

# DAY 19

**ANSWER:** Ma'arib (a city in the country of Yemen, three miles away from its capital, San'a')

## **SŪRAH SABA': VERSES 15-19**

**There was indeed a sign for (the community of) Saba' in their home-land: two gardens, on the right and on the left. "Eat of the provision from your Lord, and be grateful to Him-- (You have) a good city, and a Most-Forgiving Lord." [15]**

**Then they turned away. So We released over them the flood of the dam, and replaced their two gardens with two gardens having fruits of bitter taste, and tamarisk and some of the lot-trees. [16]**

**Thus We punished them because of their ungratefulness. And We do not give (such a) punishment but to the ungrateful. [17]**

**And We had made towns to be seen between them and between the towns in which We had placed Our blessings, and had measured the journey between them: "Travel along them a t nights and days peacefully." [18]**

**Then they said, "Our Lord, make (the phases of) our journeys more distant." And they wronged themselves, therefore We turned them into stories and tore them into pieces. Surely in this, there are signs for everyone who is ever- patient, fully grateful. [19]**

## **COMMENTARY**

In previous verses, warning was given to those who denied prophethood and the Day of Judgment and failed to realize that the power of Allah Ta'ālā was most perfect. Reference was then made to miracles shown at the hands of past prophets and mention was made of the events relating to Sayyidnā Dāwūd 'alayhis salām and Sayyidnā Sulaymān 'alayhis salām. Now the text mentions the limitless blessings bestowed on the people of Saba' who were later punished because of their ungratefulness.

### **The people of Saba' and the particular blessings of Allah upon them**

Ibn Kathīr has said that Saba' is the title of the kings and citizens of Yemen. Tababi'ah (plural of *tubba'*) who ruled this country were these very people of Saba', and Queen Bilquīs who has been mentioned along with Sayyidnā Sulaymān 'alayhis salām in Sūrah An-Naml was also from among these people. Allah Ta'ālā had opened the doors of His blessing on them providing their state with all conceivable comforts. Against these blessings they were asked to believe in one God and obey His commandments and thus be grateful for blessings bestowed on them. For a certain period of time, these people stayed straight with their mandate and kept enjoying ease and comforts. Then came the time when they became so engrossed in the good things of life they were blessed with that they started touching the limits of negligence, even

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denial. Then Allah Ta'ālā sent thirteen of His prophets to warn them. They did their best to admonish them and bring them round to the straight path. But, these people kept persisting with their attitude of negligence. Then came the consequence. A flood was sent over them, a punishment that devastated their once flourishing city of gardens. (Reported by Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq - Ibn Kathīr)

Imām Aḥmad reports from Sayyidnā Ibn 'Abbās radī'allāhu 'anhu that someone asked the Holy Prophet ﷺ if Saba' mentioned in the Qur'ān was the name of a man, woman or some country. The Holy Prophet ﷺ said: This is the name of a man who had ten sons among his progeny. Out of these, six remained settled in Yemen and four migrated to Syria. The names of those who lived in Yemen were: Mudhhiḡ, Kindah, Azd, Ash'ari, Anmar, Himyar (from the progeny of these six sons, there came to be six tribes known by those very names).

And the names of those who settled in Syria are: Lakham, Judham, 'Amilah, Ghassan (tribes coming in their lines were known by the same names). This narration has also been reported by Ḥāfiẓ Imām Ibn 'Abd-ul-Barr in his book, *al-Qasd wa al-Amam bi Ma'arifati Ansab-il- 'Arab wa-l-'Ajam*.

According to Ibn Kathīr's research with reference to scholars of genealogy, these ten sons were not directly from the loins of Saba', rather, they were born in the third or fourth generation of Saba'. After that, their tribes spread out in Syria and Yemen and got to be known by their very names. And the real name of Saba' was 'Abd-ush-Shams. His genealogical tree becomes established by the name Saba' 'Abd Shams son of Yashhab son of Ya'rub son of Qaḥṭan. Historians write that Saba' 'Abd Shams had, during this time, given the glad tidings of the coming of the Last Prophet, Sayyidnā Muḥammad al-Muṣṭafā ﷺ. It is possible that he came to know about it from early books of the Torah and Injīl, or from astrologers or soothsayers. He has also composed some lines of poetry in Arabic in which he has mentioned his coming and wished to have been during his time and been of some help to him. Then, he has also exhorted his people to believe in him and support him.

