

SŪRAH AL-FĀTIḤAH سُورَةُ الْفَاتِحَةِ

Due to the fact that Sūrah al-Fātiḥah is recited in every *rak'ah* (unit) of prayer¹ and was described by the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) as the greatest sūrah in the Qur'ān,² a brief explanation will be given of its verses.

Al-Fātiḥah was revealed during the Makkan period and was the first sūrah to be sent down to the Prophet (ﷺ) in its entirety. Parts of some other sūrahs had been revealed prior to it, the earliest of them being the first five verses of Sūrah al-'Alaq.

Al-Fātiḥah contains seven verses, described in both the Qur'ān³ and ḥadīth⁴ as "*as-Sab' ul-Mathānī wal-Qur'ān al-'Atheem*" (the Seven Oft-Repeated Verses and the Great Recitation). The sūrah was given other names as well, the most common of them being: *Fātiḥat al-Kitāb* (the Opening of the Book), *Umm al-Qur'ān* (the Mother of the Qur'ān) and *Sūrah al-Ḥamd* (the Sūrah of Praise), as it begins with "*Praise be to Allāh, Lord of the Worlds.*"

It has also been called "the Prayer" by Allah in a *ḥadīth qudsi*.⁵ The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) related that his Lord had said, "*I have divided the Prayer into two parts: one for Me and one for My servant; and My servant shall have what he requests. When the servant says, 'Praise be to Allāh, Lord of the worlds,' I say, 'My servant has praised Me.' When he says: 'The Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful,' I say, 'My servant has praised Me.' When he says, 'Sovereign of the Day of Recompense,' I say, 'My servant has glorified Me.' When he says, 'It is You we worship and You we ask for help,' I say, 'This is between Me and My servant, and my servant will have what he requests.' When he says, 'Guide us to the straight path – the path of those upon whom You have bestowed favor, not of those who have earned [Your] anger or of those who are astray,' I say, 'This is for My servant, and My servant will have what he requests.'"*"⁶

Despite its brevity, *al-Fātiḥah* contains abundant connotations, and for that reason it has been called *Umm al-Qur'ān*. It includes the general meanings presented in the Qur'ān and the major principles and themes the Qur'ān addresses: '*aqeedah*, '*ibādah* and '*sharī'ah*. The Prophet (ﷺ) once remarked: "*By Him in whose hand is my soul, there is nothing like this sūrah in Torah or the Injeel or the Zabūr. It is the seven oft-repeated verses and the great Qur'ān that Allah has given me.*"⁷

¹ The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "*There is no prayer (ṣalāh) for the one who does not recite al-Fātiḥah.*" (Al-Bukhārī and Muslim) When a person first enters Islam, the first thing he or she must memorize is this opening sūrah in order to perform the prescribed prayers. If one recites only this sūrah in prayer, it is sufficient for the prayer to be valid. Reciting more is preferred, but not obligatory.

² Narrated by al-Bukhārī.

³ In Sūrah al-Hijr, 15:87.

⁴ In narrations by al-Bukhārī.

⁵ A revelation from Allah related in the words of the Prophet (ﷺ).

⁶ Narrated by Muslim.

⁷ Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

Meanings:

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

1. In the name of Allah, the Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful

Scholars have differed over whether the *basmalah* (the words "*Bismillāhir-Raḥmānir-Raḥeem*")⁸ is part of the sūrah or merely an indication of its beginning. In most copies of the Arabic *mus-ḥaf* today it appears as a distinct *āyah* (verse) in Sūrah al-Fātiḥah but not in other sūrahs.⁹

The meaning of Bismillāh is: "[I begin] in the name of Allah."¹⁰

Bism (بسم) literally means "by the name of" or "with the name of" and is a contraction of two words: *bi* (by/with) and *ism* (name). Ordinarily, and elsewhere in the Qur'ān it is written as بِاسْمِ but pronounced in the same way.

Allāh (الله) is the proper name of the one eternal, unique, absolute and perfect deity who is the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists. It is a word that indicates the only being that possesses the qualities of divinity and lordship. The definite article, *al* (ال) has merged into the word *ilāh* (إله – an object of worship). This definite article is an integral part of the word's structure and cannot be separated from it – thus establishing the meaning of the true object of worship and the only deity worthy of worship.

