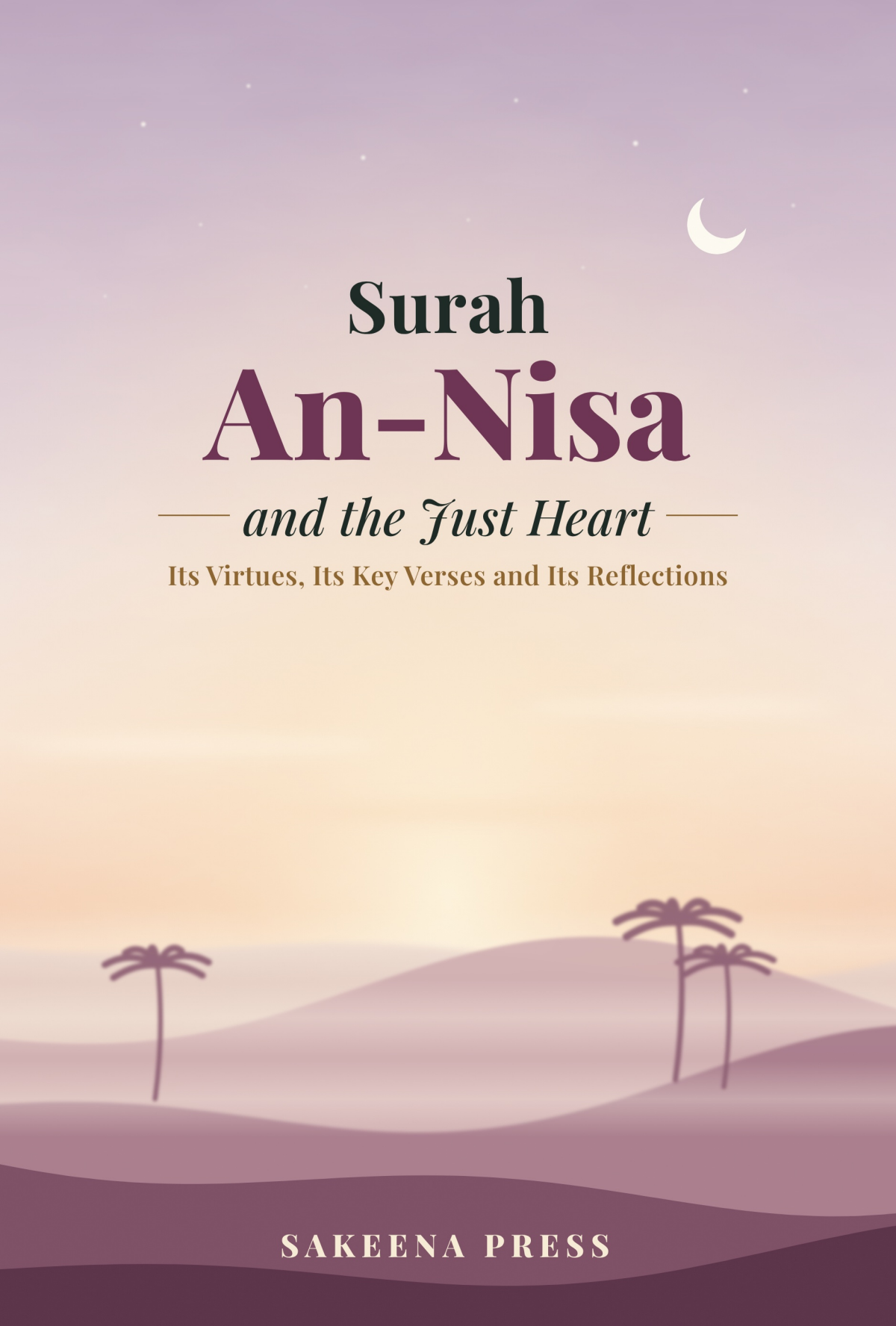
Surah An-Nisa

and the Just Heart

Its Virtues, Its Key Verses and Its Reflections



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For everyone who holds something in trust for another,
and for everyone who has been forgotten.

