



The Divine Gift of Gratitude: The Secret of Happiness in the Modern World

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Introduction

Writing in *The Atlantic* in an article titled “*Gratitude without God*,” Emma Green asked the following question in the context of the annual American holiday of Thanksgiving: “Gratitude is the animus of these secular rituals, but the object of the gratitude is unclear. If people aren’t thanking God, who are they thanking? You can thank your grandma for making delicious pie, but who do you thank for the general circumstances of your life?”¹

This simple yet profound question frames an enigma that many of us perhaps don’t even perceive as a problem. We generally agree that we should strive to inculcate gratitude. Historically speaking, it is even understood as a necessary virtue across cultures and religions, through the societal, psychological, and moral lenses we apply. All agree that gratitude is a commendable trait and a means to better quality of life, happiness, physical and emotional health and wellbeing.² But while the benefits of gratitude are easily observed and extensively documented, its definition remains somewhat elusive. *What exactly is gratitude, and how do we achieve it?* That depends on who you ask. The secular, scientific perspective claims that gratitude exists without the need to recognize God as its ultimate source and benefactor. In other words, it has no moral, religious, or spiritual bearing, despite the fact that theologians of the past and present attribute its origins to religious belief and worship.³

Many of us would like to believe that we embody gratitude, or at least aspire to do so in our daily lives, despite the ups and downs we encounter. However, studies show that fewer of us today actually experience what it truly is to be grateful. No doubt, people are facing hardship and pain on many levels in these turbulent times.

¹ Emma Green, “Gratitude Without God: If Giving Thanks Isn’t Inherently Religious, Where Does It Come From?,” *Atlantic*, November 26, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/11/the-phenomenology-of-gratitude/383174/>.

² Summer Allen, “The Science of Gratitude,” Greater Good Science Center UC Berkeley for the John Templeton Foundation, May 2018, 28–50, https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-JTF_White_Paper-Gratitude-FINAL.pdf.

³ Naser Aghababaei, Agata Błachnio, and Masoume Aminikhoo, “The Relations of Gratitude to Religiosity, Well-Being, and Personality,” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 21, no. 4 (2018): 408–417, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2018.1504904>.

Nevertheless, instant gratification, and the momentary happiness and comfort associated with it rarely bring lasting contentment and gratitude. Current levels of discontent not only indicate a dangerous trend, but also beg the questions, *Why is that so? Do our current circumstances play a role? And where is God in the equation?* Modernity and secularism have at a bare minimum eroded ties to God, reducing religion to rituals and inherited cultural practice at best. Often, it is not even that, nothing more than a vague concept quite akin to wishful thinking in order to serve as a lubricant for our shallow lives. The impact of our societal immersion in materialism, consumerism, and enslavement to social media is self-evident—not to mention the imminent, potentially life-altering threats of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and the metaverse.⁴ More than a century ago, French sociologist Emile Durkheim (d. 1917) was already writing about the “cult of the individual,”⁵ a diagnosis of modern society’s ills, further confirmed by contemporary research showing the rise of near-ubiquitous self-entitlement, narcissism, and “generation me vs. we” mindsets⁶ that have resulted in pervasive estrangement and dissatisfaction, despite living in material abundance.⁷

A closer examination of ourselves would reveal *shukr* as the missing key to the life of contentment we all naturally seek. *Shukr* is gratitude, but it’s also far more. It extends beyond the descriptions and prescriptions of gratitude defined within secular boundaries. It extends well beyond oneself or another as its object, to directing one’s gratitude foremost to God, the Almighty, the most Merciful and Generous, the One who grants us the gift of life, sustenance, and most of all, His guidance. *Shukr* is a religious obligation and therefore integral to our purpose.⁸ It is

⁴ Mike Snider and Brett Molina, “Everyone Wants to Own the Metaverse Including Facebook and Microsoft. But What Exactly Is It?,” *USA Today*, November 10, 2021, updated January 20, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2021/11/10/metaverse-what-is-it-explained-facebook-microsoft-meta-vr/6337635001/>; John Mac Ghlionn, “Metaverse: The World Not Prepared for Dangers It Poses,” *TRT World*, December 16, 2021, https://www.trtworld.com/perspectives/metaverse-the-world-not-prepared-for-dangers-it-poses-52701?fbclid=IwAR2Iv8ypVsOAqN3ChK28widr1SOXEoRXbPNafB469NOK_YwsnniO02f6ARo.

⁵ Charles E. Marske, “Durkheim’s ‘Cult of the Individual’ and the Moral Reconstitution of Society,” *Sociological Theory* 5, no. 1 (1987): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/201987>.

⁶ Jean M. Twenge, “The Evidence for Generation Me and Against Generation We,” *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 1 (2013): 11–16, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2167696812466548>.

⁷ Joshua Coleman, “Estranged,” *Aeon*, December 17, 2020, <https://aeon.co/essays/modern-culture-blames-parents-for-forces-beyond-their-control>.

⁸ “So remember Me; I will remember you. And be grateful to Me and do not deny Me.” Qur’an 2:152.

a powerful spiritual state emanating from deep within our hearts, expressed practically through acts of worship and obedience to God. Accordingly, it must also manifest in acts of generosity, kindness, and gratitude to others.⁹

Islam's two sacred sources, the Qur'an and Sunnah, provide us divine truths about the realities around and within us, be they observable or imperceptible. They afford us profound clarity and guidance to the holistic prescription for life. Gratitude is among the central themes extensively addressed therein by the Maker of all of humanity. After all, who knows us better than the One who created and fashioned us? Hence, we look to the Qur'an and Sunnah for a complete understanding of gratitude—one that gives us a clear and practical path to implementation.

The concept of *shukr* explains and reconciles what we already grasp intuitively, yet find difficult to achieve at times. It provides the motivation and tools to act on what is demanded of us by God, in return for the promise of attaining success and happiness. The objective of this paper is to evaluate and even challenge our understanding and practice of gratitude, in order to strengthen our faith, conviction, and practice. Our analysis will reveal the distinguishing and core aspects of *shukr* as a moral obligation, an act of worship, and a foundation for contentment in this world *and* in the Hereafter.

Getting back to Thanksgiving for a moment, it is interesting that when he proclaimed it a national holiday in 1863, Abraham Lincoln himself chose to direct its observance toward God when he said:

The year that is drawing towards its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God... No human counsel hath devised, nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great

⁹ “Whoever is not grateful to the people, he is not grateful to Allah.” Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (Beirut: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1998), 3:505, no. 1954, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:1954>; authentic according to al-Tirmidhī in the comments. Authenticity confirmed by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ wa Ziyādatihī* (Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 2:1122, no. 6601.

things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.¹⁰

The origin of gratitude and the challenge to humanity

Writing about the origin of gratitude in *The Science of Gratitude*, Dr. Summer Allen suggests scientific evidence shows gratitude may have biological roots, embedded in the structure of our brains, our DNA, and may even be the culmination of human social evolutionary adaptation. Despite citing a number of studies of neurological, genetic, and developmental connections to gratitude, the author concludes that gratitude is likely an inherent component of human nature—one that provides the “glue” necessary for humans to form meaningful relationships.¹¹ Looking at these findings through an Islamic lens, the idea that humans are naturally inclined toward gratitude is fully supported by the concept of the *fiṭrah*, or the God-given predisposition with which we are all born. We are naturally inclined to worship Allah, our Creator and Master, to behave in accordance with His commands, and to uphold moral character.¹² *Shukr* is a significant component of this divinely ordained morality, worship, and code of conduct. However, there are also a number of internal and external factors that can hinder one’s maintenance of *shukr*. Satan’s plots against our hearts and minds may at times weaken and even overpower the *fiṭrah*, and in this case, *shukr*, if not actively guarded against.

