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Surah At-Tawbah

The Repentance · Madani · 129 ayat — reflections on
surah 9 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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التوبة — At-Tawbah, "The Repentance". Surah 9 of 114, revealed in Madinah, 129 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/9/.

ONE

The surah in brief

A decisive declaration disavowing treaty-breaking idolaters and exposing the hypocrites, calling believers to sincere striving and repentance, and distinguishing true faith from false excuses.

At-Tawbah, uniquely opening without the basmala, is a late Madani surah of severe clarity that draws a line after years of broken pacts by the Meccan idolaters. It announces a disavowal (bara'ah) of treaty-violators while honoring pacts kept, and it exposes the hypocrites of Medina who evaded the hard march to Tabuk with excuses and wealth. Yet its severity is braided with mercy: it details the qualities of sincere believers who trade their lives for Paradise, and it tells of the three who were left behind until the earth closed in on them and Allah turned to them in forgiveness. It closes on the Messenger's tender concern for his people — grieved by their hardship, eager for their good.

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 9:58

While the Prophet was distributing wealth, 'Abdullah ibn Dhil-Khuwaisira at-Tamimi told him to be just. The verse about those who find fault with him over the distribution of alms was revealed about this man.

"The following Verses were revealed in connection with that very person (i.e., 'Abdullah bin Dhil-Khawaisira at-Tarnimi)"

Abu Sa'id al-Khudri · Sahih al-Bukhari 6933

Qur'an 9:79

When ordered to give alms, the companions worked as porters to earn something to give. Abu 'Aqil brought half a sa' and another man brought more; the hypocrites mocked both, and Allah revealed the verse about those who criticise such believers.

"So the hypocrites said, 'Allah is not in need of the alms of this (i.e. Abu 'Aqil); and this other person did not give alms but for showing off.' Then Allah revealed"

Abu Mas'ud al-Ansari · Sahih al-Bukhari 4668

Qur'an 9:84

When 'Abdullah ibn Ubai ibn Salul died, the Prophet went to offer his funeral prayer despite 'Umar's objection, saying he had been given the choice by 9:80. Shortly after he prayed, the two verses of Surat Bara'a forbidding prayer over any of them were revealed.

"Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) offered his funeral prayer and returned and after a short while the two verses of Surat Bara' were revealed"

'Umar ibn al-Khattab · Sahih al-Bukhari 1366

Qur'an 9:95-96

Ka'b stayed behind from Tabuk and told the Prophet the truth. He said he would have been ruined like those who lied, about whom the verse "They will swear by Allah to you when you return to them" was revealed.

"would have been ruined like those who had told a lie when the Divine Inspiration was revealed"

Ka'b ibn Malik · Sahih al-Bukhari 4673

Qur'an 9:113

As Abu Talib was dying, the Prophet urged him to say there is no god but Allah, but Abu Jahl and 'Abdullah ibn Abi Umayya persuaded him to stay on the religion of 'Abdul-Muttalib. The Prophet said he would keep asking forgiveness for him unless forbidden, and the verse was revealed.

"So Allah revealed (the verse) concerning him"

Al-Musayyab ibn Hazn (father of Sa'id) · Sahih al-Bukhari 1360

Qur'an 9:117-119

Ka'b was one of three who stayed behind from Tabuk without excuse and told the Prophet the truth instead of lying. After their long ostracism, Allah revealed that He had forgiven the Prophet, the Muhajirin, and the three.

"And Allah revealed to His Apostle: 'Verily! Allah has forgiven the Prophet, the Muhajirin'"

Ka'b ibn Malik · Sahih al-Bukhari 4678

TWO

Its themes

- Disavowal and honoring pacts
- Exposing hypocrisy
- Sincere striving and sacrifice
- Repentance accepted
- The Messenger's mercy
- Reliance on Allah

THREE

Key verses

If ye help not (your leader), (it is no matter): for Allah did indeed help him, when the Unbelievers drove him out: he had no more than one companion; they two were in the cave, and he said to his companion, "Have no fear, for Allah is with us": then Allah sent down His peace upon him, and strengthened him with forces which ye saw not, and humbled to the depths the word of the Unbelievers. But the word of Allah is exalted to the heights: for Allah is Exalted in might, Wise.

