

THE HEART OF
THE QUR'AN

A COMMENTARY ON CHAPTER 36
SURAT YA SIN



KEYS TO THE QUR'AN

VOLUME THREE

SHAYKH FADHLALLA HAERI



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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	i
Book Description	ii
About the Author	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 36: <i>Surat Ya Sin</i>	4
Summary	58
eBooks By Zahra Publications.....	69

Book Description

*Surat Ya Sin*¹ is the heart of the Qur'an (*qalb al-Qur'an*). It is the chapter (*surah*) of the Qur'an which is read over the dead; therefore it is a chapter of great importance to the living. Should one seek to know the meaning of life, one must experience death, for man has come from the non-physical realm and he is swiftly proceeding towards it again. Knowledge is based on opposites. Man's apprehension of knowledge depends upon the condition of his heart. If the condition of his heart is pure and receptive, he sees perfection in every aspect of every situation he finds himself in. The Qur'an allows one to fathom the unfathomable.

¹ The original Arabic text of the Qur'an and the diacritics characters have been removed from this eBook because they do not render accurately in some eReaders.

About the Author

Acknowledged as a master of self-knowledge and a spiritual philosopher, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's role as a teacher grew naturally out of his own quest for self-fulfillment.

He travelled extensively on a spiritual quest which led to his eventual rediscovery of the pure and original Islamic heritage of his birth, and the discovery of the truth that reconciles the past with the present, the East with the West, the worldly with the spiritual – a link between the ancient wisdom teachings and our present time.

A descendant of five generations of well-known and revered spiritual leaders, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri has taught students throughout the world for over 30 years.

He is a gifted exponent of how the self relates to the soul, humankind's link with the Divine, and how consciousness can be groomed to reflect our higher nature.

The unifying scope of his perspective emphasizes practical, actionable knowledge that leads to self-transformation, and provides a natural bridge between seemingly different Eastern and Western approaches to spirituality, as well as offering a common ground of higher knowledge for various religions, sects and secular outlooks.

He is a prolific author of more than thirty books relating to the universal principles of Islam, the Qur'an, and its core purpose of enlightenment.

Introduction

The prevailing disease of our present age is denial of the One Reality that underlies, permeates, encompasses and yet stands apart from existence. To awaken the heart of the seeker to this Reality, the teacher attempts to tap the remedy drawn from the unity and timelessness of the Truth, the source of which is within that very heart. The source book of Truth, the all-encompassing Book of Reality, the key to unlocking the heart of the seeker on the path to divine knowledge, is the Qur'an. The absolute Truth is reflected in the Book, is further reflected through the purified heart of the believer (*mu'min*) and reaches out to illuminate every atom in creation.

For the proper approach to the Qur'an there must be the right intention and the right outer courtesy: the ritual ablution (*wudu'*), the right courtesy in holding, opening and closing the Book, and even in where it is placed afterwards. Since it is the Book of Books, the correct approach is the vital key that allows us to profit best from its reading and recitation.

The traditionally classical approach to the Qur'an is to study it from the standpoint of linguistics, history (the specific occasions of the revelation of certain verses) and other relevant aspects. Having done that, should one seek greater insight, should one want to dive more deeply into this ocean, one must be completely empty of any notions, expectations or reactions. To obtain the greatest inward benefit the reader must be completely void. One must be totally and utterly in a state of purity. This means that the Qur'an is approached with the maximum fearful awareness (*taqwa*) and with the utmost openness from a pure heart that is open in the sense that anything may come to it or nothing at all, depending upon the extent of one's receptivity. If the approach be impure, contact with the Qur'an will be superficial. Nevertheless, this will still be a positive and beneficial experience for whosoever approaches the Qur'an with the slightest outer propriety so long as he is not doing so just to criticize or analyze it.

The true inner courtesy owed to the Qur'an is that one should be as though in the presence of the King of kings, in the presence of the Ultimate, Whose words have been sung through the heart and by the tongue of His beloved Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, his

family and his righteous Companions.² One should bring to life the realization that this divine song has come to one as a rare and precious gift; otherwise, its secrets will remain locked and inaccessible. For those who have the purest intentions the Qur'an is vast and its gifts are endless. Every time a seeker, scholar or commentator reflects on it as he progresses in his life, with an ever deeper experience of the purest mode of approach he finds a fresh spring,

Our interest is both the outward (*zahiri*) as well as the inward (*batini*) approach to the Qur'an, because we are interested in unity (*tawhid*). Islam is the most perfect way of life and path to knowledge because it is the journey of unity. If it is original Islam, it will take one to the knowledge of unity, from faith (*iman*) to absolute certainty (*yaqin*). `Ali ibn Abi Talib said: 'If every unknown thing were made known to me, I would not increase in certainty.' One should reflect upon the state of inner knowledge that `Ali speaks about, that absolute certainty about the knowledge of Reality.

