



# Why Laylatul Qadr? The Significance & Virtues of the Most Important Night of the Year

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Islam makes certain times and places especially sacred. While a believer can certainly engage in worship such as remembering or glorifying God at any time (“standing, sitting or lying on their sides”<sup>1</sup>), some periods of time have special and unique blessings associated with them. Similarly, while the entirety of the Earth has been made a place of worship and prostration, there are some locations (such as the three Mosques) that are uniquely blessed. This creates within the psychology of the believer a yearning to seek out these unique opportunities in order to come closer to Allah. That yearning brings about several positive spiritual emotions: awe, reverence, wonder, anticipation, eagerness, excitement, hope, and longing, all of which are encompassed in the term *shawq*.<sup>2</sup>

As we live today in an era of digital distractions and materialistic heedlessness, often acts of worship are squeezed into brief moments in our daily routine, which does not furnish one with a complete transformative spiritual experience. Serious worship requires not just taking a brief moment to pray, but allowing our prayers to define our direction in life. Thus, Islam offers opportunities for intense spiritual experiences, experiences that involve setting aside the *dunya* (worldly life) and its distractions. Of the greatest of such opportunities are the blessed nights of Ramadan. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Whoever spends the nights of Ramadan in prayer out of faith and in the hope of reward, he will be forgiven his previous sins.”<sup>3</sup> The foremost of these opportunities are the last ten nights of Ramadan. As the Prophet’s wife ‘A’isha narrates, “When the last ten nights began Allah’s Messenger (peace be upon him) kept awake at night (for prayer and devotion), wakened his family, and prepared himself to observe *salah* (with more vigor).”<sup>4</sup> It is no coincidence that *i’tikaf* (seclusion in the *masjid*) is also recommended in Ramadan. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ used to practice *i’tikaf* for the entirety of the last ten days of Ramadan.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Qur’an 3:191.

<sup>2</sup> The Prophet used to supplicate, “O Allah, I ask you for the sweetness of seeing Your Face, and the eagerness (*shawq*) of meeting you” (*Sunan an-Nasa’i* 1305). Ibn al-Qayyim describes *shawq* as “the journey of the heart in seeking its beloved” (*Tareeq al-Hijratayn*, Dar ‘Alam al-Fawa’id, vol. 1, p. 723).

<sup>3</sup> *Sunan an-Nasa’i* 2192.

<sup>4</sup> *Sahih Muslim* 1174.

<sup>5</sup> *Sahih Muslim* 1171.

By far however, there is no day or night that has been emphasized more than the night known as *laylat al-qadr* (the Night of Decree). The Qur'an's 97th chapter is dedicated entirely to this night:

*Indeed, We revealed [the Qur'an] during the Night of Decree. And what can make you know what is the Night of Decree? The Night of Decree is better than a thousand months. The angels and the Spirit descend therein by permission of their Lord for every matter. Peace it is until the emergence of dawn. (97:1-5)*

The companion Anas ibn Malik reported: “Ramadan approached, so the Messenger of God said: ‘This month has come to you, and in it there is a night that is better than a thousand months. Whoever is deprived of it is deprived of all goodness, and no one is deprived of its goodness except one who is truly deprived.’”<sup>6</sup>

The precise night on which *Laylatul-Qadr* occurs has not been mentioned. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Search for *Laylatul-Qadr* in the odd nights of the last ten nights of Ramadan.”<sup>7</sup> There is a tremendous wisdom behind not knowing exactly when it occurs, which scholars have pointed out. As Ibn Qudamah al-Maqdisi (d. 620 H) writes:

*God has concealed this night from the ummah so that they may strive in seeking it and performing worship throughout the month in the hopes of catching it. Similarly, He concealed the hour of special acceptance on Friday so that one would increase in their supplications throughout the day, and He concealed His Greatest Name (ism al-a'dham) amongst His Divine Names and His Pleasure with acts of obedience so that people would strive for them. And He concealed an individual's lifespan and the Hour [of the Day of Judgment] so that humanity would continuously strive in good deeds, being heedful of them.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 1644.

