

SURAH 73:1-20

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: Surah 73 (Al-Muzzammil) | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Rashad Khalifa

OVERVIEW

Surah 73, titled 'Al-Muzzammil' (The Cloaked One), addresses the Prophet Muhammad directly, commanding him to rise by night for prayer and meditation. The text initially imposes a rigorous schedule—praying for half the night, or slightly more or less—and commands the reading of the Quran. It establishes the gravity of the revelation ('a heavy message') and the severity of the coming judgment, described as a day that makes infants gray-haired. The text draws a typological parallel between Muhammad's mission to Mecca and Moses' mission to Pharaoh, warning that rejection leads to severe temporal and eternal punishment. Crucially, the final verse (v. 20) acknowledges the difficulty of the initial command. God abrogates the strict night vigil requirement because He knows of believers' sickness, travel, and striving (Jihad). The burden is shifted to 'reading what you can,' performing the contact prayers (Salat), giving charity (Zakat), and 'lending God a loan of righteousness.' The passage concludes that salvation is contingent upon the good deeds one 'sends ahead' for their soul, contrasting sharply with the Christian doctrine of grace.

KEY FIGURES

God (Allah), The Cloaked One (Muhammad), Pharaoh, The Messenger to Pharaoh (Moses)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. MERIT-BASED SOTERIOLOGY

Assertion: Salvation and reward are secured by 'sending ahead' good deeds and lending God a 'loan of righteousness.'

"Whatever good you send ahead on behalf of your souls, you will find it at GOD far better and generously rewarded. [Surah 73:20]"

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the mechanism for securing a positive standing with God is transactional. The believer 'lends' righteousness to God and 'sends ahead' good deeds to be found later. This posits that human works have intrinsic redemptive value that obligates God to reward the doer. Evangelical Christianity teaches that human righteousness is 'filthy rags' (Isaiah 64:6) and that justification is a gift of grace received through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9), not a result of works, so that no one may boast. The Quranic model here is a ledger of credit; the Biblical model is the cancellation of debt.

2. STRICT UNITARIANISM (TAWHID)

Assertion: There is absolutely no god beside the Lord of the East and West.

"Lord of the east and the west; there is no other god beside Him. [Surah 73:9]"

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts 'there is no other god beside Him' in a context that historically rejects the Christian understanding of the Trinity. While Evangelicals agree there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4), they believe this one God exists eternally in three persons. The Quranic assertion here, combined with its broader context, is intended to negate any association of partners (shirk) with God, which includes the Sonship of Jesus. This creates a fundamental theological gap regarding the nature of God.

3. ABROGATION (NASKH)

Assertion: God modifies religious obligations based on human capacity and changing circumstances.

"He knows that you cannot always do this. He has pardoned you. Instead, you shall read what you can... [Surah 73:20]"

Evangelical Comparison: This passage is a classic proof-text for the Islamic doctrine of Abrogation, where a later command (v. 20) relaxes an earlier, more difficult command (v. 2-4). In Evangelical theology, the moral law reflects God's unchanging holy nature and cannot be simply relaxed because it is hard; rather, the inability of humans to keep the law points to the need for a Savior who fulfills the law on their behalf (Matthew 5:17). The Quranic approach here is to lower the bar; the Biblical approach is to provide a Substitute who clears the bar.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of redemption. Surah 73 presents a God who demands a 'loan of righteousness'—implying that human beings have the capacity to generate righteousness that satisfies God's holiness. Evangelicalism posits that humanity is spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1) and can offer nothing but sin; therefore, righteousness must be imputed by Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Furthermore, the text's Christology is non-existent; God is the only advocate, negating the role of Jesus as the Mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5).

Shared Values:

Monotheism; Reality of Judgment Day; Importance of Prayer; Charity/Care for the poor; Historical reality of Moses and Pharaoh

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation is contingent on 'sending ahead' good deeds and 'loaning' righteousness.
2. [Critical] Theology Proper (Trinity) – Explicit Unitarianism ('no other god beside Him') denying the Son and Spirit.
3. [Major] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – God's pardon is linked to religious performance (reading Quran, Salat) rather than unmerited favor.

Semantic Warnings:

"Advocate (Wakil)"

In Text: God Himself as the trustee, guardian, or disposer of affairs.

Evangelical: Jesus Christ (1 John 2:1) or the Holy Spirit (John 14:16) as the Intercessor/Helper.

Example: Surah 73:9 says 'choose Him [God] as your advocate,' whereas 1 John 2:1 says 'we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.'

"Loan of Righteousness"

In Text: Good deeds (charity, prayer) done by the believer, viewed as a credit lent to God to be repaid with interest (reward).

Evangelical: N/A - The Bible teaches God owns everything (Psalm 50:10-12) and cannot be indebted to man (Romans 11:35).

Example: Surah 73:20 commands lending God a loan; Romans 11:35 asks 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?'

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Escaping the terrible punishment of Hell and finding reward with God.

How Attained: By works: Prayer, Zakat, Quranic recitation, and 'loaning' righteousness.

Basis of Assurance: No assurance provided; depends on the quantity/quality of what is 'sent ahead.'

Comparison to Sola Fide: Surah 73:20 explicitly ties reward to human effort ('Whatever good you send ahead...'). Romans 4:4-5 states, 'Now to the one who works, his wage is not counted as a gift but as what is due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Meditate during the night (initially strict, later relaxed)
2. Read the Quran (specifically 'cover to cover' in Khalifa's rendering)
3. Commemorate the name of your Lord
4. Choose God as advocate
5. Disregard rejectors in a nice manner
6. Observe the contact prayers (Salat)

7. Give the obligatory charity (Zakat)

8. Lend God a loan of righteousness

9. Implore God for forgiveness

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Muhammad as a messenger parallel to Moses

2. Fear the Day of Judgment

3. Prioritize religious duties over sleep

Ritual Requirements:

1. Night Vigil (Qiyam al-Layl) - originally mandatory, later recommended/voluntary

2. Salat (Contact Prayers)

3. Zakat (Obligatory Charity)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. Verse 20 mentions that God relaxed the prayer rules because He knows we are weak. If God lowers the standard because we can't meet it, how do we know if we've ever done 'enough' to satisfy Him?

2. The text says to 'lend God a loan of righteousness.' In the Bible, God says He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and needs nothing from us. How does it feel to view your relationship with God as a loan/repayment transaction?

3. The judgment described in verse 17 is so terrifying it makes infants gray-haired. Do you feel confident that the 'good you sent ahead' is enough to protect you on that day?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Heavy Message - The Law and the burden of righteousness are indeed 'heavy' and unbearable for humans. Jesus offers a contrast: 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' [Matthew 11:28-30]

2. The Need for an Advocate - The text recognizes the human need for an Advocate (Wakil). The Gospel clarifies that while God is the Judge, the Advocate is Jesus Christ the Righteous, who stands in our defense because He paid our penalty. [1 John 2:1]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] - The believer is burdened with the knowledge that their eternal state depends on the 'good sent ahead.' Even with the relaxation of the night prayer, the transactional nature of the relationship ('loan to God') creates a perpetual pressure to perform to ensure solvency.

2. Isolation [Moderate] - By rejecting the Trinity and the mediation of Christ, the believer stands alone before the 'Lord of the East and West' without a Mediator who shares their human nature (Hebrews 4:15).

3. Fear of Judgment [Severe] - The imagery of a day that turns infants gray-haired (v. 17) instills a deep, existential dread that is not assuaged by a guarantee of atonement, only by the hope that one's works are sufficient.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Prophetic Revelation (Wahy)

Verification Method: The text relies on the threat of future judgment and historical typology (Pharaoh) as self-verification.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the historical resurrection of Christ and the testimony of the Holy Spirit through the written Word (1 Corinthians 15, 2 Timothy 3:16). This text demands submission based on the authority of the speaker ('We') without the external validation of redemptive history found in the Gospel.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Early Meccan (approx. 610-615 AD), though verse 20 is widely considered Medinan (later) due to references to fighting (Jihad) and Zakat.

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

Textual Issues: Khalifa translates verse 4 as 'read the Quran from cover to cover.' This is anachronistic, as the Quran was revealed piecemeal over 23 years and was not a completed book 'cover to cover' at the time this command was given. The Arabic 'rattil' means to recite slowly/distinctly, not 'read cover to cover.'