

SURAH 91:1-15

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: Surah 91 (Al-Shams) | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Rashad Khalifa

OVERVIEW

Surah 91, titled 'The Sun' (Al-Shams), begins with a series of rhythmic oaths sworn by various cosmic phenomena—the sun, moon, day, night, sky, and earth—culminating in the human soul. The central argument is anthropological and soteriological: God has inspired the soul with the faculty to distinguish between right and wrong (verse 8). The text then presents a stark dichotomy: spiritual success is achieved by the one who 'redeems' (purifies) their own soul, while failure is the lot of the one who neglects it. To illustrate the consequences of failure, the text recounts the narrative of the tribe of Thamoud. They rejected God's messenger and slaughtered a divinely designated camel, resulting in their total annihilation by God. In Rashad Khalifa's translation, the surah concludes by noting the heedlessness of subsequent generations, emphasizing the perpetual relevance of this warning.

KEY FIGURES

God (Allah), The Soul (Nafs), The Messenger (Saleh, implied), The Tribe of Thamoud, The Worst of Thamoud (Qudar ibn Salif, implied)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. AUTO-SOTERISM (SELF-REDEMPTION)

Assertion: Spiritual success and salvation are contingent upon the human agent 'redeeming' or purifying their own soul.

"Successful is one who redeems it." (Surah 91:9)

Evangelical Comparison: This doctrine represents a fundamental divergence from Evangelical theology. In this text, the burden of 'redemption' (Khalifa's translation of 'zakkaha') is placed squarely on the human subject. The text asserts that the individual succeeds by performing the action of purification. In contrast, Evangelicalism teaches that no human can redeem their own soul (Psalm 49:7-8) and that the heart is 'deceitful above all things' (Jeremiah 17:9), rendering self-purification impossible. Biblical redemption is an external act of God through Christ's blood (Ephesians 1:7), received by faith, not an internal achievement of the believer.

2. INNATE MORAL CAPACITY (FITRA)

Assertion: The human soul is created with an inherent, inspired knowledge of what is evil and what is good.

"The soul and Him who created it. Then showed it what is evil and what is good." (Surah 91:7-8)

Evangelical Comparison: The text posits that the soul is equipped with an innate compass ('showed it what is evil and what is good'). While Evangelical theology acknowledges the 'law written on hearts' (Romans 2:15), it maintains that the human will is in bondage to sin (Romans 3:10-12) and spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). This text implies the soul retains the capacity to choose and execute its own redemption without a mediator, whereas the Bible teaches that the natural man cannot understand or accept the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental incompatibility lies in the mechanism of salvation. Surah 91:9 states, 'Successful is one who redeems it [the soul].' This makes the human being the active agent of their own salvation (Auto-soterism). The Evangelical baseline asserts that Christ is the only Redeemer (Titus 2:14) and that salvation is a gift of grace, not a result of works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Furthermore, the text rejects the need for a mediator, assuming the soul has the inherent power to choose good and purify itself, denying the biblical doctrine of the Fall.

Shared Values:

Monotheism (God as Creator); Moral accountability; Reality of divine judgment; Existence of the soul

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide (Faith Alone) – Salvation is contingent on the work of purification performed by the individual.
2. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – Christ is absent; the soul is saved by its own adherence to moral law, rendering Christ's sacrifice unnecessary.
3. [Major] Anthropology (Total Depravity) – Asserts the soul has innate ability to know and choose good without regeneration.

Semantic Warnings:

"Redeems (Zakkaha)"

In Text: To purify, grow, or develop the soul through moral effort and submission.

Evangelical: To buy back, purchase, or ransom (Greek: apolytrosis) through the payment of a price (Christ's blood).

Example: *In Surah 91:9, man redeems himself by works. In Galatians 3:13, Christ redeems man from the curse of the law.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Success (Falah) - implying prosperity in the afterlife and escape from destruction.

How Attained: By the individual 'redeeming' (purifying) their soul and avoiding 'neglect' (sin).

Basis of Assurance: None offered; assurance is tied to the success of one's own efforts, which is subjective.

Comparison to Sola Fide: Explicitly contradictory. The text says 'Successful is one who redeems it [by works],' while Romans 4:5 says '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. Respect God's signs (implied by the command regarding the camel in v.13)

Implicit Obligations:

1. Purify/Redeem one's own soul
2. Avoid neglecting the soul's moral compass
3. Heed historical warnings of destruction

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text says 'Successful is one who redeems it' (the soul). How do you know when you have done enough to fully redeem your soul?
2. Verse 8 says the soul knows what is evil and good. Do you find that your soul always wants to do the good, or is there a struggle?
3. In the Bible, King David said no man can redeem the soul of another or give God a ransom for him (Psalm 49). If God is the Creator of the soul (v. 7), why is the burden of redeeming it placed on us?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Need for Redemption – The text correctly identifies that the soul needs redemption/purification to be successful. The bridge is that the 'price' of redemption is too high for man to pay. [Psalm 49:7-8 ('No man can redeem the life of another... the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough') -> Mark 10:45 (Christ came to give his life as a ransom).]
2. The Creator of the Soul – Since God designed the soul, He knows how it functions. He knows it is broken. The Manufacturer must be the one to fix it. [Psalm 100:3 ('It is He who made us, and we are his') -> 2 Corinthians 5:17 (New Creation in Christ).]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety / Works-Righteousness [Severe] – The believer carries the terrifying weight of their own eternity. If success depends on 'redeeming' one's own soul, every failure or sin threatens that success. There is no finished work to rest in.
2. Uncertainty [Moderate] – Since the standard is internal purification, the adherent can never be objectively sure they have met the criteria. This leads to a lack of assurance of salvation.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Direct Divine Revelation (the text) and Intuition (the soul's innate knowledge).

Verification Method: Observation of the natural world (verses 1-6) and historical reflection on destroyed civilizations (verses 11-15).

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelicalism relies on the objective, written Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16) as the final arbiter of truth. This text appeals to internal intuition ('showed it what is evil') which the Bible warns is unreliable due to the fall (Proverbs 14:12).

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early)

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad (Divine Revelation via Gabriel according to tradition).

Textual Issues: Rashad Khalifa's translation of verse 9 uses 'redeems' for the Arabic 'zakkaha' (usually 'purifies'). This carries heavy theological baggage for Western readers. Additionally, Khalifa translates verse 15 as 'Yet, those who came after them remain heedless,' whereas standard translations (Pickthall, Yusuf Ali) render it 'And He [God] feareth not the consequences thereof.' Khalifa's rendering shifts the focus from God's sovereignty to human ignorance.