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Surah Al-Ma'idah

The Table Spread · Madani · 120 ayat — reflections on
surah 5 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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المائدة — Al-Ma'idah, "The Table Spread". Surah 5 of 114, revealed in Madinah, 120 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/5/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Faithfulness to covenants and Allah's completed religion, setting out lawful and forbidden foods, the duties of justice, and correcting the distortions of earlier communities about Isa and revelation.

Al-Ma'idah is among the last major surahs revealed, and it reads as the community's mature covenant-charter, opening with the command to fulfill all contracts. It legislates the sacred and the permitted — completing the rites, foods, hunting bounds, and the purification of wudu — and famously records the perfection of the religion at 5:3. It repeatedly binds justice to piety, insisting fairness must hold even toward those one hates, and it recounts the two sons of Adam, the covenants of Israel and the Christians, and the table spread (ma'idah) requested of Isa. Throughout, it warns against breaking pledges with Allah and taking corrupt allies, calling the ummah to be a witness-community faithful to its trust.

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 5:3

A Jew told 'Umar that if the verse "This day I have perfected your religion" had been revealed to them, they would have made that day a festival. 'Umar said he knew when and where it was revealed: to the Prophet standing at 'Arafat, on a Friday.

"No doubt, we know when and where this verse was revealed to the Prophet. It was Friday and the Prophet (ﷺ) was standing at 'Arafat"

'Umar ibn al-Khattab · Sahih al-Bukhari 45

Qur'an 5:6

'A'isha's necklace was lost at al-Baida' on the way to Madinah, and the army halted where there was no water. When morning prayer came and no water was found, the verse "O you who believe! When you intend to offer prayer" was revealed, and Usaid ibn Hudair said the family of Abu Bakr was a blessing for the people.

*"Water was sought, but in vain; so the following Verse was revealed:-
- "O you who believe! When you intend to offer prayer.." (5.6)"*

'A'isha · Sahih al-Bukhari 4608

Qur'an 5:93

When wine was prohibited and poured out in the streets of Madinah, people said some Muslims had been killed at Uhud with wine in their stomachs. Allah revealed that there is no blame on believers who do good deeds for what they consumed before.

"The people said, "Some people (Muslims) were killed (during the battle of Uhud) while wine was in their stomachs." So Allah revealed"

Anas ibn Malik · Sahih al-Bukhari 4620

Qur'an 5:101

The Prophet delivered a moving sermon, and a man asked, "Who is my father?" The Prophet named him. Then the verse "Ask not about things which, if made plain to you, may cause you trouble" was revealed.

"A man said, "Who is my father?" The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "So-and-so." So this Verse was revealed"

Anas ibn Malik · Sahih al-Bukhari 4621

Qur'an 5:106

A man of Banu Sahm died abroad travelling with Tamim ad-Dari and 'Adi ibn Badda', who brought back his property but said a gold-engraved silver bowl was lost. The bowl was later found in Makkah, and two of the dead man's relatives swore it was his. The verse on witnesses to a bequest at the time of death was revealed.

"So, this verse was revealed in connection with this case: 'O you who believe! When death approached any of you ...'"

Ibn 'Abbas · Sahih al-Bukhari 2780

TWO

Its themes

- Fulfilling covenants
- The lawful and the sacred
- Completion of the religion
- Justice bound to piety
- Isa and the People of the Book
- Loyalty and allegiance

THREE

Key verses

Forbidden to you (for food) are: dead meat, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which hath been invoked the name of other than Allah; that which hath been killed by strangling, or by a violent blow, or by a headlong fall, or by being gored to death; that which hath been (partly) eaten by a wild animal; unless ye are able to slaughter it (in due form); that which is sacrificed on stone (altars); (forbidden) also is the division (of meat) by raffling with arrows: that is impiety. This day have those who reject faith given up all hope of your religion: yet fear them not but fear Me. This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion. But if any is forced by hunger, with no inclination to transgression, Allah is indeed Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.

Qur'an 5:3

'Today I have perfected your religion for you' was revealed on Arafah in the Farewell Pilgrimage; a Jewish man told Umar that had it come to them they would have made that day a festival, and Umar replied that it fell on two festivals already. Reflect that the din is complete — our task is faithful practice, not innovation.

O ye who believe! stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety: and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.

Qur'an 5:8

Be upholders of justice as witnesses for Allah, and never let hatred of a people drive you to injustice — 'be just, that is nearer to piety.' Reflect on how fairness toward an enemy is a sterner test of faith than fairness toward a friend.

O ye who believe! Violate not the sanctity of the symbols of Allah, nor of the sacred month, nor of the animals brought for sacrifice, nor the garlands that mark out such animals, nor the people resorting to the sacred house, seeking of the bounty and good pleasure of their Lord. But when ye are clear of the sacred precincts and of pilgrim garb, ye may hunt and let not the hatred of some people in (once) shutting you out of the Sacred Mosque lead you to transgression (and hostility on your part). Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancour: fear Allah: for Allah is strict in punishment.

