
ON THE SINS WE NO LONGER NOTICE
THE SINS
WE STOPPED SEEING
SHEHZAD SHAIKH

The Sins We Stopped Seeing

Finding your way back to sincerity and consistency in a world that made sin feel normal

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The Sins We Stopped Seeing *Finding your way back to sincerity and consistency in a world that made sin feel normal*

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﴿ بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ ﴾

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Especially Merciful.

A note before we begin

Not long ago I was waiting in a shop with a radio playing, and I stepped out and sat outside rather than sit where it could be heard. From there I watched Muslims who had just come back from Umrah walk in and settle into it without a pause. Not one of them was rebelling. Not one of them believed he was doing anything at all. It simply did not register. I started going to that shop first thing in the morning instead, when they put on Sūrah Yāsīn.

I am not telling you this because I caught something they had missed. I am telling you because of what it sent me looking for in myself, and how much of it I found. Whatever had gone quiet in them that afternoon is quiet in me too. Only somewhere else, and I had needed to see it in someone else first.

That absence of registering is what this book is about.

Not the sins you lie awake over. Those are being handled; the discomfort is doing its work. This book is about the ones that have gone quiet. The ones so ordinary, so woven into the fabric of an ordinary week, that nothing in you moves any longer when you commit them.

So let me set down a few commitments, that you may know what you are holding.

This is not a work of scholarship. I am not a scholar, and nothing in these pages is a fatwa. I am a Muslim who noticed something uncomfortable about his own days.

What I can tell you is this. I have read every narration in this book — not as a scholar reads them, but the way you are about to. They did something to me. That is the whole of what I am claiming for them.

I have written this as one of you, and not at you. You will notice that I say "we" almost everywhere. That is neither a stylistic habit nor false modesty. Every chapter here is one I needed, and there are several I am still failing at. I have no vantage above you from which to speak. I have only walked a little further down the same road, and not for very long.

But I am not going to soften things. Warmth and vagueness are two different articles, and a book about sin that never quite says what the sin is would be a comfortable waste of your time. I will be gentle with you and exact about the thing itself. These are not in conflict.

I have stayed upon common ground. The Muslim community holds real differences of opinion, and this book is no place to litigate them. I have built upon what is broadly agreed across the schools — the fundamentals of worship, of character, and the clear texts. Where a matter is genuinely contested, I say so and send you to someone qualified, rather than quietly issuing a ruling I have no right whatever to issue.

Verify what is cited here. Every ayah and every hadith carries its source, so that you can check it. Please do. That is the correct posture toward anyone who quotes revelation at you, and I am included in that. Where a scholar's exact wording could not be confirmed, the passage is paraphrased and says so, rather than putting words into the mouth of a man who cannot correct me.

And this book will not leave you in despair. If you finish a chapter carrying only weight, then I have failed at the task. Allah says:

﴿ قُلْ يَـٰعِبَادِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا۟ مِن رَّحْمَةِ ٱللَّهِ ﴾

"Say: O My servants who have transgressed against themselves, do not despair of the mercy of Allah."

— Sūrah az-Zumar 39:53 ♦

That ayah governs everything that follows. Every sin named in this book has a door out of it, and I have tried never to show you the one without the other.

May Allah forgive what I have gotten wrong here, benefit you by whatever is right in it, and place it heavy in the scales rather than against them.

SHEHZAD SHAIKH

How to read this

Slowly, and not all at once. This is not a book to be finished. Thirteen short chapters, one sitting to each, is about right. Read it in a weekend and you will feel a great deal and change nothing — the very failure this book is about.

Three parts, and they build one upon another.

Part One is diagnosis. Why sin stops feeling like sin, what small sins do, and the fog that lets both run unnoticed. Do not skip it; the rest will not land without it.

Part Two walks through seven ordinary places where this happens — the tongue, the gaze, the performance, comparison, money, prayer, and people. Each asks the same question: what have we stopped noticing here?

Part Three is the way back: repentance, sincerity, consistency. If Part Two is where the book hurts, Part Three is what it was for. Do not set the book down before you reach it.

Every chapter ends the same way — one thing to sit with, and one small thing to do. The smallness is deliberate; it is the book's whole argument about how change happens, and chapter thirteen explains why.

On the Arabic. Qur'an and hadith appear in Arabic with translation and source — with the exception of four longer narrations, which are given in English with their reference. If you do not read Arabic, the English carries you — but let your eye rest on the Arabic regardless. That is the thing itself; the English is only a window onto it.

And one request. Somewhere in Part Two you will strike a chapter that stops feeling theoretical — the one where you recognise yourself and would rather move on. That is the chapter you were meant to read. Stay there.

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PART ONE — THE FOG

CHAPTER ONE

When Sin Stops Feeling Like Sin



There was a day — you may not remember it, but there was a day — when a small wrong troubled you.

Perhaps you were nine. Perhaps fourteen. You said a word that was not true, a light word, a word that cost nobody anything, and something inside you turned over and would not settle. You carried it to your bed that night and turned it over in the dark. How strange to remember that child now. How strange that we should need reminding he ever existed.

Where did he go?

For he did go. Not in a single night, and not by any decision of yours — no man sits down and resolves that his conscience should fall silent. It went the way a sound goes when you have heard it all day: still there, still sounding, and no longer heard.

And we should be honest about what happened next. When that quiet arrived, we did not mourn it. We congratulated ourselves. We said we had matured. We said we had stopped being severe with ourselves. We called it perspective, and we were pleased.

Perhaps it was perspective. But there is another possibility, and Allah names it in the Qur'an with a precision that is difficult to sit with.

﴿ كَلَّا ۖ بَلْ ۜ رَانَ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِم مَّا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴾

"No — rather, the stain has covered their hearts from what they used to earn."

— Sūrah al-Muṭaffifīn 83:14

Rān. A covering; a film. The lexicons reach for rust — the thin dark bloom that settles upon metal and eats it while it goes on shining. The whole of this book rests on that image.

Rust is not a blow. Nothing struck the metal, and nothing announced itself. It arrived one imperceptible layer at a time, out of the ordinary air, and by the time there is anything to see, the thing has been changing for years.

A lamp does not announce that it is dimming either. It burns, and burns, and one evening you find yourself leaning closer to the page, wondering when the print became so small. The glass darkened one film of smoke at a time, and the eye adjusted so gently that the dimming was never an event at all.

Now look at the last words of the ayah, and do not hurry past them: **from what they used to earn.**

Not from what was done to them. Not from the age they lived in, nor the company they kept, nor the market that sold to them. From what they *earned*. This was not a thing that befell those hearts while they slept. It was a thing they built, deposit upon deposit, without once intending to build it.

The mercy hiding inside the warning

Before we go further, look once more at the verb, for it is easy to hurry past on the way to the frightening part and it is the best news in the chapter.

Mā kānū yaksibūn — what they **used to** earn. Not what they earned. The construction is the one Arabic reaches for when it means a habit: a thing done, and done again, and gone on being done.

So the rān is the residue of a practice, not of a sin. And there is a distance between those two things: a space after every wrong a man commits, in which it has not yet become one of his habits. That space opens again after each one. It is where *astaghfirullāh* does its work, and it is always there.

The danger being described, then, was never the sinning. **It was the not stopping to notice.**

And if that is so, then consider what your discomfort is, you who are reading this and feeling something unpleasant settle in your chest. It is not the disease. It is the instrument, and the instrument is still working. The heart that can still feel a sin is a heart with feeling left in it. Hold that as we go, for the chapters ahead will press upon bruises, and I would not have you mistake the pressing for the wound.

Why these sins, and not others

Our own age is unusually efficient at this, and it is worth seeing why.

Most of us are not tempted by the great and obvious sins. We are not standing at the edge of some cliff, wrestling with ourselves in the dark. The sins quietly filling our days do not look like cliffs at all. They look like this:

A conversation about a friend who is not in the room. Ten seconds longer upon a photograph, and then the next one. A good deed shaped, in the telling, so that it will be seen. A dull ache when someone we know does well. A payment plan we did not read. Four rakʿah performed at speed while the mind finishes an email.

Is there one item in that list that carries the texture of transgression? Not one. Every one of them is smooth. Nobody in your life will raise an eyebrow at any of them; several will be admired. And they repeat — not once in a year, but many times in a single day.

Small deposits, at enormous frequency. That is the arithmetic that produces rān, and it is the same arithmetic that never once produces alarm.

Ibn al-Qayyim gave much of his life to this subject, and he put the whole of it into eight words:

> *Sins are wounds — and one wound may cause death.*
>
> — Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *al-Fawāʾid*, from the section "Lessons and Warnings" (Umm al-Qurā English edition, 2004). ♦

Hold that word: **wounds.** Not entries in a ledger — injuries to a living thing.

And you know what a wound does when it is left. It does not hurt more each day; after a while it hurts less, and the man carrying it begins to move about his business as though nothing were open in him. The absence of pain is not the healing. Very often it is the opposite — it is the nerve giving out before the flesh does.

So a heart that no longer aches at sin has not grown strong. It has grown **numb**. And we have spent years mistaking the second thing for the first, and thanking Allah for it.

*

The heart that can still feel a sin is a heart with feeling left in it.

The damage underneath

The damage is worth being exact about, because it is not what we assume.

We picture the cost of sin as a tally: deeds upon one side, misdeeds upon the other, a number adjusted somewhere out of sight. But the ayah does not describe a ledger. It describes **an organ losing its function.**

The work of the heart, in the Qur'an's telling, is *perception*. It is what recognises truth when truth appears before it. It is what leans toward the good and recoils from what is foul. It is, in the plainest sense, the instrument by which you know where you are standing.

So when it fogs, you do not merely accrue a debt. **You lose the ability to read your own position.** The instrument that would report the fault is the instrument the fault is eating, which makes it unlike every other kind of decline, and which is why it can run for twenty years without once raising an alarm. A dimmed heart cannot notice that it has dimmed.

That leaves a question this whole book exists to answer, and it is not a comfortable one:

If the instrument that detects the fault is the very thing the fault destroys — how would you ever find out?

There are three answers, and they are the shape of everything that follows.

You borrow a standard from outside yourself. The Qur'an and the Sunnah do not fog when you do. They say this year what they said last year, whatever your conscience has quietly renegotiated in between. That is most of Part Two: holding an ordinary Tuesday against a text that will not move.

You look for absence rather than presence. You will not catch the fog by staring at it. But you may notice that the Qur'an no longer moves you as once it did. That du'ā' has become recitation. That you cannot recall the last time you longed for Allah. Such absences can be read even when the sins cannot.

And you accept that recognition will be uncomfortable, and you do not run from it. A polished heart *hurts* when it touches sin. If Part Two hurts, that is the mechanism working — not the book being harsh with you.

Nothing here is beyond repair

One more time, for the next twelve chapters need you holding this and not something heavier.

Even the heart in that ayah, with the covering fully settled, is being described *to us* — and it is Allah who is describing it. He did not name the rust in order to frighten us. He named it because **a thing described is a thing that can be treated**, and a man who knows what is happening to him is no longer helpless in front of it.

The polish is always there — not eventually, and not after some qualifying season of suffering, but on the day you turn back, in the moment of turning. Chapter eleven is given over to how wide that door

stands, and you may find it wider than you have allowed yourself to believe.

But the polish has one prerequisite, and it is the only thing I am asking of you now.

You have to be able to see the rust.

That is all Part One is for: to give you back your eyes, rather than to make you feel worse. What you do with them afterwards is between you and Allah, and He is far more willing to meet you there than we have taught ourselves to expect.

*

SIT WITH THIS

Think of one thing you do regularly now that would have troubled the man you were five years ago. Do not judge it yet, and do not defend it. Only find it, and ask honestly: did I learn something in those five years that made it permissible — or did I simply stop feeling it?

THIS WEEK

When you catch yourself in something small, do not begin a whole project of repentance. Pause for three seconds, say *astaghfirullāh*, and mean it. Nothing more. You are not trying to mend anything yet. You are teaching the flinch to return.

CHAPTER TWO

The Minor Sins That Aren't Minor



There is a sentence we all speak, and it is doing far more work than we have ever asked it to account for.

"It's not a big deal."

Say it aloud and watch what it accomplishes. It does not deny that the thing was wrong; it concedes that freely, almost generously. And then, in the same breath, it takes the wrongness and files it somewhere it will never be looked at again. **It is a filing system, not a defence.** Most of us have one running quietly, hour after hour, sorting our days into what matters and what does not, by criteria we have never once taken out and examined.

So let us examine them. For the Companions held this same conversation, and they arrived somewhere very far from where you and I now stand.

What Anas noticed

Anas ibn Mālik lived long enough to see the generation that came after the Prophet ﷺ. And he said a thing to them that ought to stop anyone who believes he has a reasonable sense of proportion:

> إِنَّكُمْ لَتَعْمَلُونَ أَعْمَالاً هِيَ أَدَقُّ فِي أَعْيُنِكُمْ مِنَ الشَّعَرِ، إِنْ كُنَّا نَعُدُّهَا عَلَى عَهْدِ النَّبِيِّ صلى الله عليه وسلم الْمُوبِقَاتِ
>
> *"You do deeds that are finer in your eyes than a hair, which we used to count, in the time of the Prophet ﷺ, among the destroyers."*
>
> — Narrated from Anas ibn Mālik. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6492 (*Kitāb ar-Riqāq*). ♦

Read it once more, and then place yourself upon the timeline.

Anas is speaking to the generation that came immediately after the Companions — men and women who prayed, who fasted, who walked the streets of Madinah within living memory of revelation. Among the most religious human beings who have ever drawn breath. And what he observes is that their **weighing** had failed, not their practice. Their sense of what a thing weighs.

One generation. That was all it required for deeds counted among the *mūbiqāt* — the destroyers, the things that ruin a man — to be re-filed as finer than a hair.

Now count the generations that lie between Anas and your Tuesday.

This is not said to crush you. It is said because it disqualifies a move we make a dozen times a day: **the assumption that our instinct about what counts is reliable.** It never was. Calibration drifts, it drifts

quickly, and it drifts *without any felt sensation of drifting*, which is what the first chapter was about.

The two men and their sins

Ibn Masʿūd drew the contrast as sharply as it can be drawn:

> إِنَّ الْمُؤْمِنَ يَرَى ذُنُوبَهُ كَأَنَّهُ قَاعِدٌ تَحْتَ جَبَلٍ يَخَافُ أَنْ يَقَعَ عَلَيْهِ، وَإِنَّ الْفَاجِرَ يَرَى ذُنُوبَهُ كَذُبَابٍ مَرَّ عَلَى أَنْفِهِ
>
> *"The believer sees his sins as though he were sitting beneath a mountain, fearing it may fall upon him. And the corrupt one sees his sins as a fly that passed over his nose"* — and he waved his hand like this.
>
> — Narrated from ʿAbdullāh ibn Masʿūd. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6308 (*Kitāb ad-Daʿawāt*). ♦

Look at what he has placed before us, because it is easy to miss.

Both men have the same sins.

Ibn Masʿūd is not contrasting a righteous man with a wicked one, and he does not say the believer sins less. He describes two men who may have done the same things, and what divides them is **perception**. One sees a mountain above his head. The other sees an insect.

The gesture is the thing to fasten upon: the flick of the hand, casual and automatic. It is not defiance. The man is not shaking his fist at Heaven;

he is brushing away something not worth the interruption, returning to his day, and he will not think of it again.

That is no villain. **That is a Tuesday.** The flick is the bodily form of *"it's not a big deal,"* and I have performed it perhaps two hundred times this month.

*

Both men have the same sins. What separates them is entirely a matter of perception.

The deeds we deem insignificant

But surely, you may fairly object, small things are small. Is there not something overwrought about treating a stray glance the way one would treat something genuinely grave?

He warned ʿĀ'ishah about exactly this, and the warning is not the one we expect:

> يَا عَائِشَةُ إِيَّاكِ وَمُحَقَّرَاتِ الأَعْمَالِ فَإِنَّ لَهَا مِنَ اللَّهِ طَالِبًا
>
> *"O ʿĀ'ishah, beware of the deeds deemed insignificant, for they have a pursuer from Allah."*
>
> — Narrated from ʿĀ'ishah. Sunan Ibn Mājah 4243 (*Kitāb az-Zuhd*); graded *ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Albānī. ♦

Muḥaqqarāt — the things *made* small. Not the things that are small, but the things we have shrunk. The word puts the diminishing on our side of the transaction.

And notice what he does not say. He does not say these deeds are secretly enormous. The lightness is granted. What is denied is the **disappearance** — *fa'innа lahā min Allāhi ṭāliban*, there is something that pursues them. They are followed. They are kept. Nothing about them is dropped for being too light to bother with.

Which is the exact assumption we live by, and have never once examined: that a thing too small to notice is a thing that does not add up.

Picture it this way. A company of travellers makes camp in a bare valley at dusk and they need a fire. There is no wood anywhere. So each man walks out and comes back with a twig — a thing so trivially light that carrying it required no decision at all. Not one of them carried a log. Not one of them carried anything a reasonable person would call fuel, and no single twig among them was capable of producing heat. Had you stopped any one of those men and accused him of building a fire, he would have looked down at the small dry thing in his hand and laughed at you.

But the fire cooked bread.

