

The Importance of Tafsīr and the Methodology of Studying It

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Pondering Over the Qur’ān

The knowledge of Tafsīr is one of the greatest types of knowledge that a person can gain.

Allāh told us in the Qur’ān,

﴿كُنْتُ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ﴾

“(This is) a Book (the Qur’ān) which We have sent down to you, full of blessings that they may ponder over its Verses” [Sūrah Ṣād 38:29]

The Qur’ān has been revealed to us so that we may ponder over its meanings. And that is why in the famous ḥadīth where the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) mentioned, *“This religion, it is naṣīḥah (purity/sincerity of advice)”*, the Companions said, *“To whom O Messenger of Allāh?”* One of the points that was mentioned in the response was, *“to His Book”*.

The naṣīḥah (purity and sincerity) of an individual is applicable in regards to the Book of Allāh by:

- having the correct ‘Aqīdah regarding the Qur’ān
- reciting the Qur’ān
- memorising the Qur’ān
- understanding the Qur’ān
- acting upon the Qur’ān

Note that one of the points is understanding the Qur’ān.

So in that narration (i.e. “*This religion is naṣīḥah*”), when it comes to the Book of Allāh, one of the meanings of that is understanding the Book of Allāh. So certainly, when Allāh tells us, “...so that they may ponder over its āyāt”, that is something that is required of the believers.

The key to pondering over something is to understand it because if you do not understand something, then it is not possible for you to ponder over, reflect upon, or take admonition and benefit from it. In order for us to implement the tadabbur (pondering over the Book of Allāh), it requires understanding; and understanding the meanings of what Allāh has informed us of in this Qur’ān comes through Tafsīr.

In the time of Prophet Muḥammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم), there were certain Companions who became Muslim purely from hearing the Qur’ān. Nobody had given them da’wah, but when they heard āyāt of the Qur’ān, from that they became Muslim. That is even narrated about ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb (رضى الله عنه), and it is narrated from Jubayr bin Muṭ’im (رضى الله عنه), and various other narrations about how some of the Companions became Muslim. When they heard āyāt of the Qur’ān and understood their meanings, from that they became Muslim. So certainly, as Allāh has told us,

﴿ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ﴾

“This is the Book (the Qur’ān), whereof there is no doubt, a guidance to those who are al-Muttaqūn” [Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:2]

Of course, we know that the Qur’ān is a guidance to all of mankind, but when Allāh tells us here that it is a guidance for the people of taqwá, it means it is the people of taqwá who actually benefit and take that guidance. So this Qur’ān gives us that guidance.

﴿نَبِيْنًا لِّكُلِّ شَيْءٍ﴾

“...an exposition of everything...” [Sūrah an-Naḥl 16:89]

It is a clarification of everything and it is preserved by Allāh. There are many things within the Qur’ān that even to this day, with all of the technological and scientific advancements, have not been discovered, yet the Qur’ān tells us about those affairs. And there are other affairs that have been discovered only recently with developments in technology and science, and yet the Qur’ān told us about those affairs hundreds of years ago.

This all highlights the great importance of the Book of Allāh: The Book of guidance for mankind. And that is why scholars throughout history gave a great deal of importance to explaining, clarifying and compiling the Tafsīr of the Qur’ān; so that the believers would have a firm and good understanding of it.

When you look at the books of Tafsīr, there is no one book that is completely comprehensive and covers everything from the affairs of Tafsīr within it. Rather, each scholar compiled what they had, so some of the books will have some of the affairs and in others you will find extra details and benefits.

At the same time, it should be highlighted that there are many books of Tafsīr written by the people of innovation, which are not to be relied upon due to errors in ‘Aqīdah and misguidances in other affairs. So a person needs to be careful regarding which particular books of Tafsīr to look into.

The Meaning of the Word Tafsīr

There are two potential meanings of the word تفسیر (Tafsīr):

1. الفسر (al-Fasr), which means to clarify/bring about the reality/extract the detail of something.

2. التفسيرة (at-Tafsīrah), which is in reference to the dawn, when the light appears in the morning.

So it is said that perhaps this word ‘tafsīr’ comes from that because when the dawn occurs, it removes the darkness that was there before and everything is then made clear and visible. You are now bringing about light unto the meanings, clarifying and making them apparent.

