

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All Praises to Allah, The Beneficent, The Merciful

1st Taraweeh Summary – Ramadan 1446 Hijri

Summary of Verses 1:1 – 2:176

Sura Fatiha (1:1-1:7)

'Sura' means Chapter and 'Fatiha' means Opening. This Opening Chapter that we recite at the beginning of each *Rakat* of our prayers contains the essence of the Quran while also serving as its Table of Contents. It is not an introduction to the Quran; it is our prayer to Allah and Allah's response to our prayer. We ask the Creator for guidance and the Creator gives us that guidance through the Quran.

Sura Fatiha is the foundation, the sum and the quintessence of the Quran. In condensed form, it contains all the fundamental principles laid down in the Quran: the principle of Allah's Oneness and Uniqueness; of His being the Originator and the Nourisher of the universe; the Source of all life-giving grace; the One to whom humankind is ultimately responsible, the only Power Who can guide and help; the call to righteous action in the life of this world; the truth of life after death and the consequences of humankind's action and behavior; the principle of guidance through Allah's messengers and, flowing from it, the continuity of all true religions; and finally, the need for voluntary self-surrender to the Will of the Supreme-Being and, thus, for worshiping Him alone.

Sura Fatiha teaches us how to perform the perfect prayer and how best to connect with the Creator. "*You alone we worship and from You alone we seek help*" (1:5) summarizes in a single sentence our relationship with Allah. Notice that before help comes worship. The order is significant. We seek Allah's help through prayer and supplication. The help we seek is not only for our daily sustenance but, more importantly, for guiding us to the Straight Path. For every believer, it is a personal journey of struggle and striving, compassion and caring, like those who undertook the journey before and became worthy of Allah's Grace. (1:6-7)

A remarkable aspect of the structure of this Sura is that the seven verses can be divided into two (literally) equal sections. The first section contains our praise of Allah, the Compassionate and the Merciful, and the second, a supplication to Allah to guide us to the Straight Path. We praise and plead, and Allah approves and accepts. We ask and Allah answers. That is why it is said that if we understand Sura Fatiha, we can perform the perfect prayer. Conversely, we cannot perform the perfect prayer if we don't understand Sura Fatiha.

(Far too many of us are careless and casual about our prayers, making them a prisoner of habit. The prophet (s.a.w) said: '*Ihsan* is to worship Allah as though you see Him, and if you cannot see Him, then worship as though He sees you.'
Whenever things became difficult for the Prophet (s.a.w), he prayed and found the strength and the calm to continue. We pray because it is an obligation commanded by our Creator but if prayer doesn't give us the strength and the peace we need and seek, it means we are not connecting with Allah in our prayers. '*Khushu*' in prayers means humility and mindfulness. It also means we must learn to pray properly and understand what we are saying in our prayers. Otherwise, we will never experience the full power of prayers when we pray.)

A hadith on Sura Fatiha, narrated by Abu Hurayrah, is as follows:

When the slave begins and says, "*In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful: Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds*" (1:1-2)

Allah says: My slave has praised Me.

(As flawed as my slave is, and as flawed as his salat maybe, s/he has praised me, Allah tells His angels. What is the basis of this praise? Gratitude, for gratitude is what helps us take the first step toward the Straight Path.)

And when the slave says, "*The Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful*" (1:3)

Allah says, My slave has lauded Me.

And when the slave says, "*Master of the Day of Judgment*" (1:4)

Allah says, My slave has glorified Me.

And when the worshiper says, *"You alone we worship, and from You alone, we seek help,"* (1:5)

Allah says, This is between Me and My slave, and My slave will receive what (s)he asks for.

(Notice that 'You alone' - *Iyyaka* - is repeated twice. The second *Iyyaka* is not necessary by rules of grammar, yet it is there, implying that we ought to seek assistance from Allah even for little things in easier times, not just for big things in difficult times. The 'Alone' implied by *Iyyaka* is the transcendent reality of our relationship with Allah, the only One we worship and seek help from. Reflect also on that 'we.' What unifies Muslims is the collective worship of Allah, although typically we seek assistance through the singular I, that is, at a personal level. "*Nastaeen*" is the synthesis of the Divine desire to help us and our yearning for His help, revealing to the discerning heart the convergence of free will, purpose, and destiny. Note also that the sequence of verses in the Quran is consequential, not coincidental. First comes worship of Allah, and then comes seeking help from Him. Scholars think that this verse is the bridge between the verses that come before and the verses that come after.)

Then when the worshiper says, *"Guide us to the Straight Path, the Path of those to whom You have been gracious, not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray,"* (1:6-7)

Allah says, This is for My slave, and My slave will receive what (s)he asks for.