There is the whole mechanism. Small sins do not harm you as great ones do — by weight. They harm you by **accumulation**, which is an entirely different physics, and one our instincts are catastrophically poor at modelling. We were built to notice mass. We were never built to notice a rate multiplied by a duration.

And every item on the list from chapter one is one of these.

Ten seconds upon a photograph, forty times a day, for ten years. A remark about someone absent, three times a conversation, across every

conversation you have. A prayer shortened by ninety seconds, five times daily, for twenty years. Work any of those figures. Not one of the individual acts would survive being called a sin aloud. The pile is enormous.

We keep asking *"how bad is this?"* — which is a question about mass. The question that would actually tell us something is **"how often is this, and for how long?"**

Where "minor" goes to die

There is a maxim among the scholars that cuts the ground out from beneath the whole filing system:

لا صغيرة مع الإصرار، ولا كبيرة مع الاستغفار

> *No sin remains minor when it is persisted in, and no sin remains major when it is met with seeking forgiveness.*
>
> — A well-known maxim of the scholars, widely transmitted in the works of the jurists and those who wrote on the diseases of the heart. ♦

It is among the most useful sentences our tradition has produced, and it has to be read in both directions.

Read one way, it is a warning. Size is not fixed. A small sin is small only while it remains occasional, and only while it is still being noticed. Persistence changes its category outright. The thing you have done every day for six years is no longer a minor sin in any meaningful sense — however it would be classed as a single isolated act — because what you are persisting in is no longer merely the act. It is *the decision not to stop*, renewed every morning.

Read the other way, it is a mercy — and this is the half we hurry past. No sin remains major before istighfār. The maxim is less a threat than a declaration that the weight of your sins is not the fixed thing you imagined, and that your own hand rests upon the scale. In both directions.

So the man beneath the mountain is not worse off than the man with the fly. He is *immeasurably* better off. He is uncomfortable, and he is safe. The other is comfortable, and he is gathering twigs.

The only real question

So set aside, for a moment, the question of whether a thing is major or minor. It is the wrong axis, and we reach for it mostly to get ourselves off the hook.

Ask instead:

Am I still noticing this?

That is the question that tracks. A sin you notice — even a grave one — has a living connection to your heart. It is still being registered. The polish from chapter one is still within reach, because you can still see the rust.

A sin you have stopped noticing is severed — the wire that would have reported it has been cut, and its size has nothing to do with it.

The dangerous sin in your life is almost certainly not the one that keeps you awake. Sins that keep you awake are being *handled* — the discomfort is doing its work. The dangerous one is the one that never arises. The one you would have to be specifically asked about in order to remember. The one that produces no feeling at all, in either direction, because it was filed long ago.

Part Two is little more than a list of the places that filing most commonly happens. Some of it will be tedious to read, because you will agree with it and feel nothing. And then, somewhere in there, one chapter will not be like the others.

Trust that reaction when it comes.

*

SIT WITH THIS

Take the flick of the hand seriously for a moment. When did you last dismiss something you had done without ever actually deciding it was permissible — you simply moved past it? Can you name the thing? That difficulty in naming it *is* the finding.

THIS WEEK

Choose one small habit you long ago stopped counting. Do not try to stop it. Only count it. Tally it in your notes for seven days — no judgement, no reform attempted. Most of us have never once seen the number, and the number is the argument.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghaflah: The Sleep of the Heart



Try to remember yesterday.

Not the schedule — that you can reconstruct from a calendar. I mean *remember* it. Recover the texture of it, the way you would recover a journey you once took. Where were you at three in the afternoon? What was in your mind? What did the light look like on the wall?

For most of us there is very little there. A few pinned moments, and then long grey stretches that are technically accounted for and experientially empty. Hours we were awake for and were not present in.

Multiply that by a week, then by a year, and sit with the possibility a moment before refusing it: this may be the ordinary setting of your life rather than the residue of one bad day.

Arabic has a word for that state, and the Qur'an uses it as a warning rather than as a description of tiredness. **Ghaflah** — heedlessness. Not sleep or ignorance or laziness, but something more particular and more unsettling: **being awake and not registering.** Present at the scene and absent from it. The eyes open, the life occurring, and nothing landing.

﴿ ٱقْتَرَبَ لِلنَّاسِ حِسَابُهُمْ وَهُمْ فِى غَفْلَةٍ مُّعْرِضُونَ ﴾

"Their reckoning has drawn near for mankind, while they, in heedlessness, turn away."

— Sūrah al-Anbiyāʾ 21:1 ♦

The ayah is built on a collision.

Two clauses. In the first, something is *approaching*: the reckoning, closing the distance, already near. In the second, the people are turning away — not fleeing, not arguing, not denying, but **turning away** in a state of heedlessness, with no awareness that there is anything to turn from.

That is not rebellion. It is people who are not looking in that direction, and it is a truer portrait of you and me than any verse about defiance could be. We are facing elsewhere, more or less permanently, and we would be astonished to be told so.

Ghaflah is why chapters one and two were possible

This chapter sits third for a reason.

The first described a heart fogging over. The second described the twigs mounting into a fire. Both leave a question hanging: *how does anyone let that happen?* How does a man carry twigs for ten years and never once look at the pile?

Ghaflah is the condition under which all of it goes unobserved.

It is not one sin standing in a line beside backbiting and envy; it is the *air* in which those sins become invisible. The fog of chapter one has a cause, and the cause is that nobody was watching the instruments — not for want of permission, but because it never occurred to anyone to look.

And this is what makes it so hard to catch: ghaflah is the one condition of the soul that **destroys the evidence of itself.** You can notice that you are angry. You can notice that you are afraid. You cannot, by definition, notice that you are not noticing. The state consists in the absence of the faculty that would detect it.

So the Qur'an has to tell us. We were never going to work it out from within.

Full equipment, no reception

The Qur'an's fullest portrait of this state is severe enough that readers turn the page:

﴿ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ لَّا يَفْقَهُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ لَّا يُبْصِرُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمْ ءَاذَانٌ لَّا يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَآ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ كَٱلْأَنْعَٰمِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْغَٰفِلُونَ ﴾

"They have hearts with which they do not understand, and eyes with which they do not see, and ears with which they do not hear. Those are like cattle — rather, they are further astray. Those are the heedless."

— Sūrah al-Aʿrāf 7:179 ♦

Every organ is present and accounted for, which is the point. Nothing has been confiscated: the hearts are there, the eyes are there, the ears are there. What is missing is **function.** Full equipment, and no reception.

The likeness to cattle is not an insult about intelligence. Cattle are functioning exactly as cattle were made to function. They eat, they move toward comfort, they avoid pain, and there is no fault in that, because nothing further was ever asked of them. The severity lies elsewhere: *we were given more, and we are spending it on the same narrow errands.* Eat, move toward comfort, avoid pain, and begin again tomorrow. Faculties fashioned for the recognition of our Creator, spent entirely upon the management of our appetites.

And then the verse names them: **ulāʾika humuʾl-ghāfilūn.** Those are the heedless — that is the word it reaches for, and not *the disbelievers*.

The two blessings we are cheated of

The Prophet ﷺ located the injury with an exactness that is difficult to sit under:

> نِعْمَتَانِ مَغْبُونٌ فِيهِمَا كَثِيرٌ مِنَ النَّاسِ، الصِّحَّةُ وَالْفَرَاغُ
>
> *"Two blessings in which many people are cheated: health, and free time."*
>
> — Narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6412 (*Kitāb ar-Riqāq*). ♦

Maghbūn is a word from the marketplace. It describes the man on the losing side of a transaction: the one who sold something precious for a fraction of its worth and **walked away from the bargain pleased with himself.** Not robbed, and not held up at knifepoint. *Cheated in a trade he himself agreed to.*

Which is what an evening on a feed is.

Nobody takes those three hours from you. You hand them across the counter. And you hand them over willingly, in exchange for something — a mild and forgettable pleasantness — and you do not feel the loss, because a man cheated in this particular manner never does. That is what separates it from theft.

Health and free time are also, notice, the two blessings that feel infinite while you hold them and become visible only once they are gone. No man in good health can hold the reality of illness in his hand. No man with an empty Saturday can imagine the version of himself who would beg for one. Their value is invisible from the inside — which is exactly what makes the trade so easy to lose.

*

Nobody takes those three hours from you. You hand them over, and you walk away from the trade pleased with yourself.

What is being spent

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said a thing that is difficult to shake off, and Ibn Rajab preserved it:

> *You are no more than days. When a day passes, some of you has passed away as well.*
>
> *And he said: O son of Adam, you have two riding animals — the day and the night. The night hands you over to the day, and the day to the night, until they hand you over to the Hereafter.*
>
> — Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, cited by Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wa'l-Ḥikam*, in the commentary on the hadith *"Be in this world as a stranger."* ♦

We speak of "spending time" as though time were a possession lying outside us, like coin in an account. He corrects the metaphor, and he corrects it at the root. **You do not have days. You are days.** The stock being drawn down is not a resource you own. It is the substance you are made of.

And then look at what he does with the second image. Two riding animals — and notice that you are not driving either of them. The day carries you and hands you to the night; the night carries you and hands you back. The motion is not yours and it does not stop for you. A man

in ghaflah imagines he is standing still while time passes him. He is being carried, at speed, toward a destination, and the only thing he has any say in is what he does while mounted.

So a day passed in ghaflah is not a day you failed to use well. It is a portion of your own self, spent and unrecoverable, and — this is the part that ought to sting — **spent on nothing you can name.** Not on sin, necessarily. Not on anything at all. Gone, in exchange for a scroll whose contents you cannot recall.

And the Qur'an is blunt about the mechanism:

﴿ أَلْهَىٰكُمُ ٱلتَّكَاثُرُ ۝ حَتَّىٰ زُرْتُمُ ٱلْمَقَابِرَ ﴾

"Competition for increase diverted you — until you visited the graves."

— Sūrah at-Takāthur 102:1–2 ♦

Alhākum — it distracted you, diverted you, amused you. And the sentence does not close upon a realisation; it closes at the graves. The diversion runs the whole length of the life, and in the Qur'an's telling nothing interrupts it. There is the warning: **ghaflah has no natural stopping point.** It does not resolve of its own accord at forty, nor when the children come, nor when things finally settle down. Something has to break it from outside.

What breaks it

Here is the mercy of it. Islam is, in its structure, an anti-ghaflah system, and most of us are already carrying the tools without ever having used them for this.

The five prayers are interruptions. That is a great part of their design. Five times the day is cut open and you are required to stand somewhere else for a few minutes. A life sliced five ways cannot drift far uninterrupted — *if* you allow the prayer to actually interrupt you. Chapter nine is about what becomes of a man who learns to perform the interruption without ever being interrupted by it.

Dhikr is a tether, rather than a tally to be run up. A short phrase, repeated, that keeps drawing the attention back to the case as it stands: you are a creature, in the presence of your Creator, at this moment. Ghaflah is the drift. Dhikr is the line back.

Remembering death is the sharpest instrument of all, and the most avoided. The Prophet ﷺ commanded us to remember often *hādhim al-ladhdhāt* — the destroyer of pleasures (Sunan an-Nasāʾī 1824; Jāmiʿ at-Tirmidhī 2307; graded *ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Albānī). We have decided that this is morbid. It is a corrective lens. Almost nothing that fills a heedless day survives contact with the question *"and does this matter, given that I am going to die?"* Most of the fog burns off within four seconds of asking it, and the reason we do not ask is not that the question depresses us. It is that it *works*, and we would then have to change something.

Where this leaves us

Part One has been diagnosis, and it comes to this.

The heart can fog over without your noticing, because the fog settles upon the very organ that would notice. Small sins gather invisibly, because our instincts measure mass and never frequency. And ghaflah is the condition that permits both processes to run for years without review.

That is why Part Two is shaped as it is. Introspection performed inside the fog only returns the fog's own verdict, which is always that everything is fine, so you will not be asked to introspect harder. We are going instead to take seven ordinary quarters of life and hold each one against a text that does not move when we move.

The aim is to wake something up, not to make you feel wretched.

For the opposite of ghaflah is not guilt. It is **presence** — and a man who is genuinely present in his own life, awake to Whose presence he stands in, will find that most of what fills this book takes care of itself.

SIT WITH THIS

Where did yesterday go? Not the calendar version — the lived one. Try to account honestly for the waking hours. Notice how much of it is simply unavailable to you, and resist the urge to fill the gap with an excuse. The blankness is the finding.

THIS WEEK

Once a day, at any moment, stop for thirty seconds and say to yourself: *right now, Allah sees me, and this moment is being written.* That is all. Do not change what you are doing. You are not building a practice — you are testing whether the fog lifts when you look straight at it. It does.



PART TWO — THE ORDINARY SINS

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tongue



You have had this conversation.

A name comes up. Not maliciously — nobody was lying in wait for it. And there is a small pause, and then someone says *"I mean, he's a lot,"* or *"she's been strange with me lately,"* or says nothing and only makes a face. And you know precisely what is meant, and you add the small thing you know, because to withhold it would be odd. It would make the moment awkward. It would make you appear to be setting yourself above the company.

Ninety seconds. Then the subject changes.

Nobody in that room did a thing he would call wrong. There was no cruelty in it, and every one of them would have said sincerely that he likes the man being discussed. That low, warm-toned exchange is the most thoroughly normalised major sin in Muslim social life, and the Qur'an describes it in language so violent that we have had to blunt the language in order to go on having the conversation.

﴿ وَلَا يَغْتَب بَّعْضُكُم بَعْضًا ۚ أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَن يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ ﴾

"And do not backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would detest it."

— Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt 49:12 ♦

Go slowly over that image, because familiarity has drained it.

Allah could have said that backbiting is forbidden, or that it is a great wrong, or that it tears communities apart. The likeness chosen instead is **cannibalism** — and not cannibalism only, but the eating of a corpse; and not a corpse only, but *your brother's*. Three separate horrors laid one upon another inside a single clause.

Then: *fakarihtumūh.* **You would detest it.** The revulsion is taken as given, not prescribed. Allah is pointing at a disgust you already possess and asking why it does not fire here.

And why the dead, particularly? Because the dead cannot answer, which is the exact quality of backbiting: the man is absent, he knows nothing of it, and he cannot defend himself. You are consuming someone rendered defenceless by nothing more than his not being in the room. The metaphor is an anatomy rather than an ornament.

The definition closes every exit

At this point every one of us reaches for the same escape, and the Prophet ﷺ was asked about it directly:

> أَتَدْرُونَ مَا الْغِيبَةُ . قَالُوا اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ أَعْلَمُ . قَالَ ذِكْرُكَ أَخَاكَ بِمَا يَكْرَهُ
>
> *"Do you know what backbiting is?"* They said: *"Allah and His Messenger know best."* He said: **"It is your mentioning of your brother in a way he would dislike."**
>
> The narration continues, in substance: he was asked what if the thing said is true of the man, and he answered that if it is true it is backbiting, and if it is not true it is slander.
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2589 (*Kitāb al-Birr wa'ṣ-Ṣilah*). ♦

The question in that hadith is *our* question. Someone put it fourteen centuries ago, in the identical defensive shape we still use, and it was closed where he stood.

Truth is not a defence. Truth is what *makes* it backbiting rather than slander. Both are sins; the accuracy of your statement determines only which of the two you have committed.

And see where the standard is set: *bimā yakrah* — what **he** would dislike. His measure, not what you consider unfair, and not what you would be embarrassed to have overheard. That makes the honest test unnervingly simple:

Would I say this if he walked in now?

The test is not whether you could justify it — a man can justify nearly anything. Would you say it, in the same tone, with the same face, with him standing there? If the answer is no, the thing already has a name, and the naming was done a very long time ago.

The exits that are genuinely open

In fairness, the scholars have always recognised that some speech about an absent man is permitted, and pretending otherwise would make the ruling unliveable.

Warning someone of genuine harm. Seeking a ruling or counsel from one qualified to give it. Reporting a wrong to a man able to change it. Identifying someone whose public conduct requires identifying. Consulting over a marriage or a business proposal. These are established exceptions, discussed at length in the classical works — an-Nawawī gathers them in his writings on the subject.

But be honest about the width of that door. Each of those exceptions is bounded by **necessity and a particular listener**. Telling a friend who can do nothing about it a thing he had no need to know is covered by none of them, and we all know the difference. We reach for the exception at the moment we have already decided to speak, which is a fairly reliable sign that it is not the reason.

Why this one, above all others, became invisible

Every sin in this book was normalised. This one had assistance.

It is the medium of intimacy. To share a criticism of a third party is among the fastest ways human beings bond. It creates an inside and an outside, and it places you and your listener on the inside together. That is *why* it feels warm rather than wrong — it is literally performing closeness. To decline is to refuse the closeness being offered, and that registers socially as coldness. The cost is real, and it is why this is hard.

Its camouflage is superb. Almost none of it announces itself. It arrives as concern (*"I'm worried about her"*), as humour (the impression, the anecdote in which someone is the punchline), as analysis (*"his problem is..."*), or as a request for du'ā', which may be the most refined form of all: *"make du'ā' for him, he's really struggling with—"* and then the details.

The friction is nothing and the frequency is enormous. We are back at chapter two: this is a twig you lift ten times a day without ever noticing your hand move. No man alive has done this once.

