Religious-minded people, guided by faith, are concerned over what exists beyond the visible world. Most often too they regard their lot in a future state as dependent on the kind of life they live on earth. Bliss in the hereafter is seen as a complete fulfillment surpassing all earthly happiness. Activities of this life, then, would have significance especially because they lead to final salvation.

Various religious traditions give more or less importance to the present life. Greater stress on the hereafter would allow little independent meaning to science, economic pursuits or the family. Those who give themselves completely to such concerns would then be judged to have missed the true purpose of life. The world religions today, however, generally see fulfillment as attainable at least in part within the limits of life on earth. Such partial fulfillment would be found in peace of mind and in some kind of active sharing in a universal design for mankind.

Islam, with its strong emphasis on the hereafter, also sees a purpose in human life. But, like other revealed religions, it does not make salvation its primary and exclusive aim. Religion must also lead man to give God the service and worship due to Him. The Qur'ān or book of sacred writings regarded by Muslims as revelations made to Muhammad considers the present life of man on earth under two aspects, (I) as a probationary period of definite duration and (II) as the sum total of ephemeral good things that this period offers for man's enjoyment. The ordinary term for the present life is al-hayātu d-dunyā, literally, "the nearer (or inferior) life."²


I. A LIFETIME OF DEFINITE DURATION ALLOWING MAN TO MERIT REWARD OR PUNISHMENT

(a) Two texts promulgated at Mecca promise a reward in the hereafter for those who have professed Islam and done good works throughout their earthly sojourn.

7: 32/30 \textsuperscript{3} \ldots These (good things which God provides) on Resurrection Day will be exclusively for those who, during this present life, have believed.

39: 10/13 \ldots Those (believing servants of God) who do good in this world will have good (in the world to come), and God's earth is wide. Truly the patient will receive their reward without calculation.

The Muslim commentator Tabari\textsuperscript{4} gives two interpretations to the phrase "will have good" in the second of these passages, namely, "good in the present life" and "good in the hereafter," with the former in first place. Other commentators (Zamakhshari, Baiqawi, and Razi\textsuperscript{5}) also see the same two possible meanings, but give "good in the hereafter" first mention. The Tafs\textsuperscript{ir} al-Jalalain\textsuperscript{6} gives "good in Paradise" as the only interpretation.

That good works merit a reward in the hereafter is confirmed by the lament of the wicked on Judgment Day at the expiration of the definite time of testing.

89: 24/25 \ldots O would that I had stored up (good works) for my life (hereafter). On that day no one will inflict His (kind of) punishment.

God will make provision in this life for His messengers and those who accept their preaching. His help will also ensure them His favor on Judgment Day. Even to unbelievers He gives their means of subsistence here on earth.

40: 51/54 We will surely help Our messengers and those who have believed. (This We will do) both in this present life and on the Day on

3. The Qur'an is cited according to the verse numbers of the standard Egyptian edition, Flügel's, where they differ, being put after the diagonal.
which the witnesses arise.

43: 32/31 . . . It is We who have portioned out their (the unbelievers') subsistence in this present life and have raised some of them above others in rank that some may take others in servitude. But the mercy of your Lord is better than what they amass.

Pharaoh’s magicians also testify that their master’s power to reward or punish is limited to the definite term of this life, whereas God’s extends also to the hereafter.

20: 72/75 . . . So pass what judgment you will. You will decide only (what belongs to) this present life. We believe in our Lord, . . . for God is better (as a rewarer) and more lasting (as a punisher).

(b) Just as good done in the present life merits a reward in the hereafter, so any kind of evil done in this world is punished both in this life and the next.

52: 45ff So leave them (the unbelievers) until they encounter their Day, on which they shall faint out of fear, the Day on which their craftiness will profit them nothing and they shall not be helped. But those who have done wrong shall bear a punishment on this side of that (Day). . . . So patiently await the Judgment of your Lord. . . .

Tabarî and the other commentators understand the phrase “punishment on this side of that (Day)” as misfortunes which the wicked suffer in the present life before the Last Judgment like famine, defeat in battle, and the loss of their wealth and their offspring.