Therefore, this name is applicable to the one and only true God, and nothing else can be called "*Allāh*." Moreover, it is inclusive of all of His descriptive names and attributes; so many scholars have expressed the opinion that it is the greatest of His names.

The intellect recognizes Allah, but the mind is subject to the limitations of its created nature so it is not capable of comprehending many of His attributes or the extent of His greatness. Allah cannot be understood according to the terms of material existence. He is not bound by the laws of physics which He created. Unlike His creations, Allah is timeless and eternal, without beginning or end. He is the one and only Lord of the entire universe. He is the Creator and Sustainer upon which all creation depends for its existence at every moment.

Ar-Raḥmān (الرحمن) and **ar-Raḥeem** (الرحيم) are two of Allah's descriptive names derived from the word *raḥmah* (mercy). In Arabic grammar both are intensive forms of "merciful" (i.e., extremely merciful). Because these two names encompass all aspects of mercy, they are used together only in reference to Allah, the Exalted. A comprehensive and complementary meaning is intended by the combination of both:

The name *ar-Raḥmān* is used exclusively for Allah and no one else. The Qur'ān says:

قُلِ ادْعُوا اللَّهَ أَوْ ادْعُوا الرَّحْمَنَ أَيًّا مَا تَدْعُوا فَلَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ.

*Call upon Allāh or call upon ar-Raḥmān; whichever [name] you call – to Him belong the most excellent names.*¹¹

⁸ Occurring at the opening of every sūrah except At-Tawbah.

⁹ The *basmalah* occurring in v. 27:30 is undeniably part of Sūrah an-Naml as it occurs within the text.

¹⁰ As Allah begins in His own name, it is preferable to begin all things with "*Bismillah*," seeking His aid and blessing.

¹¹ Sūrah al-Israa', 17:110.

Ar-Raḥmān is merciful in the absolute sense;¹² thus, it is used to describe Allah alone, while *raḥeem* might be used to describe a human being as well.¹³ *Raḥmān* emphasizes the concept of being entirely, intensely and absolutely merciful with mercy that encompasses all of creation. One component of this mercy is justice, which will be fully manifested in the Hereafter. And Allah also describes Himself also as *ar-Raḥeem*, which includes the concepts of continuity and specialization; i.e., He is especially and specifically merciful to the believers, given that they are more deserving of His mercy than others. In the words of the Qur'ān:

وَكَانَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَحِيمًا.

*And ever is He Merciful (Raḥeem) to the believers.*¹⁴

Allah's forgiveness of their errors and sins is part of this mercy, and it extends into the eternal life of the Hereafter. The Prophet (ﷺ) stated, "Allah's mercy has one hundred shares, only one of which He sent down to be shared by human beings, jinn, and all the animals. With this share of mercy they are able to show affection and mercy to one another and 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."¹⁵ So Allah (ﷻ) is *ar-Raḥmān* and *ar-Raḥeem* with respect to both this world and the next. His Messenger (ﷺ) said, "When Allah created the creation, He wrote in the register that is with Him above the Throne, 'My mercy overcomes My anger.' " ¹⁶

Ibn al-Qayyim added a further clarification: "*Ar-Raḥmān* refers to an attribute that is connected to Allah and is part of His essence whereas *ar-Raḥeem* indicates a relationship to the one to whom mercy is shown. The former is adjectival (describing what He is) and the latter is verbal (describing what He does). The former indicates that mercy is His attribute, and the latter indicates that He bestows His mercy upon creation."

2. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

Believers are directed to praise Allah and to acknowledge His absolute sovereignty over all creation.

وَهُوَ اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ لَهُ الْحَمْدُ فِي الْأُولَى وَالْآخِرَةِ وَلَهُ الْحُكْمُ وَإِلَيْهِ تُرْجَعُونَ.

*And He is Allāh; there is no deity except Him. To Him is [due all] praise in the first [life] and the Hereafter. And His is the [final] decision, and to Him you will be returned.*¹⁷

Praise implies recognition of Allah's favors, what is known of them and what is not known. The āyah confirms that all kinds and forms of praise are due to Allah alone and that He alone is worthy to praise Himself. And it teaches how Allah should be praised.