In terms of the religion, what do we mean by the books of Tafsīr? In essence, they are the books wherein you are looking for the understanding behind the Speech of Allāh; the understanding of the intention of Allāh in that speech—what Allāh intends by these āyāt, what their meanings are, what the benefits are, what the action to be done upon them is. You are looking for that detail, that understanding, that explanation of the Speech of Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى). That is what we are referring to when we talk about Tafsīr, Islamically.

The Methods of Tafsīr

Tafsīr of the Qur’ān is done in three main ways/methods:

1. The greatest and best method is to do the Tafsīr of the Qur’ān via the Qur’ān itself.

For example, you will notice that in the Qur’ān Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى) mentions the story of Mūsá (عليه السلام) or Ādam (عليه السلام) not just in one place in one sūrah, but in multiple places in the Qur’ān. So what does that mean? It means that one of the things that can be done here is to find the Tafsīr of some of these āyāt by looking at other āyāt in the Qur’ān.

Maybe there is a part of the story of Mūsá (عليه السلام) for example in one part of the Qur’ān and we want to get the Tafsīr of those āyāt regarding that part of the story. What can we do? We can go to the other chapters of the Qur’ān where the story of Mūsá (عليه السلام) is mentioned and maybe in those chapters they clarify and explain in

more detail what we read in this other part of the Qur'ān. So now we have ended up finding the Tafsīr of these āyāt by looking at other āyāt in the Qur'ān.

And that is the best method of doing Tafsīr because then you are explaining the Speech of Allāh with the Speech of Allāh, and who is more knowledgeable of the Speech of Allāh than Allāh Himself. This type of Tafsīr helps greatly in understanding aspects of things that are general and things that are specific when you put together the different āyāt into context with each other. And there are books of Tafsīr written by some of the scholars upon this method.

An Example of How Tafsīr of the Qur'ān Can Be Done via the Qur'ān

There are examples found in the Sunnah where it highlights how the Qur'ān gives Tafsīr of other parts of the Qur'ān.

One example of that is if we look at the āyah where Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى) said,

﴿الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمُ الْأَمْنُ وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ﴾

“It is those who believe (in the Oneness of Allāh and worship none but Him Alone) and confuse not their belief with Ḍulm (wrong i.e. by worshipping others besides Allāh), for them (only) there is security and they are the guided.” [Sūrah al-An‘ām 6:82]

When this āyah was revealed some of the Companions became concerned because they said to each other, who from amongst us never falls into some type of Ḍulm? All of us from time to time fall into some wrongdoing or oppression of someone; we fall into these errors and mistakes. They were thinking, how are we going to gain this safety and security and guidance when all of us sometimes fall into Ḍulm. So they went to the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) to enquire about the Tafsīr of this āyah.

The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) explained to them that the meaning of the āyah is not as they perceived. The errors and sins that a person does can be called *ẓulm*, but the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) told them the Tafsīr of the āyah via another āyah in the Qur’ān from Sūrah Luqmān,

﴿وَإِذْ قَالَ لُقْمَانُ لِابْنِهِ وَهُوَ يَعِظُهُ يَا بُنَيَّ لَا تُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ﴾

“And (remember) when Luqman said to his son when he was advising him: ‘O my son! Join not in worship others with Allāh. Verily! Joining others in worship with Allāh is a great *ẓulm* (wrong) indeed.’” [Sūrah Luqmān 31:13]

Highlighting therefore that one of the types of *ẓulm* is shirk with Allāh. So this āyah gives you the Tafsīr of the other āyah. Thus, we understand that those who have *īmān* and do not mix it with shirk, then they will have the safety and security, and they will have the guidance.

2. Tafsīr of the Qur’ān via the Sunnah of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم).

Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى) mentioned,

﴿لِلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا الْحُسْنَىٰ وَزِيَادَةٌ﴾

“For those who have done good is the best (reward, i.e. Paradise) and even more (i.e. having the honour of glancing at the Countenance of Allāh)” [Sūrah Yūnus 10:26]

In a ḥadīth in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) clarified that the *زيادة* (extra/even more) mentioned in the āyah is seeing Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى) in Paradise. So now the Sunnah has given us the Tafsīr of an āyah.

If you cannot find other āyāt to give you the Tafsīr, you look at the Sunnah of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) to find the Tafsīr of a particular āyah. And that is something you will find in large amounts within the books of Tafsīr, where examples are being given from the Sunnah of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) explaining āyāt of the Qur'ān.

Of course, we know there is a difference between the scholars regarding the explanation of the Qur'ān that the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) gave to the Companions.

