

07. Sûrahs 3 - 5



Sûrah 3 (from Medina; though see verse 199).

*Sûrah 3:10 'As for those who disbelieve, neither their wealth nor their children will avail them aught against God. And it is they who shall be fuel for the Fire'*

Verse 10 expresses a theme that recurs throughout the Quran: those who disbelieve (in Allah as presented in the Quran, and in Muhammad his Messenger) will be fuel for the fire of hell (see earlier comments on hell in the Quran). Religious groups of all kinds over the centuries have sometimes behaved as though only those who belong to their religion will be saved. To find this expressed in the Quran is understandable in seventh century Arabia, but for any religious group to make such a claim is to fail to know God.

*'Truly, the religion in the sight of God is submission (Al-Islam).'*

The word 'Islam' means 'submission'. Submission to God is central to Islam. For Christians, too, obedience to God is central. The word 'obedience' is important. Its roots are in the Latin language. Being obedient means 'listening' (Latin audiens) from close contact (Latin ob). The Hebrew and Greek words for obedience also involve listening.

See the earlier quotes from the Gospel of John which speak of Jesus' obedience. Obedience is due to God who reveals God's Self in a multitude of mysterious ways – for Christians, most significantly in Jesus

*Sarah 3:31-32 'Say: "If you love God, follow me, and God will love you and forgive you your sins. And God is Forgiving, Merciful". Say: "Obey God and obey the Messenger." If they turn away, truly God loves not the disbelievers.'*

Jesus taught us that God's love is unconditional, and he showed this in the way he related to people. God loves believers and disbelievers. Of course, love does not impose. We can reject God's love. It matters how we choose, but Christians believe that nothing we do can stop God loving. Our behaviour can prevent us from receiving the love that is unconditionally offered. To welcome God's offer of love we are invited to follow Jesus, as this sūrah invites Muslim believers to follow Muhammad. Jesus does more than invite us to follow him. He asks us to let him live in us, and he gives us a share in his Spirit, his prayer, his faith, his hope, his love, his communion with God.

*Sûrah 3:35-36 'The wife of 'Imran [Mary's father] said: "My Lord! I have borne a female ... and I have named her Mary, and I seek refuge for her in You and for her progeny, from Satan the outcast".*

*Sûrah 3:45 'The angels said, "O Mary, truly God gives you glad tidings of a Word from Him whose name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, high honoured in this world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought nigh".*

The Gospels do not mention Mary's parents. Luke recounts the conception of Jesus in a scene in which God sends the angel Gabriel who says to Mary: "Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you ... You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High" ... Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God"(Luke 1:28-35).

*Sûrah 3:84 'We believe in God and what has been sent down upon us, and in what was sent down upon Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses, Jesus and the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit'.*

Throughout the Quran, Jesus, along with Moses, is recognised and respected as a significant Messenger from God.

The Sûrah goes on to describe the punishment in store for those who believe and then abandon their belief. It makes an exception for *'those who repent and make amends, for truly God is Forgiving, Merciful'* (Sûrah 3:89).

### 1. Repentance

The New Testament, too, stresses the importance of repentance. Mark sums up Jesus' proclamation with the words: 'The time is fulfilled. The reign of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news' (Mark 1:15). We repent when we see things differently, and have the courage to live differently because of what we see (see Acts 26:20). Jesus is calling his contemporaries to open their minds and hearts to welcome the good news that God is, indeed, forgiving and merciful, and wants to embrace sinners in love so that they can truly 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10).

## 2. Forgiveness and Mercy

‘Forgiving’ and ‘Merciful’ are among the many ‘Beautiful Names’ given to God in the Quran.

In scene after scene in the Gospels we watch Jesus demonstrating God’s mercy and readiness to forgive sinners. The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of his best known stories (Luke 15:11-32). From the cross we hear him praying to his Father: ‘Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34).

Paul prays: ‘Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin’ (Romans 4:7-8). ‘Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness ... and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you’ (Ephesians 4:30-32).