¹² i.e., His mercy is not limited to the capacity of humanity or any other of His creation; rather, it is unlimited.

¹³ The Prophet (ﷺ) was described in the Qur'ān (9:128) as *raḥeem*.

¹⁴ Sūrah al-Aḥzāb, 33:43. The Prophet (ﷺ) said: "No one will enter Paradise through good deeds; not even me, unless Allah covers me with His mercy." (Al-Bukhārī and Muslim) While no human deed is free from imperfection, Allah's mercy toward His believing servants is based on the intent, effort and attitude of each.

¹⁵ Narrated by Muslim.

¹⁶ Narrated by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

¹⁷ Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ, 28:70.

Al-ḥamdu (praise accompanied by reverence) is due to Allah at all times and in all conditions. To praise Him at the beginning and end of every action and every effort is a fundamental principle of Islam, for it expresses recognition of His innumerable favors. The definite article ال when attached to the word حمد imparts the meaning of all praise and every kind of praise. Moreover, praise (*ḥamd*) has a wider implication than thanks (*shukr*) and is inclusive of it. While thanks is due for specific recognized favors, praise is in gratitude for all blessings in general, apparent and unapparent, as well as acknowledgement of the Lord's perfect attributes.

Lillāhi is the divine name preceded by the letter ل (meaning to or for). With the phrase "*Al-ḥamdu lillāh*," the Creator praises His own name, and He alone is worthy to do so. In this manner believers are taught the best words with which to praise Him as well. And although all praise and gratitude is due to Allah from His servants at every moment and is an obligation upon them, He rewards them generously when they praise Him.

Allah also declares that He is *Rabbul-ʿālamēen* (Lord of the worlds). **Rabb** (رَبّ) is comprehensive in meaning, indicating an owner, master, ruler, controller, provider, guardian and caretaker. Divine lordship is inclusive of creation, sustenance, ownership, guardianship, development, control and completion of everything brought into existence. It is represented by the Arabic الرَّبّ (the Lord) which can refer to none but Allah, the Lord of all creation.

ʿĀlameen is a plural form of *ʿālam* (world). It is derived from *ʿalāmah*, which means a sign or a trace. So each of the worlds created by Allah is a trace of its Creator and a sign of His existence. In the Qurʾān *al-ʿālameen* can refer to people or it can mean categories of beings, species or communities, such as "the world of insects" or "the world of plants." The plural form indicates all of these worlds or the entire universe. Qatādah said, "It refers to everything in existence other than Allah." And Ibn ʿAbbās defined it as the creation in its entirety, the heavens and earth and whoever is within them and between them, that which is known and unknown. He also said that *al-ʿālameen* refers to everything possessing a soul that moves on the earth.¹⁸ Allah is the Lord of everything in existence. He created everything and has absolute power over it; nothing is outside of His Lordship.

The affirmation of the absolute sovereignty and dynamic authority of Allah over all creation is embodied in the concept of *tawḥeed*.¹⁹ "*Lord of the worlds*" expresses belief in the one supreme master who created His creation for a purpose and continues to guard and care for it, ensuring its stability for as long as He should will. Nothing is beyond His control. Additionally, the phrase "Lord of the worlds" reflects Allah's power over those who disobey Him and His ability to punish them, creating unease and apprehension in the heart.

3. The Entirely Merciful, the Especially Merciful

الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ

"**Ar-Raḥmān ar-Raḥeem**" is repeated again in this verse after the mention of divine lordship to emphasize His mercy. It is not to be forgotten that the Lord of the worlds, to whom

¹⁸ Some scholars restricted the meaning of *al-ʿālameen* to those creations possessing intelligence, and Allah knows best.

¹⁹ In contrast to the confusion of polytheistic beliefs, Islam has focused on the correction of human beliefs and clearly defined the concept of Allah's nature and attributes.

humble servitude is due, remains *ar-Raḥmān, ar-Raḥeem*. The recurrence of these two names provides a portrayal complementary to that of the previous āyah. This method is utilized throughout the Qur'ān for keeping balance in the heart between the fear of punishment and hope for mercy. Allah has similarly described Himself with contrasting attributes in other verses; for example:

اعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ.

*Know that Allāh is severe in penalty and that Allāh is Forgiving and Merciful.*²⁰

نَبِّئْ عِبَادِي أَنِّي أَنَا الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ وَأَنَّ عَذَابِي هُوَ الْعَذَابُ الْأَلِيمُ

*Inform My servants that it is I who am the Forgiving, the Merciful. And that it is My punishment which is the painful punishment.*²¹

The believer's constant state between hope and fear promotes worship and obedience.²² The Qur'ān keeps him within this balance, motivating exertion of his best efforts toward obeying and pleasing his Creator.

4. Sovereign of the Day of Recompense

مَالِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

After the reminder of His mercy comes another unique description. Allah not only affirms that He is Lord of the presently existing worlds, but that He is also the Owner and Inheritor of the Day of Recompense, for which He will have created new worlds. It is then that Allah's judgment of every creature will be announced and full compensation given for whatever was earned of good or evil during life on earth. Belief in the Hereafter is essential because it reduces human obsession with the present life and its immediate earthly desires. Believers are assured in the Qur'ān that the eternal life will more than compensate for any exertion and sacrifice they may have put forth in this temporary existence, and that justice, so lacking in the present world, will be completely restored in the Hereafter as a logical conclusion to purposeful creation.

Mālik (مَالِك) and **Malik** (مَلِك) are both established ways of reciting the first word of this āyah. Each has been reported with continuous transmission going back to the Prophet (ﷺ). The scholars have stated that when related to Allah, *malik* is an attribute of essence whereas *mālik* is an attribute of action.

Both recitations convey sound meanings, although *malik* is more comprehensive. When recited as such, the emphasis is upon the meaning of sovereignty, i.e., that Allah (ﷻ) is the only sovereign to whom all dominion, power and authority belongs on that Day. And when recited as *mālik*, the emphasis is on ownership, which is included within the concept of sovereignty. Ownership does not necessarily include sovereignty while sovereignty undoubtedly includes ownership and possession.²³

²⁰ Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:98.

²¹ Sūrah al-Hijr, 15:49-50.

²² An excess of fear produces hopelessness and inertia, while an excess of optimism produces heedlessness and negligence.

²³ Allah is the Owner and Sovereign of the present creation as well as the Day of Recompense. However, on that Day, the brief sovereignties of this world will have ended and the totality and perfection of Allah's sovereignty

Yawm generally refers to a period of time, and not necessarily a day of 24 hours as known in this world. For example, the Qur'ān mentions a day the extent of which is a thousand years²⁴ and a day the extent of which is fifty thousand years.²⁵ Also known as "al-Yawm al-Ākhir" (the Last Day), it is in reality as near as an individual's death, when the soul is released from the confines of time that was created by Allah for life on earth.

Deen refers here to compensation and recompense, as in the words of Allah:

يَوْمَئِذٍ يُوفِّيهِمُ اللَّهُ دِينَهُمُ الْحَقَّ

*On that Day Allah will pay them in full their true [i.e., deserved] recompense.*²⁶

Ibn 'Abbās explained the Day of Recompense as the Day on which all creations are judged: the Day of Resurrection. He said, "Allah will recompense them for their actions; if good, then with good, and if bad then with bad, except for whatever He forgives. And indeed, the only command [that Day] will be His command."²⁷

And thus, Allah (ﷻ) has said:

وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا يَوْمُ الدِّينِ. ثُمَّ مَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا يَوْمُ الدِّينِ. يَوْمَ لَا تَمْلِكُ نَفْسٌ لِنَفْسٍ شَيْئًا وَالْأَمْرُ يَوْمَئِذٍ لِلَّهِ.

*And what can make you know what is the Day of Recompense? Then, what can make you know what is the Day of Recompense? [It is] the Day when a soul will not possess for another soul [power to do] a thing; and the command, that Day, is [entirely] with Allah.*²⁸

5. It is You we worship and You we ask for help

إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ

Thus far, Allah, the Exalted, has referred to Himself in the third person. At this point He instructs His servants to address Him directly in the second person, evoking consciousness of His presence. The āyah conveys the essential principle of *tawḥeed*,²⁹ which is the logical result of the sūrah's preceding descriptions. It expresses the right of the Creator over His creations, as in the ḥadīth: *Allah's right over His servants is that they worship Him without associating anything with Him.*³⁰ And it is the response to His command:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

*O mankind, worship your Lord who created you and those before you, that you may become righteous.*³¹

will be clearly manifest. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) related, "On the Day of Resurrection Allah will fold the heaven in His right hand and the earth in His left, saying, 'I am the Sovereign; where are the kings of the earth?'" (Al-Bukhārī and Muslim)

²⁴ Refer to Sūrah as-Sajdah, 32:5.

