

How Islam Is Correctly Learned & Revived Through the Salaf

Islam is not learned through personal opinion, cultural inheritance, emotional experiences, or newly invented methodologies. Rather, it is learned through revelation as it was understood, practiced, and transmitted by those whom Allah Himself chose to accompany His Messenger ﷺ and to carry this religion after him.

Allah commanded that all matters of religion be returned to revelation, saying: “If you disagree over anything, refer it back to Allah and the Messenger, if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day.” (4:59) The Companions of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ were the first recipients of this command. They learned Islam directly from him, implemented it with understanding, and conveyed it faithfully to those after them. Their students (the Tabi’in) then transmitted it in the same manner, followed by those who came after them upon goodness. These generations are known as the Salaf al-Salih.

Allah presents those early generations as the example to be followed: “And the first forerunners among the Muhājirīn and the Ansār and those who followed them with good conduct—Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with Him...” [9:100] and The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “The best people are my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them...” [Bukhari 2652, Muslim 2533] Imam Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله explained: that “Salaf refers to the earliest generations of this Ummah, and whoever follows their path in belief, worship, and character is upon their way. There is no blame upon one who identifies as Salafi, for the way of the Salaf is nothing but truth.” [Majmu’ al-Fatawa] Thus, Islam is learned and revived only by returning to the understanding of the Salaf—the continuation of the original path, and saved path without alteration.

Signs of Being Upon the Saved Path

The saved path is not known by numbers, claims, emotions, slogans or blind following but by clear characteristics established in the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and the understanding of the first generations. These signs appear in belief, worship, conduct, and methodology, and they distinguish the path of guidance from all other paths.

Pure Tawhid

Singling Allah alone in worship, without partners

Adherence to the Sunnah

Holding firmly to the Sunnah of the Messenger ﷺ

Upon the Understanding of the Companions

Practicing Islam as it was understood by them

Avoidance of Innovation

Staying away from innovation in beliefs and practices

Unity Upon Truth

Uniting upon evidence, not numbers or popularity

Sound Sources of Knowledge

Taking Islam from trustworthy scholars of Sunnah.

Upright Character and Sincerity

Combining firmness upon truth with good manners

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “Whoever turns away from my Sunnah is not from me.” (Bukhari 5063, Muslim 1401)

These are among the signs. Whoever finds himself upon them should thank Allah and remain firm; whoever finds deficiency should correct himself and return to the straight path, for guidance and salvation are found only in adherence to the Sunnah as practiced by the first generations.



SALAF

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The Saved Path

Why Islam Is Understood Through the Salaf

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The Meaning & Definition of “Salaf”

The word Salaf refers to the earliest generations of this Ummah—those who learned Islam directly from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and conveyed it with knowledge, sincerity, and precision.

Imām al-Sam‘ani رحمه الله said: “As-Salaf: refers to the first generation among the Companions of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, then the Tabi‘in, then the followers of the Tabi‘in. These are called the Salaf; anything after them is not called Salaf.” (al-Ansab, 3/273) and Imam al-Lalika‘i رحمه الله said: “What is meant by the Salaf is the people of the first generations, upon whom Allah’s pleasure descended, whom Allah praised in His Book, and whom His Messenger ﷺ described with virtue and excellence.” (Sharh Usul I‘tiqad Ahl al-Sunnah, no. 2)

The scholars of Ahl al-Sunnah held that the Salaf are the standard by which Islam is understood. Following them is not a new ideology, sect, or movement, but adherence to the original understanding of Islam as it was revealed and practiced. For this reason, Allah did not merely command obedience to revelation in general, but specifically warned against departing from the path of the early believers, saying: “And whoever opposes the Messenger after guidance has become clear to him and follows other than the way of the believers (Sahabah), We will turn him to what he has chosen and burn him in Hell—and evil it is as a destination.” (4:115). This principle was further clarified by the Messenger of Allah ﷺ himself, who explicitly commanded adherence to the Sunnah as it was carried and implemented by the first generation after him. He ﷺ said: “You must follow my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the rightly guided Caliphs after me. Hold firmly to it and bite onto it with your molar teeth.” (Abu Dawud 4607, al-Tirmidhi 2676)

Thus, the Salaf are defined by adherence to the Sunnah, and following them is following the Messenger ﷺ upon the path Allah obligated.

Where the Truth Remains & How It Is Preserved

The truth of Islam did not remain ambiguous after the death of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. Allah preserved it through those who received revelation directly, understood it correctly, and conveyed it faithfully. These were the Companions of the Messenger ﷺ, followed by their students and those who followed them upon goodness.

Allah said: “You are the best nation brought forth for mankind: you enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in Allah.” (3:110) The scholars of tafsir explained that this verse first and foremost applies to the Companions, and then to those who follow them in belief and action. Their excellence was tied to īmān, obedience, and adherence, not merely to time or lineage.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ also clarified that guidance would remain with those who uphold the original understanding of Islam when he said: “There will not cease to be a group from my Ummah manifest upon the truth, not harmed by those who forsake them or oppose them, until the command of Allah comes.” (Bukhari 3641, Muslim 1920). And he ﷺ also said: “Whoever turns away from my Sunnah is not from me.” Together, these two statements clarify that the aided and manifest group is defined by adherence to the Sunnah. Those who remain firm upon it are not harmed by opposition or abandonment, while those who turn away from it are excluded from this aided path. Thus, the manifest and aided group are those who uphold the Sunnah as it was practiced and preserved by the first generations.

Imām al-Awzā‘i رحمه الله said: “Be patient upon the Sunnah, and stop where the people stopped; say what they said, and refrain from what they refrained from.”

Thus, the truth is with the Salaf by Allah’s choice, the Messenger’s ﷺ testimony, and their adherence to the Sunnah, upon which the religion remains preserved.

The Hadith of the Saved Sect & The One Straight Path

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ informed this Ummah that division would occur, and that salvation would not be found in numbers or claims, but in adherence to a single, clear path.

He ﷺ said: “My Ummah will split into seventy-three groups. All of them will be in the Fire except one.” They said: “Who are they, O Messenger of Allah?” He said: “That which I and my Companions are upon.” (Tirmidhi 2641)

The Messenger ﷺ defined the saved as those who are upon what he and his Companions were upon—and the Companions are the Salaf. This establishes that the saved path is adherence to the Sunnah as it was understood, practiced, and preserved by the Salaf, beginning with the Companions and followed by those who came after them upon goodness. Salvation is therefore tied to following the Sunnah upon their understanding, not upon later interpretations or newly introduced paths.

Allah affirmed that this path is one and straight, and that deviation only occurs by departing from it. He said: “And this is My straight path, so follow it; and do not follow the other paths, for they will separate you from His path.” (6:153)

The Companions understood that the straight path is singular, while misguidance branches into many paths. For this reason, Imam al-Barbahari رحمه الله said: “Know that Islam is the Sunnah, and the Sunnah is Islam. One of them cannot be established without the other.” (Sharh al-Sunnah)

Thus, the saved are those who remain firmly upon the one straight path—the Sunnah of the Messenger ﷺ as it was understood and practiced by his Companions and those who followed them upon goodness. Every other path, regardless of how numerous or widespread, leads away from that guidance.