly, so he ties knot upon knot upon knot, until at last nothing can come undone, not because the knot is strong but because it is so clenched that there is no opening left anywhere for a finger to get in. That, he says, is the heart being described here. Not merely

hard. Sealed. Clenched so tight that nothing, no sign, no warning, no mercy, can find a single crack to slip through.

And then the comparison turns devastating, because Allah will not allow stone to stand for lifelessness. That is the move that makes this verse so much sharper than it first appears. He immediately insists that stone is more alive than these hearts. There are rocks, He says, from which entire rivers burst. There are rocks that crack open and let water come seeping out. There are rocks that come tumbling down out of the fear of Allah. Stone splits. Stone weeps. Stone trembles and falls. Every one of those is a kind of response, a kind of yielding, a kind of being moved.

These hearts did none of it. You watched a dead body draw breath again, Allah is telling them, and you felt less than a rock feels when the rain touches it. Even the rock answers the water. You did not answer the resurrection. The most unfeeling object you can imagine turns out to be tender compared to a heart that has gone numb beside the proof.

Three rocks, three hearts

Read the verse once more and you notice something deliberate. Allah does not name one rock. He names three. The rock that bursts into a river. The rock that cracks and trickles. The rock that falls in fear. And Nouman Ali Khan's reading, the one he builds the heart of this parable on, is that these are not three geological curiosities. They are three kinds of heart. The whole of humanity is somewhere on this map, and Allah has drawn it in stone.

The first rock bursts. The water comes blasting out of it in a rushing torrent, more than it could possibly hold, as though it had been waiting its whole existence for the touch that would set it free. That, he says, is the soul already so full of longing for the truth that the lightest tap sends it gushing. The rare seeker. He thinks of Salman al-Farisi, who crossed half the known world hunting for the truth, moving from teacher to teacher and land to land, so that the instant he finally met faith it poured out of him, because it had been brimming inside him the whole journey. He thinks of people who heard the Qur'an for the first time and wept, and said afterward, we were already Muslim before this, the faith was already in us, the recitation only opened the door. These are like the rare rock that explodes into a waterfall. Walk through any mountain range, he points out, and you will not find the rocks bursting into rivers all around you. It happens, but it is uncommon, the way the true seeker is uncommon. Most eighteen-year-olds are thinking about their friends and their games and the next thing they want, not lying awake asking who placed the sky there and why they exist and what the emptiness inside them is. The one who does ask is a rare rock, and when the water reaches him he does not need time to think it over. It simply gushes.

The second rock only cracks. From the outside it looked completely dry, a hard, closed, unpromising thing, and then something struck it, and it split, and to everyone's surprise there was water inside after all. Not a river. But not nothing. There were drops hidden deep in there the whole time. That, he says, is the heart that

looked utterly closed to faith, a fierce opponent of it, or a young person lost in distraction and entertainment and noise, until something cracked them open. The life of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ is full of exactly this rock: men who were ferocious against Islam before they were ever for it, who looked bone dry to everyone around them, until something struck them and the crack ran through and revealed the faith that had been buried inside the whole time. A death. An accident. A friend gone too soon. A prayer they wandered into almost by accident and felt, for the first time, something they had never felt before, so that they stayed for a little longer, and then a little longer, while their friends asked what on earth had happened to them. The faith had been buried under the distractions all along, and the shock cracked the surface and let it out. He adds one sober warning here that we would be foolish to forget: a rock, once it cracks, stays cracked, but a human being is not a rock. A heart that has begun to crack open can be sealed shut again. You can feel the water start to rise, feel the whole thing beginning to give way, and then say to yourself, that is enough, and close it back up. The mercy of the crack is real, and so is the danger of refusing it.

And the third rock is the strangest of the three, because Allah mentions no water inside it at all. It does not burst, it does not crack, and yet it falls, tumbling down the slope out of the fear of its Lord. That, Nouman Ali Khan says, is the new believer. The one who has surrendered, who prays and bows and is afraid to displease Allah, but in whose heart faith has not yet truly settled, has

not yet soaked all the way in. Elsewhere Allah speaks to exactly such people, the Bedouins who claimed they had faith and were told, gently, not yet, say rather that you have submitted, for faith has not yet entered your hearts. And His word to them is not a rebuke. It is reassurance: keep obeying Allah and His Messenger, and not one of your deeds will be diminished. Even if you do not feel anything yet, the prayer still counted, the good deed was not wasted, the water will come. Because falling, he points out, is the believer's own posture. We fall halfway in our bowing, and all the way in our prostration. A heart that drops to the ground out of fear of Allah, even before it has ever tasted the sweetness, is already in motion toward Him. And the rock that keeps falling, slamming against the ground again and again, will eventually crack. Fear is enough to start it moving.

Even the hardest rock cracks in the end

There is a mercy hidden in the geology of this verse, and Nouman Ali Khan tells us he went back and actually studied the rocks to find it. A boulder looks sealed and smooth to our skin, with no way in. But it is riddled with pores too fine for the eye, and over thousands and even millions of years, water works its way through those passages into the very heart of the stone and pools there. People have split open rocks millions of years old and found ancient water still trapped inside, sealed in the dark since before there were eyes to see it. Other rocks meet a different fate: rain-water is never purely water, it carries a faint acid, and that acid eats slowly at the stone, softening it and softening it across ages,

until one day the whole boulder gives way and the water it had been hiding comes gushing out as a waterfall.

The lesson writes itself, and it is the most hopeful thing in the whole parable. With enough exposure, over enough time, even the hardest surface on earth eventually breaks. So with enough exposure to the reminders of Allah, even the hardest heart can finally open. The verse is a warning, but it is not a verdict. No heart described here is sentenced; every one of them is being shown that water has a way of getting in.

The danger the verse names is the precise opposite of that opening, and it is worth feeling clearly. Picture rain falling on good soil. It dips in, sinks down, finds the seed waiting in the dark, and green things begin to push up toward the light. The water did its work because the ground let it in. Now picture that same rain striking something harder than rock. It does not matter how much falls, how long it falls, how heavy the downpour. None of it gets in. It beads on the surface and runs off and the inside stays bone dry. That, Nouman Ali Khan warns, is the real terror of the hard heart. You can sit in the masjid, inside the recitation, understanding every single word, and feel nothing move, because nothing is being let in. The water is everywhere around you and not one drop reaches the seed.

The fear that frees you

Dwell on that third rock a little longer, the one that falls purely from the fear of Allah, because Nouman Ali Khan turns it into something

far heavier than it first appears. Ask honestly what it actually takes for a person to fall out of fear of Allah alone, and you start to see how rare and hard-won that posture is.

Imagine a man who realises that part of his family's business is unlawful and decides, this Ramadan, to shut it down. Now watch the fears line up to stop him, one after another. His wife will be upset. His brothers and uncles will be upset. The children were promised a holiday, a new car, the bigger house, the wedding hall already booked for his daughter, the new clothes for Eid. Every one of those is a fear. Word will get out, people will talk, the family will look diminished in the eyes of everyone they know. Each of those is a fear too, and together they form a wall. To fall before Allah out of His fear means that not one of those other fears was strong enough to override this one. They were all still there. They simply lost.

That, he says, is a conquest in the heart, and it is not an easy battle. It is simple enough to declare, I worship Allah alone, I bow to no idol, I face the Kaaba and there is no statue in front of me. The far harder confession is the one underneath it: do I fear Allah alone? Be honest and the list of other things you fear grows fast and uncomfortable. Not so much that people will harm you, but the look they will give you. Their disappointment. Their comments. Being alone. Being rejected. Being laughed at. When a fear like that, or a love, or a craving, swells in the heart until it is larger than the fear of Allah, you will disobey Allah rather than face it, and you will tell yourself a hundred reasonable stories about why. So a

heart hardening, in the end, looks far less dramatic than open rebellion. It looks like this: feeling nothing when you cross a line, hearing clearly what Allah has said and simply not acting on it, and, worst of all, not even registering that anything serious has happened.

Not Allah who is unaware, you

The verse ends on a line that sounds, at first, like a routine closing warning, and is not. Allah is not unaware of what you do. Nouman Ali Khan points to the particular shape of the Arabic negation here and shows how it quietly turns the mirror. The phrasing carries an implication that goes past the obvious reassurance that Allah sees everything. It hints, underneath, that it is not Allah who has become unaware. It is you. Your hearts have grown so hard that you no longer feel the weight of your own actions. You think you are sharp, you think you understand everything, you have all the arguments ready, and meanwhile you have lost the one thing that mattered: the ability to feel the gravity of what you are doing. That is what a hard heart truly costs a person. Not knowledge. The capacity to be moved by the knowledge they already have.

And notice, he adds, the exact word the verse chooses for what they do, *ta'maluun*. Arabic has a separate word for thoughtless, automatic action, the kind of thing you do without choosing it, the way you breathe without ever deciding to take the next breath. This is not that word. This is *'amal*, conscious, intended, motivated action, the kind that comes straight from the heart and means

something. Allah chose it on purpose, Nouman Ali Khan observes, because the entire subject of this passage is the heart, and your true intentions live nowhere else but there. He is not warning you about your reflexes. He is warning you about what you mean. There are people who pray to be seen, who pray because the room is praying, who pray only because someone would make a scene if they did not, and Allah knows precisely where each intention sits, because it sits in the heart, which is the very thing this whole parable has been about from the first word.

What this example asks of our hearts

Here the picture turns on us, and it was always going to. There is a detail near the end that should make any of us pause, and Nouman Ali Khan does not let it slip by. This verse, your hearts became hard, was revealed in Madinah, and Allah addresses it as your hearts to a community whose ancestors, generations and generations earlier, were the ones who actually stood beside Musa and saw the sea split and watched the dead man rise. The people being spoken to could so easily have objected. That was not us. We never saw a sea. We never struck a cow against a corpse. Why are You speaking to me as if I had been standing there?

And the answer cuts to something deep in how we all carry our past. Nations love their history, but only the parts that flatter them. We crossed the sea. We won that war. We built that, we founded that, we triumphed there. The proud chapters go into the book and are taught to every child. The ugly chapters quietly never make it

in: the corruption, the cruelty, the times we were the oppressor and not the underdog. We curate our story down to its highlights and bury the rest. So when these people reached back and proudly said we, standing shoulder to shoulder with their glorious ancestors, Allah's response was piercing. You want to say we and claim the splitting of the sea as your own? Then own the rest of it too. The ingratitude is yours. The hard hearts are yours. The same disease that ran in them runs in you. You do not get to inherit only the glory.

He turns the verse on us before we can turn it on anyone else, and the Qur'an itself does the very same thing in another place, in words aimed squarely at the believers.

Has the time not come for those who have believed that their hearts should become humbly submissive at the remembrance of Allāh and what has come down of the truth? And let them not be like those who were given the Scripture before, and a long period passed over them, so their hearts hardened; and many of them are defiantly disobedient.

QUR'AN 57:16

That is you. That is me. Has the time not yet come, it asks, for the hearts of those who believe to grow soft at the remembrance of Allah, and not to drift into what happened to the people before us, over whom a long time passed until their hearts turned to stone? We too tell our story in highlights. We too bury the dark parts, and

Nouman Ali Khan names exactly why we do it: the comfortable memories sit nicely on the heart, and we do not want the water that would change us. The honest chapter is the one that would crack us open, so we keep it out of the book. A heart can curate its own history precisely in order to stay exactly as hard as it already is.

So sit with the honest question tonight, the one the whole parable has been walking you toward. Of the three rocks, which are you? The one that bursts at the first touch, already brimming with longing for Him? The one that has gone hard on the surface but still has water hidden deep inside, waiting for the shock that will crack it? Or the one with no water in it yet, falling all the same, out of fear of a Lord it has not yet learned to love? There is no shame in any of the three. Even the falling rock is moving toward Him. The only heart this verse truly grieves over is the fourth one it does not list among the rocks at all, the one harder than stone, that the water simply runs off.

And whatever your honest answer is tonight, take one small thing from this into your ordinary life, the way the gold of these examples is meant to be spent and not merely admired. Let one reminder in this week that you would normally let run off. Sit through one recitation and actually try to feel it, not only follow it. Face one fear, just one, that has been quietly louder in your heart than the fear of Allah, and choose Him over it. That is how a hard surface begins to break: not all at once, but drop by drop, exposure upon exposure, until the stone can no longer hold what has been soak-

ing into it. The rain is still falling. It has never stopped. No heart is too hard for it forever. O Allah, You who turn the hearts, do not let ours grow hard beside Your signs, do not let us be of those over whom a long time passed until their hearts turned to stone. Soften us at the remembrance of You, make our hearts of the rock that splits and gushes and the rock that falls in fear of You, and keep them firm upon Your religion until we meet You.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 4. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Empty cries

The sheep that come running to a sound that means nothing

Picture a man standing at the edge of a hillside, his flock scattered across the slope below him. He cups his hands, opens his mouth, and makes a sound. Not a sentence. Not even a word. Just a call, the same odd cry he makes every morning, a noise with nothing inside it. And down on the slope the heads lift, one after another, and the animals turn and come. They do not understand a syllable of it, because there is no syllable to understand. He has not told them he loves them, or that the grass is good, or that the wolf is near. He has simply made a sound, and they have come running, because that sound is the one they were trained to follow.

That is the example Allah strikes, in the longest surah of the Qur'an, for those who turn away from the truth. It is one of the most unsettling images in the whole book, and what makes it unsettling is not the sheep. It is that, before Nouman Ali Khan turns this mirror toward anyone else, he turns it slowly, deliberately, toward us. This is the fifth of the striking examples we are walking through, and by the end of it you will not be able to hear an empty call again without wondering whether you, too, are in the habit of coming when it sounds.

The leaders who kept the book to themselves

To stand inside this picture you have to walk back a few verses, because the Qur'an stitches its scenes together and this one opens only with its hinges in place. The passage that leads up to the parable describes a very particular kind of leader: the learned ones who held the scripture and hid the parts of it that would have set their people free. They could see plainly that some of what the Qur'an was teaching already lay in their own books. And they knew exactly what would happen if they admitted it out loud.

Nouman Ali Khan draws the calculation out without mercy, because it is so human. To accept the Prophet ﷺ as the messenger of Allah was, for one of these scholars, to stop being the scholar. Overnight you become just another follower among followers, and the title is gone, the standing is gone, the crowd that used to climb to your door with its questions is gone, and so is the income that crowd brought. So you keep the dangerous parts of the book to yourself, and you feed the public only the portions that keep them coming back to you. It was never only a matter of religion, he notes. It was a business and a social position, and both depended on the people staying dependent.

He widens it past one community into something the whole of history recognises. For most of the human story, he says, religion was used to manage populations, very often married to whatever king or government held power, kept deliberately shallow so the people would feel and obey and never think. Keep the masses emotional, and they will not reach for their minds. And so the vers-

es describe a managed crowd answering exactly the way a managed crowd answers, when it is finally invited to weigh the truth for itself:

And when it is said to them, "Follow what Allāh has revealed," they say, "Rather, we will follow that which we found our fathers doing." Even though their fathers understood nothing, nor were they guided?

QUR'AN 2:170

Hear the smallness of the answer. Do not ask us to follow what was revealed; we will follow what we found our fathers doing. And then Allah lays the trap bare with a single question that the crowd has never once thought to ask itself. What if those fathers understood nothing at all, and were never guided in the first place? You inherited the whole path without ever checking where it led. You walked it because the people in front of you were walking it, and that, the verse says, is no reason at all.

You were built to think

Then, right in the middle of all this, before the parable lands, Allah does something that looks at first like a change of subject and is not. He turns the reader's face up to the open sky.

Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of the night and the day, and the [great] ships which sail through the sea with that which benefits people, and what Allāh has sent down from the heavens of rain, giving life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness and dispersing therein every [kind of] moving creature, and [His] directing of the winds and the clouds controlled between the heaven and earth are signs for a people who use reason.

QUR'AN 2:164

The heavens and the earth, the night folding into the day, the ships riding the sea with what people need, the rain that wakes dead ground back to life, the winds turned this way and that, the clouds held in the open space between the sky and the earth: signs, the verse says, for a people who use their reason. Nouman Ali Khan stops here, because the placement of this verse is the whole point. Allah set it here on purpose, in the very passage about leaders who hide the book and crowds who follow without thinking, as if to remind everyone present what a human being was actually made to do.

Long before any revelation ever reached you, he reminds us, the cloud was already there, and the mountain, and the sea, and a mind in you that could look at all of it and ask who put it there, and why you of all creatures get to stand under it and benefit. Allah did not make you the way He made the animal, that eats and sleeps

and moves on and asks nothing. He gave you something the cow and the sheep do not have: a mind that lifts its head past the food to the One who sent it down. The human being was built to be a thinker first, and only then handed revelation, which is precisely why a thoughtful heart recognises the truth the instant it arrives. It lands like a confirmation of something already stirring inside. So to stop thinking, he warns, is not merely to miss a lesson here or there. It is to bury the one faculty that makes you more than an animal, the very thing Allah set you apart with.

The version of religion that only makes you feel

If the corrupt leaders were hiding the parts of the book that make a person think, then what, Nouman Ali Khan asks, were they showing? They had to put something in front of the crowd, and so they built an entire version of religion whose only purpose was to keep people emotional and never let them reflect. Make them weep, or make them afraid, or make them roar with excitement, but above all keep their minds switched off, because a mind that is busy feeling is a mind that is not busy thinking.

He is careful, and so we must be careful, to say that the emotions themselves are not the disease. Our own faith has tears in it and fear in it and longing in it, and that is good; the heart is meant to move. But that, he says, is one part of this religion, never the whole of it. Alongside the feeling there is law, and wisdom, and strategy, history to learn from and a society to weigh, a whole architecture of deep and patient thought. The trick of the corrupt

shepherd is to amputate all of that and leave only the dopamine, a faith that is nothing but fiery speeches and goosebumps and the high of a crowd that got loud together for an evening. Sometimes that stirring is a fine thing. But a religion that is only that is a religion engineered so that no one inside it ever has to use their head.

And here he refuses the comfortable distance. The Muslims, he says plainly, are not immune from this. The book of Allah is pure and the way of His Prophet ﷺ is pure, but our handling of them can be very impure indeed, and Islam too has been bent, in our own history and in our own day, into a tool for managing crowds and endorsing the powerful. He says it because the parable is about to come, and he does not want anyone in the room hearing it as a story about other people.

The same herd, in new clothes

Just before the picture of the flock, Allah names the attachment underneath all of this, and it turns out to be an attachment made entirely of feeling and not at all of thought.

And [yet], among the people are those who take other than Allāh as equals [to Him]. They love them as they [should] love Allāh. But those who believe are stronger in love for Allāh. And if only they who have wronged would consider [that] when they see the punishment, [they will be certain] that all power belongs to Allāh and that Allāh is severe in punishment.

QUR'AN 2:165

Love is the word, Nouman Ali Khan points out, and that is deliberate, because this was never an intellectual bond. It is the pull of the herd, an emotional devotion to whoever is being followed. And he will not let the picture stay safely in the past, where the crowd once gathered around a corrupt priest or a shaman at the top of a mountain. That crowd, he says, has not disappeared. It has only changed temples.

The temple now is the feed on the screen. We follow the celebrity, the influencer, the athlete, the brand, exactly the way crowds once followed a shepherd: what they wore, where they ate, where they travelled, what we must buy if we want to belong. He speaks here from his own study of marketing, and what he describes is chilling in its simplicity. Advertising works by reaching for one of the primal urges in a human being, safety, status, the hunger to be seen as higher than the next person, and then poking it, and then the herd moves as one. A belt whose only job in the world is to hold up your clothes becomes a badge of rank, and you will pay a hundred

times its worth so that the right people see it on you. A car you do not need becomes a way to be looked at on the road. A university becomes less an education than a sentence you get to say afterward, so your family can place you in a higher herd. And nobody in the whole stampede is asking why. That, he says, is the empty call of our own age, and we come running to it every single day.

Then comes the verse that should make every follower sit up, because it refuses to let the crowd off the hook. You might expect Allah to blame only the leaders and hand the followers a blank cheque. He does not. On the Day of Judgment, Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, the very ones who were followed will turn and disown every follower they ever had, the influencer who once told a stadium that he loved every face in it now declaring before Allah that he has no idea who these people are. And the followers, who once wept at his concerts, will cry out for one more chance to go back and cut themselves loose from him, just as he has cut himself loose from them. The connections that felt so real are revealed to be nothing at all. Allah comes for the leaders, yes, and He comes for the followers too, because each of them was handed a mind and chose not to use it. If they were clever enough to make you feel dumb, you were clever enough not to be.

The crowd is not your proof

To name the sickness exactly, Nouman Ali Khan tells of an experiment from his university days, and it is worth sitting with, because it shows the herd at work in a room full of intelligent people. A hall

of capable students, each handed a simple sum, the kind you can do on paper in twenty seconds. The room is asked for the answer one by one, and voice after voice gives the same wrong number, because every voice but one has been quietly told beforehand to give it. There is a single honest student in the room who knows nothing of the arrangement. He works the sum, gets the right answer, distrusts it because everyone around him disagrees, works it again, gets the same right answer, works it a third time. And then, when his turn finally comes and he is asked aloud, he gives the wrong one. The crowd's answer.

Privately, afterward, the reason always splits into two. Some of them say: how could I possibly be the one who is right when this many people are saying otherwise; surely they cannot all be mistaken. And others say something even more revealing: I knew I was right, I never doubted it for a second, but I did not want the whole room turning to look at me as the strange one, so I went along.

Two faces of the same herd, Nouman Ali Khan says, and the parable holds them both. In the first, the mind shuts off entirely, because it trusts the size of the crowd over the truth in front of it. In the second, the mind stays fully on, sees the truth perfectly clearly, and follows the crowd anyway, because standing out costs more than the person is willing to pay. He likens the second to a stampede of horses: one runs, and the next runs, and soon the whole herd is thundering forward, and not one of them is looking, so that if the lead horse runs straight off the edge of a cliff the rest

pour over it behind him, certain he must know the way. Now turn that toward your own life for a moment. How many of your choices, the wedding you could not really afford but had to match your cousin's, the loan you should never have taken, the belief you have never once stopped to examine, came down in the end to nothing more than this: everyone around me was doing it, and I did not want to be the one who looked strange. The sheep, Nouman Ali Khan notes, does not even need the stick to keep it in line. The fear of the stick is enough.

Why the flock comes running

So the picture finally arrives, and it is strange at first, which is why he has built so carefully toward it.

The example of those who disbelieve is like that of one who shouts at what hears nothing but calls and cries [i.e., cattle or sheep] - deaf, dumb and blind, so they do not understand.

QUR'AN 2:171

Notice first, Nouman Ali Khan points out, that the animals are never actually named in the verse. Allah does not say sheep, or cattle. He gives you only the sound, the bare call going out, and a creature that catches the noise of it and nothing more. The lexicons tie the verb to a shepherd herding his flock, which is how we know the scene, but the verse itself keeps the animals offstage and

leaves you holding the emptiness of the exchange: a sound with nothing inside it, and a response with nothing behind it.

To understand why the flock answers, Nouman Ali Khan actually went and watched shepherds at their work, and what he draws out of it is quietly devastating. He watched the herders call, and noticed that each had his own particular cry, no shared word between them, and that in one clip a pair of tourists tried to summon the flock with sounds of their own and the sheep ignored them completely, until the shepherd made his own meaningless noise and every animal came at once. They were tuned, he says, to a single frequency, and they knew that this was the one they were meant to obey. And the heart of it is this: the shepherd himself knows full well that he is making a meaningless sound. He is not saying, my beautiful flock, I love you, come to safety. There is nothing behind the cry. And the sheep are not moved by its meaning, because there is none to be moved by. They simply hear it, and they come.

They come, he explains, because they have been conditioned to, and he lays out exactly how. Sheep are herd animals, far too weak to stand alone, so they cling to a leader, and the shepherd has slipped quietly into that place through three doors. He feeds them, so he becomes their provider. He drives off the fox and the wolf, so he becomes their protector. He leads them down to the grass and back home again, so he becomes their guide. And then a fourth door, darker than the rest: the straggler that lags behind gets the stick, so the flock learns to fear falling out of step.

Provider, protector, guide, and fear. Four ropes, Nouman Ali Khan says, and not a single one of them runs through the animal's mind. The sheep never has to understand anything at all. It only has to follow, and the four ropes do the rest. And the example of the one who rejects faith, Allah says, is exactly this: a creature that hears the call, comes when it is called, and never once asks whether anything was said, or whether anything was there to be said at all.

What this example asks of our hearts

Set the two endings side by side, the way Nouman Ali Khan does at the close, and the whole arc of the surah opens up. The very first parable in al-Baqarah ended with the same three words this one ends with, but the final phrase was changed:

Deaf, dumb and blind - so they will not return [to the right path].

QUR'AN 2:18

That first picture closed deaf, dumb, blind, so they will not return. This one closes deaf, dumb, blind, so they do not reason. To return, Nouman Ali Khan reflects, is to find your way back to what Allah placed in you, the knowledge of Him that is buried in the depths of every soul. But you cannot return if you will not think, and so this second example quietly reveals the cause of the first. The reason a heart never comes home is that it stopped using the

one faculty that could have carried it there. The lights went out in the desert because no one would think their way toward the flame.

And then he turns the mirror fully on us, and it is the hardest turn in the whole telling. He is not, he says, merely describing the religions of other people, comfortable as that would be. What frightens him is how close we have drifted to the very thing the verse condemns. There are Muslim homes today, he warns, where a child who asks a real, searching question about the Qur'an is told to stop, that thinking is for the experts, that your job is only to recite it and to fix your tajweed and to follow. A young person hears every clever argument against faith pouring out of their screen, brings one home in genuine confusion, and is met with: do not ask, just pray, just follow, let me take you to someone who will deal with it. That, he says, is the one betrayal this religion cannot survive. Because of every faith that ever came into the world, this is the one that begged human beings to think, that says again and again, will you not reason, will you not reflect, here are signs for a people who use their minds. To raise a generation that follows without thinking is to hand them the very disease Allah held up here as a warning, and to do it in the name of the book that came to cure it. We were never meant to be the flock that comes running to a sound. We were meant to be the people who hear, and weigh, and understand, and then choose.

So this example asks something of our hearts, and it is not a small thing. It asks whether your faith has a mind in it, or only a habit. Inherited belief is not examined belief; a path walked only because

your fathers walked it is, as the verse says, a path walked by people who may have understood nothing. So know why you believe, not merely that you do. It asks you to honour the faculty Allah set you apart with, to refuse to switch off the very thing that makes you human, and to remember that the sky and the sea were calling your mind awake long before any messenger reached your door. It asks you to test the calls you answer: to stop, before you come running out of pure habit, and ask whether there is anything actually behind the sound, or whether you have simply been trained to come. And it asks you, hardest of all, to be willing to stand alone, because the crowd has never once been your proof. That a thousand people are moving in one direction has never made that direction true, and on the Day when the leaders disown their followers, "everyone else was doing it" will not be a defence you can offer. You will answer for what you chose to follow.

There is, in the Qur'an, the cry of the heart that learned this, the voice of the one who heard the true caller and came with open eyes. Carry it as your own prayer against the empty call: *Our Lord, indeed we have heard a caller calling to faith, [saying], 'Believe in your Lord,' and we have believed.* So tonight, before you answer the next sound out of habit, stop, and ask whether anything is truly there. O Allah, do not let us be the flock that runs to an empty cry. Make us of those who hear the true caller and come with open eyes, who think before we follow and weigh before we love, and

who, when the whole herd moves one way, are willing to turn and walk toward You instead.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 5. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Charity's harvest

One seed in the ground, and seven hundred grains it could not have imagined

Picture a farmer at the very start of a season, alone in his field at first light, bent over the soil. He is pressing one seed into the ground, and then another, and then another, and there is no triumph in any of it, only labour. His back aches. His hands are in the dirt. And here is the part we forget, because we eat bread without ever having grown it: he has no idea whether any of this will come to anything. He does not know if the rain will come, or whether it will come too hard and drown the field. He does not know if the soil hides insects waiting to eat the seed before it ever wakes. He does not know if a frost is coming, or a heatwave, or a swarm of locusts that will arrive in an afternoon and leave nothing behind. He is breaking his body over each seed on nothing but hope, and he will not be paid, if he is paid at all, until the very end of the season. No employee on earth waits that long, on terms that uncertain, for a wage that is not promised. It is the most patient gamble a human being can make.

Now keep your eye on one of those buried seeds, the one he pressed in and walked away from and forgot. It splits open in the dark. A green thread climbs toward a light it has never seen. And where you expected one stalk, there are seven. And when you

peel back the husk of each one, there are a hundred grains packed inside it. This is day six of twenty-seven, and the picture Allah strikes here, the example that Nouman Ali Khan opens for us across this lecture, is exactly this: what your charity becomes after it leaves your hand, in ground you will never see it grow in.

A handful of grain, and seven hundred more

Most of us, if we are honest, already half know this verse. It surfaces in every masjid, at every appeal, whether we want it to or not, and familiarity has a way of flattening a thing until we stop seeing it. So set down what you think you know and look at the picture in plain numbers.

The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allāh is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allāh multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills. And Allāh is all-Encompassing and Knowing.

QUR'AN 2:261

One grain, given for the sake of Allah, goes into the soil. From that single grain rises not one stalk but seven, and each stalk, when you open it, is heavy with a hundred grains. Do the arithmetic and one seed has quietly become seven hundred. And then, before the sum has even had time to settle in your mind, Allah adds something that breaks the calculation open: and He multiplies for whom He wills. The seven hundred was not the ceiling. It was the floor.

The language can slide past us, because, as Nouman Ali Khan notes, most of us are not farmers, and a word like ear or spike of grain means nothing to a person who buys flour in a bag. So picture it as simply as he asks us to. The plant pushes up out of the ground wrapped in green, and you have to peel that green covering back to find the seeds bedded inside. That bundle is one ear. The verse says one seed produced seven of them, and a hundred seeds sit inside each one. Hold that image steadily, because every turn of this example lives inside it, and the whole thing falls apart if you let the picture go vague.

An example never stands on its own

Here is the first thing Nouman Ali Khan refuses to let us do, and it is the discipline that runs through this entire series. He will not let us pluck this verse out and admire it on its own like a gem set apart on a shelf. An example in the Qur'an, he reminds us, is never standalone. It is Allah reinforcing a lesson that the surah is already teaching, so that the lesson lodges in your memory and will not leave. The example is the nail driven into a wall already being built. Which means that before we admire the grain, we have to hear what Allah was already saying in the verses right before it, because the grain is the continuation of that, not a fresh beginning.

And what is Allah saying right before? Life and death. Over and over, in image after image, with a relentlessness that is easy to miss if you read quickly. Just verses earlier, Allah names Himself al-Hayy, the Ever-Living, the source from which all life comes.

Then a believer is drawn as someone who has grasped a handhold that will never break, and Nouman Ali Khan paints the scene underneath the word: a man who has fallen from a ship into the open sea, the waves slamming him in every direction, drowning, and his one hope is the great chain of the anchor, which he seizes and holds for his life. The strongest handhold, with no break in it, gripped by someone who will die without it.

Then comes a parade of the dead being brought back. Ibrahim, peace be upon him, standing before a tyrant who had been handed kingship, and telling him plainly that his Lord is the One who gives life and causes death. The man, drunk on his own power, claims he too gives life and death, and Ibrahim does not argue the point but moves the ground from under him entirely.

Have you not considered the one who argued with Abraham about his Lord [merely] because Allāh had given him kingship? When Abraham said, "My Lord is the one who gives life and causes death," he said, "I give life and cause death." Abraham said, "Indeed, Allāh brings up the sun from the east, so bring it up from the west." So the disbeliever was overwhelmed [by astonishment], and Allāh does not guide the wrongdoing people.

QUR'AN 2:258

And even the rising and setting of the sun, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is a matter of life and death, because all of life quiets at night and stirs again at dawn: the birds, the animals, the crops that climb

toward the light. Life is a function of the sun, and the One who commands the sun commands life itself. Verse after verse, the same certainty is being pressed into the heart until it is soaked through with one conviction: Allah brings the dead back. Keep that conviction close. The grain is about to need it.

He is the one who never leaves your side

Sit for a moment with one word from this same run, the word the Qur'an uses for Allah being on the believer's side, because Nouman Ali Khan opens it through the old life of the Arabs and it is worth following him in slowly.

Allāh is the Ally of those who believe. He brings them out from darknesses into the light. And those who disbelieve - their allies are ṭāghūt. They take them out of the light into darknesses. Those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide eternally therein.

QUR'AN 2:257

The word translated here as ally, wali, has a root that reaches back into a very physical thing. When the Arabs rode their animals, the leather and metal of the saddle would chafe the animal's skin raw over time, so they laid a soft pad between the two, a thin cushion against the animal's back, beneath the saddle and the rider both. That middle layer was the wali. And the reason it carried that name, Nouman Ali Khan explains, is that if you left it on the animal long enough, day after day of riding, it fused to the skin, the way a

bandage left on too long becomes part of the wound it covered, so that when you finally went to lift one, the other lifted with it. A wali, at its root, is two things bonded so completely that they move as one.

It went further than animals. In the tribal world before Islam, a small tribe facing a larger one, knowing it was about to be crushed, would go to another tribe and ask: be our wali. We will trade with you, marry into you, lend to you, send our men when your well runs dry, and if war comes, your enemy is our enemy and we will fight as one body. To strike one of them was to strike both. So when Allah says He is the wali of those who believe, He is telling them something specific and enormous: when the crisis comes, and for the believer it will come, He is the One who never leaves their side, who keeps reaching down into the dark to pull them back toward the light, the way you would haul a drowning man up out of deep, black water. Notice that darkness, too, is the place of death, under the ground, beneath the waves, and the pulling out into light is the saving of a life. This is the One who is about to ask you to give. Hold that as well, alongside everything else.

Not only are you raised, your deeds are raised

Then comes the scene the whole run has been building toward, and it is the hinge on which this example turns.

Or [consider such an example] as the one who passed by a township which had fallen into ruin. He said, "How will Allāh bring this to life after its death?" So Allāh caused him to die for a hundred years; then He revived him. He said, "How long have you remained?" He [the man] said, "I have remained a day or part of a day." He said, "Rather, you have remained one hundred years. Look at your food and your drink; it has not changed with time. And look at your donkey; and We will make you a sign for the people. And look at the bones [of this donkey] - how We raise them and then We cover them with flesh." And when it became clear to him, he said, "I know that Allāh is over all things competent."

QUR'AN 2:259

A man rides past a town that war has emptied and time has finished off, the roofs caved in and the walls fallen on top of them, and he cannot imagine the place ever living again. Nouman Ali Khan reads it straight into our own despair, and the application is uncomfortably exact. We look at the state of the ummah, at how broken and divided and powerless it seems, and the same question rises in us: how could this ever come back to life? And Allah answered that question centuries ago, in this very verse, by letting the man die for a hundred years and then waking him. His food and drink sit beside him untouched, as though no time has passed at all, which somehow makes the hundred years harder to believe, not easier. His donkey is bare bones. And then Allah shows him the bones lifting, jumping up, knitting back together and dressing

themselves in flesh, death running in reverse before his open eyes. He came away with one sentence on his lips: now I know Allah has power over all things. The man went back, and he revived his people, and they rose again.

Then a few verses on, Ibrahim, peace be upon him, who had already walked through fire unburned and seen his family kept alive in an empty desert, asks his Lord to show him how He gives life to the dead, not from any doubt, but to settle his heart with the sight of it.

And [mention] when Abraham said, "My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead." [Allāh] said, "Have you not believed?" He said, "Yes, but [I ask] only that my heart may be satisfied." [Allāh] said, "Take four birds and commit them to yourself. Then [after slaughtering them] put on each hill a portion of them; then call them - they will come [flying] to you in haste. And know that Allāh is Exalted in Might and Wise."

QUR'AN 2:260

Four birds, called back to their master from the tops of the hills. Even a heart as certain as Ibrahim's, Nouman Ali Khan observes, was given a reminder, because all of us need our certainty reinforced, and Allah was never only speaking to Ibrahim. He was preparing you and me.

Now here is the turn that ties the whole run-up to the grain, and it is the heart of this example. Every scene so far was about you dying and being brought back to life, or an ummah dying and being brought back to life. Then, gently, Allah shifts the subject. Not only will you be raised, He says, your deeds will be raised too. You give something in charity and you walk away, and to you that act is finished, closed, yesterday's business, a door shut behind you. But it was a seed. While you forgot it entirely and got on with your life, it was splitting open underground and climbing toward a light you will never trace, in ways you cannot imagine. Just as Allah will raise you from the dust, He will raise the deed you thought was dead and behind you. That is the bridge the parable is built on, and you cannot feel its weight unless you have first stood in the graveyard of all those earlier verses.

In the way of Allah, not just any good

Read the verse again and notice the exact wording, because Nouman Ali Khan is careful here and the care matters: those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah, fi sabilillah. This is not, he points out, a phrase for charity in general. Every good thing you spend is good and is rewarded, on your family, on a neighbour, on the poor, on any worthy cause, and the Qur'an honours all of it elsewhere and calls it good. But this particular phrase, in the way of Allah, has a direction built into it. It points at the mission the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was sent to carry: that the word of Allah

reach every corner of the earth, that people everywhere come to know their Lord.

Set the verse back into its own moment and it comes alive. Surah al-Baqarah came down to people who had barely escaped Makkah with their lives, who had reached Madinah and finally caught their breath, and almost at once the Qur'an begins telling them their work is not finished. In the middle of it Allah reminds them that Ibrahim, peace be upon him, and his son raised the foundations of the House, the Ka'ba, as a place for all of humanity to come and know their Lord, and that this House is still held hostage by idols, ringed with statues, turned into a temple of false worship. The direction of prayer is turned toward it five times a day, so that every prayer becomes a reminder that the job is not done. The mission is to return and restore it. And a mission like that needs an army, and an army needs spending: horses bought and trained and shod, saddles, stables, water, feed, an entire enterprise folded into a single command to give. Nouman Ali Khan calls it, with a half-smile, a whole military industrial complex inside one verse.

So when some among them wavered, give for what, an army, against the Quraysh, the wealthiest and best-connected and most battle-hardened people of the region, we will only burn our money and get ourselves killed, the verses before the grain had already disarmed both fears in advance. Killed? Allah is the Ever-Living who raises the dead, so death has stopped being an argument. Nouman Ali Khan draws the order out beautifully: a person's most valuable thing is his life, and his second most valuable is his

wealth, which is exactly why someone has to threaten your life to take your money. Allah dealt with the first fear first, death, and only then turned to the second. And the money? This grain is the answer to that one. Give it, He says, and watch what I grow. And He gathers all of them, the one at the front of the battle and the one making the horseshoes and the one cooking the food, into a single image:

Indeed, Allāh loves those who fight in His cause in a row as though they are a [single] structure joined firmly.

QUR'AN 61:4

Every brick in a wall knows its place, Nouman Ali Khan says, some high, some low, some on this side and some on that, and all of them are holding up one structure, serving one mission. That is what spending in the way of Allah joins you to.

The harvest is guaranteed the moment you plant

Now come back to the farmer, because this is where the example turns from comfort into something closer to wonder. In every farming culture on earth, Nouman Ali Khan observes, nobody celebrates at planting. Of course they do not. You celebrate at harvest, when the crop has survived the flood and the frost and the heat and the locust and finally stands gold in the field, ready to be cut. Only then do the drums come out, only then the colours, because only then are you certain you will be paid. Until harvest there is no

guarantee, and so there is no joy, only the long anxious watching of the sky.

What Allah does for the believer, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is move the celebration all the way back to the moment the seed enters the ground. For your charity given for His sake, the crop is guaranteed before a single green shoot appears. There is no nervous season of waiting to see whether it takes. Allah has already promised the harvest. You give, and you may walk away rejoicing, because the One who controls the rain and the soil and the season has underwritten the whole thing.

And look at the strangeness Allah deliberately built into the picture. One seed never yields seven ears. That is not how the natural world works, and we are meant to notice that it is not. Seven, moreover, is the number the Qur'an ties again and again to the heavens, and Nouman Ali Khan reads it as a quiet signal that something other than ordinary growth is at work here, something heavenly breaking into the plain mechanics of a field. Then comes the line that breaks the calculator entirely. Seven hundred you can still picture. But and Allah multiplies for whom He wills, and He seals the verse with His name al-Wasi, the All-Encompassing, the Vast. In business, Nouman Ali Khan notes, you make projections: you study the comparable prices, the market, the inflation, and you estimate your return. But this is an investment whose return comes from places you could never project, on a scale no human mind could run. Even seven hundred multiplied by seven hundred is still human arithmetic. Allah's multiplying is a different order of in-

crease, a flavour of His own, added on top, that you simply cannot understand. You did the smallest thing. He does the rest, beyond anything you were able to imagine.

What this example asks of our hearts

Now the picture turns toward you, and it asks something quiet and exact.

Think of the times you have stood at some appeal and felt small. The caller asks who will give ten thousand, and hands go up, and then five thousand, and more hands, and then two thousand, and you are standing there with three coins in your pocket, the change you needed to get home, and a voice somewhere in you says: that man's gift counted for something, yours counts for nothing. Hold that feeling up against what Allah actually magnified in the verse. He did not multiply the whole farm. He multiplied one seed. He took the single grain, the small, almost embarrassing thing, and turned it into seven hundred and then past counting. The smallness was never the problem. It was never the problem. It was the seed, and a seed is the one thing in the world that is supposed to be small.

This is also the answer to the deeper despair, the one that says, look how little my giving changes anything, look how much corruption remains, what is even the point. Nouman Ali Khan answers it with the example of Nuh, peace be upon him, who gave the best da'wah possible for nine hundred and fifty years and watched things grow worse, not better, and never once concluded that his

mission was pointless, because the point was never for him to see the result. The point was to plant the seed. The growing of it, and the when of the growing, belongs to Allah alone. You might plant a seed today that He grows fifty years from now, or two hundred, or only on the Day you stand before Him.

And so Nouman Ali Khan leaves us with a picture worth carrying out of this chapter and into the rest of your life. Imagine someone, centuries back, a traveller who stayed a single night with a family in a far mountain village, who showed them nothing more than kindness and honesty and said a few true words about Allah before he moved on. One young heart in that house stirred. That young person became Muslim, and started a family, and from that one stirring, over the long centuries, came teachers, and masjids, and orphans cared for, and scholars who taught others, and people who reformed whole communities and saved lives, a forest grown from a seed that one traveller never lived to see and could not, on the night he planted it, have begun to dream of. He comes before Allah on the Day of Judgement with that one small thing he once did, and finds it risen into something vast, climbing into the sky, and asks, what is this? And he is told: that was your seed.

You do not get to choose which of your deeds Allah will grow, or when. So the verse asks three things of your heart, and they are small enough to actually do. First, stop measuring the seed. Give the little you have without weighing it against anyone else's, because the smallness is exactly what Allah multiplies. Second, give it for His sake, *fi sabilillah*, with the mission of His word reaching

people somewhere in your intention, and not only the building or the relief, real as those are. And third, then let it go into the ground and walk away in peace, the way the believer plants on a promise while the farmer breaks his back on hope, trusting that what you gave is not dead behind you but alive, growing in the dark, kept by the One who raises both the dead and the deeds we thought were finished. Give tonight, even three coins, and leave the harvest to the One who multiplies for whom He wills. As Ibrahim and Isma'il prayed while they raised the foundations of His House:

Our Lord, accept [this] from us. Indeed, You are the Hearing, the Knowing.

QUR'AN 2:127

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 6. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Barren and fertile ground

A rock dressed as good soil, and a garden on a height

Two people give the very same gift. The same amount, to the same cause, on the same day. From the outside you could not tell them apart, and for a while no one could, not the people watching, not even the two givers themselves. Then it rains. The same rain falls on both, and it does two opposite things. On one plot the water washes everything away and leaves a bare, slick rock staring back, as though nothing had ever grown there. On the other the rain sinks in, and the garden answers it with double its fruit. Nothing changed in the gift. Everything depended on the ground it was sitting on.

That is the picture Allah strikes for two kinds of giving, in the surah that has been teaching us about charity for several verses by the time we arrive at it. This is the seventh of these striking examples, and like every one of them it begins as a picture and ends as a mirror. The whole parable turns on something you cannot see from the outside at all: not how much was given, not how publicly, but the heart underneath the hand. Nouman Ali Khan opens these two verses, al-Baqarah 2:264 and 2:265, slowly and with care, and from the first image to the last he keeps returning us to the one question they were built to ask. What is under your giving? Is it

sealed rock dressed in a thin skin of soil, or open ground on a height?

The seed, and the warning set beside it

You cannot feel the weight of these two plots of ground without first holding the promise they are answering, because that promise is exactly what they can quietly undo. A few verses earlier, Allah had already planted an image in our minds, and it is a staggering one. Give for His sake, and your gift is a single seed dropped into the dark of the soil that splits open into seven ears of grain, and in every one of those ears a hundred more grains, and then, beyond even that arithmetic, Allah multiplies for whom He wills:

The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allāh is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allāh multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills. And Allāh is all-Encompassing and Knowing.

QUR'AN 2:261

One handful of grain becomes a field. That is the return on the best investment a person will ever make, and Nouman Ali Khan asks us to hold it firmly before the next picture lands, because the next picture is the one that can multiply that field by zero. This is the way you protect anything precious: right after you are shown how much it is worth, you are told the two or three things that can ruin it. You have made the wisest deposit there is. Now, Allah says,

do not be the one who takes that same deposit and turns it into nothing.

Two ways to multiply a good deed by zero

The warning comes plainly, and it names exactly two things. Do not nullify your charities, Allah says, and the easiest way to feel the word, Nouman Ali Khan notes, is to think of it as multiplying by zero: taking something real and laying it utterly to waste. The first of the two things that does this is *al-mann*. The word itself, he points out, simply means a favour. Here it is the act of holding that favour over someone's head, giving with strings even when you swore there were none.

You know the shape of it the moment it is described. You help someone once, and then, somehow, you have notes. They are running your errands, fixing your friend's flat tyre, hanging the picture on your wall, coming whenever you call, because some part of them now feels owned, and some part of you lets them feel it. You begin to leverage what you gave, by a word or by a pressure too quiet to name, so that the person is never quite free of you again. And it is not only between individuals. A man writes a large cheque to the masjid, for the sake of Allah, the whole fundraiser closes, and a season later he arrives with a suggestion about who should lead the prayers, a suggestion that is, quietly, a hundred thousand pounds heavy. That is *mann*: the gift turned into a lever.

The second thing is *al-adha*, causing pain, and it can grow out of *mann* or stand entirely on its own. It is the wounding word that fol-

lows the gift. Sometimes it is aimed straight at the person: this is what you call gratitude. Sometimes it does not even mention them by name; it is just released into the room. He is a good brother, you know, I helped him out last year. He is doing very well for himself now, but I remember when he was sleeping in my basement. I gave that man his first job. You are not informing anyone of anything. You are pressing someone down so that you rise a little, or simply letting words loose that wound. Hold both of these, the favour held overhead and the word that hurts, because the parable Allah is about to strike was built to expose exactly this kind of giving.

The corruption that surfaces late

Then comes a turn that is easy to walk past, and Nouman Ali Khan slows us down on it. Notice who Allah lays down beside the person who reminds and wounds:

O you who have believed, do not invalidate your charities with reminders [of it] or injury as does one who spends his wealth [only] to be seen by the people and does not believe in Allāh and the Last Day.

QUR'AN 2:264

The one who gives only to be seen. The show-off. Now, every Muslim already knows that showing off ruins a deed, and they know why: deeds are weighed by intention, and intention comes

before the act. You decided to be seen before you ever gave; the rot was there from the start. But reminding people of a favour, and wounding them with words, comes after the act, sometimes a year after, sometimes ten. So why does Allah set the two side by side and call them equally ruinous, the corruption that comes before and the corruption that comes after?

His reading is that the later behaviour is a diagnosis. If a person truly gave for Allah alone, the matter was closed the instant the gift left the hand; it was a transaction between them and their Lord, and no one else was ever a party to it, so there would simply be nothing to bring up later. You would never corner someone to announce that you prayed two units of prayer last year, because that was between you and Allah and the thought of mentioning it is faintly absurd. In exactly the same way, a gift given purely for Allah does not resurface a year, or ten years, or twenty years later as a reminder of what you spent on the masjid, on the charity, on your younger brother, on your in-laws. It does not come up, because the account was never with people in the first place. So when the reminder does come up, it has exposed something. It has shown that a thread of showing off was woven in from the very beginning, a bad seed that did not sprout at first but came up later, out of a hidden corruption that was there all along. You may even have lied to yourself that you gave for the right reasons. The thing you said afterward is what tells the truth.