Al-Ghazālī gave the tongue an entire treatment in the *Iḥyā'*, and his observation, in substance, is one worth carrying about with you:

> *The tongue is given a freedom no other limb is given. It requires no wealth, no strength, no preparation and no opportunity — it is always available, always ready, and the sins it commits cost nothing to commit. This is precisely why its harvest is so vast, and why so few people guard it.*
>
> — Al-Ghazālī, in substance, from the Book of the Dangers of the Tongue in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm ad-Dīn* (paraphrase)♦

Every other sin has a barrier before it. Theft requires opportunity. Ribā requires a transaction. This one requires a breath.

The weight it carries

Muʿādh ibn Jabal asked the Prophet ﷺ what would save him, and the answer came to rest here:

> وَهَلْ يَكُبُّ النَّاسَ فِي النَّارِ عَلَى وُجُوهِهِمْ أَوْ عَلَى مَنَاخِرِهِمْ إِلاَّ حَصَائِدُ أَلْسِنَتِهِمْ
>
> *"And is there anything that topples people into the Fire upon their faces except the harvests of their tongues?"*
>
> — Narrated from Muʿādh ibn Jabal. Jāmiʿ at-Tirmidhī 2616 (*Kitāb al-Īmān*); graded *ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Albānī. ♦

Ḥaṣā'id — harvests. A harvest is not a seed. It is the gathered yield of a whole season of planting, brought in at the end and weighed all at once. That is the valley and the twigs once more, and it is why a sin so light can carry a warning so heavy.

And then there is the hadith that ought to frighten any man confident that his worship covers him:

أَتَدْرُونَ مَا الْمُفْلِسُ

"Do you know who the bankrupt one is?" They said: *"The bankrupt among us is one with no money and no property."* He ﷺ said: **"The bankrupt of my nation is one who comes on the Day of Resurrection with prayer, and fasting, and zakāh — but he comes having insulted this one, and slandered that one, and consumed the wealth of this one, and spilled the blood of that one, and struck this one. So this one is given from his good deeds, and this one from his good deeds. And if his good deeds run out before the debts are settled, their sins are taken and cast upon him, and then he is cast into the Fire."**

— Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2581 (*Kitāb al-Birr*). ♦

Look closely at who that man is. He prayed, he fasted, he gave zakāh — by every visible measure a practising Muslim, better in all likelihood than you or I. He arrives holding a fortune and departs holding nothing, because the deeds were **transferred to the people he talked about.**

There is the mechanism nobody warns us of. Your good deeds are not safe from your conversation. Every ninety-second exchange creates a creditor, the creditor will be present on that Day, and he will be paid out of your account.

Your good deeds are not safe from your conversation. Every exchange creates a creditor.

The way back

I will not hand you a technique for elegantly redirecting conversations. You would use it twice.

Begin with the rule, for the rule is complete.

> وَمَنْ كَانَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الآخِرِ فَلْيَقُلْ خَيْرًا أَوْ لِيَصْمُتْ
>
> *"Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, let him speak good or remain silent."*
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6018 (*Kitāb al-Adab*); also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

Two roads, and there is no permitted middle country of *mildly negative but basically harmless.* Good, or quiet. Most of what we say about absent men is neither.

Ibn al-Mubārak was asked about the old saying that if speech is silver then silence is gold, and his answer is worth more than the proverb:

If a man's words are in obedience to Allah, they are of silver.
Silencing oneself from His disobedience is gold.

— ʿAbdullāh ibn al-Mubārak, cited by Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wa'l-Ḥikam*. ♦

He has quietly corrected the proverb. Silence is not golden because silence is a virtue in itself; a man who never speaks a word of good has not become precious. The gold is in the *particular* silence — the one held at the exact moment the sentence was ready and the sentence was wrong.

That silence lasts about three seconds, and nobody in the room ever notices it. Al-Fuḍayl ibn ʿIyāḍ, in the same collection, says plainly what it costs: *"if a man cares for his tongue, he will be in great distress."* Distress — not *easy once you decide*. He is telling you in advance that the difficulty you are about to feel is the correct one, and not a sign that you have misunderstood the instruction.

Then, practically: the intervention is not a speech. It is a *pause.* The words are already in motion before anything has been decided — so the whole battle is fought in the half-second beforehand, and the only weapon that has ever worked is the habit of stopping.

Silence will do. You need not correct anyone, defend the absent man, or announce a policy to the room. Only decline to add your portion. The conversation moves on within seconds and nobody remarks upon it; the awkwardness we all fear largely does not exist, and changing the subject costs nothing.

And when you have already done it — which you will have, today — say *astaghfirullāh*, make duʿā' for the man by name, and speak well of him somewhere it counts. The scholars have long differed over whether he must be told; many held that seeking forgiveness and praying for him

is the safer course where telling would only open a fresh wound. Ask someone qualified about your own case. But do not let uncertainty about the perfect remedy become your reason for doing nothing at all.

Then, in time, treat the appetite rather than the act. The mouth is downstream. We speak of people because we are measuring ourselves against them, because their faults reassure us, because their failures make our own footing feel more secure. That is chapter seven's country, and until it is dealt with, the tongue is only ever being managed.

But manage it anyway. Begin today. There is no sin in this book with a better return upon the effort, and none where the accounts are settled quite so directly with the man you wronged.

*

SIT WITH THIS

Think of the last three conversations you had. Was there a third person in any of them who was not in the room? What did you contribute? Now picture him having heard it. That flinch — that is the instrument from chapter one, still working.

THIS WEEK

One time — only once — when the conversation turns and you know exactly what you could add, do not add it. Say nothing. Notice that the world does not end, that nobody remarks upon it, and that you feel unexpectedly clean afterwards. Once is enough to prove it possible.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Gaze and the Feed



Nobody decides to look.

That is worth establishing first, because most of what has been written on the subject assumes a moment of choosing that never takes place. You are not standing at a threshold weighing your options. You are lying in bed, the thumb moving at a speed you are not conscious of, and an image passes, and you have already looked. There was no gate, and no decision to be made at one.

Then comes the event itself: a **second** glance. A moment in which the thumb slows a little, in which you do not scroll on. That second is deliberate, and you know that it is, and it is over so quickly that it scarcely registers as having occurred.

That second is the whole of this chapter.

The command, and the strange thing within it

﴿ قُل لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغُضُّوا۟ مِنْ أَبْصَـٰرِهِمْ وَيَحْفَظُوا۟ فُرُوجَهُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَزْكَىٰ لَهُمْ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا يَصْنَعُونَ ﴾

"Tell the believing men to lower their gaze and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is fully aware of what they do."

— Sūrah an-Nūr 24:30 ♦

The ayah that follows addresses the believing women with the same instruction. This is not a burden laid upon one side of a room and lifted from the other — the command to lower the gaze is given to both, one after the other, in almost identical words. It is worth saying plainly, because in practice the discussion is so often pointed in one direction only.

Now take the phrase *yaghuḍḍū min abṣārihim* — lower **from** their gaze. Not close their eyes, or withdraw from the world, but **reduce**: a partial, deliberate restraint upon something otherwise running free. The Qur'an is describing a hand laid upon a valve rather than blindness.

And then, before any threat or mention of consequence: *dhālika azkā lahum.* **That is purer for them.**

That word — *azkā* — carries growth within it as well as purity. Its root is the root of zakāh, which purifies wealth precisely by causing it to

increase. So the first thing said of the lowered gaze is not that it shields you from punishment. It is that it does something *to you*. It cleans, and it makes to grow.

Which turns the whole matter around. **The gaze is not a rule you are failing. It is a nourishment you are going without.** Every time it is lowered for Allah, something within you is fed. That is a very different proposition from a prohibition you are perpetually falling short of — and it is the one the Qur'an actually leads with.

It is named for what it is

> كُتِبَ عَلَى ابْنِ آدَمَ نَصِيبُهُ مِنَ الزِّنَى مُدْرِكٌ ذَلِكَ لاَ مَحَالَةَ فَالْعَيْنَانِ زِنَاهُمَا النَّظَرُ وَالأُذُنَانِ زِنَاهُمَا الاِسْتِمَاعُ وَاللِّسَانُ زِنَاهُ الْكَلاَمُ
>
> *"Written upon the son of Adam is his share of zinā, which he will inevitably reach: the zinā of the eyes is the gaze, the zinā of the ears is listening, and the zinā of the tongue is speech."*
>
> The narration continues, in substance: the hand and the foot have their share also, the heart desires and wishes, and the private parts either confirm that or deny it.
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2658a (*Kitāb al-Qadar*); also Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

The Prophet ﷺ reached for the heaviest word available to him. He did not call the gaze a step toward zinā, nor a cause of it. He called it **the zinā of the eyes** — giving the sin's own name to its smallest form.

That naming does deliberate work. It refuses the mental compartment nearly all of us maintain, in which the serious thing stands over here and a broad, harmless country of looking and watching and consuming stretches out over there. The hadith collapses that country into one continuous act distributed among the limbs, and the eyes are where it begins.

The order he lays down matters too: eyes, ears, tongue, hand, foot — and then *the heart desires and wishes.* **The heart is downstream.** The gaze is largely what *builds* the desire rather than expressing one already there. We have the causality reversed. We believe we look because we want; in the main, we want because we looked.

The first and the second

Jarīr ibn ʿAbdullāh asked about the glance that merely happens — the one that arrives ahead of any choosing:

> سَأَلْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صلى الله عليه وسلم عَنْ نَظَرِ الْفُجَاءَةِ فَأَمَرَنِي أَنْ أَصْرِفَ بَصَرِي
>
> *"I asked the Messenger of Allah ﷺ about the sudden glance, and he commanded me to turn my gaze away."*
>
> — Narrated from Jarīr ibn ʿAbdullāh. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2159a (*Kitāb al-Ādāb*). ♦

There is a mercy inside that answer, and we walk past it almost every time.

He was not told that the glance was a sin. He was told what to do *next.* Read the instruction again and notice where the weight of it falls — not on the arriving, but on the turning away. Jarīr was not being corrected for having eyes. He was being given something to do with them.

So no responsibility attaches to what happens *to* you. You were walking, or scrolling, and the world placed something in front of your eyes. That is not the thing under discussion.

The moral weight rests entirely on **what comes after** — on the thumb that slows, on the eye that returns. That is the only portion you own, and the only portion being asked of you.

This ought to be a relief, and for most of us it is the opposite, because we have been mislocating the guilt for years. Men carry a diffuse shame about the bare fact of noticing, as though having eyes were itself the failure. You will go on noticing things until the day you die. The religion knows this, and has never asked otherwise.

It asks about the return. Only about the return.

*

You are not answerable for what reaches your eyes. You are answerable for the return.

A note on a famous line

You will have met a saying quoted in this context — that the glance is a poisoned arrow from among the arrows of Iblīs. It appears constantly in reminders and in posts, almost always presented as a hadith.

Its attribution to the Prophet ﷺ is questioned. It is found in some collections, but a number of hadith scholars have graded its chain weak, and it does not stand in the same rank as the narrations quoted above.

I tell you this for two reasons. First, because a book arguing for honest self-examination cannot itself be careless about what it places in the mouth of the Messenger ﷺ — and the material that *is* rigorously established here is already more than enough. Second, because it is worth seeing how this happens: a saying is vivid, it is useful, it circulates, and after enough repetitions nobody checks. That is the same mechanism this entire book is about, running in another field.

The image itself is a fine one, and the scholars did write on the gaze in terms every bit as vivid — and we can quote them by name, without borrowing the Prophet's ﷺ authority for it. Ibn al-Qayyim put it like this:

> *Abstaining from lowering one's gaze engraves the images of the one who is seen upon the heart — and the heart is like the Kaʿbah, and surely it will not be satisfied with idols.*
>
> — Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *al-Fawāʾid*, among the maxims (Umm al-Qurā English edition, 2004). ♦

See what he has done with the picture. Rather than an arrow that wounds you from outside, the gaze *carves*, and what it carves is left behind, and the place it is left is a house built for one Occupant.

The heart is like the Kaʿbah — an argument, not a decoration. A house is not harmed by an idol because the idol is heavy or dangerous, but because of what the house was built for. And a man may fill it, image by image, without once intending to build a single idol, exactly as the men in the valley never intended a fire.

What changed

The command is fourteen centuries old. Here is what is new.

The supply became infinite. Every generation before ours was subject to the accidents of who happened to walk past. The number of such encounters in a whole lifetime was, by our measure, almost nothing. You now pass more images in four minutes than your great-grandfather met in a year.

The second glance became frictionless. To return your gaze in public once required turning your head — a bodily act, visible to others, socially expensive. It now requires slowing your thumb by a fraction of a second in a dark room. The price of the sin has fallen to nothing, and the price was doing most of the work of restraint.

It stopped looking like looking. Nobody experiences a feed as *looking at people.* It is "being on my phone." The same eyes, the same images, the same effect upon the heart — but the activity now bears a name with no moral content in it at all, and so it is never examined.

And it was engineered, deliberately rather than incidentally. There are people whose entire occupation is to ensure your thumb keeps moving; they are extraordinarily good at it, and far better resourced than you. You are not failing at a fair fight. Recognising that is targeting information rather than an excuse: it tells you the battle cannot be won

by willpower at the moment of exposure, and has to be won earlier, at the level of *what you allow within reach.*

The one nobody sees

﴿ يَعْلَمُ خَآئِنَةَ ٱلْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِى ٱلصُّدُورُ ﴾

"He knows the treachery of the eyes, and what the breasts conceal."

— Sūrah Ghāfir 40:19♦

Khā'inat al-a'yun. The treachery of the eyes. The classical commentators explain it as the stolen look — the glance a man takes while appearing to look elsewhere, calibrated exactly so that no one present will detect it.

Of every sin in this book, this is the one with the most perfect cover. It leaves no trace, makes no sound, costs no money, and is deniable even to yourself. A man may do it ten thousand times and never once be seen.

Which is why the ayah exists. **Allah names the sin that no human being can witness** — because a sin nobody can see is a sin nothing outside a man will ever restrain, so it has to be restrained by the knowledge of being seen regardless.

Taqwā stops being an abstract virtue here and becomes an operational one. There is no other enforcement in this domain: no accountability

partner, no filter, no shame, no consequence. Only you, in a dark room, and the fact that you are not alone in it.

The way back

Do the work upstream, not at the moment of exposure. By the time the image is before you, most of the outcome has already been settled. Prune what reaches you: unfollow without negotiating over individual accounts. Kill the algorithmic surfaces that exist precisely to serve you what you never asked for. Get the phone out of the bedroom, for the overwhelming mass of this happens in the last ninety minutes of consciousness, when every defence you own is spent.

Then train the second, once. Not perfectly, and not as a permanent regime — only prove to yourself that the interval exists. The next time the thumb slows, scroll on. You will feel a small sharp resistance, and then it is gone, and you will notice something almost strange: you feel *better*, immediately, in a way out of all proportion to the size of the act. That is *azkā*. The ayah told you it would be so. Most people have simply never done it often enough to find out.

And do not let the failures compound. The most damaging pattern here is not the glance — it is the collapse that follows it. The evening is written off, the whole thing spirals, and a two-second sin becomes a two-hour one. There is no rule anywhere in this religion that a lapse must be seen through to its end. Say *astaghfirullāh* and stop mid-scroll. To stop halfway is not a failed repentance. It is a real one.

Finally, take the mercy seriously. You will not become a man who notices nothing. That man does not exist, was never asked for, and is not the goal. The goal is a man whose gaze *returns* — who looks, and turns away, and turns away again, ten times a day for the rest of his life, each time for Allah.

That man is not failing at this. **That is precisely what success at this looks like.**

*

SIT WITH THIS

Where does most of it actually happen — which room, which hour, which device, which posture? Be specific. Almost everyone finds it concentrated into one narrow and entirely predictable window. That window, not your willpower, is the thing to change.

THIS WEEK

Charge your phone outside the bedroom for one night. Only one. This is not a reform of your life — it is an experiment to discover how much of what you had blamed on weak character was in fact a matter of proximity.

CHAPTER SIX

The Performance



Something has happened in the last fifteen years that has no precedent in the whole history of this religion, and we have never really stopped to name it.

Every one of us now owns a broadcasting station, and it is never switched off.

Consider what that means for a sin like riyā'. For every generation before ours, to show off required that an audience first be physically assembled. You had to be *somewhere*, with *people*, and the number of witnesses to your good deed was capped by the size of the room. Most acts of worship, for most of human history, went structurally unwitnessed. Not because those people were more sincere than we are — because there was nobody there.

That cap is gone. The audience is now permanent, portable and unlimited, and it is available at the very instant the good deed occurs.

This is not a chapter about social media. It is a chapter about what becomes of a heart when the possibility of being seen is never once absent — and social media is merely the most complete form that condition has ever taken.

The name it is given

The word for it is *riyāʾ* — from *ruʾyah*, to be seen. It does not mean showing off in the loose way we use that phrase. It means something exact: performing an act of worship with one eye on the room.

And the scholars place it under *shirk*. A lesser form, yes — but the word is not decoration, and they did not soften it. Something is being associated with Allah.

Understand why the word fits. Every deed has a direction; it is *for* someone. And riyāʾ is the act of quietly turning that direction while leaving the outward form perfectly intact. The prayer looks identical. The charity is the same sum. Only the one addressed has changed — and the one addressed was the entire point.

