



The Art of Worship: How to Make the Most of Ramadan Nights

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Introduction

Worship is an art. It is an art that every worshipper must master. Yet few ever do. Parents and preachers, shaykhs and masters, groups and spiritual orders, books and lessons all may play a role. But it is you who must learn to make your connection to Allah a thing of beauty. Without proper knowledge of Allah, worship is defective, or at least incomplete. Yet that knowledge must sink into your bones rather than be stored in the mind in order for it to bear fruit. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ came to teach worship, and the best of all teachers taught to perfection; he taught all that is pertinent to worship, leaving out nothing of value.

The teaching of worship itself is an art. In His Book, Allah praises the *rabbānīyūn*—those devoted to teaching, who show the wisdom of their Lord in teaching, who have perfected the art of teaching. Ibn Abbas said in explaining the Qur’anic command, “Be *rabbānīyūn*,” (3:79) “*Rabbānīyūn* are the wise and sagacious, those who teach what is rudimentary before what is advanced.”¹ In this spirit, the master seekers and worshippers of this *ummah* have sought to organize the teachings of the Qur’an and the Sunnah pertaining to worship in order to facilitate progressive learning. Shaykh al-Islām Abū Ismā‘īl al-Anṣārī (for his lineage from the Anṣār) al-Harawī (from the great center of learning, Herat, Afghanistan) al-Ḥanbalī, author of the most popular Sufī manual of his time, *Manāzil al-Sā’irīn*, divided the path of the worshipper into one hundred stations. Over time, as many lists of stations were offered as there were writers on the subject. Commenting on al-Harawī’s stations, Imam Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, considered excessive concern with numbers and ordering a form of *takalluf*, arbitrary affectation, but acknowledged its usefulness for teaching, and benefitted from the ordering proposed by Shaykh al-Harawī.

Based on my reading of these various lists and, in particular, Imam Ibn al-Qayyim’s *Madārij al-Sālikīn*, I offer five simple steps toward mastering the art of worship. Shaykh al-Islām al-Harawī had written, in fact, that the worshipper of earlier, better generations had identified one thousand stations of worship, but in

¹ Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 6:542, no. 7316, verse 3:79.

his time, people had no strength for that, so he had reduced them to a hundred. Our march toward the five stations, then, must be marked with appropriate humility. These five steps have the advantage, nevertheless, that they are readily visible in many of the supplications and practices taught by the Beloved Messenger of Allah ﷺ himself.

These steps are:

1. Remembrance (*dhikr*)
2. Gratitude and patience (*shukr* and *ṣabr*)
3. Self-reckoning (*muḥāsabah*)
4. Repentance (*tawbah*)
5. Love (*maḥabbah*)

Consider the greatest of all supplications, *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah* (the Opening Chapter). It opens with the praise and remembrance of Allah, then proceeds to the acknowledgment of servitude to Allah and reaffirming the pledge of worship and reliance on Him alone, and then finally asks for guidance and success. Another highly recommended supplication, honored as the “Master Supplication” by the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, has a similar breakdown: remembrance and praise, acknowledgment of servitude, and then pleading for forgiveness. We will return to it in the Station of Repentance.

The wisdom in this ordering—by no means final and exclusive—is that we praise Allah, acknowledging His Greatness before bringing ourselves into the picture. He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Hidden, whereas we are His creation, utterly obliged, dependent for our existence on Him. Remembering Him in praise and longing is not only the right response, it is an instinct, a need, and it fills a hole in our hearts that cannot be filled by anything else.

Thankfully, however, He has only asked us to worship as much as we can, rather than as much as He deserves. Practically, then, in the span of the few hours we have at our disposal—until our stamina and focus run out—how to make the most of it? This is what I want to review here.

1. Remembrance (*dhikr*)

In this step, focus on praising Allah without thinking about the creation. In remembrance, the key is not only to think, but to feel, and ultimately feel overwhelmed by Allah, the ultimate goal.