Why this can be named disbelief

Then the verse does something startling. It says this giver does not believe in Allah or the Last Day, and it closes by calling such people disbelievers, and it does all of this inside a verse that opened by addressing the believers. It is a jolt, and Nouman Ali Khan says it is meant to be one. The believer, this tells you, is not safe from kufr. Charity, he reminds us, is an act of worship owed to Allah in precisely the way prayer is owed to Him. Prayer is for Allah alone. Fasting is for Allah alone. Giving is for Allah alone. To give for His sake is to say, with the act itself: I expect my return from Him, on the Last Day, and from no one standing here. So to give while really expecting something from people, your name lifted, your influence felt, your basement remembered, is to slip another party into a place that belongs to Allah and Allah only. And that, in this specific and narrow sense, is a refusal of what believing in Allah and the Last Day was ever supposed to mean. Someone who has truly seen that one seed becomes seven hundred and keeps multiplying without end, and still finds that this is not enough, still needs to talk about the gift to feel something in this world, has shown that the next life was never quite real to him.

And then the image lands, and it is worth standing inside it.

His example is like that of a [large] smooth stone upon which is dust and is hit by a downpour that leaves it bare. They are unable [to keep] anything of what they have earned. And Allāh does not guide the disbelieving people.

QUR'AN 2:264

Picture a large, smooth boulder. The word, safwan, comes from a root of purity and smoothness, Nouman Ali Khan notes: it is sleek, bald, sealed, the kind of stone water simply cannot enter. Once it sat high on a mountain; rain dislodged it and rolled it down to the foot of the hill, and the same rains kept shifting the land until soil slid down and settled over it, layer on layer, until you could not see the rock at all. All you saw was good-looking ground. Someone passes by, sees fresh soil in the shade at the base of the hill, and thinks: what fine land this is. So he plants. He drops his seeds into it, exactly as the earlier verse taught, and a garden actually comes up, green and convincing, looking for all the world like the garden flourishing higher up the slope. He is delighted with what he has grown, and he has no idea what lies an inch beneath it. Then the downpour comes. The word here, wabil, is the violent, flooding kind of rain, the rain that sits beside the word for calamity, and it does not water this garden, it strips it. It peels the soil clean off and leaves the boulder bald and slick and staring, saldan, as though no seed had ever touched it. He returns to find a rock where his garden had been. He cannot hold on to one single thing he worked for. The whole investment he piled on top is gone, because the ground beneath it was sealed, and nothing ever soaked

in. The giving looked alive on the surface. Underneath was a heart that, like the rock, let nothing through.

Giving is an investment, and you have to protect it

Running underneath all of this, Nouman Ali Khan asks us to hear a particular language: the language of business and return. Planting a seed is an investment; you put it in the ground precisely because you expect to get something back. And every investment carries a real danger, the danger every investor knows: you can put the money in and never see it return. So Allah speaks of giving the way you would speak of guarding an investment. You do not simply place it and walk away and assume it is safe. You protect it.

And He names the two threats, one on each side of the act. Before you give, make the intention clean, so that you are not building your garden on a sealed rock. After you give, do not multiply it by zero with reminders and wounds. Guard it at both ends, Nouman Ali Khan says, and it becomes a true investment, the safest one a human being can make. He puts the conclusion plainly, and it is worth carrying: the wisest place to park what you own, the one deposit that cannot be stolen and cannot lose its value, is Allah's keeping. And there is only one person in all the world who can ever damage that particular investment. It is not the thief and not the market. It is you.

A kind word over a wounding gift

Allah does not leave you without guidance for the moments when you are stretched thin and a gift would cost you more than money. He sets, just before the two plots of ground, a measure for what to choose:

Kind speech and forgiveness are better than charity followed by injury. And Allāh is Free of need and Forbearing.

QUR'AN 2:263

A decent word, He says, and the overlooking of a wrong, is better than a charity you ruin with injury afterward. Nouman Ali Khan paints the phone call so many of us know. There is family in another country, and because you live where you live, they have decided you have walked through the gates of ease, that you are already set for life, when in truth you are working a hard job and sending back what you can. The asks come, and they are not always gentle. They wanted five thousand; you could manage five hundred; and the five hundred is met with a line that finds the soft places: this is what you call help. The sarcasm lands exactly where it was aimed. Money changes people, they say. You have forgotten where you came from. It goes on, call after call, and eventually the transmission gives out and you snap. You remind them how much you have already done, you tell them to be grateful, you tell them you have had enough, and you hang up.

And here is the discipline of the verse. The person on the other end may well have been impossible, genuinely, for a long time. But Allah, Nouman Ali Khan notes, is more concerned that the wounding words not come out of you. They have their own account; you have yours. Their rule-breaking does not cancel your rules. So Allah says it outright: if it truly comes down to a gift wrecked by harsh words or no gift at all and a kind word instead, choose the kind word. Even asking them, with dignity, for an apology is better than handing over the money and then following it with something that wounds.

Then He seals the verse with two of His names, and Nouman Ali Khan dwells on both. The first is al-Ghani, the One free of all need. It is a reminder dropped right into the middle of the argument: you may be the one with money on that call, but you are needy too, and the only reason you can give anything at all is that Allah is with you. Do not stand on that phone call as though you were the rich one and they were the beggar; before Allah you are both in need. The second name is al-Halim, the Forbearing, and this one he hands us as a picture. Imagine the mother whose child is kicking and scratching and screaming, clawing at her face, and who keeps holding him, keeps feeding him, keeps singing him to sleep, wakes for him in the middle of the night and does not set him out in the cold to teach him a lesson. That, he says, is hilm: to put up with someone and to keep being good to them anyway. And Allah is Halim with people who curse Him, who pretend He does not exist, who mock His Messenger ﷺ and ridicule His religion, and still He

does not stop their next breath, does not seize their tongues, does not withhold what keeps them alive. If Allah, who is owed everything, forbears like that with those who owe Him and deny Him, then you, on your hardest phone call, having been given even a little of that forbearance, are meant to spend it.

The garden on the height

Now the other plot, and the giver standing on it. This one spends seeking only the pleasure of his Lord, and the verse adds something tender about him:

And the example of those who spend their wealth seeking means to the approval of Allāh and assuring [reward for] themselves is like a garden on high ground which is hit by a downpour - so it yields its fruits in double. And [even] if it is not hit by a downpour, then a drizzle [is sufficient]. And Allāh, of what you do, is Seeing.

QUR'AN 2:265

Seeking the approval of Allah, and tathbitan min anfusihi, making their own souls firm. The image inside that word, Nouman Ali Khan notes, is of someone who plants a seed and then presses the soil down firmly around it with the flat of the hand, settling it so it sits secure and will not be dislodged. That is the giving this verse describes: a giving that steadies and roots the one who gives. And the mark of this person is simple. He has no expectations of people at all. His relationship with someone before he helps them and

his relationship after he helps them is exactly the same, because the whole transaction was only ever with Allah, and the human being on the other end was never the point. You can be grateful to him or turn on him; you can thank him or, as so often happens, start out grateful, slide into expecting it, and end up resentful that he has what you do not. None of it moves him, because he was never giving to you. The Arabs, he reminds us, have an old saying about the milkman who alone is gentle with a difficult cow and is headbutted for his trouble, and another that a dog will be a dog even dressed in a gold collar. But this giver is not studying anyone's character before he gives, not asking whether this person will bite him later. He gave with zero expectation, so there is nothing in the other person's behaviour that can spoil what he did.

And his likeness is a garden, jannah, the very word the Qur'an reserves for Paradise, and Nouman Ali Khan finds the choice sweet and deliberate. It is set bi-rabwah, on a height, and the elevation is the entire point. The boulder sat at the bottom of the hill, in the flood zone, where every excess of water pools and ruins, the way the lowest land in any city is the cheapest precisely because it drowns. This garden sits high, where the rain that falls is exactly the rain the plants need and the surplus drains away down the slope. So when the heavy downpour comes, the wabil that destroyed the rock, this ground drinks it and gives its fruit back doubled. And even if no downpour comes at all, even a fine drizzle, a mist, the dew that hangs in the high cool air, is enough to keep it

green. The garden is never at the mercy of the weather, because what is truly feeding it is not the rain.

One of the things that heavy rain can stand for, Nouman Ali Khan offers, is hardship. Some people gave for the sake of Allah and then appeared, by every visible measure, to lose. The believers spent and bled at Uhud and did not win the day, and to a watching eye the whole investment looked gone: the money spent, the men killed, and nothing to show for it. That loss exposed false hearts exactly as the downpour exposed the rock. But the true giver who spent and even died took his reward doubled, the giving and the dying both counted, because he was never expecting his return in this world to begin with. This is the disposition Allah praises elsewhere, of people who knew that whatever came could only be one of two good things:

Say, "Do you await for us except one of the two best things [i.e., martyrdom or victory]..."

QUR'AN 9:52

Win and it is good; fall and it is better. The garden on the height does not fear the weather. In abundance it doubles; in drought it simply endures; and in the storm that strips the rock, it is fed.

What this example asks of our hearts

Here the two pictures turn and become a single mirror, and it is uncomfortable on purpose. The rock and the garden gave the

same gift. From the outside, in the moment, you could not have told them apart, and for a while no one could, not the onlookers and not the two men themselves. The entire difference lay underneath, in ground no one could see, and it was the rain that finally told the truth. So the question this parable presses into your hands is not how much you give, or how often, or how visibly. It is what is under your giving. Is it sealed rock wearing a thin skin of soil, giving so that you will be seen, or wrecking the gift afterward with a reminder, a leveraged favour, a wounding line? Or is it open ground on a height, giving for Allah and for nothing else, the kind of ground that turns even hardship into fruit?

And notice the mercy folded into the test, because the surface lies and Allah did not leave you to be fooled by it. The rain is the very thing that strips the soil back and shows you the ground. The moment you catch yourself bringing the gift up, holding it over someone, needing the credit, reaching for the basement story, the rock beneath your giving has just shown itself, and it has shown itself while you are still alive and can still do something about it. That is not a verdict. It is a warning delivered in time. The rock can be broken up. The seed can be moved to higher ground. The intention can be cleaned before the next gift leaves your hand, and the tongue can be held after it.

This is also where the parable quietly joins hands with the rest of the surah, and Nouman Ali Khan asks us to feel one landscape being built picture by picture. There was light and darkness, the seed first buried in the dark and then rising into the light. There was

rain, and there was the earth, and here is the earth itself, planted and watered and either washed bare or made to flower. And soon there will come the image of the good word as a tree whose roots run deep into the ground, and you will remember that the rock made deep roots impossible, that nothing can sink its roots through sealed stone, that the tallest trees stand on the highest ground with the deepest roots of all. Allah is composing a single scene across these verses and asking you to find yourself somewhere inside it. So before you give again, do the quiet work the parable is really about. Clear the rock. Choose the height. Give for an audience of One, expecting your whole return from Him on the Day you will need it, and let the rain, whatever it brings you, only make you greener. O Allah, make our giving for You alone, free of the favour held over a head and the word that wounds, set our hearts on high ground where Your rain only makes us greener, and accept from us the little we manage to do. And Allah, of what you do, is Seeing.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 7. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Blazing whirlwinds

A whole garden, grown over a lifetime, burnt in a single hour

Close your eyes for a moment and build the garden. Not the small plot behind a house, but the garden you would lay out if money had stopped being a question, if every season had finally tilted in your favour. Tall date palms standing in a ring around the edge, hardy and certain, taking the wind on their own backs. Inside their shelter, the delicate thing, rows of grapevines climbing their trellises, the luxury crop that needs specialists and patience and constant care. A river moving beneath the soil so the ground waters itself and no one ever carries a bucket up the slope. And every fruit you can name, ripening somewhere on a branch. You did not inherit this. You built it. You saved while everyone around you spent, you pinched and counted and waited, you gave up your youth to it, and now, at last, it is yours.

That is the picture the Qur'an holds up in this eighth example, and it does something none of the examples before it quite dared to do. For two days running, in the verses just before this one, Allah has been drawing gardens to talk about charity: a bare stone washed clean by rain, a garden on high ground that doubles its fruit. Then the camera turns, slowly, and points straight at you. The verse opens not with a statement but with a question aimed at

your own heart. And the moment you say yes, of course I would want that, the same garden begins, in front of your eyes, to burn.

The garden of your dreams

Listen first to the verse itself, the whole arc of it in a single breath, the dream and the disaster held in the same sentence:

Would one of you like to have a garden of palm trees and grapevines underneath which rivers flow in which he has from every fruit? But he is afflicted with old age and has weak [i.e., immature] offspring, and it is hit by a whirlwind containing fire and is burned. Thus does Allah make clear to you [His] verses that you might give thought.

QUR'AN 2:266

Notice how it begins. Not "the one who does such-and-such is like," the way a parable usually opens, but a question put directly to you: would one of you love to have this? Nouman Ali Khan draws our attention to the word Allah chose for the garden here, *janna*, the very word the Qur'an has used dozens of times for the Garden of the next life, for Paradise itself. That is not an accident. For a believer, the instant you hear *janna*, before another syllable arrives, your heart leaps to the eternal Garden. And then, gently, Allah pulls the meaning back down into this world and lays the dream of the afterlife over the dream of a life well lived, so that one image carries both at once. You are meant to feel the pull of Paradise and the pull of worldly success in the same word, and to

notice, before the verse is finished, which one you were really reaching for.

He lingers over the design of the garden, because the first listeners would have. You do not simply throw a garden together. The date palms go around the perimeter like a living fence, and there is a reason for that. They are hardy; they take the brunt of the wind so the fragile crop in the middle is spared. They bring quick, certain money, because everyone in the region needs dates, and they survive a harsh climate where softer plants fail. They are the safe investment, the foundation. Only once that foundation is laid, only once a man is secure, does he reach inward for the expensive, high-risk thing: the grapes, which need trellises and trained hands and patience, which spoil easily and sell for a fortune precisely because not everyone can grow them. This, Nouman Ali Khan observes, is the Qur'an showing an intricate, almost startling knowledge of how human beings actually think about building wealth. You start with the sturdy and the certain. You earn your way, slowly, to the luxury. And then, the verse adds, this garden has in it from every fruit, every kind of return, as though everything this man touched simply grew. The word for fruits in the Qur'an and in the Arabic of the time carries the sense we still reach for when we say in English the fruit of your labour: not just produce, but reward, return on a life of effort. Everything worked out. Every seed he planted kept giving.

And here human nature gives the verse its grip. You may tell yourself you have no interest in any of this, that you would rather be

left alone. But Allah is speaking, he notes, to the overwhelming run of people, to what He placed in us. Why else do we save for years to travel to exactly such places on our holidays, greenery and high ground and falling water, the three elements together, and stand there taking photographs of a scene we paid good money simply to look at? It does not matter whether the visitor is a believer or not. The human being is drawn, at the level of the soul, to a garden with a river under it and palms around the edge. Allah built that longing into us, and then, in this verse, He uses it.

The garden is your giving

To feel why this matters, you have to keep the verse just before it in view. The day before, Allah had drawn a different garden, one on high ground, struck by rain:

And the example of those who spend their wealth seeking means to the approval of Allah and assuring [reward for] themselves is like a garden on high ground which is hit by a downpour - so it yields its fruits in double. And [even] if it is not hit by a downpour, then a drizzle [is sufficient]. And Allah, of what you do, is Seeing.

QUR'AN 2:265

That garden was a picture of the person who gives for Allah's approval, whose smallest sincere gift He multiplies. The entire stretch of the surah here is about charity, about what we put into the earth for Allah's sake. So when this new garden of palms and vines ap-

pears, it was never really about real estate at all. The garden is your giving. The palms and the rivers and every ripening fruit are the good you have planted across a whole lifetime, the charity, the help, the years of quiet effort offered up to your Lord. Hold that, and the verse stops being a story about a rich man's farm and becomes a question about your own deeds.

And then a single word turns the dream into a nightmare. Everything has grown, everything is flourishing, the man finally has it all, and then, Nouman Ali Khan points out, comes the same verb that struck the rain in the earlier examples: *asaba*, it struck him. Old age struck him. Not arrived, not crept up, not came: struck, the way a calamity strikes, the way the downpour struck the bare stone and exposed it. The choice of that verb is doing work. The rain had stripped the dust off the smooth rock to reveal the hard truth underneath; now old age strikes this man and exposes the truth of his situation too. He has the garden at last, and he no longer has the legs to climb the hill to it. He has the river and the waterfall, and he is too frail to take a dip without the cold finishing him. He has the accounts, and his eyes are too weak to read them, his hearing too dim to follow when someone reads them aloud. The thing is perfect, and he cannot taste any of it. Because contentment, the verse is quietly teaching, was never out there in the garden. Allah placed it inside the heart, and this man's heart is now full of dread.

Old, and surrounded by the weak

Old age is no small trial. Nouman Ali Khan reminds us that the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ used to seek refuge in Allah from it, from the helplessness of outliving your own strength, of losing your independence, of needing to be carried up your own stairs. We should fear it too, and ask Allah to keep us whole. But the verse does not stop at age. It adds a second blow, and the wording of it repays a slow reading.

Allah does not say the man has young children. He says he has weak offspring, *dhurriyya du'afa*, and Nouman Ali Khan slows down here, because the word reaches further than just sons. It covers grandchildren, and their children, the generations coming after. One single description is laid over all of them: weak. And he draws out two readings, both of them heavy. They may be weak because they are too young, so that if their father dies now they will be devoured, robbed of everything he built, unable to defend a single tree of it. Picture a man at the end of his strength, knowing that the moment he closes his eyes the vultures circle, and the only people who might have stood between his life's work and the world are too small to lift a hand. Or, in the second reading, they are weak in a deeper and more painful way: they are spoiled. The father started from nothing. He knows what every palm cost in sweat, how you turn one tree into two and two into four, because he did it with his own back. But his children only ever saw the garden already standing, the money already arriving, and so they never learned grit, never learned difficulty, never learned the value of

a thing they did not have to earn. A wealthy man's heir, so often, is a soft one. And even grown, even adults, they are too weak to hold what he is about to hand them. He knows it, and there is nothing he can do about it, because, as Nouman Ali Khan notes, you do not choose your children; Allah chooses them for you.

There is a loneliness threaded through this picture too, he says, that only a person who has reached the very top will fully recognise. Climb high enough, in business or in any field, and the real relationships thin out. The new friends are half friends of you and half friends of your success, and the day the success stops, so do they; the friendship was never with the person but with what the person could provide. So a man at the summit cannot truly trust anyone, and the only people left to lean on are his own blood. And even they, the verse says, are weak. He has everything, and no one. He has the whole garden, and not one strong hand to leave it in. The blessing has quietly curdled into a curse. The Mansion is built, the property is his, the old man is still alive inside it, and he is not living in peace; he is living in anxiety, eating the finest food in the most beautiful place and tasting nothing, because the outside is perfect and the inside is in ruins.

A whirlwind with fire inside it

And now, while he is old and his children are weak and there is nothing in his hands to stop it, the third and final blow falls. A whirlwind tears down out of the sky and lands on the garden. Nouman Ali Khan traces the word to a root that means to wring,

the way you twist a soaked cloth until every last drop is squeezed out of it; that, he notes, is why we still call such a storm a twister. The old man can only stand and watch a lifetime of work go into the blender, and the blender turns on. He is too weak to move anything to safety. His children are too weak to help. And it is a natural disaster besides; there is nothing to be done but run and watch.

But Allah does not let it be an ordinary storm, and here is the detail that should stop you. Inside the whirlwind there is fire, *fihī nar*. So it is not merely breaking the garden, it is burning it. And Nouman Ali Khan draws the line precisely: snap a tree in a gale and you can still salvage the wood, still reuse it, still recover something from the wreckage. Burn a tree to the ground and all you are left with is ash, and ash is good for nothing at all. A storm that only breaks leaves you something to pick up afterwards. This storm carries fire through it, the way, he notes, a real fire-whirlwind in nature draws flame up into its column and turns into a rotating tube of fire that incinerates everything it crosses. And then the verb seals it: *fahtaraqat*, it combusted, the garden itself caught and went up, as if to say it was too vulnerable, too dry, with nothing in it strong enough to survive the test. A whole life, decades of saving and sacrifice and patient planting, reduced in a single hour to something you cannot even bend down and lift off the ground. Not damaged. Not set back. Gone.

Why an old man, and why his own fire

Here is the turn that makes the whole example ache, and it is the reading Nouman Ali Khan has been moving toward the entire time. Of all the people Allah could have placed in this garden, why an old man? Why highlight the age so insistently? Because there is a particular and very human danger in being old and having built something great. The man no longer runs the garden; others run it. His name is on it, but the work is theirs now. He walks in and once it was yes sir, yes sir, his word setting everything in motion; now he is retired, set gently aside, invited to the yearly gathering to be handed a plaque. He can feel himself becoming invisible in the very place he created. The garden is still magnificent, and he is no longer magnificent, and that is a particular kind of grief.

So what does such a man begin to do? At every dinner, every gathering, every chance he gets, he reminds them. You know who planted that tree? You know who dug that well? You think you know how to run this place? None of you would have a job here if it were not for me. He cannot bear to be forgotten, so he keeps pointing at himself, and he does not much care whose feelings it bruises, because they need to know where this garden came from. And that, Nouman Ali Khan says, is exactly what the Qur'an warned against three verses earlier, in the verse that frames this whole run of examples:

O you who have believed, do not invalidate your charities with reminders [of it] or injury as does one who spends his wealth [only] to be seen by the people and does not believe in Allah and the Last Day. His example is like that of a [large] smooth stone upon which is dust and is hit by a downpour that leaves it bare. They are unable [to keep] anything of what they have earned. And Allah does not guide the disbelieving people.

QUR'AN 2:264

Do not destroy your charity, Allah says, with al-mann wa al-adha, with reminding people of the favour you did them and wounding them with it. The old man with the dying garden, desperate that the world remember what he gave, is the very same man who hands a gift and then will not stop talking about it. And so Allah shows him something terrible and merciful in the same stroke. You spent your life afraid that your weak children would one day ruin your garden, that they would let it slip through their soft hands after you were gone. But you do not have to wait for them. With your own tongue, with your own aching need to be seen and thanked and remembered, you will set the fire yourself, and you will stand there, still alive, and watch your life's work burn. The whirlwind does not come from the children, or from the sky, or from fate. It comes from inside you. You are the fire.

A seed that grows forever, or a garden that cannot last

Now set the two pictures side by side, the way Nouman Ali Khan does, because the contrast is the whole lesson. A few verses earlier, Allah had drawn a single seed:

The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allah is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allah multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills. And Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.

QUR'AN 2:261

One seed becoming seven ears, each ear a hundred grains, multiplying on and on toward a number you could never count, because Allah is the one growing it. And here, in the very same surah, a whole garden, far more than a seed, more than a man could plant in a lifetime, and it cannot even be kept alive. Why? Because the man insisted on guarding it himself. That, Nouman Ali Khan teaches, is the entire difference between charity given the right way and charity poisoned by the wrong intention. Hand your investment to Allah and He multiplies it in ways you could never engineer: one coin dropped in a masjid's box, reaching through a child who learns there, a couple married there, a soul that finds Islam there, into generations you will never live to see, a small commission of reward flowing back to you from good you never knew you started. You do not need your name carved on the wall for that; the reward does not wait on the donor plaque. Allah grows it His own

way. But cling to it yourself, demand the credit, build your own empire and stand guard over it, and you spend your days in anxiety protecting something that was always, in the end, going to slip away.

That is why the very next verse turns the lesson into an instruction you can act on tonight:

O you who have believed, spend from the good things which you have earned and from that which We have produced for you from the earth. And do not aim toward the defective therefrom, spending [from that] while you would not take it [yourself] except with closed eyes. And know that Allah is Free of need and Praiseworthy.

QUR'AN 2:267

Spend from the good of what you have earned, not the defective, not the cast-offs you would only accept yourself with your eyes closed. And here Nouman Ali Khan pushes the point somewhere bracing: examine where your giving goes the way you would examine any serious investment. Before you put money into a business you ask after its track record, its returns, whether it is run well. Bring that same seriousness to what you give for Allah's sake, not because Allah needs your scrutiny, but because you do, because you should be greedy, as he puts it, for the reward it grows, and a gift poured into something weak and stagnant grows

little. The lesson was never simply give. It was give in the way that lasts, from your best, into what is alive.

What this example asks of our hearts

So turn the picture now toward yourself, because that is what it was built to do. You may not own a garden of palms and vines, but you have your version of it: the good you are quietly putting into the world, the charity, the help, the years of effort for Allah's sake that you hope will still be standing when you are gone. This whole terrifying, tender example is Allah pleading with you not to set fire to it with your own hand. And the fire He warns about is not the dramatic blaze of open sin. It is the slow, ordinary, almost invisible fire of a heart that needs to be seen: the heart that gives and then reminds, that helps and then holds it over people, that cannot let a single good deed pass un-thanked. That fire feels, from the inside, like nothing much at all. It feels like a fair remark, like wanting your due. And it burns gardens to ash.

Watch, too, where the danger gathers, because the verse is pointed about this. It is not the young striver who is in the greatest peril here; it is the one who has already built something, who has a name, a reputation, a legacy he is now anxious to protect. The more you have given, the more there is to burn, and the louder the temptation grows to make certain everyone remembers your hand in it. The man in this parable, Nouman Ali Khan is careful to say, is not a villain. He is someone who did the hard thing, who saved and sacrificed and planted a garden most people only ever dream of,

and that is precisely what makes his ending so frightening. He had everything a life of work can buy, and he watched it burn, partly to a storm he could not stop, and partly to a fire he carried inside himself the whole time. Allah holds him up not to shame him but to save us, because every one of us is building a garden, and every one of us is tempted to set it alight.

Carry the contrast home with you. The seed that Allah grows reaches into generations; the garden that you guard cannot survive even your own children. So give, and then let it go. Give from your best, give for His eyes alone, and refuse to drag the gift back out into the open to be admired. Plant for three thousand years, not for thirty. Think past your own lifetime the way you would plan a business past this quarter, and then hand the whole of it to the One who multiplies a single seed into a harvest no one could number. And beg Him, who alone keeps a garden from the fire, to take what you have planted from your weak and grasping hands and let it grow where you cannot watch and cannot ruin it, in this life and on the day you finally stand before Him and see what it became. O Allah, accept from us what we have given, protect it from our own hands, empty our hearts of the need to be seen, and let not one good deed we have planted be lost to the fire. Our Lord, accept this from us; indeed, You are the Hearing, the Knowing.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 8. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Touched by the devil

The one who consumes interest, standing like a man the devil has beaten senseless

Picture a man trying to get to his feet. He pushes himself up, and something knocks him flat. He tries again, and down he goes again. His speech is slurred, his eyes will not focus, he swats at the air and shouts at people who are not there. To everyone watching he looks like a man under attack by something they cannot see, a body lurching and falling and rising only to fall once more. That is the figure the Qur'an holds up in this verse, and it is not a man who lost a fight in the street, and not a man who has been drinking. It is a man counting his money.

Before we go anywhere near the image, a word about where it sits and what it is for. This parable lives inside the harshest, most detailed passage in the whole Qur'an on interest, on *riba*, and the questions of exactly what counts as *riba*, and how its principles meet the tangle of modern banking that all of us are caught inside, are serious and weighty and belong to the scholars, not to us. Nouman Ali Khan himself, whose reading of this example we are following, sets all of that aside deliberately at the start of his lecture. He warns against the age of the soundbite, the instinct to take a life and death matter and flatten it into something you heard once and never thought about again. He would not let a heart sur-

geon be replaced by a thirty second clip, and he will not let this be either. So this chapter does the same. It does not hand you a verdict. It hands you the portrait. Not what is forbidden, but what greed does to a human being on the inside.

The whole curriculum on money

To see why this image lands where it does, you have to see what Allah has built around it. Nouman Ali Khan points out that the end of Surah al-Baqarah is arranged like a complete curriculum on wealth, set down in a deliberate order. First, page after page on the most beautiful thing a person can do with money, which is to spend it in the path of Allah. Then, set right beside it, the ugliest thing a person can do with money, which is this. And after this, what lawful business and honest loans actually look like. The best use of wealth, the worst, and the lawful middle, all three laid side by side in a single place, something close to a whole Qur'anic economics gathered in one passage. There is nowhere in the Book more detailed on spending for Allah than here, and nowhere more detailed on riba than here, and they are neighbours on purpose.

So the parable does not arrive cold. It arrives as the dark mirror of everything just said about giving. A few verses earlier the believer was being trained to a tenderness that is almost painful in its delicacy. Give, and never remind the person that you gave. Give, and expect nothing back from them at all. Speak to the one in need so gently that you guard their dignity even as you help them. And more than that, learn to read the need on a face before a single

word is spoken, before anyone stands in front of you, before there is a fundraising page or a video or a link to send money. The one who cannot read that quiet need, who assumes that because a person never asks they must have no problem, is called by the Qur'an ignorant. The believer is being trained into a hypersensitivity to other people's suffering. And underneath it all is a reversal of the whole transaction: the one you give to is doing you the favour, because they are letting you plant a seed with your Lord that grows without end. Hold that picture of the giver in your mind, because the man in this verse is its exact opposite.

The example of those who spend their wealth in the way of Allāh is like a seed [of grain] which grows seven spikes; in each spike is a hundred grains. And Allāh multiplies [His reward] for whom He wills. And Allāh is all-Encompassing and Knowing.

QUR'AN 2:261

Not earning, but eating

Now the verse itself, and the first thing to do is look at the very first verb.

Those who consume interest cannot stand [on the Day of Resurrection] except as one stands who is being beaten by Satan into insanity. That is because they say, "Trade is [just] like interest." But Allāh has permitted trade and has forbidden interest. So whoever has received an admonition from his Lord and desists may have what is past, and his affair rests with Allāh. But whoever returns [to dealing in interest or usury] - those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide eternally therein.

QUR'AN 2:275

Allah does not say those who earn interest, or those who collect it, or those who deal in it. He says those who eat it. Nouman Ali Khan keeps the word raw on purpose, because the dignified translations soften it to consume, and consume sounds tolerable, almost respectable, but the Arabic says eat. And the choice is pointed, because elsewhere in the Qur'an, when Allah speaks of eating, He says it with dignity:

O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good and do not follow the footsteps of Satan. Indeed, he is to you a clear enemy.

QUR'AN 2:168

That sounds like a human being, eating from what is good and pure, eating from what was honestly earned. This does not. To eat money, to be described as feeding on it, is to be described the

way you would describe an animal at a trough, head down, no thought beyond the next mouthful, chewing and chewing. The word has already begun to strip the dignity off the picture before the parable has even started.

And there is a quiet edge in the word *riba* itself. Nouman Ali Khan traces its root to the sense of something that swells and grows, the same root family as the word used just before this passage for a garden on raised, growing ground. That is the nature of the thing. You lend out five coins and demand back six, then seven, and the pile must keep growing. And if the borrower cannot make it grow for you, then something else of his must. His land grows your land. His labour grows your wealth. His animals, invested, breed you more. His children, taken in payment, become servants in your house. Nouman Ali Khan follows this all the way down to its end and names it without flinching: this is one of the engines by which human beings were swallowed whole across history, by which slavery itself crept into the world, a debt that could never be repaid hardening slowly, year by year, into ownership of the person. At some level the predatory lender is even hoping the borrower fails, because failure is when he can take far more than he was ever owed. That is the thing being described here. Not a transaction. A devouring.

The ones who tower, and cannot stand

Now the strangeness of the image, which is the whole point of it. The people in this verse are, in the eyes of the world, the ones

who stand tallest of all. Nouman Ali Khan notes that the word for standing here, in its Arabic, was a borrowed expression for having stature, for towering over a society. And these are precisely the people who tower. The great lenders, the financiers, the ones with the finer house and, in the old days, the finer horse, and now the finer car, the watch, the shoes, the clothes, the wedding booked into the grand ballroom while everyone murmurs at the scale of it. They become the very symbol of stability and success. Everyone else feels small beside them, almost like insects looking up at a giant. They feed off the desperation of the poor and they rise higher and higher, and the higher they go the lower everyone else feels, until they seem to be the only ones left standing tall over the whole of humanity.

And about those exact people, the ones who never seem to stop rising, Allah says: they do not stand. They cannot stand at all, except in one terrible way. Everything they have built makes them look upright and unshakeable, the picture of a man firmly on his feet, and the verse says the truth of them is a man who keeps trying to get up and keeps being knocked back down. The towering is an illusion. Underneath it there is nothing to stand on.

The touch that became a beating

Here is the heart of the image, and the place Nouman Ali Khan lingers longest, because the verse puts two words side by side that seem to pull in opposite directions.

The first is the word for the beating. In the Arabic it carries the sense of striking something violently and repeatedly, the way a shepherd beats a tree hard, again and again, to bring the leaves raining down, the way an agitated, hungry camel pounds its forelegs into the ground and throws up clouds of dust. It is a brutal, pummelling, relentless beating, what Nouman Ali Khan describes as a ground and pound, the kind of beating where the man on the ground is struck the moment he tries to rise. And buried in that same word, he notes, is a subtle and disturbing sting: the man is no longer only being beaten by the devil. In the way he now lurches and falls and rises only to fall again, in the loss of all control, he has started to resemble the devil himself.

The second word is its opposite. It is the word for a touch, and not a heavy touch, the very faintest contact two things can have, the lightest brush there is. A pounding and a brush of the fingertips, in the same breath.

So what is Allah painting? Read it, Nouman Ali Khan says, as a beating that began with nothing more than a touch. You have heard the phrase touched by an angel. This is the Qur'an's portrait of a man touched by a devil. It started as the smallest contact, a single greedy thought entertained just once, and then it grew, the way *riba* grows, the way the swelling word for it grows, until it had knocked him senseless. The touch became the beating. The brush of the fingertips became the thing that left him unable to stand.

And here Nouman Ali Khan asks us to picture it the way the first listeners would have, in an age before any talk of nerves or scans

or chemical imbalances of the brain. When the Arabs saw a person with slurred speech, with a wandering eye, talking to no one, raging at the street, losing all memory of himself, they had a phrase for it. They said the devil has touched him. He paints the scene with painful familiarity: the man on the pavement that thousands walk past and no one speaks to, isolated for so long that he begins to talk to himself, then to shout at the world, at the banks, at people who are not there. A person so far gone, so cut off, that he becomes a danger to himself and to everyone near him, capable of real harm, capable of pushing someone or worse, and with no awareness at all that he has done it, because he has lost the very faculty that would tell him. That, Allah says, is the real condition of the man who eats interest, however well his suit is cut, however grand the ballroom he booked.

What greed does to a person

Stay with what the image is actually diagnosing, because this is the part that turns on every one of us, not only on financiers. Nouman Ali Khan describes greed not simply as wanting more, but as a kind of derangement, a fixation that locks you onto one thing you have decided you must have until you go blind to everything else you have been given.

And he hears in it the echo of the very first story. Adam, peace be upon him, was placed in a garden filled with every good and lawful delight imaginable, an endless wealth of permitted things to enjoy. And the entire work of the enemy was to make him forget all of it

and obsess over the one tree he had been told to leave alone. Nouman Ali Khan draws out the patient cruelty of the method. The Qur'an describes the enemy reeling the first couple in with a careful deception, and he points to the Arabic image hidden in the word for it, the picture of a bucket lowered slowly toward a trapped animal with a little food inside, drawn closer and closer until the creature is near enough to be taken. The only way to get a human being that close to the one forbidden thing is to make him ignore the hundred lawful blessings already in his hands. Surround a child with every toy on earth and tell him only not to touch one switch on the wall, and that switch is the one thing he can see, the one thing he stares at even when he is not touching it. That, Nouman Ali Khan says, is what greed is. It is becoming ungrateful to everything legitimate that is already yours, and lunging for the one thing that is not. And so the enemy who appeared at the beginning of the human story, promising Adam a bankruptcy dressed up as a gain, appears again here at the end of the surah, working the same con. The Qur'an names his method plainly:

Satan threatens you with poverty and orders you to immorality, while Allāh promises you forgiveness from Him and bounty. And Allāh is all-Encompassing and Knowing.

QUR'AN 2:268

And see what this derangement does to a person's sense of time. The man touched by the devil acts purely on impulse, the way an animal acts, immediately and without thought, with no concern for

tomorrow, for consequence, for who gets hurt. Nouman Ali Khan calls this the cruellest contrast in the whole passage. The giver, a few verses up, is the most long-sighted person alive, planting a seed now for a harvest he will reap with Allah, thinking in seasons and in the hereafter. The eater of interest cannot see past the next mouthful. And then he points to what that blindness looks like at full scale, with the seriousness the subject demands. A man in a fine wool suit, sitting in an executive office, who can put his signature to a single document that turns a thousand families out of their homes, that shuts down whole factories, that leaves people on the street, and then go to a party that same night and feel nothing at all. He recalls how, in the financial collapse that so many still remember, the people at the very top made more than they ever had while the world below them was plunging into ruin, throwing celebrations while families were destroyed. There is no flicker of feeling left, because somewhere along the way the part of them that could feel was beaten out. They have, in the truest sense, lost their minds, and they are running so much of the world. The point of saying all this is never to gloat at those people from a safe distance. The point is to turn the image around and ask, with fear, what an unchecked appetite is quietly doing to me.

Trade is not like interest

Notice how the man in the verse defends himself, because it is the oldest trick there is. Caught out, he does not argue his actual case. He does not even say *riba* is not so different from honest trade. He flips the whole thing around and goes on the attack: trade is just

the same as interest anyway, so by your logic no one could do any business at all, you would shut the entire economy down, you must want everyone to starve. Nouman Ali Khan names the move precisely. The best defence is offence. Make the person calling out the wrong feel like the fool, the naive one, the one who does not understand how the world works. And he notes how the most predatory institutions do exactly this with language, never saying predatory lending or price gouging, but reaching for a thesaurus of softer words, development, growth, trajectory, market adjustment, anything to keep the real name off the real thing.

And Allah does not even take the bait of the argument. He does not sit down to debate the man's economics. He answers with one clean line that the verse states as a settled fact: Allah has permitted trade and has forbidden interest. They are not the same, and the difference is not arithmetic.

The difference, Nouman Ali Khan says, is in the kind of thing each one is. Honest trade carries goodness inside it. Riba feeds on desperation, on the hard-earned money of people who are already struggling, taking their earnings rather than earning anything at all, which is exactly why the verse said they eat it and never said they earn it. And he draws this out from a teaching given to an earlier people, that the final Prophet would come making the good and pure things lawful and the filthy things forbidden, which means something quietly profound: whatever Allah declares lawful is, by definition, not merely allowed but good and pure, with goodness and barakah laid into it, and whatever He forbids is, by definition,

filthy, a thing that spreads harm like a disease. The implication of the next verse is striking:

Allāh destroys interest and gives increase for charities. And Allāh does not like every sinning disbeliever.

QUR'AN 2:276

Allah erases interest and makes charity grow. So the real way to fight riba was never only to stand and condemn it. Nouman Ali Khan presses this point hard, because it is where his whole reading turns outward into something we can build. You do not defeat riba by giving fiery speeches against the banks year after year while nothing changes. You defeat it by building the lawful, fruitful alternative until the predatory thing has nothing left to feed on, real business, real giving, real provision, honest enterprise that employs families and circulates clean wealth and generates the zakat and the sadaqah that grow a whole blessed economy. He even opens the word for lawful itself, halal, and finds in its root the sense of a knot untied, something set loose to spread and not be contained. Allah wants the good to spread. That is the mindset, he says, that the believer is meant to bring to wealth, not a retreat from the world but a clean and generous mastery of it.

What this example asks of our hearts

Turn the picture around now, all the way around, because the verse was never really about distant tycoons in glass towers. It is a

parable about an appetite, and every single one of us is fed by one. The question it presses on you is quieter and far more uncomfortable than which banker is the worst. It is this: when you want a thing badly enough, do you still stop to ask whether it is clean? Or does the wanting take the wheel, until lawful and unlawful blur together and all you can see is the one thing you have decided you must have? That, Nouman Ali Khan would have us notice, is the first tremor of the touch, the very same faint contact that, left alone and fed, becomes the beating that knocks a man flat. The financier who feels nothing as he ruins a thousand families did not begin there. He began with one small thing he wanted and would not question. We are looking, in this image, not at a stranger, but at the far end of a road whose first step we take all the time.

And there is the deeper diagnosis to sit with, the one underneath the money. Greed, in this reading, is at root a failure of gratitude. It is being handed a hundred lawful blessings and going blind to all of them because of the one thing you were told to leave alone. It is Adam in the garden of everything, staring at the single tree. So the question the parable asks is not only is what I want clean, but can I even still see what I already have? The man who is grateful, who can lift his eyes from the one forbidden thing to the abundance already in his hands, is the man the enemy cannot reel in, because the bucket only works on the creature that has forgotten the rest of the field.

And the verse will not leave you standing in fear without showing you the door, because the same passage that is severe is also wide open with mercy. It is severe, severe enough, a few verses on, to speak of a war declared by Allah and His Messenger ﷺ on those who refuse to stop:

And if you do not, then be informed of a war [against you] from Allāh and His Messenger. But if you repent, you may have your principal - [thus] you do no wrong, nor are you wronged.

QUR'AN 2:279

But look how the same breath that warns of war opens its hand. Repent, it says, and you keep your principal, wronging no one and wronged by no one. And back in the central verse itself: whoever receives this reminder from his Lord and stops, what is past is forgiven, and his affair is left to Allah. The man knocked flat is not a sentence anyone has to serve. He is a warning held up while we can still heed it. He is shown to us precisely so that we will get up before greed costs us the ability to. That is the mercy folded inside the harshness, that the picture comes early enough to save us.

So tonight, do the one honest thing this example asks. Look at the thing you most want, the appetite that quietly runs you, whatever it is, and ask whether you still care that it is clean, and whether you can still see everything Allah has already placed in your hands. Loosen the grip of that wanting while you still can. And turn back

toward the One who can give you everything you truly need without ever once needing you to harm a soul to get it. O Allah, guard us from the greed buried in our own souls, keep us tender the way You taught the giver to be tender, make us grateful for the lawful good already in our hands and content with it, and let us turn back to You before any appetite knocks us off our feet. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 9. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Adam and Jesus

Two men, each made by a single word

In all of the Qur'an, search as you like, there is only one place where Allah sets two prophets down beside each other and says, in effect, look closely, this one is like that one. He could have paired any two He wished. He chose the two whose entry into the world broke every rule by which a human being has ever come to be. Adam, peace be upon him, who had no mother and no father, formed from the dust of the earth. And Isa, peace be upon him, the son of Maryam, peace be upon her, who had a mother and no father at all. Two exceptions in the whole long history of birth, and Allah lays them side by side in a single sentence.

It is the most carefully placed example in the entire series, and it is the most sensitive. Because around this one verse, for centuries, sat the most learned people of two great faiths, each with a long and confident answer to the oldest question that could be asked about Isa: who exactly was he? And Allah does not meet their volumes with a volume of His own. He does not argue across pages. He draws one picture, sets the two men in the same light, and the picture settles what the argument had been labouring at for generations. To feel the weight of how He does it, you first have to know who He was speaking to.

Spoken to the scholars, not the crowd

The Qur'an knows its audience precisely, and Nouman Ali Khan asks us to notice how its address shifts as the revelation moves. In Makkah, a large part of the audience were idol-worshippers, people with their own traditions and gods and inherited culture, and Allah spoke to them in the language of their own world, from inside their own assumptions. But when the Prophet ﷺ came to Madinah, the address turned. In surah al-Baqarah, Allah speaks to the Children of Israel, and the language tells you He is not addressing the Jewish community at large but its scholars in particular, the rabbis, the learned men who carried the tradition. And in surah Aal Imran, something parallel happens, except now the address leans toward the Christian world, and again not toward Christians in general but toward their scholars: the ministers, the deacons, the ordained, the men who had spent long years in monasteries working out, with great care, exactly what to believe about Isa.

This, he says, is one of the quiet revolutions of the Qur'an. When people set out to win others to a religion, they almost always go to the least educated first, to the villages, to the people least equipped to argue back. Missionaries seek out the unschooled. The Qur'an does the precise opposite. It walks up to the most qualified theologians of Judaism and the most qualified theologians of Christianity and begins to question them on their own ground, to challenge them where they are strongest. It is, he notes, unheard of, unprecedented in the history of religions. So when this likeness is struck, it is not aimed at someone who had never given

Isa a thought. It is aimed at the people who had thought about him the most, who had built entire systems of belief on the answer, and it meets them there, at the height of their learning.

The whole theology it was answering

To feel the force of the verse, we have to say plainly what the people around it believed, because the verse is shaped, word for word, to answer it. Nouman Ali Khan walks through the Christian theology of his subject, and he is careful, each time, to remind his listeners of something we must keep in front of us too: everything in this account is their telling, not Islam's. We carry it only the way he carries it, to understand what the ayah is responding to.

It began, in that account, with Adam. God, they said, made Adam in His own image, made him almost divine, formed so perfectly that he was nearly like God himself. Then came the single command not to eat from the tree, and the eating, and with it the fall. That perfect image, in their telling, cracked like glass, shattered, was damaged beyond any repair a human being could manage. And from that crack, every human after Adam was born into a damaged image, carrying an inherited brokenness, an original wound that no amount of good deeds could ever mend. The whole of humanity was sent down to the earth, in their account, as a punishment for that first sin: to toil and sweat for bread, to suffer, to die. The world itself became the sentence.

And here, they reasoned, was the trap with no exit. The one who broke the image was the human being, so only a human being

could be the one to mend it. But the human being was the very thing that was broken, too corrupt and too wretched ever to repair himself, however much good he did. So a solution was needed that humanity could not supply, and the answer they reached was staggering: God Himself would become a man, and through that man repair what the first man had broken, even sacrifice himself to pay for the brokenness. From there grew a long contrast, drawn out by their great theologians across the centuries, setting the two figures against each other point by point. Adam was given an easy command and could not keep it; Isa was given the hardest command imaginable and did not refuse it. Adam disobeyed and listened to the devil; Isa conquered the devil. Adam brought death into the world; Isa would bring life that never ends. Two men set in opposition, one the wound and one the cure, and beneath the whole of it the idea that in the beginning there was the Word, and the Word had become flesh and walked among them.

Two corrections, then one verse

Before Allah strikes the comparison itself, He quietly takes apart the foundation the whole contrast was built on. He retells the story of Adam from the beginning, and Nouman Ali Khan draws out the corrections that matter most.

The first is about what Adam was. Allah never made him divine. What was placed in Adam was the ruh, a breath by Allah's own command, something special, yes, but never a piece of God, never a cracked fragment of divinity. It is exactly this, he notes, that was

mistaken for godhood: a soul breathed in by a special decree of Allah, which is His command, not His essence. Hold that word, command, because it is about to become the hinge of everything.

The second correction is about why we are here. We were never sent to this earth as a punishment for an inherited crack. The Qur'an rejects that from the start, and it does so by the very way it orders the telling. In the two places where Adam's story is given in detail, surah al-Baqarah and surah al-A'raf, Allah does something deliberate before He ever reaches the story: He describes how beautiful He made this world, how much provision He laid out across it, how much sustenance He set here for all of us, and how little gratitude we show in return. Only then does He tell us how we came to be here. And that ordering, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is itself the argument. If this world were a prison, you would describe the horror of the cell before explaining how the prisoner ended up in it. A jail is not introduced as a paradise. Allah describes a gift, lavish and undeserved, and then tells the story of our arrival. Adam, in fact, was made for the earth from the very beginning; the garden was a training ground, a place to learn the danger of the whisper before being sent to the life he was always made for. This world was never the sentence. It was always the gift.

With the ground cleared, the towering contrast between Adam the broken and Isa the perfect is met, not with a counter-argument, but with a single sentence.

The likeness struck

Indeed, the example of Jesus to Allah is like that of Adam. He created him from dust; then He said to him, "Be," and he was.

QUR'AN 3:59

Read it slowly, because Allah has folded an entire library into it. They had spent centuries spinning a contrast, Adam against Isa, the wound against the cure. Allah sets the two not against each other but beside each other, and the likeness is exact: the example of one is like the example of the other. Then the first move. He created him from dust. That phrase alone, Nouman Ali Khan notes, gently returns both men to what they truly are. Not gods, not halves of God, not perfect images cracked or uncracked, but creations, brought into being by the One who is Himself neither created nor a creator's equal. To say a man was made from dust is to close the door on his divinity in five words.

