

## The Quranic View on Supplication

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمْ ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِي سَيَدْخُلُونَ  
جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ

***And your Lord says: Call upon Me, I will answer you; surely those who are too proud for My worship shall soon enter hell abased. (al-Mu'min, 40/60)***

This verse of the Qur'an is one of those that raises some questions. In the verse God guarantees not to turn away any supplicant empty-handed and to approve every petition that His servants place before Him. However, in practice we see that although people continually ask God to answer their prayers, most of their supplications remain unfulfilled. In fact, if we compare the volume of requests that are placed before God and the limited number of individuals who have their supplications answered, it appears that a large proportion of supplicants are unsuccessful.

At this point the reactions of the supplicants takes different forms, and everyone's interpretation of the outcome will depend on his level of insight and understanding and his worldview. The one who knows well the actual concept of supplication and its consequences adopts an enlightened view about what has happened, whereas those who are pessimists and who possess gloomy dispositions view the matter in a different light.

As a result, frequently people whose supplications have apparently not been answered, and whose outlook is superficial, become despondent and pass through the vicissitudes of life alternating between disappointment and despair. They turn their back on faith and even fall into the error of denying God's omnipotence.

The question that arises here is that why do the prayers of supplicants go unanswered despite God's assurance to the contrary? Exegetes have attempted to answer this question and in the main, have suggested two possibilities:

1. The acceptance of prayers depends on various conditions, the most important of which is inner purity from, and the absence of, the pollution of excessive sin and defiance of God's commandments. This is because disobedience of God is the main factor in the rejection of supplications, and it deprives man from attaining God's abundant and endless grace and bounties.
2. God's knowledge of what is in the best interest of an individual, which is based on wisdom, as well as His all-encompassing knowledge over all aspects of an affair, results in the acceptance of some supplications and the rejection of others. This is because God is aware of what is beneficial for an individual as well as for the entire creation, whose lives are inextricably linked with one another. An individual only views matters, knowingly or unknowingly, as they affect himself, and the wider implications and impact of his supplication do not enter his thoughts. However, God's all-encompassing knowledge does not consider every prayer expedient for acceptance. Even at an individual level, everything that a supplicant prays for may not be beneficial for him, and if it is not in his ultimate best interest to have his prayers answered, God will not do so.

Although these two main explanations are plausible and correct to some extent, they are not fully satisfactory answers, and do not completely alleviate the curiosity of the questioner, especially because God has emphatically stated in the verse under review that He guarantees to answer every supplication. In fact, the wording of the verse does not mention any conditions that need to be met before the prayers of a supplicant are answered.

Furthermore, classifying the most usually asked supplications as outside the ambit of this general verse may not be consistent with the eloquence of God's words, and we must therefore seek an explanation that is robust enough and at the same time, both conforms with the verse as well as provides the questioner and the researcher with a suitable and basic answer.

When we begin to examine the verses of the Qur'an with some thoroughness, we find that the kinds of supplications that God has guaranteed to answer have a particular formulation, and by observing and following it, one can be expectant of the acceptance of his prayer. In fact, the Qur'an illustrates paradigms of supplications so that God's servants can emulate them and place their own worthy desires in front of the Creator, with sincerity and every hope for acceptance.

The supplication must be in synchrony with the human's progress towards perfection and in harmony with the constant movement of creation towards perfect existence; this is when the prayers will be met with the desired response, and will be answered by God.

In other words, the supplications of a servant in front of God must be consistent and compatible with the objectives of the creation of man, which are inextricably linked to his existence. That supplication that would extend the vision of a man to the boundaries of the spiritual realms is one that shapes his destiny and enables his development in every aspect that is necessary to achieve the pinnacle of spiritual distinction and elevation, so that he is aided by Divine grace to increase his status even further.

Thus a true supplication must be viewed from this perspective, whereas the majority of the prayers of mankind are completely devoid of any spiritual motivation or content and are about personal and mundane desires, or about relief from the daily hardships which people ordinarily face in the course of their lives.

As we mentioned before, according to the exegetes of the Qur'an, there are two main obstacles that impede the granting of supplications: sin and the absence of one's best interests; however, in the case of true supplications, these two factors cease to apply because they begin by asking God for forgiveness from sin and His pardon and clemency.

