

Graciousness of the Most Gracious Lord

Iyyaka Na'budu Wa Iyyaka Nasta'een

It is You we worship and You we ask for help. (Al-Faitha 1:5)

We recite this verse daily at least seventeen times in Surah *Al-Fatiha* during our prayers. It is a reminder of our covenant with Allah SWT of total and absolute servitude. Imam Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya has discussed in detail how this one verse contains the entire message of Islam in itself by eliminating every other source of devotion and assistance from our lives. The only time we are truly surrendered to Allah is when we refuse any form of reliance on others and know that the only one who is capable of helping is Him SWT.

Another esteemed scholar has explained this verse from a very different angle. He said that since Allah has created this earth as a testing ground, He SWT has already ordained that believers will be tried in order to determine their spiritual status. Allah SWT says in Surah *Al-Ankabut*:

أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا ءَامَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ ﴿٢﴾

Do the people think that they will be left to say, "We believe" and they will not be tried?
(29:2)

The esteemed scholar goes on to explain that the following verse is the confirmation of this *sunnah* of Allah SWT.

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ ﴿٥﴾

It is You we worship and You we ask for help. (Al-Fatiha 1: 5)

Allah SWT has already ordained that once you proclaim "*Iyyaka Na'budu*", (you alone we worship) you'll have a problem, a calamity or opposition to test your level of sincerity of this proclamation. You will have a trial in the form of immense happiness or fear to see where your fidelity lies.

Therefore, Allah SWT has already ordained that believers from the moment they agree to become '*abd*' (slave of Allah), will face opposition. Right after telling us that, Allah SWT continues in order to answer His slaves' inevitable question 'what do we do then?', in the following words: "*Wa Iyyaka Nasta'een*" (and only from You we seek support). Allah SWT is telling us that we will have trials but there is nothing to worry about because He is there and if we ask, He will help us through our tribulations.

The Element of Victory

The element of victory is total and absolute surrender to Allah SWT. Allah SWT opens for His slave once he has reached a state of desperation such that the slave has exhausted all means and has realised that there is nothing else that can be done.

This does not mean that one should not try physical means to relieve a problem; it is really the status of heart while the means are being tried. It is the *yaqeen* or conviction in the heart that the only one who *can* open the doors is Allah SWT, and without Him we cannot achieve anything. It is this conviction that opens means for believers in ways that defy all possible physical laws and common sense.

The secret of this victory is absolute belief in the One you are asking from. The victory from Allah has been promised to the believers and it doesn't suit them to have any doubt or hesitation in their hearts about the ability of their Lord.

By this way when the slave reaches the status of '*ubudiyyah*' (slavery to Allah), he will face trials and opposition; and it is at this point that Allah assures him that He SWT is there to take care of him. But to gain that one cannot have any doubts or thoughts that someone else will or can support him.

It is from the graciousness of Allah SWT that He notifies His slaves that trials are part of the plan that cannot be avoided, and at the same time also assures them that they are not alone while being tested. He is there to provide any support that they might need.

Goals vs. Actions

At this point we will take a little segue from our topic and discuss the differences between our goals in life and the actions we carry out. The question is, which of these should have priority—the goals or the actions?

It is the goals—because once we define our goal we will take steps or actions that will help us reach that goal. Once we have a defined goal, a defined purpose, it'll drive us to set a plan to achieve that purpose as opposed to taking actions which keep us busy but might not bring the results we want.

The actions carried out impulsively have no comparison with those that are planned. Think of a beach where there is sand and rocks for miles to see. Big waves come and move the sand and rocks and they are rearranged according to their density—big and small rocks clustered according to their weight. So the waves rearranged the rocks; an action took place without any particular plan. Whereas if you take the same sand and decide to build a castle, you would have to plan it. You'll collect rocks and sand based on the size and design of your castle.

All I am trying to emphasize is one thing: random actions vs. planned actions to achieve a goal.

The waves did not build a castle even though the rocks were collected, because the wave did not have a plan or a goal. It is just a force pushing the rocks, though systematically according to weight, yet unable to produce any outcome. The point is that if I do not define my goal and my purpose in life and plan step by step on how to achieve that goal, my efforts will be rendered fruitless.

Ar-Rahman Should Be The Goal!

