

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Surah An-Naml

The Ant · Makki · 93 ayat — reflections on surah 27 of the Qur'an

QURAN

CONTENTS

Surah An-Naml

1	The surah in brief	What it is, when it came, what it sets out to do
2	Its themes	5 threads running through the surah
3	Key verses	4 passages, with a reflection on each
4	Reading it closely	4 sections
5	Carrying it	4 things to take from it

النمل — An-Naml, “The Ant”. Surah 27 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 93 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/27/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Through the gifts given to Dawud, Sulayman, and the account of Sheba's queen, alongside Musa and Salih, the surah displays God's knowledge and dominion, calling people to gratitude and warning that only He answers the distressed and raises the dead.

An-Naml carries the Qur'an as glad tidings and guidance, then unfolds three narratives that reward gratitude and expose arrogance. Musa receives his call at the fire; Dawud and Sulayman are given knowledge, and Sulayman — taught the speech of birds and given command over jinn and wind — overhears an ant warning its colony and thanks God for the favor (27:19). The hoopoe's report leads to the exchange with the Queen of Sheba, whose throne is fetched in the blink of an eye and who submits to the Lord of the worlds. Salih's Thamud and Lut's people follow as warnings, before the surah presses a series of questions — who created, who answers the distressed, who guides — each ending 'is there a god beside God?' (27:59–64). Al-Qurtubi notes the arc moves from gratitude for blessing to the certainty that only the Creator answers the one in need.

TWO

Its themes

- Gratitude for divine favor
- Sulayman's knowledge and kingdom
- The Queen of Sheba's submission
- Rhetorical proofs of tawhid
- Who answers the distressed

THREE

Key verses

So he smiled, amused at her speech; and he said: "O my Lord! so order me that I may be grateful for Thy favours, which thou hast bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I may work the righteousness that will please Thee: And admit me, by Thy Grace, to the ranks of Thy righteous Servants."

Qur'an 27:19

Sulayman smiles and prays to be enabled to thank God for His favor and to do righteousness — al-Sa'di reads gratitude here as itself a favor one must ask God's help to fulfill.

"It is from Solomon, and is (as follows): 'In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful:

Qur'an 27:30

Sulayman's letter opens 'in the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful' — Ibn Kathir cites this as evidence for beginning affairs with the basmalah.

Or, Who listens to the (soul) distressed when it calls on Him, and Who relieves its suffering, and makes you (mankind) inheritors of the earth? (Can there be another) god besides Allah? Little it is that ye heed!

Qur'an 27:62

'Who answers the distressed when he calls, and removes the evil?' — the mufasssirun make this the heart's proof of tawhid: in true desperation people instinctively call upon God alone.

Thou seest the mountains and thinkest them firmly fixed: but they shall pass away as the clouds pass away: (such is) the artistry of Allah, who disposes of all things in perfect order: for he is well acquainted with all that ye do.

Qur'an 27:88

Mountains you think fixed will pass like clouds on that Day — al-Qurtubi reads the image as a warning that even earth's most solid things are in motion under God's decree.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

An-Naml is a Makki surah, part of a closely related trio (ash-Shu‘ara’, an-Naml, al-Qasas) that share the disjointed letters Ta-Sin and a common concern with the stories of the prophets. Where ash-Shu‘ara’ emphasised the destruction of deniers and al-Qasas will dwell on the trials of the persecuted, an-Naml strikes a distinctly warmer, more wondrous note. It opens by calling itself "guidance and good tidings for the believers" (27:2), and its dominant emotion is gratitude — the recognition of favour and the duty to thank the Giver.

The surah takes its name from a single charming moment: an ant warning her colony to take shelter lest Sulayman's marching host crush them unknowingly (27:18), and Sulayman smiling and thanking Allah for the favour of understanding it. That small scene captures the surah's spirit — a universe teeming with speech and awareness we cannot ordinarily perceive, all of it under the knowledge of God, and the proper human response of gratitude and humility before it. An-Naml is a surah about who truly holds knowledge and power, and about how a soul that recognises this responds.

How the surah unfolds

After the opening praise of the Qur‘an as guidance for the believers who establish prayer and are certain of the Hereafter (27:1-6), the surah begins with Musa at the fire (27:7-14) — the moment of his commissioning, the staff that becomes a

serpent, the hand that shines white, and the sending to Pharaoh whose people rejected the signs "out of injustice and arrogance, while their souls were convinced of them" (27:14). That phrase sets a theme: denial is often not ignorance but arrogance overriding inner certainty.

The surah then gives its centrepiece: the extended narrative of Dawud and especially Sulayman (27:15–44), unique to this surah in its detail. Sulayman and Dawud are given knowledge and give thanks. Sulayman inherits Dawud, is taught "the speech of the birds," and is granted a kingdom of jinn, men, and birds marshalled in ranks. Then comes the ant, and Sulayman's smile and his beautiful prayer: "My Lord, enable me to be grateful for Your favour which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents, and to do righteousness of which You approve" (27:19). The hoopoe returns with news of the queen of Sheba (Saba), a people who prostrate to the sun instead of to Allah. Sulayman sends a letter; the queen, wise and cautious, tests him with a gift, which he refuses — "What Allah has given me is better than what He has given you" (27:36). Her throne is brought before her by one who had knowledge of the Book in the time it takes to blink (27:40), and finally, entering his glass-floored palace which she mistakes for water, she recognises the futility of her former worship and submits "with Sulayman, to Allah, the Lord of the worlds" (27:44). This story of a mighty ruler who is guided rather than destroyed is deliberately different from the surrounding pattern.

