

Tafseer of the Salaf

Imam Ibn Taymiyyah

An Introduction to the Principles of Tafseer

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The first thing to know is that the Prophet, peace be upon him, has explained the meaning of the Qur'aan to his companions, just as he taught its words. The Divine command: **"You should explain to people what has been sent down to them,"** [16:44] calls for the former just as it calls for the latter. Abu `Abd al-Rahmaan al-Sulamee has said that whenever the people who taught them the Qur'aan like `Uthmaan ibn Affaan (radiyallaahu `anhu), `Abdullaah ibn Mas`ood (radiyallaahu `anhuma) and others learned then verses of the Qur'aan from the Prophet (sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam) and did not proceed further unless they had understood whatever ideas and regulations those verses contained. They used to say: "We learned the text of the Qur'aan and studied its ideas and injunctions all together." This explains why they spent such a long time in learning a chapter (soorah). Anas (radiyallaahu `anhu) has said: "We used to hold in great esteem the one who learned the two soorahs of the Qur'aan: al-Baqarah and Aali-Imraan". Ibn `Umar (radiyallaahu `anhu) spent many years, and according to Maalik, a complete eight years, in learning these soorahs. In fact, the companions were submitting to the command of Allaah:

"This is a blessed Book; We have revealed it to you so that you contemplate over it," [38:29] and

"Don't they contemplate over the Qur'aan!", [47:24] and,

"Have they not pondered over (Allaah's) words!". [23:68]

Obviously, you cannot contemplate words unless you understand their meaning. That is why Allaah has said:

"We have revealed it as an Arabic Qur'aan so that you comprehend it", [12:22]

and to comprehend the Qur'aan means to understand its meaning.

Everyone knows that a book is meant for understanding, not just for reading. This is all the more true of the Qur'aan. No one ever reads a book on a subject: medicine, mathematics or any other, without trying to understand it. The same is true of the Qur'aan, on which rests our well-being and happiness, our religion and life. This is why the companions of the Prophet (sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam) differed little in their exegesis of the Qur'aan. Their successors (al-Tabi'een) have differed comparatively more; however their differences, as compared to those of the latter generations, are negligible. As a rule, the better a generation, the more profound is its understanding and knowledge of the Qur'aan, and the greater is the agreement of its scholars on its exegesis. Among the successors there were many who studied the whole Qur'aan with the companions. For instance, Mujaahid studied the entire Qur'aan, as he has himself said, with Ibn `Abbaas (radiyallaahu `anhuma), he questioned him about each and every verse, and noted all

his comments. That is why al-Thawree has said: "If you get the comments of Mujaahid it is enough." This also explains why al-Shaafi`ee, al-Bukhaaree and various other scholars, as well as Imaam Ahmad and others who have commented on the Qur'aan quote the words of Mujaahid more than the words of any one else. The point I am stressing is that the successors learned the exegesis (tafseer) of the Qur'aan from the companions as they learned the hadeeth of the Prophet (sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam) from them. This is not at all to deny that they exercised their minds on different verses and expressed their opinions, as they did with regard to various ahaadeeth of the Prophet (sallallaahu `alayhi wa sallam).

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