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Surah Al-Qalam

The Pen · Makki · 52 ayat — reflections on surah 68 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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September 2026 · v1.305.2

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القلم — Al-Qalam, “The Pen”. Surah 68 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 52 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/68/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Defending the Prophet against the slander that he was mad, the surah affirms his sublime character, warns the arrogant deniers through the parable of the ruined garden-owners, and urges patient endurance like the prophets, unlike the impatient companion of the whale.

Al-Qalam, sworn upon by the pen and what it inscribes, opens as a defense of the Prophet against his enemies' slander that he was mad, declaring instead that he stands upon a magnificent character. It then draws the moral opposite: a wealthy, arrogant denier marked by cruelty and false swearing, whom the Prophet is told not to yield to. Its central parable is of the owners of a garden who resolved to harvest at dawn and deny the poor their share, only to find it laid waste overnight, a warning against greed and forgetting Allah's will. The surah urges patient endurance and points to Yunus as a caution, telling the Prophet not to be like the man of the fish who grew impatient, and it ends affirming the Quran as a reminder for all peoples.

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 68:13

Ibn 'Abbas said the verse "Cruel after all that, base-born" was revealed about an unnamed man of Quraysh who had a mark like the tag hung on a sheep's neck.

"It was revealed in connection with a man from Quaraish who had a notable sign"

Ibn 'Abbas · Sahih al-Bukhari 4917

TWO

Its themes

- The Prophet's noble character
- Rebuke of the arrogant denier
- The parable of the garden
- Patience in adversity
- The lesson of Yunus

THREE

Key verses

And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character.

Qur'an 68:4

Indeed you are of a magnificent character. A'isha said the Prophet's character was the Quran; al-Sa'di calls this the highest praise ever given a human being, and the answer to every slander against him.

Heed not the type of despicable men,- ready with oaths,

Qur'an 68:10

Do not obey every worthless habitual swearer, slanderer, going about with malice. Ibn Kathir lists these as the vices of the corrupt: hollow oaths, backbiting, and sowing discord.

Verily We have tried them as We tried the People of the Garden, when they resolved to gather the fruits of the (garden) in the morning.

Qur'an 68:17

We tested them as We tested the owners of the garden who swore to harvest at dawn without saying 'if Allah wills.' Their story warns that plans made in defiance of Allah's will and against the poor collapse.

Verily, for the Righteous, are Gardens of Delight, in the Presence of their Lord.

Qur'an 68:34

For the God-conscious are Gardens of Bliss with their Lord, set right after the garden's ruin. The contrast frames the whole surah: worldly greed lost, God-conscious patience rewarded.

So wait with patience for the Command of thy Lord, and be not like the Companion of the Fish,- when he cried out in agony.

Qur'an 68:48

Be patient for your Lord's decision and be not like the companion of the fish who called out while in distress. Yunus becomes the counter-model: do not let hardship push you into impatience with Allah's timing.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Qalam ("The Pen") is one of the very earliest Makkan revelations — many scholars place it second in order of descent, immediately after the opening five verses of al-'Alaq, largely on the strength of its opening oath "by the pen and what they inscribe" and its urgent, personal defence of the Prophet ﷺ. It belongs to the first phase of the mission, when the Quraysh had begun to sneer at Muhammad ﷺ and to whisper that a man receiving revelation must be deranged.

The surah takes its name from that opening oath. Its mood is bracing and combative in a controlled way: it steadies the Prophet ﷺ under insult, exposes the moral squalor of his tormentors, warns them with a haunting parable, and closes by counselling patience. Where a later Madani surah might legislate, this early Makkan piece works on the heart — it is reassurance, character-defence, and warning braided together.

How the surah unfolds

It opens with the mysterious letter Nun, then swears by the pen and by what the scribes write — an honouring of knowledge and the written word at the very dawn of a revelation that would itself be inscribed. On the strength of that oath comes the flat denial of the slander: "You are not, by the favour of your Lord, mad" (68:2). The reassurance is immediate and total — and it is

crowned by one of the most beautiful testimonies in the Qur'an: "Indeed you are upon a magnificent character" (68:4). The very man they call majnun is in fact the summit of noble conduct.

