



WHICH OF THE FAVORS OF YOUR LORD DO YOU DENY—Part I

Lecture at the Zāwiya of Shaykh Nooruddeen Durkee

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BEGINNING WITH THE BEGINNING

Sūratu-r-Rahmān begins with the affirmation of who Allah is in light of this revelation and insight into how we must approach this revelation, specifically. Interestingly, the sequence of ‘āyāt that open *Sūratu-r-Rahmān* focuses us even more deeply on Allah, **who is The Universally Merciful, (who) taught the Qur’an, (who) created the human being.** One might think that the order should be reversed, creation, then Qur’an. But no, the Qur’an precedes the creation of the human being. As such, from the very beginning of this *sūrah* we are given the framework for viewing the whole *sūrah* and its repetitive and affirmative refrain; a refrain that changes its ‘meaning’ or our focus with each of the ‘āyat that precedes it. **“Fabi’ayyi’alaa’I Rabbikuma Tukadhdhiban?”**

In the opening ‘āyat of Suratu-r-Rahman, Allah (Swt) immediately moves from the creation of the human being to focus on the clarity of the speech of the human being; affirming so much in the choice of the word and phrase: ***allamahu-l bayan: He Taught them clear speech.*** 55:04. From the beginning of this talk I focus on the beginning of the *sūrah* so that we can understand, not just what the favors of the Lord are, but to whom they are given and why. Thus we can then move to the logical and necessary next level of understanding the responsibility that comes with the favors.

In this fourth ‘āyat of *Sūratu-r-Rahmān* “*allamahu-l bayan,*” the word “*ālama*” is used, coming from the Arabic root “Ayn Lam Mim.” This word, as you know, refers to knowledge,

but it also refers as *'ālamīn* to 'all beings' and to the fact that both knowledge and beings are signs of the reality that is Allah (SwT). In the active sense with this word also emphasizes the inner reality of great knowledge, and the tradition in Islam of teaching and to learning, by studying. So, we can begin to see that Allah's teaching refers not only to the knowledge that is available to human beings but to the fact that this knowledge is a sign of and a goal of our potential and duty to Allah (SwT). If only we would look, listen, study, and learn the signs that Allah (SwT) has put before us.

When we also look at the word *'bayan*' is added, from the root *ba-ya-na*, there is added emphasis in the meaning, and the *alam*, the knowledge, is doubly supported by clear or manifest signs. But this clear speech also refers to the revelation itself.

Other *'āyāt* in Qur'an can offer us insight into these words as well, lending deeper meaning to the concept. As in Suratu-l-Baqarah "**...yet We have made clear the signs to a people...**" (1:118). And again in Suratu-l-Baqarah: "**...after We have shown them clearly in the Book**" (2:159). Or the use of the word *bayan* in Suratu-l- Imran "**This is a clear [statement] for the people, and guidance, and a cautionary reminder to those who guard themselves [for Allah].**"(3:138)

These *'āyāt* reflect Allah's purpose and intention for clarity, and the manifestation and expression of the bounties of His divine Gifts. With this goes the potentiality of the human being who was created to see the clear signs, use them, and continuously attribute all of the bounties and favors directly to Allah; understanding their comprehensiveness as a manifest expression of all that is contained in His creation for us.

Let us return then to the opening *'āyāt* of Sūratu-r-Rahmān. Moving on to *'āyāt* 5-7, which place all in the context of the total creation.

"The sun and the moon [move] according to a precise reckoning. And the stars and the trees prostrate themselves. And He has raised up the sky and set the balance—that you might not transgress the balance." (55:5-8)

Here, in these opening 12 *‘āyāt* is the set stage for the discussion of the favors or bounties of Allah (Swt).

THE ALAA OF ALLAH

And let us look now at the refrain of *Sūratu-r-Rahmān*:

“FABI’AYYI ‘ALAAI RABIKUMA TUKADhDhiBAN. Which then of the favors of your Lord will you deny?”

