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Surah al-Fatihah

After the recital of *Takbirah al-Ihram*, *Surah al-Fatihah* is to be recited and if this *surah* is not recited in the prayer, the prayer is invalid. “There is no prayer without the Opening of the Book {*fatihah al-kitab*}.”¹ The other name of this *surah* is the Opening of the Book {*fatihah al-kitab*} because the Qur’an begins with this *surah*. This *surah* has seven verses² and according to the tradition of the Most Noble Messenger (S) on the authority of Jabir ibn ‘Abd Allah al-Ansari, it is the best *surah* of the Qur’an.³

Surah al-Fatihah is the only *surah* which is obligatory upon every Muslim to recite at least ten times daily in his five obligatory prayers.

Concerning the importance of this *surah*, it is enough to say that it is narrated in the traditions: “If you recite this *surah* 70 times for the dead person and he revives, do not be surprised.”⁴

From the name, “Opening of the Book” {*fatihah al-kitab*} of this *surah*, it is clear that all the verses of the Qur’an were compiled during the time of the Prophet (S) and formed into a book and at his order this *surah* was placed at the beginning of the Book. The verses of the blessed *Surah al-Hamd* (or, *Fatihah*) are about God and His attributes, the issue of the Resurrection {*ma’ad*}, request for guidance on the path of truth, and the acceptance of the sovereignty {*hakimiyyah*} and lordship {*rububiyyah*} of God.

Also, in this *surah* we express our interest to tread the path of the saints of God and aversion and disavowal of the misguided ones and those who have earned the divine wrath.

Surah al-Fatihah is the source of remedies—a cure for both physical ailments and spiritual maladies. In his book, *Tafsir Fatihah al-Kitab*, the late ‘Allamah Amini has narrated many traditions in this regard.

The instructive lessons of Surah al-Fatihah

1. By reciting *Surah al-Fatihah*, man cuts his hope from other than God by saying, “*Bismillah*” {In the Name of Allah}.

2. By saying “*Rabbi’l-‘alamin*” {Lord of all the worlds} and “*Maliki yawmi’d-din*” {Master of the Day of

Retribution}, he feels that he is the servant {*marbub*} and the one who is ruled {*mamluk*}.

3. By reciting the phrase, “*Rabbi’l-‘alamin*,” he establishes a connection between himself and the universe.

4. By “*Ar-rahmani’r-rahim*” {the All-beneficent, the All-merciful}, he see himself under the aegis of His vast favor.

5. By “*Maliki yawmi’d-din*” {Master of the Day of Retribution}, his negligence of the Day of Resurrection will be erased.

6. By “*Iyyaka na’bud*” {You {alone} do we worship}, he abandons his selfishness and desire for fame.

7. By “*Iyyaka nasta’in*” {to You {alone} do we turn for help}, he removes from his mind the idea of seeking help from other than God.

8. By “*An’amta ‘alayhim*” {You have blessed}, he understands that the distribution of favors lies in His hand and envy must be abandoned because the envious one in reality is not satisfied with God’s manner of deciding on and allocating sustenance.

9. By “*Ihdina’s-sirata’l-mustaqim*” {Guide us on the straight path}, he wants to ask for firmness in treading the path of truth.

10. By “*Sirat alladhina an’amta ‘alayhim*” {the path of those whom You have blessed}, he declares his solidarity with those who have traversed the way of God.

11. And finally, by “*Ghayri’l-maghdubi ‘alayhim wa la’d-dallin*” {such as have not incurred Your wrath, nor are astray}, he declares disavowal of falsehood and the people of falsehood.

Bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim {In the Name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful}

Among various peoples and communities, there is a custom of beginning an important work with the name of one of the leading figures of that community who is respected and admired, so that the task would be started and pursued with blessing and auspiciousness.

Of course, each person acts according to his or her correct or corrupt ideas and beliefs. Some people commence their tasks with the name of idols and *taghuts* while others do the same with the name and assistance of God and the saints of God. Nowadays, it has become the custom that in constructing important buildings, distinguished figures are the first to strike the pickaxe on the ground. Prior to the Battle of the Trench, the Holy Prophet (S) was also the first to break the ground in digging the trenches.

Bismillah {In the Name of Allah} is the beginning of the book of revelation. *Bismillah* is not only the

beginning of the Qur'an but rather the beginning of all heavenly scriptures. *Bismillah* has been the epigraph of the work of all the prophets (‘a). When the ark of Nuh (Noah) (‘a) was about to set out amidst the waves in the storm, he asked his followers to embark and then he said: “*In the Name of Allah it shall set sail and cast anchor.*”⁵

When Hadrat Sulayman (Solomon) (‘a) invited the Queen of Sheba (Bilqis) toward God, he began his invitation letter with the phrase, *Bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* {In the Name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful}.⁶

Hadrat ‘Ali (‘a) says: “*Bismillah* is the source of blessing in work, and abandoning it leads to the lack of success of affairs.”⁷

He (‘a) also said to someone who was writing the phrase, “*Bismillah*”: “*Jawwiduha*” {Inscribe it well}.⁸

The recital of “*Bismillah*” at the beginning of every work has been enjoined—eating, sleeping, riding on an animal (or a vehicle); marriage and matrimony, and many other tasks. Even if an animal is slaughtered without the utterance of “*Bismillah*”, consumption of its meat is unlawful {*haram*}. The secret behind this is that the food of a goal-oriented religious person must also have a divine connection.

Why do we start each task with “*Bismillah*”?

