

## Reflections on Soorah al-Faatihah

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

The Qur'aan consists of 114 chapters or Soorahs of unequal length. Soorah al-Faatihah is the first Soorah in the Qur'aan and is recited in each rak'ah of every prayer as the Prophet, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*), declared:

**“There is no Salaah (valid) without the opening chapter of the Book.”<sup>1</sup>**

It was revealed to the Prophet (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*), in Makkah. From all the verses of the Qur'aan Allaah chose this Soorah for us to read in every prayer for some divine wisdom. Almost every Muslim in the world has committed it to memory. When a person accepts Islaam, the first thing that he or she memorizes is this opening chapter - the Faatihah. This is so they can perform the prescribed prayers. Its meaning should be learnt and contemplated on every time we offer Salaah. When a person recites Soorah al-Faatihah in his Salaah, the Lord of heavens and earth responds to every verse he says!

Text of Soorah al-Faatihah

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

**1. In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy**

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

**2. Praise be to Allaah, the Lord of All the Worlds;**

الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

**3. The Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy.**

مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

**4. Master of the Day of Judgment.**

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ

**5. You alone we worship and from You alone we seek help.**

<sup>1</sup> Saheeh Al-Bukhaaree, Saheeh Muslim

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اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

### 6. Guide us to the straight way,

صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ

### 7. The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your grace, not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray.

## Names of Soorah al-Faatihah and their significance

This Soorah has other names like The Opening<sup>2</sup>, the Essence of the Qur'aan<sup>3</sup>, the Seven Oft-Repeated Verses<sup>4</sup>, and the Glorious Recital<sup>5</sup>.

Indeed this Soorah holds the essence of the Qur'aan and contains its principles and major themes. It incorporates, in a condensed form, all the fundamental principles laid down in the Qur'aan: the principle of God's oneness and uniqueness, of His being the originator of the universe, the fountain of all life-giving grace, the One to whom man is ultimately responsible, the only power that can guide and help; the principle of life after death and of the consequences of man's behaviour; the principle of guidance through God's message-bearers and, flowing from it, the principle of the continuity of all true religions (implied in the allusion to people who have lived - and erred - in the past); and, finally, the need for self-surrender to the will of the Supreme Being and, thus, for worshipping Him alone. It is for this reason that this Soorah has been formulated as a prayer, to be constantly repeated and reflected upon by the believer.

It is also called the Prayer, as in the Prophetic Hadeeth<sup>6</sup>:

**“I have split The Prayer (meaning Soorah al-Faatihah) into two parts; one for Me and one for My slave, and My slave will have what he asks for. When the slave says: Praise be to Allaah, the Lord of All the Worlds, I say: ‘My slave has praised Me.’ When he says: The Most Gracious, The dispenser of grace, I say: ‘My slave has extolled Me.’ When he says Master of the Day of Judgment, I say: ‘My slave has glorified Me’ or ‘My slave has deferred to Me.’ When he says: You alone we worship and from You alone we seek help, I say: ‘This is between Me and My slave, and my slave will have what he asks for.’ When he says: Guide us to the straight way, The way of those on whom you have bestowed Your**

<sup>2</sup> Saheeh al-Bukhaaree, Saheeh Muslim

<sup>3</sup> Saheeh al-Bukhaaree, Saheeh Muslim

<sup>4</sup> Saheeh al-Bukhaaree, Saheeh Muslim

<sup>5</sup> Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

<sup>6</sup> Hadeeth Qudsee is a Hadeeth where the Prophet relates the words of his Lord.

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**grace, not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray, I say: ‘This is for My slave, and My slave will have what he asks for.’”<sup>7</sup>**

One reason it is called Prayer is because the Soorah is part remembrance and part supplication. ‘Guide us to the straight way’ is supplication for the greatest gift one can ask from Allaah: divine guidance.

### **1. I begin with the Name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy.**

The Soorah begins with an invocation of God’s proper Name – Allaah, beginning with God’s sacred Name in accordance with the first revelation of Allaah send upon His Prophet:

**["Read in the Name of your Lord."]<sup>8</sup>**

It conforms with the Islaamic worldview:

**["He is the First and the Last and the Outward and the Inward."]<sup>9</sup>**

Three Names of God appear in this invocation:

- Allaah
- al-Rahman (The Most Merciful)
- al-Raheem (The Bestower of Mercy)

‘Allaah’ is considered the personal name of God, shared with nobody else. No one has been given this Name. It has no plural in the Arabic language. We can not name our children with this Name.

