Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on July 12, 2013

The Qur’an in Ramadan

It is reported on the authority of Salman al-Farsi (RA) that the Messenger of Allah (SAW) addressed his companions on the last day of the month of Sha’ban, saying, “O People! A great month has reached you, a blessed month in which lay a night better than one thousand months. Allah has made the observance of fasting during the month as a compulsory duty, and the passing of its nights in prayer optional.” It is the month of Ramadan.

One of the greatest blessings of this month is that the Qur’an, which is guidance for mankind, was sent down in it. “The month of Ramadan is the month when the Qur’an was sent down as guidance to mankind” (al-Baqarah, 2:185). Allah has guaranteed all those who follow this guidance that they shall neither have fear, nor shall they grieve. “Then when guidance comes to you from Me, those who follow My guidance will feel no fear and will know no sorrow” (al-Baqarah, 2:38).

Indeed, the Qur’an is blessed. It was sent down on a blessed night—the ‘night of power’ (Laylat ul-Qadr) that is better than a thousand months. “Truly We sent it down on the night of power; and what will convey to you what the night of power is? The night of power is better than a thousand months” (al-Qadr, 97:1-3). Unfortunately, we tend to take the Qur’an very lightly. Do we really believe in it as we ought to believe in it? No! Had we truly believed in it, the Muslim ummah would not be in the state of fear, grief, and anxiety as it is today. This is because the actions, dealings, morals, and behavior of the multitude of Muslims are not quite in harmony with the teachings of the Qur’an. It is reported in one of the ahadith that once when the Prophet (SAW) said that there was going to be a fitnah (turmoil/trial/affliction), Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA) asked him the way out of it, and the Prophet (SAW)’s succinct replied, “Kitabullah” (The Book of Allah).

This is because the Qur’an, if approached sincerely and in earnest, transforms one from within. Rather than getting enslaved by their lustful desires, those who hold on to the Qur’an get purified by it. It purifies their thoughts, hearts, and deeds. One of the missions of the Prophet (SAW) was to purify his companions through the Qur’an. Indeed, he was the agent or the purifier in the process of purification. “It is He who has raised among the unlettered people a messenger from among themselves who recites His revelations to them, and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and wisdom, for they had formerly been clearly misguided” (al-Jumu’ah, 62:2).

If we are purified and changed from within, Allah (SWT) will change our condition for the better. This is the way of Allah (Sunnatullah). “Allah does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves” (al-Ra’id, 13:11). It is Allah (SWT) who is in control and who is in charge, and not the powers that be. He does as He wills. He can change our condition whenever He wills. However, for us to desire a positive change in our state of affairs is not enough. We have first to make ourselves deserving of it.
There can be no better time than the sacred month of Ramadan to take the initiative of getting connected with the Qur’an. Unless we do this, we would have missed the whole objective of Ramadan. Allah (SWT) does not want to punish us by asking us to abstain from food, drink, and spousal relations from dawn to dusk. Rather, the objective of fasting is to make us conscious of Him and grateful to Him for all His blessings that we so often take for granted. “O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of Allah.” (al-Baqarah, 2:183). We are taught through prophetic traditions to praise and thank Allah on numerous occasions. For example, after taking a meal, we are advised to say, “Praise and thanks belongs to Allah, who fed us and quenched our thirst and made us Muslims.”

The word Qur’an is a verbal noun (masdar) derived from the root letters qaaf-raa-hamza denoting ‘reading’ or ‘recitation’. Rather than being treated as a symbol of decoration, as is usually the case in many Muslim homes, the Qur’an is a Book that is meant to be read or recited. The Qur’an is known by many other names such as Al-Huda (The Guidance), Al-Kitab (the Book), Al-Nur (the Light), and so on. Allah chose ‘Al-Quran’ to be the formal name of the scripture revealed to Muhammad (SAW) just as He had earlier chosen the proper names of earlier scriptures as Al-Taurat, Al-Injil, and Al-Zabur.

Indeed, the Qur’an is to be read; but it should not be read merely for the sake of reading it. Undoubtedly, there is virtue and reward (thawab) in reading it. But reading without understanding it and without following its teachings may become an exercise in futility, because neglecting its guidance may wipe of all the reward that one may have earned while reading it. This is because the sins one commits by not abiding by the injunctions of the Qur’an may well outweigh the rewards earned through just reading it. Reading of the Qur’an must be preceded by seeking Allah’s refuge from the accursed Satan. “When you read the Qur’an, seek Allah’s protection from Satan, the rejected one” (al-Nahl, 16:98).

There are three different ways in which the Qur’an can be read or recited—through qira’a, through tartil, or through tilawah. Each of these three ways fulfills a particular function. The first way refers to simple reading. While this requires one to be able to read the Arabic script, it does not require knowledge of tajwid, which means giving every letter of the Qur’an its rights and dues of characteristics when reciting it and observing the rules that apply to those letters in different situations. Reading the Qur’an motivates one to learn the rules of tajwid, the basics of which can be learnt in a short while; perhaps an hour, but mastering the same calls for prolonged practice under supervision of a sheikh or scholar of tajwid.

