

# Tafseer Surah al-'Asr (العصر)

Notes on Nouman Ali Khan's Concise Commentary of the Quran

By Rameez Abid

## Introduction

- This is one of the shortest surahs in the Quran
- Some reports say that the companions of the Prophet (pbuh) would never depart from each other before reciting this surah
  - The reason is because it encapsulates the message of the whole Quran in just three verses. This surah is like a seed and the rest of the Quran is its tree
- Imam Shafi' is reported to have said that if Allah had sent nothing down except for this surah, it would have sufficed the people
  - If you want to know what Allah wants from us, then this surah contains the answer
- The focus of this surah is around our time running out and mentions that we are wasting it by running after things which are nothing but loss. The surah redefines success and failure for us
- This surah is a standard for what it means to not be a failure
  - It is defining the minimum standards to avoid becoming a failure in this life and the next
    - If the four things mentioned in this surah are not in your life, then it is not a successful life even if you are wealthy. All four are necessary and not just one of them
- It can also be said that this surah is a brief commentary on human history by Allah
  - Every single human being is lost except those mentioned with the four characteristics in this surah

## Tafseer of the Verses

### 1. By time

- a. This is an oath to prepare us for what's coming after this verse
  - i. It is a form of literary style to draw importance to something so that it will be taken seriously
    1. Oaths in Arabic are used to capture attention
- b. Some also said that it means that time itself will be called on the Day of Judgement as a witness and it will testify against mankind
- c. The Arabic word *al-'asr* (time)
  - i. Its origin has several meanings:
    1. It is used for juicing fluids out of grapes, oranges, olives, etc.
      - a. In the context of this verse, it means time is continuously dripping drop by drop

2. It is used for tornadoes because they are held strongly together and cannot be stopped
  - a. It destroys whatever it passes and in the same way time destroys our youth and cannot be stopped. It squeezes the life out of us
3. To describe something hidden inside something else
  - a. Ex: the juices squeezed are inside the fruits, the dirt is inside the tornado, etc.
4. When the sun starts going down and turning red because it look as if the sun is being pushed down and its light being squeezed out
  - a. This is why we call the afternoon prayer 'Asr
5. A young girl who is about to start her period the first time because her time is limited and it could happen at any given time. It is as if her body is being squeezed to draw out the blood
6. To refer to rain clouds because when they are squeezed together, it starts to rain
7. To refer to holding something and not letting it go
  - a. In the context of this verse, it means we cannot escape time and are held by it. It is squeezing us and is not letting go
8. A place where you can find refuge
  - a. In the context of this verse, it means the greatest protection against our loss is the right use of our time. If we waste our time, then it can also destroy us
- d. This word was also used in classical Arabic poetry to indicate time that has already been lost and you have regret that you did not take better advantage of it

## 2. Indeed, mankind is in loss

- a. This is the heart and thesis of this surah
  - i. It is saying that all of mankind is already drowning in loss
- b. The Arabic nominal sentence is used to show a strong emphasis on the statement
  - i. The sentence starts with *inna* (indeed) and there is a *laam* before *fee* (in) which also add further emphasis. All of these emphases are done to show how important this statement is
- c. The Arabic word *al-insaan* (mankind)
  - i. It emphasizes every single human being
  - ii. Its origin has two meanings:
    1. Those who express love and want to be loved
      - a. We are emotional creatures and have compassion
    2. Those who forget
      - a. We are forgetful creatures
- d. Every other verse which mentions the word *insaan* (mankind) in the Quran is further elaborating on this verse
  - i. Such verses can be further categorized in the following ways:
    1. Those verses that discuss what human beings are made of

- a. The objective is to remind us that our origins (dirt and sperm) are insignificant and to discourage us from being arrogant. He is reminding us of this so that we do not ruin our future because those who do not know their past lose sight of their future
- 2. Those verses that speak about the weaknesses of mankind
  - a. All of Allah's creation obeys Him but human beings were given free will and created weak, therefore, they constantly make mistakes. One of the reasons Allah sent down laws to us was to make life easier for our weak selves
    - i. Those who think that it makes life harder are failing to see the bigger picture
    - ii. Weaknesses include: reactionary, impatient, arrogant, greedy, hasty, stressed, etc.
  - b. Whenever Allah mentions a weakness in a verse, He also tells us how to fix it. Once we begin to appreciate Allah, we also begin to overcome our weaknesses and can also strengthen others around us
    - i. So even though we were created with weaknesses, we have also been given the ability to overcome them as well if we want to
  - c. People act according to their weaknesses because they want immediate gratification and happiness, however, this life was not made for that. There will always be problems that we will all face in this life in different ways. The most we can be in this life is content and a true happily ever after will only come about in paradise
    - i. We need to remember the lives of the prophets, if anyone deserved complete happiness in this life it was them, however, we find them constantly surrounded by problems
- 3. Those verses which mention that the way we are is by our own choice
  - a. These verses are about how human beings follow wrong on their own and not because Allah made them that way
    - i. We do this by being impatient, ungrateful, hasty, arrogant, greedy, argumentative, thinking ourselves to be self-sufficient, oppressive, utterly emotional, ignorant, prone to negativity, disloyal, restless, agitated, anxious, stingy, etc.
      - 1. We make the choice to be this way on our own and are not forced by Allah. As was mentioned in the previous point, we may be born with tendencies to these weaknesses but have the power to overcome them if we want to. We pursue them by our own choice
- 4. Those verses which mention how human beings react when good or bad happens to them

