

SURAH 95 (AL-TIN)

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

OVERVIEW

Surah 95, titled 'The Fig' (Al-Tin), is a Meccan surah that addresses the fundamental nature of humanity and divine judgment. The text opens with a series of oaths invoking the fig, the olive, Mount Sinai, and Mecca ('this honored town'). These locations are traditionally interpreted as referencing the locales of great prophets (Jesus/Jerusalem, Moses/Sinai, Muhammad/Mecca). The central argument is anthropological and soteriological: God created humanity in the 'best design' (ahsan taqwim), implying an original state of purity or perfection. However, humanity is subsequently reduced to the 'lowliest of the lowly' (asfala safilin). The text provides an exception clause: this degradation is avoided only by those who 'believe and lead a righteous life.' In Rashad Khalifa's specific translation, the result of this righteousness is a reward described as 'well deserved,' emphasizing a merit-based outcome. The surah concludes by challenging the listener's rejection of faith and affirming God's sovereignty as the wisest Judge.

KEY FIGURES

God (Allah), Man (Humanity), Moses (implied by Mount Sinai), Muhammad (implied by 'this honored town')

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. AHSAN TAQWIM (BEST STATURE)

Assertion: Humanity was originally created in a state of perfection or optimal design.

"We created man in the best design." (095:004)

Evangelical Comparison: Islam teaches that humans were created in the best stature, physically and spiritually. Evangelicalism shares the view that creation was originally 'very good' (Genesis 1:31) and that humans bear the Imago Dei. However, Islam generally rejects the concept of Original Sin (inherited guilt from Adam). While this text acknowledges a fall to 'lowliest of the lowly,' Islamic theology typically views this as a potential for failure or a test, rather than an inherited nature of total depravity requiring a new birth.

2. CONDITIONAL MERIT

Assertion: Salvation and reward are contingent upon the combination of belief and the performance of righteous deeds.

"Except those who believe and lead a righteous life; they receive a reward that is well deserved." (095:006)

Evangelical Comparison: The Khalifa translation explicitly uses the phrase 'well deserved' to describe the reward of the righteous. This establishes a transactional soteriology where human effort obligates God to reward. Evangelicalism teaches that wages are what we deserve (death, Romans 6:23), while eternal life is the 'gift of God' (Ephesians 2:8-9), not of works. The text posits that man escapes the 'lowliest' state through his own performance, whereas the Bible teaches man is dead in sin and requires external resurrection by Christ.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of redemption. Surah 95 acknowledges a 'fall' of sorts (from best design to lowliest), but the remedy is auto-soteric: the human agent must believe and perform works to escape this state. The Khalifa translation emphasizes this by calling the reward 'well deserved.' Evangelical theology asserts that humans are incapable of escaping their lowly state (total depravity) and that any 'reward' is actually the merit of Christ imputed to the believer (Sola Fide). The text denies the necessity of a mediator or substitutionary atonement.

Shared Values:

Monotheism; God as Creator; Humanity has a special status in creation; Reality of moral judgment

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – The text claims the reward is 'well deserved,' explicitly denying that salvation is an unmerited gift.
2. [Major] Anthropology (Total Depravity) – Suggests humans can maintain their 'best design' through their own volition and works, denying the bondage of the will to sin.
3. [Critical] Christology (Sufficiency of Christ) – No mediator is mentioned; the transaction is directly between the human's works and God's judgment.

Semantic Warnings:

"Reward"

In Text: Payment that is 'well deserved' based on performance of righteous life.

Evangelical: Often refers to crowns given to believers for service, but distinct from 'Salvation' which is a free gift (Romans 6:23).

Example: *In this text, the reward (salvation from lowliness) is earned. In the Bible, salvation is a gift; rewards are secondary honors for the saved.*

"Righteous Life"

In Text: A prerequisite for escaping the 'lowliest' state.

Evangelical: The fruit of salvation, not the root or cause of it (Ephesians 2:10).

Example: *The text implies one becomes righteous to be saved; the Bible teaches one is saved to become righteous.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Escaping the state of 'lowliest of the lowly' and receiving a reward.

How Attained: By believing and leading a righteous life.

Basis of Assurance: The assurance is based on the quality of one's own life ('well deserved').

Comparison to Sola Fide: The text explicitly adds 'lead a righteous life' as a condition alongside belief for the reward. This violates Sola Fide (Galatians 2:16).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Believe (implied by the exception clause)
2. Lead a righteous life

Implicit Obligations:

1. Acknowledge the sanctity of the locations mentioned (Sinai, Mecca)
2. Accept God's judgment as supreme wisdom

Ritual Requirements:

1. Pilgrimage (Hajj) is implied by the reference to 'this honored town' (Mecca) in the broader Islamic context, though not explicitly detailed in this short text.

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text says the reward is 'well deserved.' How do you determine when your righteous life is good enough to deserve heaven?
2. If God created us in the 'best design' but we can become the 'lowliest of the lowly,' is it possible to lose that status again after gaining it?
3. What does it mean to you that God swears by Mount Sinai (associated with Law) and the Fig/Olive (often associated with previous prophets)?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Fall from Best to Lowest – This mirrors the Biblical narrative of Creation (Good) and Fall (Sin). We agree that humanity is broken and far from our original design. [Romans 3:23 ('For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God') connects the loss of glory (best design) to the need for justification freely by grace.]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance Anxiety [Severe] – The believer must constantly strive to ensure their life is 'righteous' enough to make their reward 'well deserved.' There is no rest in a finished work.
2. Fear of Degradation [Moderate] – The threat of being turned into the 'lowliest of the lowly' hangs over the believer who fails to maintain righteousness.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Divine Oath/Revelation

Verification Method: Reflection on the natural world (fig/olive) and historical sites (Sinai/Mecca) as witnesses to the truth.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: Meccan Period (Early Islamic history)

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad (Divine Revelation via Gabriel in Islamic view); Khalifa translation 1978.

Textual Issues: Khalifa translates the Arabic 'ghayru mamnun' as 'well deserved.' Standard translations (Pickthall, Yusuf Ali, Sahih International) render this as 'unfailing,' 'unending,' or 'without reproach.' Khalifa's translation inserts a stronger theological claim of merit ('deserved') than the Arabic necessarily dictates, reflecting his specific theological emphasis.