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Surah Al-Baqarah

The Cow · Madani · 286 ayat — reflections on surah 2
of the Qur'an

QURAN

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CONTENTS

Surah Al-Baqarah

1	The surah in brief	What it is, when it came, what it sets out to do
2	Why it was revealed	17 occasions from the authentic collections
3	Its themes	6 threads running through the surah
4	Key verses	5 passages, with a reflection on each
5	Reading it closely	4 sections
6	Carrying it	4 things to take from it

البقرة — Al-Baqarah, "The Cow". Surah 2 of 114, revealed in Madinah, 286 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/2/.

ONE

The surah in brief

A comprehensive charter for the believing community after the Hijrah, laying out faith, law, and the traits of the God-conscious versus the disbeliever and hypocrite, and anchoring trust in Allah through Ayat al-Kursi.

Al-Baqarah, the longest surah, is the Madani charter of the new ummah in Medina. It opens by sorting humanity into three responses to guidance — the God-conscious, the deniers, and the hypocrites — then recounts the trust given to Adam and, at length, the covenant-history of Bani Israel as a warning to the Muslims who now inherit leadership. From there it turns to building the community: the change of qibla toward the Ka'bah, and legislation on fasting, pilgrimage, marriage and divorce, debt, and the ban on riba. Islahi reads its central theme as the transfer of religious leadership from Bani Israel to the Muslim ummah, which now inherits the trust of guidance; it holds Ayat al-Kursi at its summit and closes with the believers' triumphant creed and Allah's assurance that no soul is burdened beyond capacity.

OCCASIONS OF REVELATION

Why it was revealed

These are the occasions (asbāb al-nuzūl) that the authentic collections narrate for verses of this surah. An occasion explains a verse; it does not limit its meaning.

Qur'an 2:125

'Umar told the Prophet he wished they would take the Station of Abraham as a place of prayer. The verse commanding that came down, one of three matters in which 'Umar said his Lord agreed with him.

"So came the Divine Inspiration: And take you (people) the station of Abraham as a place of prayer"

'Umar ibn al-Khattab · Sahih al-Bukhari 402

Qur'an 2:143

Some Muslims had died or been killed before the qibla was changed to the Ka'ba, and the companions did not know what to say about their earlier prayers. Allah revealed that He would never let their faith be lost.

"Some men had died before the Qibla was changed towards the Ka'ba. They had been killed and we did not know what to say about them"

Al-Bara' ibn 'Azib · Sahih al-Bukhari 4486

Qur'an 2:144

The Prophet prayed towards Jerusalem for sixteen or seventeen months while wishing to face the Ka'ba, and this verse was revealed. A man who had prayed 'Asr with him then passed people bowing in another mosque, told them, and they turned towards the Ka'ba while still bowing.

"The Prophet (ﷺ) prayed facing Bait-ulMaqdis (i.e. Jerusalem) for sixteen or seventeen months but he wished that his Qibla would be the Ka'ba (at Mecca). (So Allah Revealed (2.144))"

Al-Bara' ibn 'Azib · Sahih al-Bukhari 4486

Qur'an 2:158

Before Islam the Ansar assumed ihram for the idol Manat and so considered it wrong to go between Safa and Marwa. After accepting Islam they asked the Prophet about it, and Allah revealed that the two hills are among His symbols.

"this divine inspiration was revealed concerning the Ansar who used to assume Ihram for worshipping an idol called "Manat""

'A'isha (asked by 'Urwa) · Sahih al-Bukhari 1643

Qur'an 2:158

Anas said they had disliked going between Safa and Marwa because it was a rite of the pre-Islamic period. This continued until Allah revealed the verse.

"Yes, as it was of the ceremonies of the days of the Pre-Islamic period of ignorance, till Allah revealed"

Anas ibn Malik (asked by 'Asim) · Sahih al-Bukhari 1648

Qur'an 2:158

Some people had performed the walk before Islam, then held back after Islam because the Qur'an mentioned tawaf of the Ka'ba but not Safa and Marwa. Abu Bakr ibn 'Abd al-Rahman concluded the verse concerned both groups.

