

Sura 1: AL-Fatiha (The Opening)

1. In the Name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy.
2. Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds,
3. The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy;
4. Master of the Day of Judgment.
5. You alone we do worship, and You alone we ask for help.
6. Guide us to the straight path,
7. The path of those on whom you have bestowed your blessings, not the path of those who earn your anger nor of those who go astray.

This short Sura, which has only seven verses, is recited by each and every Muslim at least seventeen times every day. The number of recitations can be doubled, if a Muslim chooses to pray the supererogatory prayers. The number would grow even larger if one chooses to pray more voluntary prayers. A prayer in which this Sura is not recited is deemed invalid. According to a tradition that was reported by the two authentic books (Al-Bukhari and Muslim), the Prophet (pbuh) has been quoted to have said, “*A prayer in which Al-Fatiha is not recited is invalid.*” This Sura outlines the basic principles of the Islamic doctrine as well as the fundamentals of the Islamic perspective. This may explain the rationale behind the requirement to recite it repeatedly by Muslims in their daily prayers.

Most probably, it has been revealed in Medina, because it was referenced in Surat al-Hijr and it is known that Surat al-Hijr was revealed in Mecca. Also, Prayer was prescribed in Mecca and it is known that Prayer is rendered invalid if the Fatiha is not recited.

Qurtobi mentions the this Sura has twelve names. However, the most common names for the Sura are the opening of the Book (al-Fatiha), the seven of the most-oft repeated verses, and the mother of the Qur’an. It is the very first Sura in the Qur’an, hence the name: the opening of the Book. It is called the seven of the oft repeated verses because it is repeated most-often in the prayer. It is also the mother of the Book because it is the foundation of the Qur’an.

Al-Razi says that the Qur’an establishes four fundamental concepts. These are the belief in the Oneness of God, the belief in the Day of Judgment; the belief in power of God and that each and everything happens by His leave, the belief in the fact that God sent messengers to guide people to the right path.

The verses, “*Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds; the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy,*” is a statement of the belief in the Oneness of God; and that He has power over everything

The verse, “*Master of the Day of Judgment,*” is a statement of the inevitability of the resurrection.

The verse, *“You alone we do worship, and You alone we ask for help,”* is a statement of the ability of the human beings to make choices and that nothing can happen except by the leave of God.

The verses, *“Guide us to the straight path; the path of those on whom you have bestowed your blessings, not the path of those who earn your anger nor of those who go astray;”* is a statement of the belief that God has sent messengers to guide people to the straight path.

Hawwa states that the Qur’an encompasses three areas of knowledge: The Doctrine, the acts of worship, and a way of life. The verses, *“Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy; Master of the Day of Judgment;”* are a statement of the doctrine. The verse, *“You alone we do worship, and You alone we ask for help,”* is a statement of the acts of worship. The way of life is stated in the verses, *“Guide us to the straight path; the path of those on whom you have bestowed your blessings, not the path of those who earn your anger nor of those who go astray.”*

The Sura starts with the phrase, *“In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy.”* The scholars have different views regarding the status of this verse. Some are of the opinion that this verse is a part of each Sura in the Quran, while some are of the opinion that it is a verse that should be recited at the beginning of each Sura but it is not part of the Sura. However, there is a consensus that it is one of the verses of Surat Al-Fatiha. This makes the number of verses of this Sura (Al-Fatiha) seven. There is an opinion that the verse, *“Indeed, We have bestowed on you (Prophet) seven of the oft repeated verses.”* (15:87) refers to Surat Al-Fatiha.

Starting the Sura in God’s name is consistent with the general rule that has been established in the first verse that was revealed to the Prophet (pbuh), *“Recite in the name of your Lord.”* (96:1). This also reflects the fundamental conception of God as the First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner. All praise is to God, He is the Truth, and from His existence emanates the existence of everything in the universe. Therefore, everything should start with His name.

The attributes, *“The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy,”* encompass all aspects and dimensions of mercy. Only God has these two attributes combined together; and only He can be called the *“The Lord of Mercy.”* One can describe a human being as a giver of mercy, but one cannot describe a human being as *“The Lord of Mercy.”* The term *“The Lord of Mercy”* is an exclusive attribute of God.

