

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Surah Al-Anfal

The Spoils of War · Madani · 75 ayat — reflections on
surah 8 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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Surah Al-Anfal

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الأنفال — Al-Anfal, “The Spoils of War”. Surah 8 of 114, revealed in Madinah, 75 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/8/.

ONE

The surah in brief

Reflection on the battle of Badr, teaching that victory comes from Allah, not numbers, and setting the manners of believers regarding the spoils, unity, obedience, and reliance on Him.

Al-Anfal was revealed around the Battle of Badr and reads as a divine commentary on that victory. It opens by resolving the dispute over the spoils (anfal), redirecting the community from the booty to Allah and His Messenger and to mending their bonds, then paints the portrait of true believers whose hearts tremble at His mention. It retells Badr as Allah's doing — the angels, the rain, the sleep of security, and the truth that 'you did not throw when you threw' — to strip away self-congratulation. It legislates steadfastness in battle, unity against discord, faithfulness to treaties, and preparation of strength, all while insisting that victory descends from Allah, not from numbers.

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 8

Asked about Surat al-Anfal, Ibn 'Abbas said it was revealed in connection with the Battle of Badr.

"It was revealed in connection with the Battle of Badr"

Ibn 'Abbas (asked by Sa'id ibn Jubair) · Sahih al-Bukhari 4645

Qur'an 8:33

Abu Jahl said, "O Allah! If this is the truth from You, rain stones down on us from the sky or bring a painful torment." Allah revealed that He would not punish them while the Prophet was among them.

"then rain down on us a shower of stones from the sky or bring on us a painful torment." So Allah revealed"

Anas ibn Malik · Sahih al-Bukhari 4648

Qur'an 8:66

When 8:65 obliged twenty steadfast Muslims to stand against two hundred, the Muslims found it hard. Allah lightened the ratio by revealing 8:66.

"it became hard on the Muslims when it became compulsory that one Muslim ought not to flee (in war) before ten (non-Muslims). So (Allah) lightened the order by revealing"

Ibn 'Abbas · Sahih al-Bukhari 4653

TWO

Its themes

- Victory belongs to Allah
- The marks of true faith
- Unity and obedience
- Steadfastness in trial
- Loyalty and treaties
- Spoils and priorities

THREE

Key verses

For, Believers are those who, when Allah is mentioned, feel a tremor in their hearts, and when they hear His signs rehearsed, find their faith strengthened, and put (all) their trust in their Lord;

Qur'an 8:2

True believers are those whose hearts tremble when Allah is mentioned, whose faith increases when His verses are recited, and who rely on their Lord. Take the verse as a mirror: does hearing His name still move your heart?

It is not ye who slew them; it was Allah: when thou threwest (a handful of dust), it was not thy act, but Allah's: in order that He might test the Believers by a gracious trial from Himself: for Allah is He Who heareth and knoweth (all things).

Qur'an 8:17

'You did not throw when you threw, but Allah threw' — even the Prophet's handful of dust at Badr is credited to Allah, to kill the disease of self-reliance after success. When something goes right through your hand, reflect on Whose hand truly acted.

O ye who believe! give your response to Allah and His Messenger, when He calleth you to that which will give you life; and know that Allah cometh in between a man and his heart, and that it is He to Whom ye shall (all) be gathered.

Qur'an 8:24

Respond to Allah and the Messenger when they call you to what gives you life, and know that Allah comes between a person and his heart. Reflect that revelation is life itself, and that delay in responding risks the heart being turned before you act.

And obey Allah and His Messenger; and fall into no disputes, lest ye lose heart and your power depart; and be patient and persevering: For Allah is with those who patiently persevere:

Qur'an 8:46

Obey Allah and His Messenger, do not dispute among yourselves lest you lose heart and your strength depart, and be patient. Read internal discord as a direct drain on a community's morale and power.

Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies, of Allah and your enemies, and others besides, whom ye may not know, but whom Allah doth know. Whatever ye shall spend in the cause of Allah, shall be repaid unto you, and ye shall not be treated unjustly.

Qur'an 8:60

Prepare against them whatever strength you can — the command to ready means, while never forgetting that outcomes rest with Allah. Balance diligent preparation with reliance, refusing both negligence and self-sufficiency.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Anfal is a Madinan surah of 75 verses revealed in the second year after the Hijrah, in the immediate aftermath of Badr — the first pitched battle between the young Muslim community and the Quraysh, and the day the Qur'an itself calls the Day of the Criterion, yawm al-furqan (8:41), because it drew a line between truth and falsehood that could no longer be blurred. The surah takes its name from its opening word, al-anfal, the spoils or bounties of war, since the first thing it addresses is a dispute among the victors over how the captured wealth should be divided.

