

SURAH 70 (AL-MA'ARIJ)

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

OVERVIEW

Surah 70, titled 'The Ascending Stairways' (or 'The Heights' in some translations), presents a stark eschatological vision. It begins by affirming the certainty of divine retribution, which disbelievers view as distant but God sees as imminent. The text describes the Day of Judgment as a time when the sky becomes like molten rock and mountains like wool. The psychological terror of this day is emphasized by the claim that a guilty person would willingly ransom their own children, spouse, and entire tribe to save themselves from the 'eager to burn' fire. The text provides a theological anthropology, asserting that humans are created anxious and stingy by nature. The only exception to this state of anxiety and the threat of hellfire is a specific group: 'the worshipers.' The Surah delineates the requirements for this group, which include consistent observance of Contact Prayers (Salat), charity to the poor, belief in the Day of Judgment, fear of God's requital, strict chastity, and trustworthiness. The passage concludes by asserting that those who fulfill these requirements have 'deserved' a position of honor, while mocking the disbelievers who flee from the truth, reminding them of their humble creation and God's power to replace them.

KEY FIGURES

God (Possessor of the highest Height), The Angels, The Guilty (The Disbeliever), The Worshipers (The Saved)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. MERIT-BASED SOTERIOLOGY

Assertion: Salvation and honor in Paradise are 'deserved' outcomes based on the successful performance of rituals (Salat), charity, and moral consistency.

"They consistently observe their contact prayers (Salat) on time. They have deserved a position of honor in Paradise. (Surah 70:34-35)"

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the mechanism for escaping hellfire is the precise fulfillment of religious duties. The text explicitly uses the term 'deserved' (in Khalifa's translation) to describe the status of the saved. This stands in diametric opposition to the Evangelical doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone, where salvation is a gift of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9) and wages are what sin earns (Romans 6:23). Here, the human agent secures their own safety through 'gracious patience,' prayer, and chastity.

2. INHERENT HUMAN ANXIETY

Assertion: Human beings are created with a nature prone to anxiety, despondency in trouble, and stinginess in wealth, which can only be cured by religious observance.

"Indeed, the human being is anxious. If touched by adversity, despondent. If blessed by wealth, stingy. Except for the worshipers. (Surah 70:19-22)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text presents a low anthropology, acknowledging that the 'natural man' is unstable and selfish. Evangelicalism agrees that the natural man is fallen (Romans 3:10-12). However, the divergence lies in the remedy. Surah 70 suggests that the performance of Salat (Contact Prayers) and charity corrects this nature. Evangelicalism teaches that only the indwelling Holy Spirit and a new nature in Christ can remedy the fallen condition (2 Corinthians 5:17), and that religious ritual without regeneration is insufficient.

3. THE FAILED RANSOM

Assertion: On Judgment Day, the guilty will attempt to offer a vicarious ransom (children, spouse, tribe) to save themselves, but it will be rejected.

"The guilty will wish he could give his own children as ransom... No; it is aflame. (Surah 70:11-15)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text vividly portrays the human instinct to find a substitute to bear their punishment—even willing to sacrifice their own children. The text rejects this possibility for the disbeliever. In contrast, the Gospel affirms that a ransom ***is*** required and ***was*** provided, not by the sinner sacrificing

their child, but by God giving His Son (Mark 10:45, 1 Timothy 2:6). The text correctly identifies the need for a ransom but denies the availability of one for the disbeliever.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap is the method of justification. Surah 70 outlines a 'contractual' relationship: humans perform specific duties (prayer, charity, chastity) and God grants Paradise as a 'deserved' outcome. There is no mention of a Savior, no concept of atonement for failures, and no assurance outside of one's own consistency. Evangelicalism posits that human consistency is impossible (James 2:10) and that justification comes solely through the imputed righteousness of Christ received by faith (Philippians 3:9).