And then the heart of it: then He said to him, "Be," and he was. Here the verse turns and faces, directly, the one idea they could not let go of. They had built so much on the Word, on the saying that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was Isa, the Word made flesh. So Allah meets them exactly there. Yes, says the reading Nouman Ali Khan draws out, Isa came to be by a word: kun, Be. But so did Adam, by the very same command, from the very same source. If you are so taken with the idea of the Word,

then look closely at what that word actually is. It is the creative command of the one God, the same kun that brought Adam out of dust, the same kind of command that once told a roaring fire to be cool and safe over Ibrahim, peace be upon him, and it was. The word that made Isa is not a second god walking the earth. It is Allah's own command, and a command is not a partner. A miracle worked by that command is not a rival to the One who commands. It is His signature.

This same answer the angel had already given to Maryam herself, before the child was ever conceived, when she asked the only question a pure woman could ask:

She said, "My Lord, how will I have a child when no man has touched me?" [The angel] said, "Such is Allah; He creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is.

QUR'AN 3:47

He creates what He wills. When He decrees a thing He says to it, Be, and it is. The birth that the world would build a divinity upon was, from the first announcement, described as nothing more and nothing less than an act of the Creator's will, the same will by which everything that exists was spoken into being.

No father, and what it really proves

The strangeness of Isa's birth was the hinge on which everything turned, and it turned, remarkably, in two opposite directions at once. Nouman Ali Khan sets the two errors side by side, because the single verse answers both. For one community, a child with no father could only mean something more than human: a son of God, a divine birth, the miracle that proved his godhood. For the other, a child with no named father could only mean something less, and they said so with real cruelty, casting a slander on his birth and on his mother that the Qur'an elsewhere rises to defend. Two communities, standing on the very same fact, drawing opposite and equally wrong conclusions from it. And this one verse corrects them both in a single stroke.

He tells it through a conversation he once had, in his younger days, half-curious and half-mischievous, the kind of in-person questioning he laughs at himself for now. He was on a train, memorising, and beside him sat a man reading the Wall Street Journal, clearly a finance man, who looked over and asked what he was studying. They began to talk, and the man said he was Catholic. So, Nouman Ali Khan asked him, your whole belief is that Isa is the son of God because he was born of a virgin, with no father, and that is the miracle? Yes, said the man. Then what, he asked, about Adam, who had no father and no mother at all? If a birth with no father makes Isa divine, then Adam is twice the miracle, born with no parents whatsoever, and you do not call Adam a son of God.

That, precisely, is the logic of the ayah. A birth without a father is not proof of divinity, because the man who came before him was made with no parents of any kind and remained, fully and only, a man, an honoured prophet and a servant of his Lord. So to the one who exalted Isa too high, the verse says gently: the very miracle you point to does not make him a son, for here is a greater miracle who was never called one. And to the one who sneered at his birth, the same verse says: why do you find it impossible? If Allah could make Adam from no father and no mother at all, He can surely make Isa from a mother alone. Two arguments, fired from opposite directions, answered with one likeness. The thing both sides fought over was never a flaw and never a divinity. It was a sign, pointing past itself to the One who can simply say Be, and it is.

The truth, and the temptation to call it a mystery

The conversation on the train had an ending, and it is the ending the next verse anticipates. When every argument had been met, when the logic had closed every door, the man finally said: well, I suppose that is the mystery of faith. And Nouman Ali Khan pauses there, because that single word opens onto the verse that follows the likeness.

The truth is from your Lord, so do not be among the doubters.

QUR'AN 3:60

Look at the word the Qur'an chooses for the people it warns against here, al-mumtarin. He draws out its root, and it carries exactly what the man on the train reached for: confusion, ambiguity, being caught in doubt, a thing left unclear. One tradition, he observes, was content for the very centre of its belief to remain a mystery, unclear by design, something not to be resolved but to be held in awe precisely because it could not be understood. The Qur'an offers the opposite. It does not present its core as a fog you must accept without seeing through it. The truth is from your Lord, plainly, clearly, so do not be of those who let it dissolve into confusion. Clarity, in the Qur'an's hand, is not the enemy of faith. Clarity is the mercy.

And notice the mercy in how the whole picture is built, because this is where reverence is everything. Allah does not mock anyone. He does not ridicule the people who got it wrong. He returns Isa to his true and honoured place, a word and a sign from his Lord, and He returns Adam to his, and He lets the clarity itself do the work. There is no need to argue for an hour when one likeness, set in the light, settles in a single moment what the argument had been struggling toward. The verse corrects, but it never sneers. It restores Isa to his honour even as it answers those who misplaced it.

The harmonies hidden in the Book

Once you have seen the likeness, Nouman Ali Khan points to a handful of small wonders woven around it, the kind anyone can

check for themselves in any Qur'an app, and he is careful to offer them as exactly that: observations to sit with, not doctrines to lean on. They are a tadabbur, a reflection on the way the Book is built, and the modesty with which he gives them is part of their beauty.

There is a quiet symmetry in the two lives the verse pairs. Adam was brought down to the earth; Isa was raised up from it. The one descended, the other ascended, and the verse that links them carries that mirroring inside it. Then the counting. Across the whole of the Qur'an, the name Adam appears, and the name Isa appears, the very same number of times, neither favoured over the other in the frequency of his mention. And if you read from the opening of the Book and track where each name first falls, the place where Isa is named in this very verse is the seventh time his name has been spoken, and the place where Adam is named here is, likewise, the seventh. The verse says the likeness of the one is like the likeness of the other, and the text itself is arranged so that they are alike, mention for mention, position for position.

These are not the foundation of anything; the theology stands without them. But they do something to the heart. They are a reminder that the Book whose every word about Isa is so deliberately placed, so exactly balanced, is not the labour of a man weighing arguments at a desk. It is arranged by the One who was being argued about.

And see, last of all, what the Qur'an is truly doing in the whole of this. It is not setting Isa against the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, as though forcing the listener to choose between two men. Nouman

Ali Khan notes that the Qur'an spends far less effort introducing these communities to the Prophet ﷺ than it spends reintroducing them to Isa himself, and to his mother Maryam, peace be upon her: to who they truly were, beneath the story that had grown up over them across the centuries. It is not Isa versus Muhammad ﷺ. It is the altered Isa against the true Isa. You keep saying his name, the Qur'an says in effect, so come and be honest about who he was. The conversation is held on common ground, and made with respect. The same mercy that returns Isa to his true and honoured place is the mercy held out to the one who is listening.

What this example asks of our hearts

This example was struck for the scholars of two great faiths, but turn it now toward yourself, because the test folded inside it is the test of every human heart, and it has nothing to do with which books you have read. It is the oldest temptation there is: to be given a sign so dazzling that you stop at the sign and forget the One it was sent to point you toward. They saw a man born without a father, a man who healed the blind and the leper and gave life back to the dead by Allah's leave, and the wonder of it was so overwhelming that, for many, it eclipsed the Giver entirely, and the sign itself became, in their eyes, a son of God. The whole of this verse is Allah turning the eye gently back: past the gift to the Giver, past the miracle to the One who said Be, and it was.

And here is the part that should make you sit very still, because you have your own dazzling signs. A child placed, impossibly, into

your arms. A recovery the doctors could not explain. A door that swung open in the very moment you had finally given up on it. Provision that arrived from a direction you were not even watching. These are your miracles, every one of them worked by the same command that made Adam from dust and Isa from a mother alone. And the question this ayah leaves resting on you is exactly the question it left resting on them: when something in your life takes the breath out of you, does your heart stop at the gift, or does it travel through the gift to the One who simply said Be, and it was? The hard heart stops at the sign and adores it. The living heart reads the sign and is carried by it straight home to the One who sent it.

To love Isa rightly, the Qur'an teaches us, is to love what he always was: a servant and a messenger of Allah, a word from Him and a sign of His power, born of the pure and honoured Maryam, given to heal and to raise the dead by his Lord's leave, raised up alive to his Lord, and never, for one moment, a partner to the One who made him. That is not a lowering of him. It is the truth about him, told with the reverence he is owed, and it is the very honour he asked for himself when he spoke from the cradle as a newborn and said, before anything else, that he was the servant of Allah. To honour him beyond that is not to love him more. It is to mistake the sign for the One it points to, the exact error this verse was struck to undo.

So let this example leave you reading the whole of your own life the way it teaches you to read Isa: never stopping at the sign, al-

ways travelling through it to the One it points to. The truth is from your Lord. Do not stop short of Him. Do not let any gift of His, however breathtaking, stand for one instant between you and the Giver. O Allah, keep our hearts certain wherever You have made the truth clear, and never of those who let it dissolve into doubt. Honour Isa and Maryam in our hearts exactly as You honour them, peace be upon them, no higher and no lower. And let no sign of Yours, no mercy, no wonder, no gift, ever come between us and You, but make every one of them a road that carries us back to the One who said, Be, and it was. Rabbana amanna bima anzalta wat-taba'na ar-rasula faktubna ma'a ash-shahidin. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 10. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Biting wind

A wind with frost in it, come down on a field that was doomed already

Imagine standing at the edge of a field that someone has poured a life into. The land was chosen and paid for. The seed was carried out by the sack and pressed into the soil. A whole season went into it: the watching of the sky, the labour of the back, the slow hope that one morning the green would come up and then the gold, and the granary would fill, and all of it would have been worth it. And then one morning a wind comes through. Not a wind that bends the wheat and passes. A wind with a cold inside it so sharp that it does not merely flatten the crop, it kills it, down past the stalks, down into the roots, down into the ground itself, until the field is not damaged but dead, and nothing will grow there again. The owners come out and stand at the edge of it and look. Everything they put in is simply gone, in a single night.

That is the picture Allah strikes in Surah Aal Imran, and He holds it up to a very particular kind of person: the one who spends everything he has to put out the light of Allah. This is the eleventh of our walk through these striking examples, and to feel why the cold in this wind cuts all the way to the bone, you have to know what was happening in the year the verse came down, and you have to let the Qur'an itself name the third kind of spender it had been waiting to draw.

The spending that was still missing

Nouman Ali Khan opens this example by reaching back, because Aal Imran does not stand alone. It is the companion of al-Baqarah before it, and the two of them, he says, are almost like two sides of a single coin: you complete the picture by holding them together. Al-Baqarah was, in a sense, the surah revealed before the first battle, its second half a preparation of the believers for what was coming. Aal Imran is the commentary after, the surah that speaks once the fighting and the wounding have already happened. And one of the threads that ties the two halves of that coin together is the question of how a person spends.

In al-Baqarah, two kinds of spending had already been painted. The believer who gives for the sake of Allah was drawn as a single seed that bursts into seven ears, every ear bearing a hundred grains, multiplying out toward infinity. Then the one whose giving was spoiled, the one who spends for the wrong reason, or who follows his charity with reminders and injury and the expectation of favours owed back, was drawn as a thin layer of soil over a smooth rock, washed bare by a single rain until nothing was left on the stone at all. Two spendings, painted in full. But the opening of al-Baqarah had named three groups, not two: the believer, the hypocrite, and the one who rejects. The spending of the believer had been shown. The spending of the hypocrite had been shown. One was still missing. The spending of the one who disbelieves had not yet been drawn anywhere.

Here, in Aal Imran, it is finally drawn. And the Qur'an sets it down exactly where it belongs, right after a verse about those who reject Allah:

Indeed, those who disbelieve - never will their wealth or their children avail them against Allah at all, and those are the companions of the Fire; they will abide therein eternally.

QUR'AN 3:116

So when the very next verse opens with the example of what they spend, the word they, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is a pronoun, and a pronoun reaches back to the nearest noun. The nearest noun is in the verse just before: those who disbelieved. This is not a general comment on anyone's charity. It is the spending of the one who has set himself against the truth, the third spender the Qur'an had left undrawn, and the image it has saved for him is the harshest of the three.

The wind with frost in it

Now the picture itself.

The example of what they spend in this worldly life is like that of a wind containing frost which strikes the harvest of a people who have wronged themselves and destroys it. And Allah has not wronged them, but they wrong themselves.

QUR'AN 3:117

There is a wind, and inside the wind there is something the Arabic calls *sirr*. Nouman Ali Khan is careful with this word, because it is easy to flatten it into nothing more than cold. The Arabs already had their words for cold; they did not need another one. *Sirr*, he explains, did not start out meaning cold at all, but it became so tied to a particular kind of wind, a wind so freezing that it bites, that it came to carry that whole sense on its own. This is not the chill you feel on your skin and then forget. It is the cold the people of Manchester and Oldham know in their bones, he says, the kind that seems to pass straight through the body, a freezing that does real harm. So picture not a breeze ruffling the heads of the wheat. Picture a killing frost riding on a wind, and a field underneath it.

And then the second word he slows down on: the wind strikes their *harth*. We hear harvest and think only of the standing crop, the part you can see. But *harth*, Nouman Ali Khan explains, is not only the visible plants. It is the whole enterprise: the land, the seed, the labour, the season, the entire operation gathered into one word. And a frost severe enough does not only ruin the plants for a year. Past a certain point of cold, he says, it can damage the soil itself, so that even after the freeze has lifted and the season has turned, you still cannot grow anything there. The ground is finished. That is what this wind does. It does not pause the harvest. It does not set it back. It comes down on the entire thing and leaves it dead, soil and all, so that everything ever put in is not delayed but simply gone.

The field was lost before the wind arrived

Then comes a detail it is dangerously easy to read straight past. The wind strikes the harvest of a people who have wronged themselves. Nouman Ali Khan draws out something quiet and devastating here. Before a single gust has blown, the verse has already told you that the real problem was never the weather. These were people who planted in the wrong place.

Think about what farming actually asks of a person, he says. You cannot simply grow any crop anywhere you please. You have to study the land and the climate, or you will sink everything into ground that was never going to yield. And he has felt this himself. A place can look beautiful in the spring, green and alive and inviting, so that you stand there and think, this is where I will build, this is good ground. And then the winter comes through that same place, and the wind cuts to the bone, and everything freezes. He drove through Massachusetts once with the heating broken in his car and the contact lens solution frozen solid in its case; he has known a Michigan winter where the breeze goes through your body; he knows a Texas summer that turns a pleasant place into somewhere you would not want to stand. The same ground is life in one season and death in another. The people in this parable looked at a doomed field in its kind season and called it a sound investment. So the frost did not create their loss. It only revealed a loss that had already been decided the moment they chose that ground. The wind was simply Allah letting their own choice arrive.

And then the verse turns the blame with its own hands. Allah did not wrong them; they wronged themselves. They will stand over the dead field, Nouman Ali Khan says, and ask, why is this happening to us, and the answer is already sitting in the verse before they ask it. Not the cold. You. The very phrase that named them at the start, a people who have wronged themselves, comes back at the end so that no one can miss it: but they wrong themselves. This was never something done to them. It was something they did, and went on doing, to themselves.

What the field actually was

To feel the full weight of the image, you have to stand where the first listeners were standing. Aal Imran came down in the years after Badr, where a small and badly outnumbered band around the Prophet ﷺ had stunned the most powerful people in all of Arabia, and after Uhud, where those same believers had been deeply wounded. Mecca was no longer merely annoyed. At Badr, Nouman Ali Khan says, they had come with arrogance in their eyes; they had underestimated a group of exiles they thought were powerless, and they had taken a beating from an army a third of their size. Now they had blood in their eyes. The survivors were pouring money into a far larger force, three or four times the size of the one that had lost, determined never to be caught off guard again. And they were not finished there.

He sets the cost of it before us so we do not picture this lightly. In that world, a single sword was not a small thing to own. A shield, a

piece of body armour, could be two or three generations of a family's savings bound up in one object. When you read that an army had only so many swords or so many horses, that is because such things were extraordinarily expensive. And when you lose a battle, the enemy strips the weapons and the armour from your fallen as spoils and walks away with them. So the believers, after Uhud, were not only wounded; they were materially devastated, weakened in exactly the things war is fought with. And Quraysh could see it. They began to think there was an opportunity here to finish the matter for good.

The campaign grew from there into something larger than a battle. They would go to other tribes, Nouman Ali Khan explains, tribes who had no quarrel with Islam at all, no skin in this game whatsoever, and they would buy them in. Not with ideology, because these tribes did not care about ideology, but with the promise of easy plunder: come, the people of Madinah are weak right now, we will not fight a battle, we will enter the city itself, and there will be property and captives and easy money for everyone. And to make that pitch land, Quraysh spent their own credibility as the big power of the region, the heavyweight whose name made a venture look safe. Tribe by tribe, the coalition swelled into the tens of thousands.

That entire campaign is the field in the parable. The horses, the weapons, the supplies, the alliances bought with plunder, every coin laid down to wipe Islam off the earth: a harvest they were certain would pay. And notice the tense, Nouman Ali Khan says, be-

cause it is doing quiet work. The verse does not say the example of what they spent. It says what they spend, present and ongoing, still spending and still to spend. This is not a comment on a war already lost and over. It is Allah, in the middle of the believers' fear and weakness, telling them softly that the enemy is still pouring everything in, that the next assault is still coming, and that the harvest they are betting their fortunes on is already a frozen field. The believers simply cannot see it yet.

And then the wind actually came

Here is the part that gives Nouman Ali Khan pause, and should give us pause too. The parable spoke of a wind. And not long after this verse, the coalition it had described actually formed and marched, tens of thousands of fighters, the largest force the believers had ever faced, and they dug in around Madinah for a siege. And when Allah describes what undid them, look at the word He chose:

O you who have believed, remember the favor of Allah upon you when armies came to [attack] you and We sent upon them a wind and armies [of angels] you did not see. And ever is Allah, of what you do, Seeing.

QUR'AN 33:9

A wind. An army camped outside a city, Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, does not carry an endless supply of food and water; it has to

keep cooking over open fires, keep its animals tied, keep the deliveries coming. And one night a fierce wind came tearing through that camp. It scattered the fires. It overturned the cooking pots. It tore the tents and sent the terrified horses and camels bolting off into the dark. The siege broke. The massive, expensive, painstakingly assembled harvest of that coalition yielded them nothing, and they went home empty-handed, with their credibility broken alongside it, the first real crack in the long fall of Quraysh. The parable had said a wind would come down on the field of those who spend against the truth. And then a wind, real and literal, came down on the field. Allah had been speaking precisely the whole time. He drew the picture first, and then He let history fill it in.

And there is a smaller, sharper precision underneath it. In the verse before the parable, Allah had spoken of their wealth and their children, specific things. But in the parable itself He says what they spend, whatever they spend, and Nouman Ali Khan hears something in that loosening of the words. It is as if Allah is saying it does not matter what they bring, because whatever it is, it is nothing. All those tribes, each hauling in who knows what, and against the plan of Allah it amounts to a man throwing handfuls of sand at a wall and waiting for it to fall. That, he says, is the actual point. Not the empty rhetoric of pounding the table and shouting that the disbelievers can spend whatever they like and will never win. The point is far more sobering: when the believers are truly on their mission, then whatever the enemy spends does nothing, and when they are

not, the guarantee was never theirs to lean on like a placebo in the first place.

Everything they put in, and it counted for nothing

Nouman Ali Khan is careful not to let us turn this into a comfortable story about us and them. There is a second reading of this verse that the scholars give, he says, and both readings deserve our attention, because the second one turns the mirror back toward every human being alive, including the one reading this.

This verse, in that second sense, is also about how Allah weighs the good done by a person who is fundamentally set against Him. A man can be at war with the truth and still, here and there, do something good. Even someone like Abu Jahl, who insulted the Prophet ﷺ and defied Allah openly, may well have taken care of an orphan, or been generous to his own family. You see it in every age, Nouman Ali Khan says: people deep in something corrupt who still look after the old woman down the street, still carry her groceries, still do the occasional kindness. And one of the reasons they do it, he observes, is a whisper inside: I do a great deal of harm, so let me put a little something on the other side of the ledger, so I can tell myself I am not all bad. Morality becomes a transaction. So many sins on this side, a few good deeds on that side, and the books are balanced, and the conscience is eased. Quraysh themselves were proud of feeding the pilgrims and tending the Sacred House even as they drove the believers out.

But the scale does not work like that, the parable warns. If a life is rooted in the rejection of the One who gave it everything, then even the good in it is planted in frozen ground. It is the same image the Qur'an strikes elsewhere, of deeds gathered up only to be scattered:

And We will approach [i.e., regard] what they have done of deeds and make them as dust dispersed.

QUR'AN 25:23

Not because kindness is worthless. But because a kindness offered while the heart is turned away from its Creator has no soil to grow in. The field was chosen wrong. The frost takes all of it, the good along with the rest.

And then one last turn, the gentlest and the sharpest at once. The verse says what they spend in this worldly life, in this closest, nearest life. Why add that, Nouman Ali Khan asks, when of course they are spending in this world and not the next; no one imagined otherwise. He hears in it a quiet diagnosis of where their whole horizon ends. They are people so immersed in the now that the only reason they spend at all is that they cannot imagine anything beyond it. Every expense, every investment, is laid down here in the hope of a return that comes back here, in this life, and nowhere else. It is the exact opposite of the believer's spending, which Allah promised would be returned in full, though not always

in this world. For these, everything is here. And the world is precisely the field the frost is coming for.

What this example asks of our hearts

It would be an easy thing to read this parable as a report on an old war, the comeuppance of an enemy who lost long ago, and to set it down feeling reassured that the wind always comes for them. That reading would miss the question the verse puts to us. Strip away the armies and the centuries, and what is left is a simple, searching question Nouman Ali Khan will not let us walk past: you spend a whole life, but is the field one that can hold a harvest?

Because you do spend. All day, every day. Hours, money, attention, effort, the years of the one life you have been given. That is the constant. The only thing the parable actually asks is where you are sowing it. Have you studied the field, or are you sinking everything into ground the frost has already claimed, chasing a return that ends the moment this world does? The believer's charity in al-Baqarah grew into seven hundred not because the act was magic, but because of where it was planted, given for the sake of Allah, sown in soil that yields forever. The very same act, done for show, or to fight the truth, or for a payoff that stops at the edge of this life, is the frozen field: the labour real, the cost real, and the harvest nothing at all.

And this is the place to be honest with the word of Allah in both directions, the way Nouman Ali Khan insists we must be. When the Qur'an points its finger at the disbeliever, we take that. But when it

turns and points at us, we have to take that too. It is far too easy to read the wind that scattered the coalition and feel only the warm glow of a team that always wins, as if our share of the work were already done and we were merely waiting for Allah to freeze the enemy's assets for us. That is the placebo. The truth is that Allah gave victory to the believers when they were on their mission, and the same surah that carries this parable says, a little further on, do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior, if you are believers. If is not a decoration on the end of that promise. It is the whole condition. So if we ever find ourselves not in that superior position, the verse sends us back to check where we stand in our iman and what that iman is asking of us, rather than to assume the wind owes us anything.

So do not weaken and do not grieve, and you will be superior if you are [true] believers.

QUR'AN 3:139

So take the question of this parable into your own ordinary days, before you pour out the next hour, the next year, the next stretch of your strength. Do not ask first how much you are putting in. Ask where it is going. Plant in the ground Allah blessed, the deed done for His sake, the wealth given to please Him, the years spent in His obedience, and no wind that ever blows can touch it. Plant against Him, or only for this nearest life, and you are tending a field the frost has already visited, however green it looks in its kind season. The season is still yours. Choose your soil while it is. O Allah, do

not let us labour for a harvest the wind will take; do not let our spending be sown in frozen ground; and plant the work of our hands and our hearts in the soil You have blessed, that yields in this life and the next, until we meet You having sown well. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 11. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Lured by devils

The one pulled off the cliff, wandering, with friends calling him home

Picture someone climbing. For a long time he was lost in the low country, in the heat and the haze, with no road and no view and no idea which way the land even sloped. And then, at last, he found the high road. The one with a direction. The one with a clear edge and a long sight of where it was going. He is walking it now, carefully, along the lip of a cliff, with the whole valley spread out below him and the sky open above. He has never been this high. He has never been this sure of his feet.

Then hands come up out of the rocks below him. Not one hand, several, reaching out of the broken ground at the cliff's base, and they get a grip on his ankles, and they pull. He is over the edge before he can catch himself, down through the air, and he lands hard on the low ground with his head ringing. When the ringing stops and he comes back to himself, he does not look up at the road he fell from and start to climb. He does not even try. He gets to his feet and he wanders, this way and that across the flat, with no idea where he is or where he had been going. And up on the path he fell from, leaning over the edge with their hands cupped around their mouths, are people who love him, and they are calling his name. Come back. Come up to us. We are here. He hears them. And he keeps wandering.

That is the picture Allah strikes in Surah al-An'am, and Nouman Ali Khan calls it one of the most precise pieces of curriculum in the whole Qur'an on how a human being loses their faith, and how the people who love them are meant to respond. To feel the weight of it, you have to know who was being pulled, and by whom, and from what.

The surah of the long argument

Al-An'am came down in Makkah, and there are reports that this long surah was revealed all at once, in a single descent. Read it from the beginning, even in translation, and you feel the shape of it immediately. It is wave after wave of dialogue with people who do not believe: that Muhammad ﷺ is a messenger, that there will be a day of reckoning, that any of this is real. Their objections are raised and answered. Their questions are turned gently back on them. The whole surah is a long, patient argument with a hostile room.

The first parable of the surah arrives at a very particular point in that argument. Just before it, in the verse before our verse, the Prophet ﷺ is given a sharp instruction. Allah tells him to walk away from a certain kind of person:

And leave those who take their religion as amusement and diversion and whom the worldly life has deluded. But remind with it [i.e., the Qur'an], lest a soul be given up to destruction for what it earned; it will have other than Allah no protector and no intercessor. And if it should offer every compensation, it would not be taken from it [i.e., that soul]. Those are the ones who are given to destruction for what they have earned. For them will be a drink of scalding water and a painful punishment because they used to disbelieve.

QUR'AN 6:70

Leave the ones who have taken their religion as a game, an entertainment, a distraction, whom the life of this world has fooled. Nouman Ali Khan opens this line out, because it is one of the most comprehensive things the Qur'an says about what religion had become for almost everybody except the believer. For most people in most places, he says, religion was never about the next life at all. It was a way to feel good. It drew the crowd with a festival, with colour and music and prizes, something to keep the people entertained and, very often, something the powerful used to keep the public asleep. He points to the old observation that religion can be the opiate of the masses, a way of keeping people pleasantly disconnected from reality so that those in power can go on doing as they like, and to put the people back to sleep the moment they begin to stir.

And at the individual level it is the same shrunken thing: the festival survives, and nothing else. The believer, against all of that, had walked away toward something completely different. The believer was not shopping. Notice, Nouman Ali Khan says, how thoroughly the Qur'an dismantles that whole machinery of transaction elsewhere, when Allah declares that He wants nothing from His servants at all:

And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me. I do not want from them any provision, nor do I want them to feed Me.

QUR'AN 51:56-57

There is no payment system here. There is no goat to sacrifice, no offering to leave at the foot of the idol so the harvest comes or the enemy falls. The God who made you wants nothing of yours and feeds you Himself. The believers had left the spiritual marketplace entirely, and the people they left behind wanted them back.

The two weapons that never change

So now the answer the believers are taught to give. And look at how Allah frames it, Nouman Ali Khan says, because the Prophet ﷺ is addressed alone, and then in the very next breath he is made to speak for everyone who has believed behind him, as one voice:

Say, "Shall we invoke instead of Allah that which neither benefits us nor harms us and be turned back on our heels after Allah has guided us? [We would then be] like one whom the devils enticed [to wander] upon the earth confused, [while] he has companions inviting him to guidance, [calling], 'Come to us.'" Say, "Indeed, the guidance of Allah is the [only] guidance; and we have been commanded to submit to the Lord of the worlds.

QUR'AN 6:71

Shall we call on something that cannot help us and cannot hurt us, and be turned back on our heels after Allah has guided us? Folded inside that one question, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is the exact campaign that was being run against the new Muslims, and it has been run against believers in every age since. Imagine one of the young Companions, seventeen or eighteen, freshly Muslim, and his older brother sitting him down. Everybody hates you now. Mother has not eaten in three days because of this. You are embarrassing the whole family. Is it a girl? Just tell me if it is a girl. Name one person we respect in this tribe who does not think this man you follow is a liar. You are throwing your future away; nobody will marry you, nobody will do business with you, we will have to cut you off, and I do not want to do that, you are my brother. And then the arm comes around the shoulder, and the voice softens. You do not even have to believe in any of it. Just do it for father. Just pretend, for his sake. Come back, and all of this goes

away. Tell you what, father gave me those two horses; they are yours. Just come back. I will check on you tomorrow.

Two weapons, Nouman Ali Khan says, and they are always the same two. A disbelieving society offers a believer benefit if he becomes more like them, and harm if he refuses. Here are the good things waiting for you if you come back to us; here is everything you will lose if you hold on. Whether it is the year of the Prophet ﷺ or this very year, those two forces are always in the room, the carrot and the stick, the promise and the threat. And the believer's reply is a small, deliberate act of defiance. Notice the precise wording, he says: the thing they are being lured back to is something that can neither benefit nor harm. Not someone, something. It is reduced to a what, an inanimate nothing, with no power to give and no power to take. So the answer carries two refusals at once: we are not afraid of your harm, because what stands behind you is powerless, and we are not seduced by your benefit, because we have found something next to which your horses are nothing.

Turned back on the heels

There is a whole world folded into one phrase in that verse: turned back on our heels. In English the nearest thing is to beat a retreat, to spin on your heel and run back the way you came. But the Arabs used it, Nouman Ali Khan explains, for a very particular kind of failure. Imagine a man who sets out on a long and demanding journey, a three-month road, and not even a tenth of the way in he loses his nerve. It is too hot. The road is harder than he thought.

The reward at the end no longer seems worth the cost of getting there. So he tells himself it has only been a few hours, he can still cut his losses, he can turn around now and get back to the safety of home before he is too far out, too deep in, too isolated to return. And he turns on his heel and goes back to where he began, empty-handed but safe.

That, Nouman Ali Khan says, is exactly how Islam felt to those first Muslims, and exactly how it can feel to anyone walking it. Every step seems to make life harder, not easier. The family gets angrier. The money gets tighter. The friends fall away. The isolation deepens. Each step is another step into more harm and less benefit, and so the temptation sits there constantly, whispering that you could simply turn back and undo all this damage, that it is not too late.

But the believers add four words to the question that change everything, and those four words are the whole secret of staying on the road. Turned back, after Allah has guided us. Guided us to what? Not to a festival. Not to an easier life. Not to anything in this world at all. The directions came from Allah and the destination is Allah Himself. And once you can see what waits at the end of the road, the difficulty of the road stops being able to touch you. Nouman Ali Khan gives the image of a man told that three hours' walk into the desert heat there is a well, and at the bottom of it a hundred kilos of gold, guaranteed, with the directions in his hand. Offer him a hundred to turn around and he ignores you. Offer him a thousand and he laughs, because in his head he is already rich,

and the heat has simply stopped mattering. If the same well had a used plastic spoon at the bottom of it, the identical walk would feel unbearable. The heat is the same. What changes is what you can see waiting for you. When the destination is real and precious enough, he says, you will bleed and sweat and weep along the way with a smile on your face, because it is worth it. The believers had seen what was at the end of their road, and after that, nothing the world threatened them with could turn them around.

The hands on your ankles

Now the image itself, and it turns, the way his examples so often do, on a single Arabic word. The verb for what the devils did to the man comes, Nouman Ali Khan explains, from a root that means to fall, the very same root used for a star falling from its height, for something dropping from a great elevation. And the particular form of the verb here means to make someone fall, or to keep trying to make someone fall. So this is not a man who slipped. This is a man who was worked at, reached for, dragged.

He passes on Imam ar-Razi's picture of it, and it is vivid. A man is walking along the very edge of a cliff. From the broken ground below, hands reach up and take hold of his leg, hooking into him, throwing a rope around him, pulling. They are trying to make him fall, and at last they succeed. He was up there, on the high road, with the view and the direction. Now he is down here, on the low ground, with his head ringing.

And there is a second meaning braided into the same word, Nouman Ali Khan says, and it is this second meaning that makes the whole parable land. That same root gives the Arabic word hawa, which means the lowest desires: greed, lust, ego, the animal pull, the appetite for revenge, all the urges that drag a person downward. The Qur'an itself speaks elsewhere of the man who takes his own hawa as his god. So the picture is really two pictures occupying the same word at once. Devils trying to make you fall off the edge, and devils luring you down into your own desires. And that, he insists, is almost always the true story underneath a lost faith. A person can be completely convinced that Islam is true, clear in the mind and settled in the heart, and still be sliding into a dark place, and the only thing in the world with the power to do that is desire. Not the arguments. The arguments come later, as cover. Behind the eight intellectual problems someone has carefully collected with the religion, there is, far more often than not, a single hawa they are too ashamed to name, so they dress it up in philosophy instead. Debunk problem one and they leap to two, then three; answer all eight and they circle back to one, and suddenly they have somewhere they need to be. He tells of a young man who built a whole channel around supposed mistakes in the Qur'an, hunting bearded men to stump on camera, and who, when offered an actual conversation with someone who could answer him, would not take it, because the real reason was never the arguments at all.

Not one devil, but a legion

Look closely at the verse and you notice something Nouman Ali Khan will not let slide past: Allah did not say the devil enticed him. He said the devils. Plural. And the plural is deliberate, because the pull is so rarely a single source. Some of it comes from the family. Some from the old friends. Some from that one messed-up uncle you have been quietly avoiding. Some from the professor at the university, some from the employer, some from the coworker, some from the media, some from a half-followed influencer, and some, in our own day, from the algorithm itself, quietly feeding you the next thing and the next: here is a problem with your Prophet, here is a problem with your Book, watch this and in five minutes you will not be Muslim anymore. Each one of these, on its own, is a small shaytan giving a small nudge. But put them together and they become a legion, and a legion is more than enough to start working a person loose from the high ground.

And yet, Nouman Ali Khan says, our religion holds two truths here that have to be kept together, because letting go of either one is a mistake. The first truth is that your environment, by itself, cannot destroy your iman. Ibrahim stood firm in a hostile world. The Prophet ﷺ stood firm in a hostile Makkah. The Companions, and almost every soul whose faith we hold up as inspiration, stood firm while surrounded by hostility. The environment is not strong enough, on its own, to break a heart that Allah has secured. But the second truth is that you are not a robot, either: your faith is not a switch that, once flipped on, can never be moved. Both are true

at once. As strong as you may be, you still need a support. And Allah Himself binds the two together, near the end of a later surah, in a command that is the precise cure for everything this parable describes:

O you who have believed, fear Allah and be with those who are true.

QUR'AN 9:119

Be conscious of Allah, and be with the truthful. Keep the right company. It does not matter, Nouman Ali Khan says, how strong your faith is or how good your answers are to every atheist and every doubter; you, sir, and you, madam, still need people around you who reinforce your iman, who hold you up, and who are themselves true. He notes too that Allah promises elsewhere that those who believe and do good will be entered into the company of the righteous, and that He left it unrestricted to either world, this life or the next, which means it can be both. One of the things your faith simply needs is a support group of the truthful. The man in the parable fell because, in the end, he did not have one strong enough beneath him.

Come to us, not come to the truth

And then the most tender turn in the whole parable. The man is down on the low ground, wandering, lost, and Allah does not abandon him there. The verse tells us he still has companions, up

on the ridge, calling him. And look at the exact word Allah chooses for them. It is not some cool, distant word for acquaintances or associates, people who used to be around. It is *ashab*, from the root that means companionship, the word for those who spent real time close to you, who kept you company, who knew you. These are not strangers shouting at a stranger. These are the people who were close to your heart, who watched you fall, and who are still up there, leaning over the edge, calling you, because they love you enough to keep calling.

And listen to what they actually say. They do not call him to the truth. They say, come to us. There is an entire world of wisdom in that difference, Nouman Ali Khan says. To call someone to the truth is to make the case, to argue why Islam is real, to line up the proofs. But that is not what this person needs, because this person never lost the argument. He did not fall off the cliff because the evidence failed him. He fell because of something dark in his emotions, a desire, a loneliness, a wound, and what a man in that state needs is not another proof. It is a hand and a presence. Come to us. We love you. Come sit with us. Come have dinner. Just come back.

He sets that, deliberately, against the other voices, the ones who lured the man down in the first place, because those voices also call out. The old friend turns up: remember the old days, come through, you do not have to do anything, just sit with us, just drink the water while we do the rest. But what those friends are really saying, underneath, is come to your desires. Be free. Do what

makes you happy. Live your life. And the cruelty of it, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is that the moment you are actually in trouble, those same friends are nowhere to be found. You wanted to be free, did you not? Well, this is what freedom gets you. Good luck. They wanted you happy, but never at any cost to themselves. Your true companions are the opposite. When they see you fall, they do not say be free. They say come home. There is still a place kept for you here. And he reminds us, gently, that there are two ways of leaving: the one who declares it openly, and the one who is quietly, inwardly walking away while still standing among the believers, a battle being lost on the inside that no one else can see or judge. The parable, he says, is a mercy aimed at both, but perhaps most of all at the one slipping silently, whom only his own heart can hear the companions still calling.

Standing, or wandering

There is one last thing folded into this passage, Nouman Ali Khan says, and it is hidden in the geometry of the very next verse. After the believers refuse to be turned back on their heels, they are told what they have been commanded toward instead:

And to establish prayer and fear Him." And it is He to whom you will be gathered.

QUR'AN 6:72

Establish the prayer, and be conscious of Him, and remember that to Him you will all be gathered. Now think about what salah actually is, physically, he says. It is to stand. You plant yourself. You hold your ground. You do not drift, because your face is set toward Allah and you have chosen to put yourself there, on purpose, before Him. Now set that picture beside the man in the parable: a man on his own two feet, but going nowhere, wandering the low land with no direction at all. The word for his wandering, Nouman Ali Khan notes, is the word for someone walking aimlessly in the open desert, not even a camel searching for water, which at least has a purpose, but a person with no destination, no idea where to turn, this way and that and this way again, lost.

So there are the two human postures the whole parable comes down to. The believer stands before Allah in this life, deliberately, in living conversation with Him. The one being lured away wanders off wherever the pull takes him, lower and lower, with no direction left and, in the end, no purpose left, in a place that is empty and isolating and dark, the very thing he had imagined would make him happy. And then the verse closes the trap, very gently. It tells those who are wandering off that they may wander wherever they like, because in the end every single person will be gathered back to Allah anyway. The only difference, Nouman Ali Khan says, will be between the one who chose to stand before Him now, of his own will, and the one who has to be brought back at the last, the word for that final gathering carrying the sense of animals herded together, driven in. It is, he says, quite an image: a man who fell off

a cliff and is wandering the desert, gathered up at the end whether he wants to be or not. Iman, in these verses, is being somewhere high, with a direction, in direct conversation with Allah through His own words. Losing it is being dragged lower and lower, with no direction at all.

What this example asks of our hearts

Now the picture turns toward you, the way every example in this series finally does. And the first thing it asks is honesty about which figure in it is you. Maybe you read this and faces come to mind, people you have watched wander off into that low and aimless place, and your heart aches for them. Or maybe, if you are honest, you have felt the hands close around your own ankles. You came up out of the darkness and onto the high road, and then one day an old friend turns up, all warmth and nostalgia: remember the old days, come through, you do not have to do anything, just sit with us, just drink the water while we handle the rest. And you think, only this once, for old times' sake. The whole point of the parable is that you are not as strong as you think you are. The environment will not break you on its own, true, but neither are you a fortress that needs no walls. The man in the verse was not a villain. He was someone who found the high road, started walking it, and got pulled off it. That could be any of us.

So carry two questions out of this. The first is about the voices calling you, and what they are actually calling you toward. Some voices say come to your desires, be free, live your life, and then

vanish the instant you are in trouble. Other voices say come home, come back to us, there is a place still kept for you. Learn to tell them apart, and choose your companions on purpose, the truthful that at-Tawbah names, because no faith in the world is so strong that it can do without them. Remember that the pull is almost never really the argument; it is the hawa underneath, and the legion of small voices, family and friend and screen and algorithm, each one tugging a little. Watch your own desires more closely than you watch your doubts, because the desires are usually the real cliff. And guard your footing by keeping company that stands you up, not company that draws you down.

The second question is for when you are the one up on the path, watching someone you love slide toward the low ground. The parable teaches you exactly what to say, and exactly what not to. Do not lead with here are eight reasons you are wrong. He has not lost the argument; he fell on something he cannot easily name, and a wounded heart does not climb back up a ladder of proofs. Lead instead with the words the companions on the ridge are given: come to us. We love you. There is a place kept for you here. The way down is always a slow fall, pretended away as freedom. The way back is always a hand, and a presence, and a door left open. So mind your footing tonight, and listen for which voices are calling you, and be that voice for someone who has wandered into the dark. O Allah, do not turn us back on our heels after You have set our feet upon the road to You. Hold us on the high road, with our faces toward You and the prayer keeping us standing.

Surround us with the truthful, and bring home every soul we love who has wandered down into the wilderness, before the day when all of us are gathered back to You.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 12. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Walking in light

The one brought from death to a light, walking with it among people in the dark

Imagine a crowded room with every light switched off. The windows are blacked out, the phones have all died, and the people inside are shuffling and bumping in the dark, hands held out in front of them, with no idea which way the door is. And then one person, just one, has a small light burning in their hand. Where does every eye in that room go? Not to the loudest voice, not to the strongest pair of shoulders. To the one who can see. The one who knows which way to walk.

That single figure, alive and lit in a roomful of dark, is the example Allah strikes in one of the great Makkan surahs of the Qur'an. And the strangest thing about the picture, the thing that stops you the moment you look closely, is where it begins. Not with life. With a corpse.

A surah taught in light and dark

Before you can feel this example, it helps to know the room it was hung in. This parable lives inside Surah al-An'am, one of the largest of the Makkan surahs, and Nouman Ali Khan begins by walking you back through the whole surah to show you something it has been doing quietly from its very first breath. The surah

keeps planting the same pairs in the listener's mind, over and over: the sky and the earth, what is buried and what is exposed, life and death, and above all of these, darkness and light.

Listen to the opening line, where two of those words are set down side by side at the very start:

[All] praise is [due] to Allah, who created the heavens and the earth and made the darkness and the light. Then those who disbelieve equate [others] with their Lord.

QUR'AN 6:1

Darkness and light, named in the first verse, and then the surah will not let them go. A few verses on, Allah speaks of what is secret and what is exposed, which is to say what is hidden under the earth and what stands above it. Then the towns destroyed in history, and the sky sent pouring down on them with rain. Then a long passage where the people of Makkah keep demanding that something come down to them from the sky as proof, a book floating down in pages, or the angel made visible, and Allah keeps answering that the truth they are looking for in the heavens has already been laid out for them on the earth. Sky and earth, night and day, the hidden and the shown. The surah is, as Nouman Ali Khan puts it, planting these ideas in the mind of the listener again and again from the beginning, so that by the time this one human figure arrives, your eyes have already been trained to notice the one thing

that matters: the difference between being able to see and not being able to see.

There is one passage just before the parable that sets the temperature of the whole surah. The people kept pressing the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ for a miracle. Show us the angel. Show us the pages coming down. Show us something, and then we will believe. And the Prophet ﷺ, who loved them and wanted nothing more than for them to be guided, must at some point have wondered whether one clear sign would finally settle the matter and make his task easier. Allah's answer to that thought is one of the most striking lines in the surah:

And if their evasion is difficult for you, then if you are able to seek a tunnel into the earth or a stairway into the sky to bring them a sign, [then do so]. But if Allah had willed, He would have united them upon guidance. So never be of the ignorant.

QUR'AN 6:35

Read that the way Nouman Ali Khan reads it. It is Allah's way of saying: I am not sending them a sign. If you want one so badly, dig a tunnel down into the earth and fetch it yourself, or build a ladder up into the sky and bring it down. Because the truth is that there is nothing buried in the depths of the earth and nothing waiting in the heights of the sky that is more overwhelming than the words you are already carrying. The Qur'an is enough. This is a religion you

walk toward on Allah's terms, not one that walks toward you on yours. The door is open to whoever wishes to come; Allah is not begging anyone through it. And notice how that whole passage is built, once again, out of the earth below and the sky above. By the time the parable lands, the surah has been teaching us its single lesson with everything it has: light or dark, sight or blindness, life or death.

The one who was dead

Now the verse itself. Read its opening words slowly, because they are genuinely strange.

And is one who was dead and We gave him life and made for him light by which to walk among the people like one who is in darkness, never to emerge therefrom? Thus it has been made pleasing to the disbelievers that which they were doing.

QUR'AN 6:122

One who was dead, and We gave him life. We expect death to come after life. A person lives, and then one day they die; that is the order we know. Here it is turned completely around. The starting point is death, and life is what happens next. So Allah is not describing a body in a grave, brought back to breathe. He is describing something else, and the key is the image of a seed Nouman Ali Khan reaches for. The Qur'an strikes that very image, a few pages earlier in this same surah:

Indeed, Allah is the cleaver of grain and date seeds. He brings the living out of the dead and brings the dead out of the living. That is Allah; so how are you deluded?

QUR'AN 6:95

Hold a seed in the palm of your hand. It is not alive. Nothing in it moves, nothing in it grows. And yet it is not nothing, either. Everything a tree will ever need is folded up and sleeping inside it. Drop that seed into the dark of the soil and, if Allah wills, it tears itself open, fights its way up against the weight of the earth, against gravity, against the whole still state of the ground around it, until it breaks the surface and turns its face toward the sun. That tearing open is the kind of death the parable means. Not the absence of life, but life that has not been switched on yet. All the tools are present. The potential is real. It simply has not been activated.

He reaches here for something from our own tradition that makes the same point. In the Qur'an and the Sunnah, sleep is treated as a kind of death, which is why, when we wake, we thank Allah for giving us life after He had caused us to die, and why on the Day of Resurrection people will ask who has raised them from their resting place. So the dead heart in this parable is asleep, not hopeless. The seed is there. It is simply waiting to be woken.

Picture the human being now, not the seed. Someone who has never really stopped to think about Allah, about why they are here, about what comes after. They grew up and went to school, made their friends, fell into the rhythm everyone falls into. There were

the school years, then university, then a job, a young professional now. Friday night is the pub or the club, Saturday is the same, and the week comes round again, and the weekend comes round again, and it all feels exactly the same as the time before. People call it the rat race. From the inside, Nouman Ali Khan says, it feels like being a zombie: alive on the outside, dead within, and the thought that there might be more to any of it never once arrives. They are, in a spiritual sense, not yet alive.

And then, one ordinary night, the seed cracks. He paints it in a way that anyone who has lived near such a moment will recognise. Someone is standing outside at two in the morning, a little drunk, a little empty, the night winding down the way it always does, and they find themselves looking up and half-saying it out loud: if You are there, and I think You are there, I need help. I cannot even figure out who I am; help me figure out who You are. Their friends are not having that conversation, because their seeds are still sealed shut. But something in this one has shifted. Their heart is not in the old life the way it used to be. The next time they walk toward the bar or the party, for the first time ever, they slow at the door and think: why am I even doing this? And they turn around and go for a drive instead, or just walk, and stare at the sky.

That tug, that first faint pull away from the gravity that held them, is the seed tearing open. It does not mean a tree has grown. It does not even mean they have found Islam yet. Nouman Ali Khan describes the long, honest searching that often follows, the stops at a temple, a church, one faith after another, the person quietly

checking everything off the list, and Islam, in a pattern he is careful not to call a rule, often among the last things they are willing to look at. But when Allah sees that the searching is sincere, He lets them go from one stop to the next until the day they finally open this Book, expecting to judge it, and find instead that it is judging them. He tells of a friend, a sharp atheist who came to the Qur'an looking for a debate and described the experience as a wrestling match in which he was pinned down again and again, getting up and trying the next surah and being pinned down again, until at last he surrendered, because the word Islam means exactly that, surrender. The seed had been switched on. Allah gave it life.

The light is the Qur'an

Then We gave him life, and made for him a light to walk by. What is the light? Here Nouman Ali Khan points not to a guess but to the Qur'an's own name for itself. One of the names the Book gives itself is nur, light. Listen to how Allah speaks of His revelation elsewhere:

O People of the Scripture, there has come to you Our Messenger making clear to you much of what you used to conceal of the Scripture and overlooking much. There has come to you from Allah a light and a clear Book [i.e., the Qur'an]

QUR'AN 5:15

And the very next verse names what that light does:

By which Allah guides those who pursue His pleasure to the ways of peace and brings them out from darknesses into the light, by His permission, and guides them to a straight path.

QUR'AN 5:16

So the one who was searching in the dark, hands held out, reaching for an answer they could not see, is suddenly handed a lamp. And the whole landscape changes. Nouman Ali Khan draws the picture of fumbling in a pitch-black room, trying to make out some shape on the floor. In the dark it could be anything, and the not-knowing is its own kind of fear. Switch on a light, and at once you know: that is a snake, stay back, or that is treasure, come closer. The thing on the floor did not change at all. Your ability to see it did. This, he says, is exactly what revelation does, and it is why the Qur'an is called the Book that makes things clear. It does not add new objects to the world. It lets you finally see the ones that were already there for what they truly are. Every question that haunted you in the dark is still standing in front of you, but now there is light falling on it, and you can tell the snake from the treasure at last.