Did he explain every single part of the Qur'ān to the Companions or did he only give them Tafsīr of the parts they could not understand? Some of the scholars such as Shaykhul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah and others have said that he (صلى الله عليه وسلم) gave the Tafsīr of every part of the Qur'ān to the Companions. While other scholars hold the opinion that the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) only gave the Tafsīr of the Qur'ān to the Companions on the parts that were difficult and unclear to them, since the Arabs at the time were pure in their Arabic tongue and strong in their language, so there was no need for Tafsīr to the Companions on the parts that were clear.

It is mentioned that if you were to select someone at random from the Arabs at that time and tell them to stand up and recite some poetry to you, they would be able to start reciting poetry, a thousand verses long, that they made up on the spot. Such was their strength in the language.

So because of that strength in the Arabic language, and the Qur'ān was revealed in that tongue, many parts were clear and so some of the scholars say that the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) only gave the Tafsīr of the sections that the Companions found difficult to understand.

3. You seek to find the Tafsīr of the Qur'ān from the statements of the Companions/Salaf. If you have something in the Qur'ān and you cannot find any other āyāt in the Qur'ān giving you the Tafsīr or any ḥadīth, then the third method is to go to the statements of the Ṣaḥābah/Salaf in explanation of those sections of the Qur'ān.

If after thorough investigation a person cannot find any other āyāt of the Qur'ān, anything in the Sunnah or any statements of the Salaf to clarify, in that rare situation, if there was a real need, then it is possible to resort to the basics of the Arabic language—but that is something far. Because initially, the Qur'ān will explain the Qur'ān, the Sunnah will explain the Qur'ān, and the Salaf will explain the Qur'ān, and the Tafsīr will be found.

A person does not resort to the language and bypass all of those other methods. Many of the people of innovation went straight to linguistics and the Arabic language and then began to make their own interpretations. And that is to be avoided. Rather, when you look into the books of Tafsīr, those three methods are the key. Then of course you have the additional benefits of Arabic language coming into the affair, but those are the three sources.

The Books of Tafsīr

Now that we know the sources of Tafsīr, we have to look at the books of Tafsīr. When examining the books of Tafsīr, the student of knowledge should understand that they are not all the same; Tafsīr is not just one thing. A person may misunderstand and think that you can pick up any book of Tafsīr and it is going to give you the Tafsīr of the Qur'ān and explain to you the different meanings of these āyāt—not necessarily. A student of knowledge must understand that the scholars write their books with different methods and different objectives.

Every book is written with a purpose and a particular objective. All the books of Ḥadīth are written by the scholars of Ḥadīth with certain objectives and purposes behind them. If you do not understand that objective and purpose, then you will misunderstand what the book is about and you will become confused over what the book is trying to do. So when it comes to Tafsīr, it has to be understood that there are different types of Tafsīr.

Some Types of Tafsīr

1. At-Tafsīr al-Ijmālī (a generalised form of Tafsīr).

These are not designed to give you the specifics and details of everything, but to give you a general understanding of what each surah, āyah or story means. They do not go into detail in explaining the āyāt or break down all of the words and meanings in the āyah.

An example of at-Tafsīr al-Ijmālī is *Tafsīr as-Sa'dī* of Shaykh 'Abdur Raḥmān as-Sa'dī (رحمه الله). It is a broad and generalised Tafsīr, which is one of the best for a student of knowledge to begin with. It is a very basic and easy stepping stone because you can go to a particular section and it will give you a very easy and general explanation of what those āyāt mean. Very simple, basic, brief explanations of the different parts of the Qur'ān. So somebody who is a new reader into Tafsīr, then something like *Tafsīr as-Sa'dī* is very good to begin with.

Another example is the many volumes from the Tafsīr of ash-Shaykh al-'Uthaymīn (رحمه الله). Again, a very easy Tafsīr to work with. He does not go into chains of narration or specific riwāyāt; he gives you a generalised meaning of each section. Yes, he goes into a bit more detail in certain affairs than the Tafsīr of as-Sa'dī but it is still a generalised type of Tafsīr, not too specific and detailed. So that is a stepping stone as well at the earlier stages.

2. Books of Tafsīr that are written in the field of Fiqh.

Some of the scholars of Tafsīr wrote their books from the angle of Fiqh. So if a student were to come across those types of Tafsīr he might think to himself that it is not explaining what he wanted, but it is because perhaps that particular Tafsīr is designed to pick out and clarify the Fiqh that is mentioned in the various parts of the Qur'ān.