- a. We need to first understand that whether good or bad happens to us, they are both a form of test
- b. These verses discuss the following topics:
  - i. Those that mention that when something bad happens to humans, they beg Allah for relief and when He gives it to them, they become ungrateful and forget His favor
  - ii. Those that mention that when He grants people good for a while and then takes it away, they become completely devoid of hope and become focused on the negative, thus, becoming ungrateful
    - 1. Whatever good comes our way from Allah, we are not entitled to it nor deserve it, rather, it is a form of mercy from Allah
    - 2. You will find such people angry with Allah because they judge Him based on their own materialistic success or failure
  - iii. Those that mention when He showers them with favors, they begin to ignore Him, thus, becoming ungrateful
- 5. Those verses which mention the relationship human beings have with their parents
  - a. If we cannot be grateful to our parents, who are a source of numerous favors on us, then we cannot be grateful to Allah
- 6. Those verses which mention that no matter what happens, at the end of the day all humans are heading back towards Allah for judgement
- e. The Arabic word *al-khusr* (loss)
  - i. It means any type of loss
    - 1. In the context of this verse, it means no matter who or what our position is in this life, we are all experiencing loss
  - ii. Literally it means cheater or someone who deceives
    - 1. In the context of this verse, it means human beings are being cheated because this life is a deception as we are told in other verses
  - iii. The word is also used to refer to a business collapse
    - 1. In the context of this verse, it means human beings are bankrupt
  - iv. The word can also mean to lose something bit by bit in drops
    - 1. In the context of this verse, it means human beings are drowning slowly into loss and do not even realize it
  - v. The classical commentators said the word loss in this verse means: human beings are headed towards destruction, retribution from Allah, etc.
  - vi. Overall, the word loss is used in the Quran to indicate missing out on opportunities that you could have taken advantage of
    - 1. If you do not, then the only thing that remains is regret
- f. Allah in the Quran uses three ways to change the reader's worldview and mindset about reality:

- i. Lessons from history
  - 1. He uses stories from the past to draw lessons for us. These stories could be about those who lost or those who succeeded
- ii. The world around us
  - 1. Allah speaks of His favors on us in order to draw an emotional connection to Him. If we reflect on everyday pleasures that we have become so accustomed to, we will realize how loving and compassionate Allah is to His creation
- iii. Through His own words
  - 1. Allah inspires us through His own words in the Quran on how to view and go through life. He inspires us with His words

**3. Except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience**

- a. The plural is used here because the believers are a group and need each other
  - i. Being in the company of fellow believers has a positive influence and reinforces the faith
- b. Belief
  - i. Those who have the security of faith with them will be safe from loss
  - ii. The word *eemaan* (belief) is described as a light in the Quran because it does not just benefit the person but also those around him
  - iii. We must believe with both our mind and our heart
    - 1. Some people rationally believe with their mind but not with their hearts
      - a. Ex: when someone accepts there is a God but refuses to obey Him like Iblees
    - 2. Some people come into Islam through the intellectual path while others through an emotional/spiritual path with the heart. The latter are better because they immediately fall into obedience, whereas, the former may still require further convincing to fall into obedience. The Quran provides both intellectual arguments and emotional arguments to cater to both types
      - a. Because submission of the heart is so important, Allah constantly emphasizes belief with the hearts in the Quran even for those who are Muslims
      - b. Today we find that many young Muslims believe with their minds but have not fully submitted with their hearts. They have a problem with obedience to Allah because they are spiritually weak. They want to do what everyone else is doing around them
- c. Righteous deeds
  - i. We are being told to consciously do good deeds
    - 1. Difference between *fi'l* and *'amal* (both are usually translated as action)
      - a. The first is just to do any act even without thinking
        - i. Ex: walking, blinking, etc.

- b. The second is to do something deliberately and consciously with intention
          - i. Ex: going to the mosque
  - ii. The Arabic word *saalih*
    - 1. It means reformed and in the context of this verse, it means righteous deeds are there to first and foremost reform what is broken within ourselves. When we do righteous deeds, we are elevating ourselves and getting better
      - a. Doing righteous deeds benefits ourselves first
        - i. When we do righteous deeds, they have a ripple effect in our society towards others as well
    - 2. The basic fundamental righteous deeds that we are being asked to do in this verse are not that many. It is as if Allah is lightening our burden because He is saying that even though we do not have much time on this planet, we can still take advantage of it by doing just a few fundamental righteous deeds
      - a. These fundamental righteous deeds are the basic obligatory and prohibited actions
  - iii. Our deeds are a manifestation of our *eemaan*. They are the fruits of our *eemaan*
- d. Advising each other to truth and patience
  - i. This part can only be done with others and never individually
    - 1. So there is a transition in the verse, which tells us that we must also be concerned with others and not just ourselves
  - ii. The Arabic word used for advising in this verse gives the meaning that such people do not only give advice but also take it. They are open to accepting good advice for themselves as well
  - iii. The Arabic word *haqq* (truth)
    - 1. It has a number of meanings:
      - a. Reality or undeniable truth
        - i. In the context of this verse, it means we should not sugarcoat the truth. We need to tell the truth like it is
          - 1. Ex: if someone is cheating another, we advise the cheater to stop and explain that it is wrong
            - a. It should be done with gentleness and compassion
      - b. Purpose
        - i. In the context of this verse, it means we should advise those around us who have lost their purpose
          - 1. Ex: someone who is just wasting their life away in meaningless things should be advised on the purpose of life
      - c. To deserve or have a right to something



- i. As soon as we advise others to the truth, our patience will be tested
- v. Advising each other to truth and patience should be done in our daily lives in whatever capacity possible with those who are around us (family, friends, co-workers, etc.)