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: 'To God belongs 99 names, 100 minus 1, anyone who memorizes them will enter Paradise.' (Bukhari & Muslim)

One of these beautiful names is *Ar-Rahman*, the Most Gracious. Allah SWT honoured the name *Ar-Rahman* by mentioning it in the opening verse of the Qur'an:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. (Al-Fatiha 1:1)

In fact this name is so important that Allah SWT has made it incumbent upon His slaves to remember it at least seventeen times a day. Every time a Muslim performs *salah* (prayer), he/she has to recite Surah Al-Fatiha which also contains the name *Ar-Rahman: Most Gracious, Most Merciful.* (Al-Fatiha 1:3)

And this amount of repetition for a Muslim is in *fard* (obligatory) prayers alone; the rest are extra. It is also the only name that is the title of a surah (chapter) of the Qur'an as well; no other name of Allah SWT is used to name a surah.

So what message is Allah SWT, the author of this magnificent book, trying to convey?

Our benevolent scholars have provided explanations as to why Allah SWT would choose *Ar-Rahman* over any other attribute. When you are in a desperate situation and you call on Allah for assistance, 'Ya Allah' or 'Ya Ilah' do not ring as close to the heart as 'Ya Rahman'.

So what is the Most Gracious Lord saying by choosing this particular attribute?

The first message really is to know who *Ar-Rahman* is and how important He is in my life. When a person calls on Allah in a state of desperation and beseeches Him by calling

Him 'Oh, My Most Gracious Lord!' what effect does it have on the slave? It brings infinite hope and a sense of relief to the heart of the believer. Regardless of how weak, incapable or sinner a person is, he is reminded that he is dealing with the Most Gracious Lord who is willing to overlook any shortcomings as long as the slave has no one but Him SWT in his heart.

The esteemed scholar goes on to explain that *Ar-Rahman* in here becomes a purpose and a goal in itself. Allah SWT wants us to know that our goal and purpose in life is to reach *Ar-Rahman*. We have to establish the relationship with the Most Gracious Lord in order to be empowered in this life.

He SWT challenges us in the Qur'an in following words:

رَبُّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فَاعْبُدْهُ وَاصْطَبِرْ لِعِبَادَتِهِ هَلْ تَعْلَمُ

لَهُ سَمِيًّا ﴿٦٥﴾

Lord of the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them - so worship Him and have patience for His worship. Do you know of any similarity to Him?" (Maryam 19:65).

Allah SWT is asking us if we know anyone equal to or better than Him SWT who is the Most Gracious and Most Exalted? Is there anyone or anything better that we can have as a goal in life other than *Ar-Rahman*?

If no, then what are we waiting for?

And if yes, then who is it?

Can a job, wealth, business, educational credentials, status, spouse, children, or anything else be better than Allah SWT as our goal in life?

This is what has happened to us today. We have replaced the Creator and His conscientiousness in our lives with petty materialistic ambitions and this is why the world has become the way it is—a miserable selfish dwelling.

Allah SWT in His ultimate wisdom knew that we would fall trap to this forgetfulness and dexterity so He SWT sent us the reminder and the criteria of happiness in His holy book, Al-Qur'an. Allah SWT tells us in *Surah Rahman* that the best goal is to strive towards establishing the relationship with Him SWT while He SWT also provided us the steps and the sequence of achieving that.

Sequence of *Surah Ar-Rahman*

The Sequence of *Surah Ar-Rahman* has two major principles:

- It has the sequence of *a'laa*, which is the sequence of receiving ultimate gifts from Allah for ourselves.
- It also has the sequence of Allah's planning for us. It clarifies that Allah already did the planning for us and it is up to us to follow this plan. If we follow the plan we will succeed, and if we do not follow the plan we will be groping in darkness without achieving real success.

The first ayah of the surah is consisted of only one word:

الرَّحْمَنُ ﴿١﴾

The Most Merciful! (55:1)

By this way, the first plan of Allah is to want me to be with "*Ar-Rahman*".

What does He SWT want my goal to be? "*Ar-Rahman*".

What does He SWT want me to choose as my purpose in life? To achieve the relationship with "*Ar-Rahman*".

How do I do that? –Allah SWT takes me to the second step, the second verse:

عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ ﴿٢﴾

Taught the Qur'an (55:2)

Allah SWT is letting me know that after recognizing my goal, I have to get the guide book or the map on how to reach my goal; and this map is Al-Qur'an. It is by following this book that I will be able to achieve success. It goes on to say:

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ ﴿٣﴾

Created man, (55:3)

The sequence in this surah is the sequence of priority so the first priority is *Ar-Rahman*, second is *Al-Qur'an*, and the third is Allah telling us that he has created us with an already defined purpose and an honour as a chosen creation to carry this blessed message of Islam.

