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Surah Ash-Shams

The Sun · Makki · 15 ayat — reflections on surah 91 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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Surah Ash-Shams

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الشمس — Ash-Shams, “The Sun”. Surah 91 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 15 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/91/.

ONE

The surah in brief

By the sun, moon, and the soul shaped and inspired with awareness of right and wrong, success belongs to whoever purifies it and ruin to whoever corrupts it; Thamud's slaughter of the she-camel stands as a warning of what defiance brings.

Ash-Shams strings together eleven oaths, by the sun and its brightness, the moon that follows, the day, the night, the sky, the earth, and finally the soul and the One who proportioned it, before delivering its single decisive claim: He inspired the soul with both its wickedness and its awareness of God. Success belongs to whoever purifies that soul and ruin to whoever buries it in corruption. To ground the lesson in history, it recalls Thamud, who in their arrogance cried lies and hamstrung the she-camel that was a sign to them, so their Lord leveled them all for the sin, fearing no consequence. The surah makes the inner struggle of the self the axis on which everything turns.

TWO

Its themes

- Oaths by cosmic signs
- The soul's twin inclinations
- Purification versus corruption
- Moral responsibility
- The destruction of Thamud
- Arrogance and its ruin

THREE

Key verses

By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it;

Qur'an 91:7

By the soul and the One who proportioned it, the oath turns from the vast cosmos to the intimate arena where salvation is actually decided.

And its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right;-

Qur'an 91:8

He inspired the soul with both its corruption and its consciousness of Him; each of us carries the two voices and must choose which to feed.

Truly he succeeds that purifies it,

Qur'an 91:9

"He has succeeded who purifies it," the whole aim of religion set in a single verb, cleansing and growing the self.

And he fails that corrupts it!

Qur'an 91:10

"And he has failed who corrupts it," the stark opposite, ruin coming not from outside but from burying one's own better nature.

*But the Messenger of Allah said to them: "It is a She-camel of Allah!
And (bar her not from) having her drink!"*

Qur'an 91:13

Thamud were warned to leave the she-camel and its drink, and their contempt for one clear command became the reason for their end.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Ash-Shams — “The Sun” — is a Makkan surah of fifteen verses, named for the first of its many oaths. It is one of the most tightly composed surahs in the Qur'an: a long chain of oaths building to a single declaration about the human soul, followed by a historical example that dramatizes it. The Prophet ﷺ recommended it among the surahs to recite in prayer.

The character of the surah is incantatory and then decisive. The opening oaths roll like waves — sun, moon, day, night, sky, earth — before breaking on the one thing they were all sworn to prove: that the person who purifies their soul succeeds, and the one who corrupts it fails. Then the story of Thamūd lands like a case study, showing what soul-corruption looks like in a whole people and where it ends.

How the surah unfolds

The surah begins (91:1–8) with seven oaths, the longest such chain in the Qur'an: by the sun and its brightness, the moon that follows it, the day that displays it, the night that veils it, the sky and its building, the earth and its spreading, and — climactically — “by the soul and the One who proportioned it, then inspired it with its wickedness and its piety.” The pairing is deliberate: after cosmic opposites (light and dark, sky and earth), the final oath turns inward to the soul, itself made with a double capacity, taught by its Maker to recognise both the road of corruption and the road of consciousness of God.

The oaths deliver their answer (91:9–10): “Successful is the one who purifies it, and ruined is the one who corrupts it.” Every preceding oath was a build-up to this two-line verdict about the human being's central task — the cultivation or the corruption of the self. It is the moral hinge of the surah, and one of the clearest statements in the Qur'an that salvation turns on what a person does with their own soul.

The surah then illustrates with Thamūd (91:11–15): they denied their prophet Ṣāliḥ out of their transgression, when the most wretched among them rushed forward — and God's messenger warned them, “The she-camel of God, and her drink!” But they denied him and hamstrung her, so their Lord crushed them for their sin and levelled it upon them all, “and He does not fear its consequence.” The abstract law of verses 9–10 is made flesh: here is a people who corrupted their souls, and here is what became of them.

The major themes, in depth

The central theme is the soul's double disposition and the responsibility that follows. Verse 8 is one of the great verses on human nature: God “inspired” the soul with both its fujūr (its capacity for sin and rebellion) and its taqwā (its capacity for God-consciousness and restraint). The commentators stress that this is not a claim that God forces either; it is a claim that both roads are made known to the soul — an innate moral awareness by which a person recognises good and evil. This grounds accountability: because the soul was shown both ways, its choice between them is genuinely its own, and the outcome — success or ruin — is genuinely earned.

The second theme is tazkiyah — the purification of the self — as the whole business of a life. “Successful is the one who purifies it” (91:9). The verb carries both cleansing (removing the soul's corruption) and cultivating (growing it in virtue), like tending a plant. This is not a peripheral piety; the surah, through its seven oaths, elevates it to the pivot on which the entire cosmos of the opening verses points. The sun that gives light, the sky that was built, the earth that was spread — all this grand order exists as the stage for one drama: whether a given human being will purify or pollute the soul entrusted to them. Nothing in the surah is presented as more consequential.

The third theme is the anatomy of soul-corruption in Thamūd. The surah does not merely say they were destroyed; it shows the mechanism. They denied out of “transgression” (ṭaghwā) — the corruption came first, the denial followed, because a soul that has indulged its fujūr cannot bear the truth. Then “the most wretched of them rushed forward” to hamstring the she-camel — a sign God had given them — and the many consented to the crime of the one. The sequence models how collective ruin works: an inner transgression, a rejection of the sign, a wicked ringleader, and a society that lets him act in its name. The destruction that follows is described as God “levelling” it upon them equally, “and He does not fear its consequence” — a striking phrase asserting that divine justice, unlike human power, answers to no one and fears no reprisal.

Points of reflection

The surah locates the great work of life not out in the world but within: “Successful is the one who purifies it.” Whatever else a person builds, the surah insists that the state of their soul is the real ledger. It invites a daily question — am I today cultivating this soul or corrupting it? — and makes clear that the answer, more than any external achievement, decides everything.

It also dignifies the human conscience. Because God “inspired” the soul with knowledge of its wickedness and its piety, we already possess an inner witness to right and wrong. Much of guidance is not the acquisition of new information but the honest following of a light already placed in us — and much of ruin is the deliberate smothering of that light, as Thamūd smothered the sign sent to them.

Finally, the story of Thamūd is a warning about how corruption spreads and how silence can share in a crime. The camel was hamstrung by “the most wretched,” but the people owned the deed and shared the punishment. The reflection reaches into every community: it is not enough to avoid personally committing wrong; a soul is also purified or corrupted by what it endorses, permits, and lets be done in its name.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Take the inner life seriously; the surah stakes success or ruin on the state of a single soul, yours.
2. Feed the soul's God-conscious voice and starve its corrupting one through steady discipline and repentance.
3. See in Thamud that arrogance toward even one clear command of God can undo a whole people.

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