

SURAH 85 (AL-BURUJ)

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

OVERVIEW

Surah 85, titled 'Al-Buruj' (The Constellations/Galaxies), is a Meccan revelation focused on the themes of divine surveillance, the persecution of the faithful, and the certainty of judgment. The text opens with cosmic oaths, establishing the grandeur of God's dominion. It proceeds to recount the narrative of the 'people of the canyon' (Ashab al-Ukhdud), who dug trenches and burned believers alive simply for their faith in God. The text condemns these persecutors to the 'retribution of burning' while promising 'gardens with flowing streams' to those who believe and lead a righteous life. It underscores God's attributes as the Initiator, Repeater, and Possessor of the glorious throne, warning that His 'blow is severe.' The surah concludes by referencing the destruction of Pharaoh and Thamoud as historical precedents for God's judgment on disbelievers, finally asserting the Quran's divine origin as preserved in a 'master tablet.' In Khalifa's translation, specific scientific terminology (e.g., 'galaxies') is used, reflecting his modernist hermeneutic.

KEY FIGURES

God (The Almighty, The Praiseworthy), The People of the Canyon (Persecutors), The Believers (Martyrs), Pharaoh, Thamoud

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. DIVINE RETRIBUTION AND JUSTICE

Assertion: God witnesses all persecution and will severely punish unrepentant persecutors with hellfire.

"Surely, those who persecute the believing men and women, then fail to repent, have incurred the retribution of Gehenna [85:010]"

Evangelical Comparison: The text presents a God of strict retributive justice who actively watches human affairs. While Evangelicalism affirms that God is the judge of the earth (Genesis 18:25) and that vengeance belongs to Him (Romans 12:19), the Quranic presentation here isolates God's judgment from any concept of atonement. In Christian theology, the wrath of God is satisfied in Christ for the believer (Romans 5:9); here, the escape from wrath is predicated on the persecutor's repentance and the believer's 'righteous life,' without reference to a substitute.

2. CONDITIONAL SOTERIOLOGY

Assertion: Salvation (The Greatest Triumph) is contingent upon belief combined with living a righteous life.

"Surely, those who believed and led a righteous life, have deserved gardens with flowing streams. [85:011]"

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine represents a fundamental divergence from Evangelical soteriology. The text explicitly links the 'greatest triumph' (salvation/paradise) to the dual condition of believing AND leading a righteous life. This is a merit-based system where works are a prerequisite for final salvation. In contrast, the Evangelical baseline asserts that works are the fruit, not the root, of salvation (Ephesians 2:8-10). The Quranic model places the burden of maintaining a 'righteous life' on the adherent to secure their eternal state, whereas the Biblical model relies on the finished work of Christ imputed to the believer.

3. PRESERVED TABLET (LAWH MAHFUZ)

Assertion: The Quran exists eternally in a heavenly preserved master tablet, implying it is uncreated and final.

"Indeed, it is a glorious Quran. In a preserved master tablet. [85:021-022]"

Evangelical Comparison: The claim of a 'preserved master tablet' suggests that the Quran is a direct copy of an eternal, heavenly archetype. This creates a closed epistemological system where the Quran supersedes all previous revelation. Evangelical theology views Scripture as 'God-breathed' (2 Timothy 3:16) through human authors, not a transcription of a pre-existent heavenly book. Furthermore, this doctrine is used to dismiss Biblical contradictions as 'corruptions' of the original tablet, making dialogue difficult.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the ethical stance against persecution is shared, the theological foundation is fundamentally different. The God of Surah 85 is 'The One' (Unitarian) who 'does whatever He wills' with no mention of covenantal love mediated through a Savior. The gap is widest in soteriology: the text offers a 'righteous life' as the mechanism for 'deserving' paradise. Evangelicalism posits that no life is righteous enough to deserve paradise (Romans 3:10), necessitating the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Additionally, the 'Preserved Tablet' doctrine creates an insurmountable barrier to Sola Scriptura, as it posits a superior, eternal source text that corrects the Bible.