I. Begin with a litany of *lā ilāha illā Allāh*. This can be done in stages.

Start with simply:

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ

Lā ilāha illā Allāhu

There is no god but Allah

until your tongue and heart are at peace with it, and you have mastered the words and the meanings and the feelings evoked by them. This is the “good word” (*kalimah ṭayyibah*) upon which and for which all has been created, as mentioned in the Qur’an, “The likeness of a good word is a good tree, its root set firm, its branches reaching into the heaven” (14:24).² Every time you say it, believe the roots and branches of this truth grow and bring new fruits of faith, beauty, and action.

Once you have mastered this, you may proceed to:

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَحْدَهُ لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ لَهُ الْمُلْكُ وَلَهُ الْحَمْدُ وَهُوَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Lā ilāha illā Allāhu waḥdahu lā sharīka lahu lahu al-mulk wa-lahu al-ḥamd, wa-huwa ‘alā kulli shay’in qadīr

There is no god but Allah alone, Who has no partner, His is the dominion and His the praise, and He is able to do all things.³

II. Next, proceed to the set of words most frequently mentioned in the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Beloved ﷺ: *Subḥān Allāh*, *al-Ḥamdu lillah*, and *Allāhu akbar*. But rather than doing so mindlessly, think of a specific blessing, a specific sign,

² This is Ibn ‘Abbās’s explanation of the “good word” in 14:24. See al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān*.

³ Part of a longer supplication, recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, nos. 6330, 6404. Hadith numbers throughout correspond to those found at sunnah.com.

and a specific point. Signs of Allah are infinite, the more aware we are of their presence around us and within us, the more alive we become as believers.

أَحَبُّ الْكَلَامِ إِلَى اللَّهِ أَرْبَعٌ: سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ، وَالْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ، وَلَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ، وَاللَّهُ أَكْبَرُ

The dearest words to Allah are *Subhān Allāh* (Glory to Allah), *Alḥamdu lillāh* (Praise to Allah), *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (There is no god but Allah), and *Allāhu akbar* (Allah is the Greatest).⁴

III. At a more advanced stage of *dhikr*, memorize and recite parts of the Qur'an that mention the beautiful names and blessings of Allah. I recommend reciting as many times as possible the last seven verses of *Sūrat al-Ḥashr* (or the last three if that's easier), for they contain the best explanation of *lā ilāha illā Allāh* ("There is no god but Allah") that I have found anywhere, so think about their meanings. Reflecting on the names of Allah is the best way to remember Him in the deepest way.

هُوَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ عِلْمُ الْغَيْبِ وَالشَّهَادَةِ ۖ هُوَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ
 هُوَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ الْمَلِكُ الْقُدُّوسُ السَّلَامُ ۖ الْمُؤْمِنُ الْمُهَيَّمِنُ الْعَزِيزُ الْجَبَّارُ الْمُتَكَبِّرُ ۖ سُبْحَانَ اللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ
 هُوَ اللَّهُ الْخَالِقُ الْبَارِئُ الْمُصَوِّرُ ۖ لَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ ۖ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

He is Allah, other than Whom there is no deity, Knower of the unseen and the witnessed. He is the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful.

He is Allah, other than Whom there is no deity, the Sovereign, the Pure, the Perfection, the Bestower of Faith, the Overseer, the Exalted in Might, the Compeller, the Superior. Exalted is Allah above whatever they associate with Him.

He is Allah, the Creator, the Inventor, the Fashioner; to Him belong the best names. Whatever is in the heavens and earth is exalting Him. And He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise. (59:21-24)

⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2137.

This list is just a beginning. The entire Qur'an is a means of remembering Allah as are the supplications taught by the Messenger ﷺ. Having an established routine of your preferred supplications helps. As the Beloved of Allah ﷺ said, "The most beloved of actions to Allah is that which is most constant, even if it is little."⁵ You may seek the help of a local teacher or mentor who prescribes the right level of litanies suitable to your ability and needs. However, until you master your favorite litanies, you may choose any one of the prayers in the Qur'an or recommended in the Sunnah whose meaning is appealing and beneficial to your heart and repeat it.