(It also implies that even when believers are not worshipping, they can still ask Allah for assistance. His door is always open. Observe also that we say guide 'us.' When it comes to the Straight Path, it is better to collectively seek Allah's help. We also get a detailed description of the 'Straight Path' in Sura Al-An'am, (6:151-153))

Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (1058-1111), the Muslim philosopher-theologian offers a profound meditation on Sura Fatiha in his book "*Jewels of the Quran*." According to Imam al-Ghazzali, the Opening Chapter contains eight of the ten

jewels or sections of the Quran. These are:

1. Essence of Allah
2. Divine Names and Qualities
3. Divine Acts
4. Day of Judgment
5. The Straight Path with its two meanings: purifying and beautifying
6. Allah's satisfaction with obedient servants
7. Allah's anger with disobedient servants
8. Day of Resurrection

The only two jewels or sections not mentioned in the Opening Chapter, according to Imam al-Ghazzali, are

9. Arguments against disbelievers
10. Juristic rulings, the two branches from which scholastic theology and jurisprudence are derived.

The Quran itself emphasizes the importance of Sura Fatiha in Sura Hijr: *"We have certainly given you (O Muhammad!) the seven oft-repeated verses and the Great Quran."* (15:87)

Sura Fatiha is the quintessence of the Quran. It is called the "Opening Chapter" for a reason. When we recite it and feel the depth and beauty of its verses in our hearts, we open ourselves to the sublime and the transcendent nature of our Creator.

Sura Al-Baqara (The Cow) (Verses 2:1-2:176)

This was the first Sura revealed in Madinah. Remarkably, all five pillars of Islam (Tawhid, Salah, Zakah, Fasting and Hajj) are mentioned in this Sura. It affirms that the Quran, whose initial verses were first revealed during Ramadan as guidance for mankind, is a Book *"about which there is no doubt."*

The Sura lays down the criteria for success and prosperity: Mindfulness of Allah at all times (*Muttaqin*, from *'Taqla'* that occurs about 150 times in the Quran, is a

believer who has a longing for Allah's pleasure and a fear of His displeasure), belief in the Unseen, steadfastness in prayer, spending out of what Allah has provided, and believing in the Revelations and the Hereafter. *"This is the Book: In it is guidance sure, without doubt, to those who fear Allah, who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them. And who believe in the Revelation sent to you, and sent before your time, and who have the assurance of the Hereafter in their hearts. They are true guidance from their Lord, and they are the ones who will prosper."* (2:2-5)

(Regarding belief in the Unseen, a saying of the American essayist and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson is instructive: "All I have seen teaches me to trust the creator for all I have not seen.")

"O you people! Worship your Lord Who created you and those who came before you, so that you may become conscientious." (2:21)

("Tattaqun" - conscientious, as translated in this verse - derives from 'Taqwa.' The scope of "Taqwa" is vast, denoting a combination and confluence of virtues that lead to mindfulness of Allah at all times that, in turn, lead to virtuous and beneficial actions in life and on earth. "Taqwa" flows from the religious impulse human beings are born with.)

Allah taught Adam (AS) *"the names of all things,"* (2:31), giving humankind a level of superiority over angels. While angels willingly bowed before Adam on Allah's command, arrogant Iblis refused, thus sealing his fate as one whose only mission in life is to tempt humankind into evil deeds. It is arrogance that led to the downfall of Shaitan and it is arrogance, as opposed to humility, that inclines people toward Shaitan's whispering. Shaitan is always lurking and it is often when we are complacent or think we are at the summit of success that he comes for us.

Consider how Shaitan led prophet Adam (AS) and his wife astray. *"And We said, 'O Adam, you and your wife, dwell in Paradise and eat from there in ease and abundance from wherever you will. But do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers.'* But Shaitan caused them to slip by tempting them to the

tree and brought them out of the state they were in. And We said, 'Go down, as enemies to one another, and you will have upon the earth a place of settlement and provision for a time.' Then Adam received from his Lord some words, and He accepted his repentance. Indeed, it is He Who is the acceptor of repentance, the Merciful." (2:35-37)

(Notice how Adam did not say, "Shaitan made me do it." Instead, he took full responsibility for his mistake and repented to Allah, Who accepted his repentance and forgave both Adam and his wife. Think about how often we blame others without acknowledging our role when things go awry. When we take responsibility for actions that cause others harm, no matter how little or big our part, we should repent to Allah and take corrective actions, instead of saying, "Shaitan made me do it.")

