

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Surah Saba

Sheba · Makki · 54 ayat — reflections on surah 34 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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Surah Saba

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سَبَأٌ — Saba, "Sheba". Surah 34 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 54 ayat.
The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/34/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Contrasting grateful Dawud and Sulayman with ungrateful Sheba, whose ease turned to ruin, the surah affirms God's all-encompassing knowledge and the certainty of Resurrection, refuting those who mock the Messenger and deny the Hour.

Saba opens with praise to the God who owns all in the heavens and earth and to whom praise belongs in the Hereafter too (34:1), then displays His favors upon Dawud and Sulayman — mountains and birds joining Dawud's praise, iron made soft, and wind, jinn, and springs placed at Sulayman's command.

Sulayman's death, hidden until a worm gnawed through his staff, exposes that the jinn had no knowledge of the unseen (34:14).

Against this the people of Sheba, blessed with two gardens and a 'good land,' met ingratitude with the bursting of their dam and the scattering of their prosperity (34:15–19). The surah affirms the Prophet was sent to all mankind as a bringer of good news and a warner (34:28), and repeatedly notes how few are truly grateful (34:13). Ibn Kathir reads Sheba as the standing lesson that blessings withdrawn follow blessings unthanked.

TWO

Its themes

- God's dominion and praise
- The gifts of Dawud and Sulayman
- Gratitude versus ingratitude
- The ruin of Sheba
- A messenger to all mankind

THREE

Key verses

They worked for him as he desired, (making) arches, images, basins as large as reservoirs, and (cooking) cauldrons fixed (in their places): "Work ye, sons of David, with thanks! but few of My servants are grateful!"

Qur'an 34:13

'Few of My servants are truly grateful' — al-Sa'di reads this as both a diagnosis and a challenge, since real, sustained gratitude is rarer than it seems.

There was, for Saba, aforetime, a Sign in their home-land - two Gardens to the right and to the left. "Eat of the Sustenance (provided) by your Lord, and be grateful to Him: a territory fair and happy, and a Lord Oft-Forgiving!"

Qur'an 34:15

Sheba is told 'a good land and a forgiving Lord' — Ibn Kathir notes they had every reason for thankfulness, which makes their turning away the sharper warning.

But they said: "Our Lord! Place longer distances between our journey-stages": but they wronged themselves (therein). At length We made them as a tale (that is told), and We dispersed them all in scattered fragments. Verily in this are Signs for every (soul that is) patiently constant and grateful.

Qur'an 34:19

After the flood they became 'scattered stories' — the mufasssirun read their dispersal as the fate of a people who traded gratitude for arrogance and were made a byword.

We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men understand not.

Qur'an 34:28

'We sent you only to all mankind, as a bearer of good news and a warner' — al-Qurtubi cites this for the universality of the Prophet's mission beyond any single people.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Surah Saba, named for the ancient South Arabian kingdom of Sheba, is a Makkan surah of fifty-four verses. Like its neighbours it argues the great Makkan case for tawhid and resurrection, but it does so with a distinctive instrument: gratitude. The surah is framed, from its first verse to its last, by the question of whether human beings will recognise God's blessings and thank Him, or take them for granted and be ruined — and it dramatises this with two great historical exhibits, the grateful house of David and Solomon, and the ungrateful nation of Sheba.

It opens with praise: all praise belongs to God, to whom belongs everything in the heavens and the earth, and to Him belongs praise in the Hereafter (34:1). This double praise — in this world and the next — sets the tone. The surah's mood is confident and expansive, sweeping from God's total knowledge of every atom, through the wonders granted to two prophet-kings, to the sudden collapse of a civilisation that forgot its Benefactor, and finally to a series of sharp challenges thrown at the idolaters of Makkah about who really provides for them and who they will call upon when terror seizes them.

How the surah unfolds

After the opening praise and an affirmation of God's exhaustive knowledge — not an atom's weight in the heavens or earth escapes Him (34:3) — the surah confronts the deniers of resurrection, who mock the idea and call the man who preaches

it either a liar or a madman (34:7–8). It answers by pointing to the sky and earth encompassing them: if God willed, He could cause the ground to swallow them or a fragment of heaven to fall (34:9). Let them look up and down and consider Who holds it all.

The surah then presents its first great example: David and Solomon (34:10–14). To David, God gave a special favour — the mountains and the birds echoed his glorification of God, and iron was made soft in his hands so he could fashion armour. To Solomon, God subjected the wind, which travelled a month's journey in a morning and a month in an evening, and made a fount of molten copper flow for him, and set the jinn to labour at his command, building sanctuaries, statues, basins, and cauldrons. And the refrain to this house is a command: 'Work, O family of David, in gratitude' (34:13) — for few of My servants are truly grateful. The passage ends with the death of Solomon: he sat leaning on his staff, and the jinn kept toiling, unaware he had died, until a creature of the earth gnawed through the staff and he fell — proof that the jinn, whom the pagans imagined knew the unseen, knew nothing of it (34:14).

The second example is the counterweight: the people of Sheba (34:15–19). They had a sign in their homeland — two gardens, right and left, watered abundantly; a good land and a forgiving Lord. They were told simply: eat of your Lord's provision and thank Him. But they turned away, so God sent upon them the flood of the dam (sayl al-'arim), which burst and turned their two lush gardens into scrubland of bitter fruit, tamarisk, and a

few lote trees. Their united, prosperous land was scattered, and they became mere tales — a proverb of ruin. This, the surah says, is how God requites ingratitude.

The surah then confirms that Iblis's low estimate of humanity was borne out by most of Sheba and its like (34:20–21), and it presses the case against idolatry directly. It challenges the idols: call on those you claim beside God — they possess not an atom's weight, have no share in the heavens or earth, and no intercession avails except by God's leave (34:22–23). It sets the believers and deniers before God to be judged, and instructs the Prophet ﷺ to say to them, 'You will not be questioned about our sins, nor we about your deeds' (34:25) — a model of dignified separation.

In its later movement the surah stages the arguments of the Hereafter. It asks, 'Who provides for you from the heavens and the earth? Say: God' (34:24) — forcing the admission. It portrays the disputes to come between the arrogant leaders and the weak masses they misled, each blaming the other, secretly regretful when they see the punishment (34:31–33). It notes that wealth and children are not what bring a person near to God (34:37). And it turns to one of the surah's memorable calls (34:46): say to them, 'I advise you one thing — that you stand up for God, in pairs and singly, and then reflect. Your companion is not mad; he is only a warner to you before a severe punishment.'

The surah closes with a ringing declaration and a final scene. The truth has come, and falsehood can neither originate anything nor bring it back (34:49). Say: if I err, I err against

myself; if I am guided, it is by what my Lord reveals (34:50). And then the terror of the last moment: if you could see when they are seized with fright, with no escape, and are taken from a place near at hand; they say 'We believe in it now' — but how can they attain faith from so far a place, when they rejected it before? (34:51–53). A barrier is placed between them and what they desire, as was done with their like before (34:54).

The major themes, in depth

Gratitude and ingratitude as the axis of human destiny. Saba is, above all, the surah of shukr. Its two central narratives are deliberately paired as opposites. The house of David and Solomon received extraordinary gifts — control of wind and jinn, the softening of iron, the praise of mountains and birds — and were commanded to answer those gifts with work and gratitude; theirs is the model of blessing received rightly. The people of Sheba received their own paradise of gardens and security and were asked only to eat and give thanks; they turned away, and their civilisation was swept into scattered ruin and reduced to a cautionary tale. Between these two stands every reader. The surah's genius is to make gratitude not a soft virtue but the very hinge on which nations and souls rise or fall — al-Sa'di observes that the command 'Work, O family of David, in gratitude' shows that true thankfulness is not words alone but a life of obedient action.

God's total knowledge and sole sovereignty against the pretensions of idols. The surah repeatedly narrows the idolaters into a corner. God knows every atom's weight everywhere (34:3); the idols own not an atom's weight of anything (34:22).

The pagans imagined the jinn had access to hidden knowledge, yet the death of Solomon proves the jinn did not even know their own master had died until a worm dropped him (34:14). When pressed to name their Provider, the idolaters themselves must say 'God' (34:24). Intercession, on which they pinned their hopes, works only by God's permission and terrifies even the angels until the command is given (34:23). Piece by piece the surah strips the false gods of knowledge, power, provision, and the ability to intercede, leaving them as nothing.

The reckoning and the mutual recrimination of the misled. Saba looks hard at the social dimension of guilt. On the Day of Judgement the surah shows the leaders who were followed and the masses who followed them turning on each other (34:31–33): the weak say, 'Had it not been for you we would have been believers,' and the arrogant reply, 'Did we bar you from guidance after it came to you? No — you yourselves were the criminals.' Both hide their regret when they see the fire. The surah's warning is that neither the pressure of leaders nor the excuse of the crowd will shield anyone; wealth and numbers, in which the deniers gloried, 'will not bring you nearer to Us' (34:37). Responsibility, in the end, is individual and inescapable.

Points of reflection

Saba turns the reader's gaze onto their own blessings and asks the simplest, hardest question: are you grateful? The story of Sheba is a mirror held up to any comfortable society — two gardens, a good land, security, and a Lord ready to forgive — and its warning is that prosperity taken for granted rots into

destruction. The surah calls us to answer every gift with the 'work of gratitude' that the family of David practised, so that our blessings become causes of nearness rather than of ruin.

It also frees the believer from the tyranny of numbers and status. In a world impressed by wealth and crowds, the surah insists that 'it is not your wealth or your children that bring you near to Us, but only faith and righteous deeds' (34:37), and that on the Day of reckoning the influential will disown those they misled. This liberates a person to stand for the truth even alone.

The surah's final call — 'stand up for God, in pairs or singly, and then reflect' (34:46) — is perhaps its most personal invitation. It asks each of us to break, even for a moment, from the momentum of the crowd and its assumptions, to stand honestly before God, and to think. Almost everything else in the surah is the fruit of that one act of sober reflection.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Genuine gratitude is rare; strive consciously to be among the few.
2. Blessings ungratefully enjoyed can be withdrawn as swiftly as they came.
3. No creature, however powerful, holds knowledge of the unseen but God.
4. The Prophet's message is for all people, not one tribe or age.

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/.