Allah closes Sūrat al-Kahf on precisely this. After the sleepers in the cave, the man with his two gardens, Mūsā and al-Khiḍr, Dhū al-Qarnayn at the ends of the earth — the surah's last instruction is: **"So whoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous work and associate no one in the worship of his Lord"** (al-Kahf 18:110).

Two conditions, not one. The deed must be righteous, and it must be undivided. And the second is not an addition to the first. It is what decides whether the first counts at all.

The three men

This is among the most sobering narrations in the whole Sunnah, and it is not about ordinary men:

> *The first of people to be judged on the Day of Resurrection will be a man who was martyred. He will be brought and shown Allah's blessings upon him, and he will recognise them.* Allah will say: *"What did you do with them?"* He will say: *"I fought for You until I was martyred."* Allah will say: **"You have lied. You fought so that it would be said 'he is brave' — and it was said."** Then it will be ordered that he be dragged upon his face until he is cast into the Fire.
>
> *Then a man who studied knowledge, taught it, and recited the Qur'an...* He will say: *"I learned knowledge and taught it, and recited the Qur'an for You."* Allah will say: **"You have lied. You learned so that it would be said 'he is a scholar,' and you recited so that it would be said 'he is a reciter' — and it was said."**
>
> *Then a man to whom Allah gave abundant wealth...* He will say: *"I left no path in which You love spending except that I spent in it for You."* Allah will say: **"You have lied. You did so that it would be said 'he is generous' — and it was said."**
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1905a (*Kitāb al-Imārah*). ♦

Look hard at who these three men are.

A martyr. A scholar of the Qur'an. A man who gave away a fortune. **These are the three kinds of person any of us would name as the most successful Muslims imaginable.** None of them did anything wrong on the outside; every act, in its form, was exemplary. The martyr truly died, the scholar truly taught, the wealthy man truly gave.

All three are the *first* to be judged, and all three are ruined by a single misdirection of the heart that no human being on earth ever detected.

Then there is the phrase that returns like a verdict: **"and it was said."**

Wa qad qīla. You wanted to be called brave. You *were* called brave. You wanted to be known as a scholar. You were. The payment was made in full, exactly as requested, at the moment of delivery — and nothing remains in the account, because you have already collected it.

That is the most chilling arithmetic in the religion. Riyā' does not lessen a deed's reward; **it pays the reward out, immediately, in a currency that expires.**

*

You wanted to be called generous. You were called generous. The payment was made in full — and there is nothing left in the account.

How it hides now

This is harder for us than for any generation before, and the reason is simple: **the sharing is no longer a separate act.**

For the three men in that hadith, the deed and its display were at least separated in time. He fought, and afterwards men spoke of him. He gave, and afterwards word travelled. There was a gap, and a gap is where a man can catch himself.

The gap has now closed. The photograph is taken *during*. The caption is composed while the thing is still happening. The muṣḥaf and the coffee, the view from the masjid, the donation receipt, the Ramadan schedule, the pinned reminder. The act and the broadcast have been

fused into one motion, and there is no longer any moment in the middle where the question could so much as arise.

And it dresses well. Almost none of it presents itself as showing off:

"It might benefit someone." Sometimes true. Notice how reliably the possibly-beneficial version is also the version that reflects well upon you.

"I'm normalising it." Also sometimes true. Also perfectly shaped to make a display feel like a service.

"I'm holding myself accountable." The announcement of the fast, the goal, the streak. Accountability is real — but it is worth noticing how much of it we perform in public and how little of it in private.

"It's just my life." The most refined of them, because it is the most deniable. You are not showing off; you are simply a man whose ordinary life happens to be visible, and whose ordinary life happens to be curated.

Which of yours are sincere is not something I can tell you, and neither can anyone else. **That is the problem.** This sin is invisible from outside by its construction, and *nearly* invisible from within. Sahl ibn ʿAbdullāh put the reason in one sentence, and Ibn Rajab preserved it:

> *Nothing is more difficult for human nature than being sincere, because it has no share in it.*
>
> — Sahl ibn ʿAbdullāh, cited by Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wa'l-Ḥikam*. ♦

Because it has no share in it. Every other act of your religion offers the self something. Ikhlāṣ offers it nothing, so the self keeps negotiating for the whole of your life.

If it was hard for him, we ought to be very slow in concluding that ours are clean.

The exposure

> مَنْ سَمَّعَ سَمَّعَ اللَّهُ بِهِ، وَمَنْ يُرَائِي يُرَائِي اللَّهُ بِهِ
>
> *"Whoever makes others hear of his deed, Allah will make others hear of him. And whoever shows off, Allah will show him off."*
>
> — Narrated from Jundub. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6499 (*Kitāb ar-Riqāq*); also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

The punishment answers the crime with a kind of terrible symmetry. You wanted to be seen. On a Day when every covering is lifted, **you will be** — and what will be shown is not the deed but what lay beneath it, before precisely the audience you were performing for.

And the Qur'an gives us the picture of what becomes of the deed itself:

> ﴿ كَمَثَلِ صَفْوَانٍ عَلَيْهِ تُرَابٌ فَأَصَابَهُ وَابِلٌ فَتَرَكَهُ صَلْدًا ﴾
>
> *"...like a smooth stone with dust upon it, struck by a downpour, which leaves it bare."*
>
> — Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:264 ♦

The dust looked like soil. From any distance you would have called it ground and imagined planting in it. Then one rain falls and there is nothing there — **bare rock**, with nothing ever underneath it.

That is what a life of visible deeds with a redirected heart comes to. Not a diminished harvest but no harvest, upon ground that was never soil.

The way back, and it is not what you think

The instinct after reading all that is to withdraw: to post nothing, hide everything, grow suspicious of every good act. That instinct is a trap, and Iblīs is entirely content with it.

If you abandon a good deed because people might see it, **you have let riyā' win by another road.** The deed is gone either way. Al-Fuḍayl ibn ʿIyāḍ, quoted by Ibn Rajab, closes both doors in a single breath:

> *People used to say that foregoing the performance of a deed for the sake of others is hypocrisy — and performing a deed for their sake is shirk.*
>
> — Al-Fuḍayl ibn ʿIyāḍ, cited by Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wa'l-Ḥikam*. ♦

See what he has done to your escape route.

You had assumed two positions were available: do the deed and risk riyā', or leave the deed and be safe. He tells you there is no such safety. To leave it *because of them* is itself a sin, and he gives it the harsher-sounding name of the two. Both roads run through the audience; both are the same disease.

So the instruction is not *do less.* It is **abandon the audience, not the deed.**

Practically:

Restore the gap. The fusion of act and broadcast is the particular modern injury, so attack it particularly. Do the thing. Then wait — an hour, a day. If you still wish to share it once the moment's warmth has cooled, the reason may well be a legitimate one. Most of the time you will find that you no longer wish to, and that tells you what the impulse was.

Build a private column. Keep deeds that **nobody will ever know of.** A charity no one sees. Two rakʿah at night that no one is told of. A duʿāʾ for a man who will never learn you made it. These are the ballast that keeps the visible deeds honest, rather than extra credit. The Prophet ﷺ named among the seven whom Allah shades on a Day with no shade *"a man who gives in charity and conceals it, so that his left hand does not know what his right hand has spent"* (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 1423; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1031a). Concealment is not a modest option. It is a named excellence.

Fix the intention in motion, and fix it again. Riyāʾ rarely arrives at the beginning; it slips in halfway, when the thing is going well and somebody is watching. So the correction is a recurring one rather than a declaration made before take-off. *For Allah.* Again, mid-deed. Again, afterwards. Ikhlāṣ is a steering correction made continuously rather than a switch thrown before you start, and chapter twelve is given over to it.

And ask for what you cannot see. Ask Allah to accept what was for Him, to forgive whatever was not, and to keep you from the part of this you have not noticed in yourself — as the honest posture of a man who has just read this chapter and cannot certify his own heart, rather than as a formality.

Because you cannot certify it, and nor can I. That uncertainty is no cause for despair. It is the reason the asking never stops.

*

SIT WITH THIS

Name one good thing you did in the last month that **nobody knows about.** Not one you merely refrained from posting — one that no living person is aware of. If nothing comes easily to mind, that is not a verdict upon your sincerity. It is information about the balance between your two columns.

THIS WEEK

Do one good deed and tell nobody — not your family, not a friend, not as a story, not as a hint. Carry it privately for the whole week. Notice the pull to mention it. That pull, examined honestly, is the most useful thing in this chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Comparison



You saw the post, and you said *māshā'Allāh*.

You typed it, even. And you meant it — mostly. But somewhere beneath the typing there was a small cold thing that moved, and it lasted less than a second, and you have no intention whatever of examining it.

That thing has a name. We have simply stopped using the name about ourselves.

Ḥasad. Envy. It has undergone the most successful renaming of any sin in this book, because we found a vocabulary that lets us keep the feeling and discard the word. We do not envy; we are *motivated*, we are *inspired*, we have *ambition*, we are *keeping an eye on the competition*, we are *just being honest about wanting more*.

The feeling is identical. Only the words changed, and the words were what used to warn us.

The first sin

It is worth remembering where this begins.

The first act of disobedience in all creation was Iblīs refusing to prostrate before Ādam, and the Qur'an sets out his reasoning plainly: *"I am better than him"* (al-Aʿrāf 7:12). Arrogance, yes — but seated inside the arrogance is something more particular. Ādam had been given something, Iblīs had not, and he could not bear the distribution.

The first sin in existence was, at root, an objection to how Allah had apportioned His favour.

That is what ḥasad is underneath. It presents itself as a feeling about a *person* — that one there, and what he has — while being a complaint about a **decision** that was never his.

*

﴿ وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوْا۟ مَا فَضَّلَ ٱللَّهُ بِهِۦ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَىٰ بَعْضٍ ﴾

"And do not wish for that by which Allah has caused some of you to exceed others."

— Sūrah an-Nisāʾ 4:32♦

See how it is built. It does not say *do not wish for what your brother has*. It says do not wish for **that by which Allah has caused some to exceed others**, placing the divine agency in the middle of the sentence where you cannot read past it.

The ayah is correcting the address on your letter more than it is protecting your brother from you. You believed your discomfort was aimed at him; the ayah quietly informs you that it is aimed somewhat higher, and always was.

That may be the most useful thing in this chapter, because it converts an unmanageable emotional problem into a theological one, and a theological problem can be reasoned with. *Do I believe He distributes wisely, or do I believe He got this one wrong?* Put in those terms, the envy tends to lose its footing inside ten seconds.

The company this sin keeps

> لَا تَحَاسَدُوا وَلَا تَنَاجَشُوا وَلَا تَبَاغَضُوا وَلَا تَدَابَرُوا وَلَا يَبِعْ بَعْضُكُمْ عَلَى بَيْعِ بَعْضٍ وَكُونُوا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ إِخْوَانًا
>
> *"Do not envy one another, do not inflate prices against one another, do not hate one another, do not turn away from one another, and do not undercut one another in trade. Be servants of Allah, brothers."*
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2564a (*Kitāb al-Birr*). ♦

Envy stands first in that list, and every item after it is a **social** injury: the manipulation of prices, hatred, severed relations, undercutting. The ordering is not accidental. Ḥasad is the root and the rest grows from it. A community whose members quietly resent one another's provision will produce every one of those symptoms, whether or not anyone names the cause.

The closing clause is the alternative: *be servants of Allah, brothers.* Two words holding the whole cure. **Servants** of One who apportions, which means the distribution was never yours to audit. **Brothers**, which

means his gain is not a subtraction from you, because you were never in a transaction with him.

The distinction that saves you

Islam does not ask you to want nothing. There is a crucial line here, and to know it spares a great deal of unnecessary self-torment:

> لاَ حَسَدَ إِلاَّ فِي اثْنَتَيْنِ رَجُلٌ آتَاهُ اللَّهُ مَالاً فَسُلِّطَ عَلَى هَلَكَتِهِ فِي الْحَقِّ، وَرَجُلٌ آتَاهُ اللَّهُ الْحِكْمَةَ، فَهْوَ يَقْضِي بِهَا وَيُعَلِّمُهَا
>
> *"There is no envy except in two: a man whom Allah has given wealth and he spends it in the right way, and a man whom Allah has given wisdom, and he judges by it and teaches it."*
>
> — Narrated from Ibn Masʿūd. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 73 (*Kitāb al-ʿIlm*); also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

The scholars explain that what is permitted here is *ghibṭah*, not ḥasad, and the distinction is exact:

Ḥasad wishes the blessing would *leave him.* It wants the gap closed by his loss.

Ghibṭah wishes that the same blessing would *come to you also.* It wants the gap closed by your gain, and is entirely content that he keep every last thing he has.

The one is a sin the Prophet ﷺ warned of; the other is praised. The test that separates them takes two seconds:

If he lost it tomorrow — no benefit whatsoever to you, he simply lost it — how would you feel?

If some part of you would be relieved, that is ḥasad, whatever you have been calling it.

And see what the two permitted cases have in common: **both are things the man is giving away.** Wealth spent rightly; knowledge taught. Wealth *spent*, not wealth possessed. Even our licensed aspiration is pointed at the benefit flowing outward rather than at the having.

*

If he lost it tomorrow — no benefit to you, he simply lost it — how would you feel?

What made this constant

Ḥasad is as old as Iblīs. What is new is the **volume**, and the change is not a small one.

Your comparison set used to be a village. A few dozen people, perhaps, whose circumstances you actually knew. It is now effectively unbounded, algorithmically sorted, and weighted toward whoever happens to be doing best today. You are no longer measuring yourself against your peers. You are measuring yourself against the *maximum* of an enormous sample — a standard that by its very construction nobody meets.

You are comparing your inside to their outside. You have full access to your own doubts, your debts, your bad mornings, and access to their

announcement. That is not an unfair comparison so much as a category error, and we commit it hundreds of times a day.

Everything is now announced. Engagements, salaries, house keys, umrah, the acceptance letter. Things you would once have learned slowly, in person, embedded in the texture of a relationship, now arrive as a decontextualised headline while you are on the bus and tired.

And it never closes. The village had an end to it. The feed has none. There is always another man doing better, and the supply is infinite, and so the wound is never permitted to scar.

The result is a generation that is not especially greedy but is permanently, quietly dissatisfied — and cannot locate the cause, because no single moment of it ever felt like envy.

What it does to you

This is the part that ought to change how you weigh it: ḥasad is a sin whose *chief* victim is the one committing it.

The man you envy is untouched. He does not know, his provision is not lessened by a single unit on account of what moved in your chest, and nothing in his life alters.

Meanwhile: you cannot enjoy your own blessings, because their worth has become relative and the denominator keeps climbing. You have made an adversary of a man who did nothing to you. You carry a low chronic discontent you could not explain to anyone. And you have quietly positioned yourself in opposition to Allah's allotment while continuing to ask Him for more of it.

It is the only sin in which you take the whole of the damage and the other party takes none of it.

Ibn al-Qayyim drew the line exactly where the hadith above draws it, and he drew it by describing what envy looks like when it keeps to its proper bound and what it becomes when it breaks it:

> *Envy has a limitation, which is to compete in seeking perfection and to be unwilling to let someone do better than oneself. Whoever surpasses that in injustice and transgression would wish for other people's grace to come to an end, and would seek to harm them. And when it becomes less than the required limit, it would be lowness and lack of ambition.*
>
> — Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *al-Fawā'id*, in the chapter on the limits of the appetites (Umm al-Qurā English edition, 2004). ♦

Both ends are faults, and it is worth reading what he places at each.

Above the line: *wishing another man's grace to come to an end.* That is the ḥasad the Prophet ﷺ forbade, and Ibn al-Qayyim calls it injustice and transgression rather than merely a bad feeling.

Below the line there is also a failure, and this is the half we never hear: **to want nothing at all is not humility. He calls it lowness and lack of ambition.** A man who feels nothing when he sees knowledge or generosity in another has not conquered his envy. He has gone numb in the other direction, and we are back at the first chapter.

The virtue is the feeling held at its correct height, not the absence of it.

And it eats away at something load-bearing:

> لا يُؤْمِنُ أَحَدُكُمْ حَتَّى يُحِبَّ لأَخِيهِ مَا يُحِبُّ لِنَفْسِهِ
>
> *"None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."*
>
> — Narrated from Anas. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 13 (*Kitāb al-Īmān*); also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

Which makes ḥasad the direct inverse of a condition of complete faith. You cannot at once want for him what you want for yourself and quietly hope the gap will narrow.

The way back

Make duʿā' for him. By name, and for the exact thing you envy.

This is the oldest remedy and by some distance the most effective. It is difficult the first few times, which is the proof that it is aimed at the right target. Ask Allah to *increase* him in the thing that stung. Say it aloud.

It works for a mechanical reason: ḥasad requires that you hold him as an opponent, and no man can sincerely petition Allah on another's behalf while holding that position. One of the two must give way. Do it enough times and it will not be the duʿā'.

Seek refuge, and use what you were already given. Allah closed Sūrah al-Falaq with this:

﴿ وَمِن شَرِّ حَاسِدٍ إِذَا حَسَدَ ﴾

"...and from the evil of an envier when he envies."

— Sūrah al-Falaq 113:5 ♦

We recite this seeking protection *from* enviers. Read it once, honestly, as a description of a state you would rather not be found in — and let the morning and evening adhkār do some of this work on your behalf.