²⁵ Refer to Sūrah al-Ma'ārij, 70:4.

²⁶ Sūrah an-Nūr, 24:25.

²⁷ The believer who avoided major sins during his life on earth will be forgiven his minor sins within a brief time. But those who rejected guidance and the sinful among Muslims who did not repent will be confronted with their transgressions in painful detail on a long and difficult Day.

²⁸ Sūrah al-Infīṭār, 82:17-19.

²⁹ i.e., acknowledgement that Allah is the only deity worthy to be worshipped, to the exclusion of all else.

³⁰ Narrated by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

³¹ Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:21. See also Sūrahs an-Naḥl, 16:36 and al-Anbiyā', 21:25.

Through the worship of Allah alone man attains freedom from all forms of intellectual and political tyranny and from the abuse and debasement inherent in servitude to other men.

Iyyāka is the second person singular pronoun in object form, and it addresses Allah, the Exalted. The object precedes the verb in order to denote emphasis and exclusivity, i.e., "It is You alone and none but You."

Na'budu is derived from the verb *'abada*, which means to be subservient and compliant to another, to worship and obey Him. Islamically, it is a comprehensive term meaning to do whatever is pleasing to Allah, both in public and in private. The prefixed letter ن stands for the subject pronoun "we" so the meaning becomes "It is You, O Allah, that we Muslims worship and none other."

The same applies to the second phrase, *iyyāka nasta'een*. **Nasta'eenu**, from the verb *"asta'āna"* means to seek or ask for assistance. The object again precedes the verb for emphasis and the letter ن is its subject. The words express a servant's dependence upon his Lord in all his affairs and his acknowledgement that any help and assistance given him by others will occur due to the will of Allah and not independently. The phrase also indicates that it is not permissible to rely on any other but Allah since none controls the affairs of creation apart from Him and He is the source of every occurrence.

Islam revolves around these two principles: worship of Allah alone and reliance on Allah alone. The Qur'ān confirms:

وَلِلَّهِ غَيْبُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَإِلَيْهِ يُرْجَعُ الْأَمْرُ كُلُّهُ فَاعْبُدْهُ وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَيْهِ

*And to Allah belong the unseen [aspects] of the heavens and the earth and to Him will be returned the matter, all of it, so worship Him and rely upon Him.*³²

Allah's help is sought in order to deal with the trials of life, to overcome its difficulties and to obey Him in every circumstance. The order in which the two verbs are mentioned indicate that worship of Allah is the objective³³ and that the favor of His assistance is requested to accomplish it; which is the reason He said concerning this verse, *"This is between Me and My servant, and my servant will have what he requests."*

6. Guide us to the straight path

اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

The previous verse defined the method of obtaining Allah's acceptance and approval, namely by worshipping Him alone and by seeking His help to worship Him in the proper way. His assistance is sought by means of supplication (*du'aa'*). The supplication in this verse expresses man's lifelong need for his Creator's guidance. Just as one cannot worship Him properly except with His help, he cannot continue except with His guidance.

It has been stated by scholars that the best thing one may ask of Allah is guidance because it is the means of attaining the best outcome from worldly life. Ibn 'Abbās explained that it is a

³² Sūrah Hūd, 11:123.

³³ As stated in Sūrah adh-Dhāriyāt, 51:56.

request to be shown the straight path or to be inspired to follow it. But although the believer has been guided to Islam initially, he must progress beyond that primary stage in order to remain steadfast on the path and avoid deviations. For this reason ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib, Ubayy bin Ka’b and others described it as a request to be made firm and constant upon the straight path.