But the surah is far more than a ruling on spoils. It is a divine reading of Badr — a debrief in which God takes the community back through the battle and shows them what really happened beneath the visible events. Its whole thrust is to lift the believers' eyes from swords and numbers to the hand of God that moved behind them, and to correct the attitudes that a first victory can breed: greed over gains, pride in one's own effort, and the illusion that success comes from strength.

Its character is intimate and instructive, alternating between narrative recollection of the battle, direct correction of the believers' conduct, the exposure of the enemy's plotting, and legislation for war, treaties, and the bonds of the community.

Throughout, the tone is that of a teacher walking students through an exam they have just sat, marking both what they did well and where they erred.

How the surah unfolds

It opens on the very dispute that gives it its name: they ask about the spoils. The answer redirects them before it informs them — the spoils belong to God and the Messenger, so be conscious of God, set right the relations between you, and obey (8:1). The lesson lands before the ruling: the danger after victory is not the enemy but the fracture that greed can open among brothers. Immediately the surah defines who the true believers are — those whose hearts tremble when God is mentioned, whose faith increases when His verses are recited, who rely on their Lord, establish prayer, and spend (8:2–4). 'Those are the believers in truth,' with ranks and forgiveness and honourable provision.

The surah then walks the community back into the battle itself (8:5–19). God brought the Prophet ﷺ out from his house in truth though a group of the believers disliked it; they had hoped for the unarmed caravan, but God willed the harder, better thing — a confrontation with the armed host, so that the truth would be established and falsehood cut off. It recalls the cry for help and its answer: the angels sent as reinforcement and glad tidings, the sleep that fell over the believers as a security (nu'as), the rain that purified them and firmed their footing, and the command to the angels to strengthen the hearts of the faithful (8:9–12). Then comes the verse that is the theological

centre of the whole surah: 'You did not kill them, but God killed them; and you did not throw when you threw, but God threw' (8:17) — every human act at Badr is returned to its true author.

The surah turns next to obedience and inner vigilance (8:20–29). Obey God and His Messenger and do not turn away while you hear; do not be like those who say 'we hear' but do not truly listen. Respond to God and the Messenger when they call you to what gives you life. Fear a trial (fitnah) that will not strike only the wrongdoers among you (8:25). Do not betray God, the Messenger, and your trusts. Your wealth and children are a test. And be conscious of God, for He will grant you a furqan — a faculty of discernment between right and wrong (8:29).

Then it exposes the enemy's designs (8:30–40): how the Quraysh had plotted to imprison, kill, or expel the Prophet ﷺ, and how God is the best of planners; their boast that they could produce the like of the Qur'an; their reckless prayer for punishment to fall if the message were true; and God's mercy in not destroying them while the Prophet ﷺ remained among them and while some still sought forgiveness (8:33). It condemns their barring of the believers from the Sacred Mosque though they were not its rightful guardians, and reduces their worship there to whistling and clapping. It warns that the wealth they spend to turn people from God's path will become a source of regret, and states the aim of the struggle: that there be no persecution and that religion be wholly for God (8:39).

The middle of the surah legislates for the battlefield (8:41–48). The one-fifth (khums) of spoils is assigned to God and the Messenger, near kin, orphans, the needy, and the wayfarer. God is recalled as the One who made the two hosts appear few in each other's eyes so that the encounter He had decreed would take place. Then the code of steadfastness: when you meet a force, stand firm and remember God abundantly; obey God and His Messenger and do not dispute with one another, lest you lose heart and your strength (rih, literally your 'wind') desert you; be patient (8:45–46). Do not be like the Quraysh who marched out in arrogance and to be seen by people, whose deeds Shaytan had adorned before he abandoned them at the sight of the two armies (8:47–48).

