

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

What is Tafsīr?

Understanding what Tafsīr is forms the foundation of understanding the Qur'an. Without it, the meanings of the Qur'an may remain veiled, misunderstood, or even misapplied. Tafsīr is not merely commentary — it is the precise



and methodical explanation of the Qur'an as understood by the Prophet ﷺ and the righteous generations after him. It is the means by which the Ummah safeguards the meanings of the Book of Allah from distortion, innovation, and ignorance.

The Linguistic Meaning of Tafsīr

The term Tafsīr (تفسير) is derived from the Arabic root ف-س-ر (fassara – yufassiru – tafsīran), which means to explain, to clarify, to uncover, or to interpret in detail. It is a verbal noun that denotes the act of making something apparent after it was hidden.

Some scholars also trace it to the root س-ف-ر (asfara), meaning to uncover or unveil. The Arabs would say: Asfarat as-samā' — “The sky has uncovered,” referring to the sun appearing at dawn. Likewise, the word safar (journey) is used because it uncovers a person's character.

Ibn Manẓūr رحمه الله said in Lisān al-‘Arab: “Fassara means to explain and clarify, while asfara means to uncover and shine.”

Therefore, Tafsīr involves uncovering and explaining the intended meanings of the Speech of Allah ﷻ — the Qur'an — that He revealed to His final Messenger ﷺ.

Allah says:

﴿وَلَا يَأْتُونَكَ بِمَثَلٍ إِلَّا جِئْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ وَأَحْسَنَ تَفْسِيرًا﴾

“They do not come to you with an example except that We bring you the truth and the best explanation (tafsīr) thereof.”¹

Ibn Jarīr at-Ṭabarī رحمه الله said: “Tafsīr means clarifying the meaning that is intended by the words.”

Thus, linguistically, Tafsīr is the process of making something clear, and technically, it refers to explaining the meanings of the verses of the Qur'an as they were understood by the Salaf.

The Importance of Tafsīr in Islam

Tafsīr is essential because the Qur'an contains guidance, laws, and wisdom that cannot be acted upon correctly unless properly understood. Allah ﷻ did not reveal the Qur'an to be recited without understanding, but to be reflected upon, understood, and acted upon.

Allah commands us to reflect deeply:

﴿أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ﴾

“Do they not reflect upon the Qur'an?”²

And, ﴿كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ﴾

“A Blessed Book We have revealed to you, so that they may ponder over its verses...”³

¹ Surah al-Furqān 25:33

² Surah an-Nisā' 4:82

³ Surah Ṣād 38:29

Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله said: “The greatest obligation is to understand the meanings of the Qur’an and to act upon it.”

Without Tafsīr based on sound principles and the understanding of the early generations, a person may misinterpret verses according to personal whims or ignorance — leading to misguidance and deviation.

Tafsīr is the correct understanding and meaning which unveils what Allah intended in His āyāt — from rulings, to stories, to the unseen, and the precise meanings behind every word and structure.

The Qur’an Explains the Qur’an (Tafsīr al-Qur’ān bil-Qur’ān)

One of the most powerful and primary methods of Tafsīr is that the Qur’an explains itself. This is known as Tafsīr al-Qur’ān bil-Qur’ān — when one verse clarifies the meaning of another.

A clear example is found in Surah al-Fātiḥah:

﴿مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ﴾ — “Master of the Day of Recompense.”

What is the Day of Recompense? In Surah al-Infitar, Allah explains:

﴿وَمَا أَذْرَاكَ مَا يَوْمُ الدِّينِ . ثُمَّ مَا أَذْرَاكَ مَا يَوْمُ الدِّينِ . يَوْمَ لَا تَمْلِكُ نَفْسٌ لِّنَفْسٍ شَيْئًا وَالْأَمْرُ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِلَّهِ﴾ “And what will make you know what the Day of Recompense is? Again, what will make you know what the Day of Recompense is? It is the Day when no soul will be able to do anything for another, and the command on that Day is entirely with Allah.”⁴

Thus, Allah ﷻ Himself explains His own Words.