Special punishments are promised to specific kinds of wrongdoing, such as that committed by those who dispossess and kill their kinsfolk or by those who avert people from Islam. These merit disgrace in this present life and a fearful punishment on Resurrection Day.

2: 85/79 You are those who killed your own (kinsfolk) and expelled a group of them from their houses. . . . But those of you who do that will have no recom pense but degradation in this present life and on Resurrection Day, they will be handed over to more severe torment. . . .

22: 8f Among the people is one who disputes about God without knowledge or guidance or an enlightening Scripture, behaving proudly, that he may lead (others) astray from God’s path. During this life he will have ignominy and on Resurrection Day We will make him taste the punishment of burning.

"Igynominy in the present life" is a Medinan threat and is an indication of the date of the verses in which it occurs.  

A third kind of specific wrongdoing that merits punishment both in this life and the hereafter is disordered attachment to wealth or children.

9: 55 Do not let their wealth or their offspring awaken your admiration. God wishes only to punish them by means of these things during this present life. He intends that their souls may depart while they are unbelievers.

The commentators disagree as to how God can punish unbelievers during this life by means of wealth and children. Tabarî admits the difference of opinion and opts for a punishment only in the hereafter. Zamakhsharî, Baidâwî, Râzî, and the Jalâls accept the text as it stands. God will punish unbelievers by means of these things during their lives on earth, they say, because of the difficulties they will have to suffer in keeping their wealth and raising their children. Râzî also argues that the dearer an object like wealth or offspring is to people, the more they suffer at having to lose it.

Worship offered to idols during one’s life on earth will also be punished in the hereafter. Abraham accuses his people of sinning in this way in order to promote friendly relations with one another. In the hereafter their punishment will be mutual hostility and Hellfire.

29: 25/24 He (Abraham) said: You have adopted idols apart from God in order to foster mutual friendship in the present life. Then on Resurrection Day you will deny and curse one another and your abode will be Hellfire.

Another passage rebukes the Israelites of the time of Moses for

their worship of the Golden Calf. But the text is really aimed at Muhammad’s Jewish contemporaries, as appears from its second part:9

7: 152f/151f As for those who took the Calf for themselves anger from their Lord and humiliation (overtook them) in this present life. . . . But to those who do evil, then afterwards repent and believe, afterwards too your Lord will be forgiving and merciful.

The “anger from their Lord” Rāzī understands as punishment in the next life in addition to humiliation to be suffered here on earth.

A final illustration of punishment inflicted in this life for idolatry is the story of Sāmirī, an Israelite present at the making of the Golden Calf. Moses is said to have condemned him to wander about unceasingly, saying to all he met, “Do not touch me.” Probably the story has some connection with Hosea 8: 5 where the worship of the Calf is connected with the Samaritans.10

20: 97 He (Moses) said: Depart, for you must say during your (whole) life, “Do no touch me” . . . .

(c) During the definite time of life on earth given to each person certain temporal benefits can be enjoyed. Again and again, the Qur’ān stresses the ephemeral character of such goods — whether they be luxuries (23: 33/34), wealth and children (18: 46/44), comforts (28: 61) or, more specifically, gold and silver, fine horses, cattle, and land (3: 14/12) — in a word the “flower” (20: 131) of life on earth.11

The Qur’ān does not take the optimistic viewpoint of Genesis in regard to the good things of this life — “And God saw that it was good.” Rather it sees earthly realities from their eschatological aspect — as means to be used to win a favorable judgment on Resurrection Day. Little is said about the goodness of human life and

10. Ibid. 335 on 20: 85/87.
11. In addition to the texts here cited, see 10: 23/24, 70/71, 88, 98; 18: 28/27; 24: 33; 42: 36/34; and 46: 20/19.
its material supports; more often they are seen as endangering man’s salvation and alienating him from God.

10: 88 Moses said: O our Lord, You have given Pharaoh and his princes adornment and riches in this present life. O our Lord, (this has been done) that they may err from Your path. . . .

46: 20/19 When the disbelievers are exposed to Hellfire, (they will be told): You squandered your goods during your life on earth and used them to enjoy yourselves. So now you will be recompensed with the punishment of humiliation. . . .