Qur'an 9:40

In the cave the Prophet tells his anxious companion, 'Do not grieve; indeed Allah is with us,' and Allah sends down tranquility upon him. When cornered and outnumbered, let this be the sentence you return to.

Allah hath purchased of the believers their persons and their goods; for theirs (in return) is the garden (of Paradise): they fight in His cause, and slay and are slain: a promise binding on Him in truth, through the Law, the Gospel, and the Qur'an: and who is more faithful to his covenant than Allah? then rejoice in the bargain which ye have concluded: that is the achievement supreme.

Qur'an 9:111

Allah has purchased from the believers their lives and wealth in exchange for Paradise — a transaction He calls a binding promise in the Torah, Gospel, and Qur'an. Reflect that the deal is already struck; the only question is delivery.

And say: "Work (righteousness): Soon will Allah observe your work, and His Messenger, and the Believers: Soon will ye be brought back to the knower of what is hidden and what is open: then will He show you the truth of all that ye did."

Qur'an 9:105

'Work, for Allah will see your work, and His Messenger, and the believers' — deeds are on display before the truest audience. Let this replace the craving for human applause with awareness of the Seeing witness.

O ye who believe! Fear Allah and be with those who are true (in word and deed).

Qur'an 9:119

'O you who believe, fear Allah and be with the truthful' — sincerity is nourished by the company you keep. Reflect on whether your closest companions pull you toward truthfulness or away from it, recalling how the three who were honest about their failure were saved.

Now hath come unto you a Messenger from amongst yourselves: it grieves him that ye should perish: ardently anxious is he over you: to the Believers is he most kind and merciful.

Qur'an 9:128

The Messenger is described as grieved by your suffering, deeply concerned for you, and toward the believers kind and merciful. Reflect on the Prophet's compassion and let it deepen both your love for him and your gentleness toward others.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

At-Tawbah is a Madinan surah of 129 verses and among the very last portions of the Qur'an to be revealed, in the ninth year after the Hijrah, when the balance in Arabia had decisively tilted toward Islam. It carries two well-known names: Bara'ah (Immunity, or Dissociation), from its opening declaration of withdrawal from the treaties with the idolaters who had broken faith; and At-Tawbah (The Repentance), from the acceptance of repentance that runs through it, most tenderly in the case of the three who stayed behind from Tabuk. Ibn 'Abbas is reported to have called it al-Fadihah, 'the Exposer,' because it kept uncovering the hypocrites, verse after verse.

It is the one surah without the Basmalah at its head. The scholars offer two main explanations. The first, reported from 'Ali, is that the Basmalah carries safety and mercy, and Bara'ah descended as a proclamation of war and dissociation from covenant-breakers, so the two did not sit together. The second, from 'Uthman, is that the Companions were unsure whether Bara'ah was a separate surah or a continuation of al-Anfal, and since both concern warfare and treaties, they were placed side by side without the separating Basmalah. Either way, the missing formula sets the surah's stern tone from the first line.

The historical setting is twofold: the great proclamation of dissociation from the idolaters, announced at the Hajj of the ninth year, and the expedition to Tabuk against the Byzantine

frontier, undertaken in severe heat and hardship, which became the sieve that separated the sincere from the hypocritical. The surah's character is decisive, searching, and grave — it closes the account with idolatry in the Peninsula, reorders the community's loyalties around faith, and lays bare the anatomy of hypocrisy more fully than anywhere else in the Qur'an. Yet for all its severity it is named for repentance, and it ends not on the sword but on the mercy of the Messenger ﷺ and the sufficiency of God.

How the surah unfolds

It begins with the proclamation of immunity: a dissociation from God and His Messenger toward the idolaters with whom the Muslims had a treaty that the idolaters had violated (9:1–2). Four months of safe passage are granted, after which those who persist in war and treachery are to be fought — the verse often called the verse of the sword (9:5) — yet even here the door stays ajar: if one of them seeks protection to hear the word of God, grant it and then convey him to safety (9:6). Treaties with those who kept faith are to be honoured in full to their term (9:4). The passage then bars the idolaters from tending the sacred mosques of God while they bear witness against themselves with disbelief, and ranks the one who believes, migrates, and strives far above the one who merely offers water to pilgrims and tends the Haram (9:17–22). It culminates in two landmark rulings: the idolaters, being impure in creed, are not to approach the Sacred Mosque after that year (9:28), and the People of the Book who reject the truth are to be fought until they pay the jizyah in acknowledgement of the new order (9:29).