And so, Nouman Ali Khan adds, the one who now holds this light understands that they had better hold on to it for dear life, the way Bani Israil were told to take hold of what they were given with strength, the way Allah tells the believers to hold fast to His rope and not let go. Loosen your grip on the light even a little, and it will

not drift away from you; you will drift away from it, and find yourself back in the dark.

Walking among people, not away from them

Now notice the next word with real care, because everything turns on it. A light by which to walk among the people. Not a light to keep at home. Not a light to enjoy in a locked, private room. He walks out, into the crowd, carrying it. The image, as Nouman Ali Khan draws it, is of a whole room in darkness and one person with the light on, and that one person does not stay in a corner; they move out among everyone.

He lingers here, because this single phrase overturns something Muslims say to themselves all the time. We imagine the goal is escape: to flee to an Islamic country, an Islamic bubble, a place far from the dark society pressing in on us. We sit in what we call kafir workplaces and kafir cities and dream of getting out. But the entire premise of the verse, he says, is the opposite. The whole point of a light is to be carried into a place that does not have one. If everyone in the room already had a light, yours would add nothing at all; you would be contributing nothing. You were handed a light precisely so that you could walk it into the dark.

And there is a quiet, demanding observation buried in the grammar, one of the sharpest things in his whole reading of this verse. Look at who is credited with what. Allah says I gave him life, and I made for him a light. The bringing to life is Allah's doing; the light is Allah's gift. But for the walking, the verse does not say We made

him walk. It says he walks, by it, among the people. The life is a gift. The light is a gift. The walking is yours. Allah switches the seed on and places the lamp in your hand, but the steps out into a world that would rather you stayed in the dark with it, those steps you have to take yourself.

The two kinds of people in the dark room

Now look back at that crowded, lightless room, the one person glowing in the middle of it, and watch how everyone else turns toward the light. There are two kinds of people in that room, Nouman Ali Khan says, and you have met them both.

One kind looks at the light and thinks: how do I get some of that? Come here, let me see by you, show me how you are seeing. In the old world, before phones, a light was a torch, and a torch is a generous thing: you can light another torch from it and lose nothing of your own flame. So the one who has the light can hand it on, and give others hope, and even those who never quite reach you are helped, because simply standing near the light, their own eyes begin to make out shapes. That is one kind of heart, and it is the better one.

The other kind looks at the very same light and thinks something uglier: who does this person think they are? Turn it off. If I do not have it, then no one gets to have it. Later in the wider Qur'an Allah will draw exactly these people, the ones who try to put out His light with their own mouths:

They want to extinguish the light of Allah with their mouths, but Allah will perfect His light, although the disbelievers dislike it.

QUR'AN 61:8

For now, in this verse, it is gentler and far closer to home. Carry your faith openly and you become the one who stands out, and people who are comfortable in the dark cannot bear the glare of someone who is not. Their eyes, used to the dark for so long, actually hurt when a light comes on. So they say: why are you being so weird, just turn it off. Is the darkness really that bad? Your mother had darkness, your grandfather had darkness, your older brother is fine in the dark, are you better than everyone now? It can come from the office, a colleague asking, could you not pray where people can see you. It can come from your own family, asking you not to wear the hijab to the party so things stay normal this time, asking you to please not leave when the wild part of the wedding begins, to stop making everyone feel bad. Holding the light makes you the strange one in the room. And the person in the parable does not put the light out, and does not run from the people either. The light is enough for them to keep walking among them. The people may run from the light. The one carrying it does not run from the people.

This, Nouman Ali Khan notes, is one of the great forces this verse stands against: conformity. The pull to look like everyone, talk like everyone, behave like everyone, because the group has decided

that this is what normal means, and normal is the only safe thing to be. The verse answers that quietly and completely. Normal, so very often, is dark. The majority can be standing in the dark together and calling it life. You have to grow comfortable holding on to the light even when it makes the people around you uneasy, because the alternative is to put it out and rejoin the dark just to stop being strange.

He will not come out

Now turn to the other figure in the verse, the one set against the first: like one who is in darkness, never to emerge from it. And here Nouman Ali Khan asks you to weigh the wording with the same precision as before, because it mirrors the first half of the verse and then breaks from it in one devastating place.

With the living man, Allah named Himself twice: I gave him life, I gave him light. With this second man, Allah does not say He put him in the dark, and does not say He keeps him from leaving. The verse simply says he is in darkness, never to emerge. Not Allah will not let him out. He will not come out. The earlier parable in this same surah had shown a person dragged down into the dark by devils; here, the staying is the man's own. The door is not locked from the outside. He is not chained there. He stays.

That difference is the whole tragedy of the verse. The man with the light is going against the current, climbing upstream, doing the hard and lonely work of carrying a flame through a crowd that wants it gone. And this other man, with the door standing open be-

hind him, stays exactly where he is, because he is comfortable. Why would anyone be comfortable in the dark? Because, Nouman Ali Khan says, he is used to it. He goes from one darkness to the next to the next, and tells himself this is simply what life is, this is what everyone does, do you want to be weird? And he reaches into our own world to name who these people so often are: the ones quietly anxious and hollowed out, on the medication for it, lurching between hangovers, unable to trust anyone or to be trusted, lonely in a crowd of friends who each have their own agenda, doing the very same numbing thing over and over and over again. The dark is slowly killing them. And they will not step out of it, because stepping out would mean being different, and being different is the one thing they cannot bear.

The surah has shown us this kind of heart before, in plainer words. Those who turn away from the signs of Allah are described not as people kept from the light, but as people who have shut their own senses against it:

But those who deny Our verses are deaf and dumb within darkneses. Whomever Allah wills - He sends astray; and whomever He wills - He puts him on a straight path.

QUR'AN 6:39

Deaf and dumb, within darkness. The signs are everywhere; the light is on offer; and a person can stand right in the middle of it

and refuse to hear or speak or step out, because they have grown at home in the dark.

Beautified: when style swallows substance

Then the verse ends on a line that seems, at first, to arrive from nowhere: thus it has been made pleasing to the disbelievers that which they were doing. What does beauty have to do with any of this? Everything, Nouman Ali Khan says, and he reaches for two words to open it: style and substance.

Some people, he explains, are driven by substance, by purpose, by function, by where a thing is actually going. Others are driven only by style, only by how a thing looks. Good communication needs both, but the temptations of each pull in opposite directions. The one who found the light is a person of substance: woken, searching, walking toward somewhere real. The one who stayed in the dark has been sold style with nothing underneath it, deeds that have been made to look beautiful to him though they lead nowhere, and he keeps doing them and could not tell you why. He has been habituated, the way a person is habituated to a thing that only harms them, smoking it down year after year for no benefit at all, simply because it has been beautified in his own mind until it feels like just what one does.

And here is the turn that makes the whole image suddenly glow. Light is not only how you find your way through a room. Light is the only way anyone sees beauty at all. Stand on a paradise of an island, palm trees and forest and the ocean stretched out in front

of you, but stand there at three in the morning with no light, and it is a place of pure terror. Bring the same shore the sunrise, and it stops your breath; if this is the earth, you think, what must the Garden be. Nothing changed but the light. So the one chasing beauty in the dark has it exactly backwards. The light that guides you to your purpose is the very same light that reveals how beautiful everything is. Live for substance, for purpose, and beauty comes to you on its own, because you are walking by the light that shows it. Live for beauty alone, in the dark, and life itself slowly turns ugly. As Nouman Ali Khan lands it: run after purpose and your life becomes beautiful; run after beauty and your life becomes a kind of darkness.

And he sets the deepest version of this choice underneath the whole parable, the one he says he will return to in the next example: either you enslave yourself to Allah, or you will be enslaved to something other than Him. There is no third option. Bind yourself to Allah and you are freed from your culture, from peer pressure, from social expectation, from your own worst habits, from the lower self. Refuse, and you do not become free; you simply hand the leash to fashion, to the group, to the family's expectations, to the trends and the influencers, and your behaviour stops being yours at all. Only one of those two is actually freedom. The man with the light has it. The man in the dark, who tells himself he is just living his life, is the one truly being led around by something he cannot even name.

What this example asks of our hearts

So the picture turns, and now it is looking at you. There are only two figures in this verse, and one of them is you, tonight. Either you are the one who was dead and was woken, handed a light, and is walking with it among people, or you are the one standing in the dark with the door wide open, held there by no one, simply unwilling to step through. There is no third person standing in the frame. The verse does not leave room for a spectator.

And the first thing it asks is the hardest to admit: that spiritually dead is not the same as spiritually finished. The verse begins at death and moves to life because it is speaking of a heart that is dormant, not destroyed, a seed with the whole tree still folded up and sleeping inside it. If some part of you recognises the zombie weekend, the numb repetition, the ache you keep drowning, then hear the mercy in that. You are not a corpse. You are a seed that has not been watered yet. The smallest genuine tug away from the dark, the half-said prayer at two in the morning, the slowing of your steps at a door you used to walk straight through, is Allah's own hand reaching in to switch the seed on. Do not talk yourself back to sleep and call it being normal.

The second thing it asks is that you let the light be the Qur'an. Allah named His Book *nur*, the light He brings people out of darkness by, and He did not name it that to be admired from a distance. Revelation will not hand you a new world; it will let you finally see the one you are already standing in, the snake and the treasure both, for exactly what they are. So take hold of it the way a

drowning person takes hold of a rope, and do not loosen your grip, because the moment you do, it is not the light that drifts; it is you.

The third thing it asks is the part that is genuinely yours. Allah gives the life and gives the light, but the verse says he walks, and that walking is the work. It would be so much easier to keep the light at home, to flee to a bubble where everyone already has one, to enjoy our faith in a locked room where no one will think us strange. But a light kept where there is already light adds nothing. You were given yours for the dark room, to carry among people, even, especially, when it makes you the odd one out. Because the odd one out, the one the comfortable cannot stand to look at, is the only one in the room who can actually see. So walk. Pray where they can see you. Wear it to the party. Leave when the wild part begins. Hold the light up in the office and the family and the crowd, and do not put it out merely to stop being different, because being different is the whole point of having been given a light.

And here is the mercy folded into the very grammar of the verse, the thing to carry away above all else. It never says the door is locked. It says he will not come out, which means the way out was always open, for the man in the dark and for you. Whoever truly seeks the light is given it, and whoever is given it and dares to carry it among people is, in the end, made new, not the same person at all, a tree where there had only ever been a seed. So let it open. Take the light Allah is holding out, and do the one part that is yours: walk with it among people, even in the glare and the awk-

wardness and the strangeness of it, all the way home. O Allah, You who bring the dead heart to life and give it a light to walk by, wake what is asleep in us, put Your light into our hands, and give us the courage to carry it among people even when it makes us strange. Bring us out of every darkness into Your light, and on the Day the believers walk ahead by their light, let us be among those who say: our Lord, perfect for us our light and forgive us; indeed, You are over all things competent.

O you who have believed, repent to Allah with sincere repentance. Perhaps your Lord will remove from you your misdeeds and admit you into gardens beneath which rivers flow [on] the Day when Allah will not disgrace the Prophet and those who believed with him. Their light will proceed before them and on their right; they will say, "Our Lord, perfect for us our light and forgive us. Indeed, You are over all things competent."

QUR'AN 66:8

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 13. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Narrowed chests

One chest thrown open to the air, one squeezed shut as it climbs the sky

Picture two people on the same mountainside. One of them is breathing easily. His chest rises and falls without effort, taking in lungfuls of clean air the way you do when you step out of a stuffy, smoke-filled room and onto an open shore, that first deep pull of air that feels like the body remembering what it is for. The other is a little higher up, and he is in trouble. The higher he climbs, the thinner the air becomes, and he is gasping now, panting, one hand pressed to his chest, certain that if he can only get a little higher he will finally be free, and growing more breathless with every step he takes toward that freedom.

They are on the same mountain. They began, more or less, in the same place. The only difference between them is one thing, and it is not their footing or their fitness or their luck. It is whether the chest is open or shut. That is the picture Allah draws in Surah al-An'am, and Nouman Ali Khan slows us right down on it, because there is a lifetime of meaning folded into those two chests, and almost all of it turns on a handful of words the Arabs felt in their bodies long before they ever stopped to think about them.

Two chests held side by side

Here is the whole image at once, the verse this chapter lives in. Allah sets the two chests against each other in a single breath, the open one and the shut one, the one He spreads wide and the one He squeezes closed:

So whoever Allah wants to guide - He expands his breast to [contain] Islam; and whoever He wants to send astray - He makes his breast tight and constricted as though he were climbing into the sky. Thus does Allah place defilement upon those who do not believe.

QUR'AN 6:125

Read it once and a few things snag immediately. The first chest, Allah opens wide for Islam. The second, He makes tight, and then tighter, until the person feels like someone struggling up into the sky where the air keeps running out. And there is a phrase in the middle that sounds, on a first reading, almost frightening, "whoever He wants to send astray", as though Allah were picking certain people out to ruin. We will have to go slowly there, because it does not mean what it sounds like, and Nouman Ali Khan will not let us rush past it.

But before any of that, he does something that changes how the whole verse lands. He sets it carefully against the parable that came just a few verses before it, because the two were never meant to be read apart.

The parable just before this one

A short distance earlier in the same surah, Allah had drawn a different scene entirely. Not a mountain, but a man brought back from the dead:

And is one who was dead and We gave him life and made for him light by which to walk among the people like one who is in darkness, never to emerge therefrom? Thus it has been made pleasing to the disbelievers that which they were doing.

QUR'AN 6:122

There is a tenderness Nouman Ali Khan draws out of that earlier verse that makes today's land all the harder. The one who was dead and then given life remembers the dark he was pulled out of. He can feel the difference in his own body. He treasures the light precisely because he knows, from the inside, what it is to have none. Set against him is someone who has only ever known the darkness, who never tasted guidance at all, and so feels no pull toward it whatsoever, because you cannot miss what you have never had. One person values the gift because he has something to compare it to. The other cannot, because he does not even know there is anything to want.

So the first parable, Nouman Ali Khan points out, was about a journey: the journey out of death and into light, the moment a person arrives at guidance. And this second parable, the two chests, is

the step that comes after. You have arrived. You can see now. The question is no longer "will you come into the light." It is something quieter and, in its own way, harder: now that you can see, will you keep your eyes open, or will you let them slowly close again? The first parable was about finding guidance. This one is about keeping it. Most of the talk we hear is about the first. Almost none of it is about the second, and the second is where most lives are actually lost.

Allah does not push anyone off the mountain

Now to that phrase in the middle, the one that stings on a first reading. "Whoever He wants to send astray." Read quickly, it sounds like Allah choosing, in advance, who will be ruined, as though some people were simply marked for the dark. Nouman Ali Khan refuses to let it sit there, and the Qur'an itself does not let it sit there either. This same Book, he reminds us, calls itself guidance for all of humanity, not for a chosen few. Allah does not hand out a map and then secretly hope that some of the travellers get lost. If the message were only ever meant for some, He would not have called it a guidance for everyone.

So keep it simple, Nouman Ali Khan says, and do not dress it up as something philosophical and tangled. Picture a teacher with twenty students. He wants every single one of them to pass. He gives them all the same lessons, the same homework, the same review before the test, and he sits there, ready and willing to answer any question any of them brings him. And then he tells them, plainly:

the ones who pass will be the ones who do the work. He is not choosing who fails. He has given everything. He has opened the whole thing up. Whether a student does the assignment or leaves it untouched is on the student, not on the teacher who provided it all. That, he says, is much closer to the truth of what Allah means by guidance and misguidance, and the lazy reading, the one where Allah forces guidance on some and forces ruin on others, leads people into real confusion about their Lord.

Then there is the part that should lift the heart, because it runs the encouraging way first. This is a principle written across the whole Qur'an: you take one step toward Allah, and He responds, and He responds with far more than you offered. The Qur'an gives the verse for it:

And those who strive for Us - We will surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the doers of good.

QUR'AN 29:69

Show Him initiative, he says, and Allah opens doors you did not even know were there. When Allah sees any one of His slaves, anywhere in existence, turn toward Him looking for guidance, there is no way that person is refused. That is simply Allah's rule. Nobody has ever turned to Him seeking the way and been turned away empty. It is the meaning carried in the words the Prophet ﷺ taught, the ones every believer half-knows by heart: you walk to Allah, and He comes to you running.

And only then, once the encouraging side is fully in view, does Nouman Ali Khan turn the principle around to its other edge, the part that explains the second chest. There is an image elsewhere in the Qur'an, he says, of people so set on rejecting the truth that it is as if they have tied a rope, and not a casual knot, but the kind the old builders used to bind the heavy beams of a structure together, before there were nails and welding and bolts. They would take the rope and coil it and twist it on one angle and then the other, wrap it and reinforce it again and again, tying it deliberately so that it could never come undone, because the whole building leaned on that knot holding fast. To people who have bound themselves to their rejection with exactly that kind of resolve, Allah's answer is essentially: you have tied your rope, and so I will tie Mine too. You have sealed it shut; I will let it stay sealed. The commitment to stay lost did not come down from Allah. It came up out of them. He only lets them keep the very thing they fought so hard to hold.

There is a deeper law underneath this, and Nouman Ali Khan finds it in the way Allah built the world itself. Things that are true of the body turn out to be true of the soul. Use a muscle, feed it well, work it, and it grows stronger; that is simply how it was made. But cover one of your eyes and refuse to open it for a year, two years, and when you finally uncover it you will be blind in it. The faculty you stopped using has died. Lie in a bed for years and your legs will no longer carry you. An unused ability, by its very nature, withers and is lost. And the same law, he says, runs straight through

guidance. If Allah gives a person the chance to accept His guidance, and that person pushes it away, and pushes it away, and keeps on pushing it away, then eventually the ability to accept it at all begins to die in them. Not because Allah reached in and snatched it out, but because a thing left unused atrophies, and He let them keep the distance they kept insisting on. That is the quiet terror hiding inside the second chest. It does not begin sealed. It is sealed slowly, from the inside, by a person who kept choosing not to breathe.

What it means for a chest to open

Now the first chest, the open one, and the single word it all turns on. The word, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is *yashrah*, and its plainest root meaning has nothing to do with hearts or souls at all. It is what you do to a thick cut of meat when you slice it wide and flat, butterflying it open before you lay it on the grill. From there the word spread to mean anything thrown open, spread out, laid wide, and then, in the way Allah uses it here, the opening of a chest. It is the very word from the short surah every believer knows, the one Allah opens by reminding His Prophet ﷺ of a gift already given:

Did We not expand for you, [O Muhammad], your breast?

QUR'AN 94:1

To have your chest opened, in this language, is simply to be able to breathe.

Nouman Ali Khan gives it the texture of an ordinary, daily feeling, the kind you have had a hundred times without naming it. You make a decision and a kind of calm settles over you, a quiet sense that yes, this is right, you can breathe now; that is a chest opening. You make a different decision and it sits wrong, it tightens something in you, you cannot quite fill your lungs, something in you is uneasy and will not settle; that is a chest closing. So when Allah opens a chest for Islam, the gift He lays on top of guidance itself is that the person comes to feel, deep down in themselves, at ease with surrender. He keeps returning to the same picture, because the picture is exact. Walk into a room thick with smoke and your nose stops up and you cannot get a clean breath. Walk out onto a beach, into the open air, and it pours into you and the chest lifts. That second feeling, that lift, is what Allah does to the heart He means to keep.

Not just believing it, but breathing it

Look closely, Nouman Ali Khan urges, at the exact word Allah chose for what the chest is opened to. He did not say "He opens his chest to iman," to belief. He said "He opens his chest to Islam," to surrender. And the difference is the whole point. Iman is what you accept as true on the inside, the conviction you hold in your heart. Islam is what you actually do about it on the outside: you pray, you leave what He told you to leave, you act on the demand. And it is one thing, he reminds us, to agree with an idea, and a far longer journey to live it. You can watch something and nod along, yes, that is true, that is an injustice, that is wrong, and then do ab-

solutely nothing about it. The distance between agreeing with something and acting on it is enormous, and most people, most of the time, never cross it. Knowing the right thing and becoming someone who does the right thing are separated by a whole life of work.

So the opened chest is not the one that merely concedes that Islam is correct. Plenty of tight, closed chests will concede that much. The opened chest is the one that finds the doing of it sweet. When the chest has not yet opened, Nouman Ali Khan says, the five daily prayers feel like a weight, a lot to ask, and the heart starts looking for the discount: surely some of these can be delayed, combined, trimmed, surely there is room to ask for less. But when the chest opens, that very same prayer is no longer a burden you are made to carry. It is a joy you get to have. You feel the gladness of being allowed to stand before Allah, and if you oversleep and miss it, what rises in you is not only guilt; it is loss, the ache of having missed out on something that genuinely felt good. That, he says, is the unmistakable mark of a chest Allah has opened. Not a believer who reluctantly agrees that prayer is right, but one who breathes the religion in the way the lungs take clean air, and feels the lack of it the moment it is gone.

The chest squeezed shut, then shut tighter

Now the second chest, and the first thing to notice is the cruelty stacked into the wording: not one squeezing, but two, laid one on top of the other. First Allah makes the chest dayyiq, tight, con-

stricted. That word on its own would already be enough; a tight chest is a hard thing to live in. But then, Nouman Ali Khan points out, Allah adds a second word, *haraj*, and the picture sharpens into something far worse. *Haraj* was the Arabs' word for a stretch of high ground where the trees grow so densely packed together that a shepherd cannot drive his flock through it at all; the branches are too close, the gaps too narrow, and not even an animal can squeeze its way between them. So this is not merely tight. It is tight to the point of being impassable, a closing-in so total that nothing can move through it at all. One bad word, and then a worse one set right beside it, so the listener feels the chest close and then jam shut.

And it does not hold steady, he says; it worsens. For a person whose chest is like this, anything to do with Allah brings the tightness on. The conversation turns toward the religion and they want, almost physically, to change the subject. They catch sight of someone praying and something in them recoils: why do these people have to pray right here, in front of everyone, why the hijab, why all of it, an irritation they could not fully explain even to themselves. And here Nouman Ali Khan is careful, because the verse is easy to aim only outward. This is not, he insists, simply a verse about the disbeliever on the airplane staring uneasily at the man with the beard. Guidance and misguidance, he reminds us, are not the same thing as Islam and disbelief. You can be Muslim on the outside, ticking every box, and still carry this exact tightness on the inside, still feel a small, unexplained discomfort whenever

Allah's claim on you draws too close, still want to change the subject when the talk gets too serious. The chest can squeeze shut on a believer too. That is why the verse is so much more searching than it first appears. It is not only describing someone else, far away. It may be describing a tightness you have felt in your own chest and never had a name for.

Climbing the sky, chasing the wrong freedom

Then comes the line that turns the whole image inside out: as though he were climbing into the sky. The word for climbing, Nouman Ali Khan notes, is built in a form that carries friction and strain right inside it, the verb itself straining the way a hard ascent strains the body. And the sky here is not simply empty air overhead; the word is used in the Qur'an for mountains and high places too. So take the climb literally. The higher this person goes, the thinner the air becomes, and the more exhausted he grows. Two forces now work against his lungs at once: a chest that was already squeezed tight, and on top of it, less and less oxygen to fill even that little space. He is suffocating, and worse, he is climbing toward the suffocation, certain the whole time that the height is freedom.

And here, Nouman Ali Khan says, is the reversal, and he calls it one of the most powerful turns in the whole verse. Ask almost anyone who resists the religion why, and the complaint comes back the same every time: Islam is restriction. This is forbidden, that is forbidden, wake at this hour, eat this and not that, earn this

way and not that way, no to this account, no to that relationship, no, no, no. I could be free. And what image in all the world says freedom more than the wide open sky? So Allah takes that very image, the open sky, the universal symbol of escape and release, and shows where the climb toward it actually leads. Not to freedom. To airlessness. The one who runs from surrender, utterly sure he is running toward freedom, is in truth running toward his own suffocation. And the one who surrendered, the one the whole world pities as boxed in by rules, hemmed in, restricted, is the one standing lower down on the mountain breathing freely, filling his lungs all the way and letting the breath out in peace. Allah reverse-engineers our whole idea of freedom, and once you have seen it, you cannot unsee it.

Nouman Ali Khan tells it on himself, to make sure it lands somewhere real and not just somewhere clever. As a boy he was schooled in a strict, all-boys environment overseas, everyone in the same uniform, the same white shirt, real discipline, real respect demanded for the teacher; the most you could do to stand out was have shinier shoes or a better pencil case than the next boy. Then his family moved, and he was dropped into a public high school in Queens, New York, and on the first day he genuinely could not tell whether he was in a classroom or a train station. People dressed however they pleased, some with their feet up on the desks, chewing gum, talking back to the teacher, calling their own parents by their first names. He was stunned. He had never in his life seen freedom like this. These people, he thought, can do absolutely

anything. But a few months in, he saw it for what it was. The "free" kids were not free at all. They had simply traded one uniform for another. There were the kids who dressed one way and the kids who dressed another way, each group with its own clothes, its own walk, its own way of talking, and if you did not conform to one of them, you got mocked and bullied. You had to wear the right thing, strut the right way, fit the right group, or you would not survive the hallway. There was no open chest in any of it. There was no being yourself. It was just surrender to a different master, and a harsher one.

And it is not only teenagers, he is quick to say; this is every society and every age. He paints the family preparing for a wedding they cannot afford, taking out an interest-bearing loan they will be paying off for years, because a cousin's wedding had three hundred guests and theirs cannot be seen to have fewer, disobeying Allah in the process, spending money they do not have, all to meet a standard set by people whose approval they are terrified of losing. A whole life can be lived this way, climbing and climbing to satisfy a crowd whose standard only ever rises, and it is the same airless ascent the verse describes. People are surrendering all the time, he says; the only question is to what. Islam frees you from every other master. So long as you are living by what Allah has given you, you owe no one an explanation: not for how tall you are, not for how much you earn, not for the clothes on your back or the schooling you did or did not get. Allah's standard liberates you from every other standard there is. And the standard of people, the

endless dread of "what will they say," is a prison you can climb in forever and never once climb out of.

What this example asks of our hearts

Now the picture turns and looks back at you, because the two climbers were never strangers on some far-off mountain. They are two ways your own chest can be tonight, and the verse is asking you, gently and very seriously, which one you are. Not whether you call yourself a Muslim; that is the label, and the verse has already told us the label is not the question. It is asking whether the religion feels, in your chest, like clean air poured into the lungs, or like a tightness you keep quietly wanting to change the subject away from. Whether the prayer is a joy you would hate to miss, or a weight you keep trying to discount down to something lighter. Both of these can live inside a believer. The difference between them is not what you are called. It is the state of your chest.

And underneath the question is the warning, the one Nouman Ali Khan draws straight out of how Allah built the world. The eye covered for two years goes blind. The legs left in the bed for years stop carrying you. An unused thing dies; it is woven into the design of everything. And the same law runs through the soul. Push Allah's guidance away long enough, refuse it and refuse it and refuse it, and one day the very ability to accept it withers and is gone. Not snatched from you in anger, but let go of, slowly, by a person who kept on choosing not to breathe until breathing was no longer something they could do. That is the real horror in the sec-

ond chest, and it is a quiet one: it does not start sealed. It seals by degrees, over years, at the hands of its own owner. The mountain does not push anyone. People climb it.

But you are reading this, and that itself is the mercy in it, because it means your chest is not sealed. The open air is one turn away. And here is the relief the whole parable has been building toward: you do not need to climb higher to find that air. The climbing was the mistake. You need to come down off the airless mountain and surrender, and watch what Allah does the moment you take the step, because He does not merely meet you, He runs. You walked; He comes running. So take it down into one ordinary thing tonight. Pray the prayer you were going to discount, and pray it as something you get to do. Give up one thing for His sake that no crowd will ever see you give up, and feel how much lighter the chest sits without the weight of their watching. And ask Him, in His own words, for the one thing this entire parable is about, the very word the verse turns on. It is the prayer Musa, peace be upon him, made on the edge of the hardest task of his life, when he was sent to stand before a tyrant who called himself a god and he had nothing in his hands but his Lord. Rabbi ishrah li sadri. Allah preserves the cry for us exactly:

[Moses] said, "My Lord, expand [i.e., relax] for me my breast [with assurance]"

QUR'AN 20:25

He named the one thing he needed, and Allah gave it, and Musa walked into the worst of it breathing free. So say it, and mean it, and breathe. O Allah, open our chests to You and to Your religion. Let us find in obeying You the breath of fresh air and not a weight we resent. Save us from the airless climb after every standard but Yours, and do not let us push away Your guidance until we have lost the very ability to want it. Rabbi ishrah li sadri. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 14. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Panting dogs

The one given Allah's signs, who clung to the earth instead

Picture a dog on a hot afternoon. Its tongue is out, its sides are heaving, and it is panting. Now drive it off. Shout at it, raise your hand, make it flee: it pants. Walk away and leave it completely alone, no threat and no demand: it still pants. Load a burden on its back, tie it to something heavy and make it haul and strain: it pants. Lift the burden off again and let it rest in the shade: it pants. Nothing you do reaches it. Whatever happens to it from the outside, push or pull, weight or ease, the thing on the inside never changes. It is fixed somewhere you cannot move it.

That is the picture Allah strikes near the end of Surah al-A'raf, and of all the striking examples in the Qur'an it may be the most frightening, because of who it is aimed at. It is not aimed at the ignorant, the person who never heard. It is not aimed at the stranger to the light. It is aimed at a man who was handed Allah's own signs, who was let in close, who had everything the rest of us are still reaching for, and who walked away from all of it. To begin to feel the weight of this example, you have to start where Nouman Ali Khan starts, not with the dog, but with the long, quiet sickness the dog is sent to diagnose.

The most thorough passage on going numb

This whole stretch of al-A'raf, Nouman Ali Khan says, is the most comprehensive place in the entire Qur'an on a single subject, and the subject is ghafla. The word is usually translated heedlessness, but that is too thin for what it carries. Ghafla is the slow numbing by which a person loses touch with reality, stops noticing what is right in front of them, stops feeling what should move them. It is not the loud disbelief of someone who openly rejects. It is the soft drift of someone who is simply no longer there.

He pauses to be fair to the word, because it is not always a flaw. Allah uses it once for the dignified woman who has no idea she is being gossiped about, because she has never moved in the circles where people tear each other down. In that sense, being unaware of some things is a mercy, a sign of a clean heart, and there is a quiet rebuke in it for our own age, which insists you must stay aware of every ugly thing happening everywhere, must keep up, must consume the noise. Some things, the Qur'an suggests, you are better off never knowing. You are only frying your mind for nothing.

But that is the rare, good sense of the word. The dangerous sense is the one this passage was sent to expose: a person unaware of exactly the thing they most need to be aware of, behaving as though Allah were not watching, when it is never Allah who is unaware. The whole passage flips that on its head, Nouman Ali Khan observes. It is not Allah who has lost track of what you are doing. It is you who have lost track of what you are actually doing. And

the question the passage circles, again and again, is the hardest one a believer can ask: how does a person become numb like that? How does someone slip out of their own awareness without ever noticing the slip? That is the soil this parable grows in, and Allah opens it with a command to the Prophet ﷺ to tell a very particular story.

He shed them like a skin

The command comes, and then watch the verbs fall, each one a step further down.

And recite to them, [O Muḥammad], the news of him to whom We gave [knowledge of] Our signs, but he detached himself from them; so Satan pursued him, and he became of the deviators.

QUR'AN 7:175

Sit with the calm English word detached, because it is hiding what the Arabic actually does. The verb is *insalakha*, and Nouman Ali Khan opens it with great care, because everything turns on it. It is the word for a snake sliding out of its old skin, leaving behind the whole shed shape of itself, an empty husk in the form of the animal that is no longer in it. It is the word for shearing a fleece clean off a sheep as it walks, so that the wool drops away in one piece and what is left underneath was the animal all along. The skin was never the snake. The fleece was never the sheep. They were only

the surface, the cover, the dead outer layer, and underneath was the living thing that was always something else.

That is the verb Allah chooses for this man, and the choice tells the whole tragedy in a single word. Allah gave him sign after sign after sign, and not one of them went in. They sat on him the way a skin sits on a snake. From the outside it looked complete: knowledgeable, devout, the bearing exactly right, the surface flawless. And underneath that perfect religious cover the real person had quietly pulled away, until the day the skin finally slipped off and there was nothing of faith beneath it. He had worn the signs. He had never been inside them.

And then, the moment the cover comes loose, the next verb arrives: Satan pursued him. While the man stood inside the protection of those signs, Satan could not reach him. The instant he stepped out of his own skin, the enemy was right behind him, and from there the last verb is almost gentle in how quietly it ruins him: he became of the deviators. Nouman Ali Khan notes that the Arabic here is the word for losing your way, the way a traveller takes one wrong turn and ends up somewhere he cannot name, no longer even sure how he got there. A man with knowledge does not crash. He drifts, one turn at a time, until he is lost.

There is something else in this verse that Nouman Ali Khan reads as deliberate, and it is the silence around the man's name. Allah says the news of him, a phrase so specific it sounds like a particular report about a particular person, and then never tells us who he is. The Companions had several different guesses. There was a

figure some named, and others, and they each had a story behind them. And the Prophet ﷺ, who received this surah in Makkah and carried it the rest of his life, who could have closed the entire question in a single sentence, never once named the man. Not in any narration do we find him saying, this is who it is. Nouman Ali Khan reads that silence as an invitation, not an oversight. If the case is left open, it is because we are meant to keep it open: to look into Allah's words, then look out at the world around us, then look back into the words, then back out, until we find which living face the description actually fits. The legacy of the Companions here is not the name they pointed to. It is the habit of mind they model, the back and forth between revelation and reality that is supposed to change how you see. Do not chase the name. Look until the description fits someone you know, and feel the chill when it does.

What it means to be given His signs

Do not soften what this man was given, because the parable only works if you feel the height he fell from. Allah does not say he was clever, or well read, or that he had studied hard. He says, We gave him Our signs, and He traces the giving back to Himself. Nouman Ali Khan lingers on that, because the grammar is doing real work. The attribution to Allah personally, twice in a few words, tells you this was no ordinary learning. This was someone Allah let in close: knowledge, wisdom, guidance, perhaps even wonders worked in his own life that turned him toward his Lord. Allah intervened to let

this man acquire more than other people acquire. He had a special share. And here is one of the most beautiful turns in the whole lecture, because Nouman Ali Khan widens the word ayah until you see how much it holds.

An ayah is not only a verse. It is a sign, and the same single word carries the mountain and the camel, the rain and the night sky, the self inside you, the sweep of history, the events of your own life, and the words of the Qur'an, all of it gathered under one name. He sets this against the way modern knowledge keeps fracturing: every field splitting into narrower and narrower specialisms until the experts can barely speak to one another, the world breaking into a thousand disconnected pieces with nothing left to hold them together. And then the Qur'an arrives with one word that unifies all of human experience, because every one of those things is a sign, and every sign points back to the same One. The mountain, the rain, the verse, your own soul, all of it one signal, all of it aimed home.

But notice, he says, how precisely the Qur'an puts it. Allah does not say the mountain is a sign. He says there is a sign in it. There is a sign in the rain, in the night, in the animal at the side of the road. And to draw out why that matters, Nouman Ali Khan gives the image of a diamond hidden inside a rock. Walk past the stone and you see only stone. You would never guess, from the dull surface, what waits inside it. The diamond is there, but you have no way to see it until something cracks the rock open. Everyone, believer and disbeliever alike, can see the rock. The difference is that the

believer can see the diamond inside it, and revelation is the thing that hands you those eyes. The Arabs had seen the night a thousand times, seen fire lit in the dark, seen the rain fall and the shepherd call his sheep and the dog at their heels. These were the most ordinary things in their world. And the Qur'an took those ordinary things and said: you have seen them, but you never once saw the sign in them. After that, the next time it rained, the rain spoke. The world stopped being scenery and became one long signal, and they could never un-see it again.

That, Nouman Ali Khan says, is the worldview the believer is given. You are never not surrounded by the signs of Allah. Either you are drowning in them without noticing, or the Qur'an has handed you the eyes to see them everywhere, in the sky outside the window, in the breeze on your face, in the tree splitting open with new life. This man had been given exactly those eyes. He had been shown the diamond in the rock. And then, with the most beautiful sight in creation already opened to him, he shut his eyes and clung to the stone.

He clung to the earth

Here is the hinge of the whole parable, the line on which everything turns.

And if We had willed, We could have elevated him thereby, but he adhered [instead] to the earth and followed his own desire. So his example is like that of the dog: if you chase him, he pants, or if you leave him, he [still] pants. That is the example of the people who denied Our signs. So relate the stories that perhaps they will give thought.

QUR'AN 7:176

We could have raised him by those very signs, Allah says. The same knowledge he carried, the same revelation, the very ayat that were meant to lift him, Allah could have used to elevate him high. But he adhered to the earth, akhlada ila al-ard, he clung to the ground, he stuck himself low, and he followed his own desire. The signs that were meant to be wings became dead weight in his hands, because he used them to stay down here rather than to rise. And this, Nouman Ali Khan insists, is where the real tragedy lives, because it does not happen to the obvious villain. It happens slowly, to good people, to people who started well.

How does a man with genuine knowledge sink? He begins the journey toward Allah, and the journey goes well, and people begin to notice. The praise arrives. So young, and already so knowledgeable, mashaAllah; I wish I had a son like that, I wish my daughter were like him. And little by little the audience, which was only ever meant to be the means, quietly becomes the end. The questions keep coming, and you start to perform the answers. Even when you do not know, you find yourself pretending you do,

because so many people are looking up to you now, and that is a responsibility, and surely they cannot all be wrong about you, surely you must be something. And now, Nouman Ali Khan says, you have become a big deal to yourself. The mouth still says every right word. The recitation is still flawless. The form of the worship is all exactly where it has always been. And nobody will ever know that the focus has quietly moved off Allah and onto the room. Only you will know. Maybe, after a while, not even you.

He tells this one on himself, which is part of why it lands. As a young man giving sermons in New York, he used to dress in a particular way, a thobe, a turban, a long beard, the sandals people half-jokingly called by a holy name. One day a stranger across the street announced that he looked like a prophet of old. He had, as he puts it, the look. And the look did something to people. They began stopping him in the street, old men with white hair pressing their children toward him, begging him to make du'a for them, certain that because he appeared holy he must stand nearer to Allah than they did, must be in a better position to be heard. There was nothing wrong with the clothing, he is careful to say, and this is not a lecture about clothing. But the reverence grew so heavy, so undeserved, that he deliberately changed how he dressed, and the moment he did, the same people who had revered him decided he had become more ordinary, less holy. The danger was never the cloth. The danger is what it does to a human being when other people decide that your appearance is your station, and you start, quietly, to believe them.

He sets this against something far cleaner. Some of the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ worked the fields with their shirts off, sweating in the dirt, and then stood up and led the prayer just as they were. To a stranger walking past, they would not have looked holy at all. They were the Companions. And the Prophet ﷺ himself sat among his people so plainly, slept on the floor so simply, that a visitor entering the gathering could not tell which man was the Messenger of Allah and which were the rest. There was no holy costume, no ring to kiss, no distance to perform. We, on the other hand, have built a culture that adores the holy look, and a culture that worships the surface is a culture that pressures everyone inside it to keep wearing the skin.

His likeness is the dog

And now the image lands, and it is meant to sting. His likeness is the dog: chase it and it pants, leave it and it pants. Nouman Ali Khan opens out the two ways the Arabic phrase can be read, and the point is that they arrive at the same place. One reading is simply driving the dog away, shooing it off. The other is loading a burden onto it, harnessing it to haul a sled or drag a load, putting it to hard work. Hold both together and the lesson is exactly the same: whether you push this man or leave him in peace, whether you pile the weight of responsibility on him or lift every burden away, you get the identical result. The same panting. The same tongue out. The same restless, unreachable wanting. Nothing on the outside

ever changes what is on the inside, because what is on the inside has already left.

Hold that against everything he was given, and the horror of it opens up. You could set the most powerful ayat of the entire Qur'an in front of this person. You could give him the most beautiful surah on the holiest night of the year, with the angels descending all around him. And you could set nothing at all in front of him, sit him alone in an empty room. His inner state would not move an inch in either case, because he is no longer present for any of it. He is there for the next bite. Nouman Ali Khan draws the image right out of the animal: a dog runs to its master not for the master but for the meat in the master's hand, and even when the master pushes it away and says plainly there is nothing, it keeps coming back, tongue out, hoping for the morsel. So a man can recite gloriously on the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan and be thinking only about whether the masjid will be generous this year, whether the recitation came out impressive, whether the camera stayed on, whether the recording will be clean. The night of power is unfolding over his head, the angels are descending, and his head is exactly where a dog's head is, fixed on the next mouthful. Take all of it away, strip the lights and the crowd, and sit him by himself, and he is still thinking about the mouthful. That, Allah says, is the likeness of the people who denied His signs.

And then, just when the verse has shown us the most desolate human possibility, it turns outward with a gentle command: relate the stories, so that perhaps they will give thought. Nouman Ali Khan

notes how striking it is that the parable about a heart gone numb ends not with a curse but with an instruction to keep telling stories. Two of the great engines of the Qur'an, its parables and its narratives, are joined right here, the parable handing off to the command to recite the stories, because the cure for the numbness this man fell into is exactly the thing he stopped letting in: revelation, told and retold, until a heart that still has any life left in it begins, again, to think.

The donkey, the dog, and who this was really about

This is a Makkan passage, and Nouman Ali Khan shows that it is speaking to two audiences at once. In the foreground are the Quraysh, who had begun to run out of questions to throw at the Prophet ﷺ, because every challenge they raised was being struck out of the park. Needing fresh ammunition, they went quietly to people who knew scripture, the Jewish tribes, and asked for harder riddles to put to him, questions like the one about the People of the Cave, designed as traps. And so behind the Quraysh stands a second audience, the ones feeding them the questions, the ones who actually knew what revelation was. Allah answers the open critic and the secret helper in the same breath, even reminding them of the mountain once raised above them, an event the Quraysh had never heard of and had to go back and ask about, exposing exactly who was whispering behind the scenes.

And once you see that second audience, the question almost answers itself. Who, in all of history, is the clearest case of a people

handed Allah's signs in abundance, given more revelation and more prophets than anyone, who then detached from what they were given? The verdict that follows is unsparing.

How evil an example [is that of] the people who denied Our signs and used to wrong themselves.

QUR'AN 7:177

It was their own selves they were wronging all along. And here Nouman Ali Khan draws out a sharp turn in the imagery that most readers would walk straight past. In their own tradition there was a saying in which the Israelites pictured themselves as a donkey and the other nations as dogs: set a burden on a donkey and a burden on a dog at the foot of a hill, and the donkey carries its load all the way to the top while the dog gives out, panting, halfway up. That, the saying went, was why they and not the nations had been entrusted with the burden of the Book; they were the donkey strong enough to carry it. The Qur'an takes that very picture and turns it back on them. Fine, it says in effect: you were once the donkey who carried it. But this, now, the dog that pants whichever way you turn it, is what you have made of yourselves. The burden was real, and the honour of carrying it was real. So was the dropping of it.

There is a mercy buried even in this severity, and it is worth naming. The Qur'an does not mock a people for being incapable. It indicts them for letting something go. You can only drop what you

were once trusted to hold. The charge is heavy precisely because the gift was great, and the parable would lose all its force if it were aimed at anyone who had less.

What this example asks of our hearts

Now the picture turns, and we are not permitted to leave it pointed at anyone else, not at a man from history with no name, not at a nation long ago, not at some famous figure on a stage. Here is the line Nouman Ali Khan will not let us walk away without: knowing is not the same as being saved. People ask him the simplest version of this all the time. They look at a part of the world where everyone speaks Arabic and understands the Qur'an when it is recited, and they ask how there can still be wrongdoing there, as though understanding were enough, as though comprehension were salvation. It was never enough. That was the exact mistake of the people the parable indicts, the ones whose scholars were treated as almost beyond error. Knowledge that you clutch in order to climb in the eyes of people, instead of to climb toward Allah, will not lift you a single inch. And the cruelest part of the arithmetic is this: the higher the knowledge, the harder the fall. The more you carry, the more danger you are in, not less.

So do not picture a famous scholar and quietly feel safe. You do not need a stage for this. You can be the one religious person in your family, the only one who prays, the only one who learned a little, the cousin everyone calls when they need a du'a, the relative who walks into the room and watches the others sit up straighter.

The moment your appearance becomes the point, the moment you would rather be seen as holy than actually be turned toward Allah, you are standing exactly where this man stood. And the sickness is bigger than any one of us, because we built the culture that breeds it. We treat the scholar as if he walks on water and cannot slip. We turn human beings into either saints who can never be wrong or devils to be discarded the instant they are, and either way we stop seeing them as people who, like every person, can stumble and turn back. A culture that adores the facade is a culture that forces everyone inside it to keep the facade on, and that is the very pressure that made this man wear a skin until it became all there was of him.

The cure, Nouman Ali Khan says, is to come back to what Allah actually wants, which is neither of the two extremes the human heart keeps lurching toward. It is not the path that despises the world, that calls your job and your home and your parents nothing and drapes that contempt in the language of religion. And it is not the path that embraces the world and chases it as the prize. It is the middle that Allah asks: to live in the world, work in it, make the most of it, and through it reach Allah, without ever clinging to it. The signs were always meant to be wings. The earth was never meant to be a destination. So the question this parable presses on each of us is brutally simple, and Allah Himself answers what becomes of the heart that never learns to ask it, in a verse from the close of this very passage on the heedless:

And We have certainly created for Hell many of the jinn and mankind. They have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not hear. Those are like livestock; rather, they are more astray. It is they who are the heedless.

QUR'AN 7:179

Hearts that do not understand. Eyes that do not see. The diamond is in the rock and they stare straight at the stone. This is the end of the road the man in the parable started down, and it is the end Allah is warning us off of, with mercy, while there is still time to turn. Because the man in this mirror lacked the one thing that knowledge can never replace, and it was not information, and it was not eloquence, and it was not the perfect outward form. It was a heart that wanted Allah more than it wanted to be seen.

So check, quietly, before you recite another word or wear another label, where your head actually is right now: on Allah, or on the next mouthful. And if you find, with honesty, that the cover has begun to slip, that the praise has started to taste better than the prayer, do not despair of the One the signs were always pointing to. Turn back before the skin sets. Remember the prayer of the believers in this same surah, the words Allah preserved for everyone who feels the ground pulling at them and wants instead to rise: Rabbana afrigh alayna sabran wa tawaffana muslimin, our Lord, pour upon us patience and let us die as Muslims, in submission to

You (Qur'an 7:126). O Allah, do not let the knowledge You give us become a skin we shed. Do not let us cling to the earth when You meant to raise us by the very signs You placed in our hands. Keep our hearts fixed on You and not on the eyes of people, open our eyes to the diamond in every rock, and gather us, when our time comes, among those still turned toward You. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 15. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Stray cattle

Given hearts that do not understand, eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear

Picture a cow at the edge of a highway, grazing. There is a fence somewhere behind her, but the grass is good right here at the verge, so this is where she stands, head down, working her jaw. An eighteen-wheeler comes by at eighty miles an hour, close enough that the wind off it lifts the fur along her back and lays it flat again, close enough that two feet of asphalt is the whole distance between her and being killed. She does not flinch. She does not lift her head. The truck roars past and is gone, and she goes on eating, because nothing in the thousands of years behind her has ever taught her to be afraid inside the fence. As long as she is in her world, in her perimeter, nothing can go wrong. So she eats, and the trucks come and go, and she eats.

That is the image at the centre of today's example, and the most uncomfortable thing about it, the thing that makes it land, is who it turns out to be a picture of. This is the sixteenth of the striking examples we are walking through, and before Nouman Ali Khan ever holds the mirror up, he stops to settle something heavy that sits right at the front of the verse, because everything else depends on getting it right.

The line that has frightened readers

The verse opens on a sentence that has troubled people for a long time. Here is the whole of it, in the meaning Sahih International gives:

And We have certainly created for Hell many of the jinn and mankind. They have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not hear. Those are like livestock; rather, they are more astray. It is they who are the heedless.

QUR'AN 7:179

Read one way, the first line sounds like a sentence of manufacture: that Allah made a great many of the jinn and of human beings for one destination, Hell, their whole existence pointed at the fire from the start, with no say in the matter. Nouman Ali Khan is candid that this is a place where scholars have read differently, and candid that he himself leans toward the minority reading. He treats that honesty as part of the work. If he is convinced of something in his study but it is not where most interpreters have landed, he says, then he owes it to you to tell you so plainly: here is their argument, here is why he does not find it convincing, here is his own position, and you must make up your own mind. He is not trying to enlist you in one camp or the other. He is asking only for openness, and for the kind of transparency a serious reader deserves when a serious thing is at stake.