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PREFACE

A Word Before You Begin

This is the third book in a series on the surahs of the Quran. The first walked through Surah Al-Baqarah, the surah that builds. The second walked through Surah Al Imran, the surah that holds. This one walks through the surah that comes after them in the mushaf, Surah An-Nisa.

An-Nisa is a long surah of one hundred and seventy-six verses, revealed in Madinah. Many readers know it only as the surah of inheritance shares and family law, and so they read it quickly, as if it were a list of rules meant for judges. That is a loss. The rules are there, and they matter, but they are not cold. Again and again the surah turns to the people a community is most likely to forget: the orphan whose wealth is in someone else's hands, the wife who has no one to speak for her, the relative with no share, the neighbour, the traveller, the person who made a mistake and wants to come back. It names them, protects them and holds the strong to account for them.

That is why this book speaks of a just heart. The surah does not only describe a just court. It describes a person who stands for what is right even against himself, who returns what was entrusted to him, who speaks well of his family and treats the weak with mercy, and who knows that Allah does not wrong anyone, not even by the weight of an atom.

A word on what this book is. It is not a tafsir; the books of tafsir explain the surah verse by verse with a depth no short book can match. It is a guided reflection on a selection of the surah's verses.

Every verse is given in Arabic exactly as it appears in the Madinah Mushaf, with its meaning and reference. Every hadith is given with its source and its grading where it is outside Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim. Where this book offers a reflection of its own, it is presented as reflection, and it never claims more than the texts say.

How this book is arranged

Part One introduces the surah: its name, its place beside Al-Baqarah and Al Imran, and its map.

Parts Two to Six each take one thing the surah does: it begins with mercy for the weak, it builds a just home, it commands justice, it keeps the door of return open, and it holds a community together.

Part Seven shows how to live with the surah, with two moments from the life of the Prophet ﷺ connected to it and simple reading plans.

Verses are given in Arabic as they appear in the Madinah Mushaf, with the meaning in English from the Saheeh International translation as published on quran.com. Where only part of a verse is quoted, the reference marks the verse it comes from. Hadith numbers follow the standard printed editions as used on sunnah.com.

Some chapters end with a short reflection box. These are questions to sit with, not additional rulings.

PART ONE

The Surah of Those Who Are Easily Forgotten

Its name, its place beside the two bright ones, and its map.

1 A Surah Named After Women

2 In the Same Night Prayer

3 The Map of the Surah

CHAPTER ONE

A Surah Named After Women

1

The surah takes its name from its subject. An-Nisa means the women, and a great many of the surah's rulings concern women: their rights in marriage, their rights in inheritance, their dignity in disagreement and in separation. But the surah does not begin with women. It begins with all of humanity.

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ ٱتَّقُواْ رَبَّكُمُ ٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكُم مِّن نَّفْسٍ وَٰحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا
زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَآءً ۚ وَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ ٱلَّذِى تَسَآءَلُونَ بِهِۦ
وَٱلْأَرْحَامَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا ﴿١﴾

"O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed Allah is ever, over you, an Observer (1)"

SURAH AN-NISA 4:1

Read the verse slowly and notice what it does before it gives a single ruling. It reminds every reader that they come from one soul. Men and women, rich and poor, the guardian and the orphan, all

were dispersed from the same origin. Before the surah tells anyone what they owe to anyone else, it tells them they are family.

Then it names two things to be mindful of. The first is Allah, through whom you ask one another. People make requests of each other in His name, and so His name stands behind every promise. The second is the wombs, al-arham, the ties of kinship. The verse places the rights of relatives immediately after the mention of Allah, and closes by reminding the reader that Allah is always watching.

Everything that follows in the surah grows from this opening. The rules about orphans, wives, heirs and neighbours are the practical shape of one idea: you all come from one soul, so be mindful of Allah in how you treat one another.

REFLECT

Who in your family do you ask for things in Allah's name, and who asks you? Is there a tie of kinship you have let grow cold that this verse is asking you to warm again?

CHAPTER TWO

In the Same Night Prayer 2

The companions saw how the Prophet ﷺ himself lived with this surah. Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman prayed behind him one night and described what he heard.

