



Keys to Tadabbur: How to Reflect Deeply on the Qur'an

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

Treasure is spelled *tadabbur*

The Qur'an is the "rope of Allah";¹ whoever grabs onto it will be saved, and whoever loosens his grip will be destroyed. The Qur'an is also the "spirit He revealed."² Allah created our bodies from the earth and decreed that their nourishment would come from the earth. Similarly, He created our spirits from a higher world and decreed that they require nourishment from this higher realm. He sent down the Qur'an to quench our spirits so they do not dry up, crack, and wither away. The Qur'an is also "the light,"³ without which a person is unacquainted with His Creator, cannot discern between truth and falsehood, and does not realize the stark disparity between this world and the hereafter.

However, all this remains dependent on deep regular reflection (*tadabbur*) on the Qur'an's messages. The command to beautify our voice in recitation, the incentive of ten good deeds per letter recited, and that of being upgraded to a higher station in Paradise with each verse we commit to memory are all intended to bring us to that end.⁴ Only through such reflection can someone tap into the secrets of the Qur'an and unlock its most valuable treasures. The Most High said,

This is a blessed Book which We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], that they might deeply reflect (do *tadabbur*) upon its verses and that those of understanding would be reminded.⁵

The causative letter *lām* in this verse, translated as "that they might," informs us of a primary wisdom behind the revelation of the Qur'an. Certainly, the mere reading and rehearsal of the Qur'an are among the most virtuous and rewarding acts of worship, but the transformative potential in Allah's words lies at the nexus of our intellectual and spiritual engagement with the Qur'an. One who only reads or listens to the Qur'an without pondering its meanings may not receive guidance

¹ Qur'an 3:103.

² Qur'an 42:52, a reference to the Qur'an according to some exegetes.

³ Qur'an 64:8.

⁴ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, bk. 45, hadith 3162.

⁵ Qur'an 38:29.

from it. Allah, the Exalted, said, “Do they not then deeply ponder over the Qur'an, or are there locks upon their hearts?”⁶

In fact, even an expert reciter or a Qur'an instructor, who does not reflect on its meaning for their own salvation, can plummet to become among the worst of God's creation. The Prophet ﷺ told us that the first three people to be sentenced on the Day of Resurrection will be a philanthropist, a martyr, and an expert reciter. Regarding the reciter, he ﷺ said,

He will be brought, the blessings of Allah will be made known and he will acknowledge them. Allah will say: What did you do about them? The man will say: I learned religious knowledge, taught others, and I recited the Qur'an for your sake. Allah will say: You have lied, for you studied only so that it would be said you are a scholar and you recited the Qur'an only so that it would be said you are a reciter, and thus it was said. Then, Allah will order him to be dragged upon his face until he is cast into Hellfire.⁷

We plead to Allah, by the light of His glorious Face, to never subject us to such a disgraceful fate.

Tadabbur is therefore the true differentiator between people who live self-serving lives, who tokenize the Qur'an on one level or another through their shallow relationship to it, and those fixated on their love of the Divine. The latter remain at the door of His words, knocking over and over again, certain that the Most Gracious will open and hand them from His treasures what this world a hundred times over can never offer them. They live to increase their intimacy with His divine messages, and in anticipation of meeting the Speaker, and they find themselves gravitating away from this transient world as a result. Sahl ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Tustarī would say,

The sign of loving Allah is loving the Qur'an; the sign of loving the Qur'an is loving the Prophet ﷺ and loving the Sunnah; the sign of loving the Sunnah is loving the hereafter; the sign of loving the hereafter is being

⁶ Qur'an 47:24.

⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1905.

averse to the worldly life; the sign of being averse to the worldly life is only consuming from it [his] needs and what will deliver [him] to the hereafter.⁸

Hence, a meaningful relationship with the Qur'an (namely, via *tadabbur*) marks how this love story began, and eternity with its Source is the grand finale, where He will host them in a place where "no eye has ever seen, no ear has heard, and what has never dawned upon the heart of any person."⁹ Many scholars view that after fulfilling the obligations, no form of ritual devotion is superior to reciting the Qur'an, and that it surpasses *du'ā'* (supplication), *dhikr* (remembrance), and every other form of spiritual engagement that does not involve Qur'an.¹⁰ This preference for recitation, of course, does not apply to situations in which there is a superseding contemporaneous obligation such as *ṣalāh*.