Reduce the input. Nobody can feel neutral before an infinite stream of other people's highest moments, and treating your reaction as a flaw of character rather than a predictable response to an engineered environment will only make you feel worse while changing nothing. Mute liberally. No one is owed your attention, and muting is not severing a tie.

Count what is yours, aloud and specifically. Itemised, rather than vague gratitude. Ḥasad works by making your own blessings invisible while illuminating another man's, and naming yours reverses the lighting. There is no ceiling on what Allah gives: *"If you are grateful, I will surely increase you"* (Ibrāhīm 14:7).

And convert it, deliberately. The feeling at its first arrival is not yet the sin; what you do next is. When it comes, run the two-second test, then aim it: *O Allah, give him more, and give me its like.* That redirection turns ḥasad into ghibṭah, which is a praised aspiration.

You do not have to stop noticing that other people are doing well. You have to stop treating their portion as a subtraction from yours. It never was. He was never dividing a fixed quantity, and you were never standing in the same queue.

*

SIT WITH THIS

Bring one particular person to mind — you already know who. Run the test honestly: if he lost that thing tomorrow, with no gain whatsoever to you, what would you feel? Do not argue with the answer. Only let yourself have seen it.

THIS WEEK

Make one sincere du'ā' for that person, by name, asking Allah to increase him in the exact thing you envy. It will feel wrong in your mouth the first time. Do it anyway, and notice what has shifted by the third.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Money That Isn't Clean



Of every sin in this book, this is the one you are most likely to be committing at this very moment, while reading, without any action on your part at all.

That is what sets it apart. Backbiting requires you to speak. The gaze requires you to look. This one can run quietly in the background of a life — accruing daily, compounding monthly — on the strength of a decision you made once, years ago, in about four minutes, on a form.

And it is the sin that Allah addressed in language He used for nothing else.

The declaration of war

﴿ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ وَذَرُواْ مَا بَقِىَ مِنَ ٱلرِّبَوٰٓاْ إِن كُنتُم مُّؤْمِنِينَ ۝ فَإِن لَّمْ تَفْعَلُواْ فَأْذَنُواْ بِحَرْبٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِۦ ﴾

"O you who believe, fear Allah and give up what remains of ribā, if you are believers. And if you do not, then be informed of a war from Allah and His Messenger."

— Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:278–279♦

Read that second sentence again, and then try to find its equal anywhere else.

No other sin in the Qur'an is announced as **war from Allah**. Allah warns, threatens, describes punishment and promises a reckoning for a great many things; the declaration of hostilities, in those words, occurs here.

And the address is *yā ayyuhā'lladhīna āmanū* — O you who believe. It is aimed at us, not at anyone outside.

There is no softening that, and I am not going to attempt it. Whatever else is true about the difficulty of modern finance, this is not a small technical matter over which scholars fuss. It is the transaction Allah singled out for that sentence.

And the earlier ayah tells us why:

﴿ وَأَحَلَّ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْبَيْعَ وَحَرَّمَ ٱلرِّبَوٰا ﴾

"...whereas Allah has permitted trade and forbidden ribā."

— Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:275 ♦

The line runs between money made from **shared risk and created value** — which is trade — and money made from **time and the leverage of another man's need.** In trade, both parties may lose; both stand exposed to the real world. In ribā, one party's return is guaranteed whatever becomes of the other. The gain has been surgically severed from the risk, and the man who bore the need bears the whole of it.

And everyone in the room

لَعَنَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صلى الله عليه وسلم آكِلَ الرِّبَا وَمُوكِلَهُ وَكَاتِبَهُ وَشَاهِدَيْهِ وَقَالَ هُمْ سَوَاءٌ

"The Messenger of Allah ﷺ cursed the one who consumes ribā, the one who pays it, the one who records it, and its two witnesses — and he said: they are all the same."

— Narrated from Jābir. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1598 (*Kitāb al-Musāqāh*). ♦

Hum sawā'. They are all the same.

Not the beneficiary alone: the one who *pays* it, the clerk who typed it out, the two men who witnessed the signature and went home and thought nothing more of it. Everyone who had a hand in bringing that contract into existence, at whatever level, however incidentally, however sincerely he would have said he was only doing his job.

That is a far wider circle than most of us have ever drawn around ourselves.

What became normal

This chapter exists for a reason that is not really about mortgages.

Ribā stopped being a transaction and became infrastructure. It is no longer a thing you *do*. It is the medium everything else moves through. It is the default setting on the card in your pocket, the terms of the phone you are reading this on, the overdraft you do not use but have, the deferred payment at the checkout, the interest quietly gathering on a balance you had meant to clear.

It was renamed, thoroughly. Nobody sells you interest now. They sell you *0% for twelve months.* A *representative APR. Flexible payment options. Four instalments, no fees. Buy now, pay later.* Every one of those phrases was written by a man whose occupation was to make a cost feel like a convenience — and they are extremely good at it.

The friction fell to nothing. To enter one of these once required a bank, an appointment, a signature, a person looking you in the face. It now requires the tap of a button at the checkout that is often *already selected*, and it is over before you have registered making a decision.

And it is hard to avoid. That part is honest, and there is no pretending otherwise. Renting requires credit checks. Employment carries pension funds you did not design. Salaries arrive in conventional banks.

Insurance is compulsory by law in most places. No man in a modern economy is operating with clean hands by choice alone.

That difficulty is real, and it is what has made the whole subject unspeakable. When a thing is hard to avoid completely, the temptation is to stop thinking about it *at all* — and that leap, from "I cannot be perfect here" to "I will not examine any of it," is the entire normalisation, accomplished in one movement.

*

The leap from "I can't be perfect here" to "I won't examine any of this" is the whole normalisation, in one move.

Where I stop and your scholar begins

My limits matter here, because this is the ground on which a non-scholar writing a book can do real damage.

What is not disputed: conventional interest-bearing lending — to borrow or to lend money at a stipulated increase — is ribā, and it is forbidden. This is settled, it is in the text above, and no school of Sunni thought holds otherwise.

What contemporary scholars genuinely differ over: the status of conventional mortgages in non-Muslim lands under conditions of necessity; whether particular "Islamic finance" products differ from the conventional ones in substance or only in form; insurance where the law compels it; pension schemes an employee cannot opt out of; what

should be done with interest already received; and how far the ruling reaches into employment merely adjacent to such institutions.

These are real disagreements among qualified men, made in view of the same texts, and I have no business resolving them for you in an e-book. **Take your particular situation to a scholar you trust** — with your actual figures, your actual country, your actual alternatives. Not a forum. Not an infographic. Not this book.

What can be said is this: scholarly disagreement about the hard cases is not a licence covering the easy ones. Most of what is costing us lies nowhere near the contested edge. The revolving credit-card balance is not a hard case; the financed upgrade to a phone that was working perfectly well is not a hard case. We reach for the complexity of the difficult questions in order to avoid the simplicity of the ones we have already answered.

What unlawful wealth does to you

If the accounting were only in the next life, this would be easier to postpone. It is not.

> *He ﷺ mentioned a man who journeys far, dishevelled and dusty, stretching his hands to the sky:* **"O Lord! O Lord!"** *— while his food is unlawful, his drink is unlawful, his clothing is unlawful, and he has been nourished by the unlawful. So how can he be answered?*
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1015 (*Kitāb az-Zakāh*). ♦

Look closely at the man being described. He is not a negligent Muslim. He has travelled — a state in which du'ā' is answered. He is dishevelled and dusty from the effort of it, his hands are raised, and he is calling upon Allah with urgency, repeating *yā Rabb, yā Rabb.* By every outward measure, a man in a moment of devotion.

Fa'annā yustajābu li dhālik. **So how can he be answered?**

The narration is telling us that unlawful income does not sit in a separate compartment labelled "financial." It enters the body, and it stands between the servant and the answer to his supplication.

That may explain something a great many of us feel and never say: the sense that du'ā' has become a formality. We ask, and nothing moves, and we look for the cause in our sincerity, our consistency, our choice of words. The Prophet ﷺ pointed at the bank statement.

And see how the description runs — not merely that his earnings were unlawful, but that his food was, and his drink, and his clothing, and that he had been *nourished* by it. The money did not stay money. It became the things he lived inside, which is the honest way to think about income: it does not sit in an account. It becomes your week.

The other half: what we do with the clean money

For there is a second sin here that receives almost no attention, and it requires no unlawful income whatever.

﴿ وَلَا تُبَذِّرْ تَبْذِيرًا ۝ إِنَّ ٱلْمُبَذِّرِينَ كَانُوٓا۟ إِخْوَٰنَ ٱلشَّيَٰطِينِ ۖ وَكَانَ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ ﴾

"And do not squander wastefully. Indeed, the squanderers are brothers of the devils."

— Sūrah al-Isrāʾ 17:26–27 ♦

Ikhwān ash-shayāṭīn. Brothers of the devils — for waste, not for theft. For spending lawfully earned money upon things that nobody needed.

We have industrialised this. The subscription you had forgotten you held. The clothes with the tags still upon them. The food discarded every week. The upgrade cycle on devices that were working perfectly. The delivery fee paid because rising from the chair was inconvenient. Not one item of it is unlawful in itself. All of it is the *amāna* of provision poured into the ground — and every coin of it will be asked about in the second half of that question.

The way back

Begin where there is no disagreement. Not with the mortgage — with the card. Clear the revolving balance, whatever it costs and however long it takes. Cancel the deferred-payment options at the checkout. Stop financing things that lose their value as you carry them home. This is the uncontested ground, it is within reach for most of us, and it is where the ongoing damage actually is.

Then look, once, properly. Most of us have never audited this. Sit down for one hour with every account, card, subscription and instalment plan, and simply *see* it. Not to mend it — to know it. No man can repent from what he has never looked at, and the not-looking is precisely what keeps it alive.

Ask someone qualified about the hard cases, and then accept the answer. With real figures. And watch the temptation to keep asking until you receive the reply you wanted — that is not the seeking of knowledge, and every one of us knows the difference.

Take the middle ground seriously.

> الْحَلَالَ بَيِّنٌ وَإِنَّ الْحَرَامَ بَيِّنٌ وَبَيْنَهُمَا مُشْتَبِهَاتٌ لاَ يَعْلَمُهُنَّ كَثِيرٌ مِنَ النَّاسِ فَمَنِ اتَّقَى الشُّبُهَاتِ اسْتَبْرَأَ لِدِينِهِ وَعِرْضِهِ
>
> *"The lawful is clear and the unlawful is clear, and between them are doubtful matters which many people do not know. Whoever guards against the doubtful has protected his religion and his honour."*
>
> The narration continues, in substance: whoever falls into the doubtful falls into the unlawful, like a shepherd grazing at the edge of a sanctuary and about to graze within it.
>
> — Narrated from an-Nuʿmān ibn Bashīr. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 1599a (*Kītāb al-Musāqāh*); also Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

The shepherd has not crossed the line. He is grazing *at the edge*, and the Prophet ﷺ is telling us that proximity, given time, decides the outcome. Not intention — proximity.

And give. Ṣadaqah is the direct counterweight, and it works upon the heart as much as upon the balance. It re-establishes what the money is: not yours, held briefly, recallable at will. A man who gives regularly finds the grip loosening on everything else in this chapter.

Finally — begin, even if you cannot finish. Ribā is the sin most likely to produce total paralysis, because full extraction feels impossible and so nothing whatever is attempted. But Allah did not command what cannot be done, and He asks for taqwā *"as much as you are able"* (at-Taghābun 64:16). One position closed this year is not a failure to be perfect. It is the beginning of a war ending.

SIT WITH THIS

What are you currently paying interest on — right now, this month? If you cannot answer immediately and precisely, that is the finding. Not the amount. The **not knowing.**

THIS WEEK

Open your banking app and find one recurring charge you had forgotten about. Cancel it, and give its monthly value once in ṣadaqah. One hour, one cancellation, one act of giving — and you have touched both halves of the question you will be asked.

CHAPTER NINE

The Prayer We Rush



You prayed ʿAṣr today. Try now to remember it.

Not whether you prayed — you know that you did. I mean *remember* it. What did you recite in the second rakʿah? Was there a moment, at any point in it, when you were aware of standing before Allah? Can you locate one second of it?

For most of us there is nothing there. Not a poor prayer, and not a distracted one — **an absent one**, performed completely and correctly, in the total absence of the man performing it. The body present, the obligation discharged, and nobody home.

This is the strangest sin in the book, because on the outside it cannot be told apart from obedience.

The warning is for people who pray

﴿ فَوَيْلٌ لِّلْمُصَلِّينَ ۝ ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَن صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ ﴾

"So woe to those who pray — those who are heedless of their prayer."

— Sūrah al-Māʿūn 107:4–5 ♦

Read carefully who it is that receives the *woe.*

Not those who abandoned the prayer, and not the disbelievers. *Al-muṣallīn* — **the praying ones.** The men in the rows. Us.

And then the qualifier: *ʿan ṣalātihim sāhūn* — heedless **of** their prayer. The commentators weigh the preposition with care: not heedless *in* their prayer, which would describe the wandering mind that every one of us fights, but heedless *about* it — treating the prayer itself as a thing of no consequence, to be put off, squeezed in, discharged and forgotten.

That distinction matters, and it ought to lift a fear you may have been carrying. **The ayah is not condemning you for a distracted mind.** Every human being who has ever prayed has struggled there. It condemns the *posture*: prayer as an item to be cleared rather than an appointment to be kept.

The word *sāhūn* shares its root with the *sahw* of the prostration of forgetfulness. It is the language of absence — of a thing slipping out of mind while the body carries on without it.

The prayer he ﷺ called hypocritical

> تِلْكَ صَلاَةُ الْمُنَافِقِ يَجْلِسُ يَرْقُبُ الشَّمْسَ حَتَّى إِذَا كَانَتْ بَيْنَ قَرْنَىِ الشَّيْطَانِ قَامَ فَنَقَرَ أَرْبَعًا لاَ يَذْكُرُ اللَّهَ فِيهَا إِلاَّ قَلِيلاً
>
> *"That is the prayer of the hypocrite: he sits watching the sun until, when it is between the two horns of Shayṭān, he rises and pecks four — remembering Allah in them only a little."*
>
> — Narrated from Anas ibn Mālik. Jāmiʿ at-Tirmidhī 160 (*Kitāb aṣ-Ṣalāh*), graded ṣaḥīḥ. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 622 reports the same event in slightly different words. ♦

Three details, and each is a diagnosis.

"He sits watching." He is not busy. There is no emergency upon him and he is not trapped at his work. He is *available*, and he waits, deliberately, while the window narrows, knowing how much time remains. He is running a countdown.

"He pecks." *Naqara* — the word used of a bird striking at seed. Rapid, shallow, repeated, the head going down and up with no pause at the bottom of it. Any man who has watched a pigeon eat can see this prayer perfectly. And any honest man has performed it.

"Remembering Allah only a little." The final measure is not the count of rakʿah, which was correct — four, as required — but how much *Allah* was in them. The answer given is: scarcely any.

And see what is *not* being criticised. The man's prayer is valid. He prayed four, it fell within the time, and had you stood and watched him you would have seen nothing amiss. **The whole of the defect is invisible from outside**, which is why this one can run for decades without ever being flagged by anybody, ourselves included.

The theft

> وَأَسْوَأُ السَّرِقَةِ الَّذِي يَسْرِقُ صَلاَتَهُ . قَالُوا وَكَيْفَ يَسْرِقُ صَلاَتَهُ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قَالَ لاَ يُتِمُّ رُكُوعَهَا وَلاَ سُجُودَهَا
>
> *"The worst thief among people is the one who steals from his prayer."* They said: *"O Messenger of Allah, how does he steal from his prayer?"* He said: **"He does not complete its bowing or its prostration."**
>
> — Narrated from an-Nuʿmān ibn Murra (*mursal*). Muwaṭṭaʾ Mālik 403. The connected route, from Abū Qatādah, is in Musnad Aḥmad; al-Albānī graded it *ṣaḥīḥ*. ♦

The worst thief. Not a thief among others — the worst of them.

And consider who is being stolen from. Every other theft takes from a man, who notices it and may one day be compensated. This one takes from an act you are performing *for your own benefit*, offered to the One who needs nothing from it. The only party who loses anything is you. You are picking your own pocket, at speed, five times a day.

The Prophet ﷺ once watched a man pray hurriedly and told him: *"Go back and pray, for you have not prayed."* The man repeated it three times, and three times received the same instruction, until at last he confessed that he did not know how to do better and was taught (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 757; also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). The verdict is the arresting part: **"you have not prayed."** Not *your prayer was poor.* The performance had been so emptied of stillness that it did not register as the act at all.

*

The only party who loses anything is you. You are picking your own pocket, five times a day.

How this became invisible

The obligation is binary, and our attention followed it there. Prayed, or did not. Five ticks by the day's end. And because the requirement can be counted, the *count* became the whole relationship — while quality, which cannot be counted, quietly ceased to be part of the question. A man can go years with a perfect record and never once ask what was inside any of them.

Lateness became normal, and then respectable. It has a vocabulary of its own now — *I'll combine them later*, *I'll catch it before Maghrib*, *I'm on the last window*. We speak of the prayer window as we speak of a deadline: a thing to be met at its outer edge, with pushing it toward the end treated as a species of efficiency. But Allah called it *kitāban mawqūtā* — a decree of fixed times (an-Nisā' 4:103). And when the Prophet ﷺ was asked which deed is most beloved to Allah, he said:

"The prayer at its time" (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 527; also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). At its time. Not within its window.