The surah then returns to the older pattern of warned peoples with two shorter accounts: Salih and Thamud (27:45–53), where nine corrupt men plot against him and are themselves

destroyed while the believers are saved; and Lut and his people (27:54–58), destroyed for their transgression. These briefer episodes remind the reader that the mercy shown to Sheba is offered to all, but arrogance forfeits it.

The surah's final movement (27:59–93) is a sustained argument from the signs of creation. In a series of rhetorical questions each ending "Is there a deity with Allah?", it asks who created the heavens and earth and sends down rain that makes gardens grow, who made the earth stable with rivers and firm mountains and a barrier between the two seas, who answers the distressed when he calls and removes his affliction and makes you successors in the earth, who guides you in the darkneses of land and sea and sends the winds before His mercy (27:60–64). None of the false gods can claim any of it. It then confronts the deniers of resurrection, describes the terror and the security of the Day, mentions the Beast that will emerge as a sign (27:82), and ends with a majestic close: on that Day the mountains you thought firm will pass like clouds (27:88); the Prophet ﷺ is commanded only to worship the Lord of this city and to recite the Qur'an and to be among the Muslims (27:91–92); and the final verse promises, "He will show you His signs, and you will recognise them" (27:93).

The major themes, in depth

The first theme is knowledge as a divine gift that demands gratitude. The Sulayman narrative is saturated with knowledge — the speech of birds, the counsel of the ant, the hoopoe's intelligence-gathering, and the man who had "knowledge of the Book" and could move a throne in an instant. Yet at no point is

this knowledge presented as Sulayman's own achievement; it is 'ilm given by Allah, and Sulayman's defining reaction is not pride but the prayer to be made grateful (27:19). The surah contrasts this with Pharaoh's people, who had inner certainty of the truth but rejected it out of arrogance (27:14). Knowledge, the surah teaches, either bends the soul toward thankful worship or hardens it into arrogant denial; the same gift saves one and damns another.

The second theme is guidance offered to the powerful, not only judgement upon them. The queen of Sheba is the surah's great counter-example to the pattern of destroyed nations. She is portrayed with real dignity — prudent, consultative, unwilling to rush to war, testing before submitting. And she is not destroyed; she is guided. Her journey from prostrating to the sun to submitting "with Sulayman, to Allah, the Lord of the worlds" shows that even a mighty, misdirected civilisation can be won by evidence and wisdom rather than crushed by force. Placed against Thamud and Lut's people, who forfeited the same offer through arrogance, Sheba tells the reader that the door of guidance is open to anyone, however powerful, who is willing to see.

The third theme is tawhid argued from gratitude for the created order. The surah's closing section is one of the Qur'an's most beautiful sustained arguments for the oneness of God, and it works entirely through favours: rain and gardens, stable earth and rivers, the answering of the desperate caller, guidance through darkness, provision from the heavens and the earth. After each, the challenge falls: "Is there a deity with Allah?" — a question the idolaters cannot answer, because they know

in their hearts that only Allah does these things. The argument is not abstract; it is an appeal to lived experience of blessing. To recognise the favour is already to recognise the Giver, and to worship anything beside Him is to be ungrateful to the only One who ever provided.

Points of reflection

An-Naml invites us to meet knowledge and success the way Sulayman did — with a smile and a prayer of gratitude rather than a swelling of the self. Every gift we hold, from intelligence to authority to wealth, is a favour we did not create, and the surah models the one safe response: "My Lord, enable me to be grateful." Ingratitude, the surah warns through Pharaoh's people, can coexist with perfect knowledge of the truth.

It teaches us to look at the world as a field of signs pointing to a single Answerer. The refrain "Is there a deity with Allah?" is meant to be carried out of the surah and into daily life: every rainfall, every rescue from distress, every guidance through a dark and confusing path is an argument, freshly renewed, for turning the whole heart to Him alone.

And it holds out hope for the proud and the lost. If a sun-worshipping queen at the head of a great kingdom could be brought, through wisdom and honest reflection, to submit to the Lord of the worlds, then no one is beyond guidance — neither those we are tempted to write off, nor ourselves. The surah's final promise is a gentle certainty: "He will show you His signs, and you will recognise them."

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Even the ability to thank God is a gift to be asked for, as Sulayman did.
2. Real power lies in submission to the Lord of the worlds, as the Queen learned.
3. In genuine distress the heart turns to God alone, testifying to His oneness.
4. Nothing in creation is as fixed as it seems; all of it answers to God.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, al-Qurtubi, al-Sa'di, al-Tabari. A summary is not a tafsir: for the verse-by-verse treatment go to the works themselves, or to the close studies at deen2u.com/tadabbur/.