Now if you ask, "Oh Allah how do I achieve that?" He answers, "I have given something to you that I have not given to any other creation" and that is:

عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ ﴿٤﴾

[And] taught him eloquence. (55:4)

Bayaan is a profound term whose definition is more comprehensive than speech and intelligence as it is usually translated. In Arabic it encompasses the meaning of communication—mode and ability of listening and speaking. It is the ability to translate

feelings into words the listener can understand, and the ability of listener to receive the message and act accordingly.

But what kind of *bayaan* is Allah SWT mentioning? It is greatly different from what we believe. Allah wants our ears to hear His message and our tongues to talk about Him SWT. If our ears belong to the message and if our tongues are talking about it then we are engaged in *bayaan*. This was the quality of the messengers and prophets. Any other form of communication falls below this great ability that Allah has honoured humans with.

Allah SWT wants us to govern the *bayaan* by His technical manual which is when speech and hearing belongs only to Allah. The messengers and prophets didn't receive *bayaan* until their ears and their tongues developed the desired quality of listening only to Allah and talking only about Him SWT. At this point, the sending and receiving becomes acceptable.

What is happening to us today?

When the ear is involved in backbiting, gossiping, and needless speech, what happens? Our reception is not clear. This automatically means that our sending will also not be clear and the talk will be full of emotions that have nothing to do with the message of Allah SWT.

Do talks filled with anxiety, whisperings of *shayateen* (devils), worry, envy and jealousy fall under the category of *bayaan*? No way! One of the elements of *bayaan* is *Sidq* (truthfulness) and the truthfulness here means to be able to communicate according to the standards set by Allah SWT.

Allah SWT is the Creator and we are His creation. He doesn't carry out hasty actions like humans rather He has everything planned in a perfect order. Therefore, the Creator created us and then provided us with a completely planned sequence on how to achieve the success and the purpose of our lives. If we are in the state of *'ubdiyyah* (slavery to

Allah) and develop an honest ear and an honest tongue, we will be able to listen to and talk about the message, and that is when we will belong to *Ar-Rahman*.

This topic envelops most aspects of our lives and if we really focus on these steps, we will accomplish a lot! If you look at us today, any failure in our lives is due to lack of proper communication, inability to receive and transmit, and lack of purpose or goal—all the basics that we as Muslims are supposed to have but we lack! Why? – Because we rebel against the plan of Allah SWT. Imagine how simple and easy life would be if we follow the plan that Allah SWT has for us?

The first step towards accepting the plan of Allah SWT that He has set for His creation is cleaning out the faculties—eyes, ears, tongue, and heart.

Why do we rebel or are unable to surrender to the will of Allah? Because we are spiritually impure; we have diseases like hastiness, fear, worry, and arrogance which prevent us from submitting to Allah's decree.

It's the Plan of Allah That Prevails

We think that we can conquer fate or Allah's plan with our knowledge but Allah SWT has proven us to be wrong over and over again, still we don't listen. Japan created the most sophisticated system of tsunami and earthquake warning over thirty years ago despite which it has repeatedly suffered major damages. The same was the case with nations like 'Ad and Thamud that are mentioned in the Qur'an.

What do we learn from that? That we cannot win over the plan of Allah SWT.

There are two approaches a person can take in life:

1. Either he plans very technically—down to minute details, all according to his thinking which makes him a *kafir* (disbeliever in Allah).

2. Or he is so scared that he refuses to do anything or make any plans because he believes he cannot achieve.

The first case is arrogance while the second is defeat!

So what should we do? Submit to and accept Allah's plan. If we take Allah's plan step by step, we will have no problems; and the first step in this direction is knowing Him—*Ar-Rahman*.

When Allah SWT created Adam the first knowledge He taught him were the names. Allah SWT taught Adam names of all things; not the verbs, or characteristics—the names!

Our reverent scholar gives us the example of babies who do not know anything when they are born. We teach them things according to their needs and their needs are simple objects like 'cup', 'book', 'food' etc. These are all names. Later on babies learn actions or verbs according to the observed behaviour. They drink or walk the way they see others do rather than someone teaching them the way they were taught names.

Thus, the primary knowledge that is transferred to us is of 'names', while the actions or 'verbs' are considered secondary knowledge and are only given 'meaning' in a social context.

Let's go back to the first verse of surah *Ar-Rahman*. Allah SWT did not start it with an action but rather His name, His quality and attribute. It's almost like Allah SWT wants to give us a message that 'I want you to learn the way a baby learns'. To put it in context, if you learn who Allah is, understand Allah and stay in the right environment with people who can be your role models, what kind of personality will you develop? How will your actions and reactions be? They will be according to the names of Allah, your knowledge of them, and your belief in them.

Similarly, if you grow up in an environment where the biggest topic is food, then you will learn the names of foods, their recipes, and learn how to cook them the right way.