2. Gratitude and patience (*shukr* and *ṣabr*)

Allah says, "And if you should count the bounties of Allah, you could not enumerate them. Indeed, mankind is [generally] most unjust and ungrateful" (14:34).

Therefore, we must express gratitude (*shukr*) to Allah and persevere (*ṣabr*) in worship. Since our intention here is to prepare for and excel in a few hours of worship, we will focus on what will help our endurance only in this short period of time. The worship of a believer is a model for the rest of her or his life. If we can attain it for a few hours, or even a few minutes in each of the hours, we can break the hold of habit, the desires of our *nafs* (the appetitive self), and the traps of Shayṭān in routine life.

Start with what is easy. You are dealing with the Creator Who loves you and has more compassion for your weaknesses and needs than your own mother and father, Who if you go toward Him by an inch, comes to you by a foot, and if you walk to Him, comes to you running, despite having no need for you while you are utterly in need of Him.⁶

⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6464.

⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6970; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2675.

Saying *al-Ḥamdu lillāh* (praise to Allah) and *al-Shukru lillāh* (thanks to Allah) is easy; start with that. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The best remembrance (*dhikr*) is ‘There is no god but Allah’ and the best prayer (*du‘ā*) is ‘Praise to Allah.’”⁷

Yet saying it is just the beginning. Being truly grateful is hard. Allah said to the family of Prophet David, upon him be peace,

“Work, O family of David, in gratitude.” And few of My servants are truly grateful. (34:13)

Allah asks the family of David to *work* in gratitude, not merely to express it verbally. When the Beloved Messenger ﷺ prayed long prayers at night until his feet would swell, Mother of the Believers ‘Ā’ishah, God be pleased with her, asked why he strove so hard when Allah had honored him by forgiving all his past and future sins, he said, “Shall I not be a most grateful slave (*‘abd shakūr*)?”⁸

Gratitude is the heart of worship. To master worship, we must master being thankful. Being thankful means being happy with what we have been given, starting with the greatest gift of faith. Gratefulness is not a particular act of worship, but the feeling of gratefulness is a prerequisite for any meaningful worship. Believer are by definition pleased with what Allah has given them, and this is an attitude that extends to all of life. Being an optimistic, easygoing, forgiving person to others is part of being a grateful servant. The Prophet ﷺ left no doubt, “He who does not thank people does not thank Allah.”⁹

If one truly thanked Allah for faith, for the mere privilege of thanking Allah, one would not have the occasion in one lifetime to proceed to thanking Allah for anything else. Al-Sari al-Saqati, the teacher and uncle of al-Junayd, said, “Thanking Allah for a blessing is itself a blessing.”¹⁰

⁷ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 3383.

⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 1130; *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2820.

⁹ *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, no. 4811; *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī*, no. 1954, graded *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ*, Ibn Ḥibbān and others declare it *ṣaḥīḥ*.

¹⁰ Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Shu‘ab al-Īmān* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī‘, 2003), no. 4096.

Perhaps the best place to begin is with the low-hanging fruit, with what is easy. Those of us who have shelter and know that we will not go hungry today should thank Allah for that.

Oddly, it is people who have little who give most thanks, and feel the happiest vis-à-vis their Lord, whereas those loaded with wealth and luxuries have their eyes set on more, ever resentful of the comparatively little that afflicts them. Wealth is a blessing if it is seen as God's test and shared and kept outside of the heart, but a curse if it enters the heart and takes the space that properly belongs only to the love of the Creator.

The price of wealth, for many of us, is too high. The feeling you should have when thinking of your wealth, unless you are in dire need, is that it is already enough, and the One who sustains birds and insects will sustain you. Our religion rejects poverty as a choice or as a form of piety per se, and seeks just distribution of wealth, but if one finds that Allah has limited one's sustenance, know that such a person has a stronger rope to Allah, and a shorter path.¹¹ The Prophet ﷺ said, "The poor of my *ummah* will enter Paradise before the rich by five hundred years"; not because Allah loves the rich less, but because they will have much more to account for.¹² If in dire need, know that what you rely on Allah for is more assuredly yours than that for which you rely on your own means.