Sincerity with the Qur'an

People who stand before Allah's revealed guidance are of different classes in terms of their sincerity; some flee in aversion, wishing to remain in denial of the truth it contains, "as if they were frightened donkeys fleeing from a lion."¹¹ Others accept "its burden" for the sake of social status, bragging rights, polemics, and similar forms of selfishness, "like a donkey that carries a load of books."¹² A third class approaches it sincerely, thirsty for more faith and guidance, and these are the only ones who will be quenched and healed by it. Allah says, "And We send down of the Qur'an that which is healing and a mercy for the believers, but it does not increase the wrongdoers except in loss."¹³ This verse testifies, as Qatādah (rA) said, that "nobody rises from a sit-down with the Qur'an without having been elevated or demoted."¹⁴ The outcome depends entirely on the soundness of their

⁸ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 1st ed. (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Dār al-Minhāj, 2011), 8:487.

⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 3224; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2824.

¹⁰ The discussion revolves around reconciling between two *qudsī* hadiths, "Whoever is too busy with My remembrance to ask Me, then I shall give him more than what I give to those who ask," and "Whoever is preoccupied by the Qur'an from remembering Me and asking Me, I shall give him more than what I give to those who ask. And the virtue of Allah's Speech over the speech of others is like the virtue of Allah over His creation." See Yaḥyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *al-Majmū' sharḥ al-Muḥadhdhab lil-Shūrāzī*, ed. Najīb al-Muṭī'ī (Jeddah: Maktabat al-Irshad, 1980), 2:189.

¹¹ Qur'an 74:50–51.

¹² Qur'an 62:5.

¹³ Qur'an 17:82.

¹⁴ Abū al-Qāsim al-Baghawī, *Ma'ālim al-Tanzīl* (Riyadh: Dār Tiba, 1990), 15:123.

faith, their current spiritual health, and the attentiveness they bring to this session. Hence, being cognizant of the different states of our hearts will help us determine our degree of readiness to be spiritually uplifted by the Qur'an. But even if we cannot yet benefit from its full downpour, we should never underestimate what even a drizzle of it can bring into our lives.

Elsewhere, Allah says, “Indeed in that is a profound reminder for whoever has a heart or who listens while he is present [minded].”¹⁵ Ibn al-Qayyim (rA) notes that this verse captures—in the most succinct way—the three factors necessary for being impacted by anything. It must have an intrinsic potency for impact, its “target” must be open to stimulation or impression, and any hindrances between the force and the impact must be removed. “In that is a profound reminder” refers to the intrinsic potency of the Qur'anic narrative. “For whoever has a heart” refers to the sincere heart that is alive and able to comprehend the implications of the message, as Allah said, “It is but a reminder and a clear recital—to warn whoever is alive.”¹⁶ Finally, “who listens while he is present [minded]” refers to mindfulness. One may wonder how to understand the word “or” in this verse. The verse says that the Qur'an is a reminder for those with a heart “or” those who listen. It seems to imply that either spiritual life or attentiveness are required, but not both. Perhaps this means that a disbeliever whose heart is not yet alive may still benefit from the Qur'an through sincerely listening to its message, and that a believer may have a sincere heart but still not benefit until he or she purges the impediments between them and the Qur'an, such as distraction or sin.¹⁷

Being sincere in giving the Qur'an our undivided attention involves more than being disciplined and thoughtful. When 'Ā'ishah (rA) was asked about the character of the Prophet ﷺ, she said, “His character was the Qur'an; he was pleased by what it approved, and displeased by what it deemed reprehensible.”¹⁸ Notice, the Qur'an in his life was not limited to a frequent recitation on his pure

¹⁵ Qur'an 50:37.

¹⁶ Qur'an 36:70.

¹⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Fawā'id* (Mecca: Dār 'Ālam al-Fawā'id, 2008), 3–5.

¹⁸ Reported by al-Bayhaqī in *Dalā'il al-nubūwah*.

tongue صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم or a reverent pause whenever it reached his blessed ears صلی اللہ علیہ وسلم. It was embodied in his ethical framework, his emotions, and his conduct.

For the purposes of this paper, we will explore where all that is rooted: our approach to reading the Qur'an and some best practices to improve our *tadabbur*.