His reading turns on one small word. In the Arabic, the gift that connects "created" to "Hell" is a single prefix, the laam, the little particle we usually translate as "for." We hear "for" and assume it means purpose. I cooked for dinner. I went to work for you. The "for" names the reason behind the deed. But that same particle, he points out, can carry another sense entirely, not intention but outcome. And he reaches for an example that almost every parent will feel in the chest. Imagine your son is at university. You are paying his tuition, his fees, his lunch. You moved to a more expensive part of town to be near the campus, you bought him a car, you go to work to keep all of it running. And then a notice arrives in the mail: your son has not attended a single class. He has been failing everything, spending his days with his friends, doing nothing he was sent to do. He comes home, and you turn to him, and you say, "This is why I paid your fee. For this. So you could go play around. I went to work for you to throw it all away." You did not pay for him to fail. You are naming, with grief, the result of everything you gave. To put it in a kinder word, says Nouman Ali Khan, that is lament. Read the verse that way and it is not a confession that the deck was stacked. It is a lament: I gave so very many of them everything, and look how it ended.

Why he reads it as a lament

His reasons are not only linguistic, and he lays them out because he knows the stakes are too high to rest on a single grammatical point. If some people were simply built for the fire from the beginning, he argues, then too much else in the religion stops making

sense. From the very start of the human story, the matter was framed as a choice. When Adam, peace be upon him, was tested and the whole drama of obedience and disobedience unfolded, Allah did not say that some of the children of Adam had been made, from the outset, as fuel. He said that whoever among them followed the path of misguidance would meet its end. The door, from the first page, opened both ways. And the Qur'an describes itself, again and again, as a guidance for people, a clarification for all of mankind, a call going out to every corner of the earth, not a book sent only to those already destined to be saved. It does not address itself to the salvageable and write off the rest as kindling. It calls everyone.

His reasons are not only those, either. Some scholars in the other camp explained the verse by saying that people simply differ in their inner brakes, that Allah made some hearts with a weaker restraint, so that when anger or temptation rose, they truly could not help themselves. He does not accept that, and he says so with respect. Every human being, he holds, has been given the ability to contain the impulse, the strength to stop himself, and over and above that a light Allah placed in us, a capacity to choose the good even under the worst pressure, even when every cell of the body is begging for the easier road. That, more than anything, is what sets a human apart from every other creature.

Then he points to the verses sitting right next to this one, because the answer is almost embarrassingly close at hand. Just before our verse stands the example we sat with yesterday, the man who

clung to the earth and chased his cravings until he panted like a dog whether you drove it off or left it alone. And immediately after that image, an entire verse before the one about the cattle, Allah says of such a people:

How evil an example [is that of] the people who denied Our signs and used to wrong themselves.

QUR'AN 7:177

They wronged themselves. The fault is laid at their own feet, in Allah's own words, one ayah earlier. So when the next breath says that many were "created for Hell," Nouman Ali Khan reads it not as Allah admitting He stacked the deck, but as Allah mourning a waste, a waste these people brought upon themselves, and the waste is about to be spelled out, gift by gift. He reads the opening line, with the word "tragedy" gently added in his own voice, as Allah grieving over creatures He made remarkable, and who threw the gift away.

Three gifts, named one by one

Now the verse counts what these people were given, and the counting is the whole point. They have hearts they do not understand with. They have eyes they do not see with. They have ears they do not hear with. Read it as the lament and every word changes colour. These are not defects being listed. They are gifts being listed, named the way that grieving father named the tuition,

the rent, the car. I gave you a heart. I gave you eyes. I gave you ears. And you used none of them. The more you were given, says Nouman Ali Khan, the heavier the loss when you let it sit unused, and the sharper the disappointment that you did not live up to it. The gifts that were meant to raise you are the very things that now measure how far you fell.

And here he stops a particular objection before it can take hold, because he has heard it so many times it wearies him, and because he once half-believed it himself. A student of science comes to him and says: the heart does not think, biology tells us so, yet the Qur'an speaks of hearts that understand, so the Qur'an must be wrong, so I stopped praying. His answer is patient and direct. The Qur'an is not a textbook of biology. It is revelation from Allah, speaking in the natural language of human beings, the way people have always actually spoken. Nobody walks up to a table and asks you to pass the dihydrogen monoxide so it may travel down the larynx; they ask for the water, because they are thirsty. A grandmother does not say her grandchild stimulates certain neurons and releases endorphins that prompt a smile; she says he brings joy to her heart. We tell someone they broke our heart and never once reach for a surgeon. We love watching the sun sink into the ocean, though the sun does no such thing. To insist on reading "a heart that understands" as a clinical claim about a muscle is to refuse, on purpose, the way every human being in every age has spoken. It is to look for an excuse, and to find a poor one.

The seen faculty and the unseen one

There is something deeper running under the language, though, and this is the turn that makes the verse land. From its opening pages the Qur'an asks us to believe in a reality we cannot see. There is a seen world and an unseen world, and the unseen is no less real for being hidden: angels we do not perceive, a record of our deeds being filled day by day, provision descending, souls travelling out at night and returning, the dead whom we lower into graves while in truth they are being raised, an entire order of things running alongside this one. We are, the Qur'an keeps insisting, a small visible piece of a vast and mostly hidden whole. And just as the world has a seen layer and an unseen layer, says Nouman Ali Khan, so do you. There is the body that can be examined and the soul that cannot. There is the heart a cardiologist can hold in his hand, and there is the heart that perceives meaning. There is the eye an optometrist can test, and the eye that sees why a thing is there. There are ears that register sound, and ears that catch what Allah is actually saying through it.

So when the verse says they have eyes they do not see with, it is not denying their eyesight. It is mourning the second faculty, the spiritual one. Open up the chest of the man whose heart the Qur'an calls hard as stone, he says, and you will not find a rock; you will find something soft and squishing, because the hardness was never in the muscle. If you performed surgery on the heart of one who denied, the very heart the Qur'an describes as petrified, the tissue would be as soft as anyone's. The hardness the Qur'an

is naming is the hardness of the unseen heart, its lost ability to perceive. And the test of that faculty is a simple one. Two people look at the same tree. The first has studied botany; he can tell you its species and its age, its health and its genome, everything there is to catalogue, and he sees in it nothing beyond what his brain has filed. The second looks at the very same tree, with the very same eyes, and something rises in him. Who put this here? A seed with no life in it splits open in the dark and becomes all of this, towering and alive, and goes on making fruit, and inside the fruit are more seeds carrying more life, and somehow I am the one who is fed by all of it, I who did nothing but press a seed into the ground and pour a little water. Who is arranging this for me? The difference between the two is not in the eye. It is in whether the heart behind the eye is awake.

Nouman Ali Khan points to the sharpest case of all, and it is unbearable when you sit with it. There were people in Makkah who looked straight at the Prophet ﷺ with their own working eyes and saw only a man who was bad for business, a man unsettling their sons, a threat to the order of the tribe. There were people in Madinah who heard the very words of Allah leave his lips with their own working ears and heard only a rival drawing off their audience, a competitor to be managed with rumours and campaigns. He took our crowd, they thought; we had better make something to expose what he really is. Eyes that saw him, ears that heard him, and the sign of all signs standing before them registered as nothing but an inconvenience to be handled. That, he says, is the

tragedy the verse is naming, and notice the order it follows: from the heart, which is the comprehensive faculty, to the eyes, and then to the ears, because the last of them is the heaviest loss of all. Hearing is the very key to revelation. The lasting miracle of Allah, after the Prophet ﷺ could no longer be seen, is the Qur'an, and the Qur'an was always meant to be heard. To have ears that take in the sound and let nothing reach the heart is to be deaf at the one door through which Allah still speaks.

Why cattle, and why worse than cattle

Then Allah strikes the image: these people are like cattle. Notice, says Nouman Ali Khan, how much of this stretch of the Qur'an is built of farm pictures, the rain and the crop, the dog that pants, the flock that is called and comes. This belongs to the same world. And the word the verse uses for cattle, an'am, comes from a root that means softness, gentleness, ease. It is the same root that gives us ni'mah, a blessing, which is something that brings softness into your life, and na'im, the deep comfort of the Garden, where the bedding is soft and the company is soft and everything is made to set you at ease. The cattle are named for the way they move. Not the pounce of the cat, not the dart of the squirrel, not the strike of the snake, all of them quick, all of them wired to startle. The cow simply moves, slow and unbothered and soft. Which is exactly why she can stand grazing while the truck screams past two feet away. Other animals have hyper-reflexes; a bird, a fly, a snake responds in an instant; even the dog is set to guard a

perimeter because it can smell and hear danger at a distance. But the cow has had the alarm bred out of her over many thousands of years of being kept safe, until she feels secure so long as she is inside the fence, and even if something does go wrong she need only walk slowly to safety. She has no sense of the real danger around her. None at all.

And that, he says, is the comparison. People with every faculty intact and no sense whatsoever of the danger they are actually in. Eat, sleep, be milked, and one day become beef, and never once look up. He brings it uncomfortably close: a person can become like a creature in a basement while empires rise and fall outside the door and never knows it happened, immersed, fed, consuming and consuming and never moving. That is one layer of the warning. But the verse does not stop at cattle. It says, rather, they are more astray. That harder phrase is the one that catches in his throat, and his reasoning is unsettling. The cow, at the very least, fulfils the purpose she was made for. She was made to graze and to give milk, and she does exactly that; at her most basic, most primitive level of existence, she meets her purpose, because that is all she was ever asked to do. You were not made for so little. You were made to know your Lord, to read His signs, to think across a hundred years and into the life that comes after this one. So to be lost with all of that on offer is to fall below the animal that only ever had to graze, because she at least met her purpose, and the heedless human meets none. To be lost, he reminds us, is also

to be wasted; and you are the greater waste, because you were the greater gift.

Fast thinking, slow thinking, and the cow we become

Here he brings the verse home, and he refuses to leave it pointed only at the denier the verse first describes. This tragedy, he says, is something a believer can taste too. The heart that perceives is the heart that thinks slowly. Most of our day runs on fast thinking, and it has to: you brush your teeth, you put your socks on, you read the text, you glance at the bus and the shop and know them at once, none of it asking you to stop. But signs only open to the slow mind, the one willing to sit with a single thing and let it deepen, and that is real work, the kind that takes effort and concentration. Most of the worst mistakes of our lives, he notes, were made in fast thinking, in the heat of a moment we did not pause to weigh. And the world is engineered to keep us in the shallows. Marketers, he says from his own training, understand the fast brain better than we do. The grocery store puts the bread and milk and eggs in the farthest corner so you must walk past everything quick and sweet to reach them; it sets the children's toys at the till, holding your child's tears over you, because impulse, not reflection, is where the sales are made. Fill the first shallow layer of the mind with an endless drip of little bites of data, he warns, and you slowly lose the very muscle that lets you go one layer down. You reach for the phone after twenty seconds because you can no longer hold still.

And then comes the line that costs him the most in the whole talk, the one he turns on himself. There are stretches, he admits, when these verses are alive in him as he walks, as he pushes the stroller, as he watches the rain come down, and those are the best times, the times he is living what he is telling us to live. And there are long stretches when he is not. When the rain is just rain and he notices nothing in it. When he takes honest stock of himself, he says, he finds that for much of his life he too is a cow. He calls it a scary acknowledgement, and an important one, and he includes himself in the warning without flinching. That is the mirror this example holds, and it spares no one, not even the teacher. You can be praying and fasting and reciting, going through every motion faithfully, and feel none of it; the horizon that once opened wide when you pondered the Qur'an quietly shrinks back to the size of today, while the faculties Allah gave you to see further sit unused. The danger here is subtle and that is what makes it deadly. It is not that you stopped believing. It is that you kept believing and stopped perceiving.

The way back is the very next verse

Here is the mercy in where this verse sits, and the thing Nouman Ali Khan will not let us walk away without. The word the verse ends on is *ghaflah*, heedlessness, and he lingers on it, because it names a particular kind of lostness. It is the state of a person standing in a place so featureless that there are no tracks, no smoke on the horizon, no lights in the distance, nothing by which to tell which way is anywhere. You do not even know where you

are standing, so how could you know which way to go? That is what it is to be heedless: aimless, with no destination in view. And Allah did not make us for that. He made us aware of where we are meant to be heading, and He gave us the way to get there. And then, immediately, in the next breath, He gives the cure. The very next verse, the line that follows the cattle without a pause, is about His own most beautiful names:

*And to Allāh belong the best names, so invoke Him by them.
And leave [the company of] those who practice deviation
concerning His names. They will be recompensed for what
they have been doing.*

QUR'AN 7:180

That placement, he says, is the answer to everything that came before it. What pulls a heart back from grazing is to remember the Ultimate Reality, to remember who Allah is. And every one of His names lifts another veil off your eyes, makes you a little less of a cow and a little more of a human again, and then a little more again. Call on Him by His names. Hear yourself say them. Come back and realise who your Lord is, and you will realise who you are, because the moment a person forgets Allah is the moment Allah lets him forget himself, until he is living the existence of an animal, or something below it. The same person who could no longer feel begins, name by name, to perceive once more.

And He built the recalibration into the very shape of the day, so that the slide could never run too far before it was checked. Five times, you stop the fast-thinking world and stand before Allah and hear His words in your own mouth, and they begin, in the opening of every prayer, with His names, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate, Master of the Day of Judgement. Notice, he says, that the prayer itself is built around calling on Allah by His beautiful names, so that the prayer becomes the antidote to a mindless existence. Let the battery run low through the hours, then come and stand before Him and be charged again; your focus resets, your horizon widens, the danger you had stopped feeling slides back into view. This is the same reason the believer prays at all: not as a tax paid to heaven but as the appointed return to awareness, five times a day, for a heart that the world keeps trying to dull. And the names you call upon are not abstractions. They are the names of the One who made you, al-Khaliq who created you, al-Bari who fashioned you, the very One who gave you the heart and the eyes and the ears in the first place. To call on Him by them is to remember both the gift and the Giver in a single act.

What this example asks of our hearts

It is tempting to read a verse like this and place it safely on the unbelievers, to picture the grazing cow as someone else entirely, some hardened denier with no relationship to us. That would be to miss the question the example is putting to our own iman, and the question is sharper than it looks, because the most frightening thing about this image is not that it describes the faithless. It is that

it can quietly describe the faithful, still praying, still fasting, grazing beside a danger they have lost the ability to feel.

So the first thing this example asks of us is to see the gifts again as gifts. The verse counts a heart, eyes, and ears, and it counts them in grief, the way a father counts the years of tuition his child threw away. Most of us go through whole days never once registering that we were handed faculties built to know our Lord, the eye that could read a sign in a tree, the ear that could be pierced by a single ayah, the heart that could understand. The more you were given, the heavier the waste of letting it sit idle. Ask yourself honestly how much of what you saw today you actually perceived, and how much simply passed across the surface of an eye that catalogued and felt nothing.

The second thing it asks is the harder one, because it refuses to let us off as the cow does. The cow grazes beside the highway and feels no danger, and yet she meets the purpose she was made for; she was asked only to graze, and she grazes. You were made for so much more, and that is precisely why to be lost is, for you, worse. It is to fall below the animal that met its small purpose, while you, given the capacity to think across a hundred years and into the life after this one, shrink your whole horizon down to the size of this afternoon. Nouman Ali Khan turned that mirror on himself first, admitting that much of his own life he too is a cow, and the honesty of it is the invitation: do not read this as an accusation of others, read it as a question about the state of your own heart this week. Are you perceiving, or only grazing?

And the third thing this example asks is the most merciful, because the way out is not far off or locked away behind some great labour. It is the next line down. Call on Allah by His most beautiful names, and let each one lift a veil from your eyes. He built the recalibration into the day already; five times over, you are called to stop, to stand before Him, to hear His names in your own mouth and let the horizon widen again. So before the world shrinks back to the size of today, take one thing from this example into your ordinary life. Stand before Him tonight and say His names slowly enough to mean them. Look at one ordinary thing, a tree, the rain, a sleeping child, and let the question rise in your heart, who is doing this for me. And the next time you stand in prayer, hear the names you are reciting as though for the first time, because that is the heart you were given, beginning to understand again. O Allah, You who gave us hearts to understand with and eyes to see with and ears to hear with, do not let us waste a single one of them; wake the heart that has gone dull, return us from grazing, and perfect for us the light by which we find our way back to You. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 16. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Depths of desperation

The ones who called on Allah alone, only while the ship was going down

Stand on the docks for a moment and watch a ship pull away. Families are crowded along the rail and along the boards, waving up at a cousin, a brother, a face they will not see again for months. The anchor lifts. The sails fill and stiffen, and the great vessel begins to slide out over water so bright and calm it looks like a blessing you could lie down on. The waving face on deck grows smaller. The whole ship shrinks to a speck on a shining horizon, and then to nothing, and everyone, on the shore and on the sea, is happy. The wind is good. The journey has begun.

This is one of the most quoted examples in the whole Qur'an. People reach for it in debates, in talks, in arguments about whether God can be known at all, and Nouman Ali Khan is gentle about that: he is not against the way they use it, but he thinks its first purpose is something quieter and far closer to home than a debating point. Before he opens the storm, he stops on a strange question. Why would Allah paint the sea, of all things, for a people who lived in the desert and had barely ever seen it? The answer turns the whole example inward, and once you feel it turn, you cannot stand on the docks as a spectator any longer. You are already on the water.

Looking outside for a proof that is already inside you

The example sits early in Surah Yunus, and it answers a demand. People kept coming to the Prophet ﷺ asking for something to look at: a visible miracle, a sign torn out of the sky, some spectacle they could see before they would agree to believe. And the reply Allah gives, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is quietly devastating. You are hunting outside for a proof you are already carrying inside. You are so adamant, so insistent that something be shown to you from out there, precisely because you have been neglecting the proof that was placed in here all along.

Every human being, he reminds us, in every century and every civilisation and every language, was handed the full set of tools needed to arrive at their Lord. Not a chosen few with special access, but everyone: eyes that can read the signs woven through the sky and the sea and the self, and a mind able to follow those signs back to the One they point at. A person did not need a prophet or a revealed page to reach the bare conclusion that all of this was made, and that what is made has a Maker. They could have arrived there on their own. The means were already in them.

So when a person stands and demands a fresh sign before believing, Nouman Ali Khan makes a sharp observation about the order of things: this is not really their first refusal. It is their next one. They had already turned away from the proof set in creation, and from the deeper proof set in their own self, long before they ever turned away from a revealed verse. Their denial of the message is only the latest in a series. And this example is about to drag that

buried, denied proof all the way up to the surface, in the one situation on earth where no human being has the composure left to keep it down.

The fair wind, and the docks

Watch how patiently the scene is set before it is allowed to break. Allah is the One who moves you across the land and the sea, the verse begins, and notice, Nouman Ali Khan says, where the camera is standing. It is at the harbour. The Arabs were a landlocked people; you travel across the land that was made easy for you until you reach the very edge of it, the beach, the docks, and there in the water is a giant vessel being boarded. People are climbing the plank. Some are already up on deck. Some are still on the boards below, waving up at the ones leaving, because some are going and some are being left behind. Then the anchor comes up, and the ship begins to glide away, and the waving cousin's face gets smaller, and smaller, until the whole boat is a tiny dot in the distance and you are simply standing there, watching it go.

Then it is out on the open water, and the open water, Nouman Ali Khan says, is glorious. On a clear day with a clean breeze, hardly anything on earth is as beautiful as the ocean: the sunlight gleaming on the waves, light clouds, blue sky meeting blue water, the seagulls, the fresh salt air you can breathe by the sea. It is one of the most serene experiences a person can have. And the wind that carries them is described as two things at once, good and pure, so there is a freshness in it and a goodness in it together. The crew

can feel it. The captain is pleased: this is a fast wind, a fair wind, in exactly the direction we need, we will make good time. The passengers, who had boarded a little nervous, feel the worry drain out of them. They are filled with hope. The weather is perfect, we will get there early, I was anxious for nothing, this is going to be a beautiful trip. Here is exactly how the Qur'an sets the picture before it shatters it:

It is He who enables you to travel on land and sea until, when you are in ships and they sail with them by a good wind and they rejoice therein, there comes a storm wind and the waves come upon them from every place and they expect to be engulfed, they supplicate Allah, sincere to Him in religion, "If You should save us from this, we will surely be among the thankful."

QUR'AN 10:22

There is one more thing happening in those opening words that Nouman Ali Khan does not want you to miss, and it is a feature of the language itself, one the Prophet ﷺ delivered exactly as it was revealed to him. The verse begins by speaking directly to you: He is the One who makes things easy for you, He boards you onto the ships. Then, the moment the ships start sailing, it slips into the third person: the ships sailed away with them, they were rejoicing, a wind came at them. And at the very end, when the water is at their throats, it turns again, into their own voices, the first person: if You save us, we will be grateful. Second person, then third, then

first, all inside a single verse. Any English teacher, he says with a smile, would mark that as broken grammar, a child's mistake. But the Qur'an's language is cinematic, the way the old Arabs loved to imagine vividly in a land with little to look at, and this is a camera deliberately swinging its angle: pulling back to watch the ship from the shore, then cutting straight inside the boat to where the terrified passengers are, until you are no longer watching them at all, you are them, with their words coming out of your own mouth.

A sailor is always looking at his death

There is a knowledge the happy passenger does not have, and Nouman Ali Khan went looking for it, because he had not done much travel by sea himself. He sat with a retired admiral of the navy, a man who had spent his whole life on the water, and asked him plainly: what actually goes through a sailor's mind out there? The answer stayed with him. You may be looking at the most beautiful thing in the world, the admiral told him, but a sailor is always looking at his death. Always. That gleaming, gorgeous, sunlit body of water can wake up a monster at any moment, an unstoppable thing, and when it does, the ship, however huge, however well built, however well crewed, stands no chance against it. None.

So the whole voyage, for the one who truly understands the sea, is a held breath. A one-month journey, a three-month journey, however long, is spent quietly hoping that the ocean does not wake up angry on any one of those days, or any one of those minutes. The old Western sailors caught it in a single word they would say as

they pushed off from the shore: godspeed, which Nouman Ali Khan unpacks as nothing more than a shorter way of saying you are in God's hands now. Out there, with all your protective gear and all your finest engineering and all your security, you are as exposed as a human being can be. You are in the jaws of death the entire time. The passengers laughing at the fair wind have simply forgotten the one thing the sailor is never allowed to forget.

The wind that does not care

Then comes the turn, and the first thing to notice about it, Nouman Ali Khan says, is that there is no warning, not even in the grammar. Allah does not say "then a storm came," or "some time later a storm came," or "soon after." He says they were rejoicing in that good wind, a ruthless wind came at them. No "then." No "soon." No morning of warning, no qualifier of any kind. That sudden, jarring cut is itself the point, because that is exactly how it happens out there. One moment the sea is calm and the sky is clear, and the next the sky has turned, the rain is coming down in heavy sheets, the ship is wobbling, and they are looking up at waves the size of mountains. Water where water has no business being, up there instead of down there, slapping the vessel from one side. They brace for it to come from that side again, and it comes from the other. They turn for that side, and now it is coming from the front, and the boat is tipping forward and then back, and the people inside are being thrown around, holding onto whatever they can, the sails ripping open, some already swept off the deck,

everyone crying out, help, help, all of it out of nowhere, all of it without any warning at all.

The word the Qur'an uses for that wind, Nouman Ali Khan notes, carries violence in its very root. It is the same word, he points out, used for the way you violently rip the dry leaves off a corn cob at harvest, tearing, stripping, peeling them away, and the same word used for a horse at a full, careless gallop, a stampede that does not care what is in its path, that will trample a fence or a child and not slow down. This is not a wind that holds anything back. Sometimes a boxer, realising his opponent is weaker, will pull his punches; this is not one of those. It comes at them with everything it has. And the waves, the verse says, come from every place at once, which means something quiet and terrible. When danger is closing in from every single direction, there is no direction left to turn for help. You turn this way, a wave. That way, a wave. It is the picture of total isolation: surrounded, with no one to call and nowhere to run. And in that moment they became certain, the verse says, that they were going to drown. One more big slap of water, and it is over.

When everyone, suddenly, has one Lord

Now look closely at who is on that ship, because Nouman Ali Khan makes you take the roll. Every kind of person is aboard. Every kind of belief. Some worshipped this idol, some worshipped that one. Some were proudly agnostic. Some were spiritual but not religious, still working things out. Some were hard materialists, scientific to

the bone, who had spent their whole lives carefully explaining God away. Every variety of conviction and philosophy and denomination, all on the same deck. And in the instant they are all sure that the next wave will finish them, watch what comes pouring out of every one of them. The same sound. Not a list of gods. Not the idols they carried aboard. Just one word: Lord. Lord, I know You are there. I know I have been ignoring You. I know I have been bad, but if You give me just this one chance, if You just make it stop, I promise I will be grateful, I mean it, I mean it. The composed, wealthy passenger who could afford the best seat and the finest view, the one everyone called master an hour ago, is now a master himself begging a Master, crying like a desperate child: save me.

This, Nouman Ali Khan says, is the buried proof surfacing, and it surfaces precisely because no one is pretending anymore. He turns the point onto the skeptic with great care and great force. People sometimes use this scene to mock atheists, and atheists sometimes answer that it is only desperation talking, that of course a frightened person reaches for God, but that the reaching proves nothing. Fine, he says, grant it. Suppose it is only desperation. Then ask the harder question: why is it God you reach for in desperation? Why, in the very moment you are at your most honest, staring down the barrel, when you have absolutely no reason left to pretend about anything, when you could be as brutally sincere as you like because it is over anyway, does the thing that erupts out of you, uncontrollable, unrehearsed, turn out to be the cry to

the very One you spent your whole life denying? That, he says, says something about what is buried deep inside you, something you were so adamantly intellectualising away, that simply pops out the moment death gets close. The ultimate proof of Allah lies in the fitrah itself, the truth set into the depths of the self, and when a human being is suddenly moments from meeting their Lord, that fitrah surfaces and speaks: ya Allah, I am not ready, please. They wanted a sign shown to them on the outside. The sign was inside them the whole time, and the storm is simply what finally let it out. They called on Allah, the verse says, with their religion made completely pure for Him alone.

Why this storm is your storm

Here the picture turns toward you, and Nouman Ali Khan turns it deliberately, leaning on something he finds significant in the language. Allah does not introduce this scene the way other examples are introduced, with "their example is like." He does not even say "this is an example," though it plainly is. He drops you straight into it, with no frame at all, and that, Nouman Ali Khan suggests, is Allah saying something quietly astonishing. You think those people out at sea are in terrible danger because they happen to be surrounded by an ocean that can turn on them. But what none of you realise is that you are all out at sea. This is already your situation. You did not need to board a ship or a plane to be living this exact reality right now.

We embark on things constantly, he says, and Allah opens up the journey for us each time. Some of us are on an educational voyage, some on a career, some on a business, some venturing into marriage, some into the raising of children. And every one of these has its dock, its moment of pure, beaming optimism: the engagement photos two days before the wedding, the goofy grin of the newly congratulated, the first day of the course, the opening of the shop, the wind just starting to pick up. Then things go well. You pass one class after another and find yourself heading for the honour roll. You open a pizza place and within a year it is the most successful in town, so you open a second, a third, and start to feel you have the golden touch, that anything you touch turns to blessing. And here is the danger he names precisely: it is the very blessings, the good wind, that begin to carry you. You start to see dollar signs instead of your own eyeballs, taking on this project and that one and twenty more, busier and busier, swept along by your own success, drunk on a drug that makes you feel entitled, like you earned all of it, until you genuinely cannot imagine the water ever turning.

And then a wind comes from nowhere. The business begins to tank, or the lawsuit lands, or the diagnosis comes back, or a death cuts straight through the family, and the waves hit from every side at once, and your whole universe collapses inward until it is nothing but this one crushing problem. Nouman Ali Khan draws out the cruel symmetry the example was built to teach: the very same word that was the blessing, the wind, is now the curse. The part-

ners and the property and the people who rode the good times with you become the very things you are now desperate to be rid of. The property you once could not believe you were lucky enough to buy is now the property you cannot believe is still hanging around your neck, and you would give anything just to be out of it. This, he says, is Allah's reminder that nothing you lean on is steady. Sometimes Allah will turn a good wind into a ruthless one for no reason you can see, simply to remind the believer that everything else can change on you, and only He is consistent with you, only He. And so, in the storm, you do exactly what they did on the ship: ya Allah, just let me ride this out, just make it stop, and I will never be ungrateful like this again. The crisis, he notes, is so total that you cannot even think past it, the way a starving person at the door cannot have a conversation about next month because they simply need to eat right now. Your entire universe shrinks to: get me out of this.

The tragedy on dry land

And then the next verse breaks your heart. He saves them. The waves fall, the ship holds, the feet touch dry land, and at once, the very instant they are safe, something happens that the verse refuses to soften:

But when He saves them, at once they commit injustice upon the earth without right. O mankind, your injustice is only against yourselves, [being merely] the enjoyment of worldly life. Then to Us is your return, and We will inform you of what you used to do.

QUR'AN 10:23

The very moment they are ashore, they are back to arrogance and wrongdoing on the earth, as if the prayer had never left their mouths. Nouman Ali Khan's contemporary picture of it is sharp enough to sting. The person who was hanging off the rail of the sinking ship begging Allah to save them, once their feet are dry, starts giving talks on resilience. I was beaten down, but it was my own courage, my own grit, my own resolve that pulled me through; you have to be brave, you have to weather the storm. I survived a storm at sea. But that, he says, is not what you sounded like when you were dangling off the side of that boat crying ya Allah, save me. At the time you were not shouting "bring it on, I will weather this." You were begging. And now that it is over, the story quietly gets rewritten, and the One who actually saved you is edited out of it entirely. He recalls watching it on a plane that hit hard turbulence years ago: the oxygen masks down, people crying, and the man beside him with his headphones in, riding it out, and the moment the plane levelled, that same man calmly put his headphones back on and hit play. Where was he in that moment? He had become a different person the instant the danger passed.

Then comes the line Nouman Ali Khan wants you to sit with longest, because he says it may be the most remarkable thing in the whole example. There is such a thing, this verse proves, as temporary sincerity. For one moment on that ship, these people were not hypocrites, not sinners, not deniers. They were full believers, with their faith made completely pure for Allah, and that, in the language of the Qur'an, is no small compliment; it is a very high thing to be called. They genuinely tasted real iman. And the tragedy is not that they never had it. The tragedy is that they held it in their hands and let it go. They went out onto that ocean looking for trade, for fish, for pearls, hunting for some catch, and in the middle of the storm they found Allah Himself, and then, the moment they were safe, they threw the pearl back into the sea. Allah, in His mercy, did not let them drown. They drowned the one thing that was actually worth saving.

What this example asks of our hearts

So the question this example finally leaves you with is not really about ships, and it was never meant to be. It is about which journey you are on right now. Which good wind is carrying you along so smoothly that you have quietly stopped thinking of Allah at all, and which waves are slamming into you from every side until your whole world is this one problem. Both of those, Nouman Ali Khan shows, are the same test, only worn differently. The fair wind is asking whether you will remember Him while things are easy and successful and the dollar signs are filling your eyes. The storm is asking whether the sincerity that floods in when the water reaches

your throat will survive the moment your feet touch dry land. Every one of us, he says, has to identify honestly which boat we are on, which waves are coming at us, which blessings are distracting us and sweeping us away from where Allah wants us to be.

We are, most of us, very good at the storm prayer. The cry comes easily when the water is at the throat; the fitrah sees to that. The hard part, the whole point, is the gratitude afterward, when the danger has passed and there is nothing left forcing you to your knees. Notice the exact words they used, Nouman Ali Khan says, and notice what they did not say. They did not promise to obey, or to be loyal. They promised to be grateful, because a person only truly learns gratitude when the blessing is taken away and then handed back. Nobody appreciates their health like someone who has just been sick, or their car like someone whose car was taken, or their job like someone who just lost theirs. The storm exists, in part, to teach a heart that had grown entitled that none of it was ever owed.

This is the same lesson the Prophet Yunus, peace be upon him, was carried to the very floor of the sea to learn, when from inside the darkness of the whale he called out and named his Lord and confessed his own state and trusted Him with the rest. It is the lesson at the heart of this whole article of faith: that there is no god but Allah, that He alone is the One who moves you over land and sea, and that turning to anyone or anything else is, in the end, turning to a wind that can change. The people on the ship knew this for one perfect, sincere moment, and then let it go. The mercy

of the example is that the cry is real, that the faith buried under all the noise of our ordinary days is real, and that Allah hears it and answers it and pulls the ship through. The warning is that we tend to leave that faith at the water's edge and walk back onto the land as though we had saved ourselves.

So do not wait for the next storm to find your Lord, and do not lose Him the moment it clears. Keep the sincerity you only ever feel when you are sinking, and carry it back onto dry land, into the easy days, into the fair wind. That, and not the rescue itself, is what He has been watching for all along. Take just one thing from this example down into an ordinary day: when the next blessing comes, thank Him before it can be taken, and when the next wave hits, beg Him without rewriting the story afterward. O Allah, the One who moves us over the land and the sea, who hears us when the waves close in from every side and saves us when there is no one else left to call: do not let our sincerity be only the sincerity of the drowning. Keep us turned toward You in the fair wind and the storm alike, enable us to be grateful for Your favour, the way You taught us to ask, and make us truly of the thankful, on the water and on the shore. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 17. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Lustrous land

The field dressed in gold, and cut down before dawn

Picture a field at the very height of its season. The rain came when it was needed, the soil drank it in, the green pushed up and thickened and then turned, until the whole stretch of land is heavy and golden and swaying in the evening light, the most beautiful it has looked all year. The farmer stands at the edge of it and feels something close to love. This is his. He cleared the ground and set the seed and waited through every long week, and now it is here, swaying in front of him, and nothing, he is sure, can take it from him. That night, or perhaps the next morning, while he sleeps with the picture of it still warm behind his eyes, a command comes, and by the time the sun is up the field is stubble. Cut flat. Grazed to the ground. As if there had never been anything green there at all.

That is how Allah sums up the whole of this worldly life, all of it, in a single verse of Surah Yunus. And to feel the weight of what He is saying, you have to stand in that field with the farmer first, before the dawn, while he still believes it is his.

Back on solid ground

The picture before this one was the sea. Yunus had just shown us the ship caught in a sudden storm, the waves rising from every side, the passengers crying out to Allah with a sincerity they had

never managed on dry land, promising to be grateful if only they were spared. And they are spared. The very next thing Allah says is that, the moment their feet touch the shore, they go about the earth in rebellion, as though none of it had ever happened.

But when He saves them, at once they commit injustice upon the earth without right. O mankind, your injustice is only against yourselves, [being merely] the enjoyment of worldly life. Then to Us is your return, and We will inform you of what you used to do.

QUR'AN 10:23

So this parable picks up exactly where the last one set them down. They are on land now, on solid ground, and the question has quietly changed. It is no longer how a person behaves in danger out on the water. It is what kind of life he builds once the danger is past and the comfort returns. Nouman Ali Khan points to how deliberately the two are paired. At the very start of the surah Allah names Himself as the One who made things easy for you in the land and in the sea, and the previous parable had spent all of its time on the sea. The land was still owed a picture. So now it comes. And this land parable, he notes, is meant to be the more obvious of the two, which is precisely why Allah opened with the harder, less obvious one and saved the plain one for last. This is the homecoming image. Not the terror of the storm, but the ease of the shore, and how quickly ease makes us forget the One who carried us back to it.

All of life, in one verse

The example of [this] worldly life is but like rain which We have sent down from the sky that the plants of the earth absorb - [those] from which men and livestock eat - until, when the earth has taken on its adornment and is beautified and its people suppose that they have capability over it, there comes to it Our command by night or by day, and We make it as a harvest, as if it had not flourished yesterday. Thus do We explain in detail the signs for a people who give thought.

QUR'AN 10:24

This is a particular kind of verse, Nouman Ali Khan observes, one Allah strikes only a few times across the whole Qur'an: the verse where He gathers the entire span of a human life into one image and hands it to you complete. Each time He does it He lights a different facet of the same truth, and here the facet He chooses is farming, the slow, back-breaking work of coaxing a crop out of the ground.

And the very first thing to notice is the part Allah leaves out. Growing food is exhausting labour. You clear the land and break the soil, you plant the seeds one at a time across the whole field, you guard the young shoots from the birds and the insects, you water through stage after stage, and even then, after all of it, a single drought can turn the entire year's work to nothing. None of that appears in the verse. Allah does not begin with the farmer's

part. He begins with the only part that is His: water sent down from the sky. In yesterday's parable, Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, that same water was your death, the sea that rose to swallow the ship. Here the very same water is your life, the rain your whole existence depends on. The clouds that carry it, he adds, mostly formed over that very sea, the vapour rising off the water until it gathered and was driven over the land and poured down. We are wrapped inside one beautiful, interlocking system, and not one piece of it is ours.

Keep this in the back of your mind through the whole picture, he says, because human civilisation itself began with farming. It is the seed of every other industry. Every job, every trade, every economy we have ever built rests on it, the way the parable before it rested on the sea, the two things on which all of humanity stands and without which all of it would fall. So when Allah reaches for this single image, He is not describing one quiet occupation off in the countryside. He is describing the pulse of the entire planet, and summing the whole of it up as water He sends and we do not. Are you the one who grows it, He asks elsewhere, with the same disarming directness:

Is it you who makes it grow, or are We the grower?

QUR'AN 56:64

The blessing you mix with until it feels like you

Watch the verbs in order now, because the picture is moving. The water comes down, and then it mixes with the plants of the earth. The rain soaks into the soil and into the seed until the two are no longer two separate things. Squeeze the leaf months later and liquid runs out of it, but that liquid was never the leaf's own. It fell from the sky, found its way down into the ground, and rose up inside the plant until you could no longer tell where the gift ended and the thing itself began.

That mixing, Nouman Ali Khan reflects, is exactly what we do with every single blessing Allah hands us. A gift comes down that we had no access to and no claim on, something that used to sit far up in the sky beyond our reach, and Allah decides to send it, and we take it up and use it and lean on it until it fuses with who we think we are. Allah gives you the ability to earn a degree, and you stop being merely yourself; now you are the engineer, the doctor, the accountant. He lets you carry His Book in your chest, and the name changes again; now you are the hafiz. The blessing becomes a credential, the credential becomes a part of the identity, and somewhere in the fusing we quietly forget that none of it grew out of us. It was sent down. It could just as easily never have come. And the height of that forgetting, he says, is the sentence we all reach for sooner or later: I built this, because I am clever, because I worked, because I am good. The seed taking the credit for the rain.

And notice who eats from this field, he adds, because Allah names them in the same breath: people, and livestock, side by side. We picture ourselves high above the animals, growing fruit and grain for ourselves and tossing the leftover grass down to the cattle. But it all sprouted from the same opened earth, and it is Allah who feeds you and your cattle from the one source. It is a humbling line, set there on purpose, to put us back in our place. And elsewhere, Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, Allah turns that same comparison into something far heavier, describing those who refuse Him as people who eat the way cattle eat:

Indeed, Allāh will admit those who have believed and done righteous deeds to gardens beneath which rivers flow, but those who disbelieve enjoy themselves and eat as grazing livestock eat, and the Fire will be a residence for them.

QUR'AN 47:12

The animal at its trough is not moved by the miracle in its mouth. It does not wonder how the food got there, what heavenly process carried it across a continent and a season to arrive at exactly this spot. It simply eats. And it would be a tragedy, he says, for a human being to eat the same way, mindless of the long, written journey behind a single piece of fruit, never once lifting the head to thank the One who sent the rain that began it.

Dressed like a bride

So far the field has only fed people. Now Allah turns from function to beauty. The earth, He says, takes on its adornment and is beautified. Here Nouman Ali Khan slows right down, because the language Allah chooses is borrowed from somewhere tender. This is the wording used, he explains, when a woman is dressed for her wedding day, layered in her finest, made up and adorned until she is almost unrecognisable, transformed, breathtaking, and dressed that way for one person alone. Allah is painting the earth as that bride, and the farmer as the young man who stands before her and cannot take his eyes away. The field has blossomed to its most stunning, and he is overwhelmed by it.

But most of us are not farmers, so what is this thrill he is describing? It is the moment, Nouman Ali Khan says, when the venture you poured years of yourself into finally turns. The deal is days from closing. The signature is finally on the page and you are only waiting now for the transfer to land. The degree you bled for is almost in your hand. And a feeling rises in the chest, unmistakable: at last, life is good, alhamdulillah, this is it, this is the thing. That is the bloom. That is the field taking on its adornment.

And beauty, he notes, was never a small or harmless thing. The most powerful nations on earth announce their power through their most beautiful monuments; the most powerful companies through their most beautiful headquarters; the most powerful people through their most beautiful homes. Power and beauty have always been married to each other, walking hand in hand. So when

the field reaches its splendour, the heart does not merely admire it from a respectful distance. Something else stirs, something hungrier, and the verse names it in the very next phrase.

The conviction that you own it

When the earth is at its most beautiful, Allah says, its people suppose that they have capability over it, that they are now in complete control. Nouman Ali Khan keeps the wedding picture running here, and it is where the image turns uncomfortable. The more beautiful the thing, he observes, the more fiercely the heart needs to own it and to control it. Think of how possessiveness gathers around something precious. Where are you going. Who were you talking to. No one else may come near it. We do not only want to look at beauty, he says; we want to grip it, to lock it down, to be certain it is ours and that it will stay ours.

And that is the lie folded quietly inside the bloom. The farmer looks at the gold swaying in front of him and is utterly convinced he is in control of it, when in plain truth he did almost none of it. He did not send the rain. He did not put the nutrients in the soil. He did not give the cloud its water or teach the seed the engineering of how to split itself open and climb toward the light. The whole season has been a gift passing through his hands, on loan from the moment it began, and at the very peak of it he mistakes the gift for a possession, the season for a kingdom, the thing he is borrowing for something he owns outright.

Hold on to that word, Nouman Ali Khan says: suppose. They supposed they had capability over it. They were sure. It was not a quiet hope at the back of the mind; it was a settled conviction, a certainty they would have staked everything on. And the very next word in the verse is the one that answers their certainty.

Our command came, and it was stubble

Just as the water once came down from the sky, now a command comes down from Allah. And Allah marks the hour with a precision that should make the skin prickle: by night, or by day. Nouman Ali Khan keeps the wedding imagery alive even into this, almost unbearably so. The disaster may arrive the very night of the wedding, or the morning after. The field that was a piece of heaven the evening before is, by sunrise, mown flat, grazed to the ground, nothing left of it but stubble. The beautiful bride, adorned and adored only hours earlier, is suddenly unrecognisable, and the man who could not stop looking now barely knows what he is looking at. And the speed of it, he points out, matches the storm in the parable before. The ruin does not creep in slowly. It arrives all at once, the way the bad wind hit the ship out of a clear sky.

Then comes the phrase that does the deepest work of the whole verse: as if it had not flourished yesterday. The Arabic, Nouman Ali Khan notes, carries more than one shade at once. On its surface it means the field looks as though it had never been lush, never thriving, never even there the day before, the splendour erased so completely it is hard to believe it was ever real. But the same root,

he explains, also carries the sense of being wealthy, of being independent, of having no need of anyone, which is the very quality named in Allah's own name al-Ghani, the One who is utterly free of need. And there is, he reflects, a strange independence to beauty. The truly beautiful thing seems to need nothing, because everyone wants it and it wants no one in return; everybody comes to it and it goes to nobody. The day before the harvest, this land was the prize the whole world reached for, the thing that seemed to say, I am the one who needs nothing, you are the ones who need me. The morning after, that splendour and that lofty self-sufficiency are gone as though they had never existed, as though the field had never once spoken so proudly. Gone overnight, and gone so utterly that it is hard to believe it was ever there.

And Allah closes the picture by naming, exactly, who it is for. Thus do We explain in detail the signs for a people who give thought. The parable is not a wistful observation about crops and weather. It is a sign, laid out deliberately, in detail, and it only opens for the one willing to stop and actually think about it.

Life is a season, not a kingdom

So turn the field around now, because by this point it is a mirror, and the face inside it is yours. Allah made our lives in episodes, Nouman Ali Khan says, the way farming itself runs in episodes. There is a phase where you simply put the seed in the ground and wait. There is a phase where you grind through the work just to eat, where the human eats and the animal eats and there is little

glory in any of it. There is a phase where you are so immersed in some task that you are fused into it, mixed in the way the rainwater mixes into the soil. And then there is the phase you ache for, the beautiful one, when the thing you longed for finally blooms in front of you. And what Allah shows us, every single time, without exception, is that the very moment you are surest the beauty is yours to keep, the command can come and leave you standing there asking, was this even beautiful, I can hardly remember why I wanted it so badly.

This is not Allah telling you the dunya is worthless, Nouman Ali Khan is careful to say. He gave you things in this world to enjoy, and you are meant to enjoy them. He is telling you what they actually are: temporary motivations, a season, intoxicating in exact proportion to how little they last. Think of the young man certain that he must marry the one girl he saw across campus, who turns the whole world over for her, convinced that once he has her everything will finally be complete, and who finds a year later that she is not the person he imagined and the certainty has simply evaporated. Think of the person who tells himself that this one thing, once acquired, will fix everything, and then watches the colour drain out of it the instant it is in his hands. There is no such thing here as everything will be okay once I have it, he says plainly. That sentence describes Jannah, and this is not Jannah. This life is movement, from one season to the next to the next, and your job was never to build something here that lasts forever. That is Allah's

work, not yours. Your job is only to do your own work well in the season you have been given.

And it is, he says, a genuinely liberating way to see the world. Not chained to things whose beauty fades, but free to enjoy them and then let them go and move on. Enjoy the bloom for exactly what it is, and refuse to be deluded by it. Because the one thing that outlasts the harvest is the good you do with it, the deeds that keep on growing long after the field has been cut. Even the strongest wall is eventually crushed; even the greatest empire is, sooner or later, run into the ground by the very heirs who inherited it. Nothing here was built to stay. It is the very posture the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ taught, when he told us to be in this world as though we were strangers in it, or travellers merely passing through. So make your peace with the season, and spend it well.

What this example asks of our hearts

It is tempting to read a verse like this one and turn it into a sad little proverb about how nothing lasts, to nod at it and move on unchanged. That would be to miss the question it is putting directly to your own heart. Because the field is you, and the dawn it warns of is coming for every season you have ever been certain you would keep.

So look honestly, first, at which figure in the parable you are. You are the farmer at the edge of the gold, almost always. There is some field in your life right now, blooming or about to: the deal, the home, the title, the marriage, the child, the thing you worked years

toward and can scarcely believe is finally yours. And the verse asks you, gently and without cruelty, whether you have started to suppose you have capability over it. Whether you have begun to mix yourself into it until you cannot tell the gift from the self, until you have quietly started to believe you built this, that it grew out of you and not down out of the sky. That supposing is the whole danger. It is the lie folded inside the bloom, and the peak of the beauty is the peak of the delusion.

The cure is not to love the field less, but to hold it differently, with an open hand instead of a closed fist. Enjoy the bloom; Allah gave it to you to enjoy. But remember, while you are standing in it, who sent the rain. Remember that you put a seed in the ground and Allah did everything else, that you are eating from a field He grew, that the whole season is a loan and not a wage. This is the article of faith the parable quietly tests, the same tawhid the rescued sailors failed the moment their feet hit the shore: that He is the Giver and the Owner and the One who decides the hour, and that the most honest thing a heart can do in the middle of its good season is to thank Him, the way the cattle at the trough never will.

And then there is the dawn. It will come. To you, in some form, the command will come by night or by day, and a field you adored will become stubble you can barely remember loving. When it does, this verse has already told you what it is, so that you are not destroyed by it: not a punishment, not the universe turning against you, but a season ending the way every season ends. And then notice, finally, the most merciful thing Allah does in this whole pas-

sage, which is where He places the very next verse. The instant the field falls, He does not leave you in the ruined field. He calls you somewhere else:

And Allāh invites to the Home of Peace [i.e., Paradise] and guides whom He wills to a straight path.