Qur'an 5:2

Cooperate in righteousness and God-consciousness, and not in sin and aggression — a principle that governs every alliance, project, and friendship. Ask of any partnership: which of the two am I helping to build?

On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person – unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land – it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. Then although there came to them Our messengers with clear signs, yet, even after that, many of them continued to commit excesses in the land.

Qur'an 5:32

To take one innocent life is as if killing all humanity, and to save one is as if saving all — a decree given to Bani Israel and carried into our law. Let it fix the sanctity of every single human life in your conscience.

O ye who believe! Do your duty to Allah, seek the means of approach unto Him, and strive with might and main in his cause: that ye may prosper.

Qur'an 5:35

Fear Allah, seek the means of nearness (wasilah) to Him, and strive in His way — the path to Him is drawn nearer through obedience and righteous striving. Reflect on what concrete deed could be your wasilah today.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Surah al-Ma'idah is a Madani surah of 120 verses and, by the strong consensus of the tafsir tradition, among the very last major portions of the Qur'an to be revealed. It carries the verse that many scholars identify as the final legislative revelation — "Today I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and approved for you Islam as religion" (5:3) — reported to have come down on the Day of Arafah during the Farewell Pilgrimage. Coming at the end, the surah has the tone of a final settling of accounts: the law is now complete, the covenant is sealed, and the community is charged with fidelity to it.

Its keyword is the covenant. It opens with the command, "O you who believe, fulfill the contracts" (*awfu bil-'uqud*), and the theme of pledges made and pledges broken threads through the entire surah — God's covenant with the believers, His earlier covenants with the Children of Israel and with the Christians, and the terrible consequences visited upon those who broke them. Ibn 'Ashur reads the surah as a meditation on *'aqd* (binding commitment) in every register, from the ritual to the political to the eschatological.

The name comes from the story near the end, where the disciples of Jesus ask him to have a table spread (*ma'ida*) sent down from heaven, and God grants it as a sign and a test (5:112–115). The mood of al-Ma'idah is grave and consummating: it

perfects the law of food, purity, and pilgrimage; it commands unbending justice; it recounts the failures of previous covenant-communities as a warning; and it closes with the most sobering scene of all — Jesus himself, on the Day of Resurrection, disowning those who took him and his mother as gods.

How the surah unfolds

The surah opens by calling the believers to fulfill their contracts and then immediately legislates within the sphere of the sacred: which animals are lawful, the inviolability of the sacred months and the pilgrimage offerings, and the command not to let hatred of a people who once barred you from the Sacred Mosque provoke you into transgression (5:2). Here at the outset appears the surah's ethical signature — cooperate in righteousness and piety, not in sin and aggression.

It then details the forbidden foods — carrion, blood, swine, and what is slaughtered for other than God — and in the middle of this list, strikingly, comes the announcement of the religion's perfection (5:3). The placement is itself a lesson: the completion of the deen is declared in the very act of drawing the line between the lawful and the unlawful, for a large part of what it means to be God's servant is to eat, act, and worship within His limits. The surah proceeds to permit the food of the People of the Book and marriage to their chaste women (5:5), then legislates the purification for prayer — the washing of wudu and the earth-touching of tayammum when water is unavailable (5:6).

From ritual purity the surah turns to moral purity in the form of justice (5:8): "Let not the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just; that is nearer to piety." This is one of the summits of Qur'anic ethics — justice is commanded precisely toward those we are inclined to wrong. The surah then recalls God's covenant with the Children of Israel, the appointment of twelve chieftains, and their failure: the episode of the holy land, when they refused to enter and told Moses, "Go, you and your Lord, and fight" (5:24), earning forty years of wandering. The lesson of a covenant—people who shrank from their trust is laid bare.

Then comes the archetypal story of the two sons of Adam (5:27–31) — the first murder, born of envy over an accepted and a rejected sacrifice, and the words of the wronged brother who would not raise his hand in return. From this the Qur'an draws its universal principle: whoever kills a soul unjustly is as if he killed all mankind, and whoever saves a life is as if he saved all mankind (5:32). Immediately follow the penalties for waging war against God and spreading corruption in the land (5:33) and the punishment for theft (5:38), placing the sanctity of life and property under firm law.

The central section addresses the earlier scriptural communities as cautionary mirrors — those who distorted their scripture, rushed into sin, and refused to judge by what God revealed. The refrain "whoever does not judge by what God has revealed" recurs with rising severity (5:44, 45, 47). The surah warns the believers not to take as intimate protectors (awliya) those who mock their religion (5:51, 57), while affirming that the true allies of the believers are God, His Messenger, and the

faithful (5:55). It confronts a blasphemous taunt — the claim that "God's hand is chained" — and answers that His hands are outstretched in generosity (5:64).