Shared Values:

Reality of Judgment Day; Existence of Hell/Retribution; Moral requirement of chastity; Importance of charity/caring for the poor; Condemnation of hoarding wealth; Importance of truthfulness

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – The text explicitly states that those who perform works have 'deserved' Paradise (v. 35).
2. [Critical] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – Salvation is presented as a reward for 'gracious patience' and ritual observance, not an unmerited gift.
3. [Major] Theology Proper (Nature of God) – God is presented primarily as a Retributor and Possessor of Height, lacking the relational Fatherhood revealed in the New Testament.
4. [Critical] Christology (Atonement) – The text implies that on Judgment Day, no ransom is available, denying the efficacy of Christ's finished work.

Semantic Warnings:

"Believer"

In Text: One who accepts the Quranic judgment and performs the required works (Salat, charity, chastity).

Evangelical: One who trusts in the finished work of Christ for salvation.

Example: In Surah 70, a 'believer' is defined by their works (v. 22-34); in Romans 4:5, a believer is one who 'does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly.'

"Ransom"

In Text: A theoretical payment (children, family) a sinner wishes to offer to escape hell, which is rejected.

Evangelical: The actual payment (Christ's blood) God provided to redeem sinners (Mark 10:45).

Example: Surah 70:11 depicts a rejected ransom offered by man; 1 Timothy 2:6 depicts an accepted ransom offered by Christ.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Escape from the 'eager to burn' fire and entry into a 'position of honor' in Paradise.

How Attained: By being a 'Worshiper' (observing Salat), giving alms, maintaining chastity, and being truthful.

Basis of Assurance: Assurance is conditional upon the 'consistency' (v. 34) of one's performance.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Surah 70:35 ('They have deserved...') stands in direct opposition to Romans 3:23-24 ('...justified freely by his grace').

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Resort to a gracious patience (v. 5)
2. Observe contact prayers (Salat) consistently (v. 23, 34)
3. Set aside money for the poor and needy (v. 24-25)
4. Keep chastity/restrict sexual relations to spouses (v. 29-30)
5. Keep one's word/be trustworthy (v. 32)

6. Testify truthfully (v. 33)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Fear the Day of Judgment
2. Do not take God's requital for granted
3. Acknowledge the inevitable retribution

Ritual Requirements:

1. Salat (Contact Prayers) performed on time and consistently

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text says in verse 11 that the guilty will wish to offer their children as a ransom to save themselves. Why do you think the instinct to offer a substitute is so strong in the human heart?
2. Verse 35 says the believers have 'deserved' a position of honor. How confident are you that your current level of consistency in prayer and charity is enough to 'deserve' paradise?
3. Verse 19 says humans are created anxious. Do you find that your prayers take away that anxiety permanently, or does the anxiety return if you miss a prayer?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desperate Need for a Ransom – The text correctly identifies that when facing God's wrath, a person realizes they need a substitute payment. The tragedy in the text is that the sinner has nothing to offer. The Gospel provides the solution: God provides the Son that the sinner wishes they could offer. [Mark 10:45 ('For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.')]
2. The Anxiety of the Human Condition – The text admits humans are naturally unstable and fearful. Jesus offers a peace that the world (and religious striving) cannot give. [John 14:27 ('Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.')]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Works-Righteousness [Severe] – The believer carries the burden of having to 'deserve' Paradise through consistency. Any lapse in 'contact prayers' or chastity threatens their status, creating a cycle of anxiety that the text claims to cure but actually reinforces by making salvation conditional on behavior.
2. Isolation in Judgment [Severe] – The text emphasizes that 'no friend will care about his close friend' (v. 10). The believer faces judgment utterly alone, without an Advocate or Mediator, bearing the full weight of their own sin.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation

Verification Method: The text does not offer empirical verification but relies on the threat of future eschatological verification (the Day of Judgment).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on historical testimony of the resurrection and the witness of the Spirit through Scripture (1 John 5:9-13). This text demands submission based on the threat of future retribution.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early to Middle)

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad; this translation by Rashad Khalifa (1978).

Textual Issues: Khalifa translates 'Salat' as 'Contact Prayers,' reflecting his specific theological emphasis on the mathematical structure of the Quran and rejection of Hadith-based tradition. Standard translations use 'Prayer'.