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Surah Al-Hujurat

The Rooms · Madani · 18 ayat — reflections on surah
49 of the Qur'an

QURAN

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الحجرات — Al-Hujurat, "The Rooms". Surah 49 of 114, revealed in Madinah, 18 ayat. The full text and a recitation are on the web edition at deen2u.com/quran/49/.

ONE

The surah in brief

A manual of manners and community ethics: honor the Prophet, verify news before acting, make peace between believers, and shun mockery, suspicion, backbiting, and slander. It teaches that true nobility lies in taqwa, and that real faith is more than a spoken claim.

Al-Hujurat is the Qur'an's charter of manners for a believing society. It begins with reverence toward the Prophet — not to speak over him or raise voices above his (49:2) — then turns to how believers treat one another. It requires verifying the report of a corrupt person before acting on it (49:6), reconciling and standing with the wronged party in disputes (49:9), and treating fellow believers as brothers. It forbids mockery, insulting nicknames, suspicion, spying, and backbiting (49:11–12), and it dissolves every tribal boast into one measure: the most honored is the most God-fearing (49:13).

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 49:1

A delegation of Banu Tamim came to the Prophet. Abu Bakr proposed al-Qa'qa' ibn Ma'bad as their leader and 'Umar proposed al-Aqra' ibn Habis, and they argued until their voices grew loud. The verse "O you who believe! Be not forward" was revealed.

"So both of them argued till their voices grew loud. So the following Verse was revealed"

'Abdullah ibn az-Zubair · Sahih al-Bukhari 4847

Qur'an 49:2

In the same dispute between Abu Bakr and 'Umar over who should lead Banu Tamim, their voices rose in front of the Prophet. Allah revealed "Raise not your voices above the voice of the Prophet," and afterwards 'Umar spoke so softly that the Prophet had to ask him to repeat himself.

"Their voices grew loud in that argument, so Allah revealed"

Ibn Abi Mulaika (from Ibn az-Zubair) · Sahih al-Bukhari 4845

Qur'an 49:9

The Prophet rode a donkey to 'Abdullah ibn Ubai, who was offended by its smell; an Ansari retorted, and their two groups fought with sticks, hands and shoes. Anas said they were told that the verse about making peace between two fighting groups of believers was revealed about this.

"We were informed that the following Divine Verse was revealed (in this concern)"

Anas ibn Malik · Sahih al-Bukhari 2691

TWO

Its themes

- Etiquette toward the Prophet
- Verifying news before acting
- Reconciliation and brotherhood
- Guarding the tongue
- Honor through piety, not lineage
- Iman vs. outward Islam

THREE

Key verses

O ye who believe! If a wicked person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest ye harm people unwittingly, and afterwards become full of repentance for what ye have done.

Qur'an 49:6

'If a corrupt person brings you news, verify it' was revealed, per al-Tabari, over a false report about the Banu al-Mustaliq; it makes checking before reacting a religious duty against injustice born of rumor.

The Believers are but a single Brotherhood: So make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers; and fear Allah, that ye may receive Mercy.

Qur'an 49:10

'The believers are but brothers, so reconcile between them' makes peacemaking a family obligation; al-Sa'di notes that faith itself is the bond, thicker than blood.

O ye who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin: And spy not on each other behind their backs. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Nay, ye would abhor it... But fear Allah: For Allah is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.

Qur'an 49:12

Backbiting is likened to eating a dead brother's flesh — a horror meant to make the tongue recoil. Ibn Kathir pairs it with the command to avoid much suspicion, the seedbed of slander.

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

Qur'an 49:13

'The most noble of you before Allah is the most righteous' levels every claim of race, tribe, or status; al-Qurtubi cites the Farewell Sermon as its living commentary.

FOUR

Reading it closely

Context & character

Al-Hujurat — “The Chambers,” after the private rooms of the Prophet’s household mentioned in verse 4 — is a short Madinan surah that functions as a manual of manners and morals for the believing community. In a handful of verses it legislates how believers should behave toward the Prophet ﷺ, how they should handle news and rumor, how they should treat and think of one another, and what actually makes one person nobler than another. It is, in effect, the ethical constitution of the Muslim society.

Several of its verses have well-attested occasions. Verse 6, the command to verify reports, is widely connected to the incident of al-Walid ibn ‘Uqba, sent to collect the alms of the Banu al-Mustaliq, who returned with a false report that they had turned hostile — nearly provoking an unjust expedition. The verses on lowering one’s voice and not calling out from behind the chambers relate to delegations and Bedouins whose rough manners with the Prophet ﷺ needed correcting. The surah gathers these occasions into timeless principles.

Its character is precise and corrective, but its aim is warmth: a community bound by verified truth, guarded tongues, clean assumptions, and a brotherhood so real that the whole surah can declare, in a single line, that the believers are but brothers (49:10). It ends by touching the root — the difference between merely professing Islam and having faith truly enter the heart.

How the surah unfolds

It opens with adab toward God and His Messenger: do not put yourselves forward before God and His Messenger, and be mindful of God (49:1); do not raise your voices above the Prophet's voice, nor speak loudly to him as you do to one another, lest your deeds be nullified without your even realizing it (49:2). Those who lower their voices in the Prophet's presence are the ones whose hearts God has tested for God-consciousness (49:3), while those who called out to him from behind his chambers mostly lacked sense; had they waited patiently until he came out, it would have been better for them (49:4-5).