Examples of Some of the Books of Tafsīr

- The Tafsīr of al-Imām Ibn Jarīr aṭ-Ṭabarī: *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (The Comprehensive Explanation of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'ān).

This is the highest-level book of Tafsīr that all of the other books of Tafsīr that came after basically rely upon and go back to. However, it should be noted, especially for the new student of knowledge, that *Tafsīr aṭ-Ṭabarī* is not what you would begin with because it is obviously very detailed and the chains of narration and the riwāyāt become very complex for somebody new.

- *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, which is from the famous ones. Many of the scholars have said that *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* is basically a summary of *Tafsīr aṭ-Ṭabarī*. And even then, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* is detailed, and there are many narrations and different stories and riwāyāt found within it. A student of knowledge cannot do without *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* either.
- *Tafsīr al-Baghawī*, a well-known, established, recognised book of Tafsīr, which again, some of the scholars have mentioned is a kind of summary of *Tafsīr aṭ-Ṭabarī*.

- *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, wherein you find more on the angle of Fiqh in some of the āyāt. This is a significant size Tafsīr with multiple volumes, just like Ibn Kathīr and aṭ-Ṭabarī. These are all big books of Tafsīr averaging around 15,20,25 volumes each.
- From the later ones, *Faḥḥul-Qadīr* of al-Imām ash-Shawkānī.
- *Aḍwā'ul-Bayān*, an interesting one of al-Imām ash-Shanqīṭī, which is a Tafsīr that is done via the Qur'ān itself. It is not every single āyah, but some of them where he will give the Tafsīr via other āyāt in the Qur'ān. This is a good example of Tafsīr of the Qur'ān via the Qur'ān itself.

There are many other books of Tafsīr; some of them are smaller, some of them are larger. You get small sections from Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn Taymiyyah and many others as well where you can find Tafsīr on various āyāt and chapters of the Qur'ān.

So that gives you a brief overview of how Tafsīr works, what it is, the different types, the sources of Tafsīr and the different types of books. For the beginning student of knowledge like we mentioned, something very easy and simple to digest would be one of the Ijmālī types of Tafsīr, such as the Tafsīr of as-Sa'dī and the Tafsīr of ash-Shaykh al-'Uthaymīn. As the student advances, then he can start looking into some of the others such as the Tafsīr of al-Qurṭubī, the Tafsīr of al-Baghawī, the Tafsīr of Ibn Kathīr and the Tafsīr of aṭ-Ṭabarī.

The Methodology of Studying Tafsīr

As for the methodology, then it would make sense that a person begins with Sūratul-Fātiḥah: the chapter that you recite in every prayer. It is befitting that a person should know the Tafsīr of Sūratul-Fātiḥah and understand its meanings because how else can you ponder over

its meanings and reflect upon what Allāh is telling you in your prayers five times a day, 17 times in the raka'āt at least.

So it is befitting that a student of knowledge begins by gaining an understanding of Sūratul-Fātiḥah and then after that can progress, and perhaps it may be suitable to go to Juz 'Amma because that is from what many of the people have memorised and that is what you often hear in the masājid with the imāms' recitation. And then perhaps after that you can go to the beginning from Sūratul-Baqarah and move your way forward into the remaining sections of the Qur'ān.

This knowledge of Tafsīr is a key component of the student of knowledge and his schedule of learning. A person should certainly give some focus to it. The scholars focus on this subject, and there are many recordings of Tafsīr from them. And you find that the students in the West similarly do classes on Tafsīr; simplified, easy explanations of al-Fātiḥah, of Juz 'Amma and of other chapters of the Qur'ān.

Certainly, a person should make sure that this is in his schedule. The Qur'ān and the Tafsīr of the Qur'ān are from the basics of seeking knowledge because when a person is leaning the religion, where is all of that religion coming from that you are learning? All of the evidences that you are coming across, where are they all coming from? From the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

And that is why in the olden days at the time of the Salaf, it is mentioned about some of the scholars that if somebody new came to their class, the shaykh would ask that person if they had memorised the entire Qur'ān. If that person said no, it is known from some of the Salaf that the shaykh would tell that student who had just come to his class to leave, go and memorise the Qur'ān and finish it, then come and attend here.

Why? Because everything he is teaching in the class, all of these evidences, whether it is Fiqh, 'Aqīdah, whatever the subject you are learning in Islām, the source is the Qur'ān and the Sunnah so a student of knowledge needs to have some grounding in these affairs of Tafsīr and Qur'ān.

والحمد لله رب العالمين