

A Courteous Approach to Qur'an

-Insights from Selected Talks-

By

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The invocation of 'Peace be upon Him' is implied at every mention of the Prophet Muhammad and Prophet Ibrahim.

Any reference to 'men' in the text has the connotation of humankind and equally refers to women and should be regarded as non-gender specific.

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an addresses most issues that concern human beings with constant references to the ultimate Reality and Truth. Considerable emphasis is given to relative time and human concerns on earth and the connection between the inseparability of the relative and the Absolute. The Qur'an emphasises that anything that exists or happens is due to God and equally emphasises human responsibility to act and live with clear accountability to God.

The main difference between other traditions and religions at the time of the Prophet Muhammad is the perplexing notion that, in truth, there is only God, and all else are shadows in this Light. This most potent thread of God's perpetual presence and dominance is considered the higher path of Muhammad towards an awakening to absolute Truth, without denying the relative and transient realities.

The mind is the connector between the infinite unseen and the relative earthly dualities. The heart is considered the seat of the soul or the spirit and the connecting point to the light of life itself. The duality of human nature is such that it seamlessly connects the so-called individual, whose personal life begins with birth and ends with death to perpetual life itself.

The essential message of the Qur'an has two beams: one which illuminates the fundamental nature of absolute Oneness and the other beam which is the acceptance, realisation and living of this information as the purpose of this life, to be fully revealed in the Hereafter. If one has not awakened to the Truth in this life, it will be apparent in the hereafter without the shadows of egos and other distractions. The individual's soul or spirit within the heart intrinsically knows this truth and transmits it to the living person at a higher level of consciousness. This awareness brings about lasting fulfilment when followed or misery, fear and sickness if ignored. The idea of heaven and hell after death emphasises the natural outcome of human intention and action in this life.

To understand the Qur'an and use it as a template, this brief background is necessary. This booklet presents extracts from talks I have given on the subject, arranged in six themes: Context

and Action, the Self, Understanding, Transformation, Awakening and lastly Oneness and Balance.

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri

1. CONTEXT & ACTION

1.1 Historical Context: A Culture of Generosity

To gain blessings and mercy from this ultimate, balanced book of wisdom, you must put it into the right perspective. This means you must appreciate the historical context, i.e., the overall situation of genuine Bedouins and nomads at that time.

They constantly confronted their physical demise, yet generosity was their highest value and most honoured characteristic. When one is close to starvation, generosity is the most meritorious of actions.

They were a people of self-reliance, dependent on their reading of the situation around them, of nature and, ultimately, Allah. Their strength came through this self-reliance, self-respect and consistent belief in a favourable outcome.

One of the critical approaches to the Qur'an should therefore include understanding the situation in Makkah and Madinah during the time of its revelation.

Identify the historical period under which the chapter or verse was revealed to understand and place it in perspective.

1.2 Migration (*Hijrah*) of Correct Action

Despite the afflictions faced by the Prophet Muhammad during the Makkan period, he expressed contentment and was a fountain of blessings. His actions were consistently compassionate, understanding, wise, patient and persevering. He worked for the sake of Allah, for nature and the evolution and revolution of the heart. The 11th, 12th and 13th year of his prophet-hood in Makkah spelt the polarisation of the new way of life with the old tribal habits. The people of Makkah saw the Prophet Muhammad as one of their sons threatening their traditional values. He criticized ancient customs, e.g. the dishonour of fathering a daughter—ironic when a father himself is born of a woman.

People were also troubled by the message that this indescribable, intangible entity is behind all you witness—an entity to which you can only allude, understandable only through the throne of the heart. The codification of this new system became a real threat, and a clash was inevitable.

The Prophet Muhammad's perspective was to see those thirteen years of affliction as years of blessedness. All reflective human beings will retrospectively look at their formative years and realise the sweetness and simplicity of past troubles.

Those who trust the perfection of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (Members of the Prophet's household) and their Schools of Teaching have the advantage of seeing the lives of their Imams as a perfect reflection of the spirit of the Prophet Muhammad and source of guidance for correct conduct.

We see the same *rūh* (soul) and values lived over a period of about three hundred years and can derive many lessons from them. One's own imam, guide, or teacher, should reflect the same spirit of compassion, generosity, understanding, and wisdom as the Prophet Muhammad.

Seek the meanings of the verses and their explanation since the Qur'an encompasses the expounding of everything. This is so that the deep connotations may be exposed to the seeker. Allah bestows upon man an understanding of His book. The Qur'an constantly repeats phrases such as 'Will you then not consider?'