The surah then legislates the ethics of information: if a corrupt person (fasiq) brings you news, verify it, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and then regret what you did (49:6). It reminds the believers that the Messenger of God is among them, and that were he to obey them in much of their opinion they would fall into hardship; rather God has made faith beloved to them and beautified it in their hearts, and made disbelief, defiance, and disobedience hateful — such are the rightly guided (49:7-8).

Next comes the charter of reconciliation and brotherhood. If two groups of believers fall into fighting, make peace between them; but if one transgresses against the other, then fight the aggressor until it returns to God's command, and then reconcile them with justice and fairness (49:9). The principle is then stated at its widest: the believers are but brothers, so make peace between your brothers, and be mindful of God, that you may receive mercy (49:10).

The surah moves to the sins of the tongue and the heart, forbidding a whole cluster of corrosive behaviors (49:11-12): let no people mock another, for the mocked may be better than the mockers; do not defame one another or trade insulting nicknames; avoid much suspicion, for some suspicion is sinful; do not spy on one another; and do not backbite — put vividly as the horror of eating the flesh of one's dead brother, which you would loathe. Then the surah lifts its gaze to all humanity in its most famous verse: O mankind, We created you from a single male and female and made you into peoples and tribes that you might know one another; the noblest of you in God's sight is the most God-fearing (49:13).

It closes at the root of religion. Some Bedouins claimed, "We have believed"; they are told to say rather, "We have submitted (aslamna)," for faith has not yet entered their hearts — though if they obey God and His Messenger sincerely He will not diminish their deeds (49:14). The true believers are those who believed in God and His Messenger and then did not doubt, but strove with their wealth and their lives in God's cause — they are the truthful ones (49:15). And they are told not to count their Islam as a favor done to the Prophet ﷺ; rather it is God who has favored them by guiding them to faith, if they are truthful (49:17).

The major themes, in depth

A first theme is adab — reverence in the presence of the Prophet ﷺ and, by extension, of the sacred (49:1-5). The surah warns that even loudness of voice before the Messenger of God could void one's deeds unnoticed, teaching that manners are

not decoration but a matter of the heart's posture before what is holy. The commentators note that the Companions took this so seriously that some barely spoke above a whisper afterward. Beyond the Prophet's lifetime, the tradition reads these verses as a lasting call to reverence toward his Sunnah and his teaching, and toward the etiquette of God's religion generally.

A second theme is the discipline of information (49:6). In an age no less than ours, the surah plants a rule that could prevent countless injustices: when the source is unreliable, verify before you act, or you may wrong innocent people and be left with regret. Al-Qurtubi and Ibn Kathir read the verse as a general principle of due diligence in accepting reports, especially those that would move a community to harmful action. It makes truth-checking a religious duty and treats the careless spreading of unverified claims as a road to sin and remorse.

A third theme is brotherhood and the ethics of the tongue and heart (49:10–12). The surah declares believers a single brotherhood and then protects that bond with a fence of prohibitions: no mockery, no defamation, no insulting labels, no unfounded suspicion, no spying, no backbiting. The image of backbiting as devouring a dead brother's flesh (49:12) is among the most powerful moral pictures in the Qur'an — it makes the sin viscerally repellent. Together these verses show that the community is held together not only by shared belief but by the daily refusal to demean one another in word, in secret inquiry, and even in thought.

A fourth theme is human equality and the meaning of faith (49:13–15). The great verse of the “peoples and tribes” abolishes every basis of pride but one: God-consciousness. Lineage, color, and nation are given for mutual recognition, not for ranking, and the only nobility God recognizes is taqwa. The surah then distinguishes islam — outward submission — from iman, the faith that has truly sunk into the heart and issues in unwavering conviction and sacrifice. It is a caution against complacency: to have entered the fold is a beginning, and God’s gift, not a favor we render Him; real faith is proven by steadfastness and striving.

Points of reflection

The surah calls us to guard both our tongues and our assumptions. It is not enough to avoid open slander; it forbids the mockery, the private suspicion, the quiet spying, and the backbiting that erode a community from within. It invites a daily vigilance over how we speak of others and how we think of them when they are absent.

Its rule of verification is a mercy for every age of rumor. Before we repeat or act on a report — especially one that would harm someone — the surah asks us to check its source and its truth. To pass on the unverified is to risk wronging the innocent and, as the verse warns, to end in regret.

And its charter of equality reorders how we measure worth. Nation, tribe, and color are for knowing one another, never for looking down; the only rank God honors is God-consciousness. The surah leaves us with a humbling final note: our very faith is

God's gift to us, not a favor we do Him — a reason for gratitude rather than pride, and for making sure that faith has truly entered the heart and not merely the tongue.

FIVE

Carrying it

1. Check the truth of what you hear before you act or repeat it.
2. Rush to reconcile disputes — brotherhood in faith is a trust to protect.
3. Treat backbiting and suspicion as grave, not as harmless talk.
4. Measure yourself and others by piety, never by lineage or standing.

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