The plea for forgiveness is found at the heart of these prayers which the supplicants who possess spiritual and intellectual distinction constantly murmur at the threshold of their matchless Sustainer. God himself has instructed man that the only way to wipe out the stain of sin is to purify himself through repentance and a firm resolve not to regress and by distancing himself from the habits of the past. It is only then that God, in His infinite mercy and love, will accept the remorse of His servant, which is no more than a return to his original course in seeking understanding about His Lord, professing belief in Him and making amends for his past misconduct.

As for the supplication not being in the best interest of the supplicant, that factor no longer applies when the prayers are of a spiritual nature, because the supplicant has asked for favours that will increase his knowledge of God, and result in an elevation of his own spiritual merits and status; certainly acceptance of such a prayer will be in the interests of the supplicant, because the factors that would have made acceptance of a supplication inappropriate do not exist in these kinds of prayers.

Therefore when it comes to supplications that have a spiritual component, the two afore-mentioned impediments no longer apply, and the grounds for acceptance of the supplication are completely prepared.

The best examples of genuine supplication can be clearly found in the Qur'an, and after the necessary investigation, we can become properly familiar with them. God has quoted samples of the supplications of His Prophets and close servants which clarify the principles and aims of God for creating the mankind, viz. to achieve His proximity. And if the supplications of the Prophets that are mentioned in the Qur'an seem to be apparently about worldly matters, they are pronounced as preludes to achieve loftier merits, and latent within them lie noble and high objectives.

Prophet Zakariyya (A) wanted a son to inherit the office of prophethood and continue the guidance of his community after him, and not for the pleasure of a father at having a son. The words of Zakariyya (A) and his whispered and heartfelt communions are too deep to pass over with just a cursory reading. The term he used for a son was, "successor" (*wali*), and not, "son" (*walad*), meaning that the fruit of his life had to be a close servant of God and his succession would result in the continuation of prophethood and the guidance of humanity.

يَرِثُنِي وَيَرِثُ مِنْ آلِ يَعْقُوبَ وَاجْعَلْهُ رَبِّ رَضِيًّا

**Who should inherit me and inherit from the children of Ya'qub, and make him, my Lord, one with whom You are well pleased. (Maryam, 19/9)**

The supplication of Zakariyya (A) was granted and he was blessed with the son that he had desired, who continued to preach God's message and guide the people till the end of his days.

Prophet Sulaiman (A) did not ask for a mighty kingdom and authority because he wanted fame, power and glory; rather, it was his noble aspiration to remedy the spiritual malaise of his people and to introduce them to sublime truths, and this was the focus of his teachings. At no time does history show that Sulaiman (A) ever used his powers for his own ambitions or for personal gain; in fact, he placed his great power and means at the service of his people to guide them so that the banner of *tawhid* was kept aloft and justice prevailed on the earth. This is the supplication of Sulaiman (A) to his Lord:

رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِي أَنْ أَشْكُرَ نِعْمَتَكَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيَّ وَعَلَىٰ وَالِدَيَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَالِحًا تَرْضَاهُ وَأَدْخِلْنِي بِرَحْمَتِكَ فِي عِبَادِكَ الصَّالِحِينَ

**My Lord! grant me that I should be grateful for Your favour which You have bestowed on me and on my parents, and that I should do good such as You are pleased with, and include me, by Your mercy, in the ranks of Your righteous servants. (al-Naml, 27/19)**

Next, let us also consider the supplication of Prophet Ibrahim (A):

رَبِّ اجْعَلْنِي مُقِيمَ الصَّلَاةِ وَمِنْ ذُرِّيَّتِي رَبَّنَا وَتَقَبَّلْ دُعَاءَ رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيَّ  
وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَوْمَ يَقُومُ الْحِسَابُ

**My Lord! make me keep up prayer and from my offspring (too), O our Lord, and accept my prayer. O our Lord! grant me protection and to my parents and to the believers on the day when the reckoning shall come to pass! (Ibrahim, 14/40-41)**

The only case mentioned in the Qur'an when the supplication of a Prophet has been denied and not accepted is that of Prophet Nuh (A) regarding the salvation of his son from the flood. This supplication stemmed purely from fatherly love, and such prayers are not guaranteed to be accepted by God (even if they issue from an eminent Prophet).