<sup>7</sup> *Sahih Bukhari*, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Qudamah, *al-Mughni* (Dar `Alam al-Kutub), vol. 4, p. 453.

## The theological significance of *Laylatul-Qadr*

Islamic scholars differ regarding the meaning behind the name of ‘*Laylatul-Qadr*’, as the word ‘*Qadr*’ can hold a variety of meanings, and each has its own theological significance.

Some scholars defined ‘*Qadr*’ in the context of this holy night as ‘destiny/decreed’ (*qadar*). To them, this meant that this was the night in which the destiny of each person was decided. It would be this night in which a person’s sustenance, lifespan, and other critical matters would be sealed for the coming year.

In support of this, ‘Abdullah ibn Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “It is written in *Umm al-Kitab* (the Heavenly copy of the Qur’an) during *Laylatul-Qadr* what shall come to pass in the following year of good and evil, sustenance, and lifespan. Even the pilgrimage of the pilgrim (shall be decided); it will be said ‘so-and-so will perform pilgrimage’ (on this night).”<sup>9</sup>

Al-Hasan Al-Basri (d. 110 H), Mujahid (d. 104 H) and Qatadah (d. 117 H)—three renowned early Muslim scholars—shared this view and were reported to have said that “all the affairs of lifespan, deeds, creation, and provision are decreed on *Laylatul-Qadr* in the month of Ramadan and will come to pass in the coming year.”<sup>10</sup>

Imam Al-Nawawi concluded his discussion on *Laylatul-Qadr* by saying: “It was named *Laylatul-Qadr*, meaning: the night of judgment and discernment (in the affairs of men). This meaning is what is true and popular.”<sup>11</sup>

Other scholars defined the meaning of ‘*Qadr*’ as ‘power,’ indicating the greatness of the honor and might of the night.<sup>12</sup> Similar to this view is the interpretation of ‘*Qadr*’ as ‘power’ in that the righteous deeds performed during this night are far more powerful than they would be on any other night.

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<sup>9</sup> *Tafsir al-Baghawi* 7/227-228.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Bayhaqi, *Kitab Fada'il Al-Awqat*, 213.

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Majmoo' Sharh Al-Muhadhab*, 6/447.

<sup>12</sup> *Tafsir Al-Baghawi*, 8/48.

Ibn ‘Uthaymeen said: “A person would attain the reward of the night, even if he has no knowledge of it. This is because the Prophet said ‘whoever stands (in prayer) during *Laylatul-Qadr*, with faith and hope, will be forgiven,’ and the Prophet did not make knowledge of the night a condition of their forgiveness. And had knowledge of the night become a necessary factor, the Prophet would have made this clear.”<sup>13</sup>

In this view, since knowledge of the night is not a prerequisite to prospering from the night, then it is not required for the worshipper to understand concepts of destiny or decree in order to achieve the rewards of worshipping on this night. All they need to do is perform acts of worship on that night.

Another meaning of ‘*Qadr*’ in the context of *Laylatul-Qadr*, involves the meaning of ‘restriction.’ This is understood to indicate that the earth becomes restricted as angels descend to the earth on the holy night, occupying the earth. This descent of the angels is referenced in the Qur’an, and since angels are typically associated with concepts such as light, guidance, and blessings, it is a symbol of how majestic *Laylatul-Qadr* is.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, since angels occupy the highest heavens, they are described in the Qur’an as ‘close to God’; yet on *Laylatul-Qadr* they are ‘seeking permission’ from God to descend to earth in recognition of the divine blessings that God places on earth during this night.<sup>15</sup> In one narration, the Prophet ﷺ stated: “Truly the angels on this night are as numerous as the pebbles upon the earth.”<sup>16</sup>

*Laylatul-Qadr* has also been described as a gift for the Prophet Muhammad’s community (*ummah*). In the *Muwatta* of Imam Malik, there is a *hadith* that states: “The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, was shown the lifespans of the people (who had gone) before him, or what Allah willed of that, and it was as if the lives of the people of his community had become too short for them to be able to do as many good actions as others before them had been able

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<sup>13</sup> *Sharh Al-Mumta*, 6/494.