The products of a factory have the special logo and emblem of that factory. For example, a porcelain-producing factory puts its logo on all its wares, both big and small. Every country has its own flag hoisted above offices and garrisons, on ships and on office tables. In the same manner, the name of God and His remembrance is also the logo and emblem of the Muslim and the phrase, “*Bismillah*” is the symbol and code of the Muslim.

In every activity, big and small; everywhere, in the mosque or factory; and anytime, in the morning or evening, this blessed phrase is uttered by Muslims, and thus, we read in the *hadith*: “Do not forget *bismillah* even in writing a couplet of a poem.” Traditions about the reward of a person who teaches *bismillah* to a child have also been narrated.⁹

Is *Bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* a part of *Surah al-Fatihah* and a distinct verse {*ayah*}?

Although some individuals have not regarded it as part of the *surah* or have abandoned mentioning it in the prayer, these people have been subjected to criticism by Muslims. For example, one day, Mu‘awiyah did not mention *bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* in the prayer, and the people strongly protested, saying: “Did you steal an *ayah* or forget it?”¹⁰

In his *tafsir* {Qur’anic exegesis}, Fakhr ar-Razi enumerates 16 proofs substantiating the fact that *bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* is a constitutive part of *Surah al-Fatihah* and Alusi also expresses this view in his *tafsir*. Ahmad ibn Hanbal has equally stated in his *Musnad* that *bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* is a part of the *surah*.

According to the *Ahl al-Bayt*¹¹ (‘a) of the Messenger of Allah (S) who were a hundred years senior to the leading *fuqaha* {jurists} of the Ahl as-Sunnah, who attained martyrdom in the way of Allah and whose infallibility {*ismah*} and purity have also been stipulated in the Qur’an, the phrase, *bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim*, is itself a distinct verse and is part of the *surah*.

The infallible Imams (‘a) insisted on reciting aloud *bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* during prayer. Imam al-Baqir (‘a) thus says regarding those who were not reciting it during prayer or not regarding it as part of the *surah*: “They stole the best *ayah*!”¹²

In his commentary on *Surah al-Fatihah*, ‘Allamah Shahid Mutahhari identifies Ibn al-‘Abbas, ‘Asim, Kasa’i, Ibn ‘Umar, Ibn Zubayr, ‘Ata’, Tawus, Fakhr ar-Razi, and as-Suyuti as among those who have regarded *bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* as part of the *surah*.

Of course, there is no *bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* at the beginning of *Surah al-Bara’ah* (*Surah at-Tawbah*). According to Hadrat ‘Ali (‘a), it is because *bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* is a phrase of security and mercy and it is not consistent with the declaration of disavowal {*bara’ah*} of the polytheists.

Bismillah {In the Name of Allah}

- *Bismillah* is the indicator of divine baptism {*sibghat Allah*}, and the mark of our monotheistic orientation.
- *Bismillah* is the code of *tawhid* {monotheism} while the name of others is the code of *kufr* {infidelity} and the name of God along with others is the sign of *shirk* {polytheism}. We should not place the name of others beside the Name of God or put the names of others in the place of God’s Name. The meaning of “*Celebrate the Name of your Lord*”¹³ is that even the Name of God should also be free from any sort of polytheism.
- *Bismillah* is the secret of eternity and perpetuity, and anything that is devoid of the “divine color” is perishable.¹⁴
- *Bismillah* is the code of love for God and reliance on Him.
- *Bismillah* is the code for keeping aloof from vanity and the expression of impotence in the presence of God.
- *Bismillah* is the code for ensuring actions with the name of God.
- *Bismillah* is the code for the sanctification of actions.
- *Bismillah* is the code for the perpetual remembrance and glorification of God—“O God! I will never forget You in any situation.”

- *Bismillah* is the expression of man's objective—"O God! You are my aim; not the people, not the world and not capricious desires.
- *Bismillah* means that we seek help from Him alone and not from others.
- *Bismillah* is indicative of the fact that the content of the *surah* has been revealed from the Genesis of Truth {*mabda'-e haqq*} and the Embodiment of Mercy {*mazhar-e rahmat*}.

The word "Allah"

Some people have regarded the word "*Allah*" to be derived from "أَلِهَ" "*aliha*" meaning "عَبَدَ" "*abada*". By "*Allah*" they mean the Real Worshipped Being who has all the perfections. Others, however, have regarded it to have been derived from "وَالِهَ" "*waliha*" with the meaning of adoration, love and amazement. Therefore, the word "*Allah*" means the Sacred Essence whose bliss has astounded and fascinated all.

It must be noted that the word "خدا" "*Khoda*" or "خداوند" "*Khodavand*" ("God" in Persian) is not a perfect translation of the word "*Allah*" because "*Khoda*" originates from "خودآی" "*khuday*" which is termed in philosophy as the Necessary Being {*wajib al-wujud*} while the word "*Khodavand*" also means "Owner". For example, in the Persian literature, we say, "*khodavand-e khaneh*" to mean "owner of the house".

The meaning "owner" or "necessary being" falls short of conveying the meaning of "*Allah*". "*Allah*" means the Essence that is worthy of love and worship because It possesses all the perfections.

In the Qur'an, approximately one hundred Names of God have been mentioned, among which "*Allah*" is the most comprehensive one. In principle, each of the Names of God points to one of His Attributes, and not just one sign and symbol for God.

The names of individuals are diverse. Some names are only symbols and are in no way compatible with the character of the person in question; in fact, one's name is sometimes repugnant to one's character such as a liar whose name is Sadiq {truthful}!

There are also times, nevertheless, when the name of a person, apart from it being his own name is also an exact description of himself, pointing to his attributes and excellences such as the name "Sadiq" for a truthful person.

Some names are like the alarm of a clock which only indicates the arrival of a certain period of time. Others, however, are similar to the voice of the *mu'adhdhin* {caller to prayer} which is both symbol and substance.