As for the statement of the Ḥadīth quoted above in which it is said that out of the ten sons of Saba', six settled in Yemen and four went towards Syria, this event relates to the time after the coming of the punishment of flood against them which means that these people had scattered towards different directions and cities at the time the flood came. (Ibn Kathīr) Quoting Qushairi, al-Qurṭubī has reported that the period of the people of Saba' is after Sayyidnā 'Isā 'alayhis salām and before the coming of the Holy Prophet ﷺ, and thus it falls in the period known as: (*fatrah* or gap)

### **The 'flood of the dam' (sayl al-'arim) and the Dam of Ma'arib (the sadd of Ma'arib)**

The word: ('arim) in: **(So We sent to them the flood of the dam - 16)** carries several recognized meanings in terms of Arabic lexical usage and the scholars of tafsīr have explained this verse in terms of

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every such meaning. But, the meaning more in consonance with the context of the Qur'ān is the one that appears in the Arabic lexicons like Qāmūs, Şiḥaḥ of Jawhari and others, that is, '*arim*' means a dam that is made to block water. Sayyidnā Ibn 'Abbās raḍī'allāhu 'anhu has also given the meaning of '*arim*' as dam. (Qurṭubī)

The episode regarding the 'flood of the dam' referred to in this verse, according to the statement of Ibn Kathīr, is that in the country of Yemen, three miles away from its capital, San'a', there was a city by the name of Ma'rib settled in which the people of Saba' used to live. The city was located in between two mountains. Water from rains used to come from the two mountains, leaving the city inundated. The city had the reputation of being a target of such deluges. Rulers of the city (of those, Queen Bilqīs has been mentioned particularly) built a strong and fortified dam between these two mountains, a dam that would remain unaffected by the flow of water. This dam stopped the serial surges of flooded water that entered from the two mountains and turned the place into a great big storage of water. Even the water from rains falling on the mountains started flowing in there. Provided inside this dam, there were three gates at appropriate levels, so that this storage of water could be released systematically for people of the city to irrigate their farms and gardens. To accomplish this objective, they would first open the topmost gate and use water as needed. When no water remained at that level, they would open the gate in the middle and after that came the turn of the third and last gate until came the time of rains next year, and the whole dam would stand filled to the brim all over again. Then, engineered and built under the dam, there was a huge big tank in which twelve outlets of water were provided to supply water to twelve canals serving different parts of the city with water flowing in all canals uniformly and was used to take care of various needs of the city. (Maẓharī)

The slopes of the two mountains to the right and left of the city were landscaped with rows of gardens fed by canals of water. These gardens stood adjacent to each other in two continuous rows by the slopes of the mountains. Though many in number, but the Qur'ān identified them as: (*jannatān*: Two gardens) because it has taken all the gardens in one row to be one due to their proximity, and then all the gardens on the other side as the other garden.

Trees and fruits of all sorts used to grow in these gardens so abundantly that, according to the statement of the leading early authority, Qatāḍah, and others, a woman would walk with an empty basket perched on her head, and it would automatically get filled with fruits falling off from the trees without the least need to make use of her hands. (Ibn Kathīr)

The second sentence of **verse 15: (Eat of the provision from your Lord, and be grateful to Him-- (You have) a good city, and a Most-Forgiving Lord - 34:15)** means that Allah Ta'ālā had ordered them through His prophets that they should make use of their extended means of livelihood provided by Allah

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Ta'ālā and continue to be grateful to Him through their good deeds and unfailing obedience to Divine injunctions, for He had made that city of theirs a really good city. It had a moderate climate without any extremes of heat or chill, so healthy, clean and bracing - to the extent that there was no trace of any hurting life forms like mosquitoes, flies, fleas, snakes and scorpions anywhere throughout the city. In fact, when travellers from outside would reach the city - having lice or other harmful parasites in their clothes - these would die off naturally as soon as they arrived there (Ibn Kathīr)

At the end of the **verse (15)**, by adding: **(a good city)** along with **(a Most Forgiving Lord)**, reference to divine blessings has been made all the more perfect by suggesting that 'this good life is not restricted to the life of the present world, in fact, should you remain consistent with your gratefulness, the promise of greater and more everlasting blessings of the Hereafter also holds good. The reason is simple. He is the creator and master-dispenser of all blessings and the one who sustains you - and should you, at one or the other time, inadvertently fail to be grateful or betray by negligence or shortcoming, Allah Ta'ālā is a great forgiver too and will forgive your shortcomings.'