If gratitude (*shukr*) is half of faith, patience (*ṣabr*) is the other half. *Shukr* is the faithful expression of gratitude toward what you enjoy of Allah's blessings, and patience (*ṣabr*) is faithful perseverance against what you experience of your Lord's tests. Since in real life at any given moment we all have both blessings and hardships, *shukr* and *ṣabr* are in fact two sides of the same coin, and are not possible without each other. You cannot be happy for any blessing in this world without forgetting things that could possibly make you sad, including the fact that all earthly blessings will surely end. The true believer makes his happiness real

¹¹ This idea is confirmed in *Musnad Ahmad*, no. 23121, with gratitude to Br. Justin Parrott for drawing my attention to this hadith. See <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2013/12/03/diet-from-dunya/>.

¹² *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2353, graded *ṣaḥīḥ* by Ibn Ḥibbān, al-Albānī, Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūt, and others. In other versions, forty years are mentioned, and in yet another, half a day is mentioned. Half a day corresponds to five hundred years given that a day with Allah in some verses is said to be a thousand years (Qur'an 32:5). The version given by al-Suyūṭī adds the reason for this delay.

through gratitude, connecting his temporary enjoyment to the everlasting reward. Similarly, when you are overwhelmed with sadness and hardship that call for patience, there are surely things that could make you happy. A patient believer connects one's grief to the unending reward for holding on to faith and trust in God. Furthermore, thankfulness requires persevering in faith (heedless joy is always a temptation), and persevering in faith is not possible without being grateful to Allah. To the wise servant who has been given insight (*baṣīrah*) by Allah, gratitude and patience are constant companions. This could not be said better than how Allah inspired His most grateful and patient servant ﷺ to express it:

Wonderful is the life of a believer. Everything is good for him, and this is for none but a believer. If good fortune comes to him, he is grateful, and that is good for him, and if a calamity strikes him, he is patient, and that is good for him.¹³

Practically, then, how do we move from the desire to be thankful and patient to the state (*ḥāl*) and then finally attain the permanent station (*maqām*) of gratitude and patience?

Know that nothing that you possess is your due, there is nothing that you deserve, nothing is your right. Your life and its innumerable blessings were given to you by Allah freely for years and years since before your birth until you even acquired the ability to think about thanking Him. Know also that your desire to thank Allah and the faith that you have in Him, however meager and deficient, is worth more than the world and all its wealth. Know, further, that no matter what your state, even if you are hungry, homeless, and feel unloved, you still are blessed with life and the opportunity to have faith and an eternal life of bliss, and that is enough for you to thank Allah. Know that your Lord and Creator is Most Merciful and Loving, always ready to forgive and overlook, and has prepared for the faithful blessings beyond our wildest fantasies. How much more there is to be grateful for if you enjoy any or all of the blessings of food, shelter, health, family, friends, and luxury?

¹³ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2999.

To make this knowledge a reality and second nature to you, keep a mental list of Allah's greatest blessings, including the virtues and character strengths Allah has blessed you with, and another list of your common sins, slips, temptations, and bad habits. The more you reflect on these two and feel them in your gut, the more you will be driven to gratitude and endurance in worship, God willing.

Reflect on these realities in your prayers, supplications, and prophetic litanies (*awrād*), which revolve around these meanings (see the Master Supplication of Forgiveness below).

3. Self-reckoning (*muḥāsaba*)

In this step, you focus on yourself: your sins and shortcomings, character traits and tendencies, desires and habits, that make you disobey Allah. We tend to forget these things, and it may take a lot of time and effort and prayer to see your *nafs* for what it is.

Shaykh al-Islām Abū Ismāʿīl al-Harawī said that the essence of self-reckoning is that you contrast His blessings with your crimes, and this contrast is difficult for someone who lacks three things: the light of wisdom, an ill opinion of his *nafs*, and the ability to discriminate between blessing and punishment.¹⁴

The light of wisdom is not about being smart, intellectual, and articulate, as the people of this world often think, but about your realization of the reality of things, and the clarity and force with which you see the hand of Allah behind everything. The more you are seen as important, successful, articulate, or handsome in this world by its people, the more likely you are to be fooled by their praise and awe for you and actually think highly of yourself, which is a calamity that blinds you to how short you fall vis-a-vis Allah's rights and the rights of Allah's creation. Having an ill opinion of your *nafs* is a necessary requisite for attaining the state of self-reckoning and self-criticism. Imam Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal was praised by all the Muslims and even Jews and Christians who saw his perseverance against torture for the sake of his faith and sang his praises, saying that they saw the examples of

¹⁴ Ovamir Anjum, *Ranks of the Divine Seekers: A Parallel English-Arabic Text* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1:386–88.

Jesus and Moses in him. But Imam Aḥmad would cry upon hearing his praise, saying, “Men’s opinion is of no use to a man who knows his worth.”¹⁵

Finally, do not be fooled by worldly blessings and opportunities for they are trials and punishments unless they are being used in the service of Allah.

Hold your *nafs* accountable as you would someone you suspect and dislike, not someone you are partial to and love. For it is better that you find yourself guilty in your own judgment and rush to correct yourself than be taken to account by Allah on the Day of Resurrection. Mother of the Believers A‘isha, Allah be pleased with her, reports that the Prophet ﷺ said, “No one is taken to account except that he is ruined.” She asked about the verse 84:8 that speaks of “an easy reckoning,” to which he said, “That is about being brought before [Allah]. But whoever is taken to account is ruined.” In another tradition, he said, “O Allah, give me an easy reckoning!”¹⁶

Practically, when standing for prayer or sitting for supplication with your hands raised, imagine yourself before an infinite ocean, that is the greatness of Allah, and your view of it is the extent of your remembrance and feeling of awe, and a mountain on each side. On the right is the mountain of Allah’s blessings, gifts, forgiveness, and second chances, and on the left is the mountain of your sins, errors, and open and hidden flaws. The clearer your view of the ocean and the taller the two mountains, the deeper your sense of awe of standing before Allah, and the clearer you will be about what you have been given and what you owe.

4. Repentance (*tawbah*)

In the fourth and penultimate step in our scheme, we come to the most important of the stations on the path to Allah. To repent to Allah is to return to Him, abandoning and repudiating all sins and acts and thoughts of disobedience.

Repentance begins with turning away from sin, feeling regret for having fallen into it and even more toward having enjoyed it, acknowledging your error, admitting without excuses, and finally, reconciling and returning to Allah, with the

¹⁵ Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a‘lām al-nubalā’* (N.p.: Mu‘assasat al-Risala, 1985), 11:211.

¹⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 2876; *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 103.

commitment in your heart to never return. You feel resolved, instead, to do good works that please your Lord, and also feel the lightheartedness and joy that come with reconciliation with your Lord.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Repentance is regret (*al-nadam*).” In another narration, he said, “Repentance from sin is feeling regret and seeking forgiveness (*istighfār*).”¹⁷

The feelings of revulsion toward the sin and regret for having fallen into it both must exist for repentance to be valid. Sincere repentance is perfected by a final feeling: one of serene pleasure that overwhelms and outlasts the others, because Allah’s mercy is greater than any sins we could commit.

Repentance is the greatest of stations on the path to Allah. Teachings of the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and the sayings of the early scholars about it would fill volumes. Suffice the words of Allah, “Allah surely loves those who repent repeatedly and those who seek to purify themselves” (2:222). Repentance is not for the sinners alone, as some uninitiated in this knowledge might think, but equally for the highest of achievers, as the Prophet ﷺ himself was urged to repent at the end of his life after fulfilling his noble mission: “Exalt the praise of your Lord and seek forgiveness, for He is surely Oft-Returning” (110:3). What greater honor for an attribute that it is shared between the servant and the Lord: Allah loves his *tawwāb* servants, and He is *al-Tawwāb* Himself. He is eager to return to His slaves who are eager to return to Him.

