



## An Explanation of Şūrat al-‘Aşr

The Chapter of Time

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### Avoiding Loss

*Şūrat al-‘Aşr* or ‘The Chapter of Time’ is a small Şūrah that gives us a very profound reminder. It tells us precisely how susceptible human beings are to suffering terminal loss if they do not spend their time properly and how they can avoid loss by investing their time wisely. It sums up all the elements of individual and social success in life.

Imām al-Shāfi‘ī ؒ has very rightly said that if the people contemplated upon this Şūrah well, it alone would be enough for their guidance.

The Şūrah says:

وَالْعَصْرُ

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ

Transliteration:

(1) wal ‘aşr(i);

(2) inna l-insāna la-fī khusr(in);

(3) illā l-ladhīna āmanu wa-‘amilu ş-şāliḥāti wa-tawāsaw bil-ḥaqqi wa-tawāsaw biş-şabr(i).

Translation:

(1) *By the Time,*

(2) *Man is indeed in loss,*

(3) *Except those who believe and do good deeds, and (join together) in the mutual spreading of Truth, and of patience and constancy.*

In other words:

*As evidenced by rapidly passing time, human beings are utter losers unless they believe in and adopt Islām (as their way of life), perform good deeds, and mutually promote Ḥaqq (Truth and Right) and steadfastness among themselves.*

### **Witness of Time**

The Sūrah opens with a reference to Time, which is presented here to show that Man is a loser if he fails to realise the real significance of the time given to him.

The importance of time can be realised from the fact that not only is it mentioned in the Glorious Qur’ān, which in itself holds immense significance, but that the Magnificent Creator swears by it, takes oath upon it, explains it and reveals a whole chapter in its name.

Time is the most precious resource that human beings have. We hear expressions such as ‘time is money’ and ‘time is wealth’ from the people who truly understand its value. Its supply is defined and limited. The maximum time available to us is our lifespan, the duration of which is not precisely known for any individual and its end may come any moment, whether we are ready or not, due to its nature of unpredictability.

Time is a non-renewable resource; every moment gone is gone forever. Time can never be brought back nor repeated. We cannot stop it. Whether we utilise it for our advantage or not, it passes away, and it is passing swiftly. Just look at the second hand on your watch, where every tick is indicating the passage of time that is gone forever. And this ticking of a watch announcing the passing of seconds is only a crude indicator of the speed with which time is passing. In this time period of the ticking away of only one second, light travels one hundred and eighty-six thousand (186,000) miles, a computer executes millions of instructions, the town of Batley (and everything else on the earth) moves approximately four hundred and twenty-nine (429) metres eastwards (by virtue of the rotation of the earth on its axis) and BP makes a handsome profit in thousands. Now, imagine the passing of a continuous stream of milliseconds moving brightly on an electronic ticker tape. It is with that speed we are moving towards the end of our time – our death.

Clearly, our success depends on how judiciously, effectively and efficiently we utilize our time. The better a person is at this, the more successful an achiever he is, whereas the weaker that one is in the utilisation of time, the bigger he is a loser.

The time that has passed becomes history. The history of nations is remembered and recorded so that lessons can be learnt from it. The Noble Qur’ān also reminds us time and time again about the fate of previous nations for the same purpose. ‘Have you

not heard of these people? Have you not heard of those people? Have you not heard of ‘Ād, Thamūd, the people of Sābā, the Sumerians, the Minoans, and the likes thereof?’

This Ṣūrah presents time as an element that, if contemplated upon, shows that people who do not use their limited but precious time properly, are utter losers. If one was to sit and listen to a clock tick away its seconds, to the sound of inevitability, each ‘tick’ and each ‘tock’ would send shivers down one’s spine if he was to truly understand that he has now less time to earn rewards of righteousness than only a couple of ‘ticks’ or ‘tocks’ ago.

In this regard, Man’s position in this life is like that of a trader selling ice in a hot climate, which is constantly melting away. It is the wise businessman who sells the ice as soon as possible and earns profit, rather than the fool who sits back watching it melt into water, waste and loss.

The very meaning and essence of *al-‘Aṣr* refers both to the fleeting nature of time (how quickly it is passing) and to the passed time that has become history.

The historical aspect of time provides us with the evidence that Allāh ﷻ always deals with communities of people precisely according to their collective behaviour. Those nations who did good deeds and acted virtuously flourished and prospered, but those who were bad, corrupt or unjust, i.e. who did not live according to the guidance of Allāh ﷻ, were losers. Those societies lost their peace and order as a consequence of their un-Islāmic behaviour. Consequently, they became weak, fell apart or were overrun by others. Many a time, after being given due respite, they were punished and destroyed; they are for us a reminder, as witnessed by time itself.

The fleeting nature of time reminds us that we have been put on this earth to be tested for a limited period, which is swiftly ever passing. An example of this can be seen in the examination rooms and hallways of schools, universities and other educational centres where time, as is duly emphasised, is a part of the examination or test.

To pass the test, we must live our life the way our Lord and Creator wants us to live. Any moments not spent in the obedience of Allāh ﷻ, are opportunities that are being wasted forever. Those who continue to lose the opportunity of utilising moments in piety, virtue and righteousness are the “utter losers”. From this point of view, we are like students who are writing an exam. The time a student does not spend in focusing on the exam questions, is time wasted which will result in loss of marks and bad grades. Our situation is even more precarious because we do not even know how soon our death may terminate the exam of our life. We may never have an opportunity to make up for the time lost into oblivion.

The swift passage of time also underscores another point. **In this brief life that we have on earth, a wise person endures the temporary difficulties of living according to the commandments of Allāh ﷻ, thereby accumulating huge rewards for the never-ending life of the Hereafter.** A loser, on the other hand, falls for the transitory gratification and deprives himself of the promised eternal success.

## The means of Salvation

Şūrah al-‘Aşr, therefore, emphasises mainly on four elements of success with special regard to Time. Those elements are; Īmān (Faith), performance of positive and constructive actions, collective struggle in the cause of Truth and general encouragement for patience and constancy.

From this small Şūrah, we learn that to avoid being “losers”, we need to:

1. Spend our time in ways and in pursuits that are aligned with our *faith* in Islām as a complete way of life;
2. *Perform actions* that are positive, constructive and conducive to attaining personal, moral and spiritual excellence as well as those that lead to growth and improvement in the society, as laid out in the Qur’ān and Sunnah;
3. *Struggle and strive collectively* in the cause of *Truth* and promoting *Ḥaqq* – which includes faith in Islām and good actions as well as fairness, justice and truth; and *encourage* each other to fulfil our obligations and responsibilities; and,
4. Remain *constant* and *consistent* in performing the above three elements and *encourage* each other for the same.

All of these four factors are critical for one’s success and are very much interrelated and interdependent. True belief shows itself in a person’s actions, making good action his way of life; and a person who loves his faith and his way of life, promotes both of them in the society -- wanting to see them appreciated and adopted in the society and to see the people standing up and aggressively working for them with perseverance.

It all comes as one package and must be adopted as such for success and salvation. One’s time and resources must also be spent on creating an environment and a movement for the promotion of Ḥaqq and perseverance as well as hoping to succeed with Allāh ﷻ on the basis of faith and good actions. The path to success opens with faith but then all the other three items must be simultaneously attended to. We cannot wait until we master one before embarking on the other. We must progress on all fronts at the same time, that is, to say, practice piety, promote the Truth and patience, and enjoin others to do likewise. Only then can we avoid loss and win salvation.