(d) Disbelievers deny any kind of human existence beyond the limits of the present life. For them the hereafter is an illusion; man’s life ends with bodily death. In passages in which the scoffers of Noah’s time reject him as their prophet, as the Meccan Quraish rejected Muhammad, this denial is explicit.

23: 37/39 There is nothing except our present life. We die and we live, and we shall not be raised to life again.

The pagans of Mecca twice repeat this denial in almost the same words.

45: 24/23 They say: There is nothing but our present life. We die and we live; only (the passage of) time destroys us. (See also 6: 29.)

The strange inversion, “We die and we live,” where the opposite order might be expected, has puzzled the commentators. They suggest several explanations, but “some of us die and some (begin to) live by being born” is the only one on which all agree.¹²

Moreover, their attitude of disbelief makes their good works valueless in God’s sight. This thought is expressed in a rather confused way in a Medinan address before the Battle of Uhud.

3: 117/113 What they (disbelievers) expend (in good works — v. 115/111) during this present life is like a wind in which is a frost. This frost strikes and destroys the crop of people who wronged themselves. God has not wronged them, but they wrong themselves.

¹². See Baidawi, Razi, and Tafsir Jalalain on 45: 24/23.
The verse seems to refer to a frost-laden wind that destroyed the unbelievers’ crops on a certain occasion. This destructive storm is now compared to their own disbelief which during this present life cancels the merit of their almsgiving ("what they expend").

A verse which Bell regards as Medinan (even though it occurs in a sura promulgated in the mid-years of Muhammad’s Meccan ministry) looks like a retort to certain people who told Muhammad that he was wasting his time by preaching to them.

18: 103-106 Say (O Muhammad): Shall We tell you those who most lose (the worth of) their works? (Shall We tell you) those whose efforts in this present life (really) are in vain, even though they think they are doing well? It is those who deny the signs of their Lord and their encounter with Him. So their works are worthless and We will give them no credit on Resurrection Day. Hell — that will be their recompense for their disbelief and for their ridiculing My signs and My messengers.

According to the Qur’ān, then, those who are really wasting their time during this life are those who do not add faith in Muhammad and Islam to their good works.

Accordingly, Muhammad is told, any attempt to excuse unbelievers during the period of this present life or to intercede with God on their behalf is useless. He Himself will be the One to judge their guilt on Resurrection Day.

4: 109 You it is who have argued on their behalf in this present life, but who will argue with God on their behalf on Resurrection Day or who will be their defender?

II. A SUM TOTAL OF EPHEMERAL GOODS

In addition to its meaning as a period of definite duration, the present life (al-hayātu d-dunyā) in Arabic signifies "the enjoyments, blessings or good of the present . . . life, worldly . . . prosperity."\(^{13}\) This is also one of its ordinary meanings in English—life: "a condition of power, activity or happiness."\(^{14}\) The Hebrew Bible gives the term connotations even closer to blessings of the

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present life and temporal prosperity, for example: “In the light of a king’s face, there is life and his favor is like the clouds that bring the spring rain” (Prv 16: 15); “The fear of the Lord leads to life and he who has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm” (Prv 19: 23); and “Loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him, . . . that means life to you and length of days” (Dt 30: 20).

(A) EPHEMERAL THINGS HAVE NO REAL VALUE

In this sense of the term the Qur’ānic view of material good is profoundly eschatological: the blessings of this life have no real value in themselves; they are compared to games and playthings, not worth the attention of an earnest believer.

47: 36/38 The present life is only a game and a pastime, but if you believe and fear God, He will give you your recompense and will not ask you for your goods.

Not only are the good things of earthly life valueless, they are also ephemeral and never to be sought by deceit — for example, by treating a Muslim as a non-Muslim in order to be able to rob him.

4: 94/96 O believers, . . . do not say to him who greets you, “You are not a believer,” seeking the frail goods of the present life, for with God is much booty . . . .

Earthly enjoyments are delusive, says the Qur’ān. Death, resurrection, Hell and Heaven — these are the realities.

3: 185/182 Every soul shall taste death; you will have your reward on Resurrection Day. Whoever is removed from the Fire (of Hell) and made to enter Paradise will have triumphed. But the present life is only the enjoyment of delusion. (See also 57: 20.)