The Qur’anic verses depicting the creation of Adam, the first human being, and the interaction between Adam and Iblīs teach us valuable and nuanced lessons about the nature of *shukr* and the pitfalls that distance one from gratitude, and subsequently, from Allah. Allah forewarns us about these pitfalls through the

¹⁰ Abraham Lincoln, Thanksgiving Proclamation from October 3, 1863, White House Archives, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/transcript_for_abraham_lincoln_thanksgiving_proclamation_1863.pdf.

¹¹ Allen, “Science of Gratitude,” 15–18.

¹² Allah’s Messenger ﷺ said, “No child is born except on *al-fiṭra* [Islam] and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian, or Magian, as an animal produces a perfect young animal: do you see any part of its body amputated?” Then he recited, “The religion of pure Islamic Faith (*hanifa*) [i.e., to worship none but Allah], the pure nature with which He [Allah] has created mankind. Let there be no change in Allah’s religion [i.e., to join none in Allah’s worship]. That is the straight religion; but most men know not” (Qur’an 30:30). Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 6:114, no. 4775, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:4775>.

opposing character traits and responses of both Adam and Iblīs. The very first words Adam spoke expressed *ḥamd* and *shukr*, praise and gratitude to Allah, indicating their centrality to the very existence and servitude of man. Life itself is a gift for which gratitude is owed to Allah.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “When Allah created Adam, He breathed the soul into him, then he sneezed and said: ‘All praise [and gratitude] is due to Allah.’ So he praised Allah by His permission. Then His Lord said to him: ‘May Allah have mercy upon you O Adam...’”¹³

Iblīs’ refusal to obey the command of Allah to bow before Adam manifested his arrogance, jealousy, and ingratitude upon seeing the superior creation of Adam.¹⁴ What ensues is an onslaught of deception, temptation, and immorality upon man until the end of time. Allah tells us: [Satan] said, “Because You have put me in error, I will surely sit in wait for them on Your straight path. Then I will come to them from before them and from behind them and on their right and on their left, and *You will not find most of them grateful.*”¹⁵ The arrogance and ingratitude of Iblīs is highlighted in his blaming Allah for his going astray, when it is Allah who blessed and gifted him with the knowledge and ability to worship Him and placed him in the company of devout angels. Iblīs despaired of the mercy of Allah, and caused his own downfall instead of turning to Allah in remorse and seeking forgiveness for his sin. There is a warning here and a clear indication that most of humanity, with the exception of the true believers, will fall prey to the trappings of Satan and fall into disobedience and ingratitude.

Let’s contrast Iblīs’ behavior with that of his first victims, Adam and Eve. His disguised-as-sincere whispers to them of becoming angels or immortals tempted

¹³ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5:382, no. 3367, <https://sunnah.com/urn/680790>; good (*hasan*) according to al-Tirmidhī in the comments. Authenticity confirmed by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’*, 2:925, no. 5209.

¹⁴ Qur’an, 15:28–35, 7:11–15. See also *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, <https://recitequran.com/tafsir/en.ibn-kathir/7:12>. “You created me from fire, and him You created from clay.” “He committed this error, may Allah curse him, due to his false comparison. His claim that the fire is more honored than mud was also false, because mud has the qualities of wisdom, forbearance, patience, and assurance. Mud is where plants grow, flourish, increase, and provide good. To the contrary, fire has the qualities of burning, recklessness, and hastiness. Therefore, the origin of creation directed Shaytan to failure, while the origin of Adam led him to return to Allah with repentance, humbleness, obedience, and submission to His command, admitting his error and seeking Allah’s forgiveness and pardon for it.”

¹⁵ Qur’an, 7:16–17

and misled them. Human nature drives an insatiable need for more than one has already been blessed with.¹⁶ Iblīs took advantage of this human fallibility to convince Adam and Eve to eat from the forbidden tree. However, both recognized their mistake and turned to Allah in humility and repentance, and were forgiven for disobeying Him. They were sent to Earth, along with their archenemy Iblīs, to live amongst—and transcend—the temporary comforts, pleasures, and tests that form the life of this world, and to follow the path of servitude to Allah for the promise of Paradise in the Hereafter. Adam was raised by Allah to the noble status of the first prophet sent to guide mankind. Allah equipped Adam, and subsequently all of humanity, with the knowledge to successfully overcome Iblīs and the temptations of this world.¹⁷

Why does Satan single out shukr in his threat to man? There is a correlation between gratitude, and faith or obedience to Allah, and ingratitude, and disbelief or rejection of Allah. Iblīs’ ultimate goal is to distance us from Allah and His pleasure, to cause us to fall from grace as he did. Hence, *shukr* must play a significant role for it to be a worthy target within us for Iblīs to sabotage and destroy. Allah tells us that when Iblīs refused to obey Him, he was proud, and became one of the [disobedient] disbelievers (*kāfirīn*).¹⁸ Iblīs had been among the angels as a noble worshiper of Allah. He clearly believed in Allah and had the knowledge and ability to worship Him. The term *kufṛ* linguistically refers to both ingratitude and rejection.¹⁹ In fact, rejection of Allah’s commands (i.e., disobedience) is the highest form of ingratitude. Hence, *kufṛ* is used here to illustrate Iblīs’ disobedience and ingratitude to Allah despite having been among His chosen guided servants. Knowing the great virtues of *shukr*, Satan issued his threat to humanity, ending with, “...and You will not find most of them grateful (*shākirīn*).”

¹⁶ Qur’an, 7:20–21. See also: Allah’s Messenger ﷺ said, “If Adam’s son had a valley full of gold, he would like to have two valleys, for nothing fills his mouth except dust. And Allah forgives him who repents to Him.” Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:93, no. 6439, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6439>.

¹⁷ Qur’an 7:22–25.

¹⁸ Qur’an 2:34. See also *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, <https://recitequran.com/tafsir/en.ibn-kathir/2:34>.

¹⁹ Arabic English Lexicon, s.v. “*kufṛ*,”

<https://archive.org/details/ArabicEnglishLexicon.CopiousEasternSources.EnlargedSuppl.Kamoos.Lane.Poole.1863/07.ArabicEnglLex.v1p7.let.21.22.23.24.Qaf.Kaf.Lam.Mim..Lane-Poole.1885/page/n147/mode/2up?view=theater>.

The illustrious Companion, ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Abbās, explained that the *shukr* stated here refers to the sole worship of Allah.²⁰ This example, [among others in the Qur’an](#), builds a consistent theme and connection between gratitude and worship. *Shukr* is part of, and must manifest in, acts of obedience and worship of Allah. Man knows his purpose is servitude to Allah through the gift of Revelation.²¹ He has been gifted the faculties and guidance to worship Him. If he then chooses to disobey Allah, this is ingratitude in the same way a precious gift is tossed aside out of a lack of appreciation for it, and, ultimately, for the one who gifted it. Through this contrast between Adam and Iblīs, and *shukr* and *kufir*, Allah delineates two distinct paths in life—that of the grateful *and* obedient believer, and that of the ungrateful one who rejects Allah and His favors:

We already showed them the Way, whether they choose to be grateful or ungrateful.²²

Ibn ‘Abbās, commenting on the verse describing the ways Satan will attempt to deceive and mislead humanity, explained that coming to them (the people) from “in front of them” refers to Satan’s raising doubts concerning their hereafter. Coming from “behind them” refers to preoccupying them in the pursuit of this life. “From the right” involves him causing people to be confused about the religion, and “from the left” involves him enticing them to commit sins. The people are spared Satan’s attack from above them, as this is reserved solely for the mercy of Allah to descend upon them.²³ In the modern paradigm, as will be further elaborated, it is quite clear that each of these factors, along with the very same character traits found in Iblīs, have significantly eroded religious morality and have thus contributed to increasing doubts about God and religion, and the discontented malaise of contemporary culture. Hence, we must heed Allah’s warning:

²⁰ Qur’an 7:17. See also *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, <https://recitequran.com/tafsir/en.ibn-kathir/7:17>.

²¹ “[Prophet], when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ and they replied, ‘Yes, we bear witness.’ So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘We were not aware of this.’” (Qur’an 7:172). See also “I did not create jinn and humans except to worship Me” (Qur’an 51:56).

²² Qur’an 76:3.

²³ *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, <https://recitequran.com/tafsir/en.ibn-kathir/7:17>.

O humanity! Eat from what is lawful and good on the earth and do not follow Satan's footsteps. He is truly your sworn enemy. He only incites you to commit evil and indecency, and to claim against Allah what you do not know.²⁴

Shukr as a way of life

Allah commands us: "And give thanks to Allah if you [truly] worship Him [alone]."²⁵ Hence, *shukr* is an obligation upon us, and without *shukr*, one's worship of Allah is incomplete. Furthermore, He tells us: "...so, remember Me; I will remember you. And thank Me, and never be ungrateful."²⁶ Given the connection between *shukr* and the correct worship of Allah, it is imperative we know how *shukr* is to be expressed in order to properly embody it.

Shukr overlaps with but is not encompassed by the secular concept of gratitude. For instance, the contemporary psychologists and leading scientific experts on gratitude, Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, distill gratitude to a two-step cognitive process: 1) "recognizing that one has obtained a positive outcome" and 2) "recognizing that there is an external source for this positive outcome." This interpretation, while useful, lacks the clarity we find in *shukr* with regard to its distinct purpose and implementation.²⁷

Linguistically, *shukr* is derived from an Arabic verb that means to be thankful to a benefactor for the favor they have bestowed. The same root letters are used to derive the noun that describes camels or sheep whose udders are full of milk, and palm trees that grow abundantly. These usages illustrate another dimension of the

²⁴ Qur'an 2:168–69.

²⁵ Qur'an 2:172.

²⁶ Qur'an 2:152.

²⁷ Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough, "Counting Blessings versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 2 (2003): 377–89, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.377>. See also, Allen, "Science of Gratitude," 10, 24–26

meaning of *shukr*—that the effects of the blessing are clearly apparent on its recipient.²⁸

In Islam, *shukr* is directed foremost to Allah as the One who is the source of all blessings. Likewise, the effects of those blessings must be apparent on the believer. Hence, the renowned theologian Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350) explained that *shukr* manifests in the heart's recognition and love for Allah as the ultimate benefactor of *all* blessings. It is expressed on the tongue as the believer's remembrance, acknowledgement, praise, and thankfulness to Allah for His countless blessings, including those of guidance, provision, and the capability to obey and worship Him. Additionally, the believer's physical faculties express *shukr* through their adherence to the commands of Allah and compliance with His prohibitions.²⁹

And Allah brought you out of the wombs of your mothers while you knew nothing, and gave you hearing, sight, and intellect so perhaps you would be thankful.³⁰

Hence, *shukr* is a divinely perfected holistic concept beyond the limited notions of gratitude as a feeling, value, or personality trait. *Shukr* has no ulterior self-serving motive, nor is it conditional on one's surroundings and circumstances. It must be present throughout the believer's spiritual, emotional, and physical being, expressed as acts of worship emanating from the heart and accordingly, in speech and action.

Al-Harawī (d. 1089) divided *shukr* into three levels: Firstly, gratitude for a desirable blessing, which is a rewardable form of *shukr*. Secondly, is the level of maintaining gratitude in times of distress. He said such people are among the first to be called to enter Paradise. Lastly, is the level of gratitude solely directed to Allah out of love and servitude. This is the state of the believer who has attained

²⁸ Arabic English Lexicon, s.v. "*shukr*,"

<https://archive.org/details/ArabicEnglishLexicon.CopiousEasternSources.EnlargedSuppl.Kamoos.Lane.Poole.1863/04.ArabicEnglLex.v1p4.let.12.13.14.Sin.Shin.Sad.Lane.1872./page/n307/mode/2up?view=theater>.

²⁹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Madārij al-sālikīn bayna manāzil īyāka na'budu wa īyāka nasta'in* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabī, 1996), 2:242–44.

³⁰ Qur'an 16:78.

the sweetness of faith to the point of no longer recognizing the difference between ease or difficulty. In a similar vein, Ibn al-Qayyim identified five pillars of *shukr*: servitude to Allah, love for Allah, acknowledging the gift of His blessings, praising Allah for them, and using them in accordance with His pleasure.³¹

Imam Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) wrote that *shukr* is rooted first and foremost in knowledge of Allah as the bestower of all blessings. This knowledge in turn conditions the mind and heart to feel grateful. That, in turn, produces a love for Allah that spurs the believer to action, thereby manifesting gratitude on the tongue and limbs as well. Knowledge involves acknowledging that Allah is the source of gratitude itself, having created you with the faculty to be grateful. It is knowing that He is the source of all that exists and whatever comes to you. It is knowing Allah by His names and attributes, as the ultimate power which guides you and gives to you in accordance with His perfect wisdom and generosity. When *you* give, it is He who inspires you to do so, while He returns to you far more in this world and in the hereafter for what you have given. As al-Ghazālī said, “So instead of being grateful to the giver, be grateful to Him who created the giver and his will.” He delineates three levels of gratitude: first, gratitude entirely focused on the gift; second, gratitude directed to the gifter, for their generosity and care; and third and most perfectly, gratitude directed to Allah by whose will the giver gifted, and both the gifter and the gift become the means to grow nearer to Him.

Consider a child who has been gifted the latest smartphone by their parents. The first level of gratitude is entirely directed at the phone for the joy of owning it and using it. The next level of gratitude is more commendable as it is directed toward the parents for their love and generosity. The final, most actualized level of gratitude is ultimately directed towards Allah, while remaining grateful to the parents, in recognizing Him as the ultimate source of all gifts and blessings. The parents and the phone are both from Allah. Therefore, in this case, gratitude is shown in using the phone while mindful of Allah’s pleasure and refraining from His displeasure. This means following the rules of acceptable use, regardless of who is watching and what may be widely acceptable today.

³¹ Al-Harawi, *Stations of the Travelers*, <https://www.stationsofthetravelers.com/36/gratefulness.html>.

An important distinction al-Ghazālī notes is that being grateful to one another, as essential as it is, is not the same as being grateful to God, for two reasons. Firstly, Allah is free from need whereas man is nothing but needy. Secondly, man’s freedom of will, and the capacity to express gratitude, are themselves gifts from Allah.³² Allah, out of His boundless generosity and mercy, never ceases to give man from His infinite bounty, despite the disobedience and ingratitude He receives in return.³³ Misusing one’s faculties and resources in ways displeasing to Allah, be it one’s wealth, knowledge, power, or time, is not only sinful but ungrateful. Furthermore, any notion of self-entitlement is dispelled knowing that Allah is the true Owner of all that exists. In reality, nothing belongs to man, except that it is a blessing from Allah to be spent in accordance with His pleasure, on oneself and on others, for the promise of multifold return from Allah.³⁴ Gratitude is also to be extended to those around us, particularly to those who have the greatest right upon us such as our parents, spouses, children, extended family, and so on. The Prophet ﷺ stated: “He who does not thank the people is not thankful to Allah.”³⁵ By nurturing and maintaining gratitude and generosity as a way of life, one also guarantees one’s quality of life.

Ignorance, arrogance, selfishness, heedlessness, greed, and taking one’s provision (*rizq*) for granted all undermine *shukr*. Guarding against these undesirable human tendencies necessitates a heightened awareness of everything within and around us for which to be grateful. Allah is pleased with the people who reflect upon and marvel at the miraculous nature of the universe, and at the intricate and subtle mechanisms that make life enjoyable. These are the people of *shukr* who recognize Allah as the true benefactor.³⁶ Provision comes in the form of innumerable

³² Al-Ghazali, *Ihya*, 4:78–81, <http://ghazali.org/books/ihya-v4.pdf>.

³³ Qur’an 27:40. “And when [Solomon] saw it placed before him, he said, ‘This is from the favor of my Lord to test me whether I will be grateful or ungrateful. And whoever is grateful—his gratitude is only for [the benefit of] himself. And whoever is ungrateful—then indeed, *my Lord is Free of need and Generous*.’”

³⁴ Qur’an 2:261. “The example of those who spend their wealth in the cause of Allah is that of a grain that sprouts into seven ears, each bearing one hundred grains. And Allah multiplies [the reward even more] to whoever He wills. For Allah is All-Bountiful, All-Knowing.”

³⁵ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Sayda, Lebanon: al-Maktabah al-Aṣrīyah, 1980), 4:255, no. 4811, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4811>; authenticity confirmed by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’*, 2:1122, no. 6601.

³⁶ See Qur’an 3:190–200, 7:58, 8:26, 16:14, 16:78, 22:36, 25:62, 27:40, 28:73, 30:46, 35:12, 45:12, 46:15.

blessings, among the most important of which are the gifts of life, divine guidance, intellect, free will, dignity, character, knowledge, faculties, talents, and time in which to worship Allah. Safety and shelter, health, and wellbeing are also *rizq* from Allah, as are blessings we often take for granted such as the air we breathe, the clean water we drink, and the nights we sleep.

Undoubtedly, there is a sense of entitlement when it comes to the blessings of loved ones, wealth, property, and countless mundane daily comforts. Allah reminds us that He has, "...given you some of everything you asked Him for. If you tried to count God's favors you could never calculate them: man is truly unjust and ungrateful."³⁷ The list is endless, yet we are called upon to be grateful in all circumstances, and regardless of how much or how little worldly abundance we may experience or desire at any given moment. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "Whoever among you wakes up in the morning secured in his dwelling, healthy in his body, having food for the day, then it is as if the [entire] world has been gathered for him."³⁸

And He is the One Who causes the day and the night to alternate, [as a sign] for whoever desires to be mindful or to be grateful.³⁹

All divine decrees and provisions are from the tests of life, whether one finds oneself wealthy or in poverty, in ease or in hardship.⁴⁰ Scholars have written extensively about the pairing of *ṣabr* (patience) with *shukr*, as mentioned in the Qur'an and Sunnah. For example, the Prophet ﷺ said: "A grateful eater will have a reward like that of a patient fasting person."⁴¹ While there is lengthy scholarly debate over the superiority and reward of the one who is grateful when wealthy versus the one who is patient when poor, each has merit and will be rewarded in accordance with their sincerity and capability, and both need to

³⁷ Qur'an 14:34.

³⁸ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:167, no. 2346; good (*hasan*) according to al-Tirmidhī in the comments. Al-Albānī agreed in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, 2:1044, no. 6042.

³⁹ Qur'an 25:62.

⁴⁰ Qur'an 21:35. "Every soul will taste death. And We test you with good and evil as a trial, then to Us you will be returned."

⁴¹ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1975), 1:561. Authenticity confirmed by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, 2:731, no. 3943.

exercise *ṣabr* and *shukr* at all times. Al-Ghazālī points out that blessings, such as knowledge and wealth for instance, also contain in them the potential to become harmful if one excessively indulges them or misuses them solely for worldly gain. Therefore, the believer is required to be grateful for them, while at the same time showing restraint and steadfastness in order to guard against falling into disobedience and sin.

Likewise, for every calamity one endures, there could have existed one that was far worse. So, the true believer is grateful for having averted greater distress in this world and in the hereafter, and for the reward they can expect for responding with faith, trust in Allah, and patience. Hence, every calamity is in reality a hidden blessing for the believer who makes it a means to patience, gratitude, forgiveness, and closeness to Allah.⁴² Abū Hurayrah reported: The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “If Allah wills good for someone, He afflicts him with trials.”⁴³ Ibn al-Qayyim attributed the following narration to the noble companion, Salmān al-Fārisī, about a man who was once wealthy, but then lost the luxuries he had become accustomed to. Despite losing all of his wealth and possessions, even the bed he slept on, he continued to praise and thank Allah. When asked by another wealthy man about how he was still able to maintain gratitude to Allah, the man replied, “I am praising and thanking Him for blessings which, if others asked me to give them to them in return for all that they have, I would never give them up...Can’t you see? I have my eyesight, my tongue, my hands, my feet...”⁴⁴

Such is also the example of humility and gratitude in every prophet sent by Allah. They represent the best of humanity, and hence were tested the most. They endured prolonged persecution for their unwavering call to the sole worship of Allah (*tawhīd*). They grieved the calamities inflicted upon their people. Some were tested through wealth, power, and victory. Numerous verses inform us of their noble

⁴² Al-Ghazali, *Ihya*, 4:106–112, <http://ghazali.org/books/ihya-v4.pdf>. See also Qur’an, 42:30. “Whatever affliction befalls you is because of what your own hands have committed. And He pardons much.”

⁴³ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 7:115, no. 5321, <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2011/02/23/allah-intends-good-afflicts-trials/>.

⁴⁴ Ibn al-Qayyim, *The Way to Patience and Gratitude* (Egypt: Umm Al-Qura, 2002), 45–46, http://wayofthesalaf.com/pdf/en/The_way_to_patience_and_gratitude.pdf.

qualities, while emphasizing their *shukr* in particular: Allah said about Noah “...indeed, he was a grateful servant,”⁴⁵ and about Abraham “...he was thankful for the blessings of God who chose him and guided him to a straight path.”⁴⁶ Allah commanded, “O Moses! I have elevated you above all others by My messages and speech. So, hold firmly to what I have given you and be grateful.”⁴⁷ The Prophet ﷺ used to pray deep into the night, until his feet swelled. When asked about why he stood for so long, he replied, “Should I not be a thankful servant?”⁴⁸

The Prophet ﷺ not only taught us the legal rulings of how to incorporate *shukr* into our practice, but he also led by example. He consistently maintained gratitude and patience during hardship and poverty, as well as with wealth and independence, making him the ideal role model for people in any situation. He ﷺ looked beyond all worldly temptations, spending wealth as it came to him to take care of the orphans and those most vulnerable, to the extent of leaving nothing behind him.⁴⁹ Every act of remembrance and worship contains within it expressions of *shukr*, whether verbal or physical. For example, one recites words of praise and gratitude, *alḥamdulillāh*, in the daily ritual prayers as well as upon waking up, after eating, and at numerous other times and situations throughout the day. The actions of bowing and prostrating in prayer, as well as fasting, demonstrate humility, servitude, and gratitude.⁵⁰ The Messenger of Allah ﷺ instructed us to recite the following supplication at the end of every prayer: “My Lord, help me to remember You, give thanks to You, and worship You well.”⁵¹

⁴⁵ Qur’an 17:3.

⁴⁶ Qur’an 16:121.

⁴⁷ Qur’an 7:144.

⁴⁸ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 2:50, no. 1130, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:1130>.

⁴⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim. *The Way to Patience and Gratitude*. p 475-476.

http://wayofthesalaf.com/pdf/en/The_way_to_patience_and_gratitude.pdf

⁵⁰ Qur’an 2:185. “Ramadan is the month in which the Qur’an was revealed as a guide for humanity with clear proofs of guidance and the standard [to distinguish between right and wrong]. So whoever is present this month, let them fast. But whoever is ill or on a journey, then [let them fast] an equal number of days [after Ramadan]. Allah intends ease for you, not hardship, so that you may complete the prescribed period and proclaim the greatness of Allah for guiding you, and perhaps you will be grateful.”

⁵¹ Aḥmad ibn Shu‘ayb al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī* (Ḥalab: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmīyah, 1986), 3:53, no. 1303, <https://sunnah.com/nasai:1303>; authenticity confirmed by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’*, 2:1320, no. 7969.

Allah reassures us that He will reward those who are grateful.⁵² In return for our humble and flawed efforts, Allah tells us that He is the most Appreciative: “Why should Allah punish you if you are grateful and faithful? Allah is ever Appreciative, All-Knowing.”⁵³ He abundantly forgives and rewards those who strive to be obedient and grateful servants, taking into account their sincerity, fallibility, limited capability, and difficult circumstances. After all, He is the One who knows the most subtle secrets about His creation. He is the most Loving, the most Merciful, and All-Wise. This leaves no room to doubt His love for us, regardless of the tests we may have to endure.

While acknowledging the many hardships people are facing today and the disparity that exists between the haves and have-nots, it must be noted that *shukr* is not dependent on what we have been given of this world. *Shukr* can only be properly achieved once we free ourselves from the perpetual need to keep up with ever-changing man-made images of a perfect life of ease and happiness without challenge. We must reframe our understanding of the reality of this world, and look to our purpose in life as servants of Allah, and to His countless blessings we so easily overlook. Hence, Ibn al-Qayyim insightfully summarized *shukr* as follows:

The station of gratitude gathers within it all of the stations of faith, which is why it is the highest and loftiest of them; it is above contentment, and it contains patience within it but not vice versa, and also contains reliance, oft-returning, love, meekness, humility, fear, and hope; all of these stations are within its ambit, and one cannot be labeled with it except when all of these come together in that person. This is why faith is two halves; one half is patience, the other, gratitude. And since patience is contained in gratitude,

⁵² Qur'an 3:145. “No soul can ever die without Allah’s Will at the destined time. Those who desire worldly gain, We will let them have it, and those who desire heavenly reward, We will grant it to them. *And We will reward those who are grateful.*”

⁵³ Qur'an 4:147. See also that Allah’s Messenger ﷺ said, “While a man was on the way, he found a thorny branch of a tree there on the way and removed it. Allah thanked him for that deed and forgave him.” Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 3:135, no. 2472, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:2472>. Also, Allah’s Messenger ﷺ said, “A prostitute was forgiven by Allah, because, passing by a panting dog near a well and seeing that the dog was about to die of thirst, she took off her shoe, and tying it with her head-cover she drew out some water for it. So Allah forgave her because of that.” Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4:130, no. 3321, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:3321>.

all of faith is included in gratitude, and the grateful are the fewest among the servants, as the Exalted said, ‘And few of My servants are truly grateful.’⁵⁴

Gifts of gratitude

The benefits of gratitude are many—and those of *shukr* far greater. It is not surprising that gratitude studies point to physical and mental health benefits, along with general life satisfaction. Gratitude interventions, such as counting one’s blessings or daily journaling, are not only encouraged, but reveal positive correlations with overall wellbeing, better sleep, heart and mental health, self-esteem, coping skills, and self-improvement. Additional benefits such as the cultivating of other virtues like patience, humility, and wisdom have also been reported, as have a number of social benefits in regard to forming and maintaining relationships, as a result of the mutual empathy and generosity that gratitude inspires.⁵⁵

We all seek happiness. We are naturally inclined toward comfort, provision, and meaningful relationships. People, wealth, and status will come and go, but the one constant that remains with each of us and always will is the One who is our Creator, Master, and most Generous benefactor. *Shukr* is the means to fulfill the purpose of life. It is the means by which to ultimately connect to Allah. Hence, *shukr* is also the means to true and lasting contentment beyond the brief glimmers of happiness that come from worldly possession. Allah reassures us of this:

And Allah will reward those who are grateful.⁵⁶

Allah tells us that the blessings He gifts cannot be enumerated.⁵⁷ They extend beyond our perception. This is also the case with Allah’s generosity in rewarding those who are grateful. The knowledge alone of immeasurable blessings and

⁵⁴ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madarij al-salikeen* [Ranks of the divine seekers], trans. Ovamir Anjum (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1:320.

⁵⁵ Allen, “Science of Gratitude,” 28–50.

⁵⁶ Qur’an 3:144.

⁵⁷ Qur’an 14:34. “And He has granted you all that you asked Him for. If you tried to count Allah’s blessings, you would never be able to number them. Indeed, humankind is truly unfair, [totally] ungrateful.”

reward beyond the scope of our imagination is a means of increased gratitude, humility, and the motivation to seek closeness to Allah. Among the greatest benefits of *shukr* to emphasize foremost is that it safeguards the believer from the very arrogance that led Iblīs and countless after him to failure.

The Qur'an narrates the story of Qārūn who was destroyed because of his arrogance. "Indeed, Qārūn was from the people of Moses, but he behaved arrogantly towards them. We had granted him such treasures that even their keys would burden a group of strong men. [Some of] his people advised him, 'Do not be prideful! Surely Allah does not like the prideful'... He replied, 'I have been granted all this because of some knowledge I have.'"⁵⁸ He ignored the advice he was given to use his wealth to seek the reward of the Hereafter. He was deceived by his wealth and knowledge, so he denied the true source of his blessings, Allah, and falsely credited himself for his success. As a result of this arrogance and ingratitude, Allah caused the ground to swallow him!

Another dangerous false perception related to arrogance is assuming one's wealth and status to be an indication of Allah's pleasure, such that one becomes complacent, even heedless, and eventually more distanced from Allah. This is a misconception from Satan's subtle deception which he skillfully camouflages in the abundance many have become accustomed to and feel entitled to. The noble Companions of the Prophet ﷺ were found among the poorest *and* the wealthiest of their time, while those who fell from Allah's favor have also been among the most downtrodden and the loftiest of their time. What separated them and saved the righteous from arrogance was their sincerity, servitude, and gratitude to Allah.

And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, "If you are grateful, I will certainly give you more. But if you are ungrateful, surely My punishment is severe."⁵⁹

Moses delivered these words to his followers to remind them of the time when they were enslaved under the relentless tyranny of the Pharaoh. Even in circumstances

⁵⁸ Qur'an 28:76–81.

⁵⁹ Qur'an 14:7.

that threatened their very survival, they were reminded to be grateful to Allah for the tremendous favors He had bestowed upon them of guidance and escape from the torment of oppression. For a persecuted people, the beacon of hope on an otherwise bleak horizon was that Allah had chosen them to be the flag bearers of faith. They already had the greatest blessing: divine guidance.⁶⁰

According to Imam al-Ghazālī, Allah's promise to give the grateful "more" spans this world and the next, from material wealth to answered supplications to forgiveness.⁶¹ Even a simple act of *shukr* like praising and thanking Allah after a meal and upon clothing oneself is the means to Allah's pleasure and forgiveness, as taught by the Prophet ﷺ who said: "If anyone eats food and then says: 'Praise be to Allah Who has fed me with this food and provided me with it through no might and power on my part,' he will be forgiven his former and later sins. If anyone puts on a garment and says, 'Praise be to Allah Who has clothed me with this and provided me with it through no might and power on my part,' he will be forgiven his former and later sins."⁶²

Thus, gratitude builds the believers' optimism and resilience, driving them to work hard, with patience, and with consistency to overcome challenges, to attain balance and a more holistic wellbeing, and to reap the rewards of this world and the Hereafter. Allah's Messenger ﷺ summarized this when he said: "How wonderful is the case of a believer! There is good for him in every situation and this applies only to a believer. If something good happens to him, he thanks [Allah] and this is good for him. When he faces adversity, he endures it patiently and this too is good for him."⁶³

⁶⁰ See *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 14:7, <https://recitequran.com/tafsir/en.ibn-kathir/14:6>.

⁶¹ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya*, 4:77, <http://ghazali.org/books/ihya-v4.pdf>.

⁶² Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 4:42, no. 4023, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4023>. Graded as *hasan* according to al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, 2:1050, no. 6086. After eating, one is to recite the following:

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي أَطْعَمَنِي هَذَا الطَّعَامَ وَرَزَقَنِيهِ مِنْ غَيْرِ حَوْلٍ مِنِّي وَلَا قُوَّةَ

After putting on a garment, one is to recite the following:

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي كَسَانِي هَذَا الثَّوْبَ وَرَزَقَنِيهِ مِنْ غَيْرِ حَوْلٍ مِنِّي وَلَا قُوَّةَ

⁶³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2295, no. 2999, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2999>.

...Be grateful to Allah, for whoever is grateful, it is only for their own good. And whoever is ungrateful, then surely Allah is Self-Sufficient, Praiseworthy.⁶⁴

An instantaneous way to feel grateful for one's blessings is to look to those who appear less fortunate than oneself.⁶⁵ This not only reminds one of the favors they have, but may inspire empathy and the desire to aid others. Additionally, the Prophet ﷺ said: "When Allah grants His blessings to His servant, He loves to see the traces of His favor upon him."⁶⁶ Allah wants to see the apparent effect of His blessings on us. This exemplifies the balance and perfection of Islam. Allah does not want us to shun the world and all that is permissible to benefit and enjoy from it, nor does He want us to fall prey to extravagance and exhibitionism.

Not only have we been instructed to be thankful to one another, but we can also further gain the pleasure of Allah by inculcating within us the divine attribute of generosity.⁶⁷ The Prophet ﷺ said: "He who does not thank the people is not thankful to Allah."⁶⁸ These qualities are universally recognized as building blocks to nurture meaningful relationships. We further recognize the immense love and mercy of Allah for His forgetful and fallible servants that He facilitates our *shukr* through the daily prescribed acts of worship (*'ibādah*) which include prayer (*ṣalāh*), recitation and remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*), and supplication (*du'ā*).

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "Purity is half of *iman* (faith). *Alḥamdulillāh* (all praise and gratitude belong to Allah) fills the scales, and *subḥānAllāh* (how far is Allah from every imperfection) and *alḥamdulillāh*

⁶⁴ Qur'an 31:12.

⁶⁵ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:102, no. 6490; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2275, no. 2963, <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2011/04/20/miskin-shukr-look-below/>. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "Look at those below you and do not look at those above you, for it is the best way not to belittle the favors of Allah."

⁶⁶ Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-īmān* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī', 2003), 8:264, no. 5791, <https://sunnah.com/bulugh/2/461>; authenticity confirmed by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, 1:351, no. 1711. Al-Bayhaqī, 2:461.

⁶⁷ Qur'an 76:9. "We feed you only for the sake of Allah, seeking neither reward nor thanks from you."

⁶⁸ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 4:255, no. 4811, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4811>; authenticity confirmed by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, 2:1122, no. 6601.

(all praise and gratitude belong to Allah) fill that which is between heaven and earth.”⁶⁹

A closer look at modernity and its impact on gratitude

The timeless words of Allah “...and few of My servants are truly grateful” have held true in every age, just as they do at present. The mindset of humility and gratitude grounded in servitude to Allah may seem outdated and unrealistic in this day and age. However, when the Qur’an was first revealed 1400 years ago, society was far from the pristine ideals of Islam, such that the Prophet ﷺ was initially met with significant resistance. Yet Islam revolutionized the world in a few short years.

The message of Islam has remained unchanged since the advent of man. We have clearly been informed of this through the examples of Adam and the chain of all the prophets who followed after him, right up to the final Messenger of Allah ﷺ. Hence, the concept of *shukr* was established as an obligation upon Adam and thus upon all of humanity, then and forever. The Qur’an is filled with stories of past societies, some quite advanced for their age, who failed to heed this obligation and thereby sealed their fate. There is no reason to think that modern societies are immune to the same heedlessness.

And Allah sets forth the example of a society which was safe and at ease, receiving its provision in abundance from all directions. But its people met Allah’s favors with ingratitude, so Allah made them taste the clutches of hunger and fear for their misdeeds.⁷⁰

Tod Sloan, author of *Damaged Life: The Crisis of the Modern Psyche*, argues that modernity’s most problematic psychological, social, and moral features are a fast-changing pace of life, decline of belief and certainty, unfulfilled expectations, decay of morality, and loss of meaning in life.⁷¹ The irony is not lost in the

⁶⁹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:203, no. 223, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:223>.

⁷⁰ Qur’an 16:112.

⁷¹ Tod Sloan, *Damaged Life: The Crisis of the Modern Psyche* (London: Routledge, 1996), 9. See also “For scholars, the term *modernity* typically designates a loose constellation of social institutions, cultural practices and economic

realization that modern people seek a higher material standard of living and better quality of life. Sloan describes the modern individual as increasingly cut off from meaningful communication, while caught in the constant pursuit of fleeting images of gratification through material means.⁷²

“Contentedness seems to be a scarce commodity in the storehouse of modern experience,” writes Sloan. “Epidemiological studies of mental health suggest that most people who live in advanced industrial societies would affirm that in one way or another we pay a psychological price for the lifestyle we call ‘modern.’”⁷³ Sloan concludes that most of the people living in advanced modernity are not happy to be there, and those in pursuit of it are not likely to enjoy the improved life they seek.⁷⁴

A survey of current research and behavioral studies reveals disturbing trends, particularly among the younger population of Millennials (born after 1980) and Gen-Z or Zoomers (born after 1996).⁷⁵ The landscape of modern society in the digital era has lost many of the moral and social norms of family and community known to man for centuries. Where, in a mental field fixated on instant gratification, can gratitude find a place to flourish?

Dr. Jean M. Twenge, who has authored more than 150 scientific publications and six books, focuses her research on behavioral trends among young adults, including the ill effects of digital media and spikes in rates of anxiety and depression. In *The Evidence for Generation Me and Against Generation We*, she states that empirical evidence points to a generational increase in narcissism. As she writes, “In nationally representative samples of high school and college students, values have shifted toward extrinsic (money, fame, and image) concerns and away from intrinsic (community, affiliation) concerns. These trends have

patterns that emerges with the advent of urban industrial economies and the democratic nation-states” (14). Note: there are a variety of definitions available, referring to multiple periods of time.

⁷² Sloan, *Damaged Life*, 63.

⁷³ Sloan, *Damaged Life*, 23.

⁷⁴ Sloan, *Damaged Life*, 21.

⁷⁵ Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik, “On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far,” Pew Research Center, May 14, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-wh-at-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>.

mostly negative consequences, such as lower empathy, less concern for others, and less civic engagement (e.g., interest in social issues, government, and politics).⁷⁶

Dr. Twenge goes on to describe additional traits associated with this trend such as vanity, materialism, and unrealistic expectations of the future, which have led to negative interpersonal outcomes. Driven by an “individualistic morality” which supports the rejection of moral and social guidelines, younger generations have become measurably more tolerant of differences across race, gender, and sexual orientation while simultaneously losing empathy towards others. She concludes with a call for parents and teachers who may be primarily focused on instilling self-esteem to stress that “self-belief is not the key to success”—rather, hard work, a realistic outlook, and empathy are in order.⁷⁷

It comes as no surprise that scientific studies of gratitude show that it is negatively associated with such personality traits as narcissism, materialism, and envy. The sense of entitlement produced by narcissism and lower life satisfaction resulting from materialism and envy naturally inhibit gratitude, given one perceives that they have less to feel grateful for.⁷⁸ These barriers to gratitude are only exacerbated by the overarching global uncertainty felt on all fronts—social, political, and religious. All of this, perhaps, explains the contemporary ambivalence toward *shukr*. A lingering presence of the pandemic has also had a significant impact on all of these fronts, and directly on the lives of people in terms of loss of life, and the sustained hardships of physical and mental health decline, as well as the loss of livelihood, material wealth, and limitations on lifestyle.

Our society’s ingratitude manifests itself in widespread dissatisfaction with life, incessant complaining, greed, arrogance, anger, jealousy, and despair, to name just a few vices. All of these harmful traits corrupt the heart because they are symptoms of attachment to other than Allah, as explained by Ibn al-Qayyim. He goes on to say that Allah hands such people over to whatever they are attached to until it

⁷⁶ Twenge, *Evidence for Generation Me*, 1.

⁷⁷ Twenge, *Evidence for Generation Me*, 1–6.

⁷⁸ Allen, “Science of Gratitude,” 22–23.

becomes a source of betrayal and failure for them.⁷⁹ As Allah states, “...they neglected Allah so He neglected them.”⁸⁰ We are warned of their fate:

They have taken other gods, instead of Allah, seeking strength [and protection] through them, but these gods will reject their worship and will even turn against them.⁸¹

No doubt the threat of Iblīs holds true to this day. His attack on humanity from all sides is evident in our moral decline, increased doubts about God and religion, and attachment to material comforts. The very same attributes Iblīs displayed—arrogance, despair, ingratitude—have sadly become normative today.

The greatest impact by far, however, is the detrimental effect of all of the factors mentioned thus far on one’s relationship with Allah, and subsequently, on one’s interpersonal relationships as well. While research points to general trends, and cannot be applied universally without exception, it does align with the overall observable decline of society, the family unit, and quality of life on many fronts, particularly in regard to its core moral values. Faith and *shukr*, as understood in Islam, are intertwined such that one cannot exist without the other. Hence, there is a correlation between the scarcity of faith *and* gratitude in society today. *What can be done to rectify this?*

All is not lost. Man has been blessed with free will and intellect to choose one of two paths—that of gratitude (*shukr*) or that of ingratitude (*kufṛ*). The only way to save oneself from the same fate as Iblīs is to turn sincerely to Allah and to seek His forgiveness and mercy as did our parents, Adam and Eve.⁸²

The Qur’an and Sunnah frequently command us to keep our eyes and hearts locked firmly on the purpose of life as one of servitude to Allah. One achieves this through sincere worship and frequent remembrance of Allah, acknowledging Him

⁷⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madarij al-salikeen*, 2:52, 1:434.

⁸⁰ Qur’an 9:67.

⁸¹ Qur’an 19:81–82.

⁸² Qur’an 7:23. “They replied, ‘Our Lord, we have wronged our souls: if You do not forgive us and have mercy, we shall be lost.’”

as the One who is the ultimate benefactor of all blessings. Furthermore, *shukr* is attained through unconditional obedience to Him, and with the recognition of the reality of this world:

Know that this worldly life is no more than play, amusement, luxury, mutual boasting, and competition in wealth and children. This is like rain that causes plants to grow, to the delight of the planters. But later the plants dry up and you see them wither, then they are reduced to chaff. And in the Hereafter, there will be either severe punishment or forgiveness and pleasure of Allah, whereas the life of this world is no more than the delusion of enjoyment. [So] compete with one another for forgiveness from your Lord and a Paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth, prepared for those who believe in Allah and His messengers. This is the favor of Allah. He grants it to whoever He wills. And Allah is the Lord of infinite bounty. No calamity occurs on earth or in yourselves without being [written] in a Record before We bring it into being. This is certainly easy for Allah. [We let you know this] so that you neither grieve over what you have missed nor boast over what He has granted you. For Allah does not like whoever is arrogant, boastful.⁸³

The believer must regularly evaluate their spiritual health, and in particular their heart, from which faith and *shukr* emanate, in order to cure it of any diseases which may blemish it. Through self-reflection, we can purify our hearts of the slightest shades of ingratitude as soon they manifest. At a time when it is commonplace to take one's blessings for granted and to complain about all that is perceived as lacking in life, Islam reminds us of accountability for the most seemingly insignificant things: "Then, on that Day, you will definitely be questioned about [your worldly] pleasures." When this verse was revealed, a Companion of the Prophet ﷺ asked whether he would be questioned given his humble possession of only *two black things*, namely dates and water, to which the Prophet ﷺ responded that even those would be subject to question.⁸⁴

⁸³ Qur'an 57:20–23.

⁸⁴ Qur'an 102:8; al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5:375, no. 3356, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:3356>; good (*hasan*) according to al-Tirmidhī in the comments.

Al-Ghazālī describes the world as a bustling marketplace we pass through, from which we need take only two provisions, one for the body and one for the soul. The soul is nurtured with the knowledge and love of God, and it in turn “should take care of the body, just as a pilgrim on his way to Mecca takes care of his camel; but if the pilgrim spends his whole time in feeding and adorning his camel, the caravan will leave him behind, and he will perish in the desert.”⁸⁵

The Prophet ﷺ likened the *dunya* to a temporary shade.⁸⁶ No sooner do we settle into the comfort of the shade than it fades away. This world is a mirage in the desert heat, luring us with promises of quenching our thirst only to dissipate when we heed its call. When we arrive we will find only Allah, who is swift to take account.⁸⁷ This vivid imagery teaches us to invest our hopes and dreams strictly in the Hereafter, the one place we will find eternal comfort and joy. This does not mean that one cannot have aspirations for the good of this world, whether they be sought in educational attainment or professional achievement. Rather, we have been taught to seek the blessings of this world *and* those of the Hereafter, in accordance with servitude and *shukr* to Allah.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “The likeness of this world in comparison to the Hereafter is that of anyone of you dipping his finger into the sea: let him see what he brings forth.”⁸⁸

Daily checklist

As for those who only pay lip-service to gratitude, and do not give thanks with the rest of their faculties, are concerned, they are like a man who has a

⁸⁵ Al-Ghazali, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Claud Field, 1910, 18, http://data.nur.nu/Kutub/English/Ghazali_Alchemy-of-Happiness.pdf.

⁸⁶ 'Abdullah bin Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with him) reported: The Messenger of Allah ﷺ slept on a straw mat and got up with the marks left by it on his body. Ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with him) said, “O Messenger of Allah! Would that you make us spread out a soft bedding for you.” He ﷺ replied, “What have I to do with the world? I am like a rider who had sat under a tree for its shade, then went away and left it.” *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, no. 2377; *hasan sahih*.

⁸⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Way to Patience and Gratitude*, 395.

⁸⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabīyah, 1955), 4:2193, no. 2858, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2858>. Translation used: <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:4108>, graded *sahih* according to al-Albani.

garment and all he does with it is touch it, but he does not put it on: it will never protect him from heat, cold, snow or rain.⁸⁹

Ibn Al-Qayyim's words affirm that we can only cultivate *shukr* through practice. The following is a list of daily practices of *shukr* prescribed in the Qur'an and Sunnah to facilitate one's awareness and consistency:

1. Knowing, remembering, and calling upon Allah by His names and attributes, particularly those of His boundless divine mercy as *al-Raḥmān*, wisdom as *al-Ḥakīm*, generosity as *al-Karīm*, love as *al-Wadūd*, and appreciation as *ash-Shakūr*.
2. Reminding oneself that Allah's power and wisdom are far beyond our capacity. Circumstances we encounter of hardship and evil contain good we may not perceive which will overtake any harm when we turn to Allah in faith, obedience, patience, and gratitude.
3. Acts of worship such as ritual prayer, fasting, charity, and supplication inculcate *shukr* when one is mindful of their purpose and the affirmations, praise, and gratitude they embody.
4. The daily prescribed remembrance of Allah recited at specific times as taught by the Prophet ﷺ as well as frequent recitation of Qur'an, particularly with time and effort to reflect on the meaning of the verses and supplications that contain reminders of Allah's mercy and kindness, statements of praise and gratitude, and supplications for forgiveness, guidance, protection, and provision. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "The best remembrance is: there is none worthy of worship except Allah (*lā ilāha illa Allāh*) and the best supplication is: All praise and thanks are due to Allah (*alḥamdulillāh*)."⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Way to Patience and Gratitude*, 47.