By way of practical tips, know that your repentance can be only as good as your mastery of the earlier stations. Repentance is an art, a lifestyle, not merely a formula. But start with a formula that helps you set your goals and organize your thoughts and feelings. There is no better formula than the Master Supplication of Forgiveness (*sayyid al-istighfār*).

اللَّهُمَّ أَنْتَ رَبِّي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ خَلَقْتَنِي وَأَنَا عَبْدُكَ وَأَنَا عَلَى عَهْدِكَ وَوَعْدِكَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُ أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ شَرِّ مَا
صَنَعْتُ أُبُوءُ لَكَ بِنِعْمَتِكَ عَلَيَّ وَأُبُوءُ لَكَ بِذُنُوبِي فَاعْفِرْ لِي فَإِنَّهُ لَا يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ

¹⁷ *Shu’ab al-Īmān*, no. 6627; *al-Silsila al-sahiha*, no. 1208.

Allāhumma anta Rabbī lā ilāha illā Anta khalaqtanī wa-anā ‘abduka, wa-anā ‘alā ‘ahdika wa-wa‘dika mā istaṭa‘tu, A‘ūdhu bika min sharri mā ṣana‘tu, abū‘u laka bi-ni‘matika ‘alayya, wa-abū‘u laka bi-dhanbī fa-ighfir lī fa-innahu lā yaghfiru al-dhunūba illā anta

O Allah, You are my Lord. There is no god but You. You have created me, and I am your servant—and I am upon Your covenant and promise as best I can. I seek refuge in You from the worst of what I have done. I fully admit to You Your blessings upon me, and I fully admit to You all my sins. So forgive me, for there is none to forgive sins but You.

After teaching this supplication, the Blessed Prophet ﷺ remarked, “Anyone who says this in the day with conviction and dies before evening will be among the people of Paradise. Anyone who says this in the night with conviction and dies before morning will be among the people of Paradise.”¹⁸

You must repent generally from all sins. But this is not enough. There are deliberate, lifestyle sins that prevent you from ever sincerely repenting.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ mentioned a person who travels far, his hair disheveled, covered with dust, and he lifts his hand towards the sky and earnestly begs, “My Lord! My Lord!” Yet his food is unlawful, his drink is unlawful, his clothes are unlawful and his body is nourished on unlawfully acquired wealth: How then can his supplication be accepted!¹⁹

These “defeaters” of repentance include oppression and injustice in which your power and status depends on killing, silencing, and imprisoning others or facilitating these crimes or merely letting this happen to others while having the power to stop them; stealing and embezzlement, interest and usury; the entertainment industry in which your life depends on spreading shamelessness and promiscuity; abuse of and disrespect toward parents, abuse of spouse and other family members; and most of all, facilitating the spread of unbelief in any form. You may perpetrate these sins or facilitate them, or simply let them happen enjoying their consequences. Such are lifestyle sins that give lie to your words of repentance.

¹⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 6323.

¹⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 1015.

From such sins, you must seek specific and total repentance, by abandoning them and acknowledging the severity of what you do and will become if you do not desist.

You must find a balance between the feeling of regret and the feeling of cheer and comfort from God's forgiveness. Seeking repentance is not pleasant at first, it requires focusing on our shortcomings and character flaws, sins of commission and sins of inaction and indifference, and finally, on our ill intentions, unfitting thoughts toward God and His promises, and subconscious ideas and feelings that lurk under our radar. Each of these is an extremely uncomfortable part of ourselves, which is why we bury it under pleasant thoughts and a veneer of righteousness. Allah says of people's record of actions, "Allah kept account of it, but they forgot!" (58:6).

Uncovering these layers of ourselves is the hardest part of repentance. It is as if you are an archeologist with an entire city to dig out with only a garden trowel. This is the proper context to understand the generous promises of Allah and His Prophet ﷺ of forgiveness. Prayers, fasting, alms, charity, and other such acts all do their part in overcoming the harm caused by buried sins and evils. People who do not know how much is buried within them think that all the promises of forgiveness are unnecessary: why would one seek forgiveness if they think they do not have any sins to begin with. Only Allah can save us from our self-deception.