The supplications that the angels and the bearers of God's throne invoke for the good of the believers as recounted in the Qur'an are all directed to help man achieve eternal felicity. Thus, they supplicate at God's door asking Him to accept the repentance of the believers and to envelop them in His mercy and forgiveness:

الَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ الْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُ يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ  
لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا وَسِعْتَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ رَحْمَةً وَعِلْمًا فَاغْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَاتَّبَعُوا سَبِيلَكَ  
وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ {0} رَبَّنَا وَأَدْخِلْهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ عَدْنٍ الَّتِي وَعَدْتَهُمْ وَمَنْ صَلَحَ مِنْ  
آبَائِهِمْ وَأَزْوَاجِهِمْ وَذُرِّيَّاتِهِمْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

***Those who bear the throne and those who go around it celebrate the praise of their Lord and believe in Him and ask forgiveness for the believers: Our Lord! You embrace all things in mercy and knowledge, therefore forgive those who turn (to You) and follow Your way, and save them from the punishment of the hell. Our Lord! and make them enter the gardens of perpetuity which You have promised to them and to those who do good of their fathers and their wives and their offspring, surely You are the Mighty, the Wise. (al-Ghafir, 40/6-7)***

The Qur'an also describes the supplications of the close servants (*awliya*) of God. As we see, these prayers have the same qualities as those of the Prophets and angels. The following are clear examples:

الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ  
وَالْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا سُبْحَانَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ {0} رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ مَنْ  
تُدْخِلِ النَّارَ فَقَدْ أَخْزَيْتَهُ وَمَا لِلظَّالِمِينَ مِنْ أَنْصَارٍ {0} رَبَّنَا إِنَّنا سَمِعْنَا مُنَادِيًا  
يُنَادِي لِلإِيمَانِ أَنْ آمِنُوا بِرَبِّكُمْ فَآمَنَّا رَبَّنَا فَاغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَكَفِّرْ عَنَّا سَيِّئَاتِنَا  
وَتَوَفَّنَا مَعَ الْأَبْرَارِ {0} رَبَّنَا وَآتِنَا مَا وَعَدْتَنَا عَلَىٰ رُسُلِكَ وَلَا تُخْزِنَا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّكَ  
لَا تُخْلِفُ الْمِيعَادَ

***Those who remember Allah standing and sitting and lying on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth: Our Lord! You have not created this in vain! Glory be to You; save us then from the chastisement of the fire. Our Lord! surely whomsoever You make enter the fire, him You have indeed brought to disgrace, and there shall be no helpers for the unjust. Our Lord! surely we have heard a caller calling to the faith, saying: Believe in your Lord, so we did believe; Our Lord! forgive us therefore our faults, and cover our evil deeds and let us die with the righteous. Our Lord! and grant us what You have promised us by Your messengers;***

**and disgrace us not on the day of resurrection; surely You do not fail to perform the promise.**

**(Aal-Imran, 3/191-4)**

If we look at the verses at the end of Suratu Baqara, we see once again that the supplications of the believers have the same elements as the prayers of the Prophets, angels and the close servants of God:

رَبَّنَا لَا تُؤَاخِذْنَا إِنْ نَسِينَا أَوْ أَخْطَأْنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْنَا إِيْرًا كَمَا حَمَلْتَهُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا تُحْمِلْنَا مَا لَا طَاقَةَ لَنَا بِهِ وَاعْفُ عَنَّا وَارْحَمْنَا أَنْتَ مَوْلَانَا فَانصُرْنَا عَلَى الْقَوْمِ الْكَافِرِينَ

**Our Lord! do not punish us if we forget or make a mistake; Our Lord! do not lay on us a burden as You did lay on those before us, Our Lord do not impose upon us that which we have not the strength to bear; and pardon us and forgive us and have mercy on us, You are our Patron, so help us against the community of unbelievers. (al-Baqara, 2/286)**

All these supplications that the Qur'an quotes from the Prophets, the angels who pray for the believers, the close servants of God and the prayers of the believers for themselves are all about raising one's station, developing one's understanding and achieving proximity to God. For this reason, after mentioning these types of supplications in the Qur'an, God states:

فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُمْ رَبُّهُمْ

**So their Lord accepted their prayer... (Aal-Imran, 3/195)**

It is quite clear that in no part of this collection of supplications is there a plea for personal or material gain or for the fleeting pleasures of life. In another verse, the Qur'an states:

وَيَسْتَجِيبُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَيَزِيدُهُمْ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ

**And He answers those who believe and do good deeds, and gives them more out of His grace. (al-Shura, 42/25)**

According to some commentators, this verse restricts the fulfilment of the supplications of the believers to their worship and obedience, because that leads to their advancement, and such prayers are always accepted by God.