The phone entered the prayer. Not always in the hand — but always in the head. You carry the last notification with you into the rukūʿ. And the phone has trained us, all day, every day, into a shallow, fragmented, rapidly switching attention — and then we stand up and expect that same mind to hold still for four minutes. It cannot. **Khushūʿ is no longer only a spiritual problem; it is partly a downstream effect of what our attention has been doing for the other twenty-three hours.**

And we began to think of it as a debt rather than an appointment. A debt is a thing you settle in order to be free of it. An appointment is a thing you *attend*. The same five prayers work in entirely different ways depending upon which of the two you believe you are doing — and almost nothing in the outward act betrays which it is.

What we are losing

This is not chiefly about validity, and it should not leave you scrupulous and anxious about whether your prayers "count" — validity is a scholar's question. The question here is what the prayer was *for*.

﴿ إِنَّ ٱلصَّلَوٰةَ تَنۡهَىٰ عَنِ ٱلۡفَحۡشَآءِ وَٱلۡمُنكَرِ ﴾

"Indeed, prayer restrains from immorality and wrongdoing."

— Sūrah al-ʻAnkabūt 29:45 ♦

That is a claim about *function*. The prayer is meant to do something to you — to leave a residue behind it that changes the hours in between.

The question that binds this chapter to every other chapter of Part Two is: **is it?** Is your prayer restraining anything? Is there any observable difference between the man you were at two o'clock and the man you are at twenty past, having prayed Ẓuhr?

If the honest answer is no — the prayer happens and nothing moves — then the trouble is probably not your fiqh. We have been performing the outward form of an act designed to transform us, getting the form exactly right, and expecting the transformation of a thing we were never present for.

This is what chapter three was about. The five prayers are Islam's built-in interruption of ghaflah; the fog is scheduled to be cut open five times daily. **We have learned to perform the interruption without ever being interrupted.**

The way back

Mend the timing before you attempt the presence. Nearly all rushed prayer is *late* prayer — the peck exists because the window is closing. Pray at the beginning of the time and the hurry evaporates

before you have done a single thing about your heart. This one change repairs more than any technique of concentration.

Stop at the bottom. In rukūʿ and in sujūd, come to a complete stop and say the tasbīḥ three times, unhurried, before you move. Only that. Most stolen prayer is stolen at those two points, and twenty seconds added to a prayer is not a demanding act of worship — but it turns a peck into a prayer.

Give it thirty seconds of runway. Do not arrive at Allāhu akbar straight out of a notification. Sit for half a minute first, with the phone in another room — not on silent, in *another room*. The prayer begins before the takbīr does.

Learn what you are saying. A great deal of absence in prayer is a mind with nothing to hold on to; no man can be present in words that mean nothing to him. Learn the translation of al-Fātiḥah properly, phrase by phrase, and discover that you have been holding a conversation all along, one in which Allah answers you line by line.

And when the mind wanders — it will — come back without commentary. No internal investigation into your own sincerity, which is itself a distraction wearing the dress of piety. Notice, return, continue. The returning *is* the worship. A prayer in which you drifted twenty times and returned twenty times is twenty separate acts of choosing Allah over the noise, not a failed prayer.

Begin with one. Not all five. Choose one prayer tomorrow — Fajr, or whichever comes easiest — and pray it as though it were the only prayer of your life. One properly attended prayer will remind you what the other four are supposed to feel like, and that memory will do more work than any quantity of resolve.

The Prophet ﷺ likened prayer to a river running at your door, in which you bathe five times a day, leaving no filth upon you (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 528; also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim).

The river has not gone anywhere. We have merely learned to run past it five times a day and arrive at the far side still dusty, wondering why nothing feels clean.

*

SIT WITH THIS

Think back to your last prayer. Can you recall one single moment of it? Not guilt — data. And then the harder question: what is different about me in the twenty minutes after I pray?

THIS WEEK

Choose one prayer each day. For that one, put the phone in another room, pray it at the start of its time, and come to a full stop in every rukūʿ and every sujūd. One prayer. Not five. See what one changes.

CHAPTER TEN

How We Treat People



Your mother said something to you while you were mid-scroll, and you said *"mm."*

You were not being cruel. You would have been genuinely wounded had anyone suggested you were. You simply did not look up — because looking up would have cost something, and the something felt small, and the interruption felt minor.

Now consider that you have done this several thousand times.

This chapter is about the sins we commit against the people who cannot leave us: parents, family, spouses, the friends who have been around long enough that we stopped handling them with care. The people whose very permanence in our lives has quietly become the reason we give them the smallest version of ourselves — because they will still be there afterwards, and everyone else will not.

The command that sits beside tawḥīd

﴿ وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ إِيَّاهُ وَبِٱلْوَٰلِدَيْنِ إِحْسَٰنًا ۚ إِمَّا يَبْلُغَنَّ عِندَكَ ٱلْكِبَرَ أَحَدُهُمَآ أَوْ كِلَاهُمَا فَلَا تَقُل لَّهُمَآ أُفٍّ وَلَا تَنْهَرْهُمَا وَقُل لَّهُمَا قَوْلًا كَرِيمًا ﴾

"Your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them 'uff', nor rebuke them, but speak to them a noble word."

— Sūrah al-Isrā' 17:23♦

Two things are set down in a single sentence: worship Allah alone, and treat your parents well. There is no gap between them. Of everything that might have been joined to the foundational command of the religion, **this** was.

And then the particular instruction, which is what makes this ayah devastating: *lā taqul lahumā uff.*

"Uff" is not even a word. It is a sound: the breath let out through the teeth, the small sigh of irritation, the *tsk* a man makes when he has been asked the same question twice. It is the smallest unit of disrespect a human being can emit; you could not construct a lesser offence if you tried.

And Allah forbade it by name.

That tells you where the floor lies. Not shouting, not disobedience, not neglect — **the sigh.** Most of us have already passed that limit today, without the faintest awareness of having done anything at all.

Then the ayah goes on to say what should stand in its place:

﴿ وَٱخْفِضْ لَهُمَا جَنَاحَ ٱلذُّلِّ مِنَ ٱلرَّحْمَةِ وَقُل رَّبِّ ٱرْحَمْهُمَا كَمَا رَبَّيَانِى صَغِيرًا ﴾

"And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy, and say: My Lord, have mercy upon them as they raised me when I was small."

— Sūrah al-Isrā' 17:24

The image is a bird lowering its wing — the gesture a parent bird makes to shelter its young. The child is being asked to make, toward the parent, the very gesture the parent once made toward him. The care is being *returned*, in the same shape in which it arrived.

The tie you cannot cut

> لَا يَدْخُلُ الْجَنَّةَ قَاطِعُ رَحِمٍ
>
> *"The one who severs the ties of kinship will not enter Paradise."*
>
> — Narrated from Jubayr ibn Muṭʿim. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2556b (*Kitāb al-Birr*); also Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

A short sentence, and unqualified, and it is worth letting it weigh what it weighs.

Now — to sever a tie is not the same as keeping distance from someone who genuinely harms you. The scholars have always recognised that a man may limit his contact with someone abusive while still discharging the obligation of the tie through du'ā', through sending what is owed, through refusing to become his enemy. If that is your situation, take it to someone qualified who knows the particulars. **I am not writing about people escaping harm.**

I am writing about the far more common thing: ties that were never severed by any decision at all. The aunt you have not called in three years. The cousin you unfollowed after a disagreement nobody now remembers. The sibling with whom things simply *cooled* — no rupture, no argument, only a slow drift that neither of you named and neither of you will now cross.

That is how most kinship dies. Not in a quarrel. In an unreturned call, repeated for a decade.

And the standard the Prophet ﷺ set for its repair is far above mere reciprocity:

لَيْسَ الْوَاصِلُ بِالْمُكَافِئِ، وَلَكِنِ الْوَاصِلُ الَّذِي إِذَا قَطَعَتْ رَحِمُهُ وَصَلَهَا

"The one who maintains ties is not the one who reciprocates. Rather, the one who maintains ties is the one who, when his ties are cut, restores them."

— Narrated from ʿAbdullāh ibn ʿAmr. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 5991 (*Kitāb al-Adab*). ♦

So *"I called last time"* is not a position within this religion. It is an accounting we invented so that our own silence might be somebody else's fault.

Suspicion, which we call reading people

﴿ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ ٱجْتَنِبُواْ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ ٱلظَّنِّ إِنَّ بَعْضَ ٱلظَّنِّ إِثْمٌ ﴾

"O you who believe, avoid much suspicion. Indeed, some suspicion is sin."

— Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt 49:12 ♦

> إِيَّاكُمْ وَالظَّنَّ، فَإِنَّ الظَّنَّ أَكْذَبُ الْحَدِيثِ
>
> *"Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the most false of speech."*
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6064 (*Kitāb al-Adab*); also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

The most false of speech. The **falsest** — ranked below outright lying, because a liar at least knows that he lies. Suspicion manufactures a fiction and then files it as a finding.

This one has flourished in the particular conditions of digital life, for we now conduct half of our relationships through a medium that carries **no tone whatsoever.** A short reply. A delay. A read receipt with no answer beneath it. A story posted while your message sits unanswered. Each of these is a blank, and a blank is filled by whatever we bring to it — and we fill it, with great reliability, using the least generous reading available.

Then we build upon the fiction. We adjust our tone. He notices and adjusts his. And a relationship cools over a meaning **that was never in the original message** — because there was no meaning in it at all. He was driving, or tired, or he had simply forgotten.

The obligation runs the other way. *Ḥusn aẓ-ẓann* — assuming the best — is a discipline rather than naïveté, and it costs nothing to apply, because in the overwhelming majority of cases the generous reading happens also to be the accurate one.

A blank gets filled by whatever we bring to it. We reliably fill it with the least generous available reading.

Anger, and the honesty defence

A man came to the Prophet ﷺ asking for counsel. He said: *"Do not become angry."* The man asked again. Again: *"Do not become angry."* And again, and each time the same answer (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6116).

And:

> لَيْسَ الشَّدِيدُ بِالصُّرَعَةِ، إِنَّمَا الشَّدِيدُ الَّذِي يَمْلِكُ نَفْسَهُ عِنْدَ الْغَضَبِ
>
> *"The strong man is not the one who overpowers others in wrestling. The strong man is the one who controls himself at the moment of anger."*
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6114 (*Kitāb al-Adab*); also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

We have a whole vocabulary now for keeping the anger and shedding the shame: *setting boundaries*, *not tolerating disrespect*, *being real*. Some of that language names something genuine. A great deal of it is a permission slip, and each of us knows which is which in his own case, even when he will not say it aloud.

And there is a specific modern arena for this: the argument conducted in text, at a distance, before an audience. Comment sections. Group chats. Quote-tweets. Every feature of that environment is calibrated to escalate — you cannot see the face, you cannot hear the voice, there are onlookers whose regard you are managing, and you have unlimited time in which to sharpen a sentence you could never have composed aloud.

The Muslim, he ﷺ said, is the one **from whose tongue and hand people are safe** (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 10; also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim). Nobody has yet located the clause exempting those parts of us that operate through a keyboard.

The promises nobody counts

> آيَةُ الْمُنَافِقِ ثَلَاثٌ إِذَا حَدَّثَ كَذَبَ، وَإِذَا وَعَدَ أَخْلَفَ، وَإِذَا اؤْتُمِنَ خَانَ
>
> *"The signs of a hypocrite are three: when he speaks, he lies; when he promises, he breaks it; and when he is entrusted, he betrays."*
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 33 (*Kitāb al-Īmān*); also Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

When he promises, he breaks it. Sitting there in a list about hypocrisy.

And we break promises constantly, in a register so casual that it has ceased to count as promising at all. *I'll call you back. Let's definitely meet up. I'll send it tonight. I'm on my way* — sent from the sofa. *Next week, for sure.*

None of it feels like a lie, because none of it feels like a commitment. But something was said, someone arranged an expectation around it, and it did not happen. Repeat that for years and you become a man whose word carries no information. The people around you adjust to it quietly, without ever telling you, which is why the cost is never visible to the man paying it.

The way back

Look up. That is the first, and it is not a metaphor. When someone in your house speaks to you, put the phone face down and turn your head. This one act, performed steadily for a week, will change more in your closest relationships than any quantity of resolve, and it costs four seconds.

Say the du'ā' for your parents, and mean it. *Rabbi'rḥamhumā kamā rabbayānī ṣaghīrā.* Allah placed it in the ayah for you to use. And if they have passed, this and your ṣadaqah on their behalf remain open — the door does not close with them.

Make one call. You already know whose. Not a message — a call. And do not rehearse an explanation for the silence, because he does not need one and you do not have a good one. Only call. Almost every severed tie in our lives is being held apart by nothing more substantial than the mild awkwardness of the first ninety seconds.

Choose the generous reading, deliberately, every time. When you catch yourself building a story out of a delayed reply, stop and construct the charitable version instead — not because it is kind, but because it is usually *true*, and because the Prophet ﷺ named the other thing the falsest of speech.

And learn to be the one who lets it go.

﴿ وَلْيَعْفُوا۟ وَلْيَصْفَحُوٓا۟ ۗ أَلَا تُحِبُّونَ أَن يَغْفِرَ ٱللَّهُ لَكُمْ ﴾

"...and let them pardon and overlook. Do you not love that Allah should forgive you?"

— Sūrah an-Nūr 24:22

That ayah asks a question no man can answer honestly and remain unmoved. You are, at this very moment, hoping to be dealt with by Allah far more generously than you deal with anyone — while holding a grudge against a man over something far smaller than what you are asking Him to overlook.

SIT WITH THIS

Who have you not spoken to in over a year — not because anything happened, but because nothing did? Name him. Then notice that you are almost certainly waiting for him to go first, and that he is almost certainly doing the same.

THIS WEEK

Call that person. Not a message — a call. Do not prepare an explanation for the silence; he does not need one. And separately, once this week, when someone in your house speaks to you, put the phone face down and look up before you answer.

Closing Part Two

Seven chapters, and one question repeated in all of them: what have we stopped noticing? If you have read them honestly, you are carrying something now, and it should be named.

That weight is not the point, and never was. It is the polish of chapter one beginning to work: the fog has thinned enough for you to see, and **seeing was the entire object of Part Two.**

But a man who stops here is worse off than when he began: to see clearly with nowhere to carry it is despair with better information, and despair is its own sin.

So do not set the book down here. Part Three is the reason the other ten chapters exist: there is a door, it is wider than you have allowed yourself to believe, and it has never once been closed against anyone who turned toward it.



PART THREE — THE WAY BACK

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tawbah: The Door That Doesn't Close



There was once a man who murdered a hundred people.

He had killed ninety-nine, and then he asked whether there was any repentance for him. He was directed to a monk, who told him there was none. So he killed the monk also, and completed the hundred.

And still he kept asking. He was directed to a man of knowledge, who said to him: *"Who could possibly stand between you and repentance?"* — and instructed him to leave his land, which was a land of evil, and travel to a land where Allah is worshipped.

He set out. And on the road, death came for him.

The angels of mercy and the angels of punishment disputed over him. The angels of mercy said: *he came repentant, turning with his heart toward Allah.* The angels of punishment said: *he never did a single good deed.* An arbitrator was sent, who told them to measure the distance to each land — and whichever he was nearer to, to that he belonged. They measured, and found him nearer to the land he was travelling toward, and the angels of mercy took him.

(Narrated from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2766a; also Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī — muttafaq ʿalayh.)

Now sit with what that story establishes.

A hundred murders, and one of them a man of religion. Not one good deed in the whole of his life — the angels of punishment say so, and nobody contradicts them. He never prayed a prayer. He never gave a coin. His repentance was never even completed; he arrived nowhere, worshipped in no land, and had no chance to prove a single thing.

He was **facing the right direction, and he was moving.** That was the entire content of his repentance. And it was enough.

Now measure your own file against his, and tell me honestly whether yours is the harder case.

The chapter opens with this because, after the ten behind us, a particular thought will have formed in some of you, and it is more dangerous than everything in those ten chapters put together: *this is too much, it has gone too far, I have done this too many times for it to count now.*

That thought is a lie, and the man on the road is Allah's own answer to it.

The address

﴿ قُلْ يَٰعِبَادِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا۟ عَلَىٰٓ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا۟ مِن رَّحْمَةِ ٱللَّهِ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ ٱلذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُۥ هُوَ ٱلْغَفُورُ ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴾

"Say: O My servants who have transgressed against themselves — do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful."

— Sūrah az-Zumar 39:53 ♦

Take this ayah apart slowly, for there is more mercy packed into the one verse than most of us have ever unpacked in a lifetime.

"Say." Allah is *instructing* the Prophet ﷺ to announce this — a proclamation He wished to be made, aloud, to people who might otherwise never learn of it, not information released upon request.

"O My servants." He is addressing men in the middle of their sin — men described in the very same breath as having transgressed against themselves — and He calls them *ʿibādī.* **My servants.** With the possessive upon it. He has not disowned them. They have not been reclassified. They are still His, while they are still in it.

"Who have transgressed against themselves." Not *against Me.* The wrong is described as self-injury — because that is what it is, and because He is not the injured party here.

