

Reflections on Surah al-Fatiha (part 2 of 3)

Description: An interpretation of the most oft-recited verses of the Holy Qur'an. Part 2: Explanation of the first four verses which pertain to the praise of Allah and acknowledgement of His divine attributes and qualities.

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Objective

- To learn the verse by verse explanation of the first four verses of *Surah al-Fatiha*.

Arabic Terms

- *Surah* - chapter of the Quran.
- *Hadith* - (plural - *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.
- *Hadith Qudsi* - Allah's message to humankind transmitted in the words of Prophet Muhammad, usually dealing with spiritual or ethical subjects.

1. I begin with the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, The dispenser of grace.

The *surah* begins with an invocation of God's proper Name - Allah, beginning with God's sacred Name in accordance with the first revelation of Allah send upon His Prophet:

“Read in the Name of your Lord.” (Quran 96:1)

It conforms with the Islamic worldview:

**“He is the First and the Last and the Outward and the Inward.”
(Quran 57:3)**

Three Names of God appear in this invocation:

- Allah
- *al-Rahman* (The Most Gracious)
- *al-Raheem* (The dispenser of grace)

'Allah' 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 'Allah' is that hearts yearn for the divine and desire to know, meet, and see Him, they take comfort in remembering Him; Allah is the sole object of their worship and devotion. Hearts turn to Allah till the tongue is moved to repeat the words of God's Prophet:

"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 'Allah' is His inherent inscrutability. Minds can not 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 Quran, or through His Prophet.

"They will never comprehend Him with their knowledge." (Quran 20:110)

Third, 'Allah' is "The God", the deity who has exclusive rights to be worshipped. That is why it is mentioned in the testimony of faith, *Lā 'ilāha 'ill-Allāh*. There are many other things taken as gods, but they are false:

"This is because Allah is the Truth and what they call on besides Him is falsehood." (Quran 22:62)

As for the two epithets, *al-Rahman* and *al-Raheem*, which are part of *Bismillah* are derived from the noun *rahma*, which signifies "mercy", "compassion", "loving tenderness" and, more comprehensively, "grace". What is the exact shade of meaning which differentiates the two terms? Perhaps the best explanation is that the term *Rahman* circumscribes the quality of abounding grace inherent in, and inseparable from, the concept of God's Being, whereas *Raheem* expresses an aspect of His activity. Both Names help define the divine relationship with creation... a relationship based on compassion, mercy, and loving tenderness. The fact is expressed beautifully in the following *hadith qudsi* where Allah says:

"Indeed, My mercy supersedes My punishment." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

In another authentic *hadith*, Allah's Messenger, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, says:

"Allah'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. Allah has reserved the other ninety-nine shares for His servants on the Day of Resurrection." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

This is why a person should never despair of Allah's mercy, no matter how great his

sins may be. Allah, the Exalted, says:

“Say: O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of Allah’s mercy, for Allah forgives all sins, and he is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Quran 39:53)

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

2. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of All the World.

Al-Hamd, translated as praise, consists, more accurately, of praise and gratitude. ‘All praise and thanks are for Allah.’ The question is: for what? Just like Allah 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 Allah 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 Allah in the beginning and in the end:

“And He is Allah: There is no god but He. To Him be praise, at the first and at the last.” (Quran 28:70)

Here we also learn another name of Allah: *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 Allah as the sole fosterer and sustainer of all creation and therefore the ultimate source of all authority.

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

3. The Most Gracious, The dispenser of grace.

Allah repeats His Names of mercy: *al-Rahman* 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. Allah 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-Rahman* 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-Malik*, 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.

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