The good news is that Allah forgives all sins, sometimes even those that are still buried, so long as the buried demons do not eat away at your faith. Excessive self-blame without remembering the mercy of Allah and studying the Beautiful Names and Attributes of Allah can be harmful. Yet, forgetting your sins can be equally harmful. Finding this balance is an art which, like any art, can only be completed with the help of love, our next station.

5. Love (*maḥabba*)

Imam Ibn al-Qayyim writes,

The heart in its journey towards God the Exalted is like a bird whose head is love, and hope and fear are its two wings. When the head and the two wings

are sound, the bird flies well, but when the head is cut off, it immediately dies, and when either or both wings are absent, the bird is the victim of any hunter or snare. The Predecessors preferred to strengthen the wing of fear during times of good health, and to strengthen the wing of hope when departing this world.²⁰

As we repeat the aforementioned four steps of remembrance—gratitude, patience, self-reckoning, and repentance—focusing one by one on different aspects of our lives and different domains of experience, we grow in something that is the ultimate fruit and essence of all true worship, and that is the love of Allah.

Love is a station that is best felt in the heart and attested by the actions and commitments of life rather than discussed in books and preached in sermons. It is the secret of the true seekers and the nearest of slaves of Allah. When the Prophet of God ﷺ lay dying and his head rested in the lap of his blessed wife, Mother of the Believers A‘isha, she heard him say, “But the Highest Companion!” and she knew that he was given a choice and he had chosen the company of his Creator, the ultimate source and the only true destination of all love.²¹

People worship Allah for various reasons and in different registers, and some reasons and registers are loftier than others, but no human being is free above needing them all. Worship Allah to save yourself from hopelessness, meaninglessness, and unhappiness in this life and Allah’s displeasure in the eternal abode, seeking to enter Allah’s promised gardens of bliss, but most of all, because you love Allah, because He is deserving of all praise and possession of all perfection and beauty, and He was deserving of it before you and all creation existed.

That being said, the idea that one must worship Allah only for love and not for fear of hell or desire for paradise has often lured the immature theorizers of worship who depart from the Qur’an and the Sunnah. Appearing among some Sufis some time in the third/ninth century and later attributed to the great worshipper and seeker Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawīyah of Baṣrah (fl. second/eighth century), this was likely not the teaching of Rābi‘ah (about whom we know only very little except her great

²⁰ Anjum, *Ranks of the Divine Seekers*, 2:170.

²¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4435.

virtue and a few, simple sayings). Nevertheless, this was a popular idea among those who denigrated the common believer and sought to identify as the elite.²² Anyone who knows his or her *nafs* should not entertain it, because in real life, not even prophets are free of temptations, and need reminders of God’s reward and punishment, and they are incomparably superior to all other mortals. True love of Allah as He deserves it is easy to claim but not possible to attain without following the footsteps of the Messenger ﷺ, which is why Allah declared, “Say [O Prophet to the believers], if you love Allah, follow me, Allah will forgive your sins.” The Prophet ﷺ feared hell and punishment, hoped for paradise and reward, and loved God and was loved by God more than anyone else. Allah bless him with the noblest blessing and most perfect salutation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we list some practical steps that you should take when preparing to spend a night, or half a night, or even a couple of hours, in worship.

1. Purify yourself physically and mentally. Set aside a few hours for nothing but Allah’s worship. This means no social media, no social calls, no chatting. Do not even listen to religious lectures and sermons during this precious time—do that during the daytime before the special time of worship begins at night. Of course, make an exception to help anyone in need, all the more if it is your family. Barring such a need, dedicate yourself exclusively to worship. This exclusive devotion is called *tabattul* in the Qur’an, and is among the high stations (73:8). The most righteous of this *ummah* lived most of their lives in such devotion to Allah that they spent every night in worship. They loved winter because its nights were long. If you persevere, you may learn to taste its sweetness for a couple of hours, and these hours may change your eternity.