The Qur'an says:

"To Allah belong the Best Names."¹⁵

In the traditions, 99 names of God have been mentioned which are described as *Asma' al-Husna* {the Best Names} and it is stated that anyone who would pray to God with these Names, his request shall be granted.¹⁶ And in the *Du'a' Jawshan Kabir*, we call on God with a thousand Names and Attributes.

The presence of the words, "*rahman*" {All-beneficent} and "*rahim*" {All-merciful} after the word "*Allah*" signifies that man commences his work with hope for divine favor and mercy and considers God as the source of all hopes and mercies.

Beginning an action with expressions of mercy signifies that the divine foundation and basis is anchored on mercy and grace, and it is only fitting for man to seek assistance from the Fountainhead of Mercy.

Rahman is a name exclusive for God because it is only His beneficence which is universal, all-encompassing and perpetual. Others either have no beneficence {*rahmah*} or what they have is not all-encompassing. In addition, if others would ever give something, it is because they expect worldly or otherworldly rewards; they give grass in order to get milk!

Regarding the words, "*ar-rahman*" and "*ar-rahim*", we shall elaborate on them under the verse, "*ar-rahmani'r-rahim*".

"Al-hamdulillah" {All praise belongs to Allah}

The words, "*madah*," "*shukr*," and "*hamd*" have identical meanings, but each of them also has its own particular meaning. For instance, the word "*madah*" means "to praise" regardless of whether the praise is worthy, based on flattery or something unworthy, or whether on account of one's excellences, fear, covetousness, beguiling, or ingratiation.

The word "*shukr*" means gratitude for the grace and favor given by others to someone. In the word "*hamd*," however, apart from gratitude and thanks, another meaning is latent and that is worship. Gratitude and thanks to the extent of worship is "*hamd*". Hence, to express "*madah*" and "*shukr*" to others is permissible, but "*hamd*" is exclusive for God because He is the Only One worthy of worship.

"*Al-hamdulillah*" is followed by four descriptions of God: "*rabb al-'alamin*," "*ar-rahman*," "*ar-rahim*," and "*maliki yawmid-din*" which indicate that on account of these divine favors and grandeur, man has to express "*hamd*" to God. But before all these descriptions, the word "*lillah*" {belonging to Allah} appears. It means that "*hamd*" is solely for Him and as He is the Only One worthy of "*hamd*," those descriptions can also be assumed even if they had not appeared afterward.

گر از دوست چشمت به احسان اوست

تو در بند خویشی نه در بند دوست

If your eyes are focusing on the benevolence of the Friend, then you are under the fetter of your self, not under the bond of the Friend.

“Rabb al-‘alamin” {Lord of all the Worlds}

God is the Lord of all the worlds. He is the Lord of whatever is in the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them:

﴿ رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا ﴾

*“The Lord of the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them”*¹⁷

And

﴿ هُوَ رَبُّ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ ﴾

*“He is the Lord of all things.”*¹⁸

Hadrat ‘Ali (‘a) says about the interpretation of “*alamin*”:

من الجمادات و الحيوانات

That is, He is the Lord of the inanimate objects and the animals, the living and non-living things.

Although in the Qur’an sometimes “*alamin*” refers to human beings, in most cases “*alam*” refers to creatures while “*alamin*” points to all creatures. It can be thus understood that He is the Lord of the entire creation and that what some believed during the pre-Islamic period of ignorance {*yawm al-jahiliyyah*} and among some nations that there is a distinct god for every type or kingdom of creatures is a false idea.

God has determined the course of growth and perfection of all creatures after creating them and the divine nurture is the same course as that of divine guidance.

“Our Lord is He who gave everything its creation and then guided it.”¹⁹

It is He who taught the honeybee which plant to suck. It is He who taught the ant how to preserve its winter resources. He has created the human body in such a way that it is automatically hematogenous.

Yes, such a God is worthy of praise and gratitude. One of the peculiar characteristics of man is that he appreciates beauty, perfection and elegance, and expresses gratitude for favors and goodness. God, the Exalted, is worthy of praise on account of His Beauty and Perfection, and He is worthy of being thanked because of His goodness and favors.

Of course, to be grateful to God is not inconsistent with expressing thanks to people provided that it is the command of God and in the way of God. Although anyone can show his appreciation for others in diverse ways, in reality he is praising the Source and Fountainhead.

“Rabb al-‘alamin” means that the relationship between God and the creatures is a perpetual and close-knit relationship.

“Rabb al-‘alamin” means that there is the possibility of growth and training for all. Not only the good but the bad also benefit from the divine favors. *“To these and to those—to all We extend.”*²⁰

God says: “We assist all and have provided the ground for all so that each person could attain whatever aim he has.” Since the world is the abode of prohibition and obstacles, it is natural that not everyone can attain his or her goal.

“Rabb al-‘alamin” means that God is both the Ruler and the Manager of creation.

The word *“rabb”* is derived from either *“رَبِّي”* *“rabiya”* which means “one who bestows growth and training”, or from *“rabba”* which means “owner”. God is the Owner of the world as well as its Nourisher and Manager. *“All creation and command belong to Him. Blessed is Allah, the Lord of all the worlds.”*²¹

According to the traditions, the phrase *“All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds”*²² is the best gratitude for the favors of God. Thus, it is enjoined to praise {*hamd*} God before any supplication or request is made of Him; otherwise, the supplication is defective.