"It seems that this verse was revealed concerning the two groups"

Abu Bakr ibn 'Abd al-Rahman (a Successor, reporting what he heard from learned men) · Sahih al-Bukhari 1643

Qur'an 2:187

At first a fasting companion who slept before breaking his fast could not eat until the next evening. Qais ibn Sirma slept without eating after a day's work and fainted the next midday. The verses permitting relations with wives on fasting nights, and eating and drinking until dawn, were revealed.

"When it was midday on the following day, he fainted and the Prophet (ﷺ) was informed about the whole matter and the following verses were revealed"

Al-Bara' ibn 'Azib · Sahih al-Bukhari 1915

Qur'an 2:187

When the Ramadan fast was prescribed, people kept away from their wives for the whole month, but some men broke this. Allah revealed that He knew they had been deceiving themselves and had forgiven them.

"So Allah revealed: "Allah is aware that you were deceiving yourselves but He accepted your repentance and forgave you"

Al-Bara' ibn 'Azib · Sahih al-Bukhari 4508

Qur'an 2:187

The words about the white and black thread were revealed without the words "of dawn", so some men tied white and black threads to their legs and ate until they could tell them apart. Allah then revealed "of dawn".

"Then Allah revealed" ... of dawn,' whereupon they understood that meant the night and the day"

Sahl ibn Sa'd · Sahih al-Bukhari 4511

Qur'an 2:189

In the pre-Islamic period people in ihram entered their houses from the back. Allah revealed that righteousness is not entering houses from the back, and told them to enter by the doors.

"In the Pre-Islamic Period when the people assumed Ihram, they would enter their houses from the back. So Allah revealed"

Al-Bara' ibn 'Azib · Sahih al-Bukhari 4512

Qur'an 2:196

At al-Hudaybiya, while in ihram, lice were falling from Ka'b's head and the Prophet ordered him to shave it. The ransom clause of 2:196 was revealed about him: fasting, feeding the poor, or a sacrifice.

"And if any of you is ill, or has ailment in his scalp (2.196), etc. was revealed regarding me."

Ka'b ibn 'Ujra · Sahih al-Bukhari 1815

Qur'an 2:197

People from Yemen came for Hajj without enough provisions, saying they relied on Allah, and then begged when they arrived. Allah revealed the command to take provision, and that the best provision is fear of Allah.

"The people of Yemen used to come for Hajj and used not to bring enough provisions with them and used to say that they depend on Allah."

Ibn 'Abbas · Sahih al-Bukhari 1523

Qur'an 2:198

'Ukaz, Mijanna and Dhul-Majaz were pre-Islamic markets, and Muslims thought trading there during the Hajj season was a sin. The verse was revealed allowing them to seek the bounty of their Lord.

"They (i.e. Muslims) considered it a sin to trade there during the Hajj time (i.e. season), so this Verse was revealed"

Ibn 'Abbas · Sahih al-Bukhari 4519

Qur'an 2:199

Most people departed from 'Arafat, but the Hums (Quraysh) departed from al-Muzdalifa. 'A'isha said the verse was revealed about the Hums, and they were then sent to 'Arafat.

"The following verses were revealed about the Hums: Then depart from the place whence all the people depart--(2.199)"

'A'isha (reported by 'Urwa) · Sahih al-Bukhari 1665

Qur'an 2:223

The Jews claimed that if a man had intercourse with his wife from behind, the child would be born squint-eyed. The verse "Your wives are a tilth unto you" was revealed.

"Jews used to say: 'If one has sexual intercourse with his wife from the back, then she will deliver a squint-eyed child.' So this Verse was revealed"

Jabir ibn 'Abdullah · Sahih al-Bukhari 4528

Qur'an 2:232

Ma'qil's sister was divorced, and when her waiting period ended her former husband asked to remarry her. Ma'qil refused although she wished to return, and Allah revealed "Do not prevent them"; Ma'qil then married her to him again.