Believers must not cover the truth with falsehood nor conceal the truth when they know it. They must shun the hypocrisy of preaching good conduct without practicing it themselves. *"Do you enjoin right conduct on the people, and forget to practice it yourselves, and yet you study the Divine Writ? Will you not understand?" (2:44)* We are to seek Allah's help with patient perseverance and prayer. Prayer comes most easily to those who are humble and who know with certainty that they will return to their Lord. They are the ones who attain *Khushu* (humility) in prayers. *"Seek Allah's help with patient perseverance and prayer. It is indeed hard, except for those who are humble in spirit." (2:42-45)*

The importance of patience and prayer is emphasized throughout the Quran, as in this verse: *"O you who believe! Seek help with patient perseverance and prayer, for Allah is with those who patiently persevere." (2:153)*

(Patience - *sabr* and its derived forms - occurs 103 times while prayer (*salah*) in its four derived forms occurs 99 times in the Quran. The Arabic word '*Sabr*' has several shades of meaning: a) patience in the sense of being thorough, not hasty b) perseverance, constancy, steadfastness, firmness of purpose c) systematic as opposed to being driven by chance d) a cheerful attitude of acceptance in sorrow,

defeat or suffering, as opposed to being malcontent but saved from passivity or listlessness by constancy and steadfastness).

Islam is not a new religion but the same religion preached by all previous messengers. *"Those who believe in the Quran, and those who follow the Jewish scriptures, and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord. On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."* (2:62)

(Verse (2:62) is repeated in (5:69) and (22:17) and underscores the universality of Allah's timeless guidance.)

How can we prevent evil from making inroads into our hearts and corrupting our actions? By remembering Allah and acting on His commands: *"And (remember, O Children of Israel) when We made a covenant with you and caused Mount Sinai to tower above you, (saying): Hold fast that which We have given you, and remember that which is therein, that you may be mindful of Allah."* (2:63)

(Think also of what the Prophet (s.a.w) said: "Hearts, like iron, become rusted, and the way to remove the rust from the hearts is through the recitation of the Quran and the remembrance of Allah." Things oxidize and rust. The shine wears off, the luster fades. It is the natural order of things. That's why deoxidants are so important. What makes the heart rust? Neglecting the remembrance of Allah allows the beast within us, the lower self, to ride us, thus 'rusting' or corrupting the heart. The deoxidants of the heart are the recitation of the Quran and the *Zikr* of Allah. As made clear in (18:28), there is a causal relationship between becoming heedless of the remembrance of Allah and following one's dark desires and impulses.)

Sincere followers of Prophets Musa (AS) and Isa (AS) are spiritually united with the followers of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) in their beliefs. They were told to *"Worship none but Allah. Treat with kindness your parents and kindred, and orphans and those in need. Speak fair to the people. Be steadfast in prayer and give Zakat."* (2:83)

Reflect on the sublime sequence identified in verse (2:83). First comes a believer's relationship with Allah, which is to worship Him and not ascribe any partner to Him. Next in importance is the relationship of a believer with people. In order of importance, it is one's parents, followed by blood relations, and orphans who are among the most helpless beings on earth and who need looking after and cared for, followed by needy people. Relationships with people include speaking politely, justly, and compassionately irrespective of creed and color. (Imagine how many of the problems we face in life would disappear if people only spoke politely to one another, instead of angrily or accusingly!) Then comes fulfilling the obligations of prayer in both its physical and spiritual aspects. Finally comes the importance of purifying our wealth through Zakat. Zakat, and charity (*sadaqa*) in general, is the active willingness to help those who need help, motivated by the desire to please Allah and Allah alone.

It is easy to gloss over Quranic verses (modern life is frenetic in which everything is rushed, even the recitation of the Quran and the performance of prayers!) and gain only a superficial understanding of Allah's Words. But when we reflect on them, think deeply about them, and act on them, the sublime beauty of the verses enters our hearts, and we draw that much closer to Our Creator. That is how we achieve *ihsan*, that is, excellence in everything that we do as believers.

In confirming the legacy of Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail as they raised the foundations of the House (The Kaaba) for the worship of One God, and the legacies of other Prophets, Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) and his community of believers made the inclusive nature of Islam clear: *"We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Ibrahim, Ismail, Ishaq, Yaqub, and the Tribes, and that given to Musa and Isa, and that given to all prophets from their Lord. We make no difference between them. And we bow to Allah in Islam."* (2:136)

Under Divine direction, the Kaaba became the new Qibla for Muslims, the direction we turn to in prayer. But more than physical direction, it is the spiritual orientation in which the thoughts and actions of Muslims are focused on Allah that is of paramount importance. *"The foolish among the people say: 'What has turned them*

from the Qibla to which they were used?’ Say: To Allah belongs both East and West ...” (2:142)

Moderation, the essence of wisdom, is the key to the character and action of Muslims: *“We have made you a middle nation so that you may act as a witness for mankind.”* (2:143) Muslims can never justify extremism in words or deeds. They are neither ascetics nor sybarites, neither spineless nor inflexible, but strike a balance between reason and religiosity. (Moderation extends also to our normal activities, as we learn in this verse: *“And be moderate in your walking and lower your voice ...”* 31:19)

Moderation also manifests itself in savoring life’s little joys. These can include smiling at strangers, being alert to the sweetness of birdsongs, admiring the beauty of a flower growing along the sidewalk, watching the dawn sky glow with the first light of the sun. The most readily available source of “little joys” is nature which exists just beyond our doorsteps, yet how easily we overlook them because of deadening routine and apathy!

