

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Surah Al-Buruj

The Mansions of the Stars · Makki · 22 ayat —
reflections on surah 85 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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Surah Al-Buruj

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البروج — Al-Buruj, “The Mansions of the Stars”. Surah 85 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 22 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/85/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Honouring the martyred believers burned in the trench by tyrants, the surah consoles the persecuted that Allah, the Loving and Mighty, witnesses all and will requite oppressors with the Fire and the faithful with Gardens, His grip ever firm.

Al-Buruj swears by the sky of constellations and the promised Day, then tells of the People of the Ditch, tyrants who dug trenches of fire and burned believers alive, sitting to watch as witnesses to their own cruelty. Their only grievance against their victims was that they believed in Allah, the Mighty, the Praiseworthy. The surah comforts the persecuted early Muslims: the same God who saw the martyrs owns the dominion of the heavens and earth, will burn the unrepentant tyrants, and will grant the believers gardens. It closes recalling the ruin of Pharaoh and Thamud and affirming that this is a glorious Qur'an, preserved in a guarded Tablet.

TWO

Its themes

- Persecution for faith
- The People of the Ditch
- Steadfastness of the martyrs
- Allah as Loving and Forgiving
- The tyrant's certain end
- The preserved Qur'an

THREE

Key verses

Woe to the makers of the pit (of fire),

Qur'an 85:4

The burners of the trench are cursed by name, so that history's persecutors stand condemned and their victims honored forever in revelation.

And they ill-treated them for no other reason than that they believed in Allah, Exalted in Power, Worthy of all Praise!-

Qur'an 85:8

The believers were resented for one thing only, that they believed in the Mighty, the Praiseworthy; faith itself was their whole crime and their whole glory.

For those who believe and do righteous deeds, will be Gardens; beneath which rivers flow: That is the great Salvation, (the fulfilment of all desires),

Qur'an 85:11

Set against the fire of the ditch is the promise of gardens with rivers, the great success, so the flame the tyrants lit is answered by eternal cool.

And He is the Oft-Forgiving, Full of Loving-Kindness,

Qur'an 85:14

In the middle of a scene of burning He names Himself the Forgiving, the Loving; His mercy is not distant from His justice but bound to it.

(Inscribed) in a Tablet Preserved!

Qur'an 85:22

The Qur'an is glorious and kept in a guarded Tablet, a reassurance that the word the tyrants tried to extinguish is beyond their reach.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Buruj — “The Constellations” or “The Mansions of the Stars” — is a Makkan surah of twenty-two verses. It was revealed in the period of intense persecution, when the earliest Muslims of Makka were being tortured for no crime but their faith, and it speaks directly into that agony. Its name comes from the oath in its opening verse, by the sky adorned with its great constellations. The surah's emotional center, though, is a story of martyrs: the Companions of the Ditch (Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd), believers thrown into trenches of fire by a tyrant for refusing to abandon their God.

The character of the surah is defiant consolation. It does not pretend the persecution is small; it acknowledges believers being burned alive. But it reframes the scene entirely — the tyrants are the ones truly in danger, and the martyrs are the ones who have won. Its tone is majestic and steady, the voice of a Lord who has seen every fire lit against His servants and forgotten none of it.

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens with oaths (85:1–3): by the sky full of constellations, by the Promised Day, by a witness and that which is witnessed. These oaths set a courtroom mood — a Day is coming, and there will be testimony. Then, before naming any lesson, the surah pronounces a curse (85:4–7): “Destroyed were

the Companions of the Ditch” — the people who dug the trench, kindled the fuelled fire, and sat at its edge watching what they did to the believers, taking in the spectacle as entertainment.

The surah then states the martyrs' "crime" (85:8–9): the tyrants resented them for nothing except that they believed in God, the Almighty, the Praiseworthy — to whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth, and who is Witness over all things. In two verses the whole moral order is inverted: the victims are shown to hold to the Lord of everything, and the persecutors are exposed as fighting the Owner of the universe. Judgment follows (85:10): those who persecuted believing men and women and did not repent will have the punishment of Hell and the punishment of the Burning — a chilling justice, fire for those who lit the fire.