As God forgives us, we are called to forgive one another. On one occasion Peter asked Jesus should he forgive as much as seven times. Jesus replied: 'not seven times, but seventy times seven times' (Matthew 18:21). We are to forgive 'from the heart' (Matthew 18:35). 'Whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone' (Mark 11:25).



Sûrah 3 records a number of early significant battles involving Muhammad and his followers. The Muslims are not to lose heart for *'If you are slain or die, truly unto God you shall be gathered ... Truly God loves those who trust' ... Deem not those who slain in the way of God to be dead. Rather they are alive with their Lord'* (verses 158-159 and 169).

Insofar as this is speaking of Muslims killed because of their faith, it would be the same as Christian teaching about martyrdom. Paul, facing death, could pray: 'I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him' (2 Timothy 1:12).

However, *'the way of God'* includes the use of violence to propagate Islam, and eliminating disbelievers. To call dying in this cause 'martyrdom' is problematic.

*Sûrah 3:199 “Among the People of the Book are those who believe in God and that which has been sent down to you, and that which has been sent down to them, humble before God ... It is they who shall have their reward with their Lord”.*

Some Muslim commentators understand this as referring to Christians who, while remaining Christians, respect the revelation given to Muhammad.

*The Study Quran* suggests that it may have been occasioned by ‘the death of the Christian king of Abyssinia who provided asylum for believers from Mecca before the migration to Medina’ (page 186 column 1).

## Sûrah 4 (from Medina).

This section speaks of ‘hypocrites’: those who converted to Islam and then reverted to paganism. It deals also with relations between men and women.

*Sûrah 4:3 ‘If you fear that you will not deal fairly with the orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two, three or four’.*

Polygamy was practised among the pagan Arabian tribes. Many of Muhammad’s followers were killed in the battle against his own tribe at Mecca. In the battle of Uhud, Muhammad himself was injured. Muhammad is concerned for the children who have lost their fathers, and here suggests that the Muslim men take a number of wives, and in this way provide the wives and the children with protection.

Christians have always favoured monogamy, for we see the love of husband and wife as a symbol of God’s faithful love to each of us personally.

*Sûrah 4:11 'God enjoins upon you concerning your children: to the male a share equal to that of two females'.*

*Sûrah 4:34 'Men are the upholders and maintainers of women by virtue of that in which God has favoured some of them above others and by virtue of their spending from their wealth. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in ['their husband's'] absence what God has guarded. As for those from whom you fear discord and animosity, admonish them, then leave them in their beds, then strike them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Truly God is Exalted, Great'.*

These are examples of the inequality between male and female in the Quran. See the earlier reflection. It is one thing to see this in light of Arabian customs in the seventh century. It is another to take these statements as expressions of God's will.

Sûrah 4:36 ‘Worship God, and ascribe not partners to Him’.

Muhammad has in mind especially the pagan Arabs and their many gods. As explained earlier, Christians need to express our faith in the One God in language that assures Muslims that monotheism among Christians is not compromised.

Sûrah 4:36 continues: *‘Be virtuous toward parents and kinsfolk, toward orphans and the indigent, toward the neighbour who is of kin and the neighbour who is not of kin, toward the companion at your side and the traveller, and toward those whom your right hands possess [your slaves]’.*

We looked earlier at the admirable concern of the Quran for the poor – a concern that is central, also, to Christians.

*Sûrah 4:74-76 'Let them fight in the way of God those who would sell the life of this world for the Hereafter. And whosoever fights in the way of God – whether he is slain or victorious – We shall grant him a great reward. And what ails you that you do not fight in the way of God, and for the weak and oppressed – men, women and children – who cry out, "Our Lord! Bring us forth from this town whose people are oppressors, and appoint for us from You a protector, and appoint for us from You a helper." Those who believe fight in the way of God, and those who disbelieve fight in the way of false deities. Fight, therefore, against the allies of Satan'.*

*Sûrah 4:89 'If they turn their backs, then seize them and slay them wherever you find them, and take no protector or helper from among them'.*

*Sûrah 4:92-93 'It is not for a believer to slay a believer unless it be in error ... Whoever slays a believer wilfully, his recompense is Hell, forever'.*

In Part One we offered a lengthy treatment of the Qur'an's giving divine authorisation for the use of violence to defend and propagate the Muslim religion. Jesus commanded us to love everyone, including those we call our enemies. His command was a consequence of his understanding of God (see Matthew 5:43-48). In the past, and still today, many Christians fail to live up to the teaching of Jesus. But his words are there to haunt us. When we fail to love our enemies, we are failing to follow his clear teaching.

