The Congregational Prayer

*al-Jumu‘ah*

Although a minority maintain that *al-Jumu‘ah* is a Makkān sūrah, internal indicators, such as the reference to the Jews in v. 6, affirm that it is from the Madinan period (Āl). It takes its name from the exhortation to gather for the Friday congregational prayer in v. 9 and is the fourth in the group of sūrahs known as “The Glorifiers” (*al-Musabbiḥāt*), which begin with a reference to the glorification of God; the other sūrahs are 57, 59, 61, and 64. This sūrah is connected to the previous sūrah by the manner in which both compare the commerce of this world with the affairs of the next. Some also liken the praise for those who fight in His way in ranks in the previous sūrah (61:4) to the call to attend the congregational prayer, as Muslims are also called to stand in ranks during prayer (Āl).

The Prophet is reported to have often recited this sūrah and the following sūrah, *al-Munāfiqūn*, together during the congregational prayer on Fridays (Āl). According to a ḥadīth, “The best day over which the sun has risen is the day of the congregational prayer (*al-jumu‘ah*); on it did God create Adam, and on it did Adam enter the Garden, and on it was he removed from the Garden. And the Hour will not come save on the day of the congregational prayer” (Q). According to another ḥadīth, “It is named ‘The Gathering’ [another translation for *al-jumu‘ah*], because that is the day on which Adam’s physical nature (*khalq*) was gathered together” (R) or “in which God gathered together the physical nature of Adam” (Q; also see IK, Sy).

After extolling the Prophet as a blessing for his followers
present and future (vv. 1–4), *al-Jumuʿah* warns of the afflictions that befell the Jews for having failed to uphold the Torah (vv. 5–8). It then calls the Muslims to take leave of worldly transactions for a time in order to observe the Friday congregational prayer (vv. 9–11).

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

1. Whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth glorifies God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Mighty, the Wise.

2. He it is Who sent among the unlettered a Messenger from among themselves, reciting unto them His signs, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and Wisdom, though before they were in manifest error, and others among them, who have not yet joined them. And He is the Mighty, the Wise.

3. That is the Bounty of God, which He gives to whomsoever He will. And God is Possessed of Tremendous Bounty.

4. The parable of those [who were] made to bear the Torah, then did not bear it, is that of an ass bearing books. How evil is the likeness of the people who denied God’s signs! And God guides not wrongdoing people.

5. Say, “O you who are Jews! If you claim that you are friends unto God apart from [other] people, then long for death, if you are truthful.” But they will never long for it due to that which their hands have sent forth. And God knows the wrongdoers.

6. Say, “Truly the death from which you flee will surely meet you; then you shall be returned to the Knower of the Unseen and the seen, and He will inform you of that which you used to do.”

7. “O you who believe! When you are called to the congregational prayer, hasten to the remembrance of God
and leave off trade. That is better for you, if you but knew. And when the prayer is completed, disperse throughout the land and seek the Bounty of God, and remember God much, that haply you may prosper.” And when they see some commerce or diversion, they scatter toward it and leave thee standing. Say, “That which is with God is better than diversion and commerce; and God is the best of providers.”

**Commentary**

1. Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth glorifies God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Mighty, the Wise.

   1. *Whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is on the earth glorifies God* is repeated in 59:1; 61:1; and 64:1 (see also 24:41; 57:1; 59:24); see 64:1c.

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2. He it is Who sent among the unlettered a Messenger from among themselves, reciting unto them His signs, purifying them, and teaching them the Book and Wisdom, though before they were in manifest error,

   2. *Unlettered* (ummī) indicates those who can neither read nor write, but in this context can refer to the idolatrous Arabs, who had no scripture (T), or to anyone without a Divine book (R; cf. 3:20). *Purifying them* refers to purification from idolatry (JJ, ṯs). This is one of several verses in which the Prophet is said to teach the Book and Wisdom (cf. 2:129, 151, 231; 3:164), the teaching of which is part of the primordial covenant made with all prophets, when God said to them, *Should a messenger then come to you confirming that which is with you, you shall surely believe in him and you shall help him* (3:81). The teaching of the
Book and Wisdom is also mentioned in relation to Abraham (4:54), Jesus (5:110), and Muhammad (4:113). In this context, some interpret Wisdom as a reference to the prophetic wont (sunnah), though it also can be understood more broadly as a reference to all Divinely inspired knowledge pertaining to this world and the Hereafter (Ṭs).

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3 and others among them, who have not yet joined them. And He is the Mighty, the Wise.