Gratitude to Allah for His mercy and blessings is a hallmark of the believer. *“So, remember Me, I will remember you, and be thankful to Me, and do not be ungrateful to Me.”* (2:152) The Arabic word for ‘ungrateful’ is ‘kufr.’ We think of ‘kufr’ as the characteristic of a disbeliever but here the verse says that not being thankful to Allah is akin to being a kufr.

(How do we show gratitude to Allah? First, by believing in our hearts that whatever bounties we have is from Allah. If we credit our accomplishments to our ingenuity, brilliance, wealth, fame, or power, we become ingrates. One example of such a person was Qarun (Sura Qasas, 28:76-81), the billionaire of his time who attributed his immense wealth to his business acumen. Most, if not all, of us, have a small or a big Qarun within us. Honest self-appraisal can save us from acting like Qarun. Second, we must act on our blessings by being good to our loved ones, neighbors and others, with the sole aim of pleasing Allah alone. Gratitude begins in the heart, then moves to the tongue, and finally to action. If we deny or fail to acknowledge

Allah's favors to us, Shaitan will find it easier to lead us astray. We can prevent this by being humble and by being grateful to Allah for the gift of life.)

Sometimes in our lives - and this applies to all without exception - Allah will test us with fear, hunger, loss of wealth and lives and the fruits of our striving, but He will save us and restore our status if we bear our losses with patience. *"Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits of your toil, but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere, who say, when afflicted with calamity, 'To Allah we belong and to Him is our return.'"* (2:155-156)

(We usually interpret hunger as the lack of food but we can also think of it as a reference to fasting during Ramadan. We willingly and obediently subject ourselves to hunger by abstaining from food and drink which is our right under normal circumstances, because Allah commanded us to. That hunger can spur our spiritual growth by removing lusts and abnormal appetites and the realization that we can do with less. Think also how relevant these two verses are to the global pandemic that upended our lives some years ago. Just when we think we are masters of the universe and can commit crimes against nature with impunity, come tests from Allah to show how weak we are, and how little we know. But Allah also assures us that if we are patient in adversity and check our destructive instincts, we can save ourselves from any calamity, be it a natural disaster or a deadly virus. Also, we normally recite *"Inna Lillahi Wa Inna Ilaihi Rajiun"* when someone dies, but as the verse makes clear, we should recite it whenever we are afflicted with any calamity so that good things come our way from the Merciful and the Compassionate. Sometimes during hardship, we may not know if we are being tested or being punished by Allah. This is perhaps the strongest manifestation of our limited free will in that if we can keep our sanity during difficult times and say, *'To Allah we belong and to Him is our return,'* then we are being tested. On the other hand, if at such times we say things like *'Why, O Allah, are you being so harsh with me? What have I done to deserve this?'*, then it is a sign that we are being punished. Allah knows best.)

We can indeed behold the magnificence of Allah's creation in the heavens and the earth, in the alternation of night and day, in the rain from the sky that brings barren land to life, and in the diversity of earth's flora and fauna. We can do so only if we are mindful and humble. What this and similar verses in the Quran emphasize is that to deepen our faith, we need to observe nature because we are interwoven with it and recognize Allah's wondrous creativity season after season. *"Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth; the alternation of the day and the night; the ships that sail the sea for the benefit of humanity; the rain sent down by Allah from the skies, reviving the earth after its death; the scattering of all kinds of creatures throughout; the shifting of the winds; and the clouds drifting between the heavens and the earth, in all of this are surely signs for people of understanding."*

(2:164)

A sign of being grateful and humble, and thus of strong faith, is to be in a state of gratitude toward Allah for His blessings. *"O you who believe! Eat of the good things We have provided for you. And be grateful to Allah if it is Him you worship."*

(2:172)

Allah is *Al-Ghafur* (The Forgiver) and *Ar-Rahim* (The Merciful). We are reminded of these attributes of our Creator in the following verse, as well as in verses (8:69), (16:110) and (41:32): *"He has only prohibited for you carrion, blood, the flesh of swine and that upon which a name of someone other than Allah has been invoked. Then, whoever is compelled by necessity, neither seeking pleasure nor transgressing, there is no sin on him. Surely, Allah is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful."* (2:173)

These and similar Quranic verses underscore believers' two main attributes and pillars of Iman: patience (sabr) and gratitude (shukr).

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