

SURAH 68 (AL-QALAM)

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

OVERVIEW

Surah 68, titled 'The Pen' (Al-Qalam), is an early Meccan surah primarily focused on defending the Prophet Muhammad against accusations of madness leveled by the Quraysh elite. The text opens with a divine oath by the Pen, asserting that Muhammad is not crazy but possesses 'great moral character' and will receive a well-deserved recompense. It sharply contrasts the Prophet with a specific, unnamed opponent described as a 'lowly swearer,' 'slanderer,' and 'forbiddener of charity.' Central to the text is the Parable of the Owners of the Garden, a narrative about wealthy men who plotted to harvest their crops early to avoid giving charity to the poor. God destroys their garden overnight, leaving them with nothing, which leads to their belated repentance. This serves as a warning to the Meccans that wealth is a test, not a sign of divine favor. The text concludes with eschatological imagery of the Day of Resurrection, where disbelievers will be called to prostrate but will be physically unable to do so, symbolizing their spiritual rigidity in life. It ends with an exhortation to the Prophet to persevere and not be impatient like Jonah (the 'companion of the fish'). Uniquely in Khalifa's translation, verse 44 refers to the Quran itself as 'this Hadith,' reflecting Khalifa's specific theological emphasis on Quran-only Islam.

KEY FIGURES

God (The Lord), The Prophet (Muhammad), The Opponent (Traditionally Walid b. Mughira, described as a slanderer), The Owners of the Garden, Jonah (The one who called from inside the fish)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. MERIT-BASED VINDICATION

Assertion: The Prophet and believers are vindicated by their 'great moral character' and submission, which earns them a 'well deserved' recompense.

"You have attained a recompense that is well deserved. You are blessed with a great moral character." (68:3-4)

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the Prophet's standing before God is predicated on his intrinsic 'great moral character' and his actions, earning a 'well deserved' reward. Evangelical theology holds that no human has intrinsic righteousness sufficient to merit God's favor (Romans 3:10-12). Justification in the Bible is a gift of grace received through faith in Christ, not a reward for moral excellence (Ephesians 2:8-9).

2. THE PROSTRATION TEST

Assertion: On the Day of Judgment, salvation is determined by one's ability to physically prostrate, which is contingent on having done so during earthly life.

"The day will come when... they will be required to fall prostrate, but they will be unable to... They were invited to fall prostrate when they were whole and able." (68:42-43)

Evangelical Comparison: The text suggests that the physical act of ritual prayer (prostration) in this life creates the spiritual capacity to do so in the next, serving as the litmus test for salvation. Evangelicalism teaches that judgment is based on one's relationship with Christ (John 5:24). While works evidence faith, the inability to perform a ritual is not the mechanism of condemnation; rather, rejection of the Son is (John 3:18).

3. EXCLUSIVE REVELATION (THE PEN)

Assertion: The Quran (referred to as 'this Hadith' in Khalifa's translation) is the final standard, superseding other books.

"Do you have another book to uphold? In it, do you find anything you want?" (68:37-38); "let Me deal with those who reject this Hadith" (68:44)

Evangelical Comparison: The text rhetorically asks if the audience has 'another book,' mocking the idea of alternative authority. It positions the Quran as the sole necessary revelation. This violates Sola Scriptura, which holds the Bible as the closed, sufficient canon of God's word (Revelation 22:18-19). Khalifa's translation

specifically uses 'Hadith' to refer to the Quran, emphasizing a 'Quran-only' epistemology that rejects even Islamic tradition, let alone Biblical authority.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of justification. Surah 68 posits that human beings are divided into 'Submitters' and 'criminals' based on their response to the Quran and their moral behavior (charity, prostration). Salvation is a 'recompense that is well deserved' (68:3). Evangelical Christianity teaches that all are 'criminals' (sinners) by nature and deed (Romans 3:23), and that justification is a legal declaration of righteousness imputed by Christ, not earned by the believer. Furthermore, the text's Christology is non-existent; God deals directly with humanity without a mediator, whereas the Bible presents Jesus as the only mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5).

Shared Values:

Condemnation of greed and arrogance; Importance of charity; Belief in a Day of Judgment; Belief in the existence of Jonah; Rejection of idolatry

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Claims the Quran is the final authority, superseding the Bible.
- 2. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation is 'deserved' (v. 3) and contingent on moral character and ritual performance (prostration).
- 3. [Major] Theology Proper (God's Nature) – God is depicted as a direct retributor without the mediation of the Son; the 'Shin' attribute (implied in v. 42) suggests anthropomorphic descriptions in traditional exegesis, though Khalifa translates abstractly.

