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Surah Al-Ma'arij

The Ascending Stairways · Makki · 44 ayat —
reflections on surah 70 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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September 2026 · v1.305.0

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المعارج — Al-Ma'arij, "The Ascending Stairways". Surah 70 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 44 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/70/.

ONE

The surah in brief

In answer to a mocker who demanded the punishment, the surah describes the Day whose measure is fifty thousand years and the fate of the ungrateful, contrasting the anxious, grasping nature of man with the steadfast worshippers who guard prayer, chastity, and trust.

Al-Ma'arij opens with a mocking questioner demanding the punishment he was warned of, and answers that it will surely come on a Day whose measure is fifty thousand years, when the angels and the Spirit ascend to Allah. It portrays that Day's terror, when no close friend asks after a friend and a guilty man would ransom himself with his children and everyone on earth to escape. The surah then diagnoses the human condition: man was created anxious and grasping, panicked by hardship and stingy in ease, and it exempts the constant worshippers who guard their prayer, give the poor their due, fear their Lord, and keep their trusts and chastity. It closes warning the deniers who rush toward the Prophet in mockery that the Day they were promised is coming.

TWO

Its themes

- The Day of ascending stairways
- No friend helps a friend
- Human anxiety and greed
- The traits of the devoted
- Guarding prayer and trusts

THREE

Key verses

The angels and the spirit ascend unto him in a Day the measure whereof is (as) fifty thousand years:

Qur'an 70:4

The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him on a Day whose measure is fifty thousand years. Ibn Kathir relays that its length reflects its terror, though it is made light for the believer.

Though they will be put in sight of each other,- the sinner's desire will be: Would that he could redeem himself from the Penalty of that Day by (sacrificing) his children,

Qur'an 70:11

No friend will ask about a friend; the guilty would ransom himself with his own children to escape. The verse strips away every worldly relationship as a refuge on that Day.

Truly man was created very impatient;-

Qur'an 70:19

Man was created anxious and impatient (halu'), fretful when evil touches him and withholding when good comes. Al-Sa'di reads this as the default nature that only worship and faith can cure.

Not so those devoted to Prayer;-

Qur'an 70:22

Except those who pray, who are constant in their prayer. The exception begins the list of qualities that lift a person out of that restless, grasping nature.

And those who respect their trusts and covenants;

Qur'an 70:32

Those who keep their trusts and covenants and stand firm in their testimony. Al-Qurtubi notes the devoted are defined not only by ritual but by honesty and reliability toward others.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Ma'arij ("The Ascending Ways") is a Makkan surah that opens on a note of mockery answered by majesty. A scoffer had demanded that the threatened punishment be brought on at once — challenging the Prophet ﷺ to produce the doom he warned of. The surah begins with that very challenge and turns it into the doorway to a portrait of the Day whose punishment cannot be rushed and cannot be escaped.

Its name comes from God being described as "Lord of the ascending ways" (dhu al-ma'arij), the stairways along which the angels and the Spirit rise to Him "in a Day the measure of which is fifty thousand years" (70:4). The character of the surah is a movement from cosmic grandeur and terror to intimate moral diagnosis: it names the disease of the human soul and then prescribes the qualities of those who are cured.

How the surah unfolds

It opens with the demander of punishment (70:1–3) and answers him not with a date but with a vision of scale: the ascending ways, the fifty-thousand-year Day. The Prophet ﷺ is told to be patient with a beautiful patience, for they see it as far off while God sees it as near (70:5–7).

Then the Day is unveiled (70:8–18). The sky becomes like molten dregs of oil, the mountains like tufts of dyed wool, and — most piercingly — no intimate friend will ask after his friend, though

they are shown one another. The guilty man in that hour would ransom himself from the punishment with his own children, his wife, his brother, the kin who sheltered him, indeed everyone on earth, if only it could save him. But no — it is the Blaze, stripping away the scalp, calling to itself everyone who turned his back and hoarded.

At the surface of the Day the surah drops into the diagnosis of human nature (70:19–21): man was created anxious and grasping — when evil touches him, frantic; when good touches him, withholding. This restless, ungenerous creature is the default self. Then comes the great exception: "except those who pray" (70:22), and the surah lists the traits that lift a person out of that anxious meanness (70:23–35) — those constant in their prayer; who set aside a known right in their wealth for the beggar and the deprived; who affirm the Day of Judgement; who dread their Lord's punishment; who guard their chastity; who keep their trusts and pledges; who stand upright in their testimony; who safeguard their prayers. These, it concludes, will be honoured in gardens.

The closing movement (70:36–44) returns to the scoffers, who come rushing toward the Prophet ﷺ in crowds from right and left, each greedy to be admitted into a garden of bliss he denies. The surah rebukes the presumption sharply, and swears by the Lord of the easts and wests that God is fully able to replace them with better than them. Then it tells the Prophet ﷺ to leave them to their vain talk and play until they meet the Day they are promised — the Day they will hurry from the graves as if racing to an idol, their eyes lowered, disgrace covering them: "that is the Day which they were promised."

The major themes, in depth

The organising theme is the total severance of Judgement Day, where every worldly bond and asset fails. The most human instinct — to lean on family in crisis — is shown to collapse: the friend does not even ask after his friend, and the criminal would trade his own children to escape (70:10–14). This is the surah's argument against a life built on kinship, wealth and status: on that Day none of it is currency, and the man who "gathered and hoarded" is precisely the one the Fire calls (70:18). It exposes the illusion that human ties or riches can buy safety before God.

The second and richest theme is the anatomy of the soul in verses 19–35. The Qur'an offers a startlingly frank picture of the un-reformed human being — *halu'an*, wired for anxiety and stinginess, oscillating between panic in hardship and hoarding in ease. What redeems this nature is not a single act but a whole disposition anchored in prayer. The list is a portrait of an integrated character: worship that is constant, wealth that carries a fixed claim for the needy, belief that keeps the Reckoning in view, chastity kept within lawful bounds, and scrupulous honesty in trusts and testimony. Al-Sa'di notes how the passage opens and closes with prayer — *salah* frames and secures every other virtue. The cure for the grasping self is a life organised around standing before God.

A third theme is the futility of demanding that God prove Himself on the scoffer's timetable. The surah answers "when?" with "how vast" and "how near," and warns that the very people

jeering for the punishment will one day scramble from their graves in humiliation. God does not owe the mocker a schedule; He owes him only the certainty of the appointment.

Points of reflection

Al-Ma'arij hands the reader a mirror and then a ladder. The mirror is verse 19: recognise the grasping, anxious self for what it is, rather than pretending to a generosity and steadiness we do not naturally possess. The ladder is the list that follows — a concrete programme by which that self is remade, rung by rung, with prayer top and bottom.

It also reframes patience. "A beautiful patience" (sabran jamilan) is not passive waiting but serene confidence that what looks distant to the mocker is near to God. The believer is invited to hold worldly hoarding loosely — knowing the Fire summons the one who "turned away and gathered" — and instead to fix a known share of his wealth as a right of the poor, to guard his prayers and his word, and to leave the scoffers to their play until the promised Day arrives.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Remember a Day when no friend or ransom can save you.
2. Recognize the restless, grasping self in you and treat it with worship.
3. Make prayer constant, not occasional, to steady the soul.
4. Guard your trusts, testimony, and chastity as marks of real faith.

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