"Do not despair." The first command in the verse is not *repent* but **stop despairing.** Allah addresses the despair before He addresses the sin, because He knows which of the two is holding us where we are.

"Allah forgives all sins." *Jamīʿā.* All of them — not those committed in ignorance, or committed once, or committed long ago. The Qur'an declines to attach the exceptions that you and I would certainly have written into it.

That verse was, by the accounts of the commentators, revealed for people who believed themselves beyond reach. It has never once stopped being addressed to them.

He wants this from you

The hardest part for people to accept is not believing they will be forgiven. It is believing that Allah *wants* it.

> اللَّهُ أَفْرَحُ بِتَوْبَةِ عَبْدِهِ مِنْ أَحَدِكُمْ سَقَطَ عَلَى بَعِيرِهِ، وَقَدْ أَضَلَّهُ فِي أَرْضٍ فَلَاةٍ
>
> *"Allah is more joyful at the repentance of His servant than one of you who comes upon his camel, having lost it in a barren land."*
>
> — Narrated from Anas ibn Mālik. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6309 (*Kitāb ad-Daʿawāt*). This is the whole of the narration at this reference. Longer tellings of the same event — the man sleeping, waking to find the mount gone, then finding it again — are reported elsewhere, including Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6308 and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, in different words. ♦

The man in that image is not inconvenienced. He is in a desert, his water is gone, and he has lain down beneath a tree to die. He has passed through hope and come out the far side of it.

And then the camel is *there*.

The joy described is the joy of a man who had already accepted his own death and has just been handed back his life. A joy so violent that his tongue fails him and the words come out reversed.

And the Prophet ﷺ tells us that Allah's joy at your repentance is greater than that.

Not that Allah accepts it, or permits it — **Allah rejoices**, and He is described, in the strongest human comparison available to us, as more joyful than a man delivered from certain death.

Whatever picture you carry of a reluctant Judge waiting to be talked round — a Lord who must be persuaded, who tolerates your return with some coolness after what you have done — that picture is not from Islam. It came from somewhere else, and it has done immense damage to people who deserved far better.

*

Allah does not merely accept your return. He rejoices at it — more than a man in a desert who thought he was going to die.

The door has opening hours you should know

> إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ يَبْسُطُ يَدَهُ بِاللَّيْلِ لِيَتُوبَ مُسِيءُ النَّهَارِ وَيَبْسُطُ يَدَهُ بِالنَّهَارِ لِيَتُوبَ مُسِيءُ اللَّيْلِ حَتَّى تَطْلُعَ الشَّمْسُ مِنْ مَغْرِبِهَا
>
> *"Allah extends His hand by night, that the one who sinned by day may repent. And He extends His hand by day, that the one who sinned by night may repent — until the sun rises from its place of setting."*
>
> — Narrated from Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2759a (*Kitāb at-Tawbah*). ♦

There is no hour in which the hand is drawn back. The day covers the sins of the night, the night covers the sins of the day, and **the coverage has no gap in it.** Whenever it was that you sinned, an open hand is already extended for exactly that window.

And for the individual man the deadline is generous almost past belief: repentance is accepted until the soul reaches the throat (Jāmiʿ at-Tirmidhī 3537). Not until you turn forty, and not until some quota is exhausted — until the final moments of a life.

So there is no such thing as *too late* for as long as you can read this sentence.

What is required, and what is not

So what does it take? The scholars, drawing upon the texts, gather it to this — an-Nawawī sets it out in his introduction to the chapters on repentance:

Stop the sin. Now, in the present — not eventually.

Regret it. Feel it as a wrong and not as an inconvenience. The Prophet ﷺ said: *"Regret is repentance"* (Sunan Ibn Mājah 4252).

Resolve not to return. Sincerely intend, at this moment, never to go back to it. This is a resolve and not a guarantee: you are required to *mean* it now, not to predict the whole of your future correctly.

And if a right of another person was involved — money taken, honour damaged, a wrong done — that right must be restored, or his pardon sought. Allah forgives what is owed to Him readily. What is owed to people is a separate account, and the bankrupt man of chapter four is what happens when it goes unsettled.

That is all of it. No waiting period, no penance performed first, no qualifying measure of suffering, no required quantity of emotion. The transaction completes at the moment you turn.

And then this:

﴿ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلتَّوَّٰبِينَ وَيُحِبُّ ٱلْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ ﴾

"Indeed, Allah loves those who repeatedly turn to Him, and He loves those who purify themselves."

— Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:222♦

At-tawwābīn — the intensive form. Not "those who repented once" but **those who turn back again, and again, and again.** The grammar itself anticipates the repetition. Allah did not describe Himself as loving those who repent flawlessly at the first attempt; He described Himself as loving *those who keep returning*.

On the repentance you have already broken

This is the wound most of us are carrying, so it deserves to be met directly.

You have repented from something before. Properly — you wept, you meant it, you were certain. And then you did it again, sometimes within days. And after that had happened three or four times, something quietly shifted: you stopped repenting. Not because you had stopped caring, but because it had begun to feel **dishonest.** Like promising Allah a thing you now had evidence you would not deliver.

That reasoning feels like humility. It is the single most effective argument Iblīs possesses, and it works upon the sincere far better than upon the careless.

A hadith qudsī takes it apart:

> *Allah, the Most High, said:* **"A servant committed a sin and said: 'O Allah, forgive me my sin.'** *And Allah said:* **'My servant committed a sin and knew that he has a Lord who forgives sin and takes to account for sin.'** *Then he sinned again and said the same, and Allah said the same. Then he sinned a third time and said the same, and Allah said:* **'My servant has known that he has a Lord who forgives sin and takes to account for sin — do what you wish, for I have forgiven you.'**
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 7507 (*Kitāb at-Tawḥīd*) and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2758a (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

The scholars are careful with that final phrase — *"do what you wish"* does not license sinning. It means: **so long as you keep doing this — sinning, and then genuinely returning — I will keep forgiving you.** The very cycle you believed had disqualified you is the cycle being described here, and it is described *approvingly.*

And see what Allah praises in each round of it — not the servant's success, but **his knowing that he has a Lord who forgives.** The turning back itself, once more, after failing, is what is being rewarded.

So the broken repentance did not close your account. Every return counted at the moment you made it. Sin, repent, sin, repent — for a lifetime, if that is what it takes — is not a failed spiritual life. **It is the spiritual life.**

And look again at who Allah is addressing in the ayah this chapter turns on. Not those who kept themselves clean. *Those who have transgressed against themselves* — the address assumes the sin before it offers the mercy. Which is the only category any of us has ever occupied.

The way back

Do it now, before you finish this chapter. Not tonight, not after 'Ishā', not once you have sorted yourself out first — the instinct to clean yourself up before approaching is backwards, because He is the one who cleans. Right where you are sitting: name it to Him, feel the regret, ask, and mean it. It takes twenty seconds.

Name the sin specifically. Say the actual thing, not a general request for forgiveness. Vague repentance is how we avoid ever really looking at what we did, and the looking is a great part of what changes us.

Then change one condition. Not your whole life — one input. Repentance from a sin whose enabling circumstances all remain in place is sincere, but it is structurally fragile. Move the phone. Leave the chat. Close the account. Make the return a little harder than it was.

And settle what is owed to people. The money, the apology, the honour taken in a conversation. This is the part we skip, and it is the part with a creditor attached.

When you fall again — and you will — return the same day. Do not let one lapse become a week. The gap between the sin and the return is where all the real damage occurs, because that is where despair moves in and begins making arguments. Shorten the gap. That is the whole of the discipline.

Whatever you carried into this book — however long it has been running, however many times you have tried — there is a man on a road somewhere who killed a hundred people and never arrived anywhere at all, and the angels of mercy took him because he was *facing the right way*.

You are facing the right way. You are reading this.

That is already the beginning.

*

SIT WITH THIS

What have you stopped repenting from because you assumed it would not hold? Name it — silently is fine. And notice that the reason you stopped asking was never that Allah had stopped answering.

THIS WEEK

Before you sleep tonight, repent from one specific thing by name. Then tomorrow, if you fall into it again, repent again the same day — without the internal speech about how pointless it is. Do this for seven days. You are not practising perfection. You are practising **returning**, and that is the skill this whole book is about.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ikhlāṣ: Getting the Root Right



Imam al-Bukhārī opened his entire collection with it. Of all the narrations available to him — thousands, sifted across a lifetime — he chose this one to stand first, ahead of anything about prayer, or belief, or the life of the Prophet ﷺ:

> إِنَّمَا الْأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّاتِ، وَإِنَّمَا لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مَا نَوَى
>
> *"Actions are only by intentions, and every person shall have only what he intended."*
>
> — Narrated from ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 1 — the first hadith of the collection — and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

Look at the example the Prophet ﷺ chose to illustrate it.

He reached for the **hijrah** — the defining sacrifice of that whole generation. Leaving home, property, tribe and safety; crossing a desert; arriving with nothing at all. There was no harder or more visible act of faith available to him.

And two men perform it. Identically. The same road, the same dangers, the same losses, arriving in the same city upon the same day. From the outside — and from the inside of the historical record — they did exactly the same thing.

One of them did it for Allah. And one of them did it because there was a woman in Madinah he wished to marry.

And the Prophet ﷺ says: each of them received what he came for. The second man is not condemned, and is not called a hypocrite or a liar. He *receives what he was after*. He wanted a marriage; he got a marriage. That was the whole transaction, and it has now closed.

There is nothing wrong with the deed. The deed was magnificent. It was simply not addressed to anyone.

Which is why ikhlāṣ is not one virtue among many

Chapter six was about riyā', the disease. This chapter is the health, and the relationship between them is not symmetrical.

Riyā' is a sin a man commits. Ikhlāṣ is more than its absence: **it is the thing that gives every other act its value.** Without it, none of the rest is transacting at all.

Think of your deeds as a long line of digits. Prayer, fasting, charity, kindness, restraint, years upon years of it. Ikhlāṣ is the numeral at the front of the line. Get it right and the whole line has worth. Get it wrong and you hold an extremely long number that begins with a zero — and the length of it makes no difference whatever.

﴿ وَمَآ أُمِرُوٓاْ إِلَّا لِيَعۡبُدُواْ ٱللَّهَ مُخۡلِصِينَ لَهُ ٱلدِّينَ ﴾

"And they were not commanded except to worship Allah, being sincere to Him in religion."

— Sūrah al-Bayyinah 98:5 ♦

"They were commanded nothing except..." — the whole content of the command, reduced to worship and sincerity. Not worship *and also* sincerity, two items on a list, but worship *in a state of* sincerity, one single thing.

The refusal

أَنَا أَغْنَى الشُّرَكَاءِ عَنِ الشِّرْكِ مَنْ عَمِلَ عَمَلاً أَشْرَكَ فِيهِ مَعِي غَيْرِي تَرَكْتُهُ وَشِرْكَهُ

Allah said: **"I am the most self-sufficient of partners, having no need of association. Whoever performs a deed in which he associates another with Me, I leave him and his association."**

— Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2985 (*Kitāb az-Zuhd*). ♦

Taraktuhu wa shirkah. **I leave him and his partnership.**

There is a kind of dignity in that answer which ought to be felt rather than analysed. Allah does not take the portion of the deed that was meant for Him and discard the remainder, or salvage a percentage. He steps away from the whole of it and leaves it entirely with the other party.

Which is perfectly just, when you sit with it. If part of the deed was addressed to people, let the people pay for it. And they did — in chapter six's phrase, *"and it was said."* They paid in full, at the time.

The upside nobody talks about

All of the above sounds like a threat, and two chapters have now gone to the downside of intention. But ikhlāṣ runs in the opposite direction too, and it is among the most liberating ideas in the religion.

If intention can hollow out a great deed, it can also fill an ordinary one.

The hijrah of the second man was a mountain reduced to nothing by its intention. And the principle runs both ways: a small, unremarkable, entirely worldly act can be lifted into worship by nothing more than where it is pointed.

Which means that all of the following are available to you today, and cost nothing extra:

Sleeping — so that you may rise for Fajr with a clear head. Eating — so that you have the strength to worship. Going to work — to earn lawfully, to keep your family from need, to be able to give. Being pleasant to a colleague — because he ﷺ said a smile in your brother's face is charity (Jāmiʿ at-Tirmidhī 1956). Exercising — because a strong

believer is more beloved to Allah than a weak one (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2664). Studying. Cooking. Driving your mother somewhere.

Not one of those changes *at all* in its outward form. And every one of them may be worship or may be nothing, according to a decision that takes half a second and that nobody but Allah will ever detect.

This is what people mean when they say Islam draws no line between the sacred and the secular. **It is a mechanism rather than a slogan, and the mechanism is intention.** Most of us live as though we possess five or six worshipful minutes in a day and sixteen hours of neutral filler. That was never true. The filler is convertible; we just never convert it, because we never point it anywhere.

ʿAbdullāh ibn al-Mubārak said it in one line, and Ibn Rajab set it down in his commentary on this very hadith:

> *A small deed may be great because of the intention behind it — and a great deed may be insignificant because of the intention behind it.*
>
> — ʿAbdullāh ibn al-Mubārak, cited by Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wa'l-Ḥikam*. ♦

Both halves of that sentence are in the hadith of the two migrants. The second half is the man who came for the marriage. The first half is available to you this afternoon, in the car, over the washing up, at your desk.

The distance between a wasted day and a day of worship is very often not a single changed action. It is an aim.

If intention can hollow out a great deed, it can also fill an ordinary one. The filler is convertible.

Being realistic about mixed intentions

Now the honest part — because if you try to apply this rigorously for a single day you will walk into a wall.

Almost nothing you do has one clean motive.

You give charity, and part of it is for Allah, and part of it is that giving makes you feel like a decent man. You pray in the masjid, and part of it is love of the prayer, and part is that you would feel strange being absent. You are patient with a difficult relative, and part of it is Allah, and part is that you do not want the argument.

If the standard were an undiluted purity of motive, no man would ever perform an accepted deed — and the men who wrote most extensively on this were the very ones most acutely aware of it. Ibn Rajab gathers their words in a short section he calls, simply, *About Sincerity*, and this one ought to be read by every man who has ever caught himself out mid-deed:

> *Sincerity is the most precious thing in this life. I am used to striving hard to rid my heart of boastfulness — but unfortunately it appears as if it were planted in it, in a different colour.*
>
> — Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn ar-Rāzī, cited by Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wa'l-Ḥikam*. ♦

Sit with that. He does not say he failed to uproot the boastfulness. He says he uprooted it — and it grew back **in a different colour**, so that he

did not recognise it as the same plant, and had to begin the work all over again.

That is a man of the early generations describing your Tuesday.

So hold on to this, which is the pastorally correct reading of the texts above:

The question is not whether other motives are present. It is which one is load-bearing.

Run the test: *if the other reasons vanished — if nobody would ever know, if there were no social cost to skipping it, if it made you feel nothing at all — would you still do it?*

If yes, the deed is standing upon Allah, and the other motives are passengers. Those passengers are not the sin chapter six described. Riyā' is when the audience is the **engine**, not when it merely happens to be riding in the vehicle.

And you are not asked to *begin* with a perfect intention — you are asked to keep correcting toward one. Ikhlāṣ is a steering input applied again and again during the deed, not a gate you pass through before it.

Why this is the chapter that makes the last one work

Ikhlāṣ stands second to last for a reason.

Deeds done for people have a shelf life exactly as long as the people's attention.

That is the mechanism, and once you have seen it you will recognise it everywhere. The Ramadan that collapses in Shawwāl. The habit that survives while the group chat is alive and dies when it falls quiet. The recitation that stopped when the streak was no longer being posted. The

practising phase that ended when you moved cities and nobody there knew the old you.

None of that is a weakness of character. It is a **power supply problem.** Those deeds were plugged into an audience, and audiences move. When the watching stopped, the current stopped, and the deed stopped. We misdiagnose it as a failure of discipline, and resolve to try harder next time, plugged into the same socket.

Ikhlāṣ is the only power source that does not move. Allah is present in Ramadan and in the tenth month. He is there in the group chat and in the empty flat at three in the morning. He is there when you have moved cities and nobody knows who you used to be.

Which is why sincerity is the precondition of consistency, and not the other way about. No man can sustain a thing indefinitely when the reason he is doing it comes and goes. Mend the *why*, and the *keeping going* becomes possible for the first time.

That is chapter thirteen. But it does not work without this one.

The way back

Ask the question before you begin. Three seconds, silently: *who is this for?* As an actual question with an actual answer, not a ritual. Most people have never put it to themselves about most of their deeds.

Then ask it again halfway through. Riyā' arrives late, when the thing is going well. Correct in flight.

Build the private column. Chapter six said this, and it belongs here too, from the positive side: deeds nobody will ever know of are how you discover whether the engine runs without an audience. They are your only real instrumentation.

Convert something ordinary today. Choose one mundane thing — the commute, the cooking, an hour of your work — and before it, say: *O Allah, this is for You.* Nothing about the act changes. Everything about the act changes.

And keep asking. Ask that Allah accept what was sincere in the deed, and forgive whatever was mixed into it without your noticing. That second half is the honest one. You cannot certify your own heart. Nor can I. What we can do is keep asking the One who can.