Thus, two fundamental Islamic concepts are outlined in the first verse. The first concept is that it is the proper Islamic etiquette to start each action with the name of God. This reflects the belief in the Oneness of God. The second concept is that the attributes of God as the Lord of Mercy and the Giver of Mercy, encompass all aspects of mercy and it sets the tone for the relationship between the Creator and the creation. The praise of God and the acknowledgement that He is the absolute Lord of the universe follow. The praise of God is the feeling that floods the hearts of the believers when they remember God. Our mere existence is by the grace of God for which we should be eternally grateful. He should be praised in the beginning and at the end. Another fundamental Islamic concept is the belief in God’s infinite power. He is the Almighty, the Lord

of the worlds. The Lord owns, controls, and teaches. He cares about His creation and He looks after them. This concept establishes the foundation of the belief in the Oneness of God. The recognition of the absolute power of God as the Lord is the corner stone of monotheism. Islam emphasized this principle to purify the faith from any hint of polytheism.

“Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.” God is the only One who deserves our limitless praise. It is a praise that is not bounded by a time or a place. He is the Lord of the Worlds, His power is limitless and He controls everything. Nothing happened in the world without His leave. There is nothing like Him. He is the Creator who created the worlds, and He is the Lord of the Worlds. The word, “worlds,” is a plural and is undefined.

The two dimensions of the attribute of mercy are repeated again; *“The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy,”* to emphasize one of the basic characteristics of the Lord and to once again establish the basis for the relationship between the Creator and the creation as one of mercy. The Lord is merciful, kind, and cares about the welfare of His creation. His mercy and kindness evoke feelings of gratitude and contentment in the hearts of His creatures. The gratitude is reflected in the praise of the Creator uttered by the creation.

The next verse, *“Master of the Day of Judgment,”* establishes an important Islamic principle that has a far reaching impact on the daily lives of people: the belief in the Hereafter. The Master owns, controls, and rewards on the Day of Judgment. The resurrection is inevitable and people will be held accountable for what they did in this life.

These two concepts complement each other. Some may believe in God as the Creator but they do not believe in the concept of the Day of Judgment. The Quran refers to them by saying, *“And if you ask them who created the heavens and earth, they will say, ‘God;’ ”* (31:25) another verse echoes the same reaction, *“They may deem it strange that a warner should have come to them from among themselves, and so those who deny the truth will say, ‘A strange thing is this. How could we be resurrected after we have become dust?’ ”* (50:2-3) this establishes the fundamental concept of life after death. When people fully recognize this fact they will not be totally consumed by the struggle to get the rewards for their deeds in this life. They will understand that their reward will not be lost, rendering their struggles worthless. If they do not get compensation in this life, they will get it in the Hereafter. Acceptance of this fact will make people lead a life of security, contentment, tolerance, and certitude. This basic principle identifies the demarcation between the road to slavery imposed by the desires and whims and the road to freedom befitting humankind. Humankind will not be able to lead the excellent way of life that God wants for them if this concept is not inculcated in their psyche.

The next verse says, *“You alone we do worship, and You alone we ask for help.”* This is a logical consequence for the belief in the Oneness of God. No one is worthy of worship except God. No one can provide help and support to the believer except God. So, believers should neither worship any one else nor should they seek help from anyone else. Such a statement frees humankind from all sorts of servitude and it guides people to worship God alone. No system, organization, or human can control the destiny of people. We worship God alone and He is the only one who can help us.

The practical application of these fundamental concepts starts with praying to receive guidance from the Creator. Give us the knowledge that guides us to the straight path. Give us the courage to stay on the straight path after we have found it. The knowledge and the ability to stay on the path are the fruits of God's guidance and mercy. Asking God for guidance is the fruit of the belief that God is the only giver of guidance. The believer's first and foremost endeavor is to ask for the guidance of his Lord. Guidance to the straight path is the only guarantee for happiness in this life and in the Hereafter. It satisfies the quest of the natural innate disposition to find and recognize the Creator.

The Creator responds to the quest of His creation for guidance by sending messengers who bring guidance to humankind. This guidance defines the straight path which God has decreed for His servants. God blessed this path with His grace. This path is not followed by those who chose not to follow God's guidance. These are the ones who deviated from the truth after they had discovered it, and those who were not interested in finding the truth in the first place.

This is the Sura which has been chosen to be part of each and every prayer, without it the prayer is rendered invalid. It outlines the fundamental concepts of the doctrine and the practice of Islam. Imam Muslim narrates that the Prophet (pbuh) has been quoted to have said, *“God said, ‘The prayer is a dialogue between Me and My servant. I will grant him whatever he asks for. When the servant says, ‘All praise is to God, the Lord of the worlds,’ I say, ‘My servant praised me.’ When he says, ‘The Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy,’ I say, ‘My servant has glorified Me.’ When he says, ‘You alone we do worship, and You alone we ask for help,’ I say, ‘This is between Me and My servant. I will grant him what he asked for.’ When he says, ‘Guide us to the straight path, the path of those on whom you have bestowed your blessings, not the path of those who earn your anger nor of those who go astray,’ I say, ‘I will grant My servant what he asked.’”*