

Reading the Quran: the proper way and the ritual way

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 8 October 2021

كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرُوا أُولَى الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٢٩﴾

“(This is) a Book that We have revealed to you abounding in good (*mubārak*), that they may ponder over its verses, and that those who have understanding may be mindful.” — ch. 38, v. 29.

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ ۗ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا ﴿٨٢﴾

“Will they not then ponder on the Quran? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy.” — ch. 4, v. 82

وَرَتِّلِ الْقُرْآنَ تَرْتِيلًا ﴿٧٣﴾

“and recite the Quran (distinctly) at a leisurely pace.” — ch. 73, v. 4

The first verse shows that the good or the blessing that the Holy Quran contains can only be attained by a human being if he or she *ponders over its verses* and becomes *mindful* of its teachings. Nowhere is it stated in the Quran that a person can benefit from the Quran merely and only by reading out its words without any knowledge of what the words are saying. The second verse requires everyone to ponder over the Quran. They will find no contradictions in it, whereby it says one thing in one place and the opposite thing in another place. This proves that the Quran could not have been composed by a human being, as no human author could maintain consistency in his words and views over such a long period of time and in such varying circumstances as those in which the Quran was revealed. The third quotation is part of a verse and it instructs the Holy Prophet Muhammad to recite the Quran at a slow pace. I will expand on this point later.

The Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, said: “People read the Holy Quran, but do so like a parrot, without thinking or under-

standing... Neither the reader nor the listeners understand what is said. The manner of reciting the Holy Quran has become merely that two or three parts of it are read, without knowing what was read. At the most, they read it melodiously and pronounce the letters *qāf* and *‘ain* properly. It is, no doubt, good to read the Quran in a fine and melodious way, but the real purpose of reciting the Holy Quran is to find out the truths and knowledge contained in it and to bring about a change within oneself.” (*Malfuzat*, 1984 edition, v. 1, p. 428–429; new edition, v. 1, p. 284–285)

Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was once asked the question: “How should the Holy Quran be read?” He replied: “The Holy Quran must be read with thought, reflection and concentration. It says in Hadith: ‘Many reciters of the Quran are cursed by the Quran’.¹ He who reads the Quran and does not act upon it is cursed by the Quran. While reciting the Quran, when you reach a mention of mercy, ask mercy from God, at a mention of chastisement, ask protection from God’s chastisement. The Quran should be read with thought and reflection and you must act upon it.” (*Malfuzat*, 1984 edition, v. 9, p. 199–200; new edition, v. 5, p. 157).

Of course, when a child is learning to recite the words of the Holy Quran, that is a different matter, and it cannot be expected that the child should be taught the full meanings of all that he reads. Even at that stage though, the child can be given some introduction to the general meaning, particularly when reading the verses dealing with the simpler subjects that a child can understand; for example, the oneness of God, work of the prophets and basic moral teachings. In any case, that is only a passing phase of life, not a permanent state.

What is wrong is that adults, who have learnt the recitation of the Quran, continue throughout their lives reciting the Quran without ever trying to know its meaning, without attempting to implement its teachings in their lives, in the belief that the mere recitation is a deed which brings Divine reward. If it were true that mere recitation earned such reward, how could the Holy Prophet possibly say that some reciters of the Quran are cursed by it?

¹ *Maktubat Mujaddid Alfi Sani, Daftar 2, Part 2, Letter no. 53.*

Muslims generally ceased many centuries ago to try learning the meanings of the Quran, and therefore they were unable to receive or see its real blessings. They invented their own ways of using it for various rituals, claiming that this was how the blessings of the Quran were to be obtained. These rituals and customs find no support in the Holy Quran, the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, or the lives of his Companions. Let us take what is known as *Khatam-i Quran*, or finishing the Holy Quran. It is not found anywhere in the teachings of Islam that on certain occasions, of celebration or mourning, people should gather and be assigned various portions of the Quran to read so that the whole of the Quran gets read. Firstly, no one gains any knowledge of the Quran by reading it in this way. And secondly, this is opposed to the method of reading the Quran as instructed in the Quran itself and as advised by the Holy Prophet Muhammad.