<sup>14</sup> Quran, 97:4.

<sup>15</sup> Quran, 4:174.

<sup>16</sup> *Musnad Ahmad*, 10734.

to do with their long lives, so Allah gave him *Laylat al- Qadr*, which is better than a thousand months.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned significance related to Divine decree and providing the Prophet’s *ummah* with a unique opportunity for worship, there is also a special connection that *Laylatul-Qadr* has with the Qur’an. In Surah al-Qadr (97:1) and Surah al-Dukhan (44:3), it is mentioned that the Qur’an was revealed on this night. Ibn Abbas has explained this by mentioning on *Laylatul-Qadr* that the Qur’an was revealed in its entirety from the highest heaven to the lowest heaven, and placed in a special chamber called *Bayt al- ‘Izzah* (the House of Honor). From there, it was revealed gradually over the course of twenty three years to the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>18</sup> This was in order to emphasize the lofty status of the revelation and to announce to the inhabitants of the Heavens that this was the final revelation.<sup>19</sup> It is also mentioned by other scholars, such as Imam al-Sha’bi (d. 105 H), that the revelation of the Qur’an to the Prophet Muhammad began in the month of Ramadan on *Laylatul-Qadr* when Jibreel first descended to visit the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>20</sup>

## What is the connection between its function and its virtue?

What is the connection between *Laylatul-Qadr* being the night of decree, and also being the most virtuous night to pray on? Why is the night when angels descend with the decree also the best night to worship in?

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<sup>17</sup> *Muwatta Malik*, 19:706. On the basis of this narration, some scholars, like Ibn ‘Abdul-Barr and al-Nawawi, asserted that the virtuous reward of this night was exclusive to Prophet Muhammad’s *ummah*, although other scholars like Ibn Kathir and Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani did not consider it exclusive (see Al-Zarqani, Muhammad Abdul-Baqi. *Sharh al-Zarqani ‘ala Muwatta Malik*, 2003, p.326).

<sup>18</sup> Mustadrak al-Hakim 3781, *Sunan al-Nasa’i* 11625, *Sunan al-Bayhaqi* 8521. Ibn Taymiyyah explains that this revelation from a written form (in *Lawh al-Mahfudh*) to a written form (in *Bayt al- ‘Izzah*) does not negate the Angel Jibreel hearing the Qur’an directly from Allah and bringing it to the Prophet (*Majmu al-Fatawa* 12/126-7). Thus we have the oral revelation of the Qur’an, and the written revelation of the Qur’an.

<sup>19</sup> Badr al-Deen al-Zarkashi, *Burhan fi Ulum al-Qur’an*, vol .1, p. 230.

<sup>20</sup> Manna’ al-Qattan, *Mabahith fi ‘Ulum al-Qur’an*, p. 97. He explains that both of these opinions are in fact correct and compatible.

One possible answer to this can be found in the explanation (*tafsir*) of the opening passage of Surah ad-Dukhan:

*Hā, Meem. By the clear Book, verily, We revealed [the Qur'an] during a blessed night. Indeed, We have always forewarned humankind. On that night, every wise decree (amr hakeem) is specified, by Our command. Surely, We have always been sending [messengers] as a mercy from your Lord, indeed He is the All-Hearing, All-Knowing. (44:1-6)*

This passage reiterates the significance of *Laylatul-Qadr* as the night during which the fates, destinies, and decrees are sent down for the forthcoming year. The famous Qur'anic commentator, Abu'l-Thana' al-Alusi (d. 1270 H/1854 CE), notes in his *tafsir* that when God says, "On that night, every *hakeem* decree is specified," one of the meanings of *hakeem* is *mukham* (decisive) which entails that "this decree cannot be changed after it descends, in contrast to before that."<sup>21</sup>

If a person reflects on all the things that could potentially happen to them in the coming year, they will experience immense hope and/or fear. Perhaps in the coming year they may experience—God forbid—the loss of a loved one, the onset of a debilitating illness, a bitter conflict, destruction of property, or worst of all the loss of their faith and connection to God.