The transient character of the good things of this life is twice illustrated by comparing them with rain soaked up as it reaches the ground.

10: 24/25 The present life is like water which We send down from heaven.
Then it is absorbed by the plants of the earth from which men and cattle eat.... (See also 18: 45/43.)

The comparison touches on two points: material goods are God-given, but are as impermanent as the grass of the field.

Since they are impermanent and delusive, they can never be compared with God’s true gifts to His faithful servants.

27: 36 But when he (the messenger of the Queen of Sheba) came to Solomon, he (Solomon) said: Will you present me with riches, even though what (mā) God has given to me is better than what He has given to you? But you are the ones who glory in your gift.

Here the first occurrence of the relative pronoun, “what” (mā) is contrasted with the second. The commentators understand the first to refer to God’s higher endowments of prophethood and kingly dominion given to Solomon and the second to the material wealth or the goods of the present life which are here offered to him as gifts brought by the Queen’s envoy.15

(B) EPHEMERAL GOODS MAY EASILY DECEIVE THE UNWARY

Because the material goods of this present life are transient and delusive, they may easily deceive the unwarly. In two suras of the late Meccan Period these unwary ones are addressed by the vocative, yā ayyuhā n-nās, “O people.” The people here meant are not only the unbelievers of Mecca but the larger group not previously reached by Muhammad’s preaching and whom he hoped to gain as followers.16

31: 33 O men,17... God’s promise is true. So do not let this present life deceive you and do not let the Deceiver (Satan or the present world or the goods of the present life18) deceive you concerning God. (See also 35: 5.)

15. Ba‘dawi and Tafsir al-Jalalain, ad loc.
17. In verse 33/32 the vocative “O men” introduces verses 33/32 and 33/33. The same form of address introduces 35: 5.
18. Lane, Arabic-English Lexicon, 2: 2239, col. 3.
Several verses of the late Meccan and early Medinan Periods tell how the enjoyments of the present life have already led disbelievers astray.

2: 212/208 This present life is dressed up fairly for those who disbelieve, and they laugh at those who believe. But those who fear God will be above them on Resurrection Day. . . .

6: 70/69 Forsake those who take their religion as a joke and an entertainment and whom the present life has deceived. . . . (See also 6: 130; 7: 51/49; and 45: 35/34.)

Deceived by appearances, these disbelievers desire nothing but the material goods of this life, even though on occasion they pretend to scorn them. But the Qur‘ān puts Muhammad on guard against this kind of hypocrisy.

2: 204/200 Someone there is whose talk about the present life will excite your admiration. He calls God to witness what is in his heart, but he is most vehement in opposing (you).

Others openly turn away from Muhammad’s preachments and run after the enjoyments of the present life.

53: 29/30 So shun the one who turns away from Our admonition and wishes nothing but the present life. (See also 28: 79.)

People like this, who are intent only on the passing goods of the present, are destined to suffer in Hell hereafter.

79: 38 As for him who oversteps the bounds and prefers the present life, surely Hell shall be his abode.

God in fact makes a promise to those who are satisfied with the comforts of the present life and look to nothing beyond it. They will be given now what they desire, but Hell will be their lot hereafter.

10: 7f As for those who expect no encounter with Us but are satisfied with the present life . . . Hell will be their abode (in exchange) for what they have been gaining.
17: 18/19 To whomsoever desires the present life (literally: the hastening away) We will, during it, quickly give whatever We will (and) to whom We wish. Then We will appoint Hell for him. He will be exposed to its blaze. ... (See also 11: 15/18 and 33: 28.)

The Qur’ānic evaluation of Man’s sojourn on earth reveals the influence of Syriac Christian monasticism and its great writers of the fourth century, St. Ephrem and Aphraates. Their poems and homilies with their frequent use of apocalyptic material, terrifying descriptions of the Last Day, the Final Judgment, and the tortures of Hell, have left their stamp on the Qur’ān and on Islamic piety. Even the many Qur’ānic references to rabbinic literature and Judeo-Christian thought come in great part through Ephrem and Aphraates who were both well acquainted with rabbinic exegesis. This indebtedness to Syriac monasticism has much to do with the deeply eschatological tone of the Qur’ān.