3 And others follows upon the unlettered, meaning those who are alive among them, and those who will come after them, who have not yet joined them (JJ). The verse may refer to everyone who will enter Islam from the time of the Prophet until the Day of Resurrection (Qm, R,Ṭs), in which case purifying them, and teaching them (v. 2) describes the Prophet’s function in relation to all later generations of Muslims in all lands (R). Given the precedence that the earliest generations of Muslims are afforded, this verse is seen by many as a reference to the generation immediately after the Companions of the Prophet, known as the Followers (tābiʿūn; JJ, R), who are noted especially by Sunni Muslims for their piety and credited with many significant developments in Islamic religion and intellectual life. From this perspective, v. 2 establishes the preeminence of the Companions and this verse establishes the merit of the Followers, as each generation of Muslims is believed to be better than the succeeding one (JJ).

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4 That is the Bounty of God, which He gives to whomsoever He will. And God is Possessed of Tremendous Bounty.

4 That is the Bounty of God, which He gives to whomsoever He will is repeated verbatim in 5:54 and 57:21. In this context, the Bounty of God can also be taken as a reference to the Prophet or to prophethood in general (R).

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5 The parable of those [who were] made to bear the Torah,
then did not bear it, is that of an ass bearing books. How
evil is the likeness of the people who denied God’s signs!
And God guides not wrongdoing people.

5 Made to bear is understood to mean “enjoined to act in accord with it” (Q).
That they did not bear it thus indicates that they do not implement the teachings of
the Torah as enjoined upon them and thus derive no benefit from it. That they are as
an ass bearing books means that they have no true knowledge of what their
scripture contains (Q, Ṭ). That people recite their scriptures without acting upon
them is the same charge brought against the priests by the prophets of the Old
Testament in the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and others (see, e.g.,
Isaiah 24:5; 29:13; Jeremiah 8:5–9; Ezekiel 22:26; Hosea 4:6–7). This verse is not
simply a condemnation of Jews for forgetting the tenets of Judaism; it is also a
warning to Muslims that this is how human beings often treat revelation. In this
vein, the Prophet once warned his community that many calamities would befall
Muslims when religious understanding had been lost and falsified. When a
Companion asked him how that could happen when Muslims would continue to
Teach the Quran generation after generation, the Prophet replied, “May your mother
weep for you! Do you not see these Jews and these Christians? They read the Torah
and the Gospel but do not act in accord with them.” Another hadith states, “There
will soon come upon the people a time in which nothing of the Quran remains save
its trace and nothing of Islam remains save its name; their mosques will be full,
though they will be devoid of guidance. Their scholars are the worst people under
the sky; from them strife will emerge and spread.” For further development of this
theme as it pertains to Jews and Christians in the Quran, see 2:75; 5:41, 65–69.

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6 Say, “O you who are Jews! If you claim that you are
friends unto God apart from [other] people, then long for
death, if you are truthful.”

6 According to this verse, if the Jews are indeed favored by God above
others, then they should prefer the Hereafter to the life of this world (JJ).
Long for death (cf. 2:94) indicates that those who are sure of their standing before God
would not fear the coming of death, but would welcome it, or that those who truly
believe long to meet God, as in a hadith, “Whosoever desires to meet God, God
desires to meet him, and whosoever abhors meeting God, God abhors to meet him.”

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But they will never long for it due to that which their hands have sent forth. And God knows the wrongdoers.

That which their hands have sent forth is understood as a reference to the Jews’ evil deeds, especially their denial of the prophethood of Muhammad (JJ) and distortion of the scriptures (see 4:47; 5:13, 41; R). The implication is that they are subtly aware of what awaits them in the next life for their transgressions and thus fear death. Elsewhere the judgment wrongdoers receive in the next life is said to result from that which their hands have sent forth (2:95; 4:62; 28:47; 30:36; 42:48; see also 5:80; 18:57; 36:12; 78:40), as does the evil that befalls them in this life.

Say, “Truly the death from which you flee will surely meet you; then you shall be returned to the Knower of the Unseen and the seen, and He will inform you of that which you used to do.”