The word for favors in these *‘āyāt* is “ALAA.” Why does Allah choose *alaa*, a weak word linguistically, but profoundly important in its specific meaning? Why not *nai’ma* and its derivatives? Blessing, grace favor as in *nai’ma*—a word that also means cattle, flocks (signs of bounty); or *nai’ma* / “how excellent”; or *ni’m* / bliss and delight, *na’ma* / prosperity. The word *alaa* indeed does mean bounty and favor, but it also has another subtle and profound implication, which is to forswear. Here Allah repetitively reminds us that all that is created and all that we have not only must be accepted and received with grace and appreciation, but we must also be able to renounce or give it up for Allah alone. At the least, we should be able to abstain from indulging ourselves in all the things of this world, so that we can benefit in the hereafter in *Jannah*

Thus, in *Sūratu-r-Rahmān* the whole stage of creation is set. The recipient is created; the manifestation is made, and the foundation for success in this world and in the next is revealed—consciousness, awareness of all that has been created (favor’s) and the gratitude by which we must accept it. But for the authority and favor of Allah (Swt) we cannot move, let alone succeed. Clearly success is a goodness that reflects the bounties and beauties and favors of Allah by goodness.

Hal Jazaa’u l ‘ihsani illa l ihsan... “Is the reward of goodness other than goodness?”

So many of the words used in this *sūrah* are affirmations of beauty and refinement, beneficence, and the real charity of Allah (Swt), each punctuated by the refrain, a constant reminder to be grateful. So now let us look at the way to approach this wonderful *sūrah*, which was called The Bride of the Qur’an by the Prophet Muhammad (sal), with a tender and sincere approach from the heart.

AR-RAHMAN AND THE HEART

When we read *Sūratu-r-Rahmān*, it should be read with the heart; with the softness and sweetness of a heart open to receive and appreciate the favors of Allah. If we accomplish this, as we succeed in such attentiveness, we will discover that our best and only response to the gifts of this world is *shukr* (gratitude). Our gratitude is the recognition of the Divine Presence and power of existence that beats in the rhythm of our hearts and our lives. All things are connected by that Presence and the intention of that Presence. This type of relatedness and relationships is far more relevant to our lives than our superficial understanding and limited view allows us to realize. Without the insight that comes from faith and submission, we can't really understand the depth and meaningfulness of that relatedness, the relatedness of the all things: the favors of Allah. The rain falls from the sky. The plants germinate as a result. Perhaps we can call them symbols of the blessings that are constantly showered on our hearts, and cause them to “*tremble and sprout*,” as Abdul Qadir Jilani says. Our hearts tremble and sprout with the goodness, love, trust, faith, sacrifice, and gratitude that characterize the capacity of human beings to perceive the meaning of life.

When we recognize and respond to the blessings that are around us as they manifest in our lives and relationships, the mysteries of life and the *hikma* (wisdom behind those mysteries) is revealed to us. Responding with gratitude to the mysteries of life reveals the truth of *tawhid*, the inter-relatedness of all things in unity. It reveals to us the essential nearness in life, nearness to God and to the Divine. Our heart is, in itself, a world filled with diverse wonders and potentials. It is a garden with many fruits and flowers in it. It also has mountains, wastelands, deserts, and depthless oceans. Our heart has places in it where we can gather our friends. It has places where we can hide from our enemies. It's hard to understand this, but if we attempt to comprehend the vastness of our hearts and the interrelatedness of life, we have the opportunity to lose our limited self and we will dive into the ocean that is in our hearts. We will submit to the rapids in the rivers of our hearts, and seek out the silence of the desert and the serenity of the mountains, and the pleasantness of the gardens, the flowers, and fruits that will calm and sustain us. Our heart is really a whole world.

Allah, Ar-Rahmān, is merciful to us in many ways. One of Mercies of Allah is that we are the masters of fulfilling our own destinies. We are also the master of abandoning our destinies. Unless we have the courage to seek out truth in our hearts, and not our desires, bereft of the heart, we will find our hearts hardened to the Divine presence and we will constantly seek only the material shocks of *dunya*. The heart that is hard is like a stone. The Qur'an says:

Then your hearts were hardened after that, and became like rocks, or even harder still. 2:74

Anything that comes into contact with a hard heart breaks, or is repelled. A heart that rejects the Divine becomes like stone that breaