

Part III

The Journey of the Muḥsin

وَمَا هَذِهِ إِلَّا حَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا ۖ إِنَّا لِلْآخِرَةِ لَهِىَ الْخَيْرَاتُ ۖ وَإِنَّ الْآخِرَةَ لَهِىَ الْحَيَوَانُ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ٦٤

فَإِذَا رَكِبُوا فِي الْفُلِكِ دَعَوْا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ فَلَمَّا نَجَّيْنَاهُمْ إِلَى الْبَرِّ إِذَا هُمْ يُشْرِكُونَ ٦٥

لِيَكْفُرُوا بِمَا ءَاتَيْنَاهُمْ وَلِيَتَمَنَّوْا فَسَوْفَ يَعْلَمُونَ ٦٦

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّا جَعَلْنَا حَرَمًا ءَامِنًا وَيُتَخَطَّفُ النَّاسُ مِنْ حَوْلِهِمْ أَفَبِالْبَاطِلِ يُؤْمِنُونَ وَبِنِعْمَةِ اللَّهِ يَكْفُرُونَ ٦٧

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا ۚ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ٦٩

*"This worldly life is nothing but amusement and diversion. But indeed, the Home of the Hereafter—that is the true life, if only they knew. When they board a ship, they call upon Allah, sincere to Him in religion. But when He delivers them safely to land, at once they associate others with Him, so that they become ungrateful for what We have given them and enjoy themselves, for they are going to know. Have they not seen that We have made Makkah a secure sanctuary while people are being snatched away all around them? Then do they believe in falsehood and reject the favour of Allah? Who is more unjust than one who invents a lie about Allah or denies the truth when it comes to him? Is there not in Hell a dwelling for the disbelievers? **As for those who strive for Us, We shall surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the muḥsinīn.**"*

(Qur'an 29:64–69)

Structural Qur'anic Context

Imām **Ibn Kathīr** explains that the closing verses of Sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt conclude a sūrah devoted to **trial (fitnah)**, perseverance and sincere faith. From its opening verses, Allah teaches that faith will inevitably be tested:

أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا ءَامَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ

"Do people think they will be left to say, 'We believe,' without being tested?"

(Qur'an 29:2)

Throughout the Sūrah, Allah recounts the experiences of earlier prophets—Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Lūṭ, Shuʿayb, Mūsā and others—demonstrating that hardship has always accompanied sincere belief.

Ibn ʿĀshūr likewise observes that the final verses gather the principal themes of the Sūrah before concluding with one of the Qur'an's greatest promises. The believer is reminded of the fleeting nature of worldly life, the certainty of the Hereafter, the

ingratitude of many people despite Allah's favours, and finally the Divine promise granted to those who strive sincerely for Him.

The placement of verse 69 is therefore deliberate. It is not an isolated encouragement. It is the culmination of the entire Sūrah.

Historical and Exegetical Context

The classical exegetes, including **al-Ṭabarī**, **Ibn Kathīr** and **al-Qurṭubī**, do not report a specific occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) restricting Qur'an 29:69 to one historical incident. Rather, they understand it as a general Divine promise addressed to every believer who sincerely strives in obedience to Allah.

Its position within Sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt, however, is significant. The first Muslim community had already begun experiencing persecution, migration, uncertainty and hardship. Throughout the Sūrah, Allah repeatedly demonstrates that trials are not signs of abandonment, but part of the path travelled by every prophet and every believing community.

The concluding promise therefore addresses not only the earliest Muslims but every believer who continues striving in Allah's cause until the Day of Judgement.

Al-Ṭabarī: Striving Before Guidance

Imām **al-Ṭabarī** explains:

"Those who strive for Us"

refers to those who strive in obedience to Allah, seeking His pleasure and opposing their own desires.

He records explanations from the early generations that this striving includes perseverance in faith, obedience, worship and the struggle against disobedience.

Allah's promise then follows:

"We shall surely guide them to Our ways."

Al-Ṭabarī explains that Allah increases such believers in guidance, directing them towards the paths leading to His pleasure and success.

