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Surah Sad

The Letter Sad · Makki · 88 ayat — reflections on
surah 38 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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September 2026 · v1.304.1

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ص — Sad, “The Letter Sad”. Surah 38 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 88 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/38/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Beginning with Dawud, Sulayman, and Ayyub as models of repentance and patience, the surah answers Quraysh's rejection of one God, recalls Iblis's arrogant refusal to bow to Adam, and affirms the Qur'an as a reminder to all the worlds.

Sad opens with an oath by the Qur'an 'full of reminder' and turns to the arrogance and factional pride of those who reject it, wondering how the message came to one man among them (38:1–8). It draws strength from the accounts of Dawud — the two disputants who tested his judgment and his prostrating repentance (38:21–25) — and of Sulayman, whose love of fine horses is folded back into remembrance of God, and of Ayyub, whose patient endurance is rewarded when a spring gushes at the strike of his foot (38:41–44). The surah names the elect servants Ibrahim, Ishaq, and Ya'qub, then closes with the primal drama of Iblis, who refused to prostrate to Adam out of arrogance and was cast out (38:71–85). It declares the Qur'an a reminder to all the worlds (38:87). Al-Sa'di reads the surah as a portrait gallery of patient, penitent servants set against the self-exalting refusal of Iblis.

TWO

Its themes

- Arrogance versus submission
- Dawud's judgment and repentance
- The patience of Ayyub
- The Qur'an as pondered guidance
- The fall of Iblis through pride

THREE

Key verses

(David) said: "He has undoubtedly wronged thee in demanding thy (single) ewe to be added to his (flock of) ewes: truly many are the partners (in business) who wrong each other: Not so do those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, and how few are they?"... and David gathered that We had tried him: he asked forgiveness of his Lord, fell down, bowing (in prostration), and turned (to Allah in repentance).

Qur'an 38:24

Dawud realizes he has been tested, seeks his Lord's forgiveness, and falls prostrate in repentance — al-Qurtubi reads a prophet's swift return to God as the model response to any slip.

O David! We did indeed make thee a vicegerent on earth: so judge thou between men in truth (and justice): Nor follow thou the lusts (of thy heart), for they will mislead thee from the Path of Allah: for those who wander astray from the Path of Allah, is a Penalty Grievous, for that they forget the Day of Account.

Qur'an 38:26

'O Dawud, We made you a successor on earth, so judge among people in truth and do not follow desire' — the mufasssirun read this as the charter of just authority: fidelity to truth over inclination.

(Here is) a Book which We have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may meditate on its Signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition.

Qur'an 38:29

'A blessed Book We sent down to you, that they may ponder its verses and that those of understanding may take heed' — al-Sa'di makes this the very purpose of revelation: tadabbur, not mere recitation.

(Iblis) said: "I am better than he: thou createdst me from fire, and him thou createdst from clay."

Qur'an 38:76

Iblis refuses saying 'I am better than him; You created me from fire and him from clay' — Ibn Kathir identifies this false comparison as the original arrogance that ruined him.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Surah Sad is a Makkan surah of eighty-eight verses, opening with the single letter Sad followed by an oath: by the Qur'an, full of reminder (38:1). It belongs to the middle Makkan period, when the Quraysh leadership had hardened into open opposition, and its dominant note is the tension between the arrogant self-regard of the deniers and the humble, God-turning hearts of the prophets. It is, in a sense, a surah about pride — the pride that keeps a person from submitting, traced from the chiefs of Makkah all the way back to its original source in Iblis.

The surah's character is combative yet consoling. It begins by exposing the Quraysh leaders' contempt and their walkout from the truth, then answers their arrogance with a gallery of prophets who were, above all, 'possessors of strength and vision' and constant in turning back to God (awwab). David, Solomon, and Job are held up not as untroubled heroes but as men who erred or were tested and who responded with repentance and patience — precisely the models the Prophet ﷺ needed in the teeth of rejection. The surah then contrasts the reward of the God-fearing with the squalid quarrels of the damned, and ends by returning to the very first act of arrogance: Iblis's refusal to bow to Adam.

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens by diagnosing the deniers: they are in false pride and defiance (38:2). It recalls how many generations before them were destroyed, and how they cried out when it was too late (38:3). It then reports the Quraysh's reaction to the Prophet ﷺ: they marvelled that a warner had come from among themselves, called him a lying sorcerer, and were scandalised that he made the many gods into one God (38:4–5). Their chiefs walked off, telling each other to hold fast to their gods and to be patient, convinced that his message was a fabrication designed for some ulterior aim, and resentful that revelation had come to him and not to their grandees (38:6–8). The surah answers their swagger with a cutting question about whether they possess the treasures of God's mercy or dominion over the heavens, and warns that they are just another 'host' doomed to be routed like the confederates before them (38:9–11).

The surah then turns to its prophets, beginning with David (38:17–26). God commands the Prophet to be patient over what they say and to remember David, a servant of great strength, ever-turning to God (awwab), for whom the mountains and birds joined in glorifying God. The famous episode of the two litigants follows: two men climbed over the wall into David's private chamber and startled him; one complained that his brother, who had ninety-nine ewes, demanded the single ewe he owned. David judged swiftly against the greedy brother, then realised God had tested him, so he sought forgiveness, fell down in prostration, and turned in repentance (38:24). God

forgave him and confirmed him as a vicegerent (khalifa) on the earth, charged to judge with justice and not follow desire (38:26).

