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Surah Al-Qasas

The Stories · Makki · 88 ayat — reflections on surah
28 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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Surah Al-Qasas

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القصص — Al-Qasas, “The Stories”. Surah 28 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 88 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/28/.

ONE

The surah in brief

The full story of Musa, from infancy in Pharaoh's house to prophethood, showing how God raises the weak and humbles the tyrant, reassuring the Prophet ﷺ that the God who returned Musa to safety will grant him victory too.

Al-Qasas tells the full story of Musa from a position of weakness to strength: his mother inspired to cast him into the river, his rescue into Pharaoh's own house, the accidental killing and flight to Madyan, his years of work and marriage, and his call at the sacred valley to confront the tyrant (28:3-35). Woven through it is the theme that God raises the oppressed and brings down the proud, sealed by the account of Qarun, a man of Musa's people whose treasures and conceit swallowed him into the earth (28:76-82). The surah reassures the Prophet, then exiled from Makkah, that the One who ordained the Qur'an will return him home (28:85). It ends on the starkest tawhid: everything perishes except His Face (28:88). Ibn Kathir reads Qarun as the counterweight to Pharaoh — tyranny of power and tyranny of wealth both crushed by God.

OCCASIONS OF REVELATION

Why it was revealed

These are the occasions (asbāb al-nuzūl) that the authentic collections narrate for verses of this surah. An occasion explains a verse; it does not limit its meaning.

Qur'an 28:56

After Abu Talib died refusing to profess that there is no god but Allah, Allah revealed about him, "Verily! You guide not whom you like, but Allah guides whom He will."

"And then Allah revealed especially about Abu Talib"

Al-Musayyab ibn Hazn · Sahih al-Bukhari 4772

TWO

Its themes

- God's plan behind weakness
- Deliverance of the oppressed
- The story of Musa
- Qarun and the trial of wealth
- Everything perishes but God

THREE

Key verses

So We sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses: "Suckle (thy child), but when thou hast fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve: for We shall restore him to thee, and We shall make him one of Our messengers."

Qur'an 28:7

God inspires Musa's mother to release him to the river with the promise 'We will return him to you' — al-Sa'di reads it as trust that God's command can make the very source of danger the path to safety.

So he watered (their flocks) for them; then he turned back to the shade, and said: "O my Lord! truly am I in (desperate) need of any good that Thou dost send me!"

Qur'an 28:24

Exhausted and alone, Musa prays 'my Lord, I am in need of whatever good You send me' — Ibn Kathir notes this humble du'a was answered at once with shelter, work, and family.

"But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah has bestowed on thee, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world: but do thou good, as Allah has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for Allah loves not those who do mischief."

Qur'an 28:77

'Seek the home of the Hereafter with what God has given you, and do not forget your share of this world' — the mufasssirun read this as the balanced ethic given to Qarun, who ignored it.

And call not, besides Allah, on another god. There is no god but He. Everything (that exists) will perish except His own Face. To Him belongs the Command, and to Him will ye (all) be brought back.

Qur'an 28:88

'Everything will perish except His Face' — al-Qurtubi presents this as the summit of tawhid, anchoring the heart to the one Reality that outlasts all else.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Qasas — "The Stories" — is the third of the Ta-Sin group of Makki surahs, and it completes a movement begun in an-Naml. Where an-Naml gave us Musa's commissioning and Sulayman's glory, al-Qasas returns to Musa and tells his story from the beginning, in more human and intimate detail than anywhere else in the Qur'an: his birth under a death sentence, his mother's terror, his upbringing in the very house of his enemy, his exile, his marriage, and finally his call. It is the fullest single-surah biography of a prophet's early life.

The surah was revealed to a persecuted, powerless Muslim community in Makkah, and its purpose is unmistakable in that light. It is a message to the weak and hunted: look how Allah dealt with Pharaoh, the mightiest tyrant of his age, and with a helpless infant floated on a river. The surah's whole architecture argues that outcomes belong to God, not to the powerful — and it drives the point home at its close with the story of Qarun, a man from Musa's own people who was destroyed not by political power but by the arrogance of wealth. Al-Qasas is the Qur'an's great meditation on the reversal of fortunes: the mighty brought low, the lowly raised, and the earth given in the end to the humble and the righteous.

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens by setting the scene of tyranny: Pharaoh had exalted himself in the land, divided its people into factions, oppressing one group of them, slaughtering their sons and sparing their women — he was of the corrupters (28:4). And then, immediately, the divine counter-purpose: "We wanted to show favour to those who were oppressed in the land and to make them leaders and make them the inheritors" (28:5). This is the thesis stated before the story begins. The narrative then illustrates it. Musa's mother is inspired to place her infant in the river; the ayah captures her heart trembling on the edge of despair, steadied only by Allah's promise to return him to her (28:7-13). The child is drawn from the water by Pharaoh's own household, becomes the delight of Pharaoh's wife, and — through the sister who watches from afar — is returned to his mother's own breast to be nursed, "so that her eye might be comforted and she would not grieve" (28:13). The tyrant's palace becomes the safest cradle for the one who will undo him.

Musa grows, and in a single unpremeditated moment strikes and kills an Egyptian who was oppressing an Israelite (28:15). Stricken with remorse, he prays for forgiveness and is forgiven, but the deed is discovered and he must flee. A man comes running from the far side of the city to warn him that the authorities are plotting to kill him (28:20) — a recurring motif in the surah of unexpected help arriving in extremity. Musa escapes to Madyan, where at the well he waters the flocks of two women too modest to push through the crowd of men (28:23-24), and then makes his quiet prayer: "My Lord, indeed I am, for whatever good You send down to me, in need" (28:24).

Provision comes at once: he is invited into the household of the old man of Madyan, marries one of the daughters, and works for him eight to ten years (28:27). The surah lingers on this stretch of ordinary, patient, honest labour — the exiled fugitive learning shepherding and trust before he is entrusted with a nation.

Only then, journeying back with his family, does Musa see the fire on the side of the mount and receive his call (28:29–35). He is sent with the signs to Pharaoh, is given his brother Harun as support, and the surah compresses the confrontation, Pharaoh's arrogant claim to be the highest lord, his command to Haman to build a tower to "look at the God of Musa," and the drowning of Pharaoh and his hosts (28:36–42). The reversal promised in 28:5 is complete.

The surah then turns to the Prophet ﷺ directly (28:43–75). It affirms that Muhammad ﷺ was not present at any of these events — he did not stand on the western side of the mount, he was not among the people of Madyan — so his knowledge of them is itself a sign of revelation (28:44–46). It answers the objection that a messenger should have come, rebuts those who say "why was he not given the like of what Musa was given" by noting they rejected Musa too (28:48), and delivers a striking argument to the ungrateful: if Allah made the night perpetual, or the day perpetual, which god besides Him could bring relief (28:71–73)? It reminds them that the good life of this world is a fleeting enjoyment, and what is with Allah is better and more lasting (28:60).

The final movement is the story of Qarun (28:76–82), a man of Musa's own people whom Allah had given such treasure that the keys of his vaults would burden a band of strong men. Warned by the wise among his people not to exult, for Allah loves not the exultant, and to seek the home of the Hereafter with what Allah had given him without forgetting his share of this world (28:77), Qarun answered, "I was only given it because of knowledge I possess" (28:78). He went out among his people in his finery, and those dazzled by the world envied him — until the earth swallowed him and his house, and those who had wished to be in his place awoke to say, "Had Allah not been gracious to us, He would have caused it to swallow us too" (28:82). The surah then delivers its verdict: that home of the Hereafter is for those who seek neither exaltation nor corruption in the land, and the good end belongs to the God-fearing (28:83). It closes by consoling the Prophet ﷺ that the One who ordained the Qur'an for him will return him to a place of return, and that "everything will perish except His Face" (28:88).

The major themes, in depth

The first theme is the sovereignty of God over the powerful — the reversal of fortunes. The surah opens with a statement of divine intent (28:5–6) and then narrates its fulfilment so meticulously that no reader can miss it. Pharaoh kills the sons of Israel to prevent a deliverer; Allah raises that deliverer inside Pharaoh's own home, fed by Pharaoh's own wealth, loved by Pharaoh's own wife. The tyrant's every precaution becomes the instrument of his undoing. To a persecuted community in Makkah this was electric hope: the arrangements of the mighty are not the last word, and the God who floated Musa to safety

on the Nile can carry the believers through their own oppression. The surah universalises the lesson in 28:5 — Allah's way is to make leaders and inheritors of those who were deemed weak.

The second theme is provision, trust, and the dignity of the powerless. The middle of the surah is quieter than its dramatic frame, and deliberately so. A hunted fugitive, alone and afraid in a strange land, waters two women's flocks out of simple decency and then confesses his utter need to Allah (28:24). Everything he lacks — shelter, family, work, safety — is given, not through his own scheming but through Allah's provision channelled through good people. The surah honours patient, honest labour: Musa the future prophet spends a decade as a shepherd in service before he is called. The lesson for the weak is that the same God who topples Pharaohs also notices a lonely man at a well, and that turning to Him in one's need is never in vain.

The third theme, delivered through Qarun, is the deceit of wealth and status. Qarun is the surah's warning to the believers themselves, lest, having been taught not to fear the powerful, they come to envy the wealthy. His error is precisely the opposite of gratitude: "I was only given it because of my own knowledge" (28:78) — the claim that his fortune was self-made and self-owned, owing nothing to God. He is counselled to use wealth for the Hereafter while not neglecting his lawful share of this world, and to do good as Allah has done good to him (28:77) — a balanced ethic of wealth that neither despises the world nor worships it. His refusal, his ostentatious parade, and the crowd's envy, all end in the earth swallowing him. The surah's

closing verdict names the alternative: those who seek neither self-exaltation nor corruption are the ones for whom the final home is prepared (28:83). Pharaoh represents the arrogance of political power, Qarun the arrogance of wealth; the surah buries them both.

Points of reflection

Al-Qasas is a lifeline for anyone who feels crushed by forces larger than themselves. It asks us to believe that God's promise to the oppressed (28:5) is as real as Pharaoh's throne was, and to see, in the very structure of Musa's story, that the schemes of tyrants are woven into their own defeat. Hope here is not naïve optimism but a reading of how God actually works in history.

It teaches the discipline of turning to Allah in our need and trusting Him through the ordinary, unglamorous stretches of life. Musa's decade of shepherding reminds us that preparation is quiet and long, that honest work and simple decency toward others are part of the path, and that the humble prayer of one who admits his poverty before God — "I am in need of whatever good You send me" — is answered.

And it warns us to guard our hearts against both fear of the powerful and envy of the wealthy. Qarun's fate is a mirror for our own age of dazzling fortunes: to say "I earned this myself" is to forget the Giver, and the world we are tempted to envy is a fleeting enjoyment. The surah leaves us with the only stable ground — "everything will perish except His Face" (28:88) — and with the good end reserved for those who seek neither arrogance nor corruption upon the earth.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. God can turn the very place of danger into the means of rescue.
2. A sincere du'a of need in a low moment can open every door at once.
3. Wealth is a trust for the Hereafter, not a proof of one's own greatness.
4. Attach the heart to what endures — the Face of God — not to what perishes.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, al-Sa'di, al-Qurtubi, 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/.