The surah then turns to correct Christian doctrine with great directness: those who say God is the Messiah, son of Mary, have disbelieved, for the Messiah himself called people to worship God, his Lord and theirs (5:72); those who say God is one of three have disbelieved, for there is no god but the One (5:73); the Messiah was but a messenger, and he and his mother ate food — a plain reminder of their creaturely humanity (5:75). It calls the People of the Book not to exaggerate in their religion (5:77). Nearer the end, the surah issues the decisive prohibition of wine and gambling, of sacrificial altars and divining arrows, calling them the abomination of Satan's handiwork to be shunned (5:90–91), and legislates the expiation of broken oaths and the rules of hunting in the state of ihram.

The surah closes on its highest and most solemn note. God will gather the messengers and ask them what response they received (5:109), and then addresses Jesus directly, recalling His favors upon him. In the final scene, God asks Jesus whether he told people to take him and his mother as gods besides God, and Jesus answers with perfect servanthood: "I said not to them except what You commanded me — worship God, my Lord and your Lord" (5:116–117). The surah ends with the sovereignty of God over the heavens and the earth and all within them (5:120) — the covenant returned, at last, to its source.

The major themes, in depth

Covenant and fidelity. The surah is built on the idea that faith is a binding commitment which must be honored, and it holds up the previous scriptural communities as case studies in what happens when a covenant is broken. God took a solemn pledge from the Children of Israel and from those who called themselves Christians, and where they violated it — distorting the scripture, refusing to judge by it, rushing into forbidden things — the consequence was hardened hearts and estrangement (5:13–14). The believers are being told, in effect: you are now the covenant-community; do not repeat their story. Al-Sa'di draws the moral plainly — the surah teaches that God's favors carry obligations, and the greater the light one is given, the graver the betrayal of neglecting it.

The completion and sufficiency of the religion. In 5:3 the Qur'an announces that the deen is perfected and God's favor completed. Ibn Kathir records the report of the Jewish man who told 'Umar that had such a verse come to his people they would have taken its day as a festival, and 'Umar's reply that it descended on a day already doubly blessed — a Friday and the Day of Arafah. The theological weight of the verse is immense: the law needs no addition, and the believer's task is no longer to await new legislation but to embody what has been given. This is why so much of the surah is detailed ritual and social law — food, purity, oaths, penalties, pilgrimage — for a completed religion is one whose contours are fully drawn.

The sanctity of life and the demand for justice. Through the story of Adam's two sons and the universal principle drawn from it (5:32), the surah makes the taking of a single innocent life a

crime against all humanity, and the saving of one a rescue of all. This reverence for life is matched by an uncompromising standard of justice that must hold even toward one's enemies (5:8) and even against one's own interest. The recurring warning against those who "do not judge by what God revealed" ties justice directly to fidelity to revelation: to abandon God's law in judgment is itself a breach of covenant. Al-Qurtubi devotes long discussion to these verses precisely because they anchor the whole edifice of Islamic justice in submission to divine command rather than tribal or personal preference.

The true station of Jesus and the correction of theology. More than any other surah, al-Ma'idah engages Christian belief head-on, and it does so with a striking rhetorical strategy: it lets Jesus speak for himself. The Messiah of this surah performs God's signs by God's permission, eats food as mortals do, calls people only to worship God, and in the final scene recoils from the very idea that he was taken as a deity, entrusting the matter entirely to God's mercy and justice (5:118). The point, Ibn 'Ashur notes, is that the corrective is not the Muslims' claim against the Christians but the Messiah's own testimony against the distortion of his message. Tawhid is presented as the thing Jesus himself lived and preached.

Points of reflection

Al-Ma'idah asks the believer to become a keeper of covenants — a person whose word, whether given to God in worship or to fellow humans in dealings, is a bond that binds. It opens with "fulfill the contracts" and spends the rest of its length showing, through the ruins of earlier communities, what becomes of a

people who take their pledges lightly. The reader is invited to examine which covenants he is quietly neglecting: the covenant of prayer and purity, the covenant of honest dealing, the covenant to judge and act by what God has revealed rather than by convenience.

It also teaches that justice is the truest test of piety, and that it is easiest to be just to those we love and hardest — and therefore most meritorious — to be just to those we resent. "Let not the hatred of a people move you away from justice" (5:8) is a standard almost no human society meets, and the surah plants it in the heart of a completed religion. Finally, in its closing scene, al-Ma'idah calls us to the servanthood of Jesus himself — to want nothing more than to be a true 'abd who says only what his Lord commanded, and to remember that a religion perfected by God is honored not by adding to it but by living it whole.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Treat your word and your contracts as sacred trusts before Allah.
2. Refuse to let dislike of anyone bend your justice.
3. Audit your alliances: partner in birr and taqwa, never in sin and aggression.
4. Hold the life of every person as inviolable.

Where this reading draws from. Ibn Kathir, al-Sa'di, al-Qurtubi, al-Tabari. 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/.