As I quoted earlier from the Quran, it says: “Recite the Quran in a slow, leisurely manner (*tartīl*)” (73:4). This verse is also mentioned in Sahih Bukhari, and Maulana Muhammad Ali comments upon it as follows in his Urdu commentary of Bukhari: “Reciting with *tartīl* means to enunciate the letters distinctly and separately and to read the words slowly in order that attention is turned to its meaning. The instruction to read the Quran slowly, so that it moves the heart, is found not only in Hadith but is also clearly given in the Quran. In spite of this, the memorisers (*ḥāfiẓ*) of the Quran compete with one another in how fast they can recite the Quran. During the month of Ramadan, the way in which the Quran is recited in *Tarawih* prayers is such that no one can understand any of it. It is read so fast that even if someone wanted to follow its meanings, he is unable to do so. In some places, the whole of the Quran is recited in just the one night of 27th Ramadan. This is clearly opposed to the instruction of the Quran to recite it slowly” (see under Bukhari, book 66: *Faḍā'il-ul-Qur'ān*, ch. 28).

In the same place in Sahih Bukhari, another verse of the Quran is mentioned: “And it is a Quran We have made distinct, so that you may read it to people by slow degrees and We have revealed it in portions” (17:106). Here it is said in the Quran itself that the revelation of the Quran to the Holy Prophet came in portions so that he could read it to people slowly, and not all at once.

When a person believes that he will receive Divine reward and blessings by *finishing* the Quran, or completing some part of it assigned to him or her to read, then he will want to complete its reading as quickly as possible. He will never abide by the instruction, as explained above, to read it slowly and thoughtfully because he believes that *the quicker he finishes it, the earlier he will get his reward*. His sole aim and object is *to reach the end*, for that is where he believes that his reward lies. Therefore, to stop and ponder over its words is a *hindrance* to his objective. It is thus clearly seen that those whose aim is *merely and only* to finish the Quran, they read it in a manner which is directly opposed to how it should be read according to the Quran itself and the Holy Prophet Muhammad.

It is recorded in a Hadith report that a man asked the Holy Prophet: “In how many days should I recite the Quran?” The Holy Prophet replied: “Finish it in one month”. The man said: “I am able to do more than that.” The Holy Prophet said: “Then finish it in twenty days.” The man repeated that he was able to do more than that, i.e., to finish it in a shorter time. The Holy Prophet said: “Then finish it in fifteen days.” The man repeated the same thing again. The Holy Prophet said: “Then finish it in ten days.” The man again repeated the same thing. The Holy Prophet said: “Then finish it in five days.” The man still asked for a shorter time, but the Holy Prophet did not allow it. (See Tirmidhi, book 46: *Reciting the Quran*, ch. 13, hadith 2946.) In another report the Holy Prophet said: “He who completes the Quran in less than three days, he has not understood it” (Tirmidhi, as above, hadith 2949). According to another hadith in Bukhari, the Holy Prophet told a man to recite the whole of the Quran in one month, and when he said he could do more than that, meaning he could do it in less time, the Holy Prophet told him that he could finish it in seven days but must not do it in less than this time (book 66: *Faḍā'il-ul-Qur'ān*, ch. 34, hadith 5054).

So the Holy Prophet preferred that a person should take no less than a month to finish the Quran, but on the insistence of people in individual cases he fixed a minimum period of five or seven days (and according to other reports three days) before which the Quran should not be finished. And he clearly gave the reason that if you finish it in a shorter time then you would not understand it.

The Holy Quran itself has put it quite beautifully: “Recite out of the Quran that which is easy for you” — **فَاَقْرَأْ وَمَا تَيْسَّرَ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ** (73:20). In other words, reciting of the Quran should not be undertaken as a burdensome task, subjecting one to hard labour, but one should read as much as one finds easy to do.

One of the rituals that people have invented for obtaining blessing from the Holy Quran is to recite it for a deceased person, with the belief that the dead person will be rewarded as a result of the Quran being read for his “sake”, and that the benefit of the recitation “reaches” the dead person. Now if we consider it rationally, it is the *living* who need to receive the Quran because only the living can learn from it and act upon it. The poor fellow who has died cannot now change his life to bring it more in accord with the teachings of the Quran.

It is, moreover, curious that very few Muslims are concerned about taking the message of the Quran to the *living*, but millions of Muslims are everyday reciting the Quran to make its benefit reach the *dead*.

We pray that may Allah enable us to follow the true teachings of His Holy Book and His Holy Prophet— *Ameen*.

بَارِكْ اللَّهُ لَنَا وَكُم فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعْنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-