If only we could all learn to break free from using the name of God to support aggression, we might find a way to draw closer to each other and mutually contribute to world peace and to see God as a God of Love who wants us all to live together in a respectful and joyful communion. Christianity teaches that God's merciful forgiveness embraces every human being, whatever their religious persuasion. Yet how hard it is for any of us to find the humility and trust to live together in peace.



Sûrah 4:110 *'Whoever does evil or wrongs himself, and then seeks forgiveness of God, he will find God Forgiving, Merciful'.*

For a reflection of forgiveness and mercy see the commentary on Sûrah 3:89.

Sûrah 4:140 *'Truly God will gather the hypocrites and the disbelievers in Hell, all together'.*

'Hypocrites' are those who converted to Islam and then went back to paganism. 'Disbelievers' are all non-Muslims.

See the reflection on hell in Part One. Christians believe that the punishment of hell exists for those only who obstinately and stubbornly close themselves off from God. We are also required to resist the temptation to sit in judgment on others. 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven' (Luke 6:37).

Sûrah 4: 157-158 *‘The Jews say: “We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God” though they did not slay him, nor did they crucify him, though it seemed so to them... but God raised him up unto Himself’.*

We examined this in Part One as an example of the Quran’s misunderstanding of Christian teaching (page 14). The idea that Jesus did not really die is found in some Gnostic sources (eg Valentinus who died in Cyprus in 160AD).

*Sûrah 4:171 'O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion, nor utter anything concerning God save the truth. Verily the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of God, and his Word, which He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers, and say not "Three." Refrain! It is better for you. God is only one God'.*

In the third presentation we reflected on the Christian understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God. It is Christian belief that Jesus revealed God's Word beautifully and perfectly in his person, because he remained open in purity to the gift of God's Spirit embracing him in love. As Jesus said: 'I am never alone, because I always do what pleases my Father' (John 8:29) Jesus is not a second God. We do not know what exaggerations Muhammad's Christian contemporaries in Arabia may have indulged in. It was and remains a tragedy that Muhammad was not aware of the beauty of the authentic Christian teaching of the Trinity. Like the Muslims, Christians are committed to the belief that '*God is only one God*'.

## Sûrah 5 (from Medina).

This section has a lot to say about the kinds of food it is permitted to eat. We find similar instructions in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Christian New Testament is very different: 'Jesus called the crowd and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile ... since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) It is what comes out of a person that defiles' (Mark 7:14-20).

It speaks, too, of the importance of ritual cleansing and of the pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca. The Ka'bah is the 'Cube', the square shaped building containing the large black stone which is revered by pilgrims during the Haj. Sûrah 5 speaks also of the importance of being faithful to the covenant with God.

Sûrah 5:3 *'This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My Blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission [Islam]'*.

This is thought by some to be Muhammad's final revelation, March 632, on the occasion of his last pilgrimage to Mecca. Muhammad died on 8th June 632.

Sûrah 5:5 allows Muslims to enter a chaste marriage with *'the chaste women of those who were given the Book before you'* (this includes Christian women).

Sûrah 5:17 explicitly includes Christians among the disbelievers. ‘

Sûrah 5:19 *‘O people of the Book! Our Messenger has come to you, making things clear after an interval [in the series] of messengers’.*

*‘Our Messenger’* is Muhammad whose mission is to clarify and complete the revelations that previously came through Moses and Jesus.