Ihḍinā is the imperative form of *hadā* (to guide or direct) with the attachment of the pronoun *nā* (us) as its object. The guidance referred to here is general and varied in meaning, but it is always inclusive of constancy and renewal. Some of its aspects as stated by the scholars are as follows:

- How to stay firm and constant on the straight path, which is described as the religion of Islam and its essentials. These include: the six pillars of faith, the five pillars of Islam, its ethical principles and avoidance of what is prohibited in the Qur’ān and Sunnah and by consensus among Muslim scholars. The believer asks his Lord for constancy in these matters knowing that people are sometimes shaken in their faith.³⁴
- How to attain an increase in guidance, resulting from the knowledge and insight granted by Allah
- Guidance in matters that are problematic – to arrive at the best solution for issues wherein opinions differ. It is guidance toward constancy in one's approach and methodology, to adhere to truth even though it might not be apparent to others, and to remain firm on the principles of Islam in all circumstances.
- Guidance concerning options – to what is best, or at least the lesser evil.
- How to best worship Allah under all conditions in the manner that most suits one's particular circumstance according to the priorities of the moment.

Guidance is granted in phases and degrees. One who has been guided in the past remains in need of guidance for the future. There are external causes which require the believer to continually seek renewed guidance. Reassessment is imposed by increased knowledge and experience, by changing circumstances and by environmental demands. Because the need for guidance is constant and enduring, the Muslim has been required to recite "*Guide us to the straight path*" in every rak’ah of prayer, asking his Lord to instruct and direct him in every matter that concerns himself and others.

Aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqeem is the straight, direct path and upright way. Early scholars described it as: the way of Allah and His Prophet (ﷺ), the truth, the religion of Allah, the Book of Allah, what is approved by Allah and similar explanations. All are related and correct and indicate Islam.³⁵ The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) affirmed, "*Allah has set forth a parable: a straight path leading to a destination. On each side of the path is a wall in which there are open doors with curtains hanging over them. At the end of the path a voice calls, ‘Enter the path, all of you, and do not turn off from it.’ Whenever someone intends to open the curtain on a door another*

³⁴ Similarly in Āyah 3:8, Allah (ﷻ) mentions that people of understanding supplicate: "*Our Lord, let not our hearts deviate after You have guided us and grant us from Yourself mercy. Indeed, You are the Bestower.*"

³⁵ Ibn al-Qayyim mentioned another meaning, which is: guidance on the Day of Judgement to the path (bridge) leading to Paradise. One who is guided in this life upon the straight path will be guided to the straight path to Paradise in the Hereafter. Stability on that path will depend on how firmly he had adhered to the straight path of Islam in the worldly life.

voice calls from above, 'Beware! Do not open the curtain lest you [be tempted and] enter.'" He then explained it, saying, "The straight path is Islam, the walls are the limits imposed by Allah, the open doors are the things He has prohibited, the voice calling from the end of the path is the Book of Allah and the voice calling from above is Allah's conscience in the heart of every Muslim."³⁶

An authoritative and all-inclusive description of this path is also given elsewhere in the Qur'ān:

صِرَاطِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ

*The path of Allah, to whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth.*³⁷

And He has said:

وَأَنَّ هَذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ

*And this is My path which is straight, so follow it and do not follow other ways, for you will be separated from His [i.e., Allah's] way.*³⁸

This shows that Allah's straight path is one path and not several. Indeed, anything that departs or diverges from His path is misguidance. Mujāhid maintained that the other paths referred to innovations and uncertainties. And Imām ash-Shāṭibi explained, "The straight path is the path designated by Allah, and that is the Sunnah. All other paths are the paths of those who disagree and deviate from the straight path, and they are the people of innovation." Additional explanation is given in the following āyah.

7. The path of those upon whom صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ You have bestowed favor, not of those who have earned [Your] anger or those who are astray.

In this final verse of the sūrah, Allah (ﷻ) expands on the meaning of *aṣ-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqeem* and provides additional detail.

Ṣirāṭ (the path) is repeated, bringing attention to the clarification that follows. The pronoun, **al-ladheena**, may be translated as "those" or "the ones." **An'ama** is a verb meaning to bless or bestow favor, while the pronoun **ت** (You) affixed to it is its subject and refers to Allah, the Exalted.