The surah then corrects the doctrinal errors of the People of the Book (9:30–37): the false ascription of sonship to God, the taking of rabbis and monks as lords beside Him, and the futile attempt to extinguish God's light. It condemns the hoarding of gold and silver away from God's cause with a vivid warning of its punishment, and it restores the true reckoning of the sacred months — twelve months, of which four are sacred — condemning the practice of *nasi'*, the tampering with the calendar by which the idolaters had shifted the sacred months to suit themselves (9:36–37).

The long central movement is Tabuk and the exposure of the reluctant (9:38–99). It opens with a rebuke: what is the matter with you that, when called to march in the way of God, you cling heavily to the earth (9:38)? It recalls how God had already helped His Messenger when he was the second of two in the cave, telling his companion, 'Do not grieve; God is with us' (9:40). It commands them to march, light and heavy, and it strips away the hypocrites' excuses one by one — their false oaths, their eagerness to have stayed home, the one who begged to be excused 'and not tempted' while he was already sunk in temptation (9:49), their grief when good befell the believers and their glee at misfortune, their fault-finding over the distribution of charity. In the midst of this the surah lays down the eight categories of those entitled to zakat (9:60). It reports their mockery of the Prophet ﷺ and the ruling that mocking God, His verses, and His Messenger is disbelief after faith (9:65–66); it likens them to the hypocrites of earlier nations; it contrasts them with the true believing men and women who are allies of one another, enjoining right and forbidding wrong (9:71); and it

orders the demolition of the 'mosque of harm' (masjid al-dirar) built not for worship but to divide the believers and shelter their enemies (9:107–110).

As the surah moves toward its close it turns to the truthful and the repentant (9:100–118). It honours the foremost of the Emigrants and Helpers and those who followed them in excellence, with God well pleased with them and they with Him (9:100). It describes those who mixed a righteous deed with a bad one and confessed their sin, whose repentance God accepts (9:102). It gives the great verse of the sale: God has purchased from the believers their lives and their wealth in exchange for the Garden — a covenant recorded in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Qur'an (9:111). And it recounts, with striking tenderness, the three who were left behind — Ka'b ibn Malik and his two companions, who did not fight and did not lie about it, until the earth for all its vastness closed in upon them and they found no refuge from God except in Him; then God turned to them so that they might turn back to Him (9:117–118).

The closing verses gather the surah's aims (9:119–129): be conscious of God and be with the truthful (9:119); not everyone need march to battle — a party should remain to gain deep understanding of the religion and warn their people when they return, so that knowledge is preserved alongside striving (9:122); and every time a surah is sent down it increases the believers in faith while it only adds filth to the diseased of heart, exposing them (9:124–125). The surah ends on two of the most beloved verses in the Qur'an: a Messenger has come to you from among yourselves, to whom your suffering is grievous, who is deeply concerned for you, gentle and merciful to the

believers (9:128); and if they turn away, say, 'God is enough for me; there is no god but Him; upon Him I rely, and He is the Lord of the Mighty Throne' (9:129).

The major themes, in depth

The first theme is dissociation and the completion of tawhid's supremacy in Arabia — the meaning of Bara'ah. By the ninth year the compromises of the earlier phase, when Muslims and idolaters shared the Peninsula and its sacred sites under treaty, were being wound up. The surah announces a clean break with idolatry: covenants with those who had broken them are dissolved, the idolaters are barred from the Sacred Mosque, and the mixing of shirk with the worship of the House is ended. This is not a call to indiscriminate aggression — treaties faithfully kept are honoured to their term, safe conduct is guaranteed to any idolater who wishes to hear the Qur'an, and a grace period is granted. It is, rather, the closing of an era: the purification of Arabia's central sanctuary and the establishment of a community whose loyalties are no longer divided between the one God and the idols of the tribe.