"Ma'qil bin Yasar told me that it was revealed in his connection."

Ma'qil ibn Yasar (via al-Hasan) · Sahih al-Bukhari 5130

Qur'an 2:238

The companions used to speak to one another about their needs during prayer. When this verse was revealed they were ordered to keep silent in prayer.

"We used to speak while in prayer. One of us used to speak to his brother (while in prayer) about his need, till the Verse was revealed"

Zaid ibn Arqam · Sahih al-Bukhari 4534

TWO

Its themes

- Guidance and the three types of people
- Covenant and the trust of leadership
- Law and community
- Tawhid (Ayat al-Kursi)
- Sacrifice and spending
- Trial and patience

THREE

Key verses

Allah! There is no god but He,—the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there can intercede in His presence except as He permitteth? He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He willeth. His Throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme (in glory).

Qur'an 2:255

Ayat al-Kursi is the Qur'an's grandest single declaration of Allah's living, self-sustaining sovereignty — nothing escapes His knowledge, no drowsiness touches Him, and His throne encompasses the heavens and earth. Reflect on it before sleep and after prayer, letting His vast care shrink every anxiety you carry.

When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way.

Qur'an 2:186

Set amid the fasting verses, Allah answers 'when My servants ask about Me' by saying He is near and answers the caller — no intermediary, no distance. Let the intimacy of du'a in Ramadan train you to speak to Him directly in every season.

Then do ye remember Me; I will remember you. Be grateful to Me, and reject not Faith.

Qur'an 2:152

'Remember Me and I will remember you' makes dhikr a two-way relationship: your turning to Him is met by His turning to you in a far greater assembly. Pair it with the next command to be grateful and not deny His grace.

Nay, seek (Allah's) help with patient perseverance and prayer: It is indeed hard, except to those who bring a lowly spirit,-

Qur'an 2:45

Patience and prayer are named as the twin supports to seek help through, though the surah admits it is heavy except upon the humble-hearted (khashi'in). When burdened, return to salah as a refuge, not merely a duty.

On no soul doth Allah Place a burden greater than it can bear. It gets every good that it earns, and it suffers every ill that it earns. (Pray:) "Our Lord! Condemn us not if we forget or fall into error; our Lord! Lay not on us a burden Like that which Thou didst lay on those before us; Our Lord! Lay not on us a burden greater than we have strength to bear. Blot out our sins, and grant us forgiveness. Have mercy on us. Thou art our Protector; Help us against those who stand against faith."

Qur'an 2:286

The closing verse assures that Allah tasks no soul beyond its capacity, then teaches the community the very du'a to lift burdens and forgive shortfalls. Reflect that your struggles are calibrated to your strength, and answer the verse with its own prayer.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Baqarah, “The Cow,” is the longest surah in the Qur’an and the first long surah revealed after the Hijra. It was not sent down at once but across several years of the Madinan period, its verses accumulating as the young Muslim community met new questions and new adversaries; some of its rulings, such as the final prohibition of interest, and the verse “fear a Day when you will be returned to God” (2:281), are among the very last revelations. The surah takes its name from the strange episode of the cow that the Israelites were commanded to slaughter (2:67–73), a story that captures much of the surah’s mood — a people given clear guidance who hesitate, argue, and evade.

Where the Makkan revelations forged individual faith, al-Baqarah reads as the founding charter of a community. Madinah confronted the believers with realities Makkah had not: a hostile pole of open disbelievers, a treacherous pole of hypocrites who professed faith while undermining it, and the long-established People of the Book, especially the Jewish tribes with their scripture and history. Al-Baqarah addresses all of them and, through them, shapes the identity of the new ummah. Its character is that of a constitution: creed, narrative, warning, and law woven together. It also holds two of the most treasured passages in the whole Qur’an — Ayat al-Kursi (2:255), which the Prophet ﷺ called the greatest verse, and the closing two verses, which were described as a gift from a treasure beneath

the Throne. Of it he ﷺ said, “Do not turn your houses into graves; indeed Satan flees from a house in which Surat al-Baqarah is recited” (Muslim).