Sûrah 5:32 *‘We prescribed for the children of Israel that whosoever slays a soul – unless it be for another soul or working corruption upon the earth – it is as though he slew mankind altogether, and whoever saves the life of one, it is as though he saved the life of mankind altogether’.*

The reference is to the story of Cain and Abel. Killing another human being is contrary to God’s law. The Quran makes an exception for those who have been responsible for killing, or for people who ‘work corruption upon the earth’. Such people can rightly be killed.

As we saw in studying the Quran’s teaching on the use of violence to defend and propagate Islam, those who *‘work corruption upon the earth’* came to extend to all who refused to submit to God’s revelation through Muhammad, and refused to accept Muhammad as God’s Messenger.

The following verses describe how disbelievers should be treated.

*Sûrah 5:33 and 38 'The recompense of those who wage war against God and His Messenger and endeavour to work corruption upon the earth is that they be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet cut off from opposite sides, or be banished from the land. That is their disgrace in this world and in the Hereafter theirs shall be a greater punishment ... As for the male thief and the female thief, cut off their hands'.*

It is one thing to see this as an expression of tribal practices in seventh century Arabia. It is quite another to see it as an expression of God's will.



*Sûrah 5:46 'We sent Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him, and We gave him the Gospel, wherein is a guidance and a light, confirming the Torah that had come before him, as a guidance and an exhortation to the reverent'.*

The Quran only ever speaks of the Gospels (never of the writings of Paul and the other writings of the Christian Scriptures). It is also unclear which Gospels he was familiar with.

Sûrah 5:51 and 55 *‘O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians as protectors (awliya’). They are the protectors of one another. And whosoever takes them as protectors, surely he is of them ... Your protector is only God and his Messenger, and those who believe, who perform the prayer and give alms while bowing down.’*

In Part One we examined this statement, and others like it. It has been interpreted by some to demand the religious right not to support or obey a non-Muslim government.

*Sûrah 5:66 'Had they [Jews and Christians] observed the Torah and the Gospel and that which was sent down to them by their Lord, they would surely have received nourishment from above and from beneath their feet. There is a moderate community among them, but as for many of them, evil is what they do!'*

If we Christians, then and now, all lived faithfully as disciples of Jesus, how different the world would be!

Sûrah 5:82 *‘Thou wilt surely find the most hostile of men toward those who believe to be the Jews and those who ascribe partners unto God. And you will find the nearest in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, “We are Christians”. That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant’.*

During Muhammad’s life he experienced sustained resistance from a number of strong Jewish tribes in Arabia. They and the pagan polytheists (*‘who ascribe partners to God’*) fought against him. The Quran is not consistent in its judgment of Christians (see 2:62; 3:199; 5:66; 5:82; 9:30-31; 29:46).

*The Study Quran* writes: ‘According to most commentators, the occasion for the revelation of these verses was the later visit of a delegation by the Negus [the Christian king of Ethiopia] to the prophet in Madinah’ (page 319 column 2).