⁹⁰ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5:393, no. 3383, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:3383>; graded as good (*hasan*) according to al-Tirmidhī in the comments. Al-Albānī agreed in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, 1:248, no. 1104.

5. Additional acts of worship the Prophet ﷺ was known to incorporate into daily life and which are mentioned specifically in regard to gratitude are the supererogatory acts of the prostration of *shukr*⁹¹ and the night prayer.⁹²

6. The tendency to compare oneself and one's circumstances to others is overcome by looking instead toward those who appear to have less, as the Prophet ﷺ advised us to. He ﷺ once asked his Companions, "Who amongst you is fasting today?" Abū Bakr said, "I am." He then asked, "Who amongst you followed a funeral procession today?" Abū Bakr said, "I did." He ﷺ again asked, "Who amongst you served food to the needy?" Abū Bakr said, "I did." He ﷺ then asked, "Who amongst you has visited the sick today?" Abū Bakr said, "I did." Thereupon Allah's Messenger ﷺ said, "Anyone in whom these good deeds are combined will certainly enter paradise."⁹³ Such acts of service enable one to experience the fulfillment of gratitude.

7. Using all that Allah has blessed you with in ways to do good and to seek His pleasure is the ultimate expression of gratitude. This includes, but is not limited to, your intellect and faculties such as your eyes, ears, speech, and physical capability. Gratitude to Allah is expressed in spending your time, talents, and resources in worship of Him and service to His creation.

8. Reciprocating acts of kindness is an expression of gratitude and key to nurturing relationships. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ instructed us, "Whoever is given something should reciprocate that act if possible. If not, he should compliment the giver. The one who compliments has expressed gratitude, while he who refrains from doing so has committed *kufṛ* (i.e., is

⁹¹ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 3:89, no. 2774, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:2774>; graded as good (*hasan*) according to al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, 2:858, no. 4701. "When anything came to the Prophet ﷺ which caused pleasure (or, by which he was made glad), he prostrated himself in gratitude to Allah."

⁹² Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2171, no. 2819b, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2819b>. "Should I not prove myself to be a grateful servant (of Allah)?"

⁹³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2:713, no. 1028b, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:1028b>.

ungrateful).”⁹⁴ This hadith is another example of the importance placed on showing gratitude to those around us, particularly to our parents, spouses, and children, but also to those within our social and professional circles. The Prophet ﷺ said: “He who does not thank the people is not thankful to Allah.”⁹⁵ People in positions of service to us such as in the workplace, at school, in public, and those employed, for example, to maintain the landscape, repair, or clean are often taken for granted and neglected and are all deserving of our gratitude.

9. Keep a daily journal in which to itemize things to be grateful for. As cliché as it sounds, picturing the glass half full by recalling one’s blessings does have a positive impact on gratitude. How often do we stop to think about our every working limb, joint, and faculty? Every breath we effortlessly take is the result of phenomenal machinery and the perfection of Allah and His mercy toward us—something to appreciate even more having witnessed the pandemic’s ravaging of our respiratory systems. Think about the blessings of waking up a believer, in the safety of your home, and being able to practice your religion freely. This is sadly not a situation to take for granted for so many of our brothers and sisters witnessing calamities such as illness, death, persecution, and genocide. It is our faith that equips us with the commitment, fortitude, and perspective to handle all of life’s challenges and losses, even those as devastating as these. Each new dawn brings with it the opportunity to worship Allah better and to perform that one act of sincerity which could secure our place in Paradise.

10. Allah instructs His Messenger, the Prophet ﷺ and in turn, all of us to “talk about the blessings of your Lord.”⁹⁶ Allah is pleased with the believer who expresses their gratitude to Him by mentioning their blessings, as He is

⁹⁴ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 4:255, no. 4813, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4813>; graded as good (*hasan*) according to al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmiʿ*, 2:1046, no. 6156; *Jamiʿ at-Tirmidhi*, no. 2034, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2034>.

⁹⁵ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 4:255, no. 4811, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4811>; authenticity confirmed by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmiʿ*, 2:1122, no. 6601.

⁹⁶ Qurʾan 93:11.

pleased with the effects of those blessings on His servant. A noteworthy point here is the distinction between boasting about something one has achieved or acquired and attributing that same blessing to the generosity of Allah. Gratitude lies in the sincerity and humility with which it is mentioned and used.

O Allah! I seek refuge with You not to exchange Your favor with ingratitude, not to be ungrateful for it after I have known it [to be from You] and not to forget it or neglect praising it. -

‘Umar ibn ‘Abdul ‘Azīz⁹⁷

Conclusion

As Pascal Bruckner poignantly notes in his book *Perpetual Euphoria*, “Democratic societies are characterized by a growing aversion to suffering. We are all the more scandalized by the latter’s persistence or spread because we can no longer resort to God for consolation. In that way, the Enlightenment gave rise to a certain number of contradictions from which we have still not emerged.”⁹⁸

The pursuit of happiness has become a religion, one that burdens rather than liberates. As younger generations sink deeper into a morass of secular, materialistic philosophies that prioritize the individual’s desires and the pursuit of an unattainable earthly utopia, it is not surprising to see that God no longer forms the basis of the choices people make in regard to their worldly or even spiritual goals. This void has crippled our capacity for gratitude. As is increasingly evident, an absence of gratitude traps people in a perpetual loop between moments of fleeting happiness and enduring discontent, not to mention the potentially devastating cost of what is at stake in the future if left unrectified.

The way forward begins with challenging our understanding of gratitude. It is found in deeper scrutiny of the voices and images we allow to influence us on a daily basis, and in acquiring the correct knowledge of our purpose in life. It is

⁹⁷ Ibn al-Qayyim, *Way to Patience and Gratitude*, 222.

⁹⁸ Coleman, “Estranged.”

absolutely to resort to God for consolation. Only then can we be reminded of our purpose of servitude to Allah, our Creator and Master, and of the gratitude due to Him for His immeasurable blessings. Only then can we be more vigilant of the subtle, ceaseless deceptions which aim to derail our focus from His pleasure and the Hereafter. When we reframe our flawed perceptions of all that is missing in life to that of the reality of this fleeting and illusive world, *shukr* emerges, not only as a solution, but as the necessary response to faith and divine guidance, and the means to the eternal joy we all seek.

Shukr stands distinct from a wide array of conventional notions about the origin, purpose, and nature of gratitude. While these notions undoubtedly have practical merit, they fall short of the perfect divinely ordained obligation of *shukr* which connects one's gratitude foremost to Allah as an act of obedience and worship, emanating from the heart into measurable and accountable actions. Allah knows His creation best, and He has therefore provided us with divine guidance and the best approach to life which will bear fruit in all times of ease and hardship. *Shukr* embodies the very essence of faith, worship, steadfastness, and the recognition of Allah as the true source of all blessings. It is a gift from the mercy and generosity of our Creator and Master, who has made *shukr* a means to facilitate the believer in this world, bringing about ease, contentment, and ultimately, eternal pleasure in the Hereafter.

No doubt we will never be able to thank Allah as much as He deserves, yet the Prophet ﷺ informed us that Allah does not bestow His bounties upon a servant for which they say, "All praise and thanks are due to Allah," except that what the servant has offered of praise and gratitude is better in the sight of Allah than what they have taken of His bounties.⁹⁹ Indeed, Allah is Most Appreciative even though we give of what is already His...

And whoever does good willingly, Allah is truly Appreciative, All-Knowing.
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⁹⁹ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 2:1250, no. 3805; authenticity confirmed and graded as good (*hasan*) by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'*, 2:975, no. 5563.

¹⁰⁰ Qur'an 2:158.