The whole concern is about the full knowledge of unity, not about information. All the verses of the Qur'an must be of benefit right now. Every aspect of the Qur'an is to be taken and used by those who are desperate for the knowledge of Reality, those who aspire to know Allah. We are not only interested in the Qur'an as a historical document. Nothing ever finishes or changes. What was in man's heart millennia ago still exists in man's heart today. All the elements are the same: trust-mistrust, love-hate, peace-violence, compassion-anger, comfort-discomfort, illness-health, life-death. The self (*nafs*) is one consciousness and contains the full spectrum of these human characteristics within it, high and low. In every heart they exist in different proportions, while varying circumstances draw on one characteristic more than another, whether it be the heart of an ordinary man or of a prophet. The difference is that a characteristic such as anger in a prophet is directed against injustice and ignorance in man, whereas the anger of an ordinary man may be reactionary, emotional or unjust, because he is capable of making mistakes. A true man of Allah, and certainly a prophet or messenger of Allah, may exhibit all the lower characteristics of the ego but operate in a direction that is positive and conducive to man's ultimate awakening.

² It is customary, whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned, to invoke the peace and blessings of Allah upon him, his family and his righteous companions.

A prophet hates: he hates ignorance and the self-imposed blindness of men. He hates injustice and man's unwillingness to move, hanging on to the past, to some illusion he inherited from his forefathers or that was conditioned by his own previous experiences.

The watchful traveler on this short journey recognizes these lower aspects of the ego in himself through his true submission and perpetual vigilance. He has a yearning (*himmah*) for knowledge that drives him on and on in his striving against unbelief (*jihad*), against these negative elements in himself. The battle is both outward and inward, for: 'He is the Outwardly Manifest and the Inwardly Hidden, and He is the First and the Last.' We notice today that the collapse of the so-called Muslim world is the natural outcome of Muslims' having neglected to take on fully the path to unitary knowledge. People talk about Islam and even teach Islam, but this cannot be the same as any other type of teaching for this teaching must be embodied, otherwise it is worse than useless.

Surat Ya Sin is the heart of the Qur'an (*qalb al-Qur'an*). It is the chapter (*surah*) of the Qur'an which is read over the dead; therefore it is a chapter of great importance to the living. Should one seek to know the meaning of life, one must experience death, for man has come from the non-physical realm and he is swiftly proceeding towards it again. Knowledge is based on opposites. Man's apprehension of knowledge depends upon the condition of his heart. If the condition of his heart is pure and receptive, he sees perfection in every aspect of every situation he finds himself in. The Qur'an allows one to fathom the unfathomable.

Surat Ya Sin is also about the Prophet Muhammad and it is addressed directly to the bearers of the unitary message who continue to carry out the message. Whoever takes on fully the message of unity is considered a representative (*khalifah*) of Allah. He becomes a true slave (*`abd*) liberated from enslavement by the absence of himself and continues to exist – in the station of on-goingness – in his Lord.

Chapter 36: *Surat Ya Sin*

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

1. Ya Sin

2. By the wise Qur'an,

Ya sin is one of the names given to the Prophet Muhammad. It is also a shortened form of *Ya insan* which means 'O mankind!' or, 'O Human Being'. The *surah* (chapter) might also be addressed to the people of Antioch to whom the Prophet Jesus (*'Isa*) sent apostles. The term, the people of *Ya Sin* signifies the Prophet's family (*Ahl al-Bayt*). This chapter begins by calling upon those among mankind who want to know, who want to follow the Prophet and connect directly with the prophetic message.

3. Surely you are one of the messengers,

This verse is addressed to the Prophet Muhammad. The message of the messengers is the message of unity (*tawhid*). The source of the message is One, though the messengers sent from that source have been many, 'and you Muhammad are one of the messengers'. Since the Prophet Muhammad is the last of the messengers, he obviously encompasses all the previous messages. Regarding this the Qur'an says: 'We do not abrogate a sign or cause it to be forgotten without bringing one better than it or like it' (2: 106).

Even as normal, experiencing human beings, each time we have a new experience it should be better, subtler and more all-encompassing than the previous one. It is as though we are travelling in an evolutionary movement forward in time, but not in the Darwinian sense. We have not, biologically speaking, risen from the ape; rather, we have come from the lowest, the sperm cell, and have then developed into the most complex living organism. This is the inherent pattern of movement in the individual, as well as in the collective historical sense.