In **verse 16**, it was said: **(Then they turned away. So We released over them the flood of the dam)**. In other words, 'when the people of Saba' flouted the commandments of Allah through their contumacy and rebellion, despite having such blessings and despite having been warned by the noble prophets, We released a flood from the dam over them.' We already know that '*arim*' means a dam. This flood was attributed to '*arim*' for the reason that this very '*arim*', a source of security and prosperity, was transformed by Allah Ta'ālā into a source of calamity for them. According to an account of the event given by Sayyidnā Ibn 'Abbās raḍī'allāhu 'anhu, Wahb Ibn Munabbih, Qatādah, Daḥḥak and other early Tafsīr authorities, when Allah Ta'ālā decided to undo the dam of Ma'rib ('*arim*') and punish and destroy these people through a flood, blind rats were set upon this great dam, who weakened its foundation and made it hollow. When came the time of rains and the flooding of water, the pressure of water broke through the already weakened foundation creating gaps and crevices in the dam. Ultimately, the water collected behind the dam ran over the entire valley in which this city of Ma'rib was located. Houses collapsed. Trees were uprooted. The water feeding the twin rows of gardens by the mountain slopes was dried up.

It appears in the report of Wahb Ibn Munabbih that it was already predicted in the books of these people that rats will destroy this dam. When people saw rats near the dam, they were alerted by the danger. As a defensive measure, a large number of cats were released under the dam in the hope that they would stop the rats from coming close to the dam.

But, when came the divine decree, the rats overcame the cats and entered into the foundation of the dam.

Then there are historical narratives that also say that as soon as some smart and far-sighted people saw the

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rats, they decided to leave the place and move to somewhere else. In fact, they made the necessary arrangements and got out of there one by one. Others stayed. But, once came the flood, they too shifted. However, there were many who were swallowed by the flood. In short, the whole city was destroyed. Some details about residents of the city who had migrated to towns in other countries have been given in the Ḥadīth of the Musnad of Aḥmad appearing earlier. Six of their tribes were scattered in Yemen, four in Syria and some of these very tribes came to be the forerunners of the larger population of Madīnah-at-Ṭaiyyibah. Related details appear in books of history.

What happened to the twin rows of gardens after the coming of flood and the destruction of the city? This has been stated in the second sentence of **verse 16** as: **(and replaced their two gardens with two gardens having fruits of bitter taste, and Tamarisk and some of the lot-trees)**, that is, their trees that yielded fruit having good taste were replaced by trees that bore fruit having an evil taste. As for the word: (*Khamṭ*), most commentators take it to mean the arak (a pungent, thorny desert tree). The lexicographer, Jawharī says that there is a kind of arak which bears some fruit and which is eaten. But, the fruit that grew on this tree was bad in taste. And 'Abū 'Ubaidah raḍī'allāhu 'anhu said that every tree that is thorny and of bitter taste is called: (*khamṭ*). The next word: (*athl*) means a kind of tree that is also known in Arabic as: (*ṭurfā'*) according to the majority of commentators and both are generally equated with tamarisk in English. No fruit it bears is worth eating. Some commentators said that '*athl*' in the sense of samr (Mimosa, Egyptian thorn) or babul or kikar, (Acacia Arabica found in the sub-continent) is a thorny tree the fruit of which is fed to goats.

The word: (*sidr*) means beri or ber in Urdu and is translated in English as the lote-fruit or lotus tree in English. Sidr is of two kinds. The one planted on farms bears fruits of pleasant taste (something close to crunchy pears) and carries more of fruits and less of thorns. The other kind is wild and grows in the form of thorny shrubs and trees with more thorns and less fruits that are bitter as well. At this place, the use of the word: (*qalīl*: little, some) along with (*sidr*: bair or lote) perhaps indicates that this too was wild which bears less fruit and is bitter. Allah knows best.

The next **verse: (Thus We punished them because of their ungratefulness.- 34:17)** means that they were punished because they committed *kufṛ*. Kufṛ has two meanings. It could mean ungratefulness and it could mean the denial of the true faith. At this place, both meanings can be applied because they did both. They were ungrateful and they rejected the thirteen prophets sent to them.

### Special Note

There are two things here that are likely to raise a question. It has been said earlier that Allah Ta'ālā had sent thirteen prophets to the people of Saba'. Then, it has also been stated above that the event relating to these people and the flood of '*arim* or dam transpired during the interim period after Sayyidnā 'Īsā



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'alayhis salām and before Sayyidnā Muḥammad al-Muṣṭafa ﷺ called the period of *fatrah* or gap. During this period, according to the majority of Muslim scholars, simply no prophet was sent which is the reason why it is called the period of *fatrah* or gap. If so, the question is, how can the coming of these thirteen prophets be held as correct? An answer to this appears in Rūḥ ul-Ma'ānī. There it is said that from the event of the flood of the dam ('*arim*) being in the period of *fatrah* or gap, it does not become necessary that these prophets too came during that very period. It is possible that the coming of the prophets to these people dates back prior to the period of *fatrah* or gap while their contumacy and hostility to faith may have increased during the period of *fatrah* whereupon the punishment of the flood from the dam was sent upon them in the period of *fatrah*. Allah knows best.