In commenting upon this verse, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī mentions human beings of four different dispositions with regard to death. There are those who are engrossed with this world, so that remembering death only increases their distance from God, as in 21:1: For mankind, their reckoning draws nigh, while they turn away heedless. Such people will have an unfortunate end because, as the Prophet has said, “Whosoever abhors meeting with God, God abhors the meeting with him.” Then there are those who are penitent, who do not abhor death, but fear the meeting with God because they are aware of their deficiencies and know that they will be held accountable for their sins. They thus busy themselves with preparing for death. Beyond this there are those with spiritual knowledge (al-ʿārifūn), who remember death constantly and yearn for it as a lover yearns for the meeting with the Beloved. Last, there are those of the highest spiritual rank, who yearn for neither death nor life but only for what pleases their Lord (Iḥyāʾ, Kitāb Dhikr al-mawt, 4:391); see the essay “Death, Dying, and the Afterlife in the Quran.” In this context, that God is Knower of the Unseen and the seen indicates that the intentions behind actions cannot be hidden from God. God then informs all human beings of the true nature of what they did while on this earth and requites those who do what is good with good
and those who do what is evil with what their actions merit (Ṭ). This is one of several verses where it is said that at the Final Judgment, God will “inform” people about their actions in this life; see also 5:14, 105; 6:60, 108, 159; 9:94, 105; 10:23; 24:64; 29:8; 31:15, 23; 39:7; 41:50; 58:6–7; 64:7; 75:13.

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9. “O you who believe! When you are called to the congregational prayer, hasten to the remembrance of God and leave off trade. That is better for you, if you but knew.

The day of the congregational prayer was also market day in Madinah; hence the Muslims are called to leave off trade during the time of the prayer. In Islam the day of the congregational prayer is not understood as a Sabbath day of rest as in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Thus the injunction to leave off trade does not apply to the entire day, but only to the period of time during which the congregational prayer is held. This verse is connected to the previous verses in that those who flee death do so out of preference for the attractions of this world; so God guides the believers to what will benefit them in the Hereafter, the remembrance of God (R), as that is a commerce that will never perish (35:29). Hasten renders asʿaw, which can also mean “endeavor,” indicating that one should leave off worldly endeavors for a time and focus upon religious endeavors, as in a ḥadīth, “When you come to prayer do not come while you are endeavoring [for this world], but come to it while you are at peace (ʿalaykum al-sakīnah)” (Q, R). In this sense, hasten or “endeavor” can refer to both the attitude in one’s heart and one’s deeds (Q, T), indicating that one should prepare for the congregational prayer outwardly by performing the ablutions and purifying one’s clothing and inwardly through humility (Q).

According to al-Qurṭubī, Asʿad ibn Zurārah (d. 1/623) and Muṣʿab ibn ʿUmayr (d. 3/625), who had been among the first Madinans to embrace Islam, began the practice of the congregational prayer so that Muslims would have a day for prayer and remembrance like the Jews and Christians. The Friday congregational prayer was thus begun by the Helpers in Madinah before the migration of the Prophet, then institutionalized by the Prophet when he arrived in Madinah, and later given Divine sanction in these verses. The Prophet first led the Friday congregational prayer himself during his migration to Madinah; he had stopped in Qubāʾ, just south of Madinah, for twelve days, then set out for Madinah on a Friday. When the time for prayer came, he prayed with the people in a seasonal riverbed that they used as a mosque. It was here that he delivered the first congregational sermon (khuṭbah; Q).
And when the prayer is completed, disperse throughout the land and seek the Bounty of God, and remember God much, that haply you may prosper.”

Disperse throughout the land is not a command, but a statement indicating permissibility (Q, R, T). Seek the Bounty of God can mean that people may now engage in commerce or that they should seek knowledge (Q). Ibn ʿAbbās is reported to have said that this injunction is not to disperse in order to seek worldly things, but rather to call upon the sick, attend funerals (which are often held after the Friday congregational prayer), and visit one’s brothers in God (Q, Sy, T). And remember God much implies at all times and in all that is done, that haply you may prosper in both this world and the Hereafter (Aj).

And when they see some commerce or diversion, they scatter toward it and leave thee standing. Say, “That which is with God is better than diversion and commerce; and God is the best of providers.”

According to a ḥadīth, the Prophet was delivering a sermon during the Friday congregational prayer when a caravan arrived from Syria. Many people left the mosque during his sermon to attend to the caravan until only twelve people remained. Then this verse was revealed (JJ, Q, T). This verse thus affirms the precedence of the prayer over commerce. Before this event the Prophet reportedly used to perform the Friday congregational prayer before delivering the sermon. But after that he would perform the prayer after the sermon (Q), as this would ensure that people would stay for both the sermon and the prayer. This is the practice that Muslims follow to this day. That which is with God is understood to mean the reward for performing the congregational prayer or that the provision that God will give those who attend the congregational prayer is better than what they would have attained through commerce (Q). Since God is the best of providers (cf. 5:114; 22:58; 23:72; 34:39), believers should hasten to Him and seek provision from Him rather than from worldly activities, knowing that the provision given by God will not pass them by (Aj).