This is where your interest will lie, you will hang out with people who have the same interest, and this is the knowledge that you will share with others. Expand this idea to any interest, let it be medicine, gold, business, clothes etc and the pattern will be the same.

Solitude Develops Personality

First step of spiritual awakening is questioning yourself and the status quo that you are expected to conform to. It is almost impossible when a person is caught in the whirlpool of relationships, obligations, and social demands. If you look at the lives of the messengers and prophets, the first stage of their relationship with Allah was to learn about His Oneness. They were all accustomed to solitude where they started questioning life and contemplating about the creation and the Creator.

After they internalized the Oneness of Allah then Allah taught them about who He is, and inspired them or sent revelations on them. From this point on their actions and reactions were according to the knowledge or inspiration that they were receiving from the One they believed in.

The same is applicable to us: once the relationship with Allah SWT is developed, all of a believer's affairs fall into place.

The question is what happens when a person has mixed companionships, mixed environment, and mixed allegiances in life?

Instead of being focused and productive, he will have mixed feelings, mixed actions and mixed goals which will produce useless results without much effect. It is the same as wanting to take a northbound and southbound train at once. It is impossible! The only way a person can get anywhere is when he makes up his mind about his destination. The same goes for your goal and purpose in life; once you have determined that, you will achieve; otherwise you will be stuck at a train station forever.

In order to develop a strong goal, a person needs to have a concrete belief and intention. And the best way to produce that is through solitude and constant remembrance of Allah SWT.

Remembrance of Allah Requires Knowing Him SWT

A person cannot remember or admire someone without knowing him. The same goes for Allah SWT. We know Allah SWT by His names, His attributes, and the wonders of His creation which prove these attributes right.

The most important of these attributes is the oneness of Allah SWT. It is the first knowledge on the spiritual path. Once the person internalizes the knowledge of the oneness of Allah the rest becomes easy. All his goals, inspiration, thinking, and actions are based on that knowledge and the person is focused on who he is carrying out the actions for.

So What Is It That Allah SWT Wants From Me?

He SWT wants actions, even if this action is just a step. He SWT wants me to make an effort and move towards my goal. This requires a struggle against things that are preventing me from achieving my goal such as feelings, worries, temptations, weaknesses, arrogance, ego—any of these could be a hindrance on the path.

We will not be judged on what we have accomplished in life, rather we will be judged on the efforts we make. The stronger a person's *iman* (faith) is the more effort he will make and more wilfully he will 'move' towards his goal. Allah will never give a person victory until he moves and carries out actions. Just like you cannot sit on your bed and think about cake and expect it to appear in front of you, you cannot expect *jannah* or any victory from Allah to just appear in front of you without any efforts.

You cannot say, Oh Allah give me victory against my enemy while sitting on your bed. No. Allah wants you to make the effort while believing in Him SWT, and He will grant you victory.

As a Muslim, I have to believe in the message of Allah SWT located in the Qur'an. Allah SWT says:

وَمَنْ أَعْرَضَ عَن ذِكْرِي فَإِنَّ لَهُ مَعِيشَةً ضَنْكًا وَنَحْشُرُهُ
يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَعْمَى ﴿١٢٤﴾

And whoever turns away from My remembrance - indeed, he will have a depressed life, and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind." (TaHa 20:124)

Allah SWT wants me to respect His message and follow it. If I follow this message, it will lead me to the path of success and eternal bliss. But if I follow my desires, temptations, culture, or customs over the commands of Allah, then I earn only misery for myself.

Knowledge of Allah Leads to All Other Kinds of Knowledge

In *Surah Ar-Rahman* it is as if Allah SWT is calling us to Him saying: O son of Adam, come to me, get the knowledge about me, and I'll teach you everything you want or need to know! So the more we know about Allah, the more Allah teaches us about everything else. The more we are ignorant of Allah, the more we remain ignorant about everything else.

How can we succeed when we act and react to the wrong piece of information or incorrect knowledge? Allah SWT is the Creator and He knows what is best for us; He SWT sent down His Message in the form of Qur'an as a constitution until the end of times. If we claim that that the knowledge of Allah doesn't fit our lives we not only become sinners, we are actually *kafir* (rejecters of Allah) and full of *Shayateen*.

We will never be perfect and that is why Allah SWT out of His mercy judges us on our intention and struggles, not the results—since the results are in the hands of Allah SWT.

He SWT wants us to exercise the knowledge that we accumulate; and all the knowledge simmers down to whether we will put Allah SWT first in our lives or others—be they teachers, parents, friends, culture or customs.