Shared Values:

Condemnation of persecution; Belief in a Sovereign Creator; Reality of Judgment Day; Existence of Heaven and Hell

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation is earned by 'leading a righteous life' combined with belief, not by faith alone.
2. [Critical] Christology – God saves and judges directly without a Mediator; Christ's work is absent and unnecessary in this scheme.
3. [Major] Sola Scriptura – The Quran claims to be the final, preserved tablet, superseding Biblical authority.

Semantic Warnings:

"Believers"

In Text: Those who believe in the Unitarian God (Allah) and the message of the Quran.

Evangelical: Those who trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Example: In verse 11, 'those who believed' are promised gardens. An Evangelical reads this as 'faith in Christ,' but the text implies 'faith in Allah's tawhid (oneness).'

"Forgiving"

In Text: Al-Ghafur; God overlooks sins, often conditional on repentance and future righteousness.

Evangelical: Justification; God declares the sinner righteous because the penalty was paid by Christ (Romans 3:24-26).

Example: Verse 14 calls God 'The Forgiving.' In Islam, this is executive clemency. In Christianity, this is judicial satisfaction.

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: The 'Greatest Triumph': Entry into gardens with flowing streams.

How Attained: By believing and leading a righteous life (Works/Merit).

Basis of Assurance: None explicitly given; depends on the severity of God's blow vs. His forgiveness.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. Verse 11 establishes a causal link between personal righteousness and the reward, whereas Romans 4:5 states that God justifies the ungodly who have faith.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Note the history of the troops (Pharaoh and Thamoud) [85:017]

Implicit Obligations:

1. Believe in God Almighty
2. Lead a righteous life to attain the gardens
3. Endure persecution with patience
4. Repent if one has persecuted believers

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text mentions the 'People of the Canyon' who were burned for their faith. History tells us these were Christians in Najran. Do you think they were martyrs for Jesus?
2. Verse 12 says God's blow is severe, but Verse 14 says He is Forgiving. How do you know which one you will receive on Judgment Day?
3. If the 'greatest triumph' requires leading a righteous life (v. 11), how righteous do you have to be to be sure you have done enough?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Martyrs of the Canyon – These martyrs died because they would not renounce their Lord. This points to the ultimate Martyr, Jesus, who died not just as a witness, but as a sacrifice. [Revelation 12:11 - 'They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.']}
2. The Preserved Tablet – Humanity longs for a Word that is settled in heaven and unchangeable. Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh, the true revelation of God. [John 1:1, 1:14 - 'In the beginning was the Word... and the Word became flesh.']}

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Moderate] – The requirement to 'lead a righteous life' to attain the 'greatest triumph' creates a burden of perfectionism. The believer can never be certain if their life has been 'righteous enough' to offset their sins.
2. Fear of Divine Caprice [Severe] – God is described as the 'Doer of whatever He wills' (v. 16) and His blow is 'severe' (v. 12). Without a covenant of grace sealed in blood, the believer is subject to the absolute, potentially arbitrary will of a Sovereign who is not bound by a promise of salvation through a substitute.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct Revelation (The Quran)

Verification Method: Historical reflection (Pharaoh/Thamoud) and acceptance of the text's self-attestation.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on historical witness to the resurrection and the internal consistency of the 66 books (Luke 24:27). This text relies on circular self-attestation ('It is a glorious Quran') and the threat of punishment for denial.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Early Meccan Period (approx. 613-615 AD).

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad (Divine Revelation); Translation by Rashad Khalifa (1978).

Textual Issues: Khalifa translates 'Buruj' as 'Galaxies' in verse 1. The traditional translation is 'Constellations' or 'Zodiacal Signs.' Khalifa's translation often forces modern scientific concepts into the text to support his 'Code 19' mathematical miracle theory.