Thus, the straight path is defined as: "*The way of those upon whom You [i.e., Allah] have bestowed favor.*" But who are the ones honored by the Lord with His favor? Ibn Katheer answered that they are the people who adhere to Allah's commandments and refrain from what He has prohibited. And the Qur'ān defines them as:

الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ وَالصِّدِّيقِينَ وَالشُّهَدَاءِ وَالصَّالِحِينَ

*...The ones upon whom Allah has bestowed favor among the prophets, the steadfast affirmers of the truth, the martyrs and the righteous.*³⁹

³⁶ Aḥmad and at-Tirmidhi - *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

³⁷ Sūrah ash-Shūrā, 42:53.

³⁸ Sūrah al-An'ām, 6:153.

Allah favored these noble believers when they demonstrated their sincerity towards Him. When they sought His guidance He guided them to the true religion; and when they accepted and followed His guidance He made known to them the way by which they could earn His favor; and when they took on that responsibility and adhered to His path He facilitated it for them and prepared for them great rewards. It is their example and their way to which the Muslim seeks guidance in his prayer.

The definition of the straight path is now completed with the exclusion of two other paths which lead in another direction and distance one from Paradise: that of people who have deserved Allah's anger and that of those who have gone astray.

Ghayr (not, other than, unlike) denotes the opposite of or an exception to what follows it. So the straight path is not that of those who have angered Allah by disobeying Him, nor it is that of those who are lost and confused due to ignorance. These are the two causes of deviation from the path of Allah: corruption of intention and action and corruption of knowledge and belief.

Al-maghdhūbi 'alayhim (the recipients or objects of anger) are mentioned first in view of the fact that their offense is greater than **adh-dhālleen** (those astray), for the latter could possibly be set right through the acquisition of knowledge whereas those possessing knowledge who refuse to act upon it are in fact rebelling against their Creator, earning and deserving His wrath.

It should be noted in this verse that in relation to the favor of Allah, He is addressed directly with the second person pronoun. But in relation to His anger, there is no direct reference to Allah. Instead, only the object of that anger is mentioned – those who have caused the anger, showing that the responsibility for what they have incurred is on none but themselves. Thus, Allah attributes favor to Himself, omits mention of who becomes angered, and attributes misguidance to those who choose to remain misguided.

The Prophet (ﷺ) once said, "*Those who have earned anger are the Jews and those who are astray are the Christians.*"⁴⁰ This is undoubtedly correct as it was reported from the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) with a sound chain of narrators.

However, commentators have pointed out that the meanings are not restricted to these two factions alone and are more general in scope. One of the greatest manifestations of disobedience among the Jews has been that although they knew the truth they turned away from it, preferring falsehood.⁴¹ But in fact, anyone who has access to Allah's guidance, deliberately refusing to follow it and thus obstructing others from the straight path may be included in this category.

And those who have strayed and erred are not limited to the Christians. They include every person who makes no effort to know the truth and is content to remain as he is in ignorance.⁴² The verse makes no reference to Allah in this connection either, for He did not

³⁹ Sūrah an-Nisaa', 4:69. *Aṣ-ṣāliheen* includes all righteous servants of Allah from every age.

⁴⁰ Narrated by Aḥmad and at-Tirmidhi who graded it as *ḥasan-ṣaḥeḥ*.

⁴¹ It has been said that the scholars among our own people who violate the law resemble them.

⁴² Some among Muslims also go astray, such as those who worship Allah in erroneous and deviant ways without knowledge.

impose that condition upon them and they remain under obligation to seek information and enlightenment.

Both are categories of people whose ways should be avoided. The first fails to act upon knowledge and the second fails to acquire it. A Muslim must continually seek the help and guidance of Allah to keep him firm on the path of beneficial knowledge, correct actions and righteous deeds – *aş-şirāṭ al-mustaqeem*.

Allah guides those who wish to be guided, which is a great favor from Him, and leaves astray those who are unworthy and unwilling to receive His favor. But when He withholds from them His favor He will not deprive them of His justice. The sūrah has spoken first about mercy, then about guidance and finally about Allah's favor. His favor is the result of guidance, and guidance is His mercy. So he who observes the meanings of *al-Fātiḥah* in terms of knowledge, methodology and action will have succeeded in protecting himself and attained a degree of righteousness.