After the mention of the rituals of the Haj, and exhorting the believers about the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), the Qur'an states that men are of two types; some of them say:

رَبَّنَا آتِنَا فِي الدُّنْيَا وَمَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنْ خَلَقٍ

***Our Lord! give us in the world, and they shall have nothing in the hereafter. (al-Baqara, 2/200)***

while others say:

رَبَّنَا آتِنَا فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ حَسَنَةً وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ {٥} أُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ  
نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كَسَبُوا وَاللَّهُ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

***Our Lord! grant us good in this world and good in the hereafter, and save us from the chastisement of the fire. They are the ones who shall have (their) portion of what they have earned, and Allah is swift in reckoning. (al-Baqara, 2/201-2)***

As we see, this supplication is not for the inspiration of the soul and elevation in the level of spirituality or achieving proximity to God; it is about acquiring the goods of this world, or of this world and the next. Therefore, in the reply contained in these verses to both groups – those who desire the goods of this world only and have prayed for the same, as well as those who desire the goods of this world and the next, and have resorted to supplication to acquire these desires, which are empty of any spiritual content – God does not mention acceptance of their supplication. Instead, to attain their objectives, He has directed them to follow a general Divinely ordained system in this world; viz. to apply effort and action to achieve their aspirations on the basis of the free will and freedom of choice that has been granted to mankind.

In this way, He informs both groups that they will achieve their desires through exercising the appropriate efforts and actions; the Qur'an states: "They shall have their portion of what they have earned."

The infallible Imams (A) have also presented valuable instances of this manner of supplication, a clear example being the supplication of Kumail, as taught to him by Imam Ali (A). One of the phrases in this supplication states:

يا ربّ قوّ على خدمتك جوارحي واشدد على العزيمة جوانحي و هب لي الجد في  
خشيتك و الدوام في الاتصال بخدمتك ... و منّ عليّ بحسن اجابتك و اقلني

## عثرتى و اغفر زلتى

O Lord! Strengthen my limbs for Your service and sustain the strength of my hands to persevere in Your service and bestow upon me the earnestness to fear You and to constantly serve You... be gracious to me through Your best response and reduce for me my sins and forgive my lapses.

The supplication continues until there occurs an interesting statement that is resonant with our present discussion:

فانك قضيت على عبادك بعبادتك و امرتهم بدعائك و ضمننت لهم الاجابة

For verily, You have ordained Your worship for Your servants and commanded them to supplicate to You and guaranteed them a response.

In this part of the *du'a* of Kumail, Imam Ali (A) makes an allusion to the guarantee mentioned in the verse of the Qur'an that we are reviewing, mentioning God's assurance to reply to every supplicant as a consequence of those supplications that are based on spiritual and noble wishes.

In truth Imam Ali (A) intends to demonstrate that supplications made in the manner of the prophets, angels, close servants and believers are the type that God has guaranteed to accept and teaches us to call to God in this manner so that we may likewise receive His reply.

When we turn to the supplications contained in the *Sahifa* of Imam Sajjad (A) we see exceptional examples of supplications that qualify for acceptance; we find that all of them express noble and spiritual aspirations. Similarly, we should study this prayer taught by Imam Mahdi (AF):

اللهم ارزقنا توفيق الطاعة و بعد المعصية و صدق النية و عرفان الحرمة و  
اكرمنا بالهدى و الاستقامة و سد السنا بالصواب و الحكمة و املاء قلوبنا  
بالعلم و المعرفة و طهر بطوننا من الحرام و الشبهة...

O Lord grant us the gift of being obedient to you,  
and being remote from sin,  
and let us be sincere in our intention,  
and give us true knowledge of that which is sacred,  
and honour us with guidance and steadfastness,  
and direct our tongues to that which is righteous and wise,



and fill our hearts with knowledge and comprehension,  
and purify our stomachs from that which is forbidden and that which is doubtful...

In the entirety of this supplication, there is no mention of any request that is restricted to worldly desires or pleasures.

The other holy Imams (A) have also left treasures of valuable supplications, containing lofty and worthy messages, all seeking God's grace to achieve the highest spiritual levels.