Checklist for *tadabbur*¹⁹

1. Spiritual detoxification

Indeed, it is a noble Qur'an, in a Book well-protected; none touch it except the purified.²⁰

Many exegetes consider this an allusion to the sinless angels who have access to *al-Lawḥ al-Mahfūz*, a primordial tablet in the heavens where the Qur'an was first inscribed. The majority of jurists, even those who accept this interpretation, still cite this verse regarding the obligation of being in a state of full ritual purity (*ṭahārah*) before touching our copies of the Qur'an.²¹ Nonetheless, scholars like Imam al-Farrā' (rA) suggested another brilliant layer of meaning here, namely that the blessings and sweetness of the Qur'an can only be reached by the believers who are purified from faithlessness.²² Similarly, Ibn al-Qayyim reports Ibn Taymiyyah as saying, "If the angels—who are created beings—are prevented from entering a house by dogs and images, then how could knowing Allah, loving Him, the sweetness of remembering Him, and the comfort of being near to Him, enter a heart that is filled with the dogs of desires and images [of worldly pursuits]?"²³

In another verse, Allah (the Mighty and Majestic) says,

¹⁹ Scholars wrote a lot on the topic of the manners of reciting the Qur'an, most of which revolve around attaining the highest possible levels of *tadabbur*. Some authored independent books on the matter, such as Imam al-Nawawī's book *al-Tibyan* (translated by Musa Furber, *Etiquette with the Quran*, <https://musafurber.com/books/etiquette-with-the-quran/>). Others dedicated chapters in their books to the topic, such as Imam al-Suyūṭī in *al-Itqān* (the thirty-fifth chapter on the manners of reading the Quran) (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), 2:302–31; Imam al-Ghazālī in his *Iḥyā'* (the Manners of Reading the Quran), 2:257–339; Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī in *Mirqāt al-Maḥātīḥ Sharḥ Mishkāṭ al-Maṣābīḥ* (the Manners of Quran) 1st ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), 5:70–88.

²⁰ Qur'an 56:77–79.

²¹ This is the official position of the four *madhāhib* (schools) of Islamic law, but this would only apply to the Arabic Qur'an in print form, not an electronic version, a printed translation, nor a printed Arabic Qur'an commentary.

²² Yahyā ibn Ziyād al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Miṣrīyah lil-Ta'līf wa-al-Tarjamah, 1983), 3:130. Imam al-Bukhārī held the same opinion in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* (Book of Tafsīr).

²³ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-sālikīn*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1973), 2:418.

I will turn away from My signs those who act unjustly with arrogance in the land. And even if they were to see every sign, they still would not believe in them. If they see the Right Path, they will not take it. But if they see a crooked path, they will follow it. This is because they denied Our signs and were heedless of them.²⁴

The signs (*āyāt*) of Allah are not just observed and experienced, but also recited. Hence, we find Sufyān ibn 'Uyaynah (rA) explaining that a part of “turning them away from My signs” includes “removing from them the ability to understand the Qur'an.”²⁵ In that vein, Ibn Qudāmah (rA) also said,

The reciter must clear himself of the deterrents of understanding, such as being insistent upon a sin, or harboring arrogance, or surrendering to his biases—for these all cause the heart to darken and corrode. The heart is like a mirror, desires are like corrosion, and Qur'anic concepts are like images that are reflected in the mirror. Spiritual training, through cleansing it of [contrary] desires, is analogous to polishing that mirror.²⁶

Sins infect the heart just as diseases infect the body, and the diseased heart cannot benefit from the nourishment that its survival and well-being depend on. Hence, if we want to understand Allah's messages, and benefit from them beyond intellectual discussions, we must be committed to purifying our hearts, which are the receptacles of the Qur'an. This is achieved by renewing our repentance on a regular basis, seeking His forgiveness for our past crimes, discontinuing the sins currently polluting our interior, and refreshing our resolve to compensate in the days ahead. Finally, we should incorporate in that detox humble pleas to Allah that express our desperation and earnestness to requalify for being guided by His word, and our acknowledgment of its power to inspire and transform a person in remarkable ways. Our Prophet ﷺ encouraged us all to learn a sacred prayer in this respect, the end of which states,

O Allah... make the Qur'an the spring of my heart, the illumination of my chest, the assuaging of my grief, and the departure of my anxiety

²⁴ Qur'an 7:146.

²⁵ Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān (Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī)*, 1st ed. (Cairo: Hajar, 2001), 10:443.

²⁶ Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī, *Mukhtasar Minhaj al-Qāsidīn* (Damascus: Dār al-Bayān, 1978), 53–54.

(*Allāhumma... ij'al al-Qur'āna rabī'a qalbī, wa-nūra ṣadri, wa-jalā'a ḥuznī, wa dhahāba hammī*).²⁷

2. A serious approach to the sacred

In several Qur'anic passages, Allah recounts His commands to past nations and prophets to “take hold of the Scripture with strength,”²⁸ meaning with the utmost seriousness. In a Meccan verse, prior to the permission of physical jihad, Allah commands His Prophet not to obey the unbelievers and to perform jihad with the Quran, “and strive against them with it a great striving.”²⁹ The necessity of treating the sacred as such includes not handling it superficially, as one may handle the words of transient created beings.

Hold fast to the Scripture!

A part of this requires treating our sessions with the Qur'an, especially those designated for *tadabbur*, as semi-formal occasions by insulating them against every avoidable distraction. In our technological era that is engineered to distract in unprecedented ways, it has become necessary for a Muslim to erect formidable walls in their life around what they value, and constantly reinforce those walls against the catapults of device-intrusion. Al-Suyūṭī (rA) said, “It is disliked to interrupt the recitation in order to speak to someone. Al-Ḥalīmī said, ‘That is because the words of Allah should not be overcome by the words of others.’ Al-Bayhaqī supported this position with the following narration in *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*: ‘When Ibn ‘Umar used to recite the Qur'an, he would not speak at all until he had concluded.’”³⁰

This undivided attention is among the pearls of wisdom for why reciting the Qur'an in the night prayers has a superior virtue; it is more distant from diversion and permits a greater chance for the tongue and heart to coincide in focus.³¹ As Allah (st) says, “Arise [to pray] at night... Indeed, the night hours are more

²⁷ *Musnad Aḥmad*, from Ibn Mas'ūd, no. 3704.

²⁸ Qur'an 19:12.

²⁹ Qur'an 25:52.

³⁰ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), 2:319.

³¹ Al-Nawawī, *al-Tibyan fī ādāb ḥamalāt al-Qur'ān*, 4th ed. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1996), 63–68.

conducive [to worship].”³² For those who feel that they do not memorize enough Qur'an to apply this, know that the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ were first instructed to perform the night prayers at a time when very little Qur'an had been revealed. This reinforces that repeating a few verses may actually provide far more benefit, by allowing for greater *tadabbur* than reading a greater number of verses a single time. Al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī (ra) said, “Those who were before you saw the Qur'an as messages from their Lord so they used to reflect on them at night and follow them during the day.”³³

Finally, for those who cannot yet understand the few verses they have memorized, major scholars have deemed it permissible to hold a *muṣḥaf* in hand as you recite.³⁴ Contemporary scholars have also extended this concession to translations as well, meaning they permitted that a reciter hold a translation and glance at it (not pronounce it) as they recite or hear the Arabic.

Whether we recite in prayer or outside of it, this concept should always be front and center for us moving forward; it is inappropriate to recite Allah's sacred words while fielding mobile notifications, while meandering with our eyes at every intriguing sight, or while being immersed in laughter and play. Scholars suggest that a reciter also be keen, when pursuing *tadabbur*, to avoid times when they are physically or mentally fatigued. In his commentary on the hadith of the Prophet ﷺ asking some of his Companions to recite the Qur'an for him and saying, “I like to hear it from others,”³⁵ Imam Ibn Baṭṭāl (rA) extends the wisdom of doing that to other relevant situations we face upon reciting the Qur'an. He said that this may be to maximize the quality of *tadabbur*, since the reciter may at times be too consumed (due to fatigue, foggy memory, or otherwise) with the rendition of the verses to juggle that along with the superior task of reflecting on them.³⁶

³² Qur'an 73:2–6. The cited translation aligns more with the readings of Ibn 'Āmir and Abū 'Amr وطأ. However, the meaning of the other reading, adopted by the rest of the ten *qurrā'*, وَطَأْ means “intense.” Both readings are authentic and both meanings are a valid understanding of the verse.

³³ Al-Nawawī, *al-Tibyan*, 54.

³⁴ Al-Nawawī, *al-Majmū'*, 4:27–28.

³⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, bk. 63, hadith 73.

³⁶ Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Lebanon, Dār al-Maʿrifah, 1884), 9:94.

Etiquette of recitation

Be keen to observe the proper etiquettes for reciting Qur'an that have been reported by our pious predecessors. These ceremonial-like practices include sitting reverently in a humble posture,³⁷ being undisturbed by hunger or the call of nature, facing the *qiblah* (direction of prayer),³⁸ maintaining ritual³⁹ and physical purity,⁴⁰ and refreshing one's oral hygiene.⁴¹ Ibn Mājah narrates that 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (rA) would say, "Your mouths are the passageways of the Qur'an, so refresh them with the *siwāk* (toothbrush)."⁴²

Brief yourself on the meanings

Familiarize yourself with the meanings of the verses you will now recite. Allah (st) condemned in the Qur'an those who neglected the meanings of their Scripture, settled for its recitation, and took their faith from speculation as a result, saying, "And among them are unlettered ones who do not know the Scripture except [indulgence in] wishful thinking, but they are only assuming."⁴³ Since *tadabbur* involves deep reflection, and since reflection is a matter of deepening our understanding, developing a baseline understanding is necessary. This is easily done by consulting a reliable book of *tafsīr* (exegesis). Imam al-Ṭabarī (rA), a celebrated pioneer in *tafsīr* literature, used to say, "I marvel at how someone who does not know the *tafsīr* could enjoy the Qur'an."⁴⁴ He is reminding us that the tranquility found in the Qur'anic melody cannot compare with its truest treasure, which lies in savoring the meanings these verses carry. For beginners, a trustworthy Sunni translation should suffice in that regard.

It should be noted that familiarizing oneself with the meanings in this manner will not suffice to qualify a person to delve into Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsīr*) or the extraction of legal rulings (*fiqh*) independently. But just as it would be

³⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 2:270.

³⁸ Al-Nawawī, *al-Tibyān*, 79.

³⁹ Al-Nawawī, *al-Tibyān*, 73–76.

⁴⁰ Al-Nawawī, 77–79.

⁴¹ Al-Nawawī, *al-Majmū'*, 2:190.

⁴² *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, no. 291; see also al-Nawawī, *al-Tibyān*, 72.

⁴³ Qur'an 2:78

⁴⁴ Yāqūt al-Hamawī, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, ed. Ihsan Abbas, 1st ed. (Tunisia: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), 6:2453.

impermissible for nonexperts to meddle in these sophisticated disciplines without adequate training, it would also be impermissible for the average Muslim to neglect *tadabbur* under the premise that they are not specialized in Qur'anic studies. A nonexpert is still capable of reflection, self-reckoning, and spiritual awakening through the Qur'an, and we must shun every whisper that suggests otherwise. Ibn Ḥubayrah (rA) said, "Among the deceptive schemes of Satan is his chasing the servants of God away from *tadabbur* of the Qur'an, due to his conviction that guidance occurs during *tadabbur*. So he says, 'This [practice of reflection] is risky,' until the person himself says, 'I will not speak on the Qur'an out of pious caution.'"⁴⁵

Tartīl

As for the recitation itself, the Qur'an and Sunnah instruct us to recite at a measured pace (*tartīl*) that allows for the pronunciation of each letter, to beautify our voices into a melodious chant (*taghannī*), and to articulate the Qur'an accurately (*tajwīd*). These all contribute to the *tadabbur* project we are exploring in this paper, but it must be said that these components of proper recitation are (at a basic level) obligations on every Muslim to learn. It was understood among the earliest Muslims that there was a learning curve here, even for someone proficient in Arabic. That is why the Prophet ﷺ said, "The person who grapples with the Qur'an, and finds it difficult, is entitled to a double reward."⁴⁶ Reciting Qur'an is therefore a particular skill, not identical to fluency, and so we must all be invested in joining classes and pursuing teachers to educate ourselves on this.

Ibn al-Jazarī (rA), a leading authority in Qur'anic sciences and *qirā'āt*, summarizes that while some scholars believed that reciting more is superior, due to the famous "ten good deeds per letter"⁴⁷ hadith and other texts, the correct position is that of the vast majority of the earlier and later generations: "reciting less but with *tartīl* and *tadabbur* is superior, because the objective is to comprehend the Qur'an and act upon it, while reciting and memorizing it are a means to realize that [objective

⁴⁵ Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Dhayl ṭabaqāt al-Ḥanābilah*, 1st ed. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-'Ubaykān, 2005), 2:156.

⁴⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, bk. 6, hadith 290.

⁴⁷ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2910.

of] comprehension.”⁴⁸ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (rA), after asserting that *tartīl* is an independently praiseworthy act even in the absence of comprehension, said, “The non-Arabic speaker who cannot understand the Qur'an should still recite in a calm and measured way, because that is more reverent and respectful, and has a greater impact on the heart compared to [reciting in] jabber and haste.”⁴⁹ In other words, this is all an intrinsic part of our reverent approach to the sacred, en route to *tadabbur*.

With regard to reciting the Qur'an in an audible (as the default) and melodious way, the Prophet ﷺ emphasized this by saying, “The person who does not recite the Qur'an melodiously is not of us.”⁵⁰ Interestingly, scholars have cautioned against letting oneself become so captivated by reciters with extraordinary voices that this deters you from *tadabbur* on the Qur'an itself. Melodious *tartīl* is for facilitating *tadabbur*, not for diverting people's attention away from it, which sadly is not uncommon. This pitfall, though, should never eclipse the importance of listening to the Qur'an on a regular basis. Al-Layth ibn Sa'd (rA) would say that “Allah's mercy does not hasten to anyone as fast as it does to the listener of the Qur'an.”⁵¹ He would then cite as proof for this the noble verse, “So when the Qur'an is recited, then listen to it and be silent that you may receive mercy.”⁵²

3. The right mindset

What should I be thinking about as I recite the Qur'an? What should I be looking for as I journey through the Divine message? The following will be a roadmap for our *tadabbur* sessions, to help us retrieve new gems with each dive.

1. Realize what it means to be uttering God's words. Have you ever thought about how it could be possible that a powerless, dependent, fleeting creature like the human being could be allowed to restate the words of the All-Powerful, Independent, Eternal Creator? The fact that Allah permitted this should be seen as a bounty from Him that we could never earn. Hence, Allah said, “And We have

⁴⁸ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-qirā'āt al-'ashr* (Beirut: al-Maṭba'at al-Tujārīyah al-Kubrā, n.d.), 1:208–209.

⁴⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 2:278.

⁵⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, bk. 8, hadith 84.

⁵¹ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jamī' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, 1st ed. (Beirut: Mu'sassat al-Risālah, 2006), 1:18.

⁵² Qur'an 7:204.

certainly made the Qur'an easy to remember. So is there anyone who will be mindful?"⁵³ About this verse, Ibn 'Abbās (rA) said, "Had Allah not facilitated it on the tongues of the children of Adam, none from the creation would have been able to speak the words of Allah, the Mighty and Majestic."⁵⁴

Appreciating the fact that Allah Himself allowed you to connect with, and express, His inimitable speech is instrumental to *tadabbur*. When Mālik ibn Dīnār (rA) would have his students recite to him, he would remark after they concluded, "Listen to what the Most Truthful is saying from above His throne."⁵⁵ Let the weight of that reality be your starting thought.

2. Check behind each word. It is interesting to note that *tadabbur* comes from the word *dubur*, which denotes the back of something. Allah, the Creator of our tongues and their eloquence, deliberately chose this word in particular to describe our ideal reading of His book. So as you recite, seek to explore what lies behind each word, and spend lengthy periods probing this. A wise person once said that the messages of the Qur'an are like our conversations with friends; the secrets are only exchanged with those most loyal after trust has been built. Nearly every practitioner of *tadabbur* can attest to this: the transformative experiences inspired by this Book are reserved for those dedicated to it, not necessarily those with more information about it.

What surprises many people about the unique power of *tadabbur* is that it evokes epiphanies that seem so obvious after the fact. This is because *tadabbur* is not about unlocking some encrypted truth in the Qur'an, but rather becoming eligible for it. Remember that Allah called this Scripture "*‘azīz*," which has several implications, including it being a "proud" book, a book that refuses to disclose its secrets to those who allot it the leftovers of their time and attention.

3. Observe from a bird's-eye view. The Qur'an has many overarching themes and objectives that we should keep in mind whenever we reflect, such as the perfection of Allah's qualities and actions, the blessing of knowing His perfect laws, the

⁵³ Qur'an 54:1.

⁵⁴ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. by Sami al-Salamah, 1st ed. (Riyadh: Dar Tiba, 1997), 7:478.

⁵⁵ Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Marwazī, *Mukhtasar qiyām al-layl* (Riyadh: Hadith Academy, 1988), 176.

archetypes of good and evil behavior, and the descriptions of Paradise and Hellfire. These are some of the most recurrent themes of the Qur'an, all of which the reader needs to be mindful of.

The reasons behind a *sūrah*'s revelation are another helpful component of grasping its overall context. Identifying whether a *sūrah* is Meccan (revealed before the migration) or Medinan (revealed after the migration) is pivotal to optimizing *tadabbur*.⁵⁶ Meccan *sūrahs*, for instance, descended in an atmosphere of idolatry, persecution, and turmoil; hence, they infuse the reader with the purity of creed, optimism, and perseverance. Madinan *sūrahs* descended amidst the birth of a state and a model community; hence, they set the infrastructure for stability, brotherhood, and mitigating the ills of prosperity. The Qur'anic narrative often flows in a way that assumes its reader is apprised of the background story, which allows one to see past its literal meanings, without necessarily ignoring them. For instance, Ibn 'Abbās (rA) recognized that *Sūrat al-Naṣr* foretold the forthcoming death of the Prophet ﷺ, though there is no direct reference to that in it. He inferred this from its tone and when it was revealed.

Another high-level perspective that is sure to help *tadabbur* involves investigating the themes or central concepts of a particular *sūrah*. This grants you a deeper sense of context, which allows for connecting the dots. *Sūrat al-Kahf*, for instance, offers all four of its stories as an immunization against life's various trials. The boys in the cave symbolize the trial of religious persecution; the owner of the two gardens symbolizes the trial of wealth; the voyage of Mūsá (as) and al-Khiḍr symbolizes the trial of knowledge; the mission of Dhū al-Qarnayn symbolizes the trial of power. And as a whole, this *sūrah* was identified by the Prophet ﷺ as a means of protection from the greatest trial in human history: *al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl* (the False Messiah).

Realize that the word *sūrah* comes from *sūr* (fence or gate), which should call our attention to the fact that each *sūrah* is a distinct bundle of verses fused together. Getting into the habit of inquiring *why* these specific verses (*sūrah*) have been separated from others will open worlds of meanings for you, by Allah's

⁵⁶ This is the most famous opinion out of three on the definition of Meccan and Medinan Qur'an.

permission. For instance, consider that *Sūrat al-Raḥmān* begins with Allah's name *al-Raḥmān* (the Most Merciful) and then ends with, "Blessed is the name of your Lord."⁵⁷ Noticing this will allow a person to return to reading everything between those two poles (even the mention of the Hellfire in this *sūrah*) in light of this newly discovered theme: Allah's mercy.

4. Draw parallels. Every quality in people, and every incident in history, that the Qur'an tells us about has counterparts in our lives and times. The function of *tadabbur* is to extract them. For instance, ask yourself why Allah (st) chose to illustrate that even His prophets were human beings who faced uphill climbs and struggles with emotion? Consider how the Qur'an first captures the fear of Mūsā (as) when he reaches the blessed valley and the staff becomes a snake; he flees and does not turn back until Allah tells him, "O Moses, fear not. Indeed, in My presence, the messengers do not fear."⁵⁸ Later, he stands before Pharaoh and fear creeps back into his heart, but this time he stands his ground.⁵⁹ Later, the whole nation of Israelites is struck with fear when caught between the sea and the approaching army, but this time the fear of Mūsā is nowhere to be found. Instead, he says, "No! My Lord is certainly with me, [and] He will direct me."⁶⁰

Just as we must relate to the prophets in our *tadabbur*, we should also be contrasting ourselves with them. For instance, when Wuhayb ibn al-Ward would recite this verse, "And [mention] when Ibrāhīm was erecting the foundations of the House, along with Ismā'īl, saying, 'Our Lord! Accept from us'" he would weep and say, "This is the friend of Allah, building the [greatest] House of Allah, and yet he begs that it be accepted of him."⁶¹ His reflection delivered him to the realization that we all too often have a premature sense of security about our meager deeds being worthy of acceptance. Similarly, when Ḥafṣ ibn Sulaymān once heard, "Have We not expanded for you [O Muhammad] your chest? And removed from you your sins that burdened your back? And We raised high for you your reputation?"⁶² he wept

⁵⁷ Qur'an 55:78.

⁵⁸ Qur'an 27:10.

⁵⁹ Qur'an 20:67.

⁶⁰ Qur'an 26:62.

⁶¹ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 1:427.

⁶² Qur'an 98:1–3.

like a child and said, “O Ziyād, the Messenger of Allah’s sins⁶³ weighed down his back,”⁶⁴ meaning what should we expect of our own sins?

Noting parallels that contrast the righteous and the wicked was also practiced by our righteous predecessors in their *tadabbur*. For instance, Allah (st) says, “Go [O Mūsā and Hārūn] to Pharaoh, for he has transgressed. And say to him a soft word, perhaps he may be reminded or fearful.”⁶⁵ Yaḥyā b. Mu‘ādh (rA) wept upon hearing someone recite this, and said, “My God, this is Your gentleness with those who say ‘I am god,’ so how about us, who testify that You are the True God? This is Your gentleness with those who say ‘I am your lord, most high,’ so how about us, who say ‘Glorified is my Lord, Most High’ [in every prostration]?”⁶⁶

Juxtaposing similar scenes from across the Qur'an, and comparing them with each other, is another form of drawing parallels. For instance, Ibrāhīm (as) is ready to slaughter his son without hesitation, while the Israelites are reluctant to slaughter a cow of their choice. *Tadabbur* around this parallel alone can restore in a reader what submission in Islam is all about: not the size of the command, but the Grandeur of the Commander. Every sacrifice is just details, and it is the surrender of the hearts (and consequently the limbs) that defines a servant of God.

5. Reflect on one’s personal needs. The Qur'an speaks to its reader in different ways at different times. This is not due to the meanings of the Qur'an being arbitrary or subjective, but rather that through *tadabbur* the most pertinent implications of a passage will manifest to satisfy a particular issue or need in our personal lives. For instance, consider the oft-repeated statement in *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, “Owner of the Day of Resurrection.”⁶⁷ This verse can serve to break one’s arrogance, chase away one’s cowardice, and heal one’s trauma. It is all the same verse but resonates within different people, or within a single person at

⁶³ Sunni scholars unanimously agree that the prophets are infallible in terms of disbelieving in God, committing major sins, and committing minor sins that discredit the message. As for lesser sins, some scholars held the possibility of prophets committing them, as part of their being human, and that they are forgiven for them. Other scholars held that they were not sins, but called such though they were automatically forgivable due to forgetfulness and the like—also a reflection of their human nature.

⁶⁴ Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliya’*, 1st ed. (Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1988), 4:197.

⁶⁵ Qur'an 20:43–44.

⁶⁶ Al-Baghawī, *Ma‘ālim al-tanzīl*, 5:275.

⁶⁷ Qur'an 1:4.

different points in their life, in a way that is most therapeutic for their respective conditions. But the key here is introspection: being focused on one's own flaws and needs, and then handing them over to the Qur'an to resolve them. Fight the desire to reflect for posting, collecting, and discussing. The early Muslims would often caution their students that when Allah gives someone a glimpse of sacred knowledge, He examines whether they will be more concerned about implementing it (*ri'āyah*) than talking about it (*riwāyah*).

Interact with the Qur'an

Finally, we must put forth effort before expecting the Qur'an to move us. Just as we are told that the Qur'an can move mountains, we are also told that some people have hearts that are harder than stone.⁶⁸ Therefore, fruitful *tadabbur* requires that a conscious effort be exerted to tenderize that heart through interacting with the Qur'an. For instance, we are instructed to seek refuge before we recite. Allah (st) says, "So when you [decide to] recite the Qur'an, seek refuge with Allah from Satan the outcast."⁶⁹ Be sure to practice this, and realize that it invites you to actively confess your poverty before Allah, admitting that unless He empties your heart from distractions, even His Book will not benefit you.

Similarly, as you recite, look for opportunities to pause and interact. There are the famous verses of *sujūd al-tilāwah* where a person is recommended to stop and fall prostrate if they come across them.⁷⁰ There are also verses that induce weeping and some even openly call for it. Allah says, "Do you marvel at this recital? And you laugh and do not weep? While persisting in heedlessness?"⁷¹ We know that the blessed eyes of our Prophet ﷺ would often overflow with tears by the weight of the Qur'an, and Allah (st) described all His prophets as weeping in response to revelation: "When the verses of the Most Merciful were recited to them, they fell in prostration, weeping."⁷² The scholars explain that it is commendable to assume a weeping attitude (in private) if one cannot weep, even if simply over their inability

⁶⁸ Qur'an 59:21 and 2:74.

⁶⁹ Qur'an 16:98.

⁷⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 2:280.

⁷¹ Qur'an 53:59–61.

⁷² Qur'an 19:58.

to sense the greatness of their duties, the weakness of their commitment, and the gravity of that.⁷³ When 'Umar (rA) read that prior verse and fell into prostration, but could not get himself to weep, he was heard saying to himself in reprimand, "That is the prostration, now where is the weeping?"⁷⁴

There are also many verses that warrant supplication, which is another opportunity to interact and make your relationship with the Qur'an a lived experience. When Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamān spent a long night praying with the Prophet ﷺ, he described his recitation in the following way:

His recitation was unhurried. And whenever he recited verses pertaining to the glory of Allah, he would glorify Him (saying the likes of '*Subḥān Allāh al-ʿAzīm*' which means: Glorified is Allah, the Most Great, above every imperfection). And whenever he recited verses [involving grace] that warranted supplication, he would supplicate. And whenever he recited verses [involving fear] that warranted seeking refuge, he sought refuge [with Allah].⁷⁵

As a final example, and to conclude with a prayer for us and every reader, it was reported that 'Abd Allāh ibn Mas'ūd (rA), once recited, "And say: My Lord, increase me in knowledge."⁷⁶ Immediately interacting with this prompt, he stopped and said, "O Allah, increase me in knowledge, faith, and conviction."⁷⁷

⁷³ Al-Nawawī, *al-Tibyān*, 86–88; Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 2:279.

⁷⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, 15:566–67.

⁷⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 242.

⁷⁶ Qur'an 20:114.

⁷⁷ Al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-kabīr*, no. 8549.