The final movement (8:49–75) treats the hypocrites who mocked the believers' trust in God, the fate of those who reject as it was the fate of Pharaoh's people, and the profound principle that God does not withdraw a favour He has conferred on a people until they change what is in themselves (8:53). It addresses covenants: the worst of creatures are those who break their treaties again and again; deal firmly with treachery so as to deter, but if the enemy inclines to peace, incline to it and trust in God (8:61). It marvels at the bond God placed between the believers' hearts — a unity that all the wealth on earth could not have bought (8:63). Then it encourages them to steadfastness in the face of superior numbers, first at ten-to-one and then, with a lightening of the burden, at two-to-one (8:65–66); it addresses the matter of the captives taken at Badr (8:67–71); and it closes by defining the community itself — the Emigrants and the Helpers who supported one another are

allies (awliya') of one another, while those who believed but did not emigrate have no such alliance until they do, and ties of kinship have their own claim in the Book of God (8:72–75).

The major themes, in depth

The dominant theme is that victory comes from God, not from means. Badr was won by a small, ill-equipped band against a larger, better-armed force, and the surah refuses to let the believers draw the flattering conclusion that they won it. The sleep, the rain, the angels, and above all the verse 'you did not throw when you threw' (8:17) dismantle any pride of achievement. This is not fatalism — the believers still marched, still fought, still threw — but a correction of attribution. They are the hand; God is the strength moving through it. The surah wants a community that strives with everything it has and then ascribes the outcome to God, immune both to despair when weak and to arrogance when strong.

Closely bound to this is the theme of obedience, unity, and the ban on internal dispute as the true conditions of divine aid. The surah opens on a quarrel over spoils and answers it by commanding reconciliation before distribution (8:1); it later warns that disputing among yourselves will make you lose heart and cause your very strength to depart (8:46). The unity of the believers' hearts is named as a gift from God that no wealth could purchase (8:63), and the principle of 8:53 — that God does not change a favour until a people change themselves — makes the community responsible for preserving the inner

state that drew His help in the first place. Cohesion, obedience, and gratitude are not soft virtues here; they are the operating conditions of survival.

A third theme is the ethics and law of war. The surah is remarkably restrained for a text revealed in the flush of victory. It fixes the just distribution of spoils through the khums so that gain does not corrupt the fighters; it forbids treachery and the breaking of covenants, ranking oath-breakers among the worst of creatures (8:55–58); it commands that if the enemy inclines to peace the believers must incline to it and place their trust in God (8:61); and in the delicate matter of the Badr captives (8:67–68) it registers a divine correction, indicating that the community had reached for ransom before the ground was firm. War in al-Anfal is a grim necessity bounded by justice, faithfulness to agreements, and openness to peace — never a licence for plunder or cruelty.

A fourth theme is the constitution of the believing community through walaayah — mutual loyalty and alliance. The surah closes by making faith, migration, and mutual support, rather than blood, the basis of the Muslims' primary bond (8:72). The Emigrants and Helpers are declared protectors of one another; those who believed but stayed back have a share in brotherhood but not yet in this alliance of active support. In a society organised around tribe and lineage, this was a reordering of the deepest loyalties: the community is bound first by shared faith and sacrifice, and only then does kinship take its recognised place. The surah thus turns a battle report into the charter of a new kind of people.

Points of reflection

Al-Anfal teaches the believer how to hold success. Its central discipline — strive to the utmost, then hand the result back to God — guards the heart against the two diseases that follow every victory: the pride that says 'my strength did this' and the greed that turns comrades into rivals over the spoils. Whenever we achieve something, the surah quietly asks us to say with it, 'You did not throw when you threw,' and to keep our hands open and our ranks whole.

It also warns that a community's greatest threat is internal. The verses on dispute (8:46) and on the change of an inner state (8:53) place the responsibility for the loss of God's favour squarely on the people themselves. Nations are not undone from outside before they are undone from within; the surah calls the believer to guard unity, obedience, and gratitude as the real armour, and to treat every quarrel among brothers as a leak in that armour.

Finally, al-Anfal reflects on the character of the true believer given at its very start (8:2–4): the trembling heart, the faith that grows with every verse, reliance on God, prayer, and generous spending. These are offered before any mention of fighting, as if to say that the inner life of faith is what makes a person fit to be helped. The surah's warfare, treaties, and spoils all rest on that foundation. To live by al-Anfal is to be someone whose heart moves at God's name, who acts fully and trusts completely, who keeps faith with covenants and comrades alike, and who never forgets, in the moment of triumph, Whose hand it was that threw.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. After any success, redirect the credit to Allah before you claim it.
2. Test your faith by whether His remembrance still stirs your heart.
3. Treat internal disputes as a loss of collective strength, and guard unity.
4. Prepare your means fully, then rest the result with Allah.

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/.