It has three meanings to it.

First, a meaning implicit in the Name ‘Allaah’ is that hearts yearn for the divine and desire to know, meet, and see Him, they take comfort in remembering Him; Allaah is the sole object of their worship and devotion. Hearts turn to Allaah till the tongue is moved to repeat the words of God’s Prophet (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*):

**“I ask you the pleasure of gazing upon Your noble Face out of longing to meet with You...”**

Second, another meaning contained in the word ‘Allaah’ is His inherent inscrutability. Minds cannot grasp Him for indeed mysterious is the Lord except what he chooses to reveal of Himself to us either through the scripture, that is the Qur’aan, or through His Prophet (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*),.

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<sup>7</sup> Saheeh Muslim

<sup>8</sup> Qur’aan [96:1]

<sup>9</sup> Qur’aan [57:3]

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**[“They will never comprehend Him with their knowledge.”]<sup>10</sup>**

Third, ‘Allaah’ is “The God”, the deity who has exclusive rights to be worshipped. That is why it is mentioned in the testimony of faith, Laa ‘ilaaha ‘illaallaah. There are many other things taken as gods, but they are false:

**[“This is because Allaah is the Truth and what they call on besides Him is falsehood.”]<sup>11</sup>**

As for the two epithets, al-Rahmaan and al-Raheem, which are part of Bismillaah are derived from the noun rahma, which signifies “mercy”.

In an authentic Hadeeth, Allaah’s Messenger, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*), says:

**“Allaah’s mercy has one hundred shares, only one of which He sent down to be shared by human beings, jinn, and all the animal species. With this share of mercy, they are able to show affection and mercy to one another, and with it, a wild beast is able to show affection to its young. Allaah has reserved the other ninety-nine shares for His servants on the Day of Resurrection.”<sup>12</sup>**

This is why a person should never despair of Allaah’s mercy, no matter how great his sins may be. Allaah, the Exalted, says:

**[“Say: O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of Allaah’s mercy, for Allaah forgives all sins, and he is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”]<sup>13</sup>**

Lastly, al-Rahmaan is an exclusive Name of Allaah. None can be given this Name or described by this characteristic, unlike Raheem.

## 2. Praise be to Allaah, the Lord of all the World.

Al-Hamd, translated as praise, consists, more accurately, of praise and gratitude. ‘All praise and thanks are for Allaah.’ The question is: for what? Just like Allaah is praised for His perfection, majesty, compassion, love, greatness, and beauty, he is also thanked for all physical and spiritual blessings. The heart of the faithful leaps to praise Allaah at the mere mention of His Name, for the heart owes its existence to the Lord. In every moment, with every breath, and with every heartbeat, God’s blessings multiply. The entire creation is submerged in divine blessings, especially the human being. All praise belongs to Allaah in the beginning and in the end:

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<sup>10</sup> Qur’aan [20:110]

<sup>11</sup> Qur’aan [22:62]

<sup>12</sup> Saheeh Muslim

<sup>13</sup> Qur’aan [39:53]

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**[“And He is Allaah: There is no god but He. To Him be praise, at the first and at the last.”]<sup>14</sup>**

Here we also learn another name of Allaah: al-Rabb (the Lord, the Sustainer). The Arabic expression al-Rabb embraces a wide complex of meanings not easily expressed by a single term in another language. It comprises the ideas of having a just claim to the possession of anything and, consequently, authority over it, as well as of rearing, sustaining and fostering anything from its inception to its final completion. It is applied to Allaah as the sole fosterer and sustainer of all creation and therefore the ultimate source of all authority.

Allaah is the Lord of the worlds. To explain it, Allaah is the Lord of everything besides Him, he sustains existence in all its forms.

### **3. The Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy.**

Allaah repeats His Names of mercy: al-Rahmaan and al-Raheem. In case people felt overawed by the description 'Lord of the Worlds,' we are gently reminded He is not like the kings of this world. Allaah is not a tyrant who displays an oppressive grip of coercion on His subjects, rather He looks after us in His tender mercy. When we were in the wombs of our mother, al-Rahmaan took care of us. When we needed food or drink, whenever in our lives we have needed Him and called upon His Name, al-Raheem has been there to respond to us.