The verse therefore establishes a profound relationship.

Striving precedes increased guidance.

Guidance is itself a Divine gift bestowed upon those who continue striving sincerely for Allah.

Ibn Kathīr: Guidance Begets Guidance

Ibn Kathīr expands this promise by citing the famous statement transmitted from several of the Salaf:

"Whoever acts upon what he knows, Allah grants him knowledge of what he did not know."

Although this statement is not itself a Prophetic hadith, Ibn Kathīr cites it as illustrating the principle contained within the verse.

Guidance therefore does not remain static.

Every act of sincere obedience opens the door to further guidance.

The believer's journey towards Allah is one of continual growth.

The more sincerely one strives, the more Allah opens pathways previously unseen.

Al-Qurṭubī: Jihād in Its Broadest Sense

Al-Qurṭubī cautions against restricting the word

"strive" (jāhadū)

to armed struggle alone.

He explains that the verse encompasses every legitimate form of striving undertaken sincerely for Allah, including striving against one's lower self (*jihād al-nafs*), perseverance in obedience, patience during hardship and steadfastness upon faith.

This broader understanding harmonises naturally with the progression we have observed throughout this article.

The believer who has learnt generosity, forgiveness, emotional restraint, repentance and Taqwā now continues striving to preserve those qualities throughout life.

Ibn 'Āshūr: The Culmination of the Believer's Journey

Ibn 'Āshūr notes that Allah concludes the verse not merely with guidance, but with His companionship:

"Indeed, Allah is with the muḥsinīn."

He explains that this Divine "withness" (*ma' iyyah*) is not a reference to Allah's universal knowledge—which encompasses all creation—but to His special support, aid, protection and care for those distinguished by *iḥsān*.

Thus, the journey reaches its highest point.

The article began with Allah's command to practise *iḥsān*.

It now concludes with Allah's promise of His special companionship to those who embody it.

A Contemporary Reflection

Nouman Ali Khan observes that Allah does not promise guidance before striving.

The order of the verse is itself instructive.

Believers often wait to feel completely prepared before acting.

The Qur'an reverses that expectation.

Sincere striving comes first.

Greater guidance follows.

His reflection does not replace the classical explanations but helps the contemporary reader appreciate the enduring relevance of the verse.

The Authentic Sunnah

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said:

"The mujahid is the one who strives against his own soul in obedience to Allah."

This authentic narration, recorded in **Musnad Aḥmad** and **Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī** (graded authentic by several later scholars), beautifully complements al-Qurṭubī's explanation that striving encompasses more than armed conflict.

Likewise, the Prophet ﷺ supplicated:

"O Allah, grant my soul its Taqwā and purify it. You are the best to purify it. You are its Guardian and Master."

(Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)

The believer's striving therefore remains inseparable from continual dependence upon Allah's guidance.

The Prophetic Embodiment

No period of the Prophet's life illustrates this verse more completely than the years spent in Makkah.

For thirteen years he endured ridicule, persecution, boycott, personal loss and rejection while continuing to call people to Allah with patience, wisdom and unwavering sincerity.

His striving was not momentary.

It was lifelong.

Despite immense hardship, he neither abandoned his mission nor despaired of Allah's promise.

The Qur'an repeatedly reassured him that perseverance upon Allah's path never goes unnoticed by his Lord.

His life therefore becomes the greatest embodiment of those who

"strive for Us."

Among the Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn

Following the Prophet's ﷺ passing, **Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (RA)** faced perhaps the greatest crisis in the young Muslim community. Despite widespread apostasy and internal turmoil, he remained unwavering in preserving the religion entrusted to the Ummah. His steadfastness, recorded extensively by **al-Ṭabarī**, **Ibn Kathīr** (*Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah*) and **Ibn Sa'd** (*al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*), illustrates a lifetime of striving motivated by obedience to Allah rather than personal ambition.

Similarly, **ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (RA)** understood leadership as continual striving in service of Allah. Reports preserved by **Ibn Sa'd** and later historians describe his tireless concern for justice, accountability and the welfare of those under his care. Whether these reports concern his nightly patrols or his insistence upon personal accountability before Allah, they consistently portray a ruler whose striving continued long after authority had been entrusted to him.

