

Background and Meaning

Al-Asr means time. Ibn Kathir identifies this as a Makkan surah and explains that time is the setting in which human beings carry out their good and evil actions. Although the surah contains only three ayat, it presents a complete statement about human loss and the qualities of those who escape it. Ibn Kathir records al-Shafi'i's observation that careful reflection on this surah would be sufficient to guide people. The statement draws attention to the breadth of its message, rather than making the rest of the Qur'an unnecessary.

Tafsir of the Surah

Ayah 1: The oath by time. Ibn Kathir explains al-asr as the span of time within which the actions of human beings occur. He also records an explanation referring to the evening, while identifying the broader meaning of time as the better-known view. The oath introduces the serious statement that follows. Time contains a person's opportunities to believe, obey, repent and do good, as well as the actions for which that person will be held responsible.

Ayah 2: Humanity's loss. The surah declares that the human being is in loss. Ibn Kathir explains this as loss and destruction. The statement is general: the exception is supplied in the next ayah. The measure of success in this passage is therefore the outcome before Allah. The surah gives the parent a precise framework for understanding why the four qualities named at its conclusion matter together.

Ayah 3: Faith and righteous action. Ibn Kathir describes those exempted from loss as people who believe in their hearts and carry out righteous deeds with their limbs. The verse joins inward belief to outward conduct. Its description includes both a person's conviction and the actions that express obedience to Allah. Faith is mentioned first, followed by deeds that are righteous, so the exception cannot be reduced to a claim of belief with no concern for how one lives.

Ayah 3: Mutual encouragement to truth. Ibn Kathir explains this as performing acts of obedience and avoiding forbidden things. The wording describes people encouraging one another, rather than each person considering only their own situation. Truth in this explanation concerns commitment to what Allah has commanded and restraint from what He has prohibited. The surah therefore includes responsibility towards others alongside personal faith and conduct.

Ayah 3: Mutual encouragement to patience. The English abridgement explains patience here in connection with the difficulties and harm that may follow commanding good and forbidding evil. Remaining committed to truth requires endurance. The surah ends with believers supporting one another in that endurance. Its four qualities form one description: faith, righteous deeds, mutual encouragement to truth and mutual encouragement to patience. Reading the whole surah together preserves that connection.



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَالْعَصْرِ



Memorised

By Time.

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ



Memorised

The human being is in loss.

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ



Memorised

Except those who believe, and do good works, and encourage truth, and recommend patience.

Parent tafsir: adapted from Ibn Kathir, Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim, 103:1-3.
 Arabic commentary: quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/katheer/sura103-aya1.html
 Patience explained: quran.com/103:3/tafsirs/en-tafisr-ibn-kathir
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