2. THE SELF

2.1 Connecting Surah (Chapter) with Self

The Qur'an is for all people across all times; thus, the reader must internalise its guidance. Realise that the guidance offered is prescriptive rather than superstitious. A human being is constantly confronted by the conflict of opposites and must learn to deal with these dualities—in a manner appropriate to each situation.

The Qur'an displays through every chapter its *sūh* (fortress of high walls) so that as one delves deeper, one enters that safe harbour. Every chapter is also a stepping stone that you have taken for yourself, and if it leaves an imprint in your heart, then the chapter (or verse) and your heart have connected.

Allah says:



Giving insight and a reminder for every servant who turns [to Allah]. (50:8)

Knowledge and understanding of one's state, its opposing factors and weaknesses, are essential for the chapter to connect to the self.

Do not have any sense of power or ability; do not look upon yourself with eyes of satisfaction. Seek forgiveness from Allah and be grateful. Abandon yourself in true submission and do not judge yourself as good or bad.

2.2 Being Human

Humans have travelled to higher atmospheres yet we hardly know anything about our inner space. Inside our humanness, the Qur'an reminds us that we are a *naḥs* (spirit and ego).

وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا ﴿٧﴾ فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا ﴿٨﴾

And [by] the soul and He who proportioned it. And inspired it [with discernment of] its wickedness and its righteousness. (91:7-8)

Nafs is the same word as *nafas*, which means ‘breathing’. We depend wholly on breath (air), water, earth and fire. Without these four essential elements, we cannot survive. The above verses urge us to look at the self and how it has been designed to fluctuate between its decadence and needs.

We are distracted by all the fires around us, in our business, work, with other human beings, with the debt we have created, with our families.

There is no time left for us to smell the Garden that is beckoning us. These distractions ultimately overwhelm our being and divert us from our true intention and purpose to focus on the Garden and enter it. Every self, every human being, knows what they are doing. We want status, we want wealth, we want to be admired, and we want to be beloved. We know what we are doing, yet we give excuses.

بَلْ تُؤْثِرُونَ الْحَيَاةَ الدُّنْيَا ﴿١٦﴾ وَالْآخِرَةُ خَيْرٌ وَأَبْقَىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

But you prefer the worldly life. While the Hereafter is better and everlasting. (87:16-17)

The Prophet put his hand around Salman al-Farsi and told him that *Jannah* (Paradise) needs and is waiting for him. The awakened being in this world travels with ease and equanimity towards the natural destiny of consciousness of the hereafter.

We are limited, having emerged from the limitless and eventually returning to infinity. Infinity begins every instant. Every moment is the beginning of a new infinity, but we are oblivious. We cannot move on if we cannot stop the mind from constantly going to the past and being insecure about the future. Memories and emotions are barriers to the present and taint our faith in the future. That is why our *salāh* (prayer) is conditional upon *hudūr ul-qalb* (presence of heart). Our hearts must be tranquil and present, and then we disappear. The Qur’an says about *insān* (man):

وَكُلِّ إِنْسَانٍ أَلْزَمْنَاهُ طَائِرَهُ فِي عُنُقِهِ ۖ

And [for] every person We have imposed his fate upon his neck (17:13)

Whatever we do, our actions are upon us. We must be responsible regarding our thoughts, intentions and actions because we will witness the consequences clearly after death. For this reason, the Prophet Muhammad says, ‘He who has died, his *Qiyāmah* (Reckoning) has happened’. This is because we can no longer act. We can, however, rectify past actions by seeking forgiveness or being available to help and serve those less fortunate than ourselves.

Constant awareness of death will bring about modesty and *zuhud* (renouncing of worldly pleasures) as we are all *arwāh* (souls) as described above (17:13). In the *Akhirah* (Hereafter) every self is driven by that inner force of the *rūh* (soul) and the witnessing upon us of what we have done and thought.

وَجَاءَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّعَهَا سَائِقٌ وَشَهِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾

And every soul will come, with it a driver and a witness. (50:21)

Every cell declares it. As the Qur’an says:

بَلِ الْإِنْسَانُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ ۖ بَصِيرَةٌ ﴿١٤﴾

Rather, man, against himself, will be a witness (75:14)

Rise to a state where you hear Allah’s words directly from the Speaker and not from yourself. To clear your mind, free your body and rūh (soul) and to ultimately progress and rise from lower to higher consciousness, resume your approach to the Qur’an.