HADITH

ثُمَّ افْتَتَحَ النِّسَاءَ فَقَرَأَهَا ثُمَّ افْتَتَحَ آلَ عِمْرَانَ فَقَرَأَهَا يَقْرَأُ مُتَرَسِّلاً

He began al-Baqarah, and I thought he would bow at the hundredth verse, but he continued. "Then he began an-Nisa and recited it, then he began Al Imran and recited it, reciting slowly."

Sahih Muslim 772a.

In one rak'ah of one night prayer, the Prophet ﷺ recited Al-Baqarah, An-Nisa and Al Imran. Hudhayfah goes on in the same narration to describe how, when he passed a verse of glorification he glorified Allah, when he passed a verse of asking he asked, and when he passed a verse of seeking refuge he sought refuge.

This book does not ask anyone to stand for that long. The point of the hadith for us is simpler. The surahs this series has been walking through were the Prophet's ﷺ companions in the dark. He did not race through them. He read slowly, and he responded to what he read. That is the way to read An-Nisa: slowly enough to stop at a verse about an orphan and think of an orphan, to stop at a verse about forgiveness and ask for it.

CHAPTER THREE

The Map of the Surah

3

One hundred and seventy-six verses become easier to hold once you can see their shape. The headings below are a reading aid, not divisions found in the text, and the surah moves between its themes freely.

The opening, verses 1 to 14. One soul and the ties of kinship. The rights of orphans and their property. The inheritance shares, introduced with the words Allah instructs you concerning your children, and closed with the limits set by Allah.

The household, verses 15 to 43. Repentance and its conditions. Women's rights in marriage and the command to live with them in kindness. Allah's desire to make things clear, to accept repentance and to lighten the burden. The great sins and the forgiveness of the small. The verse of good treatment to parents, relatives, orphans, neighbours and travellers.

Justice and obedience, verses 44 to 70. Allah does not wrong anyone even the weight of an atom. The command to render trusts to their owners and to judge with justice. Obedience to Allah and His Messenger ﷺ, and the company of those whom Allah has blessed.

The community under pressure, verses 71 to 126. Striving, emigration and prayer in fear. Greeting one another, investigating before accusing, and the verse about the disabled who stay behind. The hypocrites and their whispering. Forgiveness for the one who wrongs himself and seeks it.

Justice to the end, verses 127 to 176. Settlement between spouses. Standing firm for justice even against yourself. The hypocrites, the People of the Book and the truth about Isa, peace be upon him. And finally the verse of al-kalalah, which al-Bara' ibn 'Azib reported was the last verse to be revealed.

That is the journey. One family, one home, one standard of justice, one open door back to Allah, and one community held together by all of these.

PART TWO

It Begins With Mercy for the Weak

The orphan's wealth, and a Lord who wants to lighten the load.

4 The Orphan's Wealth

5 Allah Wants to Lighten Your Burden

CHAPTER FOUR

The Orphan's Wealth

4

The first group the surah protects by name is the orphan. In the society of the time, as in ours, an orphan's property was usually in the hands of an adult guardian, and the orphan had no one strong enough to ask for an account of it. The surah steps into that gap.

وَءَاتُوا۟ ٱلْيَتَـٰمَىٰٓ أَمْوَٰلَهُمْ ۖ وَلَا تَتَبَدَّلُوا۟ ٱلْخَبِيثَ بِٱلطَّيِّبِ ۖ وَلَا تَأْكُلُوٓا۟ أَمْوَٰلَهُمْ إِلَىٰٓ أَمْوَٰلِكُمْ ۚ إِنَّهُۥ كَانَ حُوبًا كَبِيرًا ﴿٢﴾

"And give to the orphans their properties and do not substitute the defective [of your own] for the good [of theirs]. And do not consume their properties into your own. Indeed, that is ever a great sin (2)"

SURAH AN-NISA 4:2

Give the orphans their property. Do not swap your poor goods for their good goods. Do not absorb their wealth into your own. Each command closes a door that a guardian might be tempted to open quietly, where no one would notice. Then, a few verses later, the surah describes what such wealth really is.