QUR'AN 10:25

What a place to put that line, Nouman Ali Khan says. The crop was not safe. The seed was not safe. The beauty was not safe. You yourself are not safe here, and nothing in this world ever was. And right there, with the stubble still in plain view, Allah calls you to the one home where everything stays, dar as-salam, the abode of peace, and tells you He guides to it whom He wills. So the field that was cut down is not, in the end, a verse about loss at all. It is a doorway. It loosens your grip on a season you were never going to keep, and turns your face toward the home that does not get mown down at dawn. The harvest will be taken from you. The invitation will still be standing. The only sane thing left to do is to walk toward the One who is calling, and to spend the rest of your season, whatever is left of it, planting the one crop that survives the morning. O Allah, give us what is good in this world and let us hold it with open hands, give us what is good in the Hereafter and gather us in the Home of Peace You call us to, and protect us from the

Fire, and from ever mistaking a passing field for the kingdom that lasts. Ameen.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 18. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Reaching for water

The one who stretches his hands toward water that never reaches his mouth

Picture a man who has been walking through the desert too long. His lips are cracked, his throat has closed to a thread, and the one thought left in his head is water. Then, at last, he comes upon a well. He drags himself to the rim and looks down, and there it is, real water, glinting far below in the dark. But there is no rope. No bucket. No vessel of any kind. And so, because his whole body is screaming for it, he leans out over the edge and stretches both arms down into the shaft, fingers spread, reaching toward water he is never, ever going to touch. He reaches as if the wanting itself could lift it. It will not. He could stand there until he collapsed and the water would not rise a single inch toward his hand.

That is the image Allah strikes in the fourteenth ayah of Surah ar-Ra'd. It is one of the shortest parables in the Qur'an, a few words only, and yet folded inside it is one of the heaviest realities a heart can be asked to face: what it actually means to call on someone, and what becomes of a call sent to anyone but Allah. This is the nineteenth of these striking examples, retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's series. And before he ever lets us look at those outstretched, empty hands, he slows us down and makes us sit

with a quieter question first, the question the whole parable turns on. What does it really mean to ask?

What it really means to ask

Start, Nouman Ali Khan says, with something as ordinary as a flat tire. You pull off to the side of the road. You get out, you find the spare in the back, you set the jack and you start to work. You strain at the car and you lift it, but only so far; your own strength runs out and the wheel still will not come free. You have done everything you possibly can, and you are one notch short. So when a stranger happens to walk by, you call out to him: brother, could you give me a hand here, I have taken it as far as I can take it. That, he says, is what it means to ask for help. You poured in your own effort first, you exhausted what was yours to give, and only then did you reach for someone else to finish what you could not.

Now set beside that man a second one. He has the same flat tire, but he stays seated in the cool of his car, and when someone walks past he leans out the window: it is hot out there, do me a favour and change this for me. He has not asked for help. He has issued a demand, having lifted nothing himself, having spent nothing of his own. The two men used almost the same words, and they did two completely different things. One was asking. The other was simply ordering a stranger to carry a weight he was unwilling to touch.

This is the shape of Allah's help too, and Nouman Ali Khan points to the Arabic to show it. One of the words for this kind of aid was used, originally, for military reinforcement: the fresh troops who come riding in from the flank once your own army is already locked in the battle, already bleeding for the ground it stands on. Reinforcement does not arrive before the fight. It arrives for the one who is already fighting. So it is with the help of Allah. Allah answers, Allah sends the reinforcement, Allah finishes what no servant could finish alone, but the first move is yours. You take the step. You do your part. And having done it, you are now in the position of the man straining at the car, the one who has truly earned the word when he calls out for help. There is a reciprocity built into the whole thing, and Allah states it about Himself in the clearest possible terms in Surah al-Baqarah:

And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me - indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided.

QUR'AN 2:186

I am near. I respond to the one who calls. Hold that promise; the whole parable is measured against it. For the One who says this of Himself is precisely the One the man at the well has turned away from, reaching instead into a dry shaft, or into the open sand, for a help that was never going to come.

To Him belongs the true call

Now the heart of his reading, and it rests on a single word. The word the parable turns on is da'wah, and Nouman Ali Khan shows that it does not point in only one direction. It carries two meanings at once, and the ayah is built so that it means both of them together.

In its first sense, da'wah is the call you make. It is another word for du'a, for your asking, for the cry you send up when you need something. When you raise your hands and beg your Lord, that is a da'wah, a call from you to Him. But in its second sense, da'wah runs the other way. It is the call made on you: the invitation, the summons, the rightful claim someone has on how you live your life. When Allah calls humanity to His path, that too is a da'wah, a call from Him to you. And the ayah opens by declaring that to Him belongs the true call, da'watul haqq, with both meanings live in the phrase at the same time.

Read it the first way, Nouman Ali Khan says, and it tells you something startling about your own prayers. The only time you have ever truly asked for anything is the time you asked Allah. Every plea you ever aimed anywhere else was not really a request at all, because it counted for nothing; it landed on empty air; it could not be answered because the thing you called on had no power to answer. The single One who ever actually responds to a call is Allah. So the only real call ever made, by anyone, in all of history, is the call made to Him. Read it the second way, and it cuts just as deep. No one has the right to summon your life the way Allah does.

Every other voice telling you who to be, what to chase, how to spend the one life you were given, is a hollow call beside His. The demand Allah makes on you is the only fully justified, fully rightful demand there is; everything else is a counterfeit summons.

Two truths, then, folded into one short phrase: He is the only One worth asking, and His is the only voice with the real right to call you. And the parable that follows is about to expose, in a single unforgettable picture, exactly what happens to the call sent the wrong way.

Your goal decides your du'a

But why? Why do so many of our calls drain straight into the sand? Before he turns us back to the well, Nouman Ali Khan answers with a picture you will recognise at once. Imagine a young man whose whole heart is set on one thing: making the team. He has a goal, and the goal owns him. Now ask him what he wants. He will not say a new phone, or nicer clothes, or a games console. He will tell you he wants the right coach. The right training schedule. The right nutrition, the right recovery, the right sleep, the right pair of shoes for the field. Every single thing he desires has quietly lined itself up behind the one goal that rules him. A clear goal does that. It reaches into all your scattered wants and reorganises them around itself, so that everything you ask for becomes, in some way, a request for the same thing.

Now take the opposite man, the one with no goal in sight. Ask him what he wants and he shrugs: I just want to be happy. So today

happiness is ice cream, and tomorrow it is a video game, and the day after it is something else, and he keeps reaching for one thing after another, and not one of them ever delivers the one thing he actually wanted, because there is no target for any of it to carry him toward. He gets the thing he asked for and the emptiness settles back in within the hour. He is no closer to anywhere, because there was no anywhere to be closer to.

Du'a, Nouman Ali Khan says, works in exactly the same way. The man chasing the team appreciates even a small gain, because he can feel it moving him toward what he is living for; the aimless man can be handed pleasure after pleasure and stay hollow, because none of it is part of any bigger picture. So aim your life at a low thing, and your prayers will shrink to fit it. You will find yourself begging Allah for small, scattered things, and then growing bitter when they do not satisfy you, because they were never able to satisfy you in the first place. But aim your life high, aim it at Him, and your asking is lifted with it. Even a small mercy will thrill you, because you know it is carrying you toward something that finally matters.

When prayer becomes a wish list

There is a way of treating God that the Qur'an quietly refuses to accept, and Nouman Ali Khan names it without flinching: consumer religion. It is the idea that the only reason you would worship at all is to get something out of it. You come to your god with a wish; you set the milk and the flowers and the candles in front of

him; you perform the ritual; and in exchange, your wish is to be granted. Worship as a transaction. Prayer as a purchase order, an item dropped into a basket at the counter of the divine.

He points to the moment Bani Israil were brought through the sea, saved by one miracle after another with a prophet walking among them, and then passed a people bowed in devotion before their idols, and turned to Musa, peace be upon him, with the most revealing request:

And We took the Children of Israel across the sea; then they came upon a people intent in devotion to [some] idols of theirs. They [the Children of Israel] said, "O Moses, make for us a god just as they have gods." He said, "Indeed, you are a people behaving ignorantly.

QUR'AN 7:138

Make us a god like that one. A god you can visit, leave an offering with, and walk away from with your wish secured. And Nouman Ali Khan tells of meeting the very same instinct alive and well today. A woman came to him in real distress, because, she said, Allah was not answering her du'a. She had fasted for it. She had stood in the depth of the night in prayer for it. She had made the journey to the sacred house and poured out this one du'a there. And when he gently asked what the du'a actually was, it came out: she wanted her daughter to marry a particular young man, and the daughter did not want him. She was asking Allah, in effect, to hand her a re-

mote control over another living soul, to press a button and rewrite a person's heart against that person's will. But the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself was told that he was not the one set in control over people. So what she called unanswered prayer was nothing of the kind. It was an unfilled order, a wish that was never a du'a to begin with.

And see where such a du'a is born, Nouman Ali Khan says, because this is the thread that ties it back to the team and the ice cream. The low du'a grows straight out of a low goal. Marry into that family and the relatives will be impressed; the cousins will be pleased; we will get to say we are connected to those people. Set your goal down there, in the approval of a few onlookers, and your prayers will shrink to the size of it, and then you will turn around and blame Allah for a smallness that was only ever yours. He is careful to add what he is not saying. He is not telling you to become some detached saint who wants nothing from this life at all. The good things of this world are not the problem. The Qur'an itself teaches us to ask for them, and to ask in a way that binds this world to the next:

But among them is he who says, "Our Lord, give us in this world [that which is] good and in the Hereafter [that which is] good and protect us from the punishment of the Fire."

QUR'AN 2:201

That, he says, is not a request for two separate things. It is one request: give me good in this life that leads to good in the next. Good in this world that has nothing to do with the world to come is not a prize. It is a danger.

Asking the way Allah taught us to ask

So what does a high call actually sound like? Look, Nouman Ali Khan says, at the du'as the prophets made when Allah set them a mission, because the mission shaped every word of the asking. When Musa, peace be upon him, was sent to stand before the greatest tyrant the world had ever produced, he did not ask his Lord for safety, or wealth, or an easy way out. He asked for what the task in front of him demanded:

[Moses] said, "My Lord, expand [i.e., relax] for me my breast [with assurance]

QUR'AN 20:25

And ease for me my task

QUR'AN 20:26

Expand my chest so the anxiety will not choke me, for he was going to a man who was a master at making hearts feel small and afraid. Ease my task. Untie the knot in my tongue so that what I have to say will be understood. Every single thing he begged for was bent toward the mountain Allah had told him to climb. The

goal set the prayer. Picture it as a mountain, Nouman Ali Khan suggests: if Allah has called you to climb a mountain, then suddenly you find yourself asking Him for strong legs, for breath that will not give out, for the right rope, the right footing, a guide, recovery when you slip. You are not asking for random things. Everything you ask for is in service of the one climb you have been set. And yes, the Prophet ﷺ taught us to ask Allah even for a shoelace; but the shoelace, Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, is so you can tie your shoe and climb. It was never an invitation to turn prayer into a list of toys.

And underneath all of it lies a mercy that should stop you in your tracks. Allah does not even leave us to invent our du'as from nothing. When Adam, peace be upon him, was so overcome with shame that he could not find the words to turn back to his Lord, Allah taught him the very words to say. The One who made you, who knows you better than you will ever know yourself, then tells you what to ask Him for. Nouman Ali Khan draws the comparison plainly: you have an idea of what you want to eat, and your doctor hands you the prescription, your trainer hands you the plan, your lawyer names the terms of the deal; whose word are you going to trust over theirs, your own guess? And here is your Maker, the one who designed you, saying, by the way, here is what you should ask Me for. The du'as Allah placed in the Qur'an are so complete, he says, that anything you could ever have thought to want is already folded somewhere inside them.

He leaves us with two more things. The first is humility. You may be utterly certain that some particular thing is the best thing for you, that if Allah only gave you this you would be His perfect servant, and Allah in His wisdom may still say no, because He knows and you do not. Ibrahim, peace be upon him, surely longed for the guidance of his own father, and it was not granted. Nuh, peace be upon him, surely longed for the rescue of his son, and it was not granted. If the closest du'a to a prophet's heart can be withheld because Allah's plan is better than the prophet's strategy, then who are we to tell Allah that He failed us by not following our wishes? The second thing is agility. When you have been pounding on one shut door for years, frustrated that it will not open, you may have gone blind to a hundred other doors Allah opened all around you, simply because they were not the one door you demanded. Do not be the bird, Nouman Ali Khan says, beating its head against the closed pane of the window while the next window stands wide open beside it. Turn. Go through the one that is open.

The mirror: whose answer were you waiting for

Now the hands in the parable turn back toward you, and the picture stops being about an idolater of long ago with his statue of carved stone. Hold the image again. A man at the lip of a well, no rope, no bucket, leaning out into the dark with bare arms toward water he will never lift. Or a man in the open desert plunging his hand into a shimmer on the sand that turns out to be nothing at all, a mirage closing around his empty fingers. Or, cruellest of the three, a man who actually does reach real water, and holds his

hand out flat, palm open, the way no human being has ever once drunk, so that the water runs straight back out between his fingers and never makes the short journey to his lips. Nouman Ali Khan reads the scene all three ways, and each one is the same diagnosis: a person doing something so pointless that you could only do it if you had lost your mind. Stupidity and desperation woven together. No one in their right senses would do this, and yet here he is, doing it, and not even sure why.

That, Allah says, is what calling on anyone besides Him is like. And the man at the well is not a stranger. He is anyone who pours real longing, real effort, real prayer into something that was never able to answer back. He is the one who made a career his god and reaches for it year after year while it gives him nothing his soul can drink. He is the one dying of thirst for a particular person's approval, the one whose whole peace has been staked on a single relationship, the one refreshing the screen for the verdict of a crowd. You can stretch your hands toward any of them for a lifetime, and they will no more rise to your lips than water answers a flat, open palm. The verse closes on the verdict without softening it:

To Him [alone] is the supplication of truth. And those they call upon besides Him do not respond to them with a thing, except as one who stretches his hands toward water [from afar, calling it] to reach his mouth, but it will not reach it [thus]. And the supplication of the disbelievers is not but in error [i.e., futility].

QUR'AN 13:14

And yet, see how gentle the diagnosis truly is when you look closely. The water in the parable is good. Thirst is not a sin. The longing is not the problem. There is nothing shameful about being a creature who needs, who aches, who reaches. The only thing wrong, the single fault in the whole picture, is the direction of the reach. Turn the very same hands the other way, toward the One who said I am near, I respond to the one who calls, and they are not empty hands at all. The thing that ran through your fingers your whole life was never being withheld from you. You were only reaching into the wrong well.

What this example asks of our hearts

It would be easy to read a parable like this and aim it safely outward, at the obvious idolater, at the person who bows to a statue, and to feel a quiet relief that the verse is not about us. That would be to waste it. This example is a mirror, and the first face it is meant to show you is your own.

So it asks you to look honestly at your own reaching. Not just what you ask for, but who you are really asking. Most of us run two prayer lives at once without noticing. There is the du'a we make with our tongues, raised to Allah in the prescribed words. And then there is the deeper, wordless du'a of our lives, the thing we actually orient ourselves toward, strain for, lose sleep over, stake our happiness on. And for many of us those two are not aimed at the same place at all. The lips face Allah while the heart leans out over a different well entirely, reaching for the approval, the position, the person, the proof that we have decided our peace depends on. This example asks you to bring those two into line. To notice the well you have actually been reaching into, and to admit, plainly, that it has never once lifted the water to your lips, and that it never will, because it cannot.

It asks you, too, to let your goal be raised, so your prayers can be raised with it. Nouman Ali Khan's whole reading hangs on this: the low du'a is not really the disease, it is the symptom; the disease is the low goal underneath it. When the thing you are living for is the regard of a handful of people, your asking will shrink to fit, and you will be left begging Allah for trivial things and then feeling abandoned when they fail to fill you. But fix your eyes on the one goal that is worth a life, on meeting Allah pleased and being met with pleasure, and watch how your du'as reorganise themselves around it the way the young athlete's wants all bent toward the team. You will start asking for good in this world that carries you

toward good in the next, and you will find that even a small mercy can move you to tears, because you can feel it carrying you home.

And it asks you to do your part, and then call, and then trust. Strain at the car before you flag down the help; the reinforcement is promised to the one already in the fight. Ask the way Allah taught His own prophets to ask, with the words He placed in His Book, words so complete that everything you could have wished for is already inside them. Then carry two things in your heart for the days when the answer does not come in the shape you wanted: the humility to accept that Allah may withhold the very thing you were certain was best, because His plan is wiser than your strategy, just as He withheld from prophets the du'a closest to their hearts; and the agility to stop beating against the one shut door and walk, gratefully, through the open one. For here is the promise that should change how you spend your days, and it is the gentlest part of the whole hard picture. The water was always good. Your thirst was never the sin. The One who answers was near the entire time, closer than the well you kept leaning into. So turn the hands. Aim the call where it is finally heard. Rabbi-shrah li sadri wa yassir li amri: my Lord, expand my breast and ease my affair, and turn my every longing toward what brings me to You. May Allah, who is near, who answers the one who calls, never let us spend our lives reaching for water that runs through our fingers, but teach us to

ask of Him the way He taught His prophets to ask, and let our every reach be toward Him.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 19. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Fading foam

The froth the flood lifts high, and then carries away to nothing

Rain falls hard on a dry land, and the valleys begin to fill. Water pours off the mountains and the rooftops, runs down through the streets, finds every crack and hollow in the ground, and as all of it gathers and gains speed, the torrent starts to carry something on its back. A white, churning froth rises to the surface of the flood and climbs, higher and higher on the crest, until it looks like the most powerful thing in the whole scene. It looks dangerous. It looks like the part you should be afraid of. And then the water settles, and you see what it really was. The froth was air. It is gone, scattered, cast off, as if it had never been there at all. What stayed was the quiet water you almost did not notice, the part that slipped down into the soil while everyone was watching the foam, and a few weeks later that ground is green.

This is the twentieth day of our walk through the striking examples of the Qur'an, and it belongs to one of the richest pictures in the whole Book, an image Allah strikes in Surah ar-Ra'd. Nouman Ali Khan calls it one of the most powerful parables in the early Qur'an, and he reads it the way a man reads a verse he has lived inside for years, turning it slowly so the light catches every face of it. Hold one thing in your mind before we begin, because the entire chapter turns on it: the loudest, highest, most frightening part of that

flood was the part with no weight in it, and the part that lasts was the part nobody was watching. That single fact is at once a portrait of your own heart, a map of the whole life of the Prophet ﷺ laid out in advance, and a law written over every society until the end of time.

The flood, and the froth on top of it

Begin with just the scene, before any meaning is poured into it, the way Nouman Ali Khan opens it for his listeners. Allah sends water down from the sky. Because of that water the valleys flood, and notice immediately the precision in it: not a drowning that destroys everything, not homes swept away and cattle killed, but each valley taking in exactly as much as it can hold. The rain seeps into every nook and cranny, into the elevations and the low places, and as all that water comes rushing down off the different heights and gathers into one torrent, it begins to carry something with it. Not clean, clear rainwater alone. You start to see bubbles forming, then froth, then a foam that rises above the surface of the flood and keeps rising, higher and higher, until it looks frightening.

That foam has a name in Arabic, and the whole parable is built around it. Nouman Ali Khan points to the word *zabad*, the bubbly white froth you see on a breaking wave at the beach as it rushes the sand, or the churning scum that rises on a flooding street. Hold the picture of it: light, airy, climbing, impressive. And then, just as you have settled into that image, Allah pauses it and shows you a second one entirely. Take metal, He says, the kind people melt

down when they want to make something: gold for jewellery, or iron and steel for a tool, a spoon, a fork, a shovel, an iron rod. They put it into an intense fire, and they do this for a reason. To shape the metal properly, the impurity buried deep inside it, the dirt and the air gaps and the other metals trapped in its core, has to come out. And when the fire reaches deep enough, that impurity rises to the top and forms a froth there too, the same kind of scum floating on the surface of the molten metal.

So now there are two kinds of foam in front of you, and you must hold them both, because the whole parable lives in what happens to them. One foam is lifted by a flood of water. The other is driven up out of metal by fire. Keep them side by side.

The example Allah strikes

Here is the verse itself, the whole thing in one breath, exactly as it was sent down:

He sends down from the sky, rain, and valleys flow according to their capacity, and the torrent carries a rising foam. And from that [ore] which they heat in the fire, desiring adornments and utensils, is a foam like it. Thus Allah presents [the example of] truth and falsehood. As for the foam, it vanishes, [being] cast off; but as for that which benefits the people, it remains on the earth. Thus does Allah present examples.

QUR'AN 13:17

There it is, the water and the metal both throwing up a froth, and then Allah names what He is doing with the image. This is how He strikes truth against falsehood, how He makes the two clash against each other so you can finally tell them apart. And He does not leave you to wonder how it ends. He tells you in the same breath. The foam goes, cast off, worth nothing. What benefits people stays, settled in the earth.

Nouman Ali Khan keeps pulling his listeners back to one detail, because every reading of this ayah turns on it. The foam was the part that looked impressive. A wave with froth on top stands taller, looks more aggressive, more dangerous, precisely because the foam adds all that height to it. It seems like the strongest part of the wave. But once the wave crashes you realise the foam was nothing at all; it was the water underneath that had the weight and the force the whole time, while the froth was just bubbles, just air made to look like power. That, he says, is exactly what falsehood is. Falsehood is the loud, light, rising part with no weight in it. Truth is the quiet part you almost did not notice, the part that lasts. Once you have seen that clearly, you can never quite unsee it again, in the world or in yourself.

Rain on the self, and fire on the self

Bring the picture all the way down now, to the size of a single human being. To you. Truth comes from the sky the way rain does. Revelation descended, and Allah tells us plainly that the truth is from your Lord, the same way the water descends from the sky.

And when that water reaches a person, something happens that the parable maps with painful accuracy.

Before the truth ever reached you, Nouman Ali Khan says, there were two things in you. There was good, and there was something that was not good, but here is the trouble: you could not always see the bad. You did not know that some of your habits were broken. You did not know which of your inherited ideas, which of the concepts handed down to you, were impurities. Then the rain came. And just by learning the Qur'an, just by sitting with the word of Allah, things began to wash off the surface of you. You started learning about one God, about kindness to parents, about honest dealings, about what life is actually for, and as you learned, broken concepts began to dissolve: hollow ideas about God, about yourself, about your own worth and your own purpose, customs that had come down to you wrapped in heritage but were pagan or vile or simply empty underneath. The water rose as froth and carried them off, and a cleaner, truer version of you was left behind. That, he says, is the first kind of cleansing, and it is the gentle one. It happens in the classroom of revelation. It happens every single time you increase your knowledge of Allah's book and Allah's messenger ﷺ, whether you feel it happening or not. Your mind is being washed of certain things. Your thought process is being purified.

But rainwater only cleans the surface. Run water over a lump of metal and the dirt locked in its core does not move. Some impurities sit too deep to be reached by anything but fire. And so there is

a second, harder cleansing, the one you never sign up for. Sometimes you have to go through a situation so painful it feels like being put into the flames, sometimes by your own choice, sometimes at the hands of someone else, and only that intense heat can penetrate deep enough to reach what study could never touch. In that heat, something rises that you did not know was inside you. You thought you had been cleansed; you thought your beliefs and your concepts and your worldview had all been purified. And then the fire shows you a stubbornness, a fear, a flaw that was lodged so deep that no amount of learning would ever have surfaced it, that you can only finally be rid of now that it has come up. Both are mercies, Nouman Ali Khan insists, though only one of them feels like one. Not all learning happens in a classroom. Life is also a teacher, and painful experience is also a teacher, and its lessons come from a different kind of textbook. One textbook is the lesson. The other textbook is the trial. Both exist for the same single purpose: to lift the froth off the metal of you.

There is one more thing folded into the wording here that Nouman Ali Khan loves. Allah says the metal is heated in pursuit of adornments and utensils, jewellery and tools, beauty and function in the same breath. And that is what the religion does to a person when it truly enters. It makes them purposeful: fair in their dealings, giving their family their rights, paying what they owe, honest where they used to lie. But it does more than that. It makes them beautiful. The ugly temper that nobody could stand to be around gets contained, and the beauty of the person emerges in its place, the way water

entering the soil does not just feed the plant but makes the flower bloom. Function and beauty together, both rising out of the same fire.

The whole seerah, in one ayah

Now step back, because Nouman Ali Khan reads this verse as far more than a lesson for the individual. He believes it is, first and foremost, a commentary on the entire life of the Prophet ﷺ, the whole arc of Makkah and Madinah mapped out in advance, the complete adventure of the message laid out before it had even happened, all inside this one ayah.

Follow the logic of it. Makkah is a valley. Allah sent water down from the sky, and the first valley to flood was Makkah, the Qur'an reaching into every nook and cranny of the city, each place taking it in as much as it could hold. But understand what kind of flood it was. The Qur'an in Makkah was not gentle background music. It was calling out, by the force of its words, the most powerful and the wealthiest and the most respected men in the city, the untouchable elite, the people you simply did not dare to speak about in a society like that. Nouman Ali Khan asks his listeners to feel how serious that was. Think of a place ruled by a royal family, where you would not walk around saying whatever you liked about the king if you valued your health, where people put the ruler's portrait on every wall and praised him to every stranger out of fear. Or think of a village run by an elder with thirty armed men around his compound, where some random boy talking about the big

man's lifestyle would not end well at all. Makkah was exactly that kind of society. And the Qur'an came down naming these men, exposing the wealthy one who had buried his daughter, the proud one who shoved away the beggar, hammering the corrupt and powerful one surah after another after another.

And when the word of Allah exposed them, when it told the whole valley that these were not the best of you but the worst filth in you, their rage rose exactly like foam on a flood. Higher and higher, angrier and angrier, the way the froth keeps climbing the crest of a wave. Now hold the chemistry of foam in your mind, the way Nouman Ali Khan does. Foam has no weight. It is dead twigs and pebbles and scum, the lightest things lying on the land, the things you never even noticed were there until the water came and lifted them. And these men had been the heavyweights of the society, the ones with gravitas, the ones everyone deferred to and looked up to and followed, because surely they had reached such power only by being wiser than the rest. The Qur'an, with nothing but words, lifted those heavyweights like froth, stirred them up, enraged them, and showed the whole valley what they actually were underneath. Their opposition declared itself, openly, loudly, on its own. They mocked the verses, they laughed at the stories, they called the Prophet ﷺ a liar and a magician and a madman, all of it out in the open. That is the first froth, the one that rises by itself the very moment the water hits it. And Allah is telling you something through it, says Nouman Ali Khan: when truth comes, the hatred for truth rises to meet it. That is the nature of things. Just as

Allah made night and day, male and female, life and death, He made truth, and the rising of falsehood against it. You cannot have the water come without the froth lifting. The clash must happen.

The fire, and the froth that hides

Then the Prophet ﷺ reached Madinah, and the second froth appears, the one that water alone can never lift, the one that fire is for.

Inside the Muslim community now were people of a different and far more difficult kind. They said the words. They testified that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah ﷺ. They stood in the ranks of the believers, they were deeply embedded in the community, and some of them even offered to come along to the battles. And the whole time, they were quietly working against the very mission they claimed to serve. They never declared themselves. You could not wash them out, because, exactly like the impurity locked inside a lump of metal, they were buried too deep for water to reach. You cannot pour soap on gold and scrub the impurity from its core with a sponge. The only thing that brings that kind of impurity to the surface is the fire.

So Allah put the believers through the fire. Battle after battle, fear, hunger, economic threats from every side, skirmish after skirmish, every one of them like the metal being thrust into the flames. And then came a wound as deep as the day of Uhud, one of the very worst of them, when some of the most precious Companions were lost, many of them the economic providers for their households,

and a city that was already poor was driven to the edge of ruin, a military disaster and an economic disaster at once. And Allah told the believers, plainly, why He had let it happen:

If a wound should touch you - there has already touched the [opposing] people a wound similar to it. And these days [of varying conditions] We alternate among the people so that Allah may make evident those who believe and [may] take to Himself from among you martyrs - and Allah does not like the wrongdoers -

QUR'AN 3:140

And that Allah may purify the believers [through trials] and destroy the disbelievers.

QUR'AN 3:141

These are days We turn between people, He says, so that Allah may make evident those who truly believe. And then comes the word Nouman Ali Khan asks his listeners to stop on. Allah says He does this so that He may purify the believers, and the Arabic verb is yumahhis, which is the very word the Arabs use for refining gold in fire, driving the impurity up out of the metal. It is the exact picture of the parable, returning here in the language of the seerah. The trial was the furnace. And in its heat, the hidden froth rose to the surface and named itself. The hypocrites who would never in a thousand years have stepped forward and said, here I am, I was

against you the whole time, came up like scum off molten metal, exposed without anyone having to expose them. That is the second froth, and that is the only way it is ever lifted: not by pouring more Qur'an over it, not by da'wah, but by fire.

And Nouman Ali Khan draws something tender out of the same passage. When the believers ran into those battles they were chasing two things, and Allah names them in their right order. They wanted martyrdom, and Allah told them they were not running toward the enemy's sword at all but toward their own forgiveness:

And hasten to forgiveness from your Lord and a garden [i.e., Paradise] as wide as the heavens and earth, prepared for the righteous

QUR'AN 3:133

And they wanted victory too, in this world. So in another place Allah lays the two side by side, exactly the way the parable laid jewellery beside utensils:

O you who have believed, shall I guide you to a transaction that will save you from a painful punishment? [It is that] you believe in Allah and His Messenger and strive in the cause of Allah with your wealth and your lives. That is best for you, if you only knew. He will forgive for you your sins and admit you to gardens beneath which rivers flow and pleasant dwellings in gardens of perpetual residence. That is the great attainment. And [you will obtain] another [favor] that you love - victory from Allah and an imminent conquest; and give good tidings to the believers.

QUR'AN 61:10-13

Look at the structure, says Nouman Ali Khan. The primary objective is forgiveness, salvation, the Garden. The secondary thing, the one you also happen to love, is victory in this world. It is the same pairing as the metal heated for jewellery or for a spoon: if you are going to all the trouble of the furnace, the precious thing is the gold, and the spoon is only the useful by-product. Victory was never the crown jewel of the believers' faith. It was the utensil. If Allah grants the ummah victory, they will worship Him; and if He withholds it, they will still worship Him, and their Islam will be no less Islam without it. The connection to Allah does not rise and fall with the conquest. The furnace was always for the gold.

Foam rises, foam falls, water stays

And then both froths, the open one and the hidden one, share a single fate. The foam goes, cast off, worth nothing.

Watch how it works across the whole sweep of history, Nouman Ali Khan says. Ideas and movements come, swell up, look completely unstoppable, and then dissolve. The Mongols came and went. Empires of colonisers came and went. Communism swept across half the earth like a wildfire, took hold of vast regions, raised up strong movements even in the heart of nations like this one, and then withered away and disappeared. Foam rises and foam falls, rises and falls, loud the entire time and weightless the entire time. Every single flood of falsehood that has ever tried to drown the truth has been froth, and froth always goes. He even turns it on the individual: he has watched people leave the religion entirely and then spend the rest of their lives making videos about how much they hate it, unable to actually leave the thing they walked away from, still crying about it, foam that rose and cannot settle.

But the water that helps people sinks down into the ground and stays. Sometimes it sinks so deep that you cannot see it anymore, until one day, out of ground everyone had written off as dead, it sends up green. Nouman Ali Khan gives the small, domestic version of it, and it lands harder than all the empires. Picture a family that left their faith generations ago. They were Muslim once, two or three hundred years back, and they passed it down, but the next generation was a little more diluted, and the next more diluted

than that, until the family became almost indistinguishable from anyone around them, Muslim in name only, faith watered down and then drained away entirely. They were sure the water had dried up for good. And then the eighteen-year-old daughter is quietly watching something online and learning to cover, and the twenty-year-old son is closing his bedroom door to pray, and the family is alarmed, telling them this is too much, take that thing off, we are not like this, we do not do this in our family. The water they thought had vanished centuries ago was embedded in the earth the whole time, and it came back up. It is so resilient, he marvels, that it can sleep for a generation, or for two centuries, and still return. Empires tried to gut Islam out of whole peoples by force, ripping the Qur'an from homes and the scarves off women in the streets, and somehow it stayed; it just stays. What benefits people remains in the earth.

And there is one last subtlety in the very wording of the verse, and Nouman Ali Khan calls it a little frightening, so he saves it for the end. When Allah concludes by saying the foam goes and the beneficial thing stays, the grammar leans the emphasis on the foam from the water, on the open kufr that rose in Makkah, and quietly leaves aside the foam from the metal. It is a subtle way, he suggests, of telling us how the two oppositions would end. The open disbelief was brought to an end in that land; kufr was finished in the valley of Makkah. But hypocrisy, the froth that hides, the impurity that only fire can reach, would remain a disease in the community to the very end of time. The flood ended the loud enemy. The

hidden one is still among us, still being driven up by the furnace, age after age.

What this example asks of our hearts

It is tempting to read a parable this vast, a single ayah that holds the whole life of the Prophet ﷺ and the rise and fall of every empire, and feel only awe at its scope, and then set it down. That would be to miss the question Allah built it to ask, because just two verses later He turns the entire flood around and points it straight at you:

Then is he who knows that what has been revealed to you from your Lord is the truth like one who is blind? They will only be reminded who are people of understanding -

QUR'AN 13:19

The one who knows that what came from his Lord is the truth, and the one who is blind to it, are not the same, and only those with understanding take the reminder. So take it. Because this was never only about hypocrites and Mongols and the streets of old Makkah. It was always, underneath all of that, about what is in you.

Some of what you carry is foam. The loud parts. The opinions you perform for an audience, the anger and the ego that rise high and look like strength and have no weight in them at all, the parts of your religion that are really about being seen. They climb the crest, they look impressive, they feel like the strongest part of you. And

the moment the flood settles, they will be cast off, scattered, gone, as if they had never been there. And some of what you carry is water. The quiet good that asks for no audience. The prayer no one sees. The patience you keep in the fire. The word of Allah you actually let sink down into yourself. That is the part that will still be there when everything loud has gone, and it will give life for years and years you will never live to see, the way one rain feeds a tree, and the tree feeds its seeds, and the seeds feed more trees, generation after generation, what benefits people, simply remaining in the earth.

So here is what Nouman Ali Khan leaves with us, and it is the truest test of this whole image: learn to tell the froth in your life from the water. Do not be frightened by the height of the foam, in the world or in yourself, because foam always goes. Do not measure your worth by the loud, rising, performed part of you, because that is exactly the part Allah will cast off. And do not resent the furnace when it comes, because the fire is reaching something the rain never could. Flood yourself with the Qur'an, he pleads, the way Makkah was flooded, because the water that truly drowned that valley and gave it life was the word of Allah, and we have not yet given ourselves to it the way it deserves. Let it wash off what study can wash, and let the trials burn out what only fire can burn, and spend the whole of yourself on the water, on the quiet good that lasts, and let everything else, all of it, go.

O Allah, make us of the water and not the froth. Purify us by Your word before You purify us by fire, and let us not resent the furnace

when it comes for what only it can reach. When this loud world finally settles into the nothing it always was, let what benefits people remain in the earth from our hands, green long after we are gone. Grant us wisdom, and join us with the righteous who last.

[And he said], "My Lord, grant me authority and join me with the righteous.

QUR'AN 26:83

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 20. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

A mound of ash

A lifetime of deeds, scattered by a single storm

Picture a man kneeling in the desert at first light, beside a small grey heap. He is cupping it with both hands, leaning his body over it so the morning air will not stir it, and there is something tender, almost reverent, in the way he guards it. It is ash, and to him it is not nothing. It is everything. It is the proof of a great fire that once roared on this very ground, the feast that fire cooked, the night a whole valley gathered in his name and ate and drank and toasted him until the sky lightened. He has been collecting it for years. His father's ash is mixed into it, and his father's father's, the residue of every glory his family ever lit. He keeps it the way another man keeps an heirloom.

Then a wind comes. Not a breath, not a gust that lifts a corner and settles again. A storm, the kind that runs the whole length of a day without pausing, that pulls trees up by the roots and lays houses flat. It falls on his little pile and takes it. Not most of it. All of it. It mixes into the sand and lifts over the dunes and is carried so far that the man, if he spent the rest of his life crawling the desert on his hands and knees, could not gather back a single speck of it.

That is the example Allah strikes in Surah Ibrahim, and it is a portrait of every deed done by a person who will not answer to their Lord. It looks, at first, like a brief and simple verse. It is one of the

most quietly devastating images in the whole Qur'an, and to feel its weight you have to begin, as the first listeners did, not with the wind but with the ash, and with a single word the Arabs once used as a compliment.

A pile of ash, and a man who treasures it

Begin with the picture, because the Arabs would have seen it before they understood it. In old Arabia, as Nouman Ali Khan opens this example, the mark of a truly wealthy man was the feast he threw. He would call the whole tribe to him: come, all of you, I am slaughtering camels and goats and cattle, there will be fires the length of the valley, there will be food and drink and celebration until dawn. And the people would come, and they would eat, and somewhere in the heat of the night they would raise a toast to the man whose generosity had made it all, and tell him they loved him, and he would feel like the centre of the world.

And in the morning, when the guests had scattered back to their tents and the valley lay quiet again, what was left where all that splendour had been? Ash. Heaps of it, grey across the ground where the bonfires had burned down. So the people made a saying out of it. That man over there, they would say, he has a lot of ash. It was praise. It meant: he is grand, he is open-handed, he throws the kind of night a person remembers for years. To have a great deal of ash was to be a great host.

So when this example begins and the first listeners heard the word for ash, they did not flinch. If anything it sounded like flattery, like

the Qur'an was about to compliment the very people it was describing. Hold that, because it is the trap closing. Allah takes the thing they were proudest of, the word they used to crown their finest men, and turns it slowly in His hand until they are forced to see what it actually is. The picture, in the end, is a man bent low over a mound of ash, shielding it from the air, and the longer you look at him the stranger his devotion becomes. He is guarding a thing that the lightest wind in the world could undo.

The deeds the example is striking at

So whose deeds are these, exactly, that turn out to be ash? The verse is precise, and Nouman Ali Khan slows the whole reading down on a single word in it. Here is what Allah says:

The example of those who disbelieve in their Lord is [that] their deeds are like ashes which the wind blows forcefully on a stormy day; they are unable [to keep] from what they earned a [single] thing. That is what is extreme error.

QUR'AN 14:18

Read the opening again. Allah does not say the deeds of those who disbelieve in Allah. He says the deeds of those who disbelieve in their Lord, their Rabb. That distinction, Nouman Ali Khan stresses, is the whole hinge of the verse, because the people the Qur'an first spoke this to were not atheists. They had no quarrel with the existence of God. Ask them outright who made the heavens and

the earth, the Qur'an says of them elsewhere, and they will not hesitate:

And if you asked them, "Who created the heavens and the earth?" they would surely say, "Allāh."

QUR'AN 39:38

They knew He had made it all. What they refused was something quieter and far more dangerous: that Allah is their Master, their Lord, the One above them with the right to govern how they live. To call Allah your Rabb is to seat Him in a position of authority over you, to admit that He is not merely the Maker who set the world spinning and then withdrew, but the Owner who has every right to direct it still. They wanted the first without the second. Nouman Ali Khan gives the picture that makes it land: the factory that manufactures a pen is not the hand that writes with it. The company that builds a car is not the one driving it down the road; once it is sold, a new owner takes the wheel and does with it whatever he pleases. So, in their minds, God built the universe, God built them, and then He stepped back and got busy with other things, and now they are free. He did His part. The rest is theirs to run as they see fit, with no one above them to answer to.

And here is the warning Nouman Ali Khan draws straight out of the verse and into our own chests. If you will not let Allah take the place of your Lord, that throne does not simply sit empty. Something always climbs onto it. If nothing else presents itself

from outside, then the thing that takes the seat is you. Your own appetites become your master. Your own opinions become the final word. In the end you become the one who decides, by yourself and for yourself, what is good and what is evil, what is allowed and what is forbidden, answering to nothing higher than your own wants. The Qur'an, in another place, describes exactly that person, the one who has taken his own desire as his god. And the more power a person gathers, the more complete the takeover becomes, until a man at the very top of his society is not only refusing a master but setting the standard of right and wrong for everyone beneath him, becoming, in effect, a small god in his own world. It is no accident, Nouman Ali Khan notes, that the tyrants of the Qur'an drifted toward calling themselves divine. That is simply where the road ends when there is no Rabb on the throne. The verse is striking at the deeds of a person living exactly that way: a whole life of effort and earning, and no Lord over a single hour of it.

Even the good they do

It would be a relief if the example only meant their worst deeds, the cruelties and the open wrongs. It does not, and this is where Nouman Ali Khan opens the verse wider than we expect, into three different kinds of doing, all of them swept up together in this one image.

There is, first, the work aimed squarely at tearing the truth down. The message of the Prophet ﷺ was spreading through Makkah,

and its elite, the men with power and standing who saw the new faith as a threat to everything they ran, poured themselves into stopping it by any means they could find. Their plotting, their pressure, their whole project of crushing the call: that is one set of deeds the verse has in view.

But then there is a second kind, and this is where the example begins to unsettle, because these were deeds that are good even by our own measure. The people of Makkah were not monsters from dawn to dusk. They fed the poor. They took care of the pilgrims who streamed in for Hajj. They maintained the Sacred House and kept it clean. They gave generously from their wealth, they honoured their guests, they sacrificed and shared the meat. Even a man as hard as Abu Jahl might be gentle with a child, or give in charity. Some of what they did was genuinely, recognisably good, the very same acts a Muslim is taught to do. Charity is good. Kindness is good. Honesty in dealings is good. These are not Muslim deeds only; they are human goods, and the disbelievers did plenty of them.

And then there is a third kind, the one Nouman Ali Khan lingers over longest, because it is the subtlest: the good a godless culture invents by its own standard, the shining things a society with no Lord above it decides to celebrate. He brings it right up to our own day. Imagine a billionaire who comes into a struggling town and builds it a stadium. Suddenly there is work, a new highway, businesses opening their doors, the whole local economy lifting, and everyone grateful to the man who made it happen. Or take the

casinos that dock as great vessels beside quiet cities and pour money back into the place: they fund the local school, open a clinic, even build a shelter for battered women. Good fruit, every piece of it. But Nouman Ali Khan asks the question underneath. Why is the shelter needed, why is the clinic full? Trace it back and you find the drinking and the ruin the casino itself was feeding. The fruit is real, and it grew on a poisoned root. People point to the fruit and say, look at all the good that came of it, and sweep the rest quietly out of sight. Allah, in this one example, gathers up all of it: the deeds meant to harm, the deeds that are truly good by any measure, and the twisted good a culture celebrates while ignoring the rot beneath it. He gathers the whole harvest, when the root is a life with no Lord, and tells us what it finally comes to.

Why ash, of all things

So He compares it to ash, and we have to stop and feel why, because the word is chosen with terrible care. Ash, Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, is what is left when something has been burned, and what is burned can never be brought back. The wood is not merely damaged; it is gone. It has been transformed into a substance with no use left in it whatsoever. You cannot rebuild the log from the ash. You cannot warm yourself at it, cook with it, build with it. It is the residue of a thing that no longer exists.

And think about what the fire was for in the first place. It was always temporary. Someone lit it for warmth, and they got their warmth, for an hour, and then the fire died and the ash was all that

remained. Someone lit it to cook, and the food was cooked and eaten and finished, and the ash was all that remained. The glory of it was real while it burned. The feast was real, the heat was real, the gathering and the laughter were all real. But none of it was ever built to last, and the instant it ended, every bit of that splendour had collapsed into a grey heap on the ground. That, Nouman Ali Khan says, is what these deeds are: dazzling like a fire at first, glorious and warm and full of light, and then, when the moment passes, nothing but the memory of a fire.

And watch how the man relates to his heap. He does not kneel over it and ask what it will do for him tomorrow; ash does nothing for tomorrow. He kneels over it and remembers how magnificent it was yesterday. My grandfather, he says, lit the very first bonfire on this ground and slaughtered the first camel. My father slaughtered two. Today I slaughtered eighty. The whole conversation faces backward. He is hoarding the past. He will frame the night, hang the picture on the wall, keep the memory burning long after the fire that made it has gone cold, because the ash is genuinely all he has left to hold. And if you actually stop and look at a person devoting his life to a collection of ash, Nouman Ali Khan says, you see it for the strange thing it is: he is treasuring something utterly worthless, glorifying a fire that burned out long ago, living inside a memory while the reality of it crumbles between his fingers.

Deeds that face forward

Here the example turns, very quietly, into a mirror, and it is worth standing still in front of it for a long moment. Set the believer beside the man with the ash, Nouman Ali Khan says, and watch which way each of them is facing.

The believer who finishes a meaningful deed is not looking back at it at all. They do not stand over what they have done and say, look what I made, look how magnificent that was. They turn their face the other way, toward the One they have not yet met, and they say: our Lord, accept this from us. Their eyes are on what lies ahead, on the Day they will stand before Him, on a reward that has not yet arrived. A good deed, to a believer, is a seed pressed into the ground, something planted for a harvest still to come. It is not a trophy to be polished and displayed. The whole posture of faith is forward-leaning, future-facing, reaching toward what is coming rather than clutching at what is gone.

Nouman Ali Khan sharpens it with something a mentor of his, a man who had built an enormous business, once told him about hiring. When a candidate sits down across the desk and spends the whole interview talking about where they studied and what they have already accomplished, this man said, the interview is finished before it began. They are facing backward; all they have is a past. But when someone sits down, perhaps with far less behind them, and says here is what I want to build, here is what I know I can do, give me the chance and watch, that is the person worth betting on, because their eyes are on what they will make, not on what they

already made. So turn the question on your own days, Nouman Ali Khan urges. The same single hour can be spent two opposite ways. A young man can wake before dawn and run, pouring that hour into the years ahead, building something into his future. Or he can wake at the very same hour and burn it on a screen, reducing the same sixty minutes to ash. It is the identical time. What differs is whether it was planted or burned. And so the believer learns to ask, of every deed and every hour: which of these am I planting for what is coming, and which am I quietly turning to ash? The deeds of the heedless, every last one of them, point only backward, toward a fire that is already out.

A storm too strong for so small a thing

Then comes the wind, and the first thing to notice is how wildly out of proportion it is. How much air does it take to scatter a pile of ash? A single breath. You could wave a sheet of paper at it and it would be gone. Ash is the frailest thing imaginable; you could not even keep it on a table near an open window, near a child, near a turning fan, without watching it lift and disappear, helpless before the lightest stirring of air.

And Allah does not send a breath. He says the wind blew hard against it, fiercely, violently, and on a day described as a stormy one, a day so consumed by gale that not one moment of its hours passes without the wind tearing through. This is the kind of wind, Nouman Ali Khan points out, that uproots whole trees and brings down buildings, and it is being aimed at a heap of ash that a pass-

ing child could have undone with a wave of the hand. It sounds like overwhelming force unleashed on something pitifully weak, and that excess is precisely the point. The verse is making sure we understand that there will be no remainder. Not most of it taken and a little left. Not even a smudge of grey clinging to the fingertips. Nothing. The wind comes with strength enough to flatten a town, falls on a thing a breath would have scattered, and leaves absolutely nothing behind.

And then the verdict lands, so heavy it would be easy to read past it: they are unable to keep, from what they earned, a single thing. A whole life of earning, the feasts and the projects and the empire built to crush a faith, and on that Day not one particle of it remains in their grip. Nouman Ali Khan even reads the image onto the field of Badr, where the proudest of Makkah marched out with their banners and their certainty, and where nearly seventy of them were left dead on the sand. Everything they had invested in stopping the message was scattered in an afternoon like ash in a gale. The very thing they had boasted with became the thing they were humbled by, the glory turned inside out into ruin in an instant, exactly as the verse said it would be.

The mirror: lost so far it cannot be found

Look at how the verse ends, and let the last phrase find you, because Nouman Ali Khan opens it like a closing door. That, Allah says, is the extreme error, the far misguidance, *ad-dalal al-ba'id*. We are used to hearing *dalal* as misguidance, a spiritual wander-

ing. But its root, he reminds us, is simply to be lost, the way a man is lost in the open desert, with no landmark and no path and no way back. And ba'id means far. And in Arabic, he notes, the word for far stretches all the way to the meaning of impossible; it is used in the language for things so distant they cannot be reached. So the verse is not only saying these people wandered off the road. It is saying that what they earned is lost as far as a thing can possibly be lost, scattered like ash over the dunes and into the rocks, gone so utterly that recovering it is not merely hard but impossible. There is no more total loss than that in all of creation. It is the very picture of something that can never, ever be brought back.

And then, in the very next breath, the verse turns and faces you:

Have you not seen [i.e., considered] that Allāh created the heavens and the earth in truth? If He wills, He can do away with you and produce a new creation.

