

SURAH 94:1-8

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: Surah 94 (Al-Sharh / The Soothing) | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Rashad Khalifa

OVERVIEW

Surah 94, titled 'Al-Sharh' (The Soothing) or 'Al-Inshirah' (The Expansion), is a short Meccan chapter traditionally understood as a message of consolation to the Prophet Muhammad during a period of intense opposition or spiritual heaviness. In Rashad Khalifa's 1978 translation, the text takes on specific nuances. It opens with rhetorical questions affirming God's intervention in 'cooling' the Prophet's temper and removing a heavy 'load (of sins)' that had burdened his back. This explicit mention of sins is a distinctive interpretative choice by Khalifa, contrasting with traditional Islamic views of prophetic infallibility ('ismah). The central maxim of the text is the repetition that 'with pain there is gain' (traditionally translated as 'hardship' and 'ease'), establishing a principle of divine providence. The surah concludes with an imperative to 'strive' whenever possible and to direct all intention solely toward the Lord. For the believer, it functions as an encouragement to persevere through difficulty, relying on past divine deliverance as evidence for future relief, while maintaining a posture of active labor and monotheistic focus.

KEY FIGURES

Allah (The Speaker, referred to as 'We'), Muhammad (The Recipient, referred to as 'You')

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. DIVINE REMOVAL OF SIN

Assertion: God removes the weight of sin from the individual (specifically the Prophet) through sovereign declaration.

"And we unloaded your load (of sins). One that burdened your back." (94:2-3)

Evangelical Comparison: In this text, the removal of the 'load (of sins)' is presented as a completed action by God ('We unloaded'), seemingly without a mechanism of satisfaction or atonement. God simply lifts the burden. In contrast, Evangelical theology asserts that sin creates a debt of justice that must be paid. While God removes the sin in both systems, the Evangelical mechanism is the cross of Christ (Colossians 2:14), where the 'handwriting of requirements' is nailed to the cross, rather than simply being 'unloaded' by a sovereign wish. Furthermore, Khalifa's translation implies Muhammad had sins to unload, which aligns with the biblical view of universal human depravity (Romans 3:23) but contradicts the traditional Islamic doctrine of 'ismah (prophetic sinlessness).

2. THE CYCLE OF HARDSHIP AND RELIEF

Assertion: Pain and hardship are intrinsically linked with gain and relief; this is a divine law.

"Indeed, with pain there is gain." (94:6)

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts a promise of temporal relief or 'gain' accompanying pain. Evangelicalism acknowledges that suffering produces perseverance (Romans 5:3-4), but the 'gain' is often spiritual maturity or eternal glory (2 Corinthians 4:17), not necessarily temporal relief or worldly gain. The Quranic promise here is often interpreted as victory in this life following the struggle, whereas the Biblical promise is the presence of Christ *in* the struggle.

3. SALVATION THROUGH STRIVING

Assertion: The appropriate response to God's favor is to strive whenever possible.

"Whenever possible you shall strive." (94:7)

Evangelical Comparison: The command to 'strive' (Arabic root usually implies labor or toil) suggests that the believer's standing or gratitude is expressed through rigorous effort. While Christians are created for good works (Ephesians 2:10), the command here frames the relationship with God as one of continuous exertion. This leans toward a works-righteousness paradigm where the burden of maintaining the relationship rests on the believer's striving, contrasting with the 'rest' offered in Hebrews 4.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental theological gap lies in the mechanism of redemption. Surah 94:2 claims God 'unloaded' the sins. In Evangelical theology, God cannot simply dismiss sin without violating His justice; the penalty must be paid (Romans 3:25-26). Therefore, this text presents a soteriology of 'Divine Fiat' (God says it is gone, so it is gone) versus 'Divine Satisfaction' (Christ paid the debt). Additionally, the command to 'strive' (v7) as the culmination of the text places the onus of spiritual maintenance on the believer's effort, creating a 'Galatian' problem (Galatians 3:3) where one seeks to be perfected by the flesh.