Not only is it mentioned at the beginning of supplication and adulation but the inhabitants of paradise also repeat the same phrase at the end of a task:

﴿وَأَخِرُ دَعْوَاهُمْ أَنْ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ﴾

“And their concluding call, ‘All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the all the worlds.’”²³

“Ar-rahmani’r-rahim” {the All-beneficent, the All-merciful}

Translating these two terms into Persian as “*bakhshandeh-ye mehraban*” is not a perfect and expressive translation because according to ‘Allamah Shahid Mutahhari, “*bakhshandeh-ye mehraban*” is the translation of the Arabic words *jawad* {generous} and *ra’uf* {kind}, and not *rahman* and *rahim*. And in principle, there have been no equivalent Persian terms for both these words.

Although both “رَحْمَن” “*rahman*” and “رَحِيم” “*rahim*” have been derived from the root-word “رَحْمَةٌ” “*rahmah*,” “*rahman*,” which encompasses the expansive beneficence of God, and is general and includes all human beings, however “*rahim*” is a mercy which will be showered only on those who are good as a reward for their good deeds. Thus, according to Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) God is *rahman* in relation to all the creatures but He is *rahim* only to the believers. God has made mercy {*rahmah*} incumbent upon Himself: “**He has made mercy incumbent upon Himself.**”²⁴ Similarly, the Prophet and the Book of Allah are also mercies for all of creation:

﴿ وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴾

“**We did not send you but as a mercy to all the nations.**”²⁵

His nourishment and training are based on mercy and His punishment and requital are like the stick of a teacher which is necessary in training. Forgiveness of sins, acceptance of repentance, concealment of people’s faults, and giving respite to compensate for the past are all manifestations of His all-encompassing mercy.

In essence, creation is a manifestation of His mercy and whatever reaches every creature from Him is grace and mercy. Thus, all *surahs* of the Qur’an (with the exception of *Surah at-Tawbah*) begin with *Bismillahi’r-rahmani’r-rahim* {In the Name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful}.

Ar-rahmani’r-rahim alongside *rabb al-‘alamin* means that the divine nourishment is based on grace and mercy. In the same manner, His teaching is also anchored on mercy and compassion: “*The All-beneficent has taught the Qur’an.*”²⁶ And this is itself a lesson for us human beings that the teacher and trainer must be always benevolent and compassionate.

“Maliki yawmi’d-din” {Master of the Day of Retribution}

God is the Master of the Day of Retribution. He is both the Master {*malik*} and the Sovereign {*malik*}. The universe is an estate {*milik*} under His possession {*malikiyyah*} as well as a dominion {*mulk*} under His sovereignty and rule. His possession is comprehensive, encompassing everything. Even the government is under his possession: “*Say, ‘O Allah, Master of all sovereignty!’*”²⁷ In the same token,

man, in relation to the limbs of his body, is the master as well as sovereign and commander.

The mastership of God is real, and not delegated and contractual. God is the Master of both the world and the hereafter. Yet, since man regards himself as the master of things and affairs in this world, he tends to become negligent of the Original Master. On that day when all causes will cease to exist, all relations will be abrogated and all tongues will be sealed, at that point, he will feel and discern the divine sovereignty well; for, he shall be addressed, thus: *“To whom does the sovereignty belong today?”*²⁸ When man would just open his eyes, he will say: *“To Allah, the One, the All-paramount.”*²⁹

The praying person who recites every day, “God the Master of the Day of Retribution” always remembers the Day of Resurrection and Reckoning. Before doing whatever work he intends to do, he first thinks about the book of accounts on the Day of Retribution.

The Arabic word “din”

The Arabic word “*din*” has various meanings:

1. “*Din*” is the divine law and *shari‘ah*, as the Holy Qur’an says: *“Indeed, with Allah religion is Islam.”*³⁰
2. “*Din*” is deed and obedience, as the Holy Qur’an states, thus: *“{Only} exclusive faith is worthy of Allah.”*³¹
3. “*Din*” as account and retribution, as this noble verse proclaims: *“Master of the Day of Retribution.”*

One of the names of the Day of Resurrection is “*yawm ad-din*”. That is, the day of punishment and reward, just as the Holy Qur’an narrates about those who deny the Day of Resurrection: *“They ask, ‘When will be the Day of Retribution?’”*³² Or, in describing that day the Qur’an says:

﴿ تَمَّ مَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا يَوْمُ الدِّينِ * يَوْمَ لَا تَمْلِكُ نَفْسٌ لِنَفْسٍ شَيْئًا وَالْأَمْرُ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِلَّهِ ﴾

“Again, what will show you what the Day of Retribution is? It is a day when no soul will be of any avail to another soul and all command that day will belong to Allah.”³³

“*Master of the Day of Retribution*” is a warning and a caution—O praying one! Starting today, think of tomorrow; the day when *“Neither wealth nor children will avail;”*³⁴ the day when *“Your relatives and your children will not avail you;”*³⁵ the day when neither the tongue has the permission to ask an apology nor the mind the opportunity to think; the day when nothing will avail and benefit except the grace {*lutf*} of God.

The placement of “*Master of the Day of Retribution*” alongside “*the All-beneficent, the All-merciful*”

shows that fear and hope must go hand in hand and encouragement and punishment are together. As the Holy Qur'an says in another verse,

﴿ نَبِيٌّ عِبَادِي أَنِّي أَنَا الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ * وَأَنَّ عَذَابِي هُوَ الْعَذَابُ الْأَلِيمُ ﴾

“Inform My servants that I am indeed the All-forgiving, the All-merciful, and that My punishment is a painful punishment.”³⁶

And in yet another verse, God is described as: ***“acceptor of repentance, severe in retribution.”***³⁷ At any rate, *“the All-beneficent, the All-merciful”* is a giver of hope while *“the Master of the Day of Retribution”* elicits fear. The Muslim must be between fear and hope, apprehension and aspiration so as neither to feel proud nor to be hopeless of divine mercy.