Allah continues on to say in the next verse:

الشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ بِحُسْبَانٍ ﴿٥﴾

The sun and the moon [move] by precise calculation (55:5)

This verse means the sun and the moon follow perfect timings as ordained by Allah SWT. Imagine if the sun becomes rebellious and refuses to come out even once at its appointed time, what will become of this world? All the creation of Allah obeys Him 100% because if they don't, it'll be a catastrophe; and this is what Allah SWT wants us to understand.

Pay attention to the sequence of knowledge Allah wants to share with us! The next verse says:

وَالنَّجْمُ وَالشَّجَرُ يَسْجُدَانِ ﴿٦﴾

And the stars and trees prostrate. (55:6)

In here the word *Najm* has two meanings, a star or a planet; and both of them make *sajdah* to Allah. *Sajdah* in here encompasses obedience, surrender and submission to Allah. Allah SWT is explaining to us that everything He created is obedient to Him.

وَالسَّمَاءَ رَفَعَهَا وَوَضَعَ الْمِيزَانَ ﴿٧﴾

And the heaven He raised and imposed the balance (55:7)

What is the scale or the balance in here? It is justice—justice to our own selves, those we interact with, our environment etc. Here too Allah SWT tells us that if we follow Him the scale will remain balanced, and any disobedience to Allah can cause this scale to tip and can make us *zalim* (oppressor).

Zulm (injustice/oppression) also has a sequence. Before we do *zulm* to others we do *zulm* to ourselves, and the ultimate *zulm* we can do to ourselves is to disobey Allah and swerve from the path He has set for us.

Let me give you an example – take a small child at the playground who is being bullied by other children. He is smaller than others so even if he tries to defend himself and fight back he will lose. But if he runs to his parent, he will be protected because the parent is bigger than the bullies in the playground and they will be afraid of him, even if the parent doesn't do anything. Which one is the better option for the child? Be arrogant and try to fight and get hurt, or be wise and seek the support of his parent?

The same is our situation in this world. We cannot take on all the enemies—seen or unseen—on our own. We need the help of the stronger and wiser Allah SWT. If we decide to deal with all our affairs on our own without seeking support of Allah SWT, not only will we be exhausted and lose, we will also ignite the anger of Allah just like any parent will be upset that the child didn't come to him at the time of need and got himself in unnecessary trouble.

SubhanAllah! Do we really believe in Allah? Do we trust Him SWT? Do we trust in the power of Allah?

Allah SWT challenges us in the Qur'an saying:

أَمَّنْ يُجِيبُ الْمُضْطَرَّ إِذَا دَعَاهُ وَيَكْشِفُ السُّوءَ وَيَجْعَلُكُمْ خُلَفَاءَ الْأَرْضِ
أَعْلَانَهُ مَعَ اللَّهِ قَلِيلًا مَا تَذَكَّرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

Is He [not best] who responds to the desperate one when he calls upon Him and removes evil and makes you inheritors of the earth? Is there a deity with Allah? Little do you remember. (An-Naml 27: 62)

When we go to Allah in a state of desperation and beg Him to help us, Allah promises that He will not let us down. But the secret is total and utter dependence on Allah alone. We cannot go to Allah asking Him for assistance, while we are thinking about others who might be able to help us.

If I come to you and say, I respect you and I need your help, what will you do? – You will willingly provide the assistance I need. But if I come to you and in the middle of telling you I respect you and need your help I start talking about others who might also be able to help me and you know that they really can't, how will you feel?

Imagine how Allah SWT feels when we do that with Him and doubt His might and power! A person might be performing *Salah*, and be in a state of *sajdah*, but in reality he could be a *kafir* and a *mushrik* because of the state of his heart and mind; because though he is making *du'a* to Allah yet 80% of his feelings and thoughts are about other things.

Challenge to Humanity!

What we are talking about is easy on the tongue but it's not easy to do! Do you think I can witness the Might and Power of Allah without first taking any action between me and Him SWT?

The action that Allah requires of me is to surrender wholeheartedly to Him SWT. If I don't then I would have denied and disrespected all the gifts of Allah that He has bestowed upon me. Magnificent gifts that He SWT has mentioned in Surah *Ar-Rahman*

like Qur'an as a source of guidance for me, my creation as a human instead of a worthless animal or object, and my ability to communicate, to name a few. Allah SWT wants me to acknowledge these gifts, thank Him for them, and use these gifts in accordance to His wishes and instructions, and in His way so we won't be among those who Allah SWT repeatedly asks in this surah:

فَبِأَيِّ آلَاءِ رَبِّكُمَا تُكَذِّبَانِ ﴿١٠﴾

So which of the favours of your Lord would you deny?