### **4. Master of the Day of Judgment.**

After explaining to His slaves why He should be praised – He fosters and nourishes, He takes care of all our needs – He tells us He is al-Maalik, the Master and the King. He is powerful and has the ability to carry His will in the kingdom. We come from the Owner. We own nothing, but are owned. He shifts our attention to the Day when He shall be the only presiding Judge and all shall stand humbly in front of him. He will judge in justice so do not forget your return is to Him. Do not think with death it will all end. Remember, you will be judged based on your earthly conduct by the only King, and none other will share this judgement.

### **5. You alone we worship and from You alone we seek help**

This verse carries the gist of Islaam: Tawheed. All the prophets from Adam to Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon them*), were sent to convey the central message: worship Allaah alone Who has no son or partner. This is the meaning of

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<sup>14</sup> Qur'aan [28:70]

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the first testimony of faith: La ilaaha illaallaah. It is the singular purpose of creation. Tawheed is salvation and we must convey the message of Tawheed to our friends and family. No human being comes so close so as to become His associate and change His decisions. Deviation in this matter is fatal to one's spiritual well-being.

What is the 'worship' that we are pledging to God alone?

It is a comprehensive word including one's dealings with Allaah in the form of ritual devotional acts like the five daily prayers or fasting as well as dealings with other human beings like family and friends. Simple physical acts performed by one's limbs like smiling and intense emotions like love, hope, and fear fall within its realm. God is worshipped by obeying His commands and refraining from what He has forbidden. Worship is every utterance and deed, apparent or hidden that Allaah loves. Simply stated, every act pleasing to God is an act of worship in Islaam. Allaah is entitled to worship by the body, soul, and heart and remains incomplete unless it is done out of reverence and fear of Allaah, divine love and adoration, hope in divine reward, and extreme humility. Giving anyone else - prophets, angels, Jesus, Mary, idols, or nature - a portion of worship due to Allaah is called Shirk and is the gravest sin in Islaam.

Humility is an essential ingredient of worship and there is no better way to approach the Lord of the worlds than through humility. A person conceited by his personal devotion blocks his own path to the Lord of Power. Worship should make us more humble. The Prophet Muhammad, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*), has taught to admit self-deficiency, frailty, and iniquity in front of the Magnificent Lord by saying:

**“O Allaah, I have greatly wronged my own soul, and no one forgives sins except for You, so grant me Your forgiveness and have mercy upon me. Verily you are the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.”**

In another prayer he used to say:

**“O Allaah, you are my Lord. There is none worthy of worship but You. You created me and I am your servant, and I abide by Your covenant and promise as much as I am able. I seek refuge with You from the evil that I do. I come back to You from Your grace upon me, and I come back to you with my sins. So forgive me, because none forgives sins except for You.”**

We are in need of Allaah's help even to worship Him. So, we ask Him to assist us. Also, Allaah is the Only One from whom help should be sought including help to worship Him. This does not mean we cannot ask someone to help us move to a new house! The "help" meant in the verse is supernatural aid. To make it clearer, when you take your sick child to an emergency room, you should ask Allaah alone to help your child, not a dead saint or a guardian angel.

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### 6. Guide us to the straight way

Human beings by nature are infirm. Today they are close to Allaah, tomorrow they become distant. In this prayer a Muslim asks Allaah to keep him strong, to keep him guided on the straight path. A Muslim repeats this petition in every Salaah. There are always those who are better than us in the spiritual ladder. A Muslim should continuously strive to rise up the 'ladder' and get closer to the Lord of Power by increasing in one's patience, good manners, and practice of Islaam. Especially, for someone new to Islaam, they would really need this prayer on their journey. A Muslim should learn and find out what God wants of him at every turn of life and to carry it out with a pure intention.

### 7. The way of those on whom you have bestowed Your grace, not the way of those who earn Your anger, nor of those who go astray

This verse is a continuation of the previous verse. It is answering the question... 'exactly whose way should I be on?' My parents, relatives, friends, fellow country-men... whose?

The answer is; those who were touched by divine grace. Who were those? They are identified in another passage of the Qur'aan:

**["And whoever obeys Allaah and the Messenger – those will be with the ones upon whom Allaah has bestowed favour of the prophets, the steadfast affirmers of truth, the martyrs and the righteous. And excellent are those as companions."]<sup>15</sup>**

The Prophet, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*), said:

**"The Jews are the ones who have earned Allaah's anger and the Christians are the ones who are astray."<sup>16</sup>**

These are the people who know the truth yet abandon it, including the Jews<sup>17</sup> and others. This should not be taken as a license for anti-Semitism.