“Iyyaka na‘bud wa iyyaka nasta‘in” {You {alone} do we worship and to You {alone} do we turn for help}

“Iyyaka na‘bud” means that “We are servants of You alone and not of others.” This sentence has two dimensions: One is the affirmation of servitude to Him and the other is the negation of servitude to other than Him. Yes, the perfect school {*maktab*} alongside faith in God necessitates denial of the *taghut*, and those who have faith in God but have accepted the hegemony of the *taghuts* are “half-Muslims” or perhaps not Muslims at all!

Faith in God minus the denial of the *taghut* means a captive Muslim! In order to be relieved from the axis of *shirk* {polytheism}, one must seek refuge in the center of unity and power. Thus, while standing in prayer the person praying does not see himself alone by thinking of himself alone.

Rather, as if representing all monotheists, he is saying: “O God! I alone am not deserving and worthy to have a meritorious worship. So, I have joined the other Muslims and we do worship and adore You together. I am not alone; rather, all of us seek assistance from You. Therefore, prayer in principle must be said in congregation, and individual prayer belongs to the next stage.

The preceding verses gave us theoretical monotheism {*tawhid*} and the proper cognition of God, whereas this verse discusses devotional and practical *tawhid*. That is, we should not only recognize God in His Oneness, but we should also, in practice, worship Him alone and we should be monotheist. Why should you abandon God who is the All-beneficent, All-merciful, Sovereign, and Master, and subject yourself to the servitude of others?

Be the servant of God alone, and not the servant of the West or the East, not the servant of gold and silver, and not the servant of the *taghuts*. You do not have even the right to serve and obey the righteous

except in cases where God gives you the permission or command. For example, regarding His Prophet, God says: “Whoever obeys the Apostle certainly obeys Allah.”³⁸ That is, if we obey our father and mother, it is because God commands us to do so and in doing so, we are actually obeying Him.

By the dictate of reason, man must accept servitude to God only because we human beings are in love with perfection and in need of growth and nourishment. God is also the embodiment of all perfections and the Lord of all beings. If we are in need of benevolence and affection, then He is the All-beneficent and the All-merciful, and if we worry about the distant future, then He is the Controller and Master of that day. So, why should we go to others and seek help from them?

“*Iyyaka na‘bud*” means that I am with the people, but I have no emotional attachment to other than You. Neither do I isolate myself from the congregation of Muslims for me to forget Your creatures nor am I be absorbed in the congregation that I would abandon You, the Creator. Rather, I know that the way toward the Creator passes through the creatures.

“*Iyyaka nasta‘in*” means that although we make use of the causes and means You have placed in creation, I know that the effectiveness and efficiency of every cause and means is through Your hand. You are the One giving effect to the cause as well as the One rendering it futile. You bestow effect on something as well as take away its effect. You will is dominant over all laws and nature is subjected to Your will.

“*Iyyaka na‘bud*” means that You alone are worthy of worship and that we worship You not on account of fear (of hell) and covetousness (for paradise), but out of love and affection to You. Which beloved {*mahbub*} is closer and more compassionate to us than You?

“*Iyyaka na‘budu wa iyyaka nasta‘in*” means that it is neither predestination {*jabr*} nor Divine Resignation {*tafwid*}.³⁹ As we say, “*na‘bud*” {we worship}, it follows that we have free will and since we say “*nasta‘in*” {we turn for help}, it means that we are needy and that all affairs are beyond our control.

“*Iyyaka na‘budu wa iyyaka nasta‘in*” means that we perform the prayer in congregation and that we Muslims are standing in one line, in unison and solidarity as brothers and equals.

“*Iyyaka na‘bud*” means: O God! I regard You as present and watching over me and so I am saying,

“*Iyyaka* {You}” for the servant who regards himself in the presence of God, the Exalted, will benefit sooner.

From the beginning of *Surah al-Fatihah*, we have been talking about God in third person, but in this part we are addressing Him in the second person (*iyyaka* {You}). Initially, we are acquainted with God and little by little we begin to reach toward Himself. And it is not only once but rather, as the conversation with one’s beloved is sweet and pleasant, we do repeat the address, “*iyyaka*” {You} (twice).

O God! Although worship is incumbent upon us, in worshipping we are also in need of Your help:

﴿ وَمَا كُنَّا لِنَهْتَدِيَ لَوْلَا أَنْ هَدَانَا اللَّهُ ﴾

“We would have never been guided had not Allah guided us.”⁴⁰

Though to Him alone do we turn for help, seeking assistance from other than Him is permissible provided that it is by His leave. For example, man seeks the assistance of his own talents, faculties and mind, this is not repugnant to the principle of *tawhid*. God Himself thus commands us to cooperation—“تَعَاوَنُوا”—because life without cooperation and assistance is not possible.

Hadrat ‘Ali (‘a) said to a certain person who was praying, “O God! Do not make me in need of people”: “This is not a correct sentence. Instead, you say, ‘O God! Do not make me in need of bad people’ because life without cooperation and assistance is impossible.”

Anyone who would sincerely say, “*Iyyaka na’bud*,” has no more sense of pride, vanity and egoism, and he is obeisant and subservient to the divine commands. He knows that since God has bestowed so much grace upon him, the best of submissiveness must be shown in His presence.

He would stand like an absolute servant in front of his Absolute Master and humbly say, “I am the servant and You are the Master. I have nobody else except You. But You have many others apart from me. You are needless of my worship. On the contrary, I am absolutely in need of Your grace and generosity, and I have to turn to You for help always.”

