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Surah Al-Masad

The Palm Fiber · Makki · 5 ayat — reflections on surah
111 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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CONTENTS

Surah Al-Masad

1	The surah in brief	What it is, when it came, what it sets out to do
2	Why it was revealed	1 occasion from the authentic collections
3	Its themes	5 threads running through the surah
4	Key verses	4 passages, with a reflection on each
5	Reading it closely	4 sections
6	Carrying it	4 things to take from it

المسد — Al-Masad, “The Palm Fiber”. Surah 111 of 114, revealed in Makkah, 5 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/111/.

ONE

The surah in brief

The ruin of Abu Lahab, who opposed and harmed the Prophet ﷺ. His wealth and standing will not save him from a blazing Fire, and his wife, who carried thorns against him, will bear a rope of palm fiber around her neck.

Al-Masad was revealed when Abu Lahab, the Prophet's own uncle, publicly rebuffed him at the hill of Safa after he called Quraysh to faith. The surah declares his hands and his very self ruined: neither his wealth nor his earnings will avail him, and he will burn in a flaming fire. His wife, the carrier of firewood who spread thorns and slander, will bear a rope of twisted palm-fibre around her neck. Uniquely, it named a living enemy as doomed to disbelief — a standing prophecy he never falsified by even feigning Islam.

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 111:1

When 26:214 was revealed the Prophet climbed as-Safa, called the clans of Quraysh, and warned them of a coming punishment. Abu Lahab said, "May you perish! You gathered us only for this?" and Surat al-Lahab was revealed.

"So the "Surat:--ul--LAHAB" 'Perish the hands of Abu Lahab!' (111.1) was revealed"

Ibn 'Abbas · Sahih al-Bukhari 4971

TWO

Its themes

- Ruin of Abu Lahab
- Wealth cannot save
- Punishment of the enemy
- The wife as accomplice
- A fulfilled prophecy

THREE

Key verses

Perish the hands of the Father of Flame! Perish he!

Qur'an 111:1

'Perish the hands of Abu Lahab' — the very hands raised against the Prophet are singled out for ruin.

No profit to him from all his wealth, and all his gains!

Qur'an 111:2

His wealth and gains did not avail him, exposing how status and money are worthless before God's decree.

Burnt soon will he be in a Fire of Blazing Flame!

Qur'an 111:3

He will enter a flaming fire — the man nicknamed 'father of flame' meets a fate matching his name.

His wife shall carry the (crackling) wood – As fuel!-

Qur'an 111:4

His wife, the firewood-carrier, shows that partnership in hostility to the truth brings shared ruin, not shared honour.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Masad — also called al-Lahab, 'the Flame' — is a Makkan surah of five verses, and the only place in the Qur'an where a specific enemy of the Prophet ﷺ is condemned by name. That enemy is Abu Lahab — a nickname meaning 'father of flame,' given for his fiery, ruddy complexion — the Prophet's own uncle, 'Abd al-'Uzza, and one of the most vicious opponents of the message. His name, meaning 'flame,' becomes a grim omen fulfilled by the fire the surah promises him.

Its occasion is well attested. When the Prophet ﷺ was commanded to warn his near kin, he gathered Quraysh at the hill of Safa and asked whether they would believe him if he told them an army lay behind the hill. They said they had only known him to be truthful. He then warned them of a severe punishment to come — and Abu Lahab cut him off with a curse: 'May you perish! Is this why you gathered us?' The surah answers that curse, turning it back upon Abu Lahab himself. Its character is one of stern, final judgment — a warning that neither wealth nor lineage can shield a soul that sets itself against the truth.

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens by answering Abu Lahab's own curse with a decree: May the hands of Abu Lahab perish, and may he perish (111:1) — *tabbat yada Abi Lahab wa tabb*. He had said 'may you

perish' to the Prophet ﷺ; the surah returns the word to its source. His 'hands' stand for all his effort and striving against Islam — all of it doomed to ruin.

