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Surah Al-Ma'un

The Small Kindnesses · Makki · 7 ayat — reflections on
surah 107 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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الماعون — Al-Ma'un, "The Small Kindnesses". Surah 107 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 7 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/107/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Exposing the one who denies the Day of Judgment: he repels the orphan and neglects feeding the poor. Woe, then, to those who pray heedlessly and for show, yet withhold even small kindnesses from others.

Al-Ma'un asks who it is that denies the Judgment, then answers by describing him through his actions: he repels the orphan and does not urge feeding the poor. It then turns to worshippers who are heedless of their prayer, who pray to be seen, and who withhold even small kindnesses. The surah exposes a religion emptied of compassion and sincerity — outward acts hollowed of both mercy toward people and truthfulness toward God. It binds true faith to how one treats the weak and to the integrity of one's worship.

TWO

Its themes

- Denying the Judgment
- Neglect of the orphan
- Feeding the poor
- Heedless and showy prayer
- Withholding small kindnesses

THREE

Key verses

Then such is the (man) who repulses the orphan (with harshness),

Qur'an 107:2

Denial of the Day shows itself in shoving away the orphan — creed and conduct are inseparable in this surah's logic.

So woe to the worshippers

Qur'an 107:4

'Woe to those who pray' — the threat falls not on non-prayer but on prayer done carelessly or for show.

Who are neglectful of their prayers,

Qur'an 107:5

Being heedless of one's prayer — neglecting its times or its meaning — empties the act of its worth.

But refuse (to supply) (even) neighbourly needs.

Qur'an 107:7

Refusing even small kindnesses reveals a heart that has closed itself to both God and neighbour.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Ma'un takes its name from its final word — al-ma'un, which the commentators explain as small kindnesses and everyday assistance: the little useful things neighbours lend one another, and, in a broader sense, the basic help a person owes to those in need. Most of the surah is regarded as Makkan, though some scholars hold that its later verses about the hypocritical worshippers point to conditions in Madina; the classical view generally treats it as an early Makkan warning with universal reach.

Its character is that of a sharp exposé of false religion. The surah asks who the real denier of faith is — and answers not with a theologian's list of wrong beliefs but with a picture of hard-heartedness: the man who shoves the orphan aside and cannot be bothered about the hungry. It then turns to a second kind of falseness, the person who prays for show while his prayer is empty of meaning. In seven short verses it draws a devastating contrast between religion as performance and religion as compassion.

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens with a question that grips the listener: Have you seen the one who denies the Recompense? (107:1) — the one who belies al-din, which the commentators read as both

the Day of Judgment and religion itself. The question invites us to picture a specific character, and then the surah shows us who he is by what he does.

The answer is entirely behavioural: that is the one who repulses the orphan, and does not urge the feeding of the poor (107:2-3). Notice the surah does not first accuse him of a doctrinal error; it points to how he treats the weakest people. He 'repulses' the orphan — pushes the vulnerable child away harshly — and he not only fails to feed the poor himself but does not even encourage others to do so. His disbelief in the reckoning is proven by his cruelty; the two are inseparable.

Then the surah pivots to a second figure with a stark 'so woe': So woe to those who pray (107:4). The shock is deliberate — woe to worshippers? The next verse resolves it: those who are heedless of their prayer (107:5) — not those who miss the details of prayer accidentally, but those who are careless of its very reality, who let it become an empty motion. And their marks are two: those who make a show (yura'un) (107:6) — praying to be seen — and who withhold al-ma'un (107:7), refusing even the small assistance that costs almost nothing. The surah ends where its title lands: on the refusal of the little kindness.

The major themes, in depth

Belief tested by compassion. The surah's most striking move is to define denial of the faith through conduct toward the vulnerable. The one who truly believes in the Day of Recompense cannot casually brush aside an orphan or shrug at a hungry neighbour, because belief in the reckoning naturally

softens the heart and opens the hand. Al-Sa'di explains that harshness toward the orphan and indifference to the poor betray a heart empty of both mercy for creation and fear of the Creator. The surah thereby exposes a counterfeit religiosity that can recite the creed while its owner's dealings prove he does not really expect to answer for them.

Prayer without a soul. The second half turns to those who do pray, which makes its warning even sharper. The problem is not the act of prayer but sahw — heedlessness of it: praying while the heart is absent, treating the prayer as a social ritual or a box to tick rather than a standing before Allah. When this emptiness is combined with riya' — praying to be seen by people (107:6) — the prayer has been hollowed out entirely, offered to an audience of humans rather than to God. The commentators note the fine distinction: the surah does not condemn forgetting a rak'ah, which happens to everyone, but the settled carelessness of one for whom the prayer never meant anything.

The unity of worship and mercy. The two halves of the surah are one argument. Genuine faith shows itself both vertically, in sincere prayer to Allah, and horizontally, in kindness to His creation — and both are counterfeited by the same disease of heart. The false believer of the first half neglects the poor; the false worshipper of the second half withholds even al-ma'un, the smallest help. The surah refuses to let anyone separate love of God from care for people. To keep up the forms of the first while failing the second is precisely the hypocrisy it condemns.

Points of reflection

Al-Ma'un is one of the Qur'an's most searching examinations of conscience because it measures faith not by profession but by the small, unglamorous decisions of daily life — how one speaks to an orphan, whether one bothers about a hungry neighbour, whether one will lend the ordinary useful thing. It warns that a person can maintain an outwardly religious life and still be, in the surah's terms, a denier of the Day, if that life produces no compassion.

For the worshipper, it is a call to guard the inner reality of prayer against two silent thieves: heedlessness and showing off. A prayer offered to be seen, or performed while the heart wanders elsewhere, is drained of the very thing that makes it worship. The surah's cure is sincerity turned in two directions at once — toward Allah in genuine, attentive prayer, and toward His creation in a mercy so real that even the smallest kindness is never refused.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Measure your faith by how you treat orphans and the poor.
2. Guard the quality of your prayer, not just its performance.
3. Purge worship of the desire to be seen by people.
4. Do not begrudge even the smallest acts of everyday kindness.

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