“Ihdina’s-sirat al-mustaqim” {Guide us on the Straight Path}

The caravan of creation is constantly moving toward God, the Exalted:

“Toward Him is the return”⁴¹

and man is also endeavoring and moving:

“You are laboring toward your Lord”⁴²

and in every movement, there is only one straight path and all other paths are deviant. Islam has also determined both the path and guide for this movement, specified the destination, and given man the means of wayfaring. And it is us who have to choose which way to traverse.

God has endowed the desire for growth, perfection and the quest for truth in the depth of the soul and the natural disposition of every human being. If they are nurtured in the light of the teachings of the prophets (‘a), this desire and endeavor will earn the special favor of God: ***“As for those who are {rightly} guided, He enhances their guidance.”***⁴³

The Qur’an talks about two types of guidance. One is creational guidance {*hidayat-e takwini*} such as

the guidance endowed the honeybee about how to suck the nectar of flowers and how to make honey. The other type of guidance is religious guidance {*hidayat-e tashri'i*} which is specific to human beings and it refers to the instructions of the divine prophets (‘a).

Which one is the Straight Path {Sirat Al-Mustaqim}?

The word “*sirat*” which has been mentioned in the Qur’an more than 40 times means a path that is permanent, luminous and wide. There are numerous paths in the life of man one of which has to choose:

The path of one’s desires; the path of people’s inclinations; the path of the *taghuts*; the path of our ancestors and the predecessors in terms of ethnic and racial fanaticisms; the path of satanic insinuations; the uncharted paths; and finally, the path of God and the divine saints.

It is natural that the person who believes in God would choose the path of God and the divine saints alone because this path has merits which the other paths do not possess:

- The straight path is the shortest route between two points. So, this is the fastest way to arrive at the destination.
- The divine path is permanent. It is contrary to other paths which change everyday according to one’s desires or the desires of others.
- There is only one way between two points; there is only straight path. Other paths are different in one way or another.
- It is the certain and harmless path. It is contrary to other paths where man is always under the threat of perdition.
- This is the way that leads to the destination, i.e. the pleasure of God, in which there is no defeat and failure.
- The straight path is the way of God: ***“Indeed my Lord is on a straight path.”***⁴⁴
- The straight path is the very path of the prophets (‘a): ***“You are indeed one of the apostles, on a straight path.”***⁴⁵
- The straight path is the path of servitude to God: ***“Worship Me. This is a straight path.”***⁴⁶
- The straight path is the path of trust and reliance on God: ***“And whoever takes recourse in Allah is certainly guided to a straight path.”***⁴⁷

Man should turn to God for help in choosing the path as well as in traversing and keeping on the path. It is just like an electric lamp that should continuously receive electricity from the main source in order to

keep alight. Thus, not only the common people but also the prophets of God and the infallible Imams (‘a) have to pray to God to keep them on the straight path.

Not only in prayer but rather in all conditions and in every task, whether it is in choosing one’s occupation or friend, in marriage and in studies, man should always pray to God to keep him on the straight path. It is because there are many cases when a certain person has correct beliefs but he has shortcomings in practice at times even acting to the contrary.

The straight path is the middle path of moderation. Imam ‘Ali (‘a) says:

الْيَمِينُ وَالشِّمَالُ مَضَلَّةٌ وَالطَّرِيقُ الْوَسْطَى هِيَ الْجَادَّةُ.

“Left and right are deviations and the path of felicity is the middle way.”⁴⁸

The straight path means to keep aloof from any sort of immoderation {*ifrat*} and profligacy {*tafrit*}; neither the denial of truth nor extremism in truth; neither predestination {*jabr*} nor Divine Resignation {*tafwid*}; neither individualism nor collectivism; neither mere theory nor mere practice; neither worldliness nor otherworldliness; neither negligence of the Truth (God) {*haqq*} nor disregard for the people {*khalq*}; neither intellectualism nor emotionalism; neither forbiddance of good deeds nor plunging into carnal desires; neither stinginess nor extravagance; neither covetousness nor flattery; neither fear nor impetuosity; etc.

As a matter of fact, we have to always adopt the middle path of moderation in belief and thought as well as in behavior and action.

In moving along the straight path, we have to always seek assistance from God because this path is narrower than a hair and sharper than a sword, and every moment, there is the danger of falling down. The one who will pass by the straight path on the Day of Resurrection is he who did not deviate from the straight path of God in the world whether in the form of intellectual deviations or practical and moral deviations.

One believes in predestination and attributes to God all actions, as if man has no role in charting his own destiny as if he is without control and will. And the other one regards himself as the sole actor of all his deeds, considering the hand of God as tied.

One treats the heavenly leaders as common people while the other one elevates them to the status of divinity, considering al-Masih (the Christ) (‘a) as the son of God, nay God Himself!

One maintains that *ziyarah* {paying homage} and *tawassu*⁴⁹ are acts of polytheism {*shirk*} while the other resorts to even a tree or a wall! Due to misplaced jealousy, one does not allow his wife to go out of the house while the other one, out of dastardliness, sends his wife to the alley and market without having

proper Islamic modest dress {*hijab*}.

All of the above are deviations from the course of the straight path. God says:

﴿ قُلْ إِنِّي هَدَانِي رَبِّي إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ دِينًا قِيمًا ﴾

“Say, ‘Indeed my Lord has guided me to a straight path, the upright religion.’”⁵⁰

Elsewhere He states:

﴿ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ ﴾

“Thus We have made you a middle nation that you may be witness to the people.”⁵¹

It has been recorded in the traditions that the infallible Imams (‘a) used to say: “We are the straight path.” That is, the actual and practical straight path, and the model and paradigm on how to traverse this path are the heavenly leaders.

