The first surah K A S H I F S H A H Z A D A | 3/6/2020

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| THE quest for God is a journey, and every journey has a beginning. Before we venture into a new territory, we must pass through the entrance. The gateway has to be known, otherwise our excursion is not possible. Many try knocking on doors, but to their dismay discover that the doors are notopened.Thisisbecause they are at the wrong door. Approach through the right gateway, and it is then that you will truly enter a new realm.  As the first surah or chapter of the Quran, Al Fatiha is its gateway. It is the supplication for those on a quest for God while the rest of the Holy Book is the answer. As the most oft-repeated supplication of the Muslim daily prayers, Al Fatiha occupies an important place in the life of a believer. Yet, we remain largely ignorant of its true meaning and form a mechanical and ceremonial attachment to this very important petition.  Conscious about not reciting the words merely in a parrot-like fashion, without having any intellectual connection with the meaning behind the utterance, we must devote some time and thought to their study. Believers are to rehearse this petition during the five daily prayers, but do we know exactly what it is that we implore? Al Fatiha comes from the Arabic root fã /d hã that literally means `He opened` From the same comes miftah or key. Al Fatiha, from the same root means `The Opener`. The title of the chapter signifies its importance as well as its purpose and serves as a befitting preamble to the Islamic scripture. Through this petition, the petitioner seeks access to the realm of God`s guidance. He wants the door to be opened for him, so that he can begin life`s most important journey. Surah Al Fatiha is the key which will open that door to the journey.  The opening line `Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds` (1:1) emphasises that as our Creator provides for all creation, so should believers provide nourishment for all under their custody and care, whether humans, plants or animals.  The words `Ar-Rahmaan` and `Ar-Raheem` rendered commonly as `Most Gracious, Most Merciful` (1:2) require very careful probing. Allah is Ar-Rahmaan, the Bestower of continuous and intense mercy, which is an attribute unique to the Creator in the Quran, whereas in the attribute Ar-Raheem, the creation is also included.  About the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) it is said `...to the Believers is he most kind and merciful (Arabic: raheem).` (9:128). In his footsteps, believers also have to be raheem towards others.We have to be conscious of the fact that Allah alone is the `Master of the Day of Judgment` (1:3). Preparation for this day should be our priority for `(It will be) the Day when no soul shall have power (to do) aught for another: For the command, that Day, will be (wholly) with Allah` (82:19).  In order to prepare for the accountability of that day, we have to proclaim: `Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek` (1:4) and then correspondingly petition for the required guidance: `Show us the straight way` (1:5). The straight way signifies that the divine path is linear and not cyclical. We make progress, we do not come back to square one.  Moreover, the word `sirat` (path) also indicates that there is a journey to be made. We must go on a personal quest to be on `The way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray` (1:6-7) indicating that there are two choices avail-able to us either walk on the path of guidance, or choose the path to perdition. Who has the in`aam (grace and bounty) of Allah, His ghadhab (wrath), and who is addhualeen (misguided)? The rest of the Quran is replete with answers to these questions, demanding a careful perusal of the remaining chapters.The true purpose of every petition is manifest in its meaning as well as the zeal and fervour with which it is proclaimed.  Failing this, our efforts will be merely ceremonial in nature and will signify our nonseriousness when we came forth as petitioners.  Al Fatiha is a supplication which should be made with our heart and soul. We should analyse each and every word in this surah, delve into its etymology and also seek to understand the themes that have been mentioned in it by cross-referencing them with other passages in the Quran where such issues are illuminated and amplified. Sarah Al Fatiha is our gateway to the realm of divine guidance, while the rest of the Quran gives us the roadmap to that journey. Its study, memorisation, and vocalisation are mandatory upon every Muslim.  The writer is a freelance contributor.  Twitter: @KashifShahzada |