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens with the disconnected letters Alif Lam Mim and an unqualified declaration that this Book is guidance for the God-conscious (2:1–5). It then sorts humanity by its response to that guidance into three groups: the believers who receive it, the disbelievers over whose hearts a seal has settled (2:6–7), and — given the longest early treatment — the hypocrites (2:8–20), whose sickness of heart, deceit, and inner darkness the surah paints in two vivid parables of a man in a rainstorm and a man whose fire is snuffed out. That the munafiqun receive such extended attention signals a distinctly Madinan danger: in Makkah faith’s enemy was outside; in Madinah it could wear the mask of belonging.

From here the surah turns to all of humankind with a summons to worship the Lord who created them (2:21–29), backing the call with the challenge to produce even a single surah like it and with signs drawn from the heavens and the earth. It then reaches back to the beginning of the human story: the creation of Adam, the teaching of the names, the appointment of a vicegerent on earth, the refusal of Iblis, and the fall met not with abandonment but with the promise that guidance would come (2:30–39). This founding scene establishes the terms of the whole surah — a creature entrusted with responsibility on earth, and a God who sends guidance to the one who slips.

A vast central section (2:40–123) then addresses the Children of Israel directly. The surah recalls God's favours upon them, their deliverance from Pharaoh, the covenant at the mountain, the manna and quails — and, alongside these, the worship of the calf, the demand to see God plainly, the slaying of the cow after much evasion, the hardening of hearts, and the distortion of scripture. This is not history for its own sake. It is a mirror held up to the new community: here is a people who were given a book, prophets, and leadership, and here is how they broke the trust — so that the ummah, now receiving the same gifts, might not repeat the failure.

The narrative then pivots to Ibrahim (2:124–141), who raises the foundations of the Ka'ba with his son Isma'il and is made an imam for humankind. Through him the surah advances a decisive claim: true faith is not the inherited label of Jew or Christian but the pure monotheism of Ibrahim, the millah that precedes and transcends both. This sets up one of the surah's great turning points — the change of the prayer direction from Jerusalem to the Ka'ba (2:142–152). The "foolish" will object, the surah anticipates, but the redirection publicly marks the ummah as ummatan wasatan, a balanced middle nation appointed as witnesses over mankind. It is a moment of coming-of-age: the community assumes the inheritance the previous nations forfeited.

The surah then defines what God actually wants. Righteousness, it declares, is not turning your face east or west but faith, generosity, prayer, keeping one's word, and patience in hardship (2:177). From this definition it moves into sustained legislation for the community's life: fair retaliation and the

sanctity of life, bequests, the fast of Ramadan (2:183–187), the Hajj, fighting in God’s cause within its limits (2:190–195), and a long body of family law — marriage, divorce, suckling, and the care of widows. Set within this legal stretch, like a lamp in a room of duties, stand Ayat al-Kursi and the declaration that there is no compulsion in religion (2:255–256), followed by three scenes of God restoring life — Ibrahim’s debate with the king, the man who passed a ruined town, and the birds Ibrahim called back (2:258–260) — answering the heart’s deepest doubt about resurrection.

The final major movement concerns wealth (2:261–283). In a series of parables the surah lifts up charity — the single seed that yields seven hundred grains — and condemns interest as its exact opposite, a taking that God erases while charity He grows. Here sits the longest verse in the Qur’an, the verse of debt (2:282), teaching the meticulous recording of loans so that trust and justice hold in a trading society. The surah then closes (2:284–286) by returning everything to God’s ownership and giving the believers their answer: “Amana al-Rasul” — the Messenger and the faithful believe, they hear and obey, and they raise the great supplication that God not burden a soul beyond its capacity.