A step higher is to read with tartil, which according to Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA) means that the Qur’an should be recited with tajwid and with due observance to the rules of waqf (pausing or stopping). Tartil is to recite the Qur’an in a slow, measured rhythmic tone. The Prophet (SAW) himself was asked by Allah to recite the Qur’an with tartil, “O you enwrapped one! stay up at night, except a little, half of it, or a little less, or a little more, and recite the Qur’an in a measured tone (tartil)” (al-Muzzammil, 73:4). Till the time of revelation of this particular surah, only a few ayat of the Qur’an of surahs al-Fatiha, al-‘Alaq, and al-Muddathir had been revealed. This implied that the Prophet (SAW) was being instructed to recite and repeat the recitation over and over again so that the Qur’an got hammered into his heart. Tartil also involves reflecting upon the divine words that are recited so that the Qur’an is internalized just as it had been internalized by the noble companions of Muhammad (SAW).

The third way of reciting the Qur’an is through tilawah. Tilawah means to recite the Qur’an with the intention to follow it so as to be guided by it. “Those whom We have given this Book follow it as it ought to be followed” (al-Baqarah, 2:121). Abdullah ibn Mas’ud (RA) is reported to have said that special attention should be paid to the ayat that begin with “O people” or “O you who believe.” In such cases, we should immediately lend our ears to God’s words, for He is addressing us. Those who read and follow the Qur’an this way perfurce call out, “We hear and obey” (al-Baqarah, 2:285).

One of the subjective conditions of reciting the Qur’an is one’s intention (niyyah). Is it only to earn reward? Is it only to perform an intellectual exercise by exploring the numerous subjects it addresses? Our main
intention should be to be guided by the Qur’an. Intention plays a very important part in how we approach the Qur’an. Ill intention could lead one astray, for Allah says, “He lets many go astray through it (the Qur’an), and guides many by it. But He makes only the disobedient go astray” (al-Baqarah, 2:26). Reciting the Qur’an is only one obligation among other obligations the Qur’an has on us. Reciting the Qur’an should be with the intention of understanding it. If we don’t understand the Qur’an, then we have missed the whole objective of the Qur’an. The Qur’an can be understood in two different ways: (1) tazakkur and (2) tadabbur. Both these modes of understanding are mentioned in the Qur’an.

Tazakkur in the Qur’an means to understand its meaning as provided on the surface, and this is not difficult. In this sense the Qur’an is an easy book to follow. Allah tells us four times in ayat 17, 22, 32, and 40 of Surat al-Qamar, “And We made the Qur’an easy to learn. Do any of you wish to learn?” (al-Qamar, 54). For this, a basic knowledge of Qur’anic Arabic is required, and this is easy to acquire with a little effort.

Tadabbur in the Qur’an is to dive deep into the Qur’an for the purpose of discovering the hidden treasure of knowledge and wisdom from the Qur’an. In this sense, it is the most difficult book because it is unfathomable. No one can claim to have found all the treasures of the Qur’an, even after devoting his whole life to its study. Tadabbur in the Qur’an makes it clear that the Qur’an cannot be the speech of anyone other than Allah. “Do they not ponder on the Quran? If it had been from anyone other than God, they would have found much inconsistency in it” (al-Nisa’, 4:82). Unlike the earlier scriptures, which are full of inconsistencies because of being manipulated through human intervention, the Qur’an is not only free of inconsistencies, but is preserved and safeguarded by Allah Himself. “Indeed We have sent down the Reminder, and indeed We will preserve it” (al-Hijr, 15:9).

Only a deep understanding of the Qur’an can make one appreciate its splendor and grandeur. Allah makes this known to us through a parable because the greatness of the Qur’an is beyond human comprehension. “Had We sent down this Qur’an on a mountain, you would certainly have seen it falling down and splitting asunder, because of the fear of God. We set forth these parables to men so that they may reflect” (al-Hashr, 59:21). Obviously, it is not the physical weight of any Qur’an that would crush a mountain. Rather, it is the weight of Allah’s speech contained in His Book that would conquer it. “We are going to deliver a weighty discourse upon you” (al-Muzzammil, 73:5). Imagine what this weighty discourse could do should we allow it to descend upon our hearts.

Isn’t it regrettable that when it comes to using our intellect in routine worldly matters, we do it with such promptness and seriousness, but when it comes to understanding the Qur’an, our brains seem to get shut off and our hearts seem to get locked. “Will they not, then, ponder over this Quran? Or are there locks upon their hearts?” (Muhammad, 47:24).

We need to open the Qur’an, read it, understand it, reflect upon it, and in sha Allah, we will be overwhelmed by it. This is what we need to do in this great month of Ramadan. The siyam in Ramadan is not merely a ritual but an act of worship and obedience (‘ibadah). Rather than wasting the precious moments of this blessed month, we should seek Allah through our ‘ibadat and righteous deeds. Allah does not need us. We need Him. The blessed month of Ramadan is our opportunity to seek Him.

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