Or perhaps in the coming year they may experience great joy and closeness with their family, the most successful achievement in their career, bliss in their marriage, a solution to old problems, new friendships and prosperity, or best of all growth in their relationship with the Divine. When a person reflects on this, he or she realizes that *Laylatul-Qadr* provides the perfect opportunity to pray for the realization of their best dreams, and the prevention of their worst nightmares. This is the night when that yearly decree is finalized. In a sense, this is that night when one's fate is 'downloaded' from the heavens.

Just as a person awaiting the decree of a judge in the courtroom prays most

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<sup>21</sup> Al-Alusi, Abu'l-Thana'. *Ruh al-Ma'ani* (*tafsir* of verse 44:4).

intensely at the moment when that decree is about to be decided, likewise *Laylatul-Qadr* may signal that final opportunity to change one's fate (*taqdeer*). After that, a person's *taqdeer* in the record of the angels is only changed if it was written from before that it would be changed. The *hadith* scholar, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (d. 854 H) notes the difference between the contingent decree (*al-Qada' al-Mu'allaq*) which God has given the angels and the irrevocable decree (*al-Qada' al-Mubram*) which is with God.<sup>22</sup> The recording of one's fate which the angels possess can be subject to change, as the Qur'an states "God erases and confirms what He wills" (13:39) and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, "Nothing averts fate except supplication (*la yaruddu al-qadar illa al-du'a*)."<sup>23</sup> However, one's record with God in the Preserved Tablet (*al-Lawh al-Mahfudh*) is immutable. Thus, a person praying on *Laylatul-Qadr* may result in their records with the angels being altered, before those records seal one's fate for the coming year. *Du'a* on this night has the greatest *power* to change *decree*, hence the night is both the Night of Power and the Night of Decree.

There is also a special link between this night and seeking forgiveness from God. A'isha asked the Prophet, "O Messenger of Allah! If I knew which night is *Laylatul-Qadr*, what should I say during it?" And he instructed her to say:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنَّكَ غَفُورٌ كَرِيمٌ تُحِبُّ الْعَفْوَ فَاعْفُ عَنِّي

O Allah! You are Most Forgiving, and you love to forgive. So forgive me.<sup>24</sup>

The Prophet ﷺ instructed us to call out to Allah using the Divine name *al-Afuww* (The Most Forgiving) on this night, and this has a special connection with *Qadar*. The linguistic meaning of this Divine Name is explained by noting that the root of 'afuw (forgiveness) linguistically connotes erasure (*al-mahuw*) and effacement (*al-tams*).<sup>25</sup> Thus, our prayers to Allah on this night are explicitly connected to a plea for Him to erase the consequences of our misdeeds. The

<sup>22</sup> Al-'Asqalani, al-Hafiz b. Hajar. *Fath al-Bari li sharh sahih al-Bukhari*. (Cairo: Dar al-Rayyan li al-Turath, 1986) vol. 10, p. 430.

<sup>23</sup> *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 1:95.

<sup>24</sup> *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, 3513.

<sup>25</sup> *Lisan al-'Arab*, 4/3019.

Qur'an states that Allah's '*afuw* protects calamity from being decreed for us as a result of our sins:

*And whatever strikes you of calamity (museebah), it is because of what your hands have earned, although He pardons (ya'fuw) a great deal. (42:30)*

So the decrees on *Laylatul-Qadr* may be descending with calamities that are consequences of our sins, and on this night we have an exclusive opportunity to invoke the forgiveness of *al-Afuww* to erase those sins as well as the resultant decree, and remove them from our fates for the upcoming year.

## Seeking its rewards

As *Laylatul-Qadr* is certainly the most blessed night of the year, a person who misses it has certainly missed a tremendous amount of good.<sup>26</sup> Many scholars mentioned that what's to be avoided beyond sin is wasting time on that precious night, unnecessary socializing with people, arguing, shopping, etc. One should keep in mind that the night technically starts at *Maghrib* (sunset), and be heedful of how time is spent from that point onwards. If a believing person is keen to obey his Lord and increase the good deeds in his record, he should strive to spend this night in worship and obedience. If this is facilitated for him, all of his previous sins will be forgiven.