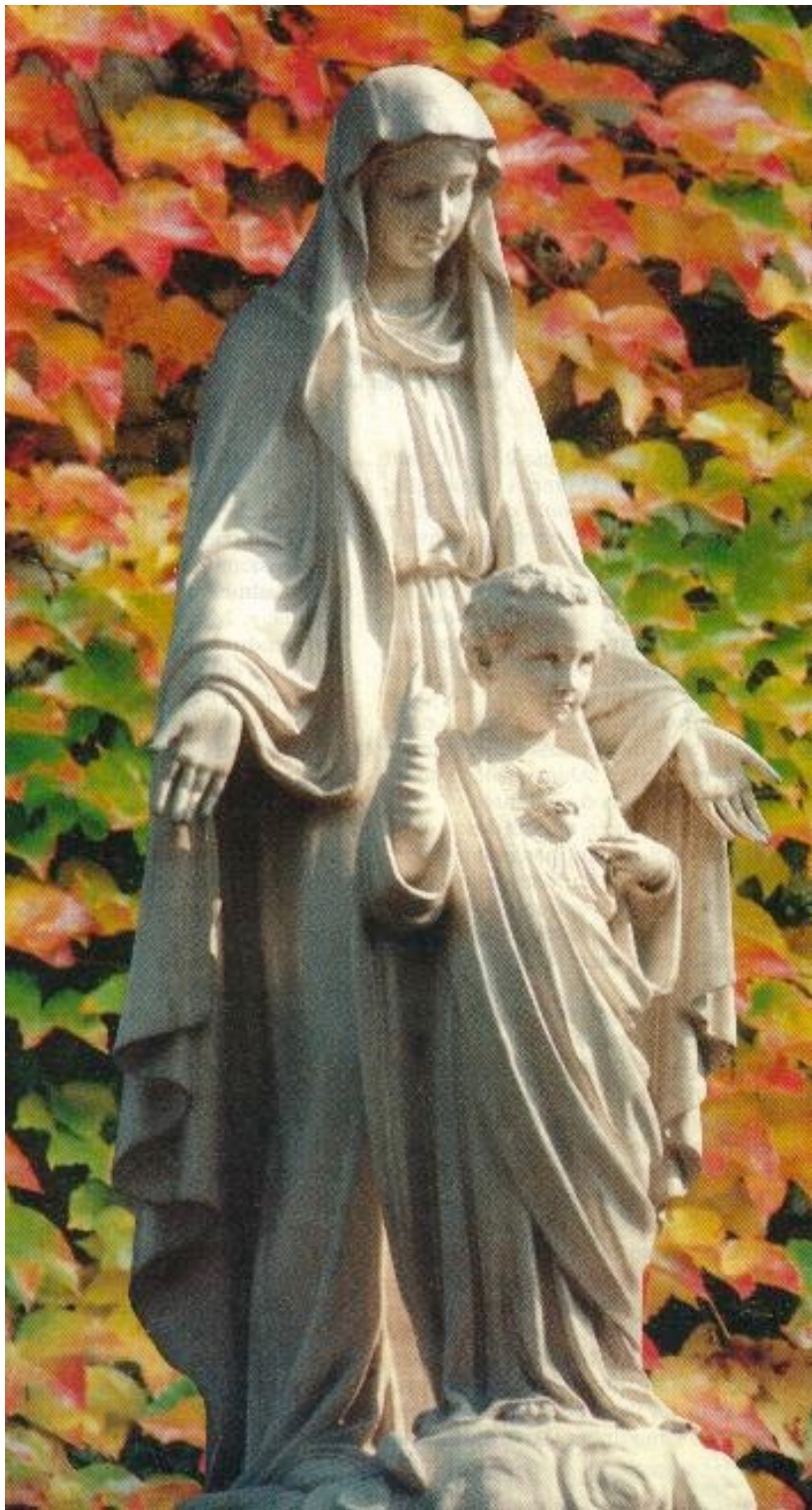
Sûrah 5:110 *‘God will say, “O Jesus son of Mary! Remember My Blessing upon thee, and upon thy mother, when I strengthened thee with the Holy Spirit, that thou mightest speak to people in the cradle and in maturity; and when I taught thee the Book, Wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel; and how thou wouldst create out of clay the shape of a bird, by My Leave, and thou wouldst breathe into it, and it would become a bird, by My Leave; and thou wouldst heal the blind and the leper, by My Leave; and thou wouldst bring forth the dead, by My Leave; and how I restrained the Children of Israel from thee, when thou didst bring them clear proofs, and those who disbelieved among them said: “This is nought but manifest sorcery”’.*

The story of the clay bird is legendary material, which Muhammad must have picked up from Gnostic sources. This is the only sûrah where Muhammad shows some knowledge of scenes from Jesus’ public ministry.

Sûrah 5: 112-115 refers to another scene in Jesus' public ministry: the multiplication of the loaves.

Sûrah 5:116 'O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say unto mankind: "Take me and my mother as gods apart from God?"

In the fifth presentation we reflected on the Quran's mistaken view of the Christian teaching on the Trinity.



Woman of the  
Sacred Heart