The word: (*kafūr*) in the second sentence of **verse 17: (And We do not give (such a) punishment but to the ungrateful - 34:17)** is an emphatic form of: (*kāfir*) which means one who is very ungrateful or is an absolute disbeliever. As such, the verse could be taken to mean: 'We do not punish anyone other than the one who is very ungrateful or is an absolute disbeliever.' This, quite obviously, is counter to all those verses of the Qur'ān and sound aḥādīth which prove that Muslim sinners will also receive the punishment of Jahannam (Hell) to the measure of their deed - even though, finally, once they have gone through their punishment, they will be taken out of the Jahannam because of their 'Imān or faith and admitted into Jannah (Paradise). To resolve this difficulty, it has been said that it does not signify punishment in some absolute sense, instead, it means a mass punishment as was sent over the people of Saba'. This one is particular to disbelievers. Such punishment does not befall Muslim sinners. (Rūḥ ul-Ma'ānī)

This finds support in the saying of a Ta'bai Ibn Khiyarah. He said: (*The punishment of sin is that the sinning person becomes sluggish in acts of worship ('ibādah) his economic conditions becomes straitened, and enjoyment (itself) becomes hard to bear ...*) Ibn Khiyarah explained the latter part of his statement by saying, '*When one is blessed with something ḥalāl he can enjoy, there comes one or the other reason which spoils this enjoyment*'. (Ibn Kathīr) This tells us that the punishments given to Muslim sinners are of this nature. No open punishment hits them either from the heavens or from beneath the earth. That is particular to disbelievers.

And sage Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said: (*Great is Allah and He said it right: The punishment of an evil deed exactly in proportion to it is not given to anyone but the kafūr' - someone very ungrateful or absolutely disbelieving*). (Ibn Kathīr) This is because a believer, who is no *kafūr*, receives some concession with respect to his or her sins as well.

An interpretation of the sense of this verse appears in Rūḥ-ul-Ma'ānī with reference to Kashf. There it is said that the statement is made in its real sense. Punishment as punishment is given only to a disbeliever and whatever pain is caused to a believing sinner through things like fire is only an apparent punishment.

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In reality, the purpose is to cleanse him from sin. This is like heating up gold in a furnace. The purpose is to remove its unwanted sediments. This holds true in the case of a believer as well. If he too is put in Jahannam as a consequence of some sin of his, it will be to burn out those elements of his body that have grown on him from consuming what is haram. Once this is taken care of, he is ready to go to Jannah and it does not take much time that he is taken out of Jahannam (Hell) and admitted into the Paradise (Jannah).

In **verse 18**, it was said: **(And We had made towns to be seen between them and between the towns in which We had placed Our blessings, and had measured the journey between them: “Travel along them at nights and days peacefully. – 18”)** This verse mentions yet another blessing Allah Ta'ālā had bestowed on the people of Saba'. Then it goes on to refer to the ungratefulness of those people who acted ignorantly and chose to ask for a reversal of this blessing by praying that the thing be made harder and more challenging for them. The statement: **(towns in which We had placed Our blessings)** in this verse probably means the rural areas of the country of Syria, because the reference to the descent of mercy in several verses of the Qur'ān is specifically related to that country. The sense of the verse is that Allah Ta'ālā had made their travels to the towns of Syria very easy for them during their trips they had to undertake for their business. Given the conditions that prevailed in the world of that time, the travel distance between the city of Ma'arib and the country of Syria was fairly long with routes being uneven. In view of this difficulty, Allah Ta'ālā had blessed the people of Saba' by having made for their convenience a series of towns at intermittent distances all the way from the city of Ma'arib to the country of Syria.

These habitations were close by the main road, therefore, these were called: **(had measured the journey between them)**. These habitations appearing one after the other were a source of convenience for weary travellers. If a traveller from one of them left home in the morning, he had the choice of reaching some other town on his way, stop there, have lunch or take rest as he wished and could leave after Zuhr and reach the next stage by sundown and spend the night there. The sentence: **(Travel along them at nights and days peacefully - 18)** means that these habitations were made at distances that were balanced and equal so that they would reach from one to the other within a fixed time.

In the last sentence of **verse 18: (Travel along them at nights and days peacefully.)**, mention has been made of a third blessing bestowed on the people of Saba'. It means that these settlements were located at such equal and balanced distances that a traveller would be able to cover them in almost identical time. Then the routes were secure. Theft and highway robbery were unknown. One could travel at any time of the night or day without any hesitation or concern.