Rather than multiplying examples, these lives remind us that striving in Allah's path is not confined to a single act of courage. It is sustained faithfulness over a lifetime.

Scholarly Convergence

Across this final movement, the voices of the mufassirūn converge with remarkable harmony.

Al-Ṭabarī teaches that sincere striving precedes increased guidance.

Ibn Kathīr reminds us that obedience opens the door to further knowledge and guidance.

Al-Qurṭubī broadens striving to encompass the lifelong struggle for obedience, patience and purification.

Ibn ʿĀshūr concludes by showing that the destination of this journey is Allah's special companionship.

The Qur'an therefore completes the progression that has unfolded throughout this article.

Allah first **commanded** iḥsān.

He then **described** the character of the muḥsinīn.

Finally, He **promises His guidance and companionship** to those who continue striving upon that path.

This synthesis does not replace the voices of the scholars. Rather, it gathers the journey they have collectively illuminated through the Qur'anic text.

The Qur'anic Development of Iḥsān

Qur'anic Movement	Development
16:90	Allah commands iḥsān
3:133–136	Allah describes the character of the muḥsinīn
2:190–195	Iḥsān governs conduct even during conflict
5:93	Taqwā matures into iḥsān
29:64–69	Striving culminates in Allah's guidance and His special companionship

From the opening command in Sūrah al-Naḥl to the closing promise of Sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt, the Qur'an has unfolded iḥsān with remarkable precision.

Allah first **commanded** iḥsān. He then described the character of the **muḥsinīn** through their generosity, restraint, forgiveness and continual repentance. He stated that Iḥsān remains the believer's standard even during hardship and conflict. He showed that Taqwā itself matures into iḥsān.

Finally, He promised His guidance and His special companionship to those who continue striving for His sake.

This progression reveals that Iḥsān is not a single deed, nor an isolated virtue. Rather, it is the continual pursuit of excellence before Allah—a journey in which worship, character, relationships and perseverance become united through sincere devotion to Him.

The Qur'an does not present the muḥsin as someone who never falls into error. Rather, the muḥsin remembers Allah after falling, seeks His forgiveness and refuses knowingly to persist in sin. Nor does the Qur'an present Iḥsān as something reserved for scholars or saints. It repeatedly addresses ordinary believers: those who spend according to their means, restrain their anger, pardon others, strive in obedience and return to Allah whenever they falter.

Perhaps this is one of the greatest mercies contained within these passages. Allah does not demand perfection before extending His love. Instead, He calls His servants to sincere striving, promising:

"...As for those who strive for Us, We shall surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the muḥsinīn."

(Qur'an 29:69)

This Divine promise reminds us that the journey of iḥsān does not conclude with our own efforts. Every act of obedience, every sincere repentance, every struggle against the lower self and every moment of patience remains dependent upon Allah's guidance, assistance and mercy. The believer strives, but it is Allah who grants steadfastness. The believer seeks excellence, but it is Allah who opens the path towards it.

As this Qur'anic journey now draws to a close, another question quietly emerges.

If every step towards iḥsān depends ultimately upon Allah's guidance, then:

- What should the believer understand about the relationship between human striving and the Divine decree?
- How do sincere effort, personal responsibility and trust in Allah coexist within His perfect knowledge and will?

These questions lead naturally to the next stage of our journey.

The Qur'an does not leave the believer to answer them alone.

Just as it unfolded the reality of *Ihsān*, it also unfolds the reality of **al-Qadr**—not as a subject of philosophical speculation, but as a source of tranquillity, humility and complete trust in Allah.

Only when the believer understands both **Ihsān** and **Qadr** together does the Qur'anic picture become complete.

For the one who strives with excellence, while placing complete trust in the wisdom and decree of Allah, has learnt to walk the path that leads not only to His guidance, but, by His infinite mercy, to His eternal pleasure.

رَبَّنَا لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوبَنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا وَهَبْ لَنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ ۝٨

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

(Qur'an 3:8)