Mystics and other scholars have emphasised that the essence of *du'a* (supplication) and beseeching at the threshold of God is an instinctive need, because the fundamental philosophy of supplication and the secret conversation of man with his Lord is to ultimately bring about his guidance, development and elevation even if the supplication is about material and basic needs.

Therefore, true supplication – whose reply has been assured by God for those individuals who have purified their thinking, filled their hearts with the love of God, and have cleansed their beings from every tinge of Godlessness – is that supplication which aids and benefits the supplicant on his journey to his Lord. However, that is not to say that, God, whose treasures of mercy and bestowal are limitless, does not grant the requests of His distressed and helpless servants out of His grace and favour. It is for this reason that the holy Imams (A) have always insisted that one should ask for every need from God and constantly supplicate to Him.

Therefore, when beseeching in the correct manner from God, the manner that results in acceptance, the believers can also invoke God's grace and mercy, so that God may approve their supplications for basic and worldly needs also. However, even if they are about alleviating the troubles of this world, such prayers must not be devoid of mention of the real needs, which are in the hereafter.

If the scope of the verse, "Call on Me, I will answer you" and the assurance of acceptance is so wide that it includes supplications for all worldly desires and material excellences and the endless quest for ease and plenty and all that man seeks in the course of his lifetime, then we are faced with a kind of contradiction. The world is a place for the trial of mankind and in the course of their life, everybody's capacity to face difficulties is revealed. Indeed God has categorically stated that this world is the abode of tribulations, which shape the character of human beings and cause them to develop and advance.

The Prophets (A) and close servants of God went through some of the most demanding adversities in their lives, yet they expressed only love and adoration at the Divine threshold and in this way acquired proximity to their Lord and received blessings suitable to their own great stations.

If supplication is all that is required to alleviate the usual and day-to-day problems and difficulties that man faces in this world and God had also guaranteed the acceptance of these sorts of prayers, then He would not have allowed the following order and arrangement to prevail on earth, where He states:

## لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي كَبَدٍ

**Verily, We have created man to be in distress. (al-Balad, 90/4)**

Indeed, this expectation and mental concept is against Divine wisdom that on the one hand, God should create a system of trials and tribulations in order to test man, and on the other he would remove all these difficulties at their supplication. For He has stated in the Qur'an:

أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا آمَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ

**Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, "We believe", and not be tried? (al-Ankabut, 29/2)**

It must not be ignored that another portion of the disappointments and difficulties that man encounters in this world are due to his own inept and unwise actions and by granting man the gifts of intellect and reason, God wants him to try his utmost to solve his own problems and overcome the obstacles that block his path.

A point that can be inferred from the last part of the verse we have been discussing is that, if we consider "worship" as mentioned in the latter part of the verse:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِي سَيَدْخُلُونَ جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ

**surely those who are too proud for My worship shall soon enter hell abased. (al-Mu'min, 40/60)**

to mean supplication, it is more compatible with the beginning of the verse, where God commands man to supplicate, because this verse talks about supplication and its acceptance, and supplication is also a part of worship. If man wants to reach an elevated level he cannot do so except through the means of the constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and supplication (*du'a*). On the other hand, worship is best expressed by words of praise of God and by thanks and gratitude for His bounties and by acknowledging His transcendent and exalted station.

However, supplication is an earnest expression of man's desires and expectations from God, and in reality, it is man's acknowledgement of his own weakness and helplessness in front of God's greatness; this is where the pompous and shameful pride of arrogant individuals prevents them from supplicating and expressing their humility and abjectness in front of their Lord, and thus cutting off their relationship with Him.

If we deliberate about the character and thinking of the arrogant, we will find that in the main, they tend to praise God with empty words, and one does not see any sincerity in their prayers. These haughty individuals are not prepared to demonstrate their humbleness in front of their Creator and acknowledge their own true worthlessness.

That is why God, the Omnipotent Lord of creation, warns those caught in the trap of pride and arrogance that the same vanity that prevents them from supplicating humbly in front of Him, will ultimately lead only to their eternal loss and punishment in the fire of hell.

Let us look once again at the verse we have been discussing:

وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمْ ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِي سَيَدْخُلُونَ  
جَهَنَّمَ دَاخِرِينَ

***And your Lord says: Call upon Me, I will answer you; surely those who are too proud for My worship shall soon enter hell abased. (al-Mu'min, 40/60)***

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