

SURAH 90

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: Surah 90 (Al-Balad) | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Rashad Khalifa

OVERVIEW

Surah 90, titled 'The Town' (Al-Balad), opens with divine oaths swearing by the sacred city (Mecca) and the cycle of human generation. In Rashad Khalifa's specific translation, the text presents a rigorous anthropology: human beings are created to 'work hard (to redeem himself).' This parenthetical insertion by Khalifa explicitly frames the human condition as one of self-redemption through effort. The text challenges human arrogance regarding wealth and accountability, reminding the reader that God observes all. The core of the argument is the presentation of 'two paths.' The believer is commanded to choose the 'difficult path' (Al-Aqabah), which is defined by specific acts of altruism—freeing slaves and feeding the hungry—coupled with faith and mutual exhortation to patience. The text concludes with a binary eschatology: those who climb this steep path achieve 'happiness,' while those who reject these revelations face confinement in Hellfire.

KEY FIGURES

God (Allah), The Human Being (Al-Insan), The Prophet (implied as the resident of the town), Orphans and the Poor, Companions of the Right (The Saved), Companions of the Left (The Damned)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. SELF-REDEMPTION THROUGH WORKS

Assertion: Human beings are responsible for redeeming themselves through hard work and moral choices.

"We created the human being to work hard (to redeem himself)." (Quran 90:4)

Evangelical Comparison: In Evangelical theology, redemption is accomplished solely by Christ's atoning work (Romans 3:24, Ephesians 1:7). The believer receives this redemption by faith. Khalifa's translation of Surah 90:4 explicitly shifts the burden of redemption onto the human agent ('to redeem himself'). This establishes a soteriology where salvation is the result of human striving and the successful completion of the 'difficult path,' rather than a reliance on a Savior's finished work.

2. THE TWO PATHS (MORAL AGENCY)

Assertion: God has equipped humans with faculties and shown them two distinct paths, requiring them to choose the righteous one.

"Did we not show him the two paths? He should choose the difficult path." (Quran 90:10-11)

Evangelical Comparison: Surah 90 assumes a Pelagian anthropology where the human being is fully capable of observing the two paths and successfully choosing and navigating the 'difficult' one to achieve happiness. Evangelical theology, grounded in passages like Romans 3:10-12 and Ephesians 2:1, argues that man is 'dead in trespasses' and incapable of choosing God or the path of life without the prior regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (Monergism).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental incompatibility lies in the mechanism of salvation. Surah 90, particularly in Khalifa's translation, posits that the purpose of human existence is 'to redeem himself' through the 'difficult path' of ethical exertion. This is the antithesis of the Evangelical doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone (Sola Fide). In the Gospel, the 'difficult path' (perfect obedience and satisfaction of divine justice) was traversed by Jesus Christ on behalf of humanity because humanity was incapable of walking it. This text places the burden of the climb back onto the sinner.

Shared Values:

Compassion for the poor and orphans; Opposition to slavery; Moral accountability; The reality of judgment and Hell

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Explicitly states man is created to 'redeem himself' through work.
2. [Critical] Christology – Total absence of a Mediator; the human saves himself directly before God.
3. [Major] Sola Gratia – Salvation is 'deserved' (Verse 18) based on performance of the difficult path.

Semantic Warnings:

"Redeem"

In Text: To save oneself from judgment through personal effort, struggle, and good works.

Evangelical: To be bought back or ransomed by the payment of a price (Christ's blood) offered by another (Ephesians 1:7).

Example: *In Surah 90:4, man works to redeem himself. In Galatians 3:13, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.*

"Believe"

In Text: One of several requirements added to works to achieve happiness (Verse 17).

Evangelical: The sole instrument by which the merits of Christ are appropriated (John 3:16).

Example: *In this text, belief is a companion to works; in the Bible, belief is the root from which works naturally flow, not a co-requirement for justification.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Deserved happiness (Verse 18) and avoidance of the Hellfire (Verse 20).

How Attained: By choosing the 'difficult path': freeing slaves, feeding the poor, believing, and exhorting others.

Basis of Assurance: Performance of the required works and adherence to the community of believers.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. The text frames salvation as a reward for climbing a difficult moral ascent, whereas Romans 4:4-5 states that to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Choose the difficult path (Verse 11)
2. Free slaves (Verse 13)
3. Feed orphans and the poor during hardship (Verses 14-16)
4. Believe (Verse 17)
5. Exhort one another to be steadfast (Verse 17)
6. Exhort one another to be kind (Verse 17)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Acknowledge God's constant surveillance (Verse 7)
2. Recognize God as the source of physical faculties (Verses 8-9)
3. Avoid boasting about wealth (Verse 6)

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 4, it says we were created to work hard to redeem ourselves. How much work do you think is enough to pay for a single sin against a perfect God?
2. The text mentions the 'difficult path' involving charity and kindness. Have you ever failed to be kind or generous when you should have been? What happens to those failures?
3. If God demands we climb a 'difficult path' to be saved, what hope is there for someone who is spiritually weak or broken?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Difficult Path (Al-Aqabah) – The path to God is indeed too difficult for sinful man to climb. It is a steep ascent of perfect righteousness. Because we could not climb up to God, God came down to us. [Romans 10:6-9 (Do not say 'Who will ascend into heaven?'... The word is near you).]
2. Freeing the Slave – The text says a righteous act is freeing a slave. Jesus came to perform the ultimate righteous act: freeing us from the slavery of sin. [John 8:34-36 ('If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed').]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Works-Righteousness [Severe] – The believer carries the crushing weight of having to 'redeem himself.' Every day is a test of whether they have done enough good works to outweigh their bad deeds. There is no rest, only the 'difficult path.'
2. Uncertainty of Salvation [Moderate] – Since salvation depends on human consistency in a 'difficult' ascent, the adherent can never have full assurance of 'deserved happiness' until the final judgment.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Divine Revelation and Empirical Observation

Verification Method: Introspection of one's own faculties (eyes, tongue) and acceptance of the message.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the Holy Spirit illuminating the written Word of God (1 Corinthians 2:12-14). This text appeals to self-evident design and the authority of the speaker (Allah) without reference to biblical prophecy or the testimony of Christ.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early Islamic revelation).

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

Textual Issues: Rashad Khalifa's translation of Verse 4 includes the parenthetical phrase '(to redeem himself)'. The original Arabic 'fi kabad' typically means 'in toil,' 'in struggle,' or 'in hardship.' Khalifa's addition imposes a specific theological interpretation of *self-redemption* that is more explicit than standard translations.