Shared Values:

Monotheism (One God); God as the source of comfort; The reality of human burden and sin; The expectation of relief after suffering

Friction Points:

- 1. [Critical] Christology (The Atonement) – Claims sin is removed by God's will alone, rendering Christ's sacrifice unnecessary.
- 2. [Major] Sola Gratia – Implies that while God removes the burden, the human response is a command to 'strive,' suggesting a works-maintenance relationship.
- 3. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Presents post-apostolic revelation as authoritative divine speech.

Semantic Warnings:

"Load (of sins)"

In Text: A burden on Muhammad's back that God removed (Khalifa's specific parenthetical insertion).
Evangelical: Sin is a debt and a stain that separates man from God, removable only by blood atonement (Hebrews 9:22).
Example: *In this text, the 'load' is removed to give comfort. In the Bible, the 'load' of sin is removed to satisfy justice and reconcile the sinner to a holy God.*

"Gain"

In Text: Relief, ease, or success following pain.
Evangelical: Often refers to spiritual profit, even amidst loss (Philippians 1:21 'to die is gain').
Example: *The text promises gain *after* pain. The Bible often promises Christ *in* the pain.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly defined here as the removal of the 'load (of sins)' and the exaltation of status.
How Attained: By Divine initiative ('We unloaded'), followed by human striving ('You shall strive').
Basis of Assurance: Past performance of God (He did it before, He will provide gain after pain).
Comparison to Sola Fide: The text does not mention faith as the instrument of justification. It focuses on God's sovereign action and man's subsequent striving. It lacks the 'by faith alone' component, replacing it with 'striving' as the lifestyle of the redeemed.

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

- 1. Strive whenever possible (v7)
- 2. Seek only your Lord (v8)

Implicit Obligations:

- 1. Acknowledge God as the source of relief
- 2. Endure pain with the expectation of gain
- 3. Maintain monotheistic focus

Ritual Requirements:

1. The command to 'strive' (v7) is often interpreted in Islamic jurisprudence as standing for prayer (Salah) after finishing other duties, though Khalifa's translation leaves it as a general command to work/strive.

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 2, Khalifa translates that God unloaded a 'load (of sins)' from the Prophet. What kind of sins do you think burdened him?
2. If even the Prophet had a 'load of sins' that needed to be unloaded, how does the average person get their load of sins removed?
3. The text says 'Whenever possible you shall strive.' Do you ever feel like your striving isn't enough to please God?
4. How does God remove the 'load of sins' in Islam? Is there a payment for that debt, or does He just overlook it?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Burdened Back – The text acknowledges that sin is a physical and spiritual weight that breaks a person's back. We cannot carry it. [Psalm 38:4 ('My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear') and 1 Peter 2:24 ('He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross'). Jesus took the load that breaks our back onto His own.]
2. The Need for Cooling/Soothing – The human heart is inflamed with passion, fear, and anger. We need divine peace. [John 14:27 ('Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you... Do not let your hearts be troubled').]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Uncertainty of Forgiveness [Severe] – If the Prophet's sins were removed by a special act of God, the average believer is left wondering if God will do the same for them. There is no universal promise of atonement here, only a historical report of what God did for Muhammad.
2. Performance Pressure [Moderate] – The command 'Whenever possible you shall strive' creates a cycle where every free moment must be filled with religious effort to maintain standing. This leads to burnout and a fear of 'wasting time' that could have been used to earn merit.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Divine Revelation (Wah'y)

Verification Method: Self-referential assertion; the text asks rhetorical questions ('Did we not?') expecting the recipient's experiential confirmation.

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on historical verification of the resurrection and the consistency of the prophetic witness (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). This text relies on the subjective internal experience of the recipient (Muhammad) regarding his 'temper' and 'load.'

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early in Muhammad's career).

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad (Divine revelation via Gabriel according to Islam); Translated by Rashad Khalifa (1978).

Textual Issues: Khalifa's translation inserts '(of sins)' in verse 2. The Arabic word is 'wizrak' (your burden). While 'wizr' can mean sin, standard translations often render it as 'burden' to avoid attributing sin to the Prophet. Khalifa's translation reflects his rejection of traditional Hadith which protect the doctrine of 'ismah (sinlessness).