Muṭarrif ibn ʿAbdullāh, of the generation after the Companions, used to make a supplication that cannot be improved upon, and it can close this chapter:

> *O Lord, I seek Your forgiveness for the sins I do after I have given them up; and I seek Your forgiveness for the commitments I promised to You but could not fulfil; and I seek Your forgiveness for whatever deed I claimed to have done just for the sake of You — but my heart meant something else.*
>
> — Muṭarrif ibn ʿAbdullāh, cited by Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wa'l-Ḥikam*, in the commentary on the first hadith. ♦

Three admissions, and every one of them is ours. The sin returned to after it was abandoned. The promise made and not kept. And the deed we announced was for Allah while something else in us was quietly collecting.

He did not resolve any of the three. He asked to be forgiven for all of them, and then he went on.

Because in the end:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لاَ يَنْظُرُ إِلَى صُوَرِكُمْ وَأَمْوَالِكُمْ وَلَكِنْ يَنْظُرُ إِلَى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَأَعْمَالِكُمْ

"Allah does not look at your appearances or your wealth. He looks at your hearts and your deeds."

— Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2564c (*Kitāb al-Birr*). ♦

Which cuts in both directions — and the second of them is the mercy.

The impressive record may be worth nothing at all. **And the small, unseen, unremarkable act, pointed correctly, may be worth more than everything visible you have ever done.**

*

SIT WITH THIS

Take one religious act you perform regularly and run the test honestly: if nobody would ever know — not your family, not your friends, no one at all — would you still do it, exactly as you do it now? Sit with the answer rather than arguing with it.

THIS WEEK

Before one ordinary, non-religious thing each day — the commute, the washing up, an hour of work — say silently: *O Allah, this is for You.* Change nothing else. By the seventh day, notice how much of your life had been sitting there unclaimed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Istiqāmah: Small and Steady



You have done this before.

Some night — after a reminder, a funeral, a bad month, the twenty-seventh of Ramadan — you decided that this was it. And the plan was **enormous.** Fajr in the masjid every day. A juz' daily. Tahajjud. Everything cut out at once, beginning tomorrow.

And for four days, or for nine, you were a different man. It was real. You were not pretending.

Then one morning you slept through Fajr, and by the end of that week the whole structure was gone — not reduced, *gone* — and you were back where you had been, plus one new piece of evidence for the prosecution: **that you are a man who does not follow through.**

And then, some months later, you did it all again.

This last chapter argues that the collapse was not a failure of your character. It was a failure of *design* — and the design error is one the Prophet ﷺ warned us of explicitly, and one that sincere Muslims repeat for the whole of their adult lives.

The whole religion in two words

A man came and asked for something he would never need to ask of anyone else:

> قُلْتُ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ قُلْ لِي فِي الإِسْلاَمِ قَوْلاً لاَ أَسْأَلُ عَنْهُ أَحَدًا بَعْدَكَ قَالَ قُلْ آمَنْتُ بِاللَّهِ فَاسْتَقِمْ
>
> *"I said: O Messenger of Allah, tell me something about Islam about which I need ask no one after you."* He said: **"Say — 'I believe in Allah' — then be steadfast."**
>
> — Narrated from Sufyān ibn ʿAbdillāh ath-Thaqafī. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 38 (*Kitāb al-Īmān*). A compiler's note on a variant chain, which sits inside the narration, is not reproduced here. ♦

Given one sentence with which to carry a man for the remainder of his life, the Prophet ﷺ gave him a declaration and a **verb**.

Not believe, then achieve; not believe, then reach the following standard. Believe, **then stay.** *Fa'staqim* — remain upright, keep to the straight road, hold your position.

Because that is where the difficulty lies. Almost nobody reading this has a problem of belief. You believe; you believed through every chapter of Part Two, including the ones that stung. What we have is a problem of *staying* — and the religion knows it, named it, and made it the answer to the last question a man would ever get to ask.

﴿ إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّنَا ٱللَّهُ ثُمَّ ٱسْتَقَٰمُوا۟ تَتَنَزَّلُ عَلَيْهِمُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا۟ وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا۟ وَأَبْشِرُوا۟ بِٱلْجَنَّةِ ٱلَّتِى كُنتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ ﴾

"Indeed, those who have said 'Our Lord is Allah' and then remained steadfast — the angels descend upon them: 'Do not fear, and do not grieve, and receive good tidings of the Paradise which you were promised.'"

— Sūrah Fuṣṣilat 41:30 ♦

The same structure again: a statement, and then *thumma istaqāmū*. And what is promised first is not a reward but **the lifting of fear and of grief** — which, if you consider honestly what you want from your religious life, is nearer the real need than anything else on offer.

Nor is it a small thing that is being asked. In Sūrah Hūd, Allah says: **"So remain steadfast as you have been commanded"** (11:112) — and He says it to the Prophet ﷺ himself. That instruction was laid upon the best of creation. So if it feels heavy in your hands, you are not misreading it.

The design error, named by the one who warned us

> إِنَّ الدِّينَ يُسْرٌ، وَلَنْ يُشَادَّ الدِّينَ أَحَدٌ إِلاَّ غَلَبَهُ، فَسَدِّدُوا وَقَارِبُوا وَأَبْشِرُوا
>
> *"This religion is ease, and no one makes the religion a matter of harshness except that it overcomes him. So be balanced, come close, and receive glad tidings."*
>
> — Narrated from Abū Hurayrah. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 39 (*Kitāb al-Īmān*). ♦

Lan yushādda'd-dīna aḥadun illā ghalabah. No man wrestles with this religion — pushes it into severity, tries to overpower it with intensity — **except that it defeats him.**

Read that as the prediction it is. It does not say the over-ambitious man will be blamed. It says he will be *overcome* — not punished, **outlasted**. The religion will still be there, going at its own steady pace, long after his sprint has ended.

That is what happened on day nine. You did not fail morally. You attempted a pace the Prophet ﷺ told us cannot be held, and you were overcome exactly as described. The outcome was written in the text before you began.

The alternative is given in the same breath: *saddidū wa qāribū* — aim true, and come close. **Come close.** Approximate perfection rather than attain it. Aim well, and land near.

That phrase ought to be printed on the inside of every Muslim's forehead in the first week of Shawwāl.

What Allah loves

> أَحَبُّ الأَعْمَالِ إِلَى اللَّهِ تَعَالَى أَدْوَمُهَا وَإِنْ قَلَّ
>
> *"The most beloved of deeds to Allah are the most consistent of them, even if they are few."*
>
> — Narrated from ʿĀ'ishah. Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 783b (*Kitāb Ṣalāt al-Musāfirīn*); also Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī (*muttafaq ʿalayh*). ♦

This is the sentence the whole book has been walking toward, and it turns nearly everything our instincts tell us upside down.

We assume Allah is most pleased by the *peak*: the extraordinary night, the exceptional month, the intensity. This says otherwise. **The measure is duration, and the text concedes the smallness in so many words.** *Wa in qall* — even if it be little. Allah anticipated the objection (*but it is such a small thing*) and answered it inside the hadith itself.

ʿĀ'ishah also described his ﷺ own practice: *"his action was like a steady rain"* — *dīmah* (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6466; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 783a). Not a storm. A dīmah is a persistent, gentle rainfall that goes on and on, and it is the kind of rain that actually soaks the ground. A downpour runs off the surface and floods. Steady rain is what things grow in.

And he ﷺ said: **"Take on of deeds what you can bear, for Allah does not tire until you tire"** (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 43). The limit is not divine capacity. It is yours. You are being asked to plan around your own real endurance — which makes assessing it honestly an act of obedience, and not an excuse.

*

A downpour runs off the surface and floods.
Steady rain is what things actually grow in.

Why every action in this book was so small

You may have noticed something about the closes of these thirteen chapters, and you may even have been irritated by it.

After a chapter on the tongue that quoted the Qur'an comparing backbiting to cannibalism, the action was: *stay silent once.* After a chapter on ribā containing a declaration of war from Allah: *cancel one subscription.* After the gaze: *charge your phone in another room, for one night.*

Every one of them is almost insultingly small beside the weight of its chapter. That was deliberate, and this is the chapter that owes you the explanation.

Because the survival of the response determines the outcome, not its size. A resolution to lower your gaze perfectly and forever will be dead by Thursday, and it will leave you worse off, because it will have taught you something false about yourself. Moving the charger will still be true in a year.

Because small actions survive bad weeks. You will have a bad week — an illness, a deadline, a grief, a long stretch of low iman. Enormous commitments do not survive those; two minutes does. What matters is not what you manage in the good weeks but what is still standing after the bad one, because that decides whether there is anything left to build upon.

Because the alternative is the cycle, and the cycle corrodes. Sprint, collapse, guilt, delay, sprint. Every turn of it deposits fresh evidence that you are a man who cannot sustain anything — and eventually that belief, and not the sin, becomes the principal obstacle. I would far rather you did one small thing from this book for ten years than everything in it for nine days.

And because small and permanent compounds, and we are terrible at seeing it. Chapter two made this exact argument in the opposite direction: twigs, gathered daily, cook bread. That is how the sins in this book were built — invisible units, enormous frequency. It is the only mechanism proven to work upon you, because it is the one that already did. **You are the product of accumulated small repeated acts. That is no longer a warning. That is a construction method.**

What to do now that you have finished

Pick one thing. One.

Go back through the thirteen chapter closes and choose the single action attached to the chapter that hurt the most — you know which one it was; you very likely wanted to skip it. Take that one action, and nothing else.

Not two. The urge to take three is the very same urge that produced day nine.

Make it so small it is almost embarrassing. Whatever size you are now imagining, halve it. If it is a page of Qur'an, make it three lines; if it is tahajjud, make it two rak'ah, once a week. The goal for the coming month is not progress but a **streak that does not break** — the streak is the skill, and the size can grow later, once the skill exists.

Attach it to something you already do. Do not rely upon remembering. Immediately after Fajr. In the car, before you get out. The moment you sit down at your desk. Existing habits are scaffolding — use them, rather than raising new supports out of nothing.

Decide now what happens when you miss. You will miss. Decide today, while you are calm, that missing one day means you do it the next day, and that it means *nothing else whatsoever* — no re-evaluation, no verdict upon your character, no starting over. The lapse is never what ends these things; the **story about the lapse** is. This is the same discipline as chapter eleven's: shorten the gap, and skip the commentary.

And keep it private. Chapter twelve explained why. A quiet deed nobody knows of runs on a power source that does not move, and it will still be there when the enthusiasm and the audience have both gone.

A last word

We began with a heart that had stopped flinching.

Thirteen chapters later, I hope something in you flinches again — not so that you should carry more guilt, but because that flinch is the instrument working, and a working instrument is the only thing you ever needed. Everything else follows from being able to see.

But leave with the right expectation, because a wrong one will undo all of it.

You are not going to be finished with this. Not this year, not ever. You will read this book, improve, and then find yourself three months from now backbiting in a car park, or scrolling at one in the morning, or rushing ʻAṣr. In that moment you will be tempted to conclude that none of it worked.

It worked. **That you noticed you had done it is the whole of what changed.** Before, it would have passed straight through you without leaving a trace. Now it registers. That is not a relapse. That is the diagnostic equipment functioning exactly as intended.

The goal was never to become a man who does not sin. That man does not exist, was never asked for, and — as the hadith of chapter eleven makes plain — is not the man Allah described Himself as loving. He described Himself as loving *at-tawwābīn*: those who keep coming back.

So: sin, notice, return, continue. Sin, notice, return, continue. For a lifetime, if that is what it takes. That is not a broken religious life. That is what a real one looks like from the inside — and anyone who has told you otherwise was describing something no human being has ever lived.

﴿ وَٱعْبُدْ رَبَّكَ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَكَ ٱلْيَقِينُ ﴾

"And worship your Lord until the certainty comes to you."

— Sūrah al-Ḥijr 15:99♦

Until the certainty comes. Not until you get it right. Not until you feel you have earned something. **Until death** — and the instruction for every single day in between is one and the same: keep going.

One small thing. Beginning today. And not stopping.

May Allah accept from you and from me, forgive us what we have stopped seeing, and make us among those who said *"Our Lord is Allah"* — and then stayed.

آمين

*

SIT WITH THIS

Which chapter did you least want to read? That is your chapter. Not the one you found most interesting — the one you moved through quickly. Go back to it.

THIS WEEK

Take that chapter's action, halve it, attach it to something you already do every day, and begin today. Then keep it for thirty days without adding anything else — however motivated you may feel on day four.

One small thing, kept, is worth more to Allah than everything in this book attempted at once. He told us so, and He was not being lenient with us. He was telling us how it actually works.

A note on the sources

Every Qur'anic verse and every hadith in this book carries its source on the page, so that you can check it. I'd like you to.

A few notes on how they have been handled.

Ahadith are cited by collection, number and book. The numbers follow **sunnah.com**, which prints the canonical number for each collection — so *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 6492* is at *sunnah.com/bukhari:6492*, and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2589* at *sunnah.com/muslim:2589*. Every narration was checked against the Arabic text there before it was printed. Where a narration is agreed upon by both collections but only one number could be confirmed, that number is printed and the other collection named, rather than a second invented.

Where a narration is *muttafaq ʿalayh* — agreed upon by both al-Bukhārī and Muslim — the book says so. That is the highest standard of authentication in the Sunni tradition, and it is what these pages lean on most.

Where a narration comes from the Sunan collections, the collection is named, with a grading where one is well established.

Where a scholar is quoted, the printed edition is named. The passages from Ibn al-Qayyim come from *Al-Fawā'id: A Collection of Wise Sayings* (Umm al-Qurā, 2004). Those from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Fuḍayl ibn ʿIyāḍ, Ibn al-Mubārak, Sahl ibn ʿAbdullāh, Yūsuf ibn al-Ḥusayn ar-Rāzī and Muṭarrif ibn ʿAbdullāh come by way of Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī's *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wa'l-Ḥikam*, and each page says so rather than presenting them at first hand. The wording is that of the English editions, lightly repunctuated for the page.

Where a narration is given in English only, the Arabic is not reproduced on the page — this happens with four of the longer narrations, where the full Arabic would not fit the format. In those places the English is a rendering of the narration at the reference given, and the reference is printed so that you can read the Arabic at the source. Quotation marks in this book mark what the Arabic on that page carries; where the narration continues beyond the Arabic printed, the continuation is given without quotation marks and labelled "in substance".

Where an exact wording could not be confirmed, the passage is not in quotation marks. It is marked as paraphrase and labelled "in substance" — the material from al-Ghazālī on the tongue, and an-Nawawī on the exceptions to ghībah and the conditions of tawbah. The ideas are theirs; the phrasing is not.

Where a popular saying is doubtfully attributed to the Prophet ﷺ, the book says so rather than using it. There is one such note in chapter five. It was left in on purpose, because it demonstrates the thing this whole book is about: a saying repeats until it feels true, and nobody checks.

And where a narration could not be pinned to a reference, or the recognised graders disagreed about its chain, it was taken out. Several were removed at the last stage, including one an earlier draft leaned on heavily. Nothing in the argument depended on any of them, and a book about not checking things had no business being one of them.

And where the matter is genuinely disputed among qualified scholars — most notably in chapter eight — the book says it is disputed, declines to rule, and points you elsewhere. That isn't evasion. It is the limit of what someone in my position is entitled to do.

Qur'an translations here are English renderings informed by the widely-used translations. They aim for clarity rather than literary polish, and they are not a substitute for the Arabic.

If you find an error here, it is mine. Please have it corrected, and may Allah reward you for it.

Before you close this

If you carry away nothing else from these pages, carry this.

The heart that can still feel a sin is a heart with feeling left in it. If any part of this book was uncomfortable to you, that discomfort was not a verdict passed against you. It was the instrument working — and it is the single most valuable thing you own.

Do not spend it on guilt. Guilt is cheap, and it changes nothing. Spend it upon one small permanent thing, beginning today.

And when you fall — today, next week, in ten years' time — come back the same day, and without the speech. He is not tired of you. The hadith tells us that He *rejoices* at your return, more than a man who lost everything he had in open desert and then found it again.

BELIEVE THAT ABOUT HIM. IT IS THE TRUEST THING IN THIS BOOK.

﴿ رَبَّنَا ظَلَمْنَآ أَنفُسَنَا وَإِن لَّمْ تَغْفِرْ لَنَا وَتَرْحَمْنَا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ ٱلْخَٰسِرِينَ ﴾

"Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves — and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers."

— Sūrah al-Aʿrāf 7:23 ♦

O Allah, forgive us what we have done knowingly and what we have done without ever noticing. Return to us the eyes that see, and the hearts that feel, and the tongues that guard themselves. Make us sincere where no one is watching, and steady when no one is asking.

And let us meet You having said *"Our Lord is Allah"* — and then stayed.

آمين

Shehzad Shaikh



Shehzad Shaikh is a software engineer from Pune. He is not a scholar and does not write as one.

SHEHZADSHAIKH.COM

SOME SINS STOPPED FEELING LIKE SINS

Backbiting became conversation.
Ribā became a payment method.
Riyā' became a post.
The lowered gaze became a scroll.

Not one of them registers any more. This book is about the ordinary sins we've stopped noticing and the way back.

Thirteen short chapters. Written from alongside you, not above you. Gentle with the reader, exact about the sin.

The heart that can still feel a sin is a heart with feeling left in it.

Every ayah and hadith is sourced so you can verify it.

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