**Verse 19** opens with the statement: **(Then they said, “Our Lord, make (the phases of) our journeys more distant.” And they wronged themselves, therefore We turned them into stories and tore them into pieces - 34:19).** It means that so unjust were these people that they would go to the extent of

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dismissing the very blessing of Allah placed there to eliminate the hardships of travel, rather went deeper into their lack of recognition and straight ungratefulness by coming forward to pray that their Lord makes the distances they cover in travel longer - hoping that the habitations do not appear at such close distances, and wishing to see some hard areas of a forest or wilderness which ask for some rough traversing as well. Their case was similar to that of the Banī Isrā'īl. They used to get the excellent sustenance of mann and salwa, all free of cost. Bored with it, they asked Allah to replace it with vegetables and greens. In return for their ungratefulness and lack of recognition for blessings, Allah Ta'ālā released the punishment on them that has been called the flood of the dam earlier. The ultimate consequence of this very punishment has been stated in this verse in strong words, that is, they were virtually expunged from this world leaving nothing but idle tales of their wealth and luxury.

The word: (*mazzaqnahum*) is a derivation from: (*tamzīq*) which means to tear and scatter (a people) or to destroy (a kingdom). The sense is that some of the inhabitants of this city of Ma'arib were destroyed on the spot and some others were scattered in a manner that small groups of them spread out to various countries. This destruction and scattering away of the people of Saba' became proverbial in Arabia. On such occasions, there is an Arab idiom: that is, these people got scattered away as were the luxury-laden people of the Saba'.

Ibn Kathīr and other commentators have reported a long narrative about a soothsayer who had come to know about the coming of the punishment of the flood a little before it actually did. He made a swift and unique plan. First of all, he sold his entire property. When he had the money in his hands, he told his people about the coming flood and exhorted them to get out of the area immediately. He also told them that those who intend to shift to a safe far-away place should go to 'Amman, and those who have a taste for liquor, pita bread and fruits should move to Busra in the country of Syria, and those who would settle for rides that go through mud, come handy during the time of famine and prove efficient when dashing on a journey, should go to Yathrib (Madīnah) which abounds in dates. His people followed his advice. The tribe of Azd went towards 'Amman, the Ghassān to Busra in the country of Syria and the Aws and Khazraj and Banū 'Uthmān started off in the direction of Yathrib, the home of date palms. After reaching Batn Murr, Banū 'Uthmān liked the place and settled right there. Because of this divergence, Banū 'Uthmān were given the title of Khuza'ah. Batn Murr is closer to Makkah al-Mukarramah where they had chosen to settle down. As for Aws and Khazraj, they reached Yathrib and stayed there. After the long narrative in Ibn Kathīr, the same detail about people scattering to different places has been reported on the authority of Sa'id from Qatādah from al-Sha'bi. Thus, says Ibn Kathīr, these people of Saba' were shredded into pieces, people who have been mentioned in: **(We torn them into pieces)**.

The concluding statement in **verse 19: (Surely in this, there are signs for everyone who is ever-patient, fully grateful - 34:19)** means that there is a great sign and lesson in the rise and fall and in the



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radical change that hit the life cycle of the people of Saba' for a person who is enduring and grateful at its best, that is, when faced with some distress or pain, one observes patience over it, and when blessed with things of comfort, one is readily grateful for it. This is a lifestyle in which one always comes out a winner. No matter what the state of his life is, he ends up in nothing but pluses, profits and gains. So says a Ḥadīth of Sayyidnā Abū Hurairah raḍī'allāhu 'anhu appearing in the Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī and Muslim where the Holy Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said:

*'Certainly unique is the state of life a true believer is always in. No matter what Allah decrees for him, it turns for him into nothing but good and profitable. If he is blessed in one way or the other or has the desire of his heart fulfilled, he thanks Allah for it and it becomes good and beneficial for him in the Hereafter. And if he suffers from some pain or distress, he bears it with considered patience for which he is rewarded in a big way and thus, this suffering too, becomes good and beneficial for him' - from Ibn Kathīr.*

Some commentators have taken the word: (*Ṣabbār*: very patient) in the general sense of ṣabr or patience - which includes remaining firm in all acts requiring obedience as well as abstaining from sins. In the light of this tafsīr or explanation, a true believer remains comprehensively attuned to Ṣabr (patience) and shukr (gratitude) under all conditions and then, for that matter, every sabr is shukr and every shukr is sabr. Allah knows best.

This concludes the commentary for Day 19.