QUR'AN 14:19

Sit with how the two verses press against each other. Allah created the heavens and the earth in truth, with purpose, Nouman Ali Khan says; nothing in this universe was made to be pointless. The ash lost its purpose, but you were not made to lose yours. And then the warning beneath it: He could do away with you and bring a new creation in your place, a creation that would actually fulfil what it was made for, that would not deserve to be scattered. In the verse before, the wind sweeps away the ash. Here, Allah says,

if you are nothing but useless deeds, He could sweep away the one who did them just as easily. We cannot stand apart from what we do, Nouman Ali Khan says. We are, in a real sense, the sum of our deeds. So the question this image leaves in your hands is not, in the end, about the people of Makkah at all. It is about you. When the storm of that Day arrives, will you be found holding ash, the cold residue of fires that dazzled and died, or will you be holding something that lasts, something planted, something the wind cannot touch?

There is still time to decide what you build. And the prophet whose name the surah carries left us the prayer for it, the very thing to ask of the Lord some refused to call their own:

My Lord, make me an establisher of prayer, and [many] from my descendants. Our Lord, and accept my supplication.

QUR'AN 14:40

What this example asks of our hearts

It is tempting to read this verse and place the man with the ash at a safe distance, a foolish ancient host kneeling over the leftovers of a party, nothing to do with us. That is exactly how to miss it. He is anyone who pours a life into things that blaze and then go cold, and who spends what is left of his days looking back at how bright they once were. He had real fires and real feasts and real applause; none of that was illusion. What he never had was a single deed pointed forward, toward the One he would not call his Lord,

and so when the wind came there was nothing in his hands to keep. His life asks our hearts a question we would rather not be asked, and it asks it gently, with the mirror turned first at ourselves.

It asks, before anything else, who is on the throne of your life. The verse did not strike at people who denied that God exists; they knew full well who made the heavens and the earth. It struck at people who would not let Him be their Master, who took His gifts and answered to no one. And the warning runs straight into us, because that throne is never empty for long. If Allah is not your Rabb, something else is, and most often it is you: your appetites, your opinions, your own comfort, quietly seated where your Lord should be, deciding your right and wrong. So the first thing this example asks is the hardest and the most personal: in the actual deciding of your days, what does Allah being your Lord change? A faith that admits a Creator and then governs itself is precisely the faith the verse calls ash.

It asks, too, which way your deeds are facing. The man with the ash treasures what his deeds were; he frames the past and hoards the memory. The believer finishes a deed and turns toward what is coming, asking only that Allah accept it, planting where the other man is polishing. So look honestly at your own good: when you do something for Allah, are your eyes on Him and the Day you will meet Him, or are they on the people watching, on the memory you are building? The same hour, the same act, can be a seed or a heap of ash, and the only difference is whether it was done facing

forward, for Him, or facing back, for yourself. This is the line that runs all the way to the heart of our faith, to the first half of the testimony you yourself say, that there is no lord worth answering to but Allah; it is the line Ibrahim, peace be upon him, lived when he reasoned his way past every false master to the One who truly made him, and the surah that carries his name closes the example with his own prayer, that we be establishers of the prayer and that our deeds be accepted.

And it asks you to believe, with your whole heart, that nothing escapes that wind except what was kept for Allah. The verse is merciless about it: a breath would have scattered the ash, yet Allah sends a daylong gale, so that not one speck survives, not a smear on the fingertips. Everything earned without a Lord is lost as far as a thing can be lost, lost into the impossible. The Day will come when deeds are approached and made, in the words of another verse that strikes the same note, as scattered dust:

And We will approach [i.e., regard] what they have done of deeds and make them as dust dispersed.

QUR'AN 25:23

So this is the choice the image presses into your hands tonight, before that storm ever arrives: look hard at what you are building, and build something the wind cannot take. Seat Allah on the throne of your life and answer to Him. Turn one deed to face forward, done for His acceptance and no one's eyes. Take one hour you

would have burned and plant it instead toward the One you will meet. The man kneeling over his ash thought he was guarding a treasure, and he was guarding a memory of a fire. You were created in truth, for a purpose, made for far more than scattering. May Allah make us of those who answer to Him and not to their own whims, who plant their deeds toward meeting Him rather than hoarding them behind, who are not left grasping at ash on the Day the wind comes. Make us establishers of the prayer, and our children after us, and accept from us what we do. Rabbana wa taqabbal du'a.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 21. Qur'an: Sahih International (14:18, 39:38, 14:19, 14:40, 25:23), verified via quran.ai.

Firm roots and high branches

A good word, like a good tree, its root deep and its branches in the sky

Picture a tree that has been standing a long time. Its branches are high, lifted into the sky, heavy with fruit, and you can see them from far off; they are the part of the tree the whole world admires. But the part that actually holds it up you cannot see at all. Below the soil, mirroring every branch above, the roots have driven down just as far, gripping the earth in the dark, drinking from water that runs where no eye ever follows it. The taller the tree has grown, the deeper it has gone. That, and only that, is the reason the storm has never taken it.

That is the picture Allah strikes in Surah Ibrahim for a single good word. And of all the examples in the Qur'an, this is one of the few that Allah closes by telling you, in His own words, to keep coming back to it.

A question struck at you alone

The ayah does not open with the tree. It opens with a question, and the question is aimed straight at you.

Have you not considered how Allāh presents an example, [making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches [high] in the sky?

QUR'AN 14:24

Nouman Ali Khan stops on the very first words, because they hide something. Read literally, the opening asks, did you not see. But the one being addressed was not standing in a field watching a tree grow. He points us to one of the shortest surahs many of us learned as children, the surah of the elephant, which opens with the same phrasing: have you not considered how your Lord dealt with the army of the elephant. The Prophet ﷺ was not alive on the day of the elephant. He saw none of it. So this was never seeing with the eyes. It is, in his reading, a call to think about something so hard and so long that it stands up in front of you, until you can almost watch it happen. Allah is not asking, did you happen to notice. He is asking, have you turned this over in your heart until you could see it.

There is a second pull inside the question, and it is sharper still. Allah says it to one person, not to a crowd. Nouman Ali Khan reaches for a scene every one of us has lived. A teacher walks into a classroom and says, students should really come on time, students should really work harder, students, students, and thirty children sit there perfectly comfortable, because each one is quietly certain the teacher means the boy beside him. But the moment the teacher points and says a single name, the whole room stiffens,

and every other child starts to wonder whose name is next. Spoken to the group, the warning is something you can hide inside. Spoken to one person, there is nowhere left to stand. This is how we have learned to hold the troubles of the believers at arm's length, he notes: the ummah is bleeding, the ummah is failing, the ummah, the ummah, and somewhere underneath it we are thinking, yes, the rest of them, not me. The grammar of this ayah will not allow that. It separates you out and sets you alone with the question, as though no one else existed.

And of all the surahs to strike this picture in, Allah strikes it in the surah named for Ibrahim, peace be upon him: the man who walked out of the thinking of his entire society to think for himself, who would not inherit a belief simply because it had always been believed. The whole surah honours a mind that refused to copy, and the question lands in exactly that key. Not, did your people consider this. Did you.

A word held up against a whole tree

Now the image itself, and the first thing to notice is what Allah has quietly left out. A single word is being held up against an entire tree. But a tree does not begin as a tree. It begins as a seed. The word, Nouman Ali Khan observes, is really being compared to the seed that grows into the tree, except that Allah takes you straight past the seed to the finished, towering result and trusts you to fill in the middle yourself. By this point in the Qur'an enough pictures have been struck, enough seeds and rain and growth described,

that you already know how a small buried thing becomes a great living one. He does not need to spell it out. He hands you the grown tree and lets you remember the seed.

And it is one word. Not a sermon, not a thirteen-year campaign of preaching, just a word. He draws out the same instinct we carry in our own speech: when someone says let me have a word with you, no one braces for a three-hour lecture. A word is something brief, one matter, one thing worth saying. The lesson folded into that smallness, he says, is that when it comes to the truth, quantity was never the point. Quality is. The interaction can be the briefest thing in the world and still go all the way down.

He reaches for a moment that proves it. The Prophet ﷺ had been driven out of Ta'if, wounded and rejected by the people there, and stood reciting the Qur'an in the dark with no human audience left to him. A small band of jinn happened to be passing, caught the sound, and hushed one another to listen.

Say, [O Muḥammad], "It has been revealed to me that a group of the jinn listened and said, 'Indeed, we have heard an amazing Qur'ān [i.e., recitation]. It guides to the right course, and we have believed in it. And we will never associate with our Lord anyone.

QUR'AN 72:1-2

They did not sit through years of preaching. They caught a good word in passing, on the worst night of his mission, and it changed

them so completely that their own reflections on what they heard were folded into the Qur'an forever. You never know which word it will be. He tells of people who have come to him over the years and admitted, almost sheepishly, that they slept through whole talks but woke for one sentence they now teach their own children. A single good word, given once, and the rest is out of your hands.

Why the word has to be tayyib

Allah does not call it a strong word or a true word or a clever word. He calls it tayyib, and Nouman Ali Khan walks slowly through everything that one adjective carries. Tayyib is the word used for sweet water, the kind you can actually drink. It is used for food that is not merely nourishing but goes down easily and tastes good on the way. It is used for land that has been cleared of stones and pests and made ready, so that something planted in it can actually grow. Wholesome, pure, and good to receive, all at once.

So a good word, in his reading, is two things together, and you need both halves or you do not have it. What you say has to carry real benefit; it has to be true and nourishing, something that will genuinely feed the person who receives it. And how you say it has to be gentle enough to be swallowed. You can take a perfectly true thing and deliver it in a way that slams a door in someone's face. Even the greeting of peace, he notes, can be a good word or, hissed through clenched teeth, can stop being one. We all know that communication is never only the words; it is the face, the

tone, the whole posture behind them. You can ask someone how they are and answer all is well in a voice that makes plain that all is the opposite of well. Tayyib is the truth carried in a way the heart can actually take it down. The right thing, said wrongly, is no longer a good word at all.

And the good word is wider than we tend to assume. Some scholars first connect it to the word of faith itself, the testimony, and that is its root. But Nouman Ali Khan widens it the way the Qur'an itself widens such things: a good word can be any true and nourishing speech, a kindness, a piece of sincere advice. It can even, he says, be a conversation you are having silently with yourself, a single good thought turned over in your own chest, because in the Qur'an a word is not only what leaves the mouth. The seed can be planted in someone else. It can also be planted in you.

The part of the tree no one sees

Here is the turn the whole parable rests on, and it is the quietest and most devastating thing in it. Of a tree, the part you can see is the branches. The part that decides whether it lives is the root, and the root is invisible, underground, doing all of its work where no one is watching. Nouman Ali Khan presses on this until it stops being botany and becomes something about you.

When you share a good word with someone and watch them walk away unchanged, no new prayer, no softened tongue, nothing visible at all, you have not failed. You have planted a seed. And a seed, the moment it cracks open in the soil, does the entirety of its

first work below the surface, where there is nothing to see for a long time. He has heard people walk out of enormous gatherings, twenty thousand hearts in a single hall, and shrug that nothing changed. Did you check every chest in that room, he asks. Did you know what each person had carried in, what argument they had at home just to make it through the door, what shifted half an inch inside them on the way out? You poured water once and then went looking for fruit. That is not how anything grows. First a root, then a stem, then, in its own time, a bud. You cannot stomp on the soil and scream at it because no sprout has appeared yet. You do not even understand the example if you do.

And the Qur'an itself confirms that the realest faith does its growing underground, out of sight:

You can only warn one who follows the message and fears the Most Merciful unseen. So give him good tidings of forgiveness and noble reward.

QUR'AN 36:11

To fear the Most Merciful unseen, Nouman Ali Khan notes, can mean to fear Him who is Himself unseen, and it can also mean to fear Him in the unseen, in private, where no one is watching you do it. The person in front of you may have shown no sign of it; you may have given your word and seen them drift off into the crowd as if nothing had landed. You do not know what they took home in their chest. The most startling proof of all came at Hudaibiyah,

where Allah told His Messenger ﷺ that there were believing men and believing women hidden inside Makkah whom the Prophet ﷺ and all the Companions did not even know were believers.

... And if not for believing men and believing women whom you did not know that you might trample [i.e., kill] them and there would befall you because of them dishonor without [your] knowledge ...

QUR'AN 48:25

Only Allah knew they were there. Hearts were carrying faith in the heart of the enemy's own city, and not one of the believers outside could see it. So keep watering, he says, and keep your hands gentle on the soil. Allah is the one who splits the seed open in the dark. That part was never yours to manage.

Roots driven deep, branches reaching up

Now the law buried inside the picture: the taller a tree grows, the deeper its roots must drive, or the first real storm tips it over. They have to grow together, or the tree becomes a danger to itself, its own height the thing that topples it. Nouman Ali Khan reads the two halves of the ayah onto two halves of a life. The branches reaching into the sky are your visible deeds, the activism, the dawah, the volunteering, the work at the masjid, everything other people can see and admire. The deep root is what is happening in your chest, where no one can ever check on you. And here is the

trap he names plainly. People will only ever cheer the branches, because the branches are the only part they can see. No one comes up to you and says, may Allah deepen your roots; they say, may Allah keep bringing fruit through you, because the fruit is what shows. And praise for the branches is so loud, and so constant, that it is the easiest thing in the world to let the root quietly dry out while the visible work grows taller and taller and more top-heavy, until a single hard season puts the whole thing on the ground.

So what makes a root deep. Nouman Ali Khan gives it two layers. The first is a heart settled on this faith, content and at rest in it, founded firmly. But content, he says, is not yet deep, because a sincere follower of almost any path feels content in their heart; a sincere believer of another religion entirely feels their heart settled on what they hold. Contentment alone does not tell them apart. Deeper than feeling content is the quality the Qur'an names for those firmly rooted in knowledge: that you have actually thought it through, that you went after it on purpose, that you arrived at what you believe with your mind and not only with your mood, so that whatever leaves your mouth about your faith, you genuinely know before you say it. You do not speak on behalf of what you believe without really knowing what you are talking about.

That does not mean knowing everything, and he is careful about this, especially for the young. You are drowning in clips from fifty directions, he tells them, a little here and a little there, podcasts and shorts and reels, until your whole sense of the religion is a thin

scatter of half-remembered scraps. Stop, he says. Pick one year. Take one thing and learn it truly, the meaning of al-Fatihah, the meaning of one short surah, until it is genuinely yours; relax about the thousands of libraries you will never read, and own the one thing you do know completely. Because then, even a single ayah, when you pass it on, comes out rich, because you were rooted in it before you opened your mouth. You experienced it first, and then you gave it. You are not tossing together a salad of scraps and calling it a meal.

And look where the branches are sent: not merely high, but into the sky. Nouman Ali Khan lingers there. The way a young plant breaks the soil and turns at once toward the sun, deeds that grow from a firm root reach upward, toward Allah, toward His pleasure, and not sideways toward people. A tree whose roots are shallow leans, and a leaning life immediately starts measuring itself against the next person: how many follow them, how much they raised this season, who is ahead. Those are branches thrown sideways, reaching for other people instead of for the sky. The goal quietly shrinks to popularity, to money, to status, to winning a contest no one was ever asked to enter. Firm roots, and the direction corrects itself. The deeper the root, the more surely the branches point up.

He notices something else about this image that the rest of the Qur'an prepares. Elsewhere Allah likens the coming of revelation to rain falling from the sky, and elsewhere He describes the Qur'an itself as light. In this tree both meet at once: the roots are fed from below by water, and everything above the ground, the leaves and

the branches, is fed from above by light. The water and the sun-light come together in one living thing, which is precisely what a believer is meant to be, watered at the root and lit at the crown.

The fruit was never your concern

Then comes a detail that is easy to read past, and Nouman Ali Khan refuses to let it slide: Allah split the fruit off into its own ayah, away from the roots and the branches entirely.

*It produces its fruit all the time, by permission of its Lord.
And Allāh presents examples for the people that perhaps
they will be reminded.*

QUR'AN 14:25

The roots and the branches were your work: a heart settled and thought through, and deeds that reach toward the sky. The fruit is not. Fruit is new life, and new life is in the hands of Allah alone, so the verse hands it straight back to Him: it gives its fruit by the permission of its Lord. Your job is to keep the root deep and the branches climbing. Whether fruit comes, and when, and into whose mouth it finally falls, is His business and not yours. And the moment you start working for the fruit, Nouman Ali Khan warns, you have started working for the wrong thing, because the fruit was never in your hands to begin with. A person who needs the room to roar back at them before they feel their word had weight has confused the branches for the harvest.

And the fruit may not even ripen while you are alive to taste it. He points to scholars who were mocked in their own lifetimes, run out of their own towns, some of them even killed, whose books then went on to save the faith of hundreds of thousands two and three generations after they were gone. They did the work and pointed it at the sky. Allah simply chose a different season for the harvest. The clearest proof is the Prophet ﷺ himself: he gave the best word, the Qur'an, for thirteen years in Makkah, and most of the city would not listen. Then one Hajj season a small group from Madinah heard it, carried it home, and an entire city was ready for Islam before the Prophet ﷺ had even arrived among them. The word he had planted bore its fruit in a place he was not standing.

Notice, too, the exact word chosen. Allah did not say you will eat the fruit. He said the tree will give it. And He chose the word that means fruit ripe and fit to be eaten, in every season, by whoever happens to pass: not only believers, but anyone, even, in the way of a real tree, the birds that nest in it and the bees that feed from it and the soil itself that it cleans and enriches. You are not told who eats. You are simply told to grow the tree.

What this example asks of our hearts

So the picture turns, the way every striking example finally turns, and now it is asking about you. A storm comes for every tree that has ever lived. The wind is not kind, the flood is not kind, the heat is not kind. The tree with shallow roots gets angry at the weather and goes over; the tree with deep roots simply stands, and if a

branch snaps it grows another, and if the fruit is torn off it gives more next season, because the part that mattered was never above the ground in the first place.

Nouman Ali Khan turns this, with great care, on a whole way of carrying religion that runs on rage. There is a kind of content, he observes, engineered to find a person who feels small and unseen, surrounded and unwanted, and to make them feel strong by making them feel besieged: feeding them an Islam that is mostly anger, mostly hating the disbelief around them, until they walk through the world inside a hard shell, antagonistic to everyone, mistaking that hardness for strength. He turns the mirror first at the impulse itself, gently, with a prayer that Allah protect the sincerity behind every effort, and then he says it plainly: that is not a deep root. That is a branch whipping in the wind. Anger is loud and shallow. It is not *tayyib*, and it does not hold when the storm actually comes.

Look instead, he says, at what a deeply rooted tree actually does where it stands. It does not warn people away from itself. It throws shade for anyone who comes near, gives fruit to strangers who have never tasted it, shelters the birds, feeds the bees, and even cleans the water running in the ground beneath it, so that the rivers nearby run clearer for its being there. It is the most welcome thing in its whole landscape, and it does that just as faithfully in hard soil as in good. That, he says, is what a person rooted in a good word becomes, even when they are planted in a place with no faith around them at all: not the angry one people cross the

road to avoid, but the shade people walk toward. It is no accident that Allah ends the parable by saying He strikes it for the people, all of them, the believer and the disbeliever alike, because the tree's shade was always meant to fall on everyone.

So which tree are you growing tonight. Are you feeding the branches that everyone can see and praise, while the root that only you can ever check quietly dries out underneath you? Because that is the question the whole parable has been narrowing toward, and there is no group to hide inside while you answer it. The only one who can ever inspect your roots is you. Go down to them. Drive them deep, into one thing you have truly thought through and genuinely know, and let the branches take care of reaching up; they will, if the root is sound. Carry your good word gently enough that a heart can take it down. Plant it, and water it, and keep your hands soft on the soil, and then leave it. The fruit, in this season or in one long after you are gone, in mouths you will never see, belongs to Allah alone, by the permission of its Lord. And when the storm comes for you, as it comes for every tree, may He keep you standing. Our Lord, pour upon us patience and plant firmly our feet. Make our word a good word and our heart its deep and settled root. Send our branches up toward You and never sideways toward the praise of people. And let the fruit fall by

Your leave alone, in a season of Your choosing, long after we are gone.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 22. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Uprooted

An evil word, like an evil tree, torn from the ground with nothing left to stand on

Picture a tree that has fallen. Not chopped down for timber, not pruned, not cut clean at the base by anyone's hand, but torn up whole and tipped onto its side, so that the pale roots are dragged out of the soil and left waving uselessly in the open air. They were never deep. The thing had shot up fast and looked, for a season, like any other tree in the field, broad enough and green enough that no one passing would have guessed. And then the first real wind came and leaned on it, and the whole structure simply went over. Now its branches point down at the dirt instead of up at the sky. The fruit is finished, cut off from a root that no longer feeds it. The shade is gone, the nest is empty, the hive has scattered. And the only things drawn to it now are the snake looking for somewhere damp to lie low, the fungus, and the slow reek of rot.

That is the picture Allah strikes in Surah Ibrahim, directly after the good tree, and it is the good tree turned inside out. Yesterday we sat with a single good word given the shape of a tree whose root was driven deep and whose branches reached into the sky, giving its fruit in every season by its Lord's leave. Today Allah shows us the dark mirror of it: an evil word, given an evil tree, so that we can see exactly what a life looks like when nothing underneath it ever

took hold. This is the work of Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples, episode twenty-three, told here slowly and at length, and it is one of those images that does its teaching not by argument but by making you stand in front of a fallen tree and ask the simple question the picture was built to ask: would you go near it.

Two extremes, and the storm that was good news

Before the second picture, a caution, and it matters. These two trees, the good word and the foul one, are two extremes. They are the best a human mouth can produce and the worst, and most of what we actually say in a day lives somewhere in the wide neutral country in between. Nouman Ali Khan is careful to put this up front, because there is a way of walking out of a parable like this one having learned the wrong thing entirely: deciding that every sentence anyone says is now either holy or filthy, and appointing yourself the inspector of everyone else's speech. That is not why Allah holds up the two ends of the scale. He holds them up so that you can find yourself somewhere along it, honestly, not so you can start labelling the world into pure and impure and stationing yourself, naturally, among the pure.

And notice where this scale is being raised. Surah Ibrahim is, by many accounts, a late Makkan surah, struck at the point where the clash between iman and kufr had reached its climax. Nearly the whole of the Makkan revelation was out by now. The truth had been made as clear as it would ever be made. And the opposition had not softened in response; it had hardened, moving from

sneering to slander to a readiness to torture and to kill. Thirteen years in, the Prophet ﷺ was watching a city answer the most beautiful word ever spoken with more rage, not less, and from the ground it could have looked like failure. It was the opposite.

Here Nouman Ali Khan reads the storm the way his old political science professor once taught him to read the streets. The more police a government must put on the road, the more soldiers and armoured vehicles and blocked junctions it needs out in public, the weaker that government actually is. Strength does not need to show its hand. A genuinely stable order barely makes itself visible; you might see a couple of officers somewhere, relaxed, eating ice cream, and that ease is itself the proof of how settled things are. So when Makkah met the Qur'an with escalating fury, that fury was not a sign the message was collapsing. It was a confession of how powerful the message had become, that it now had to be fought this hard. The taller a tree grows, the more the wind hits it; height is exactly what makes a tree catch the storm. The rage was the wind admitting the tree was tall. Read that way, the very thing that looked like defeat was a quiet announcement of victory, and the Prophet ﷺ, on the verge of leaving a city that seemed hopeless, was being told that the seed he had planted there was already alive underground, waiting for a season he could not yet see.

The word for filth

Now the word Allah chooses, and you should feel it before you try to understand it. He does not call this a false word, or a wrong word, or even an unbelieving word. He calls it *khabith*, and Nouman Ali Khan walks slowly through everything that one word drags in with it, because the choice is deliberate and the weight of it is the whole point. *Khabith* is the word the Arabs used for vomit and for waste, for whatever the body discharges, for the pus that seeps from a wound. It is the word for the guts you pull out of a slaughtered animal and throw away because they are good for nothing. It is the dross, the scum that the smiths skimmed off molten metal and discarded because it stank. Foul, rotten, repulsive, the kind of thing you instinctively cross the street to avoid, the thing you will not let even the sole of your shoe touch, though touching it could never really harm you, because the recoil is not about harm; it is about filth. He pauses, gently, to tell the Urdu and Punjabi speakers in the room to stop flinging this word at their own children and their own families, because they have no idea what they are actually saying when they do.

So understand what Allah is and is not doing here. He is not merely describing a word that fails to be Islamic, a statement that happens to be incorrect. He is describing a word with a stench on it, something a clean soul pulls back from the way a body pulls back from rot. And there is a silence in the verse that Nouman Ali Khan will not let you walk past. In yesterday's ayah, when Allah struck the good tree, He named Himself in it: the fruit comes by the permis-

sion of its Lord. He drew attention to His own involvement. Here, striking the foul tree, He says nothing of Himself at all. Not a word. It is as though His name is too pure to be set anywhere near this thing, as though He has deliberately distanced Himself from the filth, and that distance is not decoration; it is the meaning. A filthy word is, by its very nature, a word spoken far from Allah. You would have to be at some real distance from Him, spiritually, intellectually, in the whole orientation of your heart, to be the kind of person from whom such a word comes. The absence of His name in the verse is a portrait of where the speaker is standing.

What Allah makes filthy, and what we do to it

The same root comes back, Nouman Ali Khan points out, in one of the defining descriptions of the mission of the Prophet ﷺ himself. When the Qur'an lists what the final Messenger was sent to do, it says he makes the good and wholesome things lawful for the people, and forbids them the foul ones, the khaba'ith:

Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered prophet, whom they find written in what they have of the Torah and the Gospel, who enjoins upon them what is right and prohibits them from what is wrong and makes lawful for them what is good and forbids them from what is evil and relieves them of their burden and the shackles which were upon them. So they who have believed in him, honored him, supported him and followed the light which was sent down with him, it is those who will be the successful.

QUR'AN 7:157

Out of that one pairing Nouman Ali Khan draws a clean principle, and it reaches well beyond words into the whole shape of the law. If Allah has made a thing halal, then by the very meaning of the word it carries good in it; it is wholesome, and there is benefit in it. And if Allah has made a thing haram, then by the very meaning of khabith there is something genuinely foul in it, something a person is honestly meant to keep a distance from. Allah does not forbid the harmless, and He does not permit the poisonous. There is no command of His that asks you to step away from something clean for no reason, and no permission of His that quietly waves you toward something rotten. The categories mean what they say.

And here, Nouman Ali Khan says, is what we keep doing to them. We take a thing Allah made halal and, because our family does not care for it, or our village frowns on it, or our culture has decided otherwise, we quietly make it haram. We close a door Allah delib-

erately left open, and then we call the closing of it religion. A woman who has been widowed or divorced has every right, given to her by Allah in dignity, to receive a good proposal and to marry again; and somewhere a mother is turning away every suitor who comes, this one's nose is wrong, this one is too short, this one stands with a shoulder too high, until the daughter is past forty and unmarried, and the cruelty gets dressed up as obedience, as though obeying a parent could ever mean obeying them into a sin against what Allah permitted. And we run the same machinery in the opposite direction. Things Allah forbade outright, plainly and more than once, a society can wave through as perfectly normal, while the Qur'an is being recited in those very homes. A man tells his daughter to come back, the marriage is over, in the precise situation where Allah said the home for that period is hers and not even his to take from her, and meanwhile everyone is careful that the chicken was slaughtered correctly. The point lands without a trace of mockery, and it turns straight back on us before it touches anyone else: every time we make the wholesome forbidden, we crack a door for the foul to come in; and a foul word grows into a foul tree on exactly that kind of ground, soil that has been taught to call the clean dirty and the dirty clean.

The tree that was torn out

Now the image itself, and Allah gives it to us in a single dense line:

And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree, uprooted from the surface of the earth, not having any stability.

QUR'AN 14:26

It is the good tree run backwards, and Nouman Ali Khan reads the central phrase closely. This was a tree once; to become a tree at all it had to grow, which means for a while it was rising and spreading and looking, to anyone glancing over, like a real tree. But Allah says it was torn out from above the surface of the ground, and that small phrase carries the whole diagnosis. It grew fast and tall up top, but nothing real ever happened below. The roots stayed shallow, just under the surface, never reaching down, never gripping, never drinking deep. So the first wind that came, the first genuine push of resistance, simply tipped the whole thing over. A tree only survives a storm if its roots went deep; therefore a tree that fell is a tree confessing, by the very fact of having fallen, that its roots were never there. The collapse is not bad luck. The collapse is the truth about the tree finally becoming visible.

And watch what falling does to it, because Nouman Ali Khan lingers on the wreckage in detail, and the detail is the lesson. The branches that once reached up toward the sky are now bent downward, pointing at the dirt, the whole structure turned earthward and pressed against the surface it could never sink into. The fruit no longer feeds anyone; severed from the root, it withers on the branch. The shade is gone. The nest and the hive that the living tree had sheltered are gone. Every good it used to give has

simply stopped. And worse than stopped, because a fallen tree does not lie there quietly and harm no one. The damp dead wood becomes a refuge: a snake slides in to lie low in the moisture and camouflage itself, scorpions come, fungus spreads, a thick reeking moss grows over it, parasites bore in and hollow it out from the inside. Anyone who has ever had a tree come down on their property and left it where it fell knows precisely what comes next. The rot does not stay put. The pests multiply. The animal problems, the insect problems, the rodent problems get worse and worse, and the dead thing that you thought was simply over turns into a living problem that grows. So Nouman Ali Khan asks the obvious question the picture was engineered to make you ask. The good tree, people walked toward, to rest in its shade. This one, would you go near it? Would you sink down tired against a trunk lying in a puddle of mud with something hissing softly inside it, and tell yourself the hiss is probably a speaker somewhere? You would not. By the very meaning of *khabith*, you would cross the street. The recoil is automatic, and it is correct.

No footing, and no cool of relief

Then the last words of the verse: it has no *qarar*. The obvious meaning, Nouman Ali Khan notes, is that it has no stability, no settled place, nothing holding it down, the exact opposite of the firmly fixed root of the good tree. The torn-out tree cannot stand because it has nothing left to stand on. Where the good word was anchored, this one is loose on the surface, and the moment any force comes against it, there is nothing to keep it in place.

But he lingers on a second sense the word carries, and it deepens the whole image. The root behind qarar reaches, in the Arabic, toward coolness and calm and relief. It is the same family of meaning behind the old Arab du'a that Allah cool a person's eyes, qur-ratu ayn, which does not mean anything about temperature; it means may Allah give that person rest from their hardship, may He ease their situation and bring them relief. So hold both senses together and the verse is saying two things in one breath. This tree cannot keep its own footing, and it can offer no rest, no shade, no cool of relief, to anyone else either. It is not merely unstable in itself; it is useless to everything around it. Its very existence has become a nuisance. The good word gave shelter to whoever came near it; the foul word cannot even hold itself up, let alone shelter you. There is nothing under it for it to stand on, and nothing in it for you to rest under. Both at once, in one small word at the end of the verse.

Feed your own roots, not your fear of the tall weed

Here Nouman Ali Khan turns the tree from botany into a commentary on ideas, and this is where the parable reaches straight into the world we actually live in. Because a word, in the Qur'an, is not only a sentence; a word is an idea, an ideology, a worldview, a whole way of seeing reality. Islam itself is a way of understanding the world, and against it stand other ways of understanding the world, rival words with their own roots, or their lack of them. And the law of the tree holds for ideas exactly as it holds for trees. When a philosophy or a movement or a trend has no real roots, an

opposition eventually comes and knocks it flat. And what rises in its place is usually nothing more than a reaction to the one that just fell, built so carefully to avoid the previous mistakes that it grows a fresh set of its own, until the next wave comes and tips it over too. Ideologies come and topple, come and topple, come and topple, each one certain it has finally solved what the last one got wrong.

He has watched Muslims panic over this for a century. Over communism, once, when it was spreading fast and the worry was that it would take over everywhere, including the Muslim world. Over atheism, now, which is spreading quickly in many places, even among Muslim youth in Muslim countries. And his answer is steady, almost unbothered: if its roots are not deep, it is already designed to fall. That tall, fast-growing thing across the field, the one everyone is anxious about, was engineered to come down; it was made to fall. So the enormous energy a person can spend being terrified of it, desperate to chop it down, is energy stolen from the only tree he will ever actually answer for, which is his own. The question, Nouman Ali Khan says, was never whether to fear the weak tree growing tall. The question is whether you fed your own roots.

And he names the traps inside the tall weed plainly, because they are worth seeing clearly. The first is that most people are not even attached to an idea; they are attached to a personality. The great movements of history spread not on the strength of their arguments but on the charisma of a voice, an eloquent, emotionally entangling speaker who gathered the crowd. But a tree leaning on a

person has no depth of its own, and it falls the moment that person does. The second trap is the engine underneath, and here Nouman Ali Khan reaches for the language of marketing: the funnel. A short clip, ten or twenty seconds, built to be clickbait, built so that millions will click it; and the clip is not the goal, it is the mouth of the funnel. From the clip, some will watch a longer clip, and from that, a podcast, and at the very bottom, narrow end, there is a product to sell. The whole towering structure exists for one purpose, to benefit the one who built it. Then he sets that beside the good tree from the day before, and the contrast is the cleanest line you can draw between the two words. Look at where the good tree's fruit went: it fed others, never the planter. The one who grows a good word does it so that other people may eat, his own branches pointed up at Allah, hoping only that when others benefit, his rank with his Lord is raised. But the foul word is spoken to enrich the speaker. That is the difference, finally, between the two trees: one exists to feed you, the other exists to feed on you. So stop measuring the tall weed. Stop standing in the field calculating its height and rehearsing your fear of it. Go and water your own roots, in the rain that Allah keeps sending down, which is His revelation.

What this example asks of our hearts

So the picture turns, the way every one of these examples turns, and it stops being about ideologies and charlatans somewhere out there and becomes about you, standing in your own field, in your own coming wind.

Nouman Ali Khan tells the story of the wandering pretender, and you should sit with it, because it is the foul tree alive and walking. A man drifts into a masjid looking holy, sitting in the back, eyes lowered, lips moving, almost floating. Someone notices him, a stranger, clearly travelling, and out of kindness takes him home to eat. Over dinner the man speaks softly of this world as a journey, of death, of the reckoning, of how unready we all are, and the host's heart is moved, and asks him to come again. He comes again, and brings the host's friends; and then their families; and soon there is a gathering, not in the masjid, he is careful never to bother the administration, but in living rooms, where families sit for hours absorbing how terrible they are and how near the fire. They find him sleeping in his car and will not allow it; they get him an apartment, food, money, all of which he refuses and refuses until he accepts. And now he has a hold. He tells them the congregation at the masjid does not really count, so they pray their own behind him in the living room. He names their newborns. He rules on who should marry and who should divorce. The women come to him with their private questions, and he has a special hold there too. And then one day something inappropriate comes to light, questions begin, and the van is gone, and two towns over a stranger is sitting in the back of another masjid, eyes lowered, lips moving, and someone is saying, I have not seen you here before, and he is answering, I am just a traveller in this world. That is the foul tree exactly: torn out from above the surface, roots that never took, setting up wherever the soil is soft and lifting off the instant the storm arrives. His whole aim was to grow tall fast and be gone be-

fore the wind, to benefit himself and leave the people worse than he found them.

And there is a gentler trap with the very same shallow root, one closer to the ordinary believer, which is religion that runs on rage. A real wound, a genuine insult to something sacred, and a fiery speech about it, and ten thousand hearts catch fire in a single hall. But the fire has nowhere settled to go, no deep root to channel it down into, so it spills sideways: a shop is burned, cars are flipped, tires set alight, a road blocked, and on that road an ambulance trying to reach a hospital cannot get through, because the people love the Prophet ﷺ so much that someone may die of their love tonight. Anger, Nouman Ali Khan warns, is loud and it is shallow. It is not tayyib, and it will not hold in a storm. It is a branch whipping in the wind, not a root in the ground. A fiery word is not forbidden, but if it does not lead the heart toward something more settled, something deeper and more stable, then Shaytan takes the good intention and turns it into whatever he likes.

So the question the parable presses on you tonight is simple, and it is uncomfortable, and it is yours alone to answer. When the wind comes for you, and it will, the loss, the insult, the temptation, the long grey stretch when faith feels like it is going nowhere at all, do you stand, or do you go over? The branches everyone can see will not tell you. Only the root decides, and the only person who can ever check your roots is you. Allah has even told us, in the verse that comes next, what holds a believer upright in that wind:

Allāh keeps firm those who believe, with the firm word, in worldly life and in the Hereafter. And Allāh sends astray the wrongdoers. And Allāh does what He wills.

QUR'AN 14:27

It begins, Nouman Ali Khan notes, with a word and ends with the firm word entire, a whole life grown into straightforward, rooted speech, kept standing by Allah in this life and the next. That is the promise on the far side of the good tree, and the warning of the foul one is simply its shadow. So do not spend your life afraid of the tall weak tree across the field; it was built to fall. Spend it driving your own roots down into something you truly know, fed by the revelation Allah keeps sending down like rain, so that when the storm comes, and it will, you are still standing exactly where He planted you. O Allah, keep us from the foul word and the hollow life. Make our word wholesome and our roots deep in what we truly know of You. And when the winds come, in this life and the next, hold us firm where You have planted us, with the firm word, by Your leave alone.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 23. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

A firm word

Kept standing, in this life and the next, by the firm word

For two days now you have been standing in front of a tree. First the good one, its root driven down out of sight and its branches reaching into the open sky, dropping its fruit in every season, never barren, never bare. Then the other one, the bad one, torn up off the surface of the earth with nothing underneath it, no ground, no grip, nothing to keep it from being carried off by the first strong wind. You have been deep inside that picture, the way a person sinks into a film in a darkened room and forgets, for an hour, that the room is even there.

And then, in the very next verse, Allah reaches into the picture and pulls you back out. He stops painting and begins speaking to you directly, here, in your own life, and as He does it He keeps one word in His hand and carries it out of the picture with Him. The word is firm. This is the rare day in the series with no new image, because Allah Himself stepped out from behind the parable to tell you, in plain and open words, exactly what the parable was for.

When Allah steps out of the picture

There is a move Allah makes in the Qur'an that Nouman Ali Khan stops to name, because once you have seen it you will see it everywhere. When Allah strikes an example, he says, He is paint-

ing a picture. He is putting your imagination to work, asking you to see a thing, and the more vivid the words He chooses, the more deeply you are drawn in, until you are no longer reading about a tree, you are standing in front of one. And then, sometimes, He does something deliberate. He lifts you straight out of the imagined scene and sets you back down in your own reality, and He does it almost in the same breath, except that He keeps an element of the picture in His hand and uses it on you out here, in the open.

That, Nouman Ali Khan explains, is exactly what this whole verse is doing. Allah did not leave the parable of the two trees to do its work alone, trusting you to sit with it, contemplate it, and draw the lesson out for yourself. He dedicated an entire ayah to stepping out and spelling the lesson out Himself, on top of everything the image had already taught. And he asks us to watch which word Allah carries out with Him. You had already met the good tree, and you had seen that its root was firmly fixed:

*Have you not considered how Allah presents an example,
[making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly
fixed and its branches [high] in the sky?*

QUR'AN 14:24

Then its opposite, the bad word, the bad tree, with the very quality the good tree had now stripped away from it:

And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree, uprooted from the surface of the earth, not having any stability.

QUR'AN 14:26

The good tree is fixed; the bad tree has no stability, no settledness, nothing under it. That is the whole picture, and it is complete. And now, out in the open, no longer talking about trees at all but talking about you, Allah takes that one word back up and says it again.

Kept firm with the firm word

Allah keeps firm those who believe, with the firm word, in worldly life and in the Hereafter. And Allah sends astray the wrongdoers. And Allah does what He wills.

QUR'AN 14:27

Allah will make the believers firm, by means of the firm word. The tree was the picture; this, Nouman Ali Khan says, is the point. And then he asks us to notice a small shift we could read straight past. Two days ago the good word was simply a word, indefinite, any word that is good, the word of faith, a sincere sentence, a kind gesture, even a piece of good advice you give without knowing what it will one day grow into. Now Allah does not repeat it that way. Now it is the word, definite, pointed in one clear direction.

This, he reads, is a very explicit reference to the Qur'an itself. The firm word Allah steadies the believer with is His own word.

Why read it that way? Because, he points out, twice in the Qur'an Allah describes His own revelation as the very thing that gives firmness to a heart. When the disbelievers scoffed that the Qur'an should have come down all at once and been done with, instead of arriving piece by piece across the years, Allah turned the address toward His Prophet ﷺ and answered them:

And those who disbelieve say, "Why was the Qur'an not revealed to him all at once?" Thus [it is] that We may strengthen thereby your heart. And We have spaced it distinctly.

QUR'AN 25:32

It comes this way, Allah says, precisely so that We may make your heart firm by it. Every time the Qur'an descended, Nouman Ali Khan reflects, it drove the peg a little deeper into the heart of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, reaffirming, reinforcing, strengthening what was already there. And he draws the conclusion that should land on every one of us. If even the very best of creation, the Prophet ﷺ himself, was being steadied this way, again and again across twenty-three years, then you and I and everyone who comes after will need that steadying too. The thing that keeps a heart standing is not a single decision made once. It is a continuous, living relationship with the word of Allah.

What the word firm actually carries

Before this stays an abstraction, Nouman Ali Khan asks us to sit with the word itself, because the Arabs did not pull thabit out of thin air. They built it from things they could see and touch. The same root, he explains, names the belt that lashes a load onto a camel. Picture it: the camel's back is narrow, the bags are loaded heavy on both sides, hanging over the edges, and left alone they would tip and slide and spill, so a strap is cinched tight around the whole load to secure it and hold it in place. That strap is from this root. It is used, too, for locusts, for the way they fix their eggs down into the ground so they will not shift or be carried off. And most vividly of all, he says, it is used for a spear that has gone into a body in war and cannot be drawn back out, because it is barbed, hooked, taloned along its sides, lodged in past the point of being torn free.

So firmness here is not a mood, and it is not a feeling that comes and goes. It is something settled, lashed down, wedged in, hooked so deep that it cannot be yanked loose. To say that Allah makes the believer firm, Nouman Ali Khan teaches, is to say that they will stand their ground, that their belief will not shake and their commitment will not shake, that nothing in their surroundings will move them from where they stand. This, he notes, is exactly why this same word lives in the prayers of the battlefield. When a few hundred believers watch a few thousand march toward them and feel their feet begin to go out from under them, their cry is built on this

very root. They do not ask merely to be steadied a little. They ask to be planted:

And their words were not but that they said, "Our Lord, forgive us our sins and the excess [committed] in our affairs and plant firmly our feet and give us victory over the disbelieving people."

QUR'AN 3:147

Plant our feet, make them so firm it is as though they have been pegged into the ground. That is the strength the word is naming. Not a person who happens to feel sure today, but a person who cannot be swayed, whose feet will not slide when the peer pressure comes, when the family pressure comes, when the trend comes, because nothing in the environment is able to push them off the spot where they stand.

The word is already firm; you are not, yet

Then comes a piece of phrasing Nouman Ali Khan calls remarkable, and it changes the way the whole verse feels. Look again, he says, at how Allah builds the sentence. He gives the believers firmness by the word that is already firm. So which of the two is settled, and which is still moving? The word is settled. The word of Allah is the thing that is already established, already perfect, already exactly what it is and never anything less. It is the believer who fluctuates, who rises and falls, who needs more of the firm

word poured in so that more and more firmness can take hold in him.

Read that honestly, and it turns out to be a kind of mercy. You were never expected to be unshakeable on your own. Of course you waver; the verse takes that for granted. It does not say the believer is firm. It says the firm word is what makes the believer firm, a little more each time it goes in. So the rise and fall you feel in your own iman, Nouman Ali Khan reflects, is not the proof that something in you is broken. It is the reason the prescription exists in the first place. And the conclusion he draws from it is sobering and clarifying at once: the only way a heart, or a single person, or a whole ummah, will ever reach any real steadiness is by how much of the word of Allah has actually been put inside it. Not how much is around it. How much is in it.

Islam on the outside, hollow underneath

This is where Nouman Ali Khan turns the lesson onto something we can all see, and it stings. There are places, he says, you can walk into where everything looks Islamic. The adhan rises over the streets five times a day. Walk into almost any restaurant and the food is halal. You see women in hijab, you see signs that say al-hamdulillah and Allahu akbar, you hear a taxi driver playing a recitation of the Qur'an. Every visible sign of Islam is there, woven through the whole culture. And then, he says, you notice something. In the space of about ten years, it can all fall away. The adhan gets restricted in certain neighbourhoods. Christmas trees ap-

pear in the malls. The hijab grows scarcer, alcohol becomes permitted, and what was everywhere a decade ago has somehow become strange. A country known for conservative, religious values decides to host a concert, and fifty thousand young people show up and fill a stadium, jamming to it as though they were never in a Muslim country at all. And you ask the obvious question, the one he asks: where did all these youth come from? Did they crawl up out of the ground? Were they zombies hiding underground? No. They were there the whole time. They were part of that society all along.

The Islam, he explains, was on the outside, like the bark and the branches of a tree, and the bark and the branches were never what held it up. Go back to the picture, he reminds us. The roots are what is firm, and the roots are underground, out of sight. If a society, or a single person, never builds the part that no one can see, never reaches the place where a young man or a young woman knows in the very depths of their heart why they are Muslim, why the Qur'an is the word of Allah, what Allah is actually saying in it, then the roots are not firm, however Islamic the outside looks. So a new wave comes through, a new trend, a new ruler, a new party winning an election, a new current off the internet, and what looked so rooted topples in a single generation. It was never that Islam was weak, Nouman Ali Khan insists. It was that our grip on it was weak. We were content with the appearance of Islam, and we were never concerned with going down to deepen the roots.

Sounds without meaning will not hold

He presses this into the most uncomfortable place he can find, and he does it with real grief rather than mockery, because he has watched it happen too many times to too many people he knows. We want our children to stay Muslim, he says, so we reach for what feels like the safest insurance we can buy: we have them memorise the entire Qur'an, certain that a hafiz will be protected and that everything else will surely follow. And then he tells the truth he has seen. He knows thousands upon thousands of stories of that very child, the Qur'an word-perfect in his chest, who is now drinking, in a gang, on drugs, far from the masjid, gone. How could this happen, the parents ask, after he memorised the whole Qur'an? And his answer is the heart of the whole verse. He memorised the sounds. The sounds were the sounds of the word of Allah, and that is no small thing, it is something beautiful. But the word of Allah does not become firm inside a person, he says, until they know what Allah is saying and they feel what Allah is saying. The memoriser did part of the work, an amazing part, but if by the end he has never tasted the meaning, the wisdom, the beauty, the relevance, the power of what is in his chest, then it is only there to recite, and where is firmness supposed to come from?

This is the warning the whole verse exists to give. A faith propped up on anything other than the firm word is propped up on something that will move. Some people's Islam, Nouman Ali Khan observes, stands on a culture, and the moment they step outside that culture it falls. Some rests on a group, and dissolves the day they

leave the group. And some is quietly built on a single personality, a beloved teacher, and it collapses the first time that teacher turns out to be human, says something wrong, makes a mistake, because the person was holding onto a man and not onto the word. Everybody is human, he says, everybody makes mistakes, and a faith anchored to a human being was always going to be unstable, because anything you hold instead of the word of Allah is, by its very nature, unstable. Only the firm word is firm. So only the firm word will keep you standing when the wind finally comes.

Firm in this life, and firm in the next

Now look at the reach of the promise, because Allah did not stop at this world. He keeps the believer firm with the firm word in worldly life and in the Hereafter, and Nouman Ali Khan lingers on a small word Allah repeats: fi, in. In this life, and in the next. That repetition did not need to be there, he says, and Allah placed it there on purpose. The firm word does not stop steadying you at the edge of the grave. It walks in with you and out the other side, onto the Day when feet are made to slip.

He sets two scenes beside each other. On that Day, the believers move forward with their light running ahead of them, and Allah hands them the very words to say, the right words rising to their tongues exactly when they need them:

O you who have believed, repent to Allah with sincere repentance. Perhaps your Lord will remove from you your misdeeds and admit you into gardens beneath which rivers flow [on] the Day when Allah will not disgrace the Prophet and those who believed with him. Their light will proceed before them and on their right; they will say, "Our Lord, perfect for us our light and forgive us. Indeed, You are over all things competent."

QUR'AN 66:8

The same firmness that the word built in them here is on their tongues there. And then, set against them, the others, the ones who have nothing firm to stand on, reaching for words on that Day and finding only the old excuses. Nouman Ali Khan walks through the ones the Qur'an records. If only Allah had guided me, I would have been one of the good people. We were only following our leaders and our elders, and they are the ones who misguided us, so give them double the punishment. It was the influencers; if we had one more chance we would get away from them the way they are getting away from us now. And here is the quiet, devastating point he makes: that is not new speech they invent on Judgment Day. It is exactly the speech they lived on their whole lives. It was always somebody else's fault, always the corrupt leaders, always the family, always the decree; if Allah already knew, how is it my fault. They sang that song all their lives, and they walk up to Allah on the Day of Judgment thinking they can sell it to Him one more time. They lived on excuses, so excuses are all they have to bring.