Then it strips away what he trusted in: His wealth will not avail him, nor what he earned (111:2). Abu Lahab was rich and proud of his standing; the surah declares that neither his property nor his gains — his sons, his acquisitions — will save him from what is coming. The two things a man of his kind leaned on are named and dismissed in a single verse.

The sentence follows: He will burn in a Fire of blazing flame (111:3) — nāran dhāta lahab, a flame that echoes his very name, Abu Lahab, 'father of flame.' The 'father of flame' will be the child of the flame he fed. Then the surah turns to his wife: and his wife, the carrier of firewood (111:4). Umm Jamil, who supported his hostility and, it is reported, would scatter thorns in the Prophet's path, is depicted carrying firewood — an image the commentators read both literally (she gathered thorns to harm him) and figuratively (she carried the fuel of slander and enmity between people). The surah ends with her fate sealed in a chilling image: around her neck a rope of twisted palm-fibre (111:5) — habl min masad — the coarse rope that gives the surah its name, binding her like the firewood she carried.

The major themes, in depth

The powerlessness of wealth and status against Allah. Abu Lahab had everything the world respects — wealth, noble lineage as the Prophet's own uncle, and influence in Quraysh. The surah's second verse demolishes the notion that any of this offers protection: 'his wealth will not avail him, nor what he

earned' (111:2). This is the same lesson that runs through al-Humazah and at-Takathur, made concrete in a named man. Ibn Kathir observes that Abu Lahab's close kinship to the Prophet ﷺ availed him nothing, because faith, not blood, is what saves. The surah severs the ancient assumption that a man's tribe and riches secure his future.

A standing miracle of prophecy. The classical scholars point to something remarkable about this surah: it condemned Abu Lahab to the Fire, as an unbeliever who would die on unbelief, while he was still alive and free to disprove it. Had he merely professed Islam, even falsely, he would have contradicted the Qur'an's prediction. He never did; he died a disbeliever years later, exactly as the surah foretold. This is cited as a sign of the Qur'an's truth — a prophecy made openly and fulfilled precisely, which Abu Lahab could have falsified with a single word and never did.

Partnership in evil, partnership in ruin. The surah does not stop at Abu Lahab but includes his wife, Umm Jamil, who shared and amplified his enmity. She 'carried firewood' — whether the literal thorns she strewed in the Prophet's way or the slander she carried between people to inflame hostility — and so she carries a burden in the next life, bound by a rope of palm-fibre (111:4–5). The pairing teaches that those who join hands in opposing the truth are joined in its consequences. Her wealth and status as a noblewoman of Quraysh, like her husband's, count for nothing; both are reduced to a figure of the firewood and rope of their own making.

Points of reflection

Al-Masad is a sobering reminder that proximity to guidance is not the same as accepting it. Abu Lahab lived beside the Messenger ﷺ, was his blood relative, and witnessed the truth at closest range — and it profited him nothing, because he chose enmity. The surah warns against the illusion that heritage, association, or reputation can substitute for a heart that submits. What a person does with the truth, not how near they stand to it, decides their end.

It also exposes the emptiness of the things people trust in place of God. Abu Lahab's wealth and Umm Jamil's status were, in the end, no shelter at all. The surah quietly redirects the reader: do not build your security on possessions, lineage, or influence, all of which the Fire ignores, but on faith and submission, which alone endure. And in its picture of a couple united in hostility, it warns that the company we keep and the causes we lend our hands to will share our fate — a call to be a carrier of good between people, not, like Umm Jamil, a carrier of the firewood of enmity.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Kinship to righteousness saves no one who rejects it — Abu Lahab was the Prophet's uncle.
2. Wealth and lineage are powerless to shield anyone from God's judgment.
3. Beware aiding others in enmity toward truth, as Abu Lahab's wife did.
4. Take the surah's fulfilled prophecy as evidence of the Qur'an's truth.

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/.