²² Anjum, *Ranks of the Divine Seekers*, “Translator’s Introduction,” 1:19–21.

2. When you worship properly, you are not in a rush. You realize that time no longer exists, because you are doing what you were created to do, that if you died in that state you would have succeeded. You have nothing better to do.
3. Offer two or more *rak'ahs* of prayers with full attention. You begin with *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*, which is the most comprehensive and measured worship, a perfect combination of praise, acknowledgment, and supplication. Reflect on it every time you read it.
4. Prefer quality over quantity. Even if you offer only two units of prayers but with attentiveness and presence of heart, that is better than a night of prayers without these qualities. Ibn 'Abbās, may Allah be pleased with him, said, "Two moderate cycles of prayer in contemplation are better than praying the whole night with a neglectful heart."²³
5. Offer and feel gratitude for each thing separately and all things at once. The sense of immense gratitude is what sets a believer apart from one deprived of faith. Think about Allah's blessings on us, our families, our *ummah*, human beings, and all of creation.
6. Read a *sūrah* of the Qur'an that evokes gratitude; e.g., *Sūrat al-Raḥmān*. You may have other favorite *sūrahs* whose meanings you already understand.
7. Contemplating the Qur'an is a lifelong endeavor, and it has different aspects. This precious time of worship is not suitable for reading technical aspects of *tafsīr* or legal and intellectual discussions. The time of worship is best utilized to recall and benefit from the meanings you already possess. This requires reading the Qur'an primarily with the intention to respond in our hearts and minds to every verse. To a verse of reward, we respond by yearning and rejoicing; to a verse of punishment, by cultivating fear; to a verse of command, by resolving in our heart to carry it out; to a verse of prohibition, by desisting from the act; and to a verse of praise to the Almighty, by cultivating all the proper feelings of awe, adoration, and

²³ 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-Zuhd wa-Yalīhi Kitāb al-Raqā'iq* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 2010), no. 288.

reverence. As you do so, let all the meanings you have previously acquired bear fruit by contemplating them over and over as you stand before Allah.

8. Make a mental list—or perhaps an actual one—of your personal blessings, talents, and gifts. Include all the people in your lives—parents, spouses, children, friends, strangers—who have been means of Allah’s gifts to you. In the next step (*muḥāsabah*), you will make another list, that of your shortcomings and sins. Focus on Allah’s gifts and attributes of perfection for now.
9. Adhering to a couple of hours of focused worship, if you are not already used to it, will require tremendous patience, all the more so because it is voluntary. You may start with less, but push yourself to stay in that state as long as you can. Even a few minutes of truly felt worship is a treasure, but Allah Almighty asked of the Beloved Messenger ﷺ and the earliest Muslims to pray a part of the night which He described as “little less than two thirds of the night, or a half, or a third” (73:20). These were ordinary nights, and their worship would increase during the last nights of Ramadan. Aim to work yourself up to that at least during the odd nights of the last ten days of Ramadan, because certain blessings and realizations are inspired in your heart only with prolonged worship and reflection. The special love of Allah and the status of *wilāyah* can be attained only through voluntary acts after perfecting the obligatory ones.
10. Barring any special conditions that prevent true attainment of mental presence and focus, worship is the greatest source of delight. Eventually you will feel immediate happiness and delight during and at the conclusion of your worship. There are conditions, however, when Allah tests His servants with illnesses and hardships beyond their control, but for those who try despite the hardship and yet fail to attain presence, the reward is, God willing, analogous to what the Prophet ﷺ described in this hadith for the Qur’an reciters: “He who excels in reciting the Qur’an is with noble and

honorable scribes, and for the one who reads it with difficulty and stutters through it there is twice the reward.”²⁴ And Allah knows best.

11. None of this will be easy at first, but the reward is worth an eternity with *al-Haqq*, Exalted is He.

²⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 798; see also *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 4937.