Against that, the reward (85:11): those who believed and did good have gardens beneath which rivers flow — “that is the great triumph.” The surah then turns to address the Prophet ﷺ and, through him, the arrogant of Makka (85:12–16): the seizure of your Lord is severe; He originates and restores; He is the Forgiving, the Loving, Lord of the Throne, the Glorious, Doer of whatever He wills. The closing verses (85:17–22) recall the destroyed armies of Pharaoh and Thamud as proof that this is a pattern, note that the deniers persist in denial while God encompasses them from behind, and end by exalting the Qur'an as a glorious recitation preserved in a Guarded Tablet — beyond the reach of any tyrant's fire.

The major themes, in depth

The central theme is the triumph of faith through apparent defeat. By worldly measure the Companions of the Ditch lost everything — their lives, in the most terrifying way. The surah refuses that measure. It calls their end “the great triumph,” because they held their faith to the last breath and passed into gardens, while their killers passed into the very fire they had kindled. For the tortured Muslims of Makka this was the most important thing they could hear: that the outcome of persecution is not decided by who holds the power to burn, but by who holds fast to God. Martyrdom is not the failure of the cause; it can be its fullest victory.

A second theme is that God is Witness (Shahīd) and Encompasser. The oath by “a witness and a witnessed” and the repeated stress that God is Witness over all things (85:9) and that He “encompasses them” (85:20) turns persecution into something recorded, seen, held in evidence. Nothing done to the believers slips past unnoticed; every trench and every jeering onlooker is on file for the Promised Day. To the sufferer this is consolation; to the oppressor it is a warning that his sense of impunity is an illusion. The tyrant thinks he acts unobserved; in truth he acts in the full sight of the Lord of the Throne.

A third theme is the naming of God by the attributes the moment requires. In the space of a few verses He is called the Almighty (al-‘Azīz) and the Praiseworthy (al-Ḥamīd), then the Forgiving (al-Ghafūr) and the Loving (al-Wadūd), then Lord of the Throne, the Glorious. The pairing is deliberate: the same God who is severe in seizing the oppressor is loving and

forgiving toward the one who turns to Him. Al-Wadūd — the Loving — appears precisely where believers are being burned, a promise that the God they died for loves them back and that His love, not the tyrant's cruelty, is the deepest fact about their situation.

Points of reflection

The surah teaches the persecuted how to see. It does not offer the false comfort that suffering will be light; it offers the true comfort that suffering is witnessed, weighed, and answered — and that steadfastness under it is a form of winning. A believer facing hostility for his faith can carry this surah as a lens: the pressure is real, but so is the Guarded Tablet in which the outcome is already written.

It also asks the reader to examine which side of the ditch he stands on. There are three roles in the story — the burned, the burners, and the onlookers who “sat at the edge, watching.” The surah condemns the spectators alongside the tyrants. To watch cruelty done to the faithful and be entertained, or merely indifferent, is not innocence. The reflection cuts into every age: complicity can be as quiet as a comfortable seat at the edge of someone else's fire.

Finally, the surah closes not on the tyrants but on the Qur'an itself, “preserved in a Guarded Tablet.” Empires that lit fires against the believers are gone; the recitation they tried to silence is still recited. The believer's ultimate reassurance is that the Word he holds is untouchable, kept safe above every power that would erase it.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Hold firm when faith costs you; the surah immortalizes those who chose the fire over apostasy and shames those who lit it.
2. Trust that no persecutor escapes the reckoning of the One who owns the heavens and the earth.
3. Cling to the Qur'an as something guarded and secure, a rope that human tyranny cannot cut.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim, al-Tabari, Jami' al-Bayan, al-Sa'di, Taysir al-Karim al-Rahman. 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/.