Semantic Warnings:

"Hadith"

In Text: In Khalifa's translation (v. 44), this refers to the Quran itself as the only valid 'narrative' or 'discourse.'

Evangelical: N/A (Islamic term). However, Evangelicals use 'Word of God' to refer to the Bible.

Example: *Khalifa translates 68:44 as 'reject this Hadith' (meaning the Quran), whereas traditional Islam uses Hadith to mean the sayings of the Prophet.*

"Submitters"

In Text: Those who follow the Quran and submit to God (Muslims).

Evangelical: Christians are called to submit to God (James 4:7), but the identity is 'Children of God' through adoption, not merely servants through submission.

Example: *The text asks, 'Shall we treat the Submitters like the criminals?' implying a dichotomy based on religious identity/obedience.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Entering 'Gardens of Bliss' (68:34) and avoiding the humiliation of the Day of Resurrection.

How Attained: By being a 'Submitter,' maintaining moral character, giving charity, and not rejecting the Quran.

Basis of Assurance: The text offers assurance based on the logical premise that God would not treat Submitters like criminals (68:35), appealing to divine justice rather than mercy.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text explicitly links reward to being 'deserved' (68:3). Sola Fide asserts that reward is 'not reckoned as of debt, but of grace' (Romans 4:4).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Do not obey the rejectors (68:8)
- 2. Do not obey every lowly swearer/slanderer (68:10)
- 3. Steadfastly persevere in carrying out the commands of your Lord (68:48)

4. Do not be like Jonah (impatient) (68:48)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Give charity (implied by the condemnation of the garden owners)
2. Prostrate (perform Salah) while able
3. Glorify God (Tasbih)
4. Accept the Quran as the only necessary 'Hadith' (narrative/discourse)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Prostration (Salah) is framed as the essential defining act of the believer

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The story of the garden owners is tragic because they were so sure of their harvest but lost everything. How do you ensure that your 'submission' is accepted by God and that you won't be surprised on the Last Day?
2. Verse 42 describes a terrifying moment where people try to prostrate but cannot. Do you believe your ability to stand before God depends on your past performance or on God's mercy?
3. The text says the righteous have 'deserved' their reward (v. 34). In your experience, do you feel you have done enough to truly 'deserve' paradise, or do you feel you need forgiveness?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Barren Garden – Just as the owners could not guarantee their harvest despite their plans, we cannot guarantee our salvation through our own works. Our 'gardens' (righteousness) are filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). We need the provision of the True Vine, Jesus Christ. [John 15:5 ('Apart from me you can do nothing.')]
2. The Inability to Prostrate – This illustrates the bondage of the will. Sinners cannot simply 'choose' to obey God perfectly; they are dead in trespasses. We need a new nature, not just a command to perform. Christ gives us a new heart. [Ezekiel 36:26 ('I will give you a new heart...')]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer is under constant pressure to prove they are a 'Submitter' and not a 'criminal.' The assurance of salvation is tied to the quality of their moral character and religious performance.
2. Fear of Exposure [Moderate] – The threat of the Day of Judgment involves public humiliation and physical exposure (v. 42). This creates a fear-based relationship with God rather than one of adoption and love.
3. Isolation [Moderate] – The command 'Do not obey the rejectors' (v. 8) and the sharp dichotomy between Submitters and criminals fosters an 'us vs. them' mentality that can lead to social isolation.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct Divine Assertion and Prophetic Integrity.

Verification Method: Future confirmation ('You will see, and they will see' - 68:5) and the moral intuition that 'Submitters' should not be treated like 'criminals' (68:35-36).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the historical resurrection of Christ and the testimony of the prophets/apostles recorded in Scripture (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). This text relies on the self-authenticating claim of the Quran and the moral character of Muhammad.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Early Meccan Period (approx. 610-614 AD).

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad (as recipient of revelation); Khalifa translation (1978) imposes 'Quran-only' theology.

Textual Issues: Verse 1 contains 'NuN', a 'Muqatta'at' (disjoined letter). Its meaning is debated. Khalifa interprets these mathematical codes as proof of authorship. Verse 42's 'exposed' (literally 'The Shin shall be

laid bare') is a famous anthropomorphic difficulty in Islamic theology; Khalifa translates it metaphorically to avoid anthropomorphism.