The Prophet ﷺ Explained the Qur’an (Tafsīr bi’s-Sunnah)

Another essential form of Tafsīr is Tafsīr bi’s-Sunnah — the explanation of the Qur’an by the Prophet ﷺ himself.

⁴ Surah al-Infitar 82:17–19

Allah says:

﴿وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ﴾

“And We sent down the Reminder to you, so that you may clarify to the people what was revealed to them.”⁵

An example of this is when the Companions heard the verse:

﴿الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ﴾

“Those who believe and do not mix their faith with zulm (oppression)...”⁶

The Sahabah became worried, saying: “Who among us does not mix his faith with some zulm?”

So the Prophet ﷺ explained: “That is not what is meant. Rather, zulm here means shirk. Have you not heard what Luqmān said to his son:

﴿يَا بُنَيَّ لَا تُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ﴾

‘O my son, do not associate partners with Allah — indeed shirk is a great injustice (zulm).’”⁷

This is a clear example of the Prophet ﷺ explaining what Allah intended, correcting any misunderstanding, and teaching the text with its meaning — the very essence of Tafsīr.

The Sahabah and Salaf Learned Tafsīr from the Prophet ﷺ

The Sahabah did not merely memorize the words of the Qur’an — they learned its meanings directly from the Prophet ﷺ. He ﷺ taught them both the text (words) and the Tafsīr (intended meaning).

Ibn Mas‘ūd رضي الله عنه said: “When we learned ten verses from the Prophet ﷺ, we would not proceed until we understood and acted upon them.”

⁵ Surah an-Naḥl 16:44

⁶ Surah al-An‘ām 6:82

⁷ Surah Luqmān 31:13

Ibn ‘Abbās رضي الله عنه — known as Tarjumān al-Qur’ān (the interpreter of the Qur’an) — was personally taught by the Prophet ﷺ, who made du‘ā:

“O Allah, give him understanding of the religion and teach him the interpretation (ta’wīl) of the Qur’an.”⁸

The Science of Tafsīr Is Built on Firm Foundations

Proper Tafsīr relies on:

- **Tafsīr al-Qur’an bil-Qur’an** – the Qur’an explaining itself
- **Tafsīr bi’s-Sunnah** – the explanation of the Prophet ﷺ
- **Tafsīr of the Sahabah** – especially from the knowledgeable like Ibn ‘Abbās, Ibn Mas‘ūd, and others
- **Arabic language** – deep understanding of classical usage and eloquence
- **Asbāb an-Nuzūl** – knowledge of the reasons and contexts of revelation
- **Usūl at-Tafsīr** – methodology and principles laid out by the scholars of Ahlus-Sunnah

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله said: “Whoever wants to interpret the Qur’an, let him seek help through the Sunnah and the statements of the Companions.”

Tafsīr Guards the Ummah from Misguidance

Many deviant beliefs arose from misinterpretations of the Qur’an due to ignorance, desires, or a lack of adherence to the understanding of the Salaf. Tafsīr protects the Qur’an from being misused by those who follow innovations and personal whims.

Imām Mālik رحمه الله said: “None should interpret the Qur’an except one who is firmly grounded in knowledge.”

⁸ Sahih Bukhārī

Recommended Works of Tafsīr upon the Manhaj of the Salaf

- Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr – rich with narrations from the Salaf, Qur’an-by-Qur’an explanations, and Sunnah-based interpretations
- Tafsīr as-Sa’dī – easy to understand, concise, and based on sound ‘Aqīdah
- Adwā’ al-Bayān by ash-Shanqītī – detailed in Qur’an-by-Qur’an Tafsīr with deep linguistic and legal insight

Tafsīr is a Lifelong Journey of Light and Guidance

Tafsīr is not simply a scholarly pursuit — it is the light that illuminates the path of the believer. Through it, we understand Allah’s commands, find strength in His promises, reflect on His warnings, and taste the sweetness of His Words.

Let us be among those who don’t merely recite the Qur’an, but reflect, understand, and live by its meanings — following the understanding of the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions.

