

SURAH 103 (AL-ASR)

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: The Holy Qur'an | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Rashad Khalifa

OVERVIEW

Surah 103, known as Al-Asr (The Afternoon/The Declining Day), is one of the shortest yet most comprehensive chapters in the Quran regarding Islamic soteriology. Rashad Khalifa's 1978 translation opens with a divine oath 'By the afternoon,' emphasizing the passage of time and the urgency of the human condition. The central thesis is the universal depravity or doomed state of mankind: 'The human being is utterly lost.' This establishes a default trajectory of spiritual failure for the human race. The text then provides a conditional escape clause—an 'exception' to this universal loss. This exception is not granted based on a single attribute but requires a fourfold combination: 1) Belief (Iman), 2) Leading a righteous life (Amal Salih), 3) Exhorting others to uphold the truth, and 4) Exhorting others to be steadfast (Sabr). In the context of Khalifa's 'Quran Alone' theology, this emphasizes that salvation is an active, communal, and moral endeavor, not merely a passive theological assent. For the believer, this text serves as a concise checklist for salvation, linking internal belief inextricably with external ethics and social responsibility.

KEY FIGURES

God (The Speaker/Swearer of the Oath), The Human Being (Al-Insan), The Believers (Those who escape loss)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. UNIVERSAL SPIRITUAL LOSS

Assertion: The default state of all humanity is one of utter loss and ruin.

"[103:002] The human being is utterly lost."

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine aligns closely with the Evangelical understanding of the human condition found in Romans 3:23 ('for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'). Both traditions agree that the 'natural man' is in a state of spiritual deficit and danger. However, the divergence lies in the cause (Original Sin in Christianity vs. Forgetfulness/Ghaflah in Islam) and the remedy.

2. CONDITIONAL SALVATION VIA WORKS

Assertion: Escaping spiritual loss requires a combination of belief, righteous actions, and mutual exhortation.

"[103:003] Except those who believe and lead a righteous life..."

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, 'leading a righteous life' is grammatically coordinated with 'believe' as a condition for the exception from loss. In Evangelical theology (Ephesians 2:8-9), salvation is by grace through faith alone, with works following as evidence (James 2). Here, the works (righteous life, exhortation) are structural pillars required to escape the state of being 'utterly lost,' implying a synergistic soteriology where human effort contributes to redemption.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap is soteriological. Surah 103 presents a 'ladder' out of the pit of loss: one must believe AND work AND exhort AND persevere to be the exception. If any rung is missing, the text implies the person remains 'utterly lost.' Evangelical Christianity presents a 'hand' reaching down: Christ pulls the lost out of the pit solely based on His merit. The believer then works and exhorts because they have *already* been saved, not *in order* to be saved. This text places the burden of securing salvation on the believer's performance.

Shared Values:

The urgency of time; The fallen/lost state of humanity; The necessity of faith; The importance of truth and patience; Community accountability

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – The text explicitly adds 'lead a righteous life' and mutual exhortation as necessary conditions to be excepted from the 'lost.'
2. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Salvation is achieved through human adherence to a pattern of behavior, rendering a substitutionary atonement unnecessary.

Semantic Warnings:

"Believe"

In Text: To accept Islamic monotheism (Tawhid) and the validity of the Quranic message.

Evangelical: To trust specifically in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ for atonement.

Example: *A Christian 'believes' in the Trinity; this text would likely categorize that as 'shirk' (idolatry), not the 'belief' that saves from loss.*

"Righteous life"

In Text: Adherence to Quranic injunctions and moral laws.

Evangelical: The fruit of the Spirit produced by regeneration, or legally, the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Example: *In this text, the righteous life is a *cause* of salvation; in the Bible, it is a *consequence*.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Being excepted from the universal state of 'loss' (Khusr).

How Attained: By combining Faith + Righteous Deeds + Exhorting Truth + Exhorting Patience.

Basis of Assurance: There is no guaranteed assurance in the text; it depends on the successful completion of the four requirements.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. The conjunction 'and' links works to faith as co-requirements. See Galatians 2:16 for the contrast: 'a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Believe
2. Lead a righteous life
3. Exhort one another to uphold the truth
4. Exhort one another to be steadfast

Implicit Obligations:

1. Urgency in spiritual matters (implied by the oath on time)
2. Community involvement (implied by 'one another')

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The Surah says everyone is 'utterly lost' except those who do four specific things. How do you know when your 'righteous life' is sufficient to qualify for the exception?
2. If you fail to 'exhort someone to be steadfast' on a bad day, does that mean you slip back into the category of the 'utterly lost'?
3. The text mentions time (the afternoon). Do you feel pressure that time is running out to accumulate enough good deeds to escape the loss?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Declining Day (Time running out) – Just as the day ends, our time is limited. We cannot do enough work in the 'afternoon' of our lives to make up for the morning's failures. We need a Savior who has already finished

the work. [John 9:4 (Night is coming), 2 Corinthians 6:2 (Now is the day of salvation)]

2. Universal Loss (Khusr) – This acknowledges the broken state of humanity. It is a bridge to discuss the Fall and the need for a rescue that is greater than self-help. [Romans 3:23, Ephesians 2:1-3]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer carries the burden of ensuring their 'righteous life' and 'exhortations' are sufficient to qualify for the exception. There is no 'It is Finished' moment; the work continues until death.
2. Social Responsibility/Policing [Moderate] – The command to 'exhort one another' creates a spiritual burden to monitor the behavior of others. One's own salvation is partially tied to how well they correct and encourage the community.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Divine Assertion/Revelation

Verification Method: Submission to the text's claim regarding the human condition.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the Holy Spirit illuminating the written Word (1 Corinthians 2:12-14). This text relies on the self-authenticating authority of the Quranic oath.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early Islamic revelation).

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad via Gabriel; Khalifa translation (1978).

Textual Issues: Khalifa's translation is generally consistent with standard renderings of this specific Surah, though his broader work ('Quran: The Final Testament') involves controversial numerological theories (Code 19) and rejection of Hadith.