

SURAH 87 (AL-A'LA)

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

OVERVIEW

Surah 87, titled 'The Most High' (Al-A'la), is a concise chapter that begins with the glorification of God as the supreme Creator who designs, guides, and controls the natural order. The text addresses the Prophet (and by extension, the believer), promising that God will facilitate the preservation of the message ('We will recite to you; do not forget') and guide him to the 'easiest path.' The central argument divides humanity into two categories: the reverent who heed the reminder, and the wicked who avoid it. The text culminates in a soteriological claim that success is achieved by the one who 'redeems his soul' through remembrance and ritual prayer (Salat). It concludes by asserting that the preference for the Hereafter over the temporary material world is a truth confirmed in the earlier scriptures of Abraham and Moses. In Rashad Khalifa's translation, specific emphasis is placed on 'redeeming' one's own soul through religious observance.

KEY FIGURES

God (The Most High), The Recipient (Muhammad), The Reverent (Believer), The Wicked (Disbeliever), Abraham, Moses

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. SELF-REDEMPTION VIA RITUAL

Assertion: Spiritual success and the redemption of the soul are achieved through personal purification and the observance of contact prayers (Salat).

"Successful indeed is the one who redeems his soul. By remembering the name of his Lord and observing the contact prayers (Salat)." (87:14-15)"

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, redemption is a purchase made solely by Christ's blood (Ephesians 1:7), received by faith apart from works. This text, particularly in Khalifa's translation, explicitly places the agency of redemption on the human subject ('one who redeems his soul'). It links this redemption directly to the performance of 'contact prayers' (Salat), establishing a works-righteousness paradigm where the sinner must pay the price for their own soul through ritual observance.

2. DIVINE PRESERVATION OF SCRIPTURE

Assertion: God guarantees that the messenger will not forget the revelation, ensuring the text's integrity.

"We will recite to you; do not forget." (87:6)"

Evangelical Comparison: While Christians believe in the inspiration of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16), the mechanism here is distinct. The text implies a direct cognitive override or supernatural preservation of memory ('do not forget') for the specific recitation. This supports the Islamic view of the Quran as a verbatim transcript of a heavenly tablet, contrasting with the organic, Holy Spirit-inspired authorship of biblical writers.

3. ETERNAL CONSCIOUS TORMENT

Assertion: The wicked will suffer in Hellfire where they exist in a state of perpetual agony, neither living nor dying.

"Consequently, he will suffer the great Hellfire. Wherein he never dies, nor stays alive." (87:12-13)"

Evangelical Comparison: The description of the 'great Hellfire' matches the severity of Jesus's warnings about Gehenna (Mark 9:43-48). The phrase 'never dies, nor stays alive' vividly captures the concept of the 'second death' (Revelation 20:14)—a state of existence without the quality of life, yet without the release of cessation. The divergence lies not in the nature of Hell, but in the criteria for who goes there (rejecting the Quranic reminder vs. rejecting Christ).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: While the text shares a monotheistic framework with Evangelicalism, the mechanism of salvation is diametrically opposed. Surah 87:14-15 (in Khalifa's translation) explicitly states that the one who 'redeems his soul' is the one who prays and remembers. This makes salvation a reward for religious performance. Evangelical theology asserts that the soul is redeemed only by the blood of Jesus (1 Peter 1:18-19) and that human works are 'filthy rags' (Isaiah 64:6) regarding justification. The text ignores the Fall and the inability of man to purify himself, assuming that instruction and ritual are sufficient for redemption.

Shared Values:

Sovereignty of God as Creator; Reality of Judgment and Hell; Superiority of the Afterlife; Respect for Abraham and Moses

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation is conditional upon 'observing the contact prayers' and self-purification.
2. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Christ is absent; the human agent performs the act of redemption for themselves.
3. [Major] Sola Scriptura – Claims to be a new revelation that supersedes/interprets previous scriptures.

Semantic Warnings:

"Redeems (Tazakka)"

In Text: To purify oneself through religious acts and prayer, thereby securing success.

Evangelical: To buy back; a purchase made by God (Christ) to liberate the slave of sin (Galatians 3:13).

Example: *In Surah 87:14, the human redeems himself. In Titus 2:14, Christ 'gave Himself for us to redeem us.'*

"Success (Falah)"

In Text: Escaping Hell and entering Heaven through proper conduct.

Evangelical: Faithfulness to Christ and conformity to His image, regardless of earthly outcome.

Example: *The text links success to 'observing contact prayers' (v. 15).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Success (avoiding the Fire, entering the everlasting Hereafter).

How Attained: By 'redeeming his soul' (tazakka) via remembrance of God and performance of Salat (prayer).

Basis of Assurance: Performance of ritual duties. There is no assurance of a finished work, only the hope that the reminder will benefit.

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text establishes a 'Sola Labor' (Works Alone) or 'Faith + Works' model. Romans 4:4-5 explicitly contrasts this: 'Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his 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. Glorify the name of your Lord (v. 1)
2. Recite/Do not forget (v. 6)
3. Remind others (v. 9)
4. Redeem your soul (v. 14)
5. Remember the name of the Lord (v. 15)
6. Observe contact prayers/Salat (v. 15)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Prioritize the Hereafter over the current life (v. 16-17)
2. Accept the Quran as a continuation of Abrahamic and Mosaic teachings (v. 18-19)

Ritual Requirements:

1. Salat (Contact Prayers) - specifically mentioned as a condition of success

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. Verse 14 says success belongs to the one who 'redeems his soul.' How much prayer is required to fully pay the price for a human soul?
2. The text says God 'creates and shapes' (v. 2). If God is the one who shapes us, why does verse 14 imply we must redeem ourselves? Can a creation fix its own spiritual defects?
3. Verse 12 describes a Hell where one 'never dies, nor stays alive.' That is a terrifying thought. On what basis are you confident you have avoided this, since your redemption depends on your own purification?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The need for a 'Reminder' - We are prone to forget God's truth. The ultimate reminder is not a law, but a Person. The Holy Spirit is sent to 'remind you of everything I have said to you' (John 14:26). [John 14:26]
2. God as the 'Shaper' - Just as God shapes the physical creation, He must reshape our spiritual nature. We cannot 'shape' ourselves into righteousness; we must be 'new creations' in Christ. [2 Corinthians 5:17]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Burden of Self-Redemption [Severe] - The text places the infinite weight of the soul's value on the finite shoulders of the believer. To 'redeem' one's own soul implies that one must generate enough merit to cover all deficits. This leads to perpetual insecurity.
2. Fear of Invalidated Ritual [Moderate] - Since success is tied to 'observing the contact prayers' (v. 15), any failure in focus, timing, or purity during prayer threatens the believer's salvation status.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation via Recitation

Verification Method: Internal resonance ('The reverent will take heed') and claimed historical continuity ('recorded in earlier teachings').

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the finished work of Christ and the closed canon of Scripture (Hebrews 1:1-2). This text relies on a new prophetic claim that demands submission to a new set of rituals for salvation.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

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

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

Textual Issues: Rashad Khalifa's translation of 'tazakka' as 'redeems his soul' is highly interpretive. Standard translations render it 'purifies himself.' Khalifa also inserts '(Salat)' into the text of verse 15 to enforce his specific ritual focus. This is a sectarian rendering.