Historically, the Prophet Muhammad came from a line of earlier prophets who transmitted and practiced the message of Reality very simply. More than one tradition (*hadith*) tells us that there have been 124,000 prophets and messengers. Throughout different times and in many places numerous villages had a prophet in their midst. People were different then, purer and more transparent. The situations they lived in were generally more conducive to travelling the spiritual path.

The final message of the Qur'an encompasses, supersedes and abrogates all previous messages. It provides man with the complete model. Though the Prophet Muhammad rose from among the Arab peoples, he was the master and seal of all the messengers before him. Because he was the last, his message is universal, open to all and applicable by everyone wherever and whenever.

4. On a straight path.

Still addressing the Prophet, Allah says: 'You are certainly on a clear path (*sirat*), a straight and direct way.' The 'straight path' (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*) is the shortest distance between two points, between subject and object, between man and Allah. That is why it is direct, for it stretches from man to what he is always seeking, which is the All-Encompassing Reality. The understanding of unity (*tawhid*) is the straight path (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*), but it cannot be the subject of mere intellectual study. One must move along the path of submission (*islam*), through belief (*iman*) to sublime excellence (*ihsan*), until one begins to have glimpses of unity, through which one can then dive into the world of meaning.

If the goal of unity (*tawhid*) is not constantly present in the minds of the Muslims, their Islam becomes diluted and falls by the wayside. Mosques become either totally empty or only superficially full, because most of the people there are attending only as a matter of form. In many parts of the Muslim world this is what one finds, because the path is no longer about remembrance of Allah (*dhikr Allah*), nor about wanting knowledge of Allah. In many places Islam itself has been put on a pedestal and is being worshipped instead of Allah. Islam, however, is a means to the knowledge of Allah, not the object itself.

We all love what is timeless. We all love what is absolute. Does anyone not want to live forever, past this life and on into the next? This means that we all love the One Who is forever living. The love of Allah, therefore, is already in our hearts, but we become diverted, we rationalize: 'Not now, tomorrow or next year, when I finish with this or that business.' We blame other people for our lack of time and all our other problems as well. The truth is that we only have ourselves to blame.

The knowledge of Allah is already written for us, either in this life or the next, so why not move for it now, while we can? We are going to be in that state later on, after tasting death, so why not try to discover what it means in this life, where it can be of use to us?

5. A revelation from the Mighty, the Merciful,

Since we are bound to the ground by the law of gravity, we naturally consider anything more exalted and divine to be 'higher', that is, it must transcend the natural barriers to which we are subject. Thus, the human view is that the message of Allah 'comes down' from on high, and this is reflected in the word translated as 'revelation', for *tanzil* (literally means a descending. It is not that Allah is high or low: there is only Allah, and He – may He be exalted – inhabits no place. Man is earth-bound, food-bound, air-bound. The word for earth in Arabic is *ard*, which also means 'something one beats upon', because we are here to beat on the earth in the right manner in order to bring out what it contains, to eke out our sustenance from it and thereby attain the right attitude of humility.

Since the word 'revelation' (*tanzil*) is 'something that is sent down', it is divine and rare, for it is from the Mighty (*'Aziz*). It also, however, has mercy (*rahmah*) in it, so it is from Him Who bestows beneficence, *al-Rahman*. The Beneficent is His Attribute of All-Encompassing Mercy, universal mercy, the same for believer and non-believer, like the rain which falls upon everyone. The Beneficent covers everything, good and bad, because this is the decree of Allah. The Merciful, *al-Rahim*, which is an intensive form of the word from the same root, is more specific, affecting particular individuals in a more intense but more limited way. Everything in existence is really under the decree of mercy of the Beneficent.

Take the poisonous snake for example. From man's point of view the creature is dreadful, a threat to life, yet it is contained within the all-encompassing domain of the Beneficent. If one is bitten by such a creature, this event is still within the domain of the Beneficent; but when one cries out 'Help!' to one's companion, the need for mercy is intensified and pin-pointed. The first aid administered for snake bite is, therefore, specific and is under the survey of the Merciful, *al-Rahim*.

When we recognize the Beneficent at work behind every event in life, we know that the enemy or difficulty was really put there for our direct benefit. From this point of view the Attribute of beneficence is higher than mercy inasmuch as it encompasses everything. Thus, when both Divine Names are mentioned, the Beneficent is always mentioned before the Merciful. There is another way to understand the Attribute of mercy, that is, *al-Rahim*. The form of this verbal noun implies an enduring quality. Thus it is distinguished from beneficence in that it applies to the believer, for Allah's mercy is not only intensified for the believer but endures into the next life as well.

6. That you may warn a people whose fathers were not warned, so they are heedless.

The prophetic message is revealed in order to bring about fear of what is not conducive to the purification of the heart. The word for 'warn' here is the intensified verbal form of *nadhara* which basically means 'to make a vow'. Making a vow means taking decisive action by which one may ward off any non-conducive events. The word *qawm* in this verse, translated as 'a people', means any community or group of communities linked together by a single common denominator, such as language, worship or lifestyle.

The Arabs before Muhammad had not had a messenger from among themselves. There were many Christians and Jews living in their midst who were the 'People of the Book', but they had not had a messenger directly from their own people, from their own culture, to give them the news and the warning. People who are not warned are heedless, forgetful and in a state of distraction (*ghaflah*). The person who is heedless has his attention riveted somewhere less important than where it should be, as when, for example, while waiting for a train one is suddenly attracted by a poster display and consequently misses the train. One was attentive, but

to something of no importance as compared to the original objective. The state of distraction the Qur'an speaks of is man's lack of attention towards Allah. He looks elsewhere instead, rather than single-mindedly concentrating on his Creator. Thus he becomes distracted by the creation and the creatures that inhabit it.

The people referred to in this verse heedlessly addressed themselves to the wrong direction, so were not receptive to the warning. Both the warning and the knowledge are inherent in man's own being, but their voice becomes smothered by acquired habits not in line with divine guidance. People become used to their habits and take comfort in them, for in their repetition is an aspect of perpetuity which is one of Allah's Attributes. Allah's Attributes permeate all substances and situations in creation. In the case of man, he must recognize that he has the choice of channeling the power of these Attributes towards what is conducive to his illumination or of channeling them into the illusion of the physical and material as the goal of existence.

Among man's worst enemies in life are his habits, even his good ones. The final stage of the seeker on the path of illumination and divine knowledge comes when he has to break all habits, even his expectation of direct knowledge. By the mercy of Allah, the right moment may come for him when the heart has retreated from the outer project for the final victory of abandonment. This stage is only for the person who is made ready by having no further expectations in this life. He is no longer expecting to 'see' Allah or 'meet' Allah – there is only Allah, so thinking that one is getting closer to Allah is a subtle form of association with Allah.

Breaking habits is necessary until one is in a state of perpetual awareness, accepting any situation as it comes, trusting that one will deal with it correctly, confident that Allah will guide one safely to its resolution. The one who has attained to this state, which is the state of witnessing (*shahadah*), will no longer spend an inordinate amount of time trying to out-guess and overcome any situation.

The purpose of the Qur'anic message, like the purpose of creation itself, is to enable man to travel from darkness into light. Physically the infant remains in the obscurity of the womb for nine months until it is forcefully expelled into the light. The habit of being in darkness is such that at birth it invariably cries. Similarly, man does not like change, because the never-changing

is the basic substratum upon which all change in existence occurs. The people referred to in this verse were stubbornly holding on to the habits of their forefathers. The tribal and cultural habits in Arabia had remained stable and fixed for a very long time, if one can call the existence they had culture. There was amongst them much debauchery and little humanity. The miracle was that from amongst them came this immense light and peace, from the midst of that intense darkness, came the Perfect Man.

7. Certainly the word has proven true for most of them, for they do not believe.

The truth is that Allah's decree affects all. They are in agony, the agony, affliction and turmoil of ignorance (*jahiliyyah*). All man's troubles arise because of ignorance. Should a person become ill or be beset by an affliction and someone else explains how the affliction came about, then the person is somewhat relieved. Much of the trouble is reduced once one knows why it occurred in the first place. Knowledge brings certainty and security and therefore makes the heart tranquil.

Man's purpose is to dispel ignorance. Knowledge already exists within. Knowledge is from Allah's Attribute of *al-'Alim*, the Knower. This Attribute is never absent, so one's task is simply to strip away ignorance. Divine knowledge (*al-'ilm al-laduni*) is already with us, and to arrive at it we must learn prescriptive outer knowledge and proper courtesy, which are all based on the prophetic practices of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Prophet's outer practices of worship, such as prostration, proceeded from his original nature (*fitrah*). Following in his footsteps, we want to focus on the perfection of his original nature in order to gain knowledge; therefore we imitate his outer practices as completely as we can. The outer form is not the goal; the outer form is only important in order to obtain the inner, so that one may be reunified. Then while inwardly one has the life, light and love of the Prophet Muhammad, one outwardly follows his practice (*Sunnah*).

The people described in this verse lack faith and they will fail to find relief because of their distraction. Because of their own often inadvertent choice the people of heedlessness are veiled by their own habits; consequently, they are dulled and doomed. Faith and belief, however, provide a positive trust which enables one to realize that although one may be in ignorance now,

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