First, Allaah's anger is not limited to the Jews. For instance, Allaah says about taking an innocent life:

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<sup>15</sup> Qur'aan [4:69]

<sup>16</sup> Tirmidhee, Musnad of Ahmad, and Ibn Hibban.

<sup>17</sup> Who is a Jew and what is Judaism? These are complex questions because many people today who call themselves Jews do not believe in that religion at all! More than half of all Jews in Israel today call themselves "secular," and don't believe in God or any of the religious beliefs of Judaism. Half of all Jews in the United States don't belong to any synagogue. They may practice some of the rituals of Judaism and celebrate some of the holidays, but they don't think of these actions as religious activities. In any case, the true followers of Hebrew prophets beginning from Moses are considered free of blame as they did not distort their original religious teachings. For our purposes a 'Jew' is a believer in Judaism who does not follow the original beliefs and practices instituted by the Hebrew prophets, but perhaps rabbinate and their councils. God knows best.

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**["If a man kills a believer intentionally, his recompense is Hell, to abide therein, and the anger and curse of Allaah are upon him."]<sup>18</sup>**

Second, divine wrath is for those who were not guided to the straight way, not for lack of knowledge, but their vain desires blocked them from the straight path. As any student of Old Testament knows, the Jewish rabbis possessed knowledge, but they did not act upon it and had the greatest influence in changing the Mosaic religion. Similarly, a Muslim scholar, or for that matter, any of us, who has knowledge but does not act on it also resembles the Jews in this matter. Part of being "guided" is to have a firm resolve to do what is right and to abandon what is wrong. The Prophet, (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*), has said:

**"A man will be brought on the Day of Resurrection and cast into the Hellfire. His haunches will be spilled into the fire and he will go around in it as a donkey goes around a mill. The inhabitants of Hell will gather around him and say: 'What is the matter with you? Didn't you used to enjoin upon us what is right and forbid us from doing wrong?' He will reply: 'I used to enjoin upon you what is right but not do it myself and I used to forbid you from doing wrong and then engage in it myself.'"<sup>19</sup>**

This man had knowledge. He knew right from wrong. Moreover, he would enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. But he did not act upon his knowledge, so he earned his punishment.

Third, this will be illustrated with an example. Let us take something basic. The Ten Commandments are the cornerstone of Judaism. Keeping the Sabbath is the most important ritual observance in Judaism, the only one instituted in the Ten Commandments. According to the Bible itself, the Jews were threatened, punished<sup>20</sup>, and earned divine wrath<sup>21</sup> for violating it. In Islaam, Friday is the most sacred day of the week and a special Salaah is held to mark it. The sanctity of Friday, set by Allaah, is well known among Muslims. Altering it for any reason to another day would be analogous to Jews violating the Sabbath. It would be knowingly corrupting a divinely set ritual observance.

**"...nor of those who go astray."**

These are the people that abandon the truth out of ignorance, like the Christians and others. The Christians are astray out of ignorance. This does not mean that obstinacy did not subsequently develop within them after some of them overstepped the mark out of their ignorance. These are the people who worship, but do so without knowledge. A Muslim who

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<sup>18</sup> Qur'aan [4:93]

<sup>19</sup> Saheeh al-Bukhaaree, Saheeh Muslim

<sup>20</sup> He destroyed Jerusalem for its violation (Jeremiah 17:27).

<sup>21</sup> "They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws—although the man who obeys them will live by them—and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert." (Ezekiel 20: 21; New International Version)



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might worship God based on ignorance without textual authority resembles the Christians, so to say. For instance, Catholic worship is offered even to inanimate objects, such as the relics of a martyr, the Cross of Christ, the Crown of Thorns, or even the statue or picture of a saint. Other Christians use rock bands or singing as worship. Quite to the contrary, Jesus never worshipped God with music, singing hymns, or venerating the cross! An analogous “imitation” by a Muslim, no matter how well intentioned, would be using music and singing devotional songs as worship since the Final Prophet did not worship Allaah in this manner. Prophet Muhammad (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him*), has clearly laid out how God is to be worshipped; it is not allowed to deviate from it in the least.

We ask Allaah to be ‘guided’ to the straight path, the path of the prophets and their righteous followers and, in way to warn us so we may not tread the same path, we pray not to be like the first group which failed to act upon their knowledge or the second group which failed to acquire it.