The major themes, in depth

The first theme is guidance and the three ways people respond to it. The surah announces at its outset that the Book guides the God-conscious, and then everything that follows tests who will actually submit. The believer takes the guidance and is changed by it; the disbeliever refuses and is sealed off; the hypocrite

says the words but withholds the heart. That the surah spends far more of its opening on the hypocrite than on the outright denier is itself a lesson: the gravest threat to a community of faith is often the corrosion within, the person who trades in belonging while emptying it of meaning. The whole surah, in this light, is an extended sorting of souls by their response to revelation.

The second theme is the ummah as heir to a covenant — and the warning that comes with inheritance. The enormous section on the Children of Israel is placed here deliberately. They were chosen, rescued, taught, and led, and yet they let the covenant fray through evasion, literalism, and the reshaping of scripture to their liking. By recounting this at length to a community that had just received its own book and its own leadership, the surah says, in effect: you now carry what they carried; do not carry it as they did. The transfer of the imamah to the line of Ibrahim and the turning of the qibla to the Ka'ba dramatise the handover — the trust of being God's witnesses on earth passing to those willing to bear it as a middle, balanced nation.

The third theme is the reality of God against the doubt of the heart, concentrated in Ayat al-Kursi. In one verse the surah affirms God's eternal life, His self-subsistence, His freedom from slumber, His all-encompassing knowledge, His unshakeable dominion, and the reach of His Throne over the heavens and the earth. Placed as it is amid laws and struggles, it anchors the community's effort in the greatness of the One they serve. And the surah pairs this majesty with the question people most quietly fear — can the dead really live again? — answering it not

with argument alone but with three concrete scenes of restoration, so that resurrection becomes something the reader has, in a sense, watched happen.

The fourth theme is righteousness made concrete in law and in the ethics of wealth. Al-Baqarah refuses to let piety float free as sentiment; after redefining true righteousness in 2:177, it legislates it — fasting to school the appetite, Hajj to gather the body of believers, family law to order the home, retaliation to protect life within just limits. And it crowns this with economics: the surah's long treatment of charity against interest teaches that a God-conscious society is built on generosity that grows and exploitation that God strips away. Faith, for al-Baqarah, is not complete until it reaches the pocket and the ledger.

Points of reflection

Al-Baqarah asks the reader to weigh which of its three groups describes their own heart. It is easy to recite the surah as the story of ancient peoples; harder to hear in the portrait of the hypocrite, or in the Israelites' endless "we hear and we disobey," a description of oneself. The surah's whole architecture pushes toward a single contrasting posture, voiced at its very end: *sami'na wa ata'na*, "we hear and we obey." The believer's task is to make that phrase, and not its opposite, the honest report of their life.

It also gives the believer companions for daily life. Ayat al-Kursi and the closing verses were singled out by the Prophet ﷺ for regular recitation — the one to fortify the heart with the greatness of God, the other to place on the tongue each night the plea of a people who accept the whole of what was revealed

and beg not to be overburdened. Read as a whole, al-Baqarah is a manual for what it means to be a community that received guidance and chose to bear its trust faithfully: to worship the living Lord, to keep the covenant the earlier nations dropped, to embody righteousness in law and generosity, and to answer revelation not with evasion but with obedience.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Examine which of the three responses to guidance your heart resembles today — and beware the hidden third, hypocrisy.
2. Learn from Bani Israel's story: knowledge without obedience forfeits the trust of leadership.
3. Anchor your nights in Ayat al-Kursi and the last two verses of the surah.
4. When commands feel heavy, seek help through patience and prayer rather than fleeing them.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, al-Sa'di, al-Qurtubi, Islahi (Tadabbur-i-Qur'an). A summary is not a tafsir: for the verse-by-verse treatment go to the works themselves, or to the close studies at deen2u.com/tadabbur/.