In their instructions regarding all aspects of life such as work, entertainment, studies, criticism, giving of charity, and expressions of interest, love, anger, and harmony, they have always admonished us to exercise moderation and equilibrium. These instructions have been recorded in the noble *Usul al-Kafi* under the heading, “*Al-Iqtisad fi’l-‘Ibadat*” {Moderation in Acts of Worship}.

At this point, we shall quote some Qur’anic verses and Prophetic traditions in which moderation has been emphasized while going to extremes has been prohibited:

- **“Eat and drink, but do not waste.”⁵²**
- **“Do not keep your hand chained to your neck, nor open it all together.”⁵³**
- **“Those who, when spending, are neither wasteful nor tightfisted, and moderation lies between these {extremes}.”⁵⁴**
- **“Be neither loud in your prayer, nor murmur it, but follow a middle course between these.”⁵⁵**
- **“And those who are with him are hard against the faithless and merciful among themselves.”⁵⁶**
- **“And maintain the prayer and give the zakah.”⁵⁷** That is, keep your relationship with both the Creator {*khaliq*} by praying to Him and with the creatures (people) {*makhluq*} by giving *zakah*.

- **“And those who have faith and do righteous deeds...”**⁵⁸ That is, both faith and conviction of the heart, and righteous deeds and behavior are required.
- Although the Qur’an says, **“And do good to the parents,”**⁵⁹ in another place it states on the contrary: **“(But if they urge you to ascribe to Me as partner that of which you have no knowledge,) then do not obey them”**⁶⁰
- **“Be witnesses for the sake of Allah, even if it should be against yourselves”**⁶¹ and **“And ill feeling for a people should never lead you to be unfair.”**⁶²
- On the night of ‘Ashura’ Imam al-Husayn (‘a) was praying intimately to God as well as sharpening his sword!
- The pilgrims of the House of God are praying on the Day of ‘Arafah and the night preceding the Feast of Sacrifice {‘id al-qurban}, but on the day of the feast they have to go to the slaughterhouse and familiarize themselves with blood!
- And finally, Islam is not one-dimensional and has not focused on only one aspect while neglecting others. Rather, it has paid attention to all the dimensions of life in a balanced manner.

“Sirat alladhina an‘amta ‘alayhim ghayri’l-maghdubi ‘alayhim wa lad-dallin”

“Sirat alladhina an‘amta ‘alayhim ghayri’l-maghdubi ‘alayhim wa lad-dallin” {The path of those whom You have blessed—such as have not incurred Your wrath, nor are astray}

After asking for guidance along the straight path, the one praying beseeches God to keep him along that path which has been the path of those who have earned divine grace. In *Surah an-Nisa’*, verse 69 and *Surah Maryam*, verse 58, the Qur’an describes this group. Here, we shall cite below the former reference:

﴿ وَمَنْ يُطِعِ الرَّسُولَ فَأُولَئِكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ
وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ وَحَسُنَ أُولَئِكَ رَفِيقًا ﴾

“Whoever obeys Allah and the Apostle—they are with those whom Allah has blessed, including the prophets and the truthful, the martyrs and the righteous.”⁶³

The person praying is invoking God to include him in the ranks of the prophets, the truthful, the martyrs and the righteous. Aspiring for this path of the upright and pure ones protects from the peril of deviation

and aberration, and their memory and reminiscence are always alive in the heart of the one praying.

Who are those who are astray and have incurred the divine wrath?

In the Qur'an, individuals such as the Pharaoh, Qarun (Korah) and Abu Lahab, as well as communities such as the peoples of 'Ad and Thamud and the Children of Israel have been described as those who have incurred the divine wrath. In every prayer, we ask God for us not to be like these individuals and communities that have incurred divine anger and wrath in belief, morality and deeds.

The Children of Israel whose account and civilization have been most frequently mentioned in the Qur'an, they were once superior to all the people of their time. Concerning them, God says: ***"I gave you an advantage over the nations."***⁶⁴ But in spite of this advantage and superiority, they incurred the anger and wrath of God because of their reprehensible thoughts and actions. In this regard, the Qur'an states: ***"And they earned Allah's wrath"***⁶⁵ That is, this change in their fate was caused by the change in their behavior.

The Jewish scholars distorted the heavenly commandments of the *Tawrah* (Torah):⁶⁶ ***"They pervert words (from their meanings)."***⁶⁷ The traders and the wealthy among them engaged in usury {*riba*} and profiteering: ***"And for their taking usury..."***⁶⁸ And in reply to the call for *jihad* and struggle, the common people refused to go to the battlefield out of self-preservation and fear, thus saying to Musa ('a):

﴿ فَازْهَبْ أَنْتَ وَرَبُّكَ فَقَاتِلَا إِنَّا هَاهُنَا قَاعِدُونَ ﴾

"Go ahead, you and your Lord, and fight! We will be sitting right here."⁶⁹

The same intellectual and practical deviations made God removed them from the pinnacle of glory to the abyss of abjectness and ignominy.

So, in every prayer, we have to implore God that we be not of the people who distorted the Book of Allah, the people who took usury, and the people who fled from war and *jihad*; similarly, that we should not be among the misguided ones; those who, like lost persons, are subject to abjectness and ignominy, and every moment, without having a prior aim, they wander about; they live as opportunists and have no will and power of their own.

Those who are astray—*"dallin"*—are not like the blessed ones—*"an'amta 'alayhim"*—who have been included in the ranks of the prophets and the righteous, and are not like those who have incurred the divine wrath—*"al-maghdubi 'alayhim"*—who are waging war against the religion of God. Instead, they

are indifferent, indolent and comfort-seeking individuals who, like animals, are only thinking of the stomach and the flesh, without caring for truth and falsehood.