The second and most sustained theme is the anatomy of hypocrisy (nifaq). No other surah dissects the hypocrite so thoroughly, which is why it was called the Exposer. It catches them in the act across a whole spectrum of behaviour: swearing false oaths to be believed, inventing excuses to avoid hardship, rejoicing in the believers' setbacks and grieving at their good, undermining morale, mocking the faith and its people, giving charity grudgingly and finding fault in its distribution, and finally building a rival mosque as a base for division. Against this dark

portrait the surah repeatedly sets the true believers — allies of one another who command good and forbid evil, who trade their lives for the Garden, who march in hardship and tell the truth even when the truth condemns them. The contrast is the point: the surah teaches the community to read the difference between the two, and to understand that hypocrisy is exposed not in words but under the weight of cost and command.

The third theme is striving in God's way as the test of sincerity, focused through the expedition to Tabuk. Tabuk was hard — a long march in blistering heat toward a formidable enemy, with the harvest ripe and the temptation to stay home strong. Precisely for that reason it functioned as a sieve. The surah's repeated call to 'march forth' is not merely a military order but a spiritual measure: who will move when moving is costly, and who will cling to the earth and manufacture reasons to remain? The verse of the sale (9:111) gives this its highest expression — the believer's very life and wealth have been bought by God, so holding them back from His path is a default on a contract already signed. Yet the surah balances the summons with wisdom: not all must march; some must stay to deepen their understanding of the religion and teach it (9:122), for a community needs both its strivers in the field and its bearers of knowledge at home.

The fourth theme, and the one that gives the surah its gentler name, is repentance and mercy. For all its sternness, tawbah runs like a bright thread through the surah. God turns to the Prophet ﷺ and to the Emigrants and Helpers in the hour of hardship (9:117); He accepts the repentance of those who confessed their mixed deeds (9:102); and He restores the three

who were left behind after the earth had narrowed around them (9:118), in a passage that shows repentance itself as a gift God grants so that the servant may return. The surah that opens by dissolving the covenants of the treacherous closes by describing a Messenger to whom the believers' pain is unbearable, and by teaching the heart to rest in the sufficiency of God alone. Severity and mercy are not in tension here; the same justice that exposes the false-hearted opens wide the door for the sincere who slipped.

Points of reflection

At-Tawbah presses one searching question on the reader: what does my faith do when it becomes costly? It is easy to profess belief when belief demands nothing; the surah shows that sincerity is proven only under the weight of sacrifice — the hard march, the withheld wealth, the unwelcome command. The hypocrite is not distinguished by a lack of words but by the excuses that surface the moment faith asks for something real. The believer is invited to examine his own excuses honestly and to ask which of the two responses, marching or clinging, is truly his.

The surah also reorders loyalty. Its command to 'be with the truthful' (9:119) and its portrait of believing men and women as allies of one another set faith and truthfulness above the older bonds of tribe and self-interest. The story of Ka'b ibn Malik dramatises this: he could have escaped censure with a plausible lie, but he chose the harder truth and was saved by it, while the smooth-tongued hypocrites who lied were left to

their oaths. The surah teaches that truthfulness, even against one's own comfort, is the mark of those God brings back to Himself.

Finally, At-Tawbah leaves the believer with the two things that steady a heart in a hostile world: the mercy of the Prophet ﷺ, who grieves at our suffering and longs for our good (9:128), and the sufficiency of God for the one who relies on Him (9:129). After a surah so full of warfare, exposure, and severity, the last word is not a sword but a place of rest — 'God is enough for me.' To live by At-Tawbah is to keep faith with one's covenants, to strive when striving is hard, to prize truth over self-protection, and, whenever people turn away, to return the heart to the God upon whom alone it can safely lean.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Keep your covenants scrupulously; break faith only where faith was first broken with you.
2. Watch for the excuse-making, wealth-clinging tendencies of hypocrisy in yourself.
3. When trapped, steady your heart with 'Allah is with us.'
4. Seek the company of the truthful — sincerity is caught as much as taught.

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/.