The believer lived on the firm word, so the firm word is what comes out of him when the ground gives way. You live, in the end, on what you will die on.

Allah lets the wrongdoer drift

Then the verse turns dark for a moment, and the wording rewards a close look. Allah sends astray the wrongdoers. But notice, Nouman Ali Khan says, that guidance was never once mentioned in this passage, so why does Allah suddenly speak of its opposite, of misguidance? Because, he reads, this is the other side of being kept firm. A better way to render it, he suggests, is that Allah allows the wrongdoers to remain in misguidance, to carry on in it, and the reason is folded right into the word He chose for them, the way the reason for an execution is folded into the word murderer. There are people, he explains, who have no interest in the firm word, who keep their distance from it, who grow disinterested in it and are even, in the end, repulsed by it. And Allah lets them stay exactly where they have chosen to be. You want to hold onto your own words instead of His? Hold onto them. He will leave you to them.

And look at the word, he adds: dhalimun, wrongdoers, which any student of Arabic will tell you means, at its root, people who put a thing where it does not belong. Your anger belongs somewhere, and you placed it somewhere else; that is dhulm. The money belongs somewhere, and you put it elsewhere; that is dhulm. And what is remarkable about this verse, he says, is that in the lan-

guage of the parable you were the one who was supposed to put the water where it belongs, the seed where it belongs, your reliance on the right tree. Instead you poured your hope and your effort into the wrong tree, the one with no ground under it, and you failed to nourish the roots that actually deserved nurturing. The wrongdoer is not simply unlucky. He misplaced himself. He set his whole weight on what could never hold it. And the verse ends where everything ends, with a line that should make a person both tremble and hope: Allah does whatever He wills. He has openly told us, Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, that if a whole people turn their backs, He will replace them with another nation who are not like them at all. Allah is not in need of us; His religion is not in need of us. The word will stay firm whether or not anyone holds it. It is only ever we who need to be tied to it.

What this example asks of our hearts

So here is the turn, and after two days of trees it lands on you with no picture left to hide behind. We are living, Nouman Ali Khan says, in one of the most important and one of the loudest moments in the entire history of the world. Colonization has ended, the internet has arrived, the whole of humanity is in conversation with itself as it has never been before. And it means something for you personally. There was a time when a person could believe something his whole life and never once meet a single human being who did not believe it too. That time, he says plainly, is over. Not only will you be exposed to ideas that oppose everything you hold; the strongest waves will come and hit you directly, and they will not discrimi-

nate whether you are seven years old or seventeen or seventy-five. Nothing decorative survives weather like that. Not being Muslim only because your mother is. Not praying only because your father would be hurt if you stopped. That, he says, is an emotional attachment, or a courtesy to your elders, and nothing deeper remains underneath it, and the next wind will take it.

Only one thing holds when the wind blows like this, and the verse named it two days ago and named it again today: the firm word. So ask yourself the honest, slightly frightening question tonight. When everything you believe gets pulled on hard, and it will, what are you actually tied to? Is it a culture, a crowd, a feeling, a single beloved person, all of which can shift and move and fall away? Or is it the word of Allah, settled and barbed and lodged so deep that it cannot be torn out of you? Remember what Nouman Ali Khan said about the people who have ever truly changed the world: they were never the largest in number. The Companions of the Prophet ﷺ were not a massive crowd. Over and over in history, it is a small band of people, deeply rooted, who turn the world, and the one thing they have that the world does not is thabat, firmness. You do not need to know everything. You need to go down to your roots and tie yourself, with real understanding and real feeling, to the one word that was already firm before you ever reached for it.

So take one thing from this verse down into your ordinary days. Open the Book, and do not be content to recite its sounds; go after what Allah is actually saying in it, and let yourself feel it. Build the part of your faith that no one can see, the part underground, until

your reason for being Muslim is a conviction you own and not a habit you inherited. And keep coming back, because the verse does not promise that one visit will hold you; it promises that the firm word, poured in again and again, is what makes a wavering heart firm. Let it drive the peg a little deeper tonight, and a little deeper tomorrow, so that it can keep you standing here, in this life, and on the Day your feet would otherwise slip. May Allah steady us with His firm word in this life and the next, drive its truth so deep into our hearts that no wind can ever tear us loose, keep our feet from slipping on the Day they would, and let what rises out of us when the ground gives way be His word, and not our excuses.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 24. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Enslaved

An owned slave who controls nothing, and a free man who gives

Picture two men standing in the same market, on the same morning, under the same sun. The first was bought. Somebody walked down a line of human beings the way you would walk down a line of animals for sale, weighed up the strength in his arms, paid a price, and led him away for a single task. From that day his life narrowed to one purpose. He cannot go where he wants. He cannot keep what he earns. He cannot decide one thing about his own day. The second man was handed wealth, real and abundant and good, so much of it that his hands are always open, giving quietly when no one is watching and openly when they are. Now look at the two of them side by side and answer one question. Are they the same?

That is the example Allah strikes in Surah an-Nahl, and it is the twenty-fifth of the striking examples we are walking through. At first glance it is a small picture about two unequal men. By the end it is an argument about who in all of existence is worth worshipping, and then it turns, the way Allah loves to turn an image, into something none of the first listeners expected. It becomes a picture of freedom itself.

Two men in a market

Before any meaning, sit with the scene, because to the people who first heard it this was not a metaphor lifted from a book. It was the marketplace down the road. Slavery was a vast institution across the whole world then, and an ordinary, unremarkable part of Arab life. A man who needed someone for the farm went to the market the way a person today goes looking for a particular car or a particular tool, scanning for the thing that fits the job he has. There were animals for sale in one line, and in a line of their own there were people. He would look them over, test them the way he would test a cow before buying it for its milk, settle on the one who suited his purpose, hand over his money, and own a human being.

And that purpose became the whole of that person's life. The master could say, in effect: I bought you to work this farm, so the best day of your life is a day on the farm, and the worst day of your life is a day on the farm, and ten years from now you will still be on the farm, and one day you will be too old to be useful, and that will be the end of it. He owns nothing. He keeps nothing. He decides nothing. His existence has been folded down to a single use, and the moment he stops being useful he is, like a cow that has stopped giving milk, disposable. Hold that figure clearly in your mind, because a second man is about to be set down right beside him, and the whole force of the example is in the gap between them.

The example Allah strikes

Here is the verse, in its plain meaning:

Allāh presents an example: a slave [who is] owned and unable to do a thing and he to whom We have provided from Us good provision, so he spends from it secretly and publicly. Can they be equal? Praise to Allāh! But most of them do not know.

QUR'AN 16:75

Two figures, then. The first is an owned slave who has no power over anything at all. Nouman Ali Khan notes that the wording here holds more than one shade at once, and that the very brevity of the language is asking us to think harder, not less. It can mean the slave is unable to get himself out of his situation, locked for life into something that belongs entirely to someone else. And it can mean he is simply unable, full stop, that whatever he is handed to do he cannot manage, the way a hired hand who is terrified of horses and breaks every tool he touches is no use to the man who bought him. Either reading lands in the same place: total powerlessness, a human being with no control of his own held over him by another.

The second figure is his opposite in every line. He is someone Allah has provided for, and provided for generously, with a good and beautiful provision, and out of that provision he spends, both in secret and out in the open. Then the question arrives, short and

sharp: can they be equal? And before any listener can even form an answer, the verse answers itself. Praise to Allah. All praise belongs to Him. But most of them do not know.

Everything has been placed in your service

An example, as this whole series keeps insisting, never stands on its own. It sits inside a larger lesson, and the teacher does not begin with the example; he builds the idea first and then hands you the picture that gathers it all together. So Nouman Ali Khan walks us back through the surah, because the parable only lands with its full weight once you see the ground it grew in.

An-Nahl returns again and again to a single idea: that everything has been placed in the service of the human being. The cattle, in which you find warmth and food and a quiet beauty, and which carry your heavy loads to lands you could never reach on your own except by breaking your back. The rain sent down from the sky, and the crops and the olives and the date-palms and the grapes it raises up out of the earth for you. The sea, subdued so that you can travel across it and draw food and ornament from it. The night and the day, the sun and the moon and the stars, each set running in its course so that you can measure your time and find your way: the sun your clock, the moon your calendar, both of them turning for you without your ever setting an alarm. Things immeasurably larger and stronger than you, the mountains pinned into the earth so it does not slip beneath your feet, all of it bent toward serving a creature as small as you.

And the surah opens earlier still, with you yourself:

He created man from a sperm-drop; then at once he is a clear adversary.

QUR'AN 16:4

You were a mere drop of fluid, nothing anyone would notice, and Allah transformed you into a full human being, and look how the gift is repaid: here you are, an open arguer, standing up to dispute with the very One who made you. That is the soil this parable grows in. A whole world quietly bending to serve us, and a creature so quick to forget who arranged it all, so quick to mistake the gift for an entitlement and the Giver for a rival.

Why He says slave, and then owned

Now to the wording itself, which is where Nouman Ali Khan opens the parable like a lock. Allah does not only say a slave. He says a slave who is owned, *abd mamluk*. But the word slave already carries owned inside it, so why add the second word at all? Why say the owned slave when slave on its own would do?

Because the word *abd*, by itself, belongs to Allah. In the Qur'an it is the title of the servant of Allah, and in truth all of humanity are the *abd* of Allah, every last one of us His servants. So a listener who hears only *abd* will instinctively complete the phrase in his heart: servant of whom? Servant of Allah. The extra word, owned, is precisely what pulls the picture away from that and points it some-

where else, toward a person owned by someone other than Allah. The qualifier is doing the work of redirecting the whole image away from its natural meaning.

There is a second thread he draws, this one from the form of the word. Where slave names something a person simply is, an identity worn from the inside, owned reads more like something that was done to a person, a state he came into from outside. The language itself, he suggests, is quietly hinting that being owned by anyone other than Allah is not anyone's natural condition. There was a time, the form implies, when this person was not owned at all, when he was free, a servant of Allah alone, and only later came to be owned by another. Keep that quietly in the back of your mind. It is the seed of the turn waiting at the end of the verse.

It is worth pausing, too, on how seriously the Qur'an means the powerlessness, because the picture is unsparing. The owner bought this man for a task and nothing more. If he turns out unable to do even that, if he cannot calm the horse or mend the fence or keep a window whole, then he is, in the cold arithmetic of the market, an expense with no return, and you do not have to spell out what comes next. Remember every created thing the surah has just listed as serving us. The moment any of them stops serving, it is discarded. That is exactly the logic the example is about to overturn.

The Master who provides before He asks

Watch what Allah does with the second figure, because here the parable quietly tells you what it has been about all along.

With the slave, the owner is never even named. It is as if those masters are not worth a mention, as if the only Owner worth naming in all of creation is Allah. So when Allah turns to the free man, He does not say I own someone. He says We provided someone. He puts Himself directly into the verse, and the very first thing He says about the relationship is not that He takes, but that He gives.

Sit with how strange that is against everything a slave market teaches. When a master buys a slave, the purchase is for the master's benefit, always and only. No one has ever bought a slave for the slave's sake. But Allah opens the bond from the opposite end. He opens it by benefiting the servant, because, as Nouman Ali Khan presses here, you cannot benefit Allah at all. There is nothing you could ever add to Him. So the relationship cannot be for His gain; it can only ever be for yours. He begins by giving, and He gives from Himself, a provision described as good and beautiful, before He has asked you for a single thing.

This is the exact opposite of the false gods named just two verses earlier:

And they worship besides Allāh that which does not possess for them [the power of] provision from the heavens and the earth at all, and [in fact], they are unable.

QUR'AN 16:73

Those were the very gods the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ found his people bowing before in Makkah, where this surah was revealed, and the tawhid he was sent to call them to is the whole argument this picture is making. The idols owned no provision for anyone, not a drop from the skies, not a grain from the earth, and had no power to provide even if somehow they had wished to. Yet people laid out food and offerings in front of them anyway, hoping to get something back. The rich man would set a fresh piece of meat before the statue while the whole crowd watched and praised his piety, meat he would never have given to a hungry orphan. The whole transaction ran on the assumption that you feed the god to be fed by it. And Allah, Nouman Ali Khan points out, wants nothing from you. He is not a god you feed in order to eat. He needs nothing, asks for nothing first, and still He gives, and gives beautifully, before the servant has lifted a finger.

An ayah of liberty

Now the picture turns over completely, the way Allah loves to flip an image the Arab mind was certain it had already understood.

The slave could do nothing. He was useless, restricted, owned, the lowest figure the market had to offer. But the servant of Allah, giv-

en so much, is not restricted at all. He spends. He has so much that he gives it away to others. To the Arab ear, giving belonged to the powerful, to the wealthy, to the masters; charity was the gesture of a man on top. Here it belongs to the abd, to the servant, and that single word breaks the whole expectation in two. The truly rich figure in the picture is the slave who gives. It is as if Allah is saying: you think you are the wealthy one, but the genuinely wealthy is My servant, the one whose hands are open.

And he gives in secret and in the open, both at once, and the pairing is not idle. Giving openly means he is not hiding, and giving secretly means he is not performing. He is not giving to be seen, and he is not giving because anyone is forcing his hand. Remember the elite the surah has already exposed, so generous in public, with the donation the size of a man and the ribbon to cut, and so miserly and grasping in private, underpaying the workers and pushing the orphan aside. The free man is the reverse of them all the way down. He gives because he is grateful, and for no other reason: my Master has been generous with me, so I will be generous with His creation. There is no fear in it, no master dangling a service over his head, no threat of being discarded. There is only thanks.

So look carefully at what Allah has actually set side by side. Not two slaves. A slave and a free man. One of them owned by something powerless, able to do nothing, kept for a use and worth nothing beyond it. The other in the service of the One who provides, and free enough, full enough, overflowing enough, to give. This, Nouman Ali Khan says, is the heart of the whole verse: slavery to

anything other than Allah is slavery, and slavery to Allah is freedom. It is, in his words, an ayah of liberty, a verse that is liberty itself. Which is exactly why the verse standing just before it warns us off the comparison entirely:

So do not assert similarities to Allāh. Indeed, Allāh knows and you do not know.

QUR'AN 16:74

Do not go making theories and pictures and rivals for Allah, because He knows and you do not. And the false gods you keep wanting to set beside Him are, in the parable He then strikes, the powerless slave who can do nothing, never the Master who provides. Notice, too, how the verse seals itself: praise to Allah. Not "the servant praises," but simply alhamdulillah, as if to say that the praise of Allah stands whether anyone comes to Him or not, and that the one who does come, comes running toward Him out of gratitude for all He has given, not driven to Him out of fear of what He might take.

What this example asks of our hearts

It is tempting to read a verse like this from a safe distance, as a picture of an old institution that has nothing to do with us, a quarrel between Allah and the idol-worshippers of Makkah that was settled long ago. That would be to miss the question it is putting straight to our own hearts, and the question is quieter and sharper

than it looks. Everyone serves something. The verse is not really asking whether you are owned. It is asking who, or what, owns you.

Because there is a kind of ownership that runs on exactly the logic of that slave market. It takes everything and gives nothing back. It buys you for a use and discards you the moment you stop being useful, the way the powerless idols in these verses gave nothing and still demanded offerings. Money can own a person like that, deciding his days, swallowing his years, handing him in return nothing he could ever give away or rest in. So can status, and an image, and the approval of a crowd, and a habit he cannot break, and a fear he will not name. They all take and take. They all set the shape of a life. And not one of them provides; not one of them was ever able to. To hand yourself over to any of them is to step into the line of the owned, controlled by something that owns no provision from the heavens or the earth, and is, in the end, unable.

And then there is the One who begins by providing. Who wants nothing from you because He needs nothing from you. Whose service, alone of all services, does not shrink a person but fills him until he overflows and his hands fall open. Remember the seed buried in the wording, the hint that being owned by anything other than Allah was never your natural state, that you were made free, a servant of Allah and of no one else, and only later let yourself be bought. The parable, read to its end, is an invitation home. It ends the way the free man lives, in one word of gratitude, *alhamdulillah*, and it asks you to live there too: not in the line of the owned, con-

trolled by something that can provide you nothing, but in the service of the Master who gives before you even think to ask, and who promises that this, and only this, is where a human being is ever truly free. So make the prayer of a grateful servant your own:

My Lord, enable me to be grateful for Your favor which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents and to do righteousness of which You approve. And admit me by Your mercy into [the ranks of] Your righteous servants.

QUR'AN 27:19

Free us, O Allah, from every master that takes and gives nothing, and let us serve You alone, who provide before we ask. Make us of the grateful, open-handed in secret and in the open, and gather us among Your righteous servants, in the one service that is freedom.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 25. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Dead weight

A man who can do nothing, set beside a man who commands justice

Picture two men standing side by side in the road. Same height, the same build, the same pair of working hands hanging at their sides. If you saw them in a line you could not tell which was which, could not say which one to hire and which one to send away. They look, from the outside, perfectly equal. Then you set each of them a task, and the likeness falls apart in an instant. One of them cannot speak, cannot quite follow what you ask of him, cannot make himself understood, and whatever direction you point him in, nothing useful ever comes back. The other one you can trust with anything, send anywhere, leave alone for a month and never once worry, because he does not merely do what is right, he calls other people to it too.

That is the second of two examples Allah strikes back to back near the heart of Surah an-Nahl, and this is day twenty-six of twenty-seven, retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's series. It looks at first like a small, almost worldly lesson, the kind a merchant might mutter about a bad servant and a good one. By the time the example has finished its quiet work, the picture has turned all the way around, and the people who were certain they were the masters discover, to their horror, that they were the dead weight all along.

Two men who look the same

The picture opens with two men, and the choice of that word is the first thing worth slowing down for. Allah does not say a strong man and a weak one, not a giant and a child, not a healthy man and a sick one. He says two men, the kind you would size up at a glance and judge to be the same. Everything the example is about to do depends on that opening equality, because the whole point is a difference you cannot see from the outside. Two people who look identical, until the moment each is asked to act.

And Allah presents an example of two men, one of them dumb and unable to do a thing, while he is a burden to his guardian. Wherever he directs him, he brings no good. Is he equal to one who commands justice, while he is on a straight path?

QUR'AN 16:76

The first man is described with one heavy word, *abkam*. It means mute, someone who cannot speak. But Nouman Ali Khan opens it wider than that, because the word carries more. It is used for a person who cannot make himself understood and cannot understand others either, a breakdown of communication running both ways at once: nothing gets in, and nothing comes out. And it stretches further still, to a mind that cannot quite think a matter through, that does not process clearly. So before you have even handed this man a task, he is already carrying a real and double disability, in the receiving and in the giving, a person you would

struggle to employ at anything, because if you told him something he would not grasp it, and on the rare chance that he did, he could not pass it on.

A burden, and a blunt knife

Then Allah piles the difficulty higher. The same phrase from the example one verse before lands again here: unable to do a thing. Not merely unable to communicate, but unable to manage even a task that needs no words in it. Set him the simplest job, something with no speaking required at all, and he still cannot do it. And then comes the heaviest word in the verse, the one the whole image turns on. He is a burden to the one responsible for him.

Nouman Ali Khan opens that word, *kall*, with real care, because it is doing a great deal of quiet work. In Arabic it describes someone who has run completely out of steam, who has collapsed in the middle of the race with nothing left in him, the way a runner gives out on the treadmill and simply stops. And it is the very word the language reaches for to name a knife that has gone blunt, an instrument that no longer cuts, that no longer does the one thing it was forged to do. Hold on to the image of the knife, he says, because a knife has no will of its own. It does not want anything. It exists for one purpose only, to carry out the intention of the hand that holds it. The will of the master is what the blade executes; the blade is just the instrument of that intent. So here is a man who is meant to be at his master's service, a tool in his master's hand, and he is as useless to that hand as a blade that will not cut. You

cannot instruct him, cannot deploy him, cannot get a single thing back from him. He is, in the plainest sense, weight without return.

Who is the mawla

There is one more word in this verse that Nouman Ali Khan asks us not to rush past, and it is the hinge on which the whole example will eventually swing: the word translated here as guardian, mawla. In the old world a slave's owner could indeed be called his mawla, and on the surface that is exactly what the example sounds like, a master and his good for nothing slave. But mawla is far, far wider than owner. It is the word for anyone who takes charge of you and bears responsibility for you. A guardian. An uncle. An older brother. An employer, a boss, a manager. Anyone standing in a position of authority, or protection, or mentorship over another person.

So the picture is not chained to the institution of slavery at all. It could just as easily be a father and the grown son who works his farm and yet cannot help him with anything. It could be a manager and the employee who is more liability than asset. It could be the soldier in the unit who is dead weight rather than strength, more risk than reinforcement. Every one of us who heads a household, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is in exactly this sense the mawla of that household, the one who has taken charge and bears the responsibility. By choosing this one open word instead of the narrow word for owner, Allah leaves the door of the example deliberately ajar, and that open door is precisely what will let the picture, in a moment, turn and face people who never once imagined it was

about them. And there is a further shade inside the word that he asks us to keep in mind, because it sharpens the ending to a point. Mawla also carries the sense of protector, the one whose job is to take care of you. Remember that, he says. It matters later.

Where the example breaks its own pattern

Now comes the turn, and it does not go where the mind expects. You have been shown a useless servant, drawn in four strokes: he cannot communicate, he cannot do anything, he is a burden, and wherever he is sent no good comes of it. So you brace for the obvious other half of the comparison, the useful servant, the one who does as he is told, gets the work done, earns his keep, returns the investment. That is the natural opposite, and it is exactly what you are set up to expect. But the Qur'an, as Nouman Ali Khan reminds us, is forever the unexpected. Allah does not say the second man is a hard worker. He says he is one who commands justice, and he is on a straight path.

Sit with how strange that is. That does not sound like a servant being praised for good service at all. It sounds like a believer. And that is precisely the point. This second man is so capable and so trustworthy that he no longer merely follows his master's orders, he carries his master's very intention out into the world himself. Allah is the One who commands justice; here it is the servant who is commanding justice, executing the will of his Lord the way a sharp knife executes the will of the hand that holds it. He has been handed the largest, most independent task there is, the work of

justice itself, and he is exactly the man you can trust to carry it. The comparison has quietly stopped being about two servants and started being about something far larger.

The men who would not open their mouths

Here is where the most striking reading Nouman Ali Khan offers comes in, and he raises it openly, marking it clearly as his own. Many of the scholars of the tradition, he notes, read this example as the dumb idol set against Allah Himself: the lifeless statue that can do nothing, the false god who cannot speak or act, held up beside the One who truly commands justice and is upon the straight path. With full respect for that tradition, he says plainly that he does not find that reading the most convincing, and he offers another that sits better, to his mind, with the flow of the surah and with the rest of the Qur'an and with the inside of the verse itself. As he always does, he urges you not to take his word for it but to study it yourself and reach your own conclusion, because a believer is meant to be someone who walks with a light, who can see for himself which way to go, not someone who only ever sits and listens. Reflection like this stays transparent as reflection; the image belongs to the Qur'an, the reading is his.

So consider the powerful of Makkah. There is a report, he recounts, that some of the city's leaders crept out separately under cover of night, each one alone, to press an ear against the wall of the house of the Prophet ﷺ and listen to the Qur'an being recited inside, and that they ran into one another in the dark before dawn,

each ashamed to be caught, and swore each other to secrecy, and could not keep away even so. By day these same men warned the youth of the city to stay far from this man and his recitation; by night they could not stop their own ears from drinking it in. Something in them, privately, knew it was true. But they could not bring themselves to say so out loud, and the reason is the whole of it. Their wealth poured in from the religious tourism the idols around the Kaaba drew from every tribe in the region; the safety of their trade routes, the only caravans the desert bandits would not touch, rested on the standing those same idols gave them; their political power and their high social status rested entirely on their being the keepers of the gods. To speak the truth aloud was to lose money, security, and status all at once, in a single breath. And so they kept their mouths shut. Their thinking, Nouman Ali Khan observes, could not reach past the world right in front of them, past the money and the status and the power; it would not stretch to the One who actually gives provision, who actually owns dignity, who actually holds power. Their minds had narrowed to the size of this life. And the word for a person who has shut down his own tongue, who will not speak what he knows, who cannot make his mind reach further, is *abkam*. Allah strikes the example of a man who cannot speak; and these were men who would not.

Pointed in every direction, and still no good

Set this beside the example that comes one verse before it, the two parables Allah strikes back to back, because they are made to be read together.

Allah presents an example: a slave [who is] owned and unable to do a thing and he to whom We have provided from Us good provision, so he spends from it secretly and publicly. Can they be equal? Praise to Allah! But most of them do not know.

QUR'AN 16:75

The first parable set an owned slave who can do nothing against a man given good provision who spends it openly and in secret, useful with his wealth, pouring it out for the benefit of others. This second parable sets the mute burden against the man who commands justice, useful with his voice, calling others to what is right. Both of the praised servants spend themselves for other people; the one gives away his money, the other gives away his courage, and neither keeps the good for himself. Nouman Ali Khan notes that this is one of the ways the Qur'an works, opening a concept briefly in one place and then unfolding it like a single seed that bursts into several flowers, charity in the first image, justice in the second, two faces of the same striving.

And now look again at the line in our verse: wherever his master directs him, he brings no good. Nouman Ali Khan hears in that exact phrase the very way Allah taught these people. A master with a struggling servant tries him on one task; he fails, so the master gives him an easier one, and an easier one again, reaching for a gentler approach each time. So Allah introduced Himself to them one way in one passage, then explained the same truth another

way in the next, then another way again, surah after surah, image after image, sign after sign, the way a patient teacher tries a new method every single time the student insists he still does not understand. The signs were set before them in the sky above their heads, and inside their own selves, and in the ruins of the nations that had gone before them. Each sign pointed somewhere true. From not one of them did any good ever come back. And underneath all of it, Nouman Ali Khan says, the deeper move is taking place: it begins sounding as though these proud, wealthy people are the masters and the useless servant is somebody beneath them. By the time the example has done its work, you understand that Allah is the Master, and they are the useless slaves, the human beings made to stand up and speak the truth who would not do the one thing they were made for.

Strong and trusted enough to be sent far

Stay a moment longer on the praise of the second man, because the last detail of it carries the most weight: he is on a straight path. Nouman Ali Khan draws out why that single phrase matters so much. The best servant, the best employee a person can have, is the one who is two things at the same time, capable and trustworthy. Lose either of the two and the whole thing collapses. The worker you can trust but who is bad at the job is of no use to you; the worker who is brilliant at the job but cannot be trusted is worse than no use, a danger. But when a person is both at once, capable and trustworthy together, you can leave the entire business in his hands and go away on the journey without checking the camera

once, because he will act exactly as you would have acted, even when no one is watching and no one will ever know.

That is the man on a straight path. He is not merely told to be just; he is walking justice himself, living the very thing he calls others to. And to walk a path is to be on a journey, and a journey means going far from the one who sent you, out where there are no eyes on you, out where a lesser man would sell the goods and vanish, or pocket the difference and come home with a lie about robbers on the road. To be sent on that journey at all is the mark of the most trusted servant there is, handed the heaviest trust, the amana, and the most freedom in which to carry it. The first man could not be trusted with the smallest errand across the room. This second man is trusted with the open road itself, and on it he keeps to the way, and turns back anyone he sees straying from it. That, and not mere obedience, is what Allah holds up as the opposite of the dead weight.

What this example asks of our hearts

Now the picture turns to face us, and it is not a flattering thing to look at, because the silence inside it is a silence we know from our own lives. Have you heard this exact reasoning, Nouman Ali Khan asks, in our own time and in our own homes? A wrong is being done openly, plainly, against the word of Allah, and you say nothing, and then in private you confess it freely: I know what is happening is wrong, I know what my uncle is doing is wrong, what my father is doing, what my brother is doing, I know it is wrong, but

you know how the family is, my hands are tied, what can I say, I cannot say anything. The celebrity, the politician, the person handed a platform watches an open injustice unfold and stays carefully, deliberately quiet, because the contract is on the line, the career is on the line, the donors are on the line, and then calls you privately afterward to say how very sad it all makes them feel, how it hurts them personally, how complicated it is. That, exactly that, is the abkam. The burden who brings no good in any direction he is turned, because he will not speak the one truth he was put here to speak.

And then the line that follows in the surah lands like a hand laid gently but firmly on the shoulder. Right before it, the warning: that everything unseen belongs to Allah, and that the Hour, the final reckoning, is no further off than the blink of an eye, perhaps nearer, and a master does not keep forever a tool that will not cut.

And Allah has extracted you from the wombs of your mothers not knowing a thing, and He made for you hearing and vision and hearts [i.e., intellect] that perhaps you would be grateful.

QUR'AN 16:78

Allah brought you out of your mother's belly knowing nothing at all, and then, on purpose, He gave you the hearing, and the sight, and the heart, made you able, fitted you with every instrument you would need, so that you would be grateful. You were not created a

blunt knife. You were created sharp, made to cut, made to serve the purpose you were shaped for. So why act useless? Why play the part of the very man the example warns you never to become? Nouman Ali Khan turns it on a tender, almost startling comparison: think of a newborn baby, who truly can do nothing, who cannot feed itself or clean itself or tell you why it cries, as helpless as the abkam in every way. That is how we all began, knowing nothing, able to do nothing. And then Allah made us useful, deliberately, gift by gift. If He created you useful, why would you choose to live as though you were not?

So the question the whole example leaves resting in your open hand is the same question it opened with. Of the two men who look exactly alike from the outside, who stand the same height with the same hands, indistinguishable in any line, which one are you, tonight, when the truth needs saying and saying it will cost you something? The proud of Makkah were certain they were the masters, the keepers of the gods, the strong ones, and Allah held up a mirror and showed them the dead weight, the tool gone blunt, the servant who brings no good in any direction. And the believers they looked down on, apparently powerless, turned out to be the strong and the trusted, the ones sent far down the road with the heaviest trust of all. The two men were never strangers from a distant age. They are two versions of the same person, you on the day you speak and you on the day you stay safely, privately silent, and from the outside not even you can always tell them apart. May Allah, who brought us out of the womb knowing nothing and gave

us hearing and sight and hearts so that we would be grateful, never let us be a burden that brings no good, but make us of the servants who command justice and walk a straight path, and keep our tongues from the cowardly silence, and admit us by His mercy among His righteous servants. The prayer the Qur'an teaches for exactly this is still the truest words for it: my Lord, enable me to be grateful for Your favor which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents and to do righteousness of which You approve, and admit me by Your mercy into the ranks of Your righteous servants.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 26. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.

Unravelled yarn

She who spun her thread strong, then tore it back to fluff

Picture a woman at her work. She has taken a fistful of raw wool, soft and shapeless as a torn cloud, the kind of weightless fluff you could blow off your palm, and she has hooked a little of it onto a weighted spindle. She lets it hang. As the spindle turns, the cloud begins to draw downward and tighten, and a thread is born, thin at first, then thicker, then strong. The more it spins the stronger it grows, and as the thread lengthens she winds it back up the shaft and keeps going, more and more yarn, the raw fabric of a whole household's life. This is the thread that will become a blanket, a tent, the warm clothes a family waits on through the cold. It is slow, skilled, patient work, and she is good at it.

And then, when the thread is finished and wound tight and ready, she takes the tip of something sharp, and she begins to pick it apart. Knot by knot. Fibre by fibre. Back into fluff.

That is the last picture Allah strikes in this stretch of the Qur'an, and it is the final example in this series, day twenty-seven of twenty-seven. After twenty-six images, after the fire and the rock and the tree and the dog and the spider, Allah ends not with a thunder-clap but with a woman quietly tearing up the very thing she spent her life making, and He asks us, plainly, not to be her.

The thread, spun strong

Before any meaning, the lecture asks us to actually see the craft, because most of us have never watched it done. Nouman Ali Khan walks through it slowly, almost tenderly. They would shear a sheep and be left with a heap of wool, soft and weightless, like cotton candy, like a fistful of cloud. Then they would take a metal device with a hook on top and a weight at the bottom, a spindle, and hook a little of that fluffy cloud into it, and let it hang. The hanging weight pulls down on the cloud, and as it pulls it starts forming a little bit of string. Then they spin it. The wool turns and twists and grows stronger, and little by little the patch of fluff becomes a thread. The longer the thread, the lower the spindle drops toward the ground, until you cannot use it anymore, so you wind the finished length back around the shaft and keep spinning, producing more and more yarn. This was the skilled, ancient way of making the very fabric of life, the wool that would be turned into mats and tents and warm clothing, the cloth a household lived inside.

Now hold the one word Allah chooses. He does not say she undid weak thread. He says she undid it after it was strong, *min ba'di quwwah*, after the spinning had made it strong, and then tore it into *ankath*, ripped little fibres. The woman in this example, Nouman Ali Khan points out, is clearly good at her craft. This is the whole hinge of the picture. The example is not of someone who failed to make thread. It is of someone who made excellent, strong thread, all of it finished and wound up and ready, and then sat

there picking it back into the cloud she started with. The skill is real. The labour was real. And she undoes it.

Here is the verse the whole evening turns on, the central image of the parable set inside a longer sentence:

And do not be like she who untwisted her spun thread after it was strong [by] taking your oaths as [means of] deceit between you because one community is more plentiful [in number or wealth] than another community. Allah only tries you thereby. And He will surely make clear to you on the Day of Resurrection that over which you used to differ.

QUR'AN 16:92

At first hearing, Nouman Ali Khan admits, this sounds like a string of disjointed pieces: a woman undoing her spindle, then oaths used as deceit, then one group rising above another, then a test, then a clarification on Judgment Day. They seem unrelated. But the verse is going to do exactly what the image does. In the image, an incoherent heap of fluff is spun into one coherent, continuous string. And our task with this ayah, he says, is to do the same: to take these scattered concepts and spin them together into a single thread of meaning. So let us spin.

Not knitting. Madness

Say it plainly, because the Qur'an means us to feel it. This is the behaviour of someone who has lost their mind. Imagine, Nouman

Ali Khan offers, an old woman knitting and knitting and knitting, and then, the very moment the work is done, tearing the whole thing open, and then knitting it again, and tearing it open again, on and on. That is not thrift. It is not craft. It is psychotic behaviour. He does not soften the word, because the strangeness is the point. The parable is not really about knitting, of course; it is about doing this intricate, skilled, demanding work and then, at the end of it, undoing every bit of it.

This matters because of where Allah files the picture. We have walked past other parables in this very series that paint foolishness and insanity, images built to make a person recoil: the one who kindles a fire and then is left in darkness, the donkey loaded with books it cannot read, the dog that pants whichever way you turn it. The woman with the spindle belongs in that same drawer. She is not drawn to be admired or pitied gently. She is drawn so that something in you pulls back and says: that is madness, who would ever do that. Hold on to that reflex. The Qur'an wants it. By the end of the example, Allah is going to ask you to look again at who, exactly, the madness belongs to.

And there is a first small turn, easy to miss in the grammar. Allah says do not be like the woman, but the command is plural: *la takunu*, all of you, do not be like her. One woman unspins one thread, and a whole community is warned about it. Why warn the entire crowd about a single crazy lady tearing up her own work? Keep that question in the back of your mind. When the answer

comes, it will be the most uncomfortable part of the whole example, and it will be about you watching her, not only about her.

The oath you swore, and then began to undo

To understand what the thread stands for, Nouman Ali Khan takes us back a few verses, into the flow of the surah. An-Nahl is one of the late Makkan chapters, and just before the parable Allah lays down a command that names the thread directly:

And fulfill the covenant of Allah when you have taken it, [O believers], and do not break oaths after their confirmation while you have made Allah, over you, a security [i.e., witness]. Indeed, Allah knows what you do.

QUR'AN 16:91

There it is. You made a covenant with Allah. You confirmed it. You set Allah Himself as the witness and guarantor over it. That, Nouman Ali Khan teaches, is the spun thread: your shahada, the oath you took that He is your Lord and that Muhammad ﷺ is His messenger. And you did not take that oath the way a person signs up in a moment of excitement and forgets it by morning. You took it and then, over the years, it was reinforced. Notice the phrase after their confirmation, *ba'da tawkidiha*. Every time more of the Qur'an came down, every time you heard another passage and your heart moved, your reason to believe was strengthened, not weakened. The thread spun tighter. The oath was made stronger.

You did not leave your affairs in your own hands or in the hands of society; you made Allah your kafil, your caretaker, the One who would handle the outcome no matter what came. By the time any real test arrived, your faith was not a thin first thread. It was wound strong over years.

Which is exactly why the warning bites. Nobody undoes a covenant they made yesterday in a fit of enthusiasm; that is easy to walk back, and Allah is not warning about that. This is about the one who spent years spinning, who reinforced the oath again and again, who handed their whole matter to Allah, and then, after all that strength, after all those years, began to pick the entire thing apart. The danger the parable names is not that you never spun. It is that you spun beautifully, for a long time, and then undid it.

Why a strong believer starts to tear

Now the human situation, and Nouman Ali Khan places it with real care, because to feel the parable you have to feel what late Makkah was actually like. This is one of the last Makkan surahs. By this point the city has become almost unlivable for the Muslims. Things are no longer merely hard; they are a security threat. There is already an effort underway to find an alternative base, a safe haven, somewhere the community might simply survive. The torture of the weak and the poor who had embraced Islam, the family of Ammar, the long ordeal of Bilal, the pressure on the young to abandon the faith and return to the old ways out of loyalty to their families: it is all happening at once. And here is the cruel shape of

it, the thing he wants us to grasp. Coming into Islam in Makkah did not get easier the longer you stayed. It got harder. One convenience you were used to is gone. Then another annoyance, another aggravation, another deprivation, another loss, stacking and stacking. And a person who has given years of sincere good can quietly reach a wall and think: I came into this for the right reasons, I really did, but I do not have the energy to keep going like this. I cannot take it anymore.

He brings it straight into our own world, because the mechanism has not changed. Think of the believer whose faith was never reinforced after that first sincere yes. Raised in a religious home, brought to the masjid, put in a weekend program, made to recite, a good kid by every outward measure. And then the questions came, and the parents did not have the answers, and instead of feeling the thread spin tighter, the longer this child stayed in the religion the more unanswered questions piled up, until faith felt like it was being weakened over time rather than strengthened. Or think of the one who simply burns out, who says this is too much anxiety, I am triggered, I am healing right now, I need to step back and take time for myself, and in stepping back lets the whole thread go slack. Nouman Ali Khan is gentle here, and also unflinching. You may have done a great deal of good before you ran out of steam. But if you walk away after all of that, then it is the woman with the spindle: tearing up years of work because a few strands were imperfect and the task got hard.

So this, he says clearly, is an ayah about grit. About toughness. You are on a task; stay on the task. And he names precisely why motivation collapses, because it is the same disease underneath all of these cases: the original intention was never reinforced. Maybe you began doing it because everyone around you was doing it, or because your parents told you to. Or maybe you genuinely began for Allah, with a clear and sincere heart, but afterward there was nothing, no renewal, no returning to it, and so that first pure intention slowly slipped away into the background until you no longer remember why you are doing any of this. He reaches for an example that stings precisely because it is so familiar. A handful of brothers in a town with almost no Muslims pool their savings to rent an empty storefront and turn it into a small masjid, purely so they will have a place to worship Allah and bring their children to worship Him. It is hard, but they do it. People start showing up for Jumu'ah. A little money comes in, then more, and after some years of fundraisers they have gathered enough to buy land and build a beautiful new masjid. And then those same brothers, once the best of friends, who once helped one another and prayed shoulder to shoulder, fall into a power struggle over who will be president, who will sign the checks, who will hire the imam, sometimes all the way into lawsuits against each other. The intention at the start was pure. But there was no reinforcement afterward, and a pure intention does not run forever on autopilot. Like iman itself, motivation has to be returned to and renewed, or it quietly disappears, and you find yourself tearing apart the very thing you once built with love.

Oaths slipped in like a blade

But the parable has a second edge, and the rest of the verse turns it toward us. Take your oaths as a means of deceit between you, the ayah says, *dakhalan baynakum*. The word *dakhal*, Nouman Ali Khan explains, means something inserted where it does not belong, something alien and unnatural forced into a body that will try to reject it, the way a bullet is *dakhal* in flesh. And see how exactly that word matches the picture. To rip the strong thread, the woman does not simply pull one big knot loose. She works the tip of a needle or a knife into the thread so she can tear it apart fibre by fibre, little by little. He draws the linguistic line precisely: the word for tearing here, *ankath*, is not the undoing of a single knot; it is the shredding of something into small pieces. So the sabotage in the verse is not one dramatic stroke. It is slow. Meeting by meeting. Comment by comment. A little blade worked into the weave, again and again.

Because they could not destroy Islam from the outside in thirteen years, he reminds us, the opponents of the message tried the next tactic: destroy it from the inside. And the way they did it was almost kind. They would come to a believer whose life had become unbearable since accepting Islam and say: look how hard everything has become for you, your cousins hate you, your uncle will not speak to you, the girl you were to marry spits at your name now, your own brother rides your horse. We are not asking you to leave your religion. You can be a perfectly good Muslim. We only ask, the next time your people hold their meeting, that you slip

something in for us, just a little, throw in a word on our behalf, because we are family too, and we are only looking out for you. That is the blade worked into the thread. The believer is not asked to renounce anything openly, only to carry a quiet double loyalty, to become a little bit of a spy, just a little. And the motive driving the whole arrangement is named right in the ayah: an takuna ummatun hiya arba min ummah, so that one community might rise above another. The word arba, Nouman Ali Khan notes, carries the sense of rising, of coming out on top. You look at the trend lines. You see that the people of disbelief seem to be gaining the upper hand and the Muslims are struggling, and you reason that it is only smart to keep good ties with whoever is winning. He calls it a laser-precise commentary on the nature of politics and sabotage, and on the very beginnings of nifaq. For the hypocrite, at the simplest level, is the one who comes into Islam for some motive other than the pleasure of Allah, whether the intention was corrupt from the start or grew corrupt over time. And here, in late Makkah, as the squeeze tightens and the incentives to hedge appear, that disease first shows its face.

She ruins the work of everyone around her

Now we can answer the question we left hanging: why warn a whole community, in the plural, about one woman tearing one thread. Nouman Ali Khan answers it with the craft itself. Spinning wool is never a solitary act; it is one link in a long chain. Someone tends the sheep and feeds them and brings them to graze. Someone guards them. Someone shears them. Someone gathers

the wool and carries it and delivers it. She spins it into thread. And after her, someone takes that thread and weaves it into the blanket or the garment that another family is waiting on, a family whose warmth depends on it. There are many hands in this supply chain, and hers is only one of them.

So when she shreds the finished thread, she does not only waste her own labour. The ones before her throw up their hands: why am I out here tending these sheep, shearing them, hauling the wool, if she is only going to destroy what I hand her? I quit, I cannot work with these people, I will go raise chickens instead. And the ones after her are left with nothing to weave, their own livelihood suddenly empty in their hands, and they too say: forget it, there is no point working with people like this. She has demoralised the entire line, before her and after her. Her madness is contagious.

And that, Nouman Ali Khan presses, is the test Allah says He sets, not only for the saboteur but for everyone standing near her. There are two audiences inside this one verse. One is the person being tempted to become the double agent. The other is everyone watching that person fail. You are doing the work, in a masjid, a student association, a small organisation, a group of people genuinely trying to do something for Allah, and someone in it messes up, lets you down, sabotages the whole effort, and you think: that is it, I am done, I cannot work with these people. And just like that, her sabotage has claimed you too. This is exactly why the passage, a few verses earlier, speaks of those who not only went astray themselves but barred others from the path:

Those who disbelieved and averted [others] from the way of Allah - We will increase them in punishment over [their] punishment for what corruption they were causing.

QUR'AN 16:88

Notice, Nouman Ali Khan says, the doubled punishment, and notice why: not merely for the corruption they fell into, but for the corruption they spread, the way they stopped themselves and stopped others. The saboteur stops herself and stops you. So do not let the crazy lady tearing her thread become your reason to drop yours. On the Day of Resurrection, Allah will make clear all the disagreements you used to puzzle over, why a community that should have been one was always somehow fracturing, and you will discover how much of it was deliberate, planted, worked in like a blade. But on that Day you will be asked about your own thread, not hers. That is the part of the test that is yours.

Hold your position, and keep spinning

A few verses on, Allah answers the whole temptation at its root. Every shiny offer to switch sides, to sell the covenant for a little present advantage, is exposed for the bad trade that it is:

And do not exchange the covenant of Allah for a small price. Indeed, what is with Allah is best for you, if only you could know.

QUR'AN 16:95

And then He weighs the two things being traded, so plainly that the choice should make itself:

*Whatever you have will end, but what Allah has is lasting.
And We will surely give those who were patient their reward
according to the best of what they used to do.*

QUR'AN 16:96

Whatever you grasp at by hedging and sabotaging will run out. What is with Allah remains. And the reward, He says, is for *alladhi-na sabar*, those who were patient, the ones who held on, who kept spinning and did not tear it up, who did not say I have had enough, I am burnt out, I am done. Sabr here, Nouman Ali Khan stresses, is not gritted-teeth waiting for something to pass. It is staying at your task and not undoing it. It is keeping your goals clear and your hands on the work when everything in you wants to drop it.

He gives the patience a soldier's shape. Every soldier is assigned a position to hold. Whether the soldiers around him hold theirs or not has no bearing on his duty; he does not abandon his post because someone else abandoned his. An army in which each man leaves his place the moment another man leaves his has already lost the battle. Your good deeds, he says, are part of a picture far larger than you can see, so do your part and guard your position, regardless of who else is doing theirs. And guard it especially because the thread is delicate. It does not matter how much wool you

have spun across an entire lifetime, how many factories full of yarn, how many people are wearing the sweaters you made, if one final act of tearing can undo it all. He reaches here for the warning at the end of life, the command that we not meet Allah except in submission, a bad ending capable of unravelling a long and good road. All the good you have ever done is not yet safe. It is as delicate as wool, and it must be protected to the very end. Keep your hands on the spindle.

What this example asks of our hearts

Now the picture turns fully, and Nouman Ali Khan ends the whole series on its sharpest edge. The one who makes the deal, who works the blade into the thread, who sells the covenant to come out on top, is certain he is being clever. The schemer always believes he is smarter than the people he is fooling; that is the whole psychology of deceit, the deceiver looking down on his marks as fools. But Allah has filed this woman under madness and stupidity on purpose, and now we see why. She had a treasure being built that would have stayed with Allah forever, the best of everything she ever did waiting to be returned to her as her reward. And she sat down and tore it back into fluff before she could ever collect it. So who is the fool? Who is the one who lost their mind? Not the believers the schemer thought he was outsmarting. Him. Allah, by this single example, exposes the one who thought himself cleverest as the most foolish and the most insane of all, because he traded a lasting treasure for a passing advantage and unravelled his own salvation with his own hands.

And the mirror is for you, in your own quieter way. You may never be asked to spy on anyone, never be approached by an enemy with an offer. But there is a thread you have been spinning, perhaps for years. The prayer you keep. The Qur'an you return to. The bond you hold with the people of faith. The covenant you confirmed and reconfirmed every single time His words reached into your chest and moved you. It is wound strong by now, stronger than you know. And the test will come, the way it always comes, not announced as a test but dressed as something else: as exhaustion, as burnout, as a grievance against someone who let you down, as a shinier and easier road that opens up the moment you stop honouring the harder one you are already on. The only question this parable leaves in your hands is whether, when that moment arrives, you will keep your hand on the spindle, or pick up the needle.

This is where the whole journey was always heading. Twenty-seven nights ago it began with a man in the dark, fighting to kindle a fire that would only leave him blind when it went out. Between then and now: a rock that split and gushed with water while a human heart stayed harder than stone, a good word grown into a tree with firm roots and branches in the sky, a dog that pants whether you chase it or leave it be, a spider that spun itself a house and called the frailest thing in creation a home. Each one a picture Allah struck on purpose. Each one, when you stood still in front of it and stopped looking for someone else to blame, a mirror held up to your own heart. And Allah ends the whole stretch not with the oth-

ers but with this one, deliberately, because it is the parable about endurance to the very end, and the series itself was a long act of endurance, twenty-seven nights of sitting with the images He chose. He hands you the last one mid-spin, with the work still in your hands and not yet finished. Do not be her. Do not undo it. Keep your hand on the spindle, renew the intention that first set it turning, hold your position whether the others hold theirs or not, and protect every length of thread you have ever spun. Whatever you have will end; what Allah has is lasting, and the reward is kept for the ones who did not let go. May Allah, the Turner of the hearts, keep our hearts firm on His religion, carry us past the exhaustion and the grievance and the easier road, and let us meet Him with our thread spun whole, all the way home.

Retold faithfully from Nouman Ali Khan's Striking Examples From the Qur'an, episode 27. Qur'an: Sahih International, verified via quran.ai.