For them, it makes no difference whether the prophets or the *taghuts* are ruling. What is important for them is that they live in material comfort and ease; anyone who likes may rule. This is the group of the misguided ones because they have not chosen a specific way for themselves.

This verse, “*Sirat alladhina an‘amta ‘alayhim ghayri’l-maghdubi ‘alayhim wa lad-dallin,*” is the perfect showcase of *tawalla* {befriending the truthful ones} and *tabarra* {avoiding the people of falsehood}.

At the end of *Surah al-Fatihah*, the person praying expresses his love, fondness and *tawalla* for the prophets, the martyrs and the righteous, as well as his disavowal {*bara’ah*} and renunciation {*tabarra*} of the misguided and those who have earned the divine wrath. This expression of aversion toward the deviant and those who have incurred the anger of God in every prayer makes the Islamic society firm and resistant to the acceptance of their rule. The Qur’an thus exhorts:

﴿ لَا تَتَوَلَّوْا قَوْمًا غَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ ﴾

“Do not befriend a people at whom Allah is wrathful.”⁷⁰

1. Mustadrak al-Wasa’il, hadith 4365.

2. The number “seven” is the number of the heavens, the days of the week, the circumambulation {*tawaf*} of the Ka’bah, *sa’i* {brisk walking or jogging} between the mounts of Safa and Marwah, and the number of stones to be thrown at the representations of Satan during the Hajj rituals.

3. Tafsir Kanz ad-Daqa’iq.

4. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 92, p. 257.

5. Surah Hud 11:41.

6. Surah an-Naml 27:30: “It is from Solomon, and it begins in the name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful.”

7. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 76, p. 385.

8. Kanz al-Ummal, hadith 29558.

9. Tafsir Burhan, vol. 1, p. 43.

10. Mustadrak al-Hakim, vol. 3, p. 233.

11. Ahl al-Bayt: according to authentic hadiths recorded in both the Sunni and Shi’ah sources, the term Ahl al-Bayt, and interchangeably Itrah and Al, is a blessed Qur’anic appellation that belongs exclusively to the Prophet, ‘Ali, Fatimah, Hasan, and Husayn (‘a). The members of this Family of five, with the Prophet Muhammad (S) at its head, were the ones alive at the time the Qur’anic verses regarding their virtue were being revealed to the Prophet (S). However, nine other Imams from the descendants of Imam al-Husayn (‘a) are also included in this chosen Family, the final one being Imam al-Mahdi (‘a).

{Trans.}

12. Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, vol. 3, p. 177; vol. 4, p. 85.

13. Surah al-A’la 87:1.

14. Surah al-Qasas 28:88: “Everything is to perish except His Face.”

15. Surah al-A’raf 7:180.

16. Tafsir Nemuneh, vol. 7, p. 27.
17. Surah Maryam 19:65.
18. Surah al-An'am 6:164.
19. Surah Ta Ha 20:50.
20. Surah al-Isra' 17:20.
21. Surah al-A'raf 7:54.
22. Surah al-Fatihah 1:2.
23. Surah Yunus 10:10.
24. Surah al-An'am 6:12.
25. Surah al-Anbiya' 21:107.
26. Surah ar-Rahman 55:1-2.
27. Surah Al 'Imran 3:26.
28. Surah al-Ghafir (or al-Mu'min) 40:16.
29. Surah Ibrahim 14:48; Surah al-Ghafir (or al-Mu'min) 40:16.
30. Surah Al 'Imran 3:19.
31. Surah az-Zumar 39:3.
32. Surah adh-Dharyyat 51:12.
33. Surah al-Infitar 82:18-19.
34. Surah ash-Shu'ara' 26:88.
35. Surah al-Mumtahanah 60:3.
36. Surah al-Hijr 15:49-50.
37. Surah al-Ghafir (or al-Mu'min) 40:3.
38. Surah an-Nisa' 4:80.
39. Divine Resignation {tafwid} means leaving man to his own devices and suspending the divine will from any effective role. {Trans.}
40. Surah al-A'raf 7:43.
41. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:18.
42. Surah al-Inshiqaq 84:6.
43. Surah Muhammad 47:17.
44. Surah Hud 11:56.
45. Surah Ya Sin 36:3-4.
46. Surah Ya Sin 36:61.
47. Surah Al 'Imran 3:101.
48. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 87, p. 3.
49. Tawassul: literally, to resort to intermediaries. Technically, it refers to the practice of petition prayer addressed to God through a holy personage such as a prophet {nabi} or a saint {wali}. {Trans.}
50. Surah al-An'am 6:161.
51. Surah al-Baqarah 2:143.
52. Surah al-A'raf 7:31.
53. Surah al-Isra' 17:29.
54. Surah al-Furqan 25:67.
55. Surah al-Isra' 17:110.
56. Surah al-Fath 48:29.
57. Surah al-Baqarah 2:43.
58. Surah al-Baqarah 2:82.
59. Surah al-Baqarah 2:83.
60. Surah al-'Ankabut 29:8.
61. Surah an-Nisa' 4:135.

62. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:8.
63. Surah an-Nisa' 4:69.
64. Surah al-Baqarah 2:47.
65. Surah al-Baqarah 2:61.
66. Tawrah (Torah): the scripture revealed to Prophet Musa (Moses) ('a) in its original form. {Trans.}
67. Surah al-Ma'idah 5: 13.
68. Surah an-Nisa' 4: 161.
69. Surah al-Ma'idah 5:24.
70. Surah al-Mumtahanah 60: 13.

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