The surah then turns the charge back on the accusers: soon both sides will see which of them was truly afflicted (68:5-7). It warns the Prophet ﷺ not to yield an inch to the deniers who wish he would soften so they could soften (68:8-9), and paints a devastating portrait of the ringleader — the habitual swearer, the contemptible, the fault-finder and slanderer, the miser, the aggressor, coarse and ignoble — a man puffed up only because he has wealth and sons (68:10-14). Classical tafsir commonly reads this as al-Walid ibn al-Mughira. His response to revelation — "legends of the ancients" — earns the promise that he will be branded on the snout (68:15-16).

At the heart of the surah stands the parable of the owners of the garden (68:17-33). Men who inherited a fruitful orchard resolved to harvest it at first light, secretly, swearing to do so without exception — and pointedly leaving no share for the poor, unlike their God-fearing father. In the night a visitation from their Lord swept the garden bare, so that at dawn they found it black as harvested stubble. They set out whispering so no beggar could enter — and arrived to ruin. Their most balanced member reminds them: did I not tell you to glorify God? They confess their wrongdoing. The lesson lands with quiet force: "Such is the punishment; but the punishment of the Hereafter is greater, if only they knew" (68:33).

From the parable the surah pivots to the two destinies — gardens of bliss for the God-conscious against any notion that God would treat the submitters like the criminals (68:34-41) — and challenges the deniers' baseless assumptions. Then comes the awesome image of the Day "when the shin is bared" and they are called to prostrate but cannot, their eyes humbled, because they refused to prostrate when they were safe and able (68:42-43). The closing movement (68:44-52) tells the Prophet ﷺ to leave the deniers to God, to be patient, and — crucially — not to be like the Companion of the Fish (Yunus) who called out in anguish; had God's grace not reached him he would have been cast onto the barren shore blamed. The surah ends noting how the disbelievers almost strike him down with their glares, dismissing the Qur'an as madness — when it is nothing but a reminder to all the worlds.

The major themes, in depth

The first great theme is the vindication of prophetic character. The world's verdict — "madman" — is inverted twice over: not only is the Prophet ﷺ sane, he stands "upon a magnificent character" (68:4). Against this the surah lays out, trait by trait, the moral portrait of the man who mocked him (68:10-13). The contrast is the argument: true derangement is not revelation but the cluster of vices — mockery, slander, greed, cruelty — that the deniers themselves embody. The surah quietly teaches that a person's worth is read in character, and that God's own testimony to His Prophet's khuluq is the standard by which all human nobility is measured.

The second theme is gratitude and the rights of the poor, carried entirely by the parable of the garden. The orchard-owners' sin was not disbelief in the abstract but a concrete meanness: the resolve to reap in secret and cut the needy out of God's provision. Their punishment fits precisely — the very harvest they schemed to hoard is annihilated before they can touch it. Al-Sa'di and others draw the plain moral: wealth is a trust that carries the claims of others, and withholding what God has made due, while imagining oneself clever and secure, invites the removal of the blessing itself. The Hereafter's reckoning, the surah adds, is heavier still.

The third theme is patient endurance modelled on the prophets. The command "be patient for the decision of your Lord" (68:48) is sharpened by the warning against imitating Yunus, who grew impatient and left his post. The Qur'an here does something remarkable: it holds up a prophet's lapse not to shame him but to instruct Muhammad ﷺ — and through him every believer — that the trial of the caller is precisely the discipline of waiting on God's timing without despair or haste.

Points of reflection

Al-Qalam invites the reader to measure worth by character rather than by the crowd's mockery or a man's bank of wealth and sons. The people most confident in their contempt are drawn as the most morally bankrupt; the man they deride carries the highest praise the Qur'an gives to a human being. It is a summons to build the self on khuluq — patience, generosity, integrity — and to refuse the small compromises the deniers keep angling for.

The garden parable presses a searching question onto the comfortable: what silent exclusions do we practise with what God has given us? To harvest "at dawn, secretly" so the poor never reach us is a temptation of every age. The surah warns that provision withheld is provision endangered, and that the truest security lies in glorifying God and honouring the claims He places on our sustenance — before the Day when no glare can wound His Messenger and no scheme can outrun the reckoning.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Let excellent character be your reply to slander.
2. Refuse the company and habits of the arrogant and malicious.
3. Tie every plan to 'if Allah wills' and never cut out the poor.
4. Endure with patience rather than rushing ahead of Allah's decree.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, 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/.