Suratul-Alaq, which was revealed on this blessed night, begins with the command to read the Qur'an, and ends with the command to prostrate and draw close to your Lord. In that is a Divine prescription for how the night is to be spent. Ash-Shafi'i (d. 204 H) said that some of the pious predecessors preferred to spend this night in prayer, some in Quran, some in *dua*, and all are rewarded by Allah.<sup>27</sup> This also shows the importance of intention in that even if you don't catch the night for some

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<sup>26</sup> The majority of scholars are of the opinion that *Laylatul-Qadr* may occur on any of the odd nights in the last ten nights of Ramadan, thus demonstrating the importance of practicing a consistent amount of worship for all of these nights. Ibn Taymiyyah made the interesting point that the "odd nights" could be counted from the beginning or the end of the month (e.g., the 28th night could be considered the third last night of a 30 day Ramadan and hence also odd), and therefore one should endeavor to strive in all ten nights (*Majmu' al-Fatawa* 25/284-285).

<sup>27</sup> This is especially important to note for women who are on their period and unable to perform *Qiyam* since the rewards of the night are still fully available to them.

reason out of your control, you will still be fully rewarded for it. While it is best to perform full *i'tikaf* (i.e., seclude yourself in the masjid for the entirety of the 10 days), there are many important things one can do even if one is unable to engage in *i'tikaf*.

Merely praying *Isha* and *Fajr* in congregation on that night is enough to fill its scales. The Prophet ﷺ said: “Whoever attends *Isha* prayer in congregation, then he has the reward as if he had stood half of the night. And whoever prays *Isha* and *Fajr* in congregation, then he has the reward as if he had spend the entire night standing in prayer.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Imam Malik (d. 179 H) narrated that he had heard that Said ibn al-Musayyab (d. 94 H) used to say, “Whoever is present at *Isha* on *Laylatul-Qadr* has taken his portion from it.”<sup>29</sup>

If one is able to do more than that, the next step involves performing extra voluntary prayers during the night. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Whoever stands in prayer during *Laylatul-Qadr* with faith and hope in the reward of Allah, all of his previous sins will be forgiven.”<sup>30</sup>

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the supplication the Prophet ﷺ advised his wife A'isha to make on that blessed night is a prayer for an all-encompassing forgiveness that involves invoking Allah's love for forgiveness.<sup>31</sup>

Here lies a benefit to the believer in discovering their own love to forgive as they invoke Allah's love of forgiveness. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ stated to his companions: “I came to inform you of the (specific) night of *Laylatul Qadr* but found so-and-so arguing and (in the process of mediating) had the knowledge of the night lifted from me.”<sup>32</sup> Since the Prophet's knowledge of the specific night of *Laylatul-Qadr* was taken from him due to internal fighting between two individuals, this serves as a reminder that the grudges between mankind veils them from attaining the pardon and forgiveness of the night. For just as the Prophet was veiled from knowing the night due to the grudges between others, it is by offering

<sup>28</sup> *Jami' Tirmidhi*, 221. Similarly in *Sahih Muslim*, 656a.

<sup>29</sup> *Muwatta Malik*, Book 19, Hadith 707.

<sup>30</sup> *Sahih Bukhari*, 1901.

<sup>31</sup> *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, 3513. Discussed earlier in the article, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Sahih Bukhari*, 49.

forgiveness to others, and overlooking each other's faults, that we discover the forgiveness of Allah during *Laylatul-Qadr*.

And in the equation of success found in the limited efforts of that one night, is the embedded infinite mercy found in the eternal pathway to salvation. The same God who commands you to seek His pardon willingly offers it to you for an effort that can be performed even by the youngest and weakest amongst us. The same God who created you with limited years to do good, gives you days and nights that are equivalent to lifetimes of worship. And the same angel, Jibreel, that He sent to honor the Prophet ﷺ that night is sent to the earth that same night annually to honor his nation.