The surah moves to Solomon (38:30–40), also praised as awwab. It recounts his fondness for the fine horses paraded before him until they passed from sight, after which he turned back to remembrance; and it mentions his trial and restoration to his throne, and his prayer for a kingdom that would belong to no one after him (38:35). God subjected to him the wind and the jinn, builders and divers, and others bound in chains. Then Job (Ayyub, 38:41–44), who called upon his Lord when Satan afflicted him with distress and suffering, and was told to strike the ground with his foot, whereupon a cool spring gushed to bathe and drink from; God restored his family and doubled them as a mercy, and taught him to fulfil his oath gently by striking once with a bundle of grass. God found him steadfast — an excellent servant, ever-turning (38:44). The surah then names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 'possessors of strength and vision,' and Ishmael, Elisha, and Dhul-Kifl, all among the chosen and the good (38:45–48).

A vivid diptych of the two destinations follows (38:49–64). The God-fearing have a beautiful place of return — Gardens of Eden with open gates, reclining and calling for abundant fruit and drink, with modest-gazed companions. The transgressors have the worst return — Hell to burn in, scalding water and dark pus to drink, and the surah stages the squabbling of the damned: a throng plunging in after their leaders, cursed and cursing, each

blaming the other, asking why they do not see certain men they used to mock — men who, it turns out, are in Paradise (38:59–63).

The surah closes by tracing all pride to its root: the story of Adam and Iblis (38:71–85). God announced He would create a human from clay and breathe into him of His spirit, and commanded the angels to prostrate. All prostrated except Iblis, who was too proud and became one of the disbelievers. Challenged, Iblis said, 'I am better than him — You created me from fire and him from clay' (38:76) — the archetypal argument of arrogance. He was cast out, cursed until the Day of Recompense, and granted respite; he vowed to mislead them all except God's chosen, sincere servants (38:82–83). God declared that He would fill Hell with Iblis and all who follow him. The surah ends by telling the Prophet ﷺ to say that he asks no reward for the message and is no pretender: 'It is but a reminder to the worlds, and you shall surely know its truth after a time' (38:86–88).

The major themes, in depth

Arrogance as the root of disbelief. Sad is, at its core, an anatomy of pride. It opens with the Quraysh chiefs too proud to accept a warner from their own ranks and too proud to reduce their gods to one God; it closes with Iblis, too proud to bow to a creature of clay. The parallel is deliberate: the Quraysh's 'I will not follow one like me' is the same logic as Iblis's 'I am better than him.' The surah shows that disbelief is rarely a failure of evidence and usually a failure of humility — a refusal to submit that dresses itself in reasons. Iblis had no doubt about God's

existence or power; he simply would not obey. The surah thereby warns that knowledge without humility damns, and that the first sin of the cosmos, from which all others descend, was arrogance.

The prophets as *awwabin* — men who turn back to God. Against the immovable pride of the deniers, the surah sets a series of prophets defined by the opposite quality: *awwab*, the one who keeps returning to God. David, having judged hastily, immediately falls in repentance and prostration. Solomon, distracted for a moment by his horses, turns back to remembrance. Job, crushed by affliction, calls upon his Lord and is praised for his steadfastness and his returning. What makes these figures models is not that they never erred or suffered, but that their reflex in every state — success, distraction, testing, sin — was to turn to God. The surah offers this to the Prophet ﷺ, and to every believer, as the antidote to Iblis's pride: greatness lies not in never falling but in never being too proud to return.

The two returns: the beautiful abode and the quarrelling Fire. The surah repeatedly uses the language of *ma'ab*, 'place of return,' to frame the Hereafter. For the God-fearing it paints an unusually inviting, restful Paradise, its gates flung open, its people relaxed and served. For the arrogant it paints not only physical torment but social disintegration: the damned arrive in mobs, curse one another, and their leaders and followers trade blame, while they scan the Fire in vain for the humble believers they once ridiculed — who are, of course, above them in bliss.

The contrast reinforces the surah's thesis: humility leads to a home of honour and peace, arrogance to a home of torment and mutual recrimination.

Points of reflection

Sad asks each of us to examine our own pride, because it locates the essence of unbelief not in ignorance but in the refusal to bow. The chilling lesson of Iblis is that one can acknowledge God completely and still be damned by a single act of arrogance. The surah calls us to root out the 'I am better than him' in our own hearts — toward God's commands and toward His creatures — before it hardens into the defiance that ruined the first rebel.

It holds up the awwabin — David, Solomon, Job — as the pattern for a healthy soul. We will err, be distracted, and be tested; the question the surah poses is not whether we fall but where we turn when we do. To make repentance and remembrance our reflex, to fall in prostration the moment we recognise our fault as David did, is to walk the prophets' path rather than Iblis's.

And the surah quietly commends the humble, unnoticed believers whom the arrogant mocked and later searched for in the Fire, unable to find them because they were in the Garden. It is an encouragement to those whom the world overlooks or ridicules for their faith: the final reckoning inverts the world's hierarchy, and the last laugh, so to speak, belongs to the humble. Better to be among those the proud once scorned than among the proud themselves.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. The mark of the righteous is a swift return to God after a fault, as Dawud showed.
2. Just authority means judging by truth even against one's own desire.
3. The Qur'an was sent to be pondered and acted upon, not merely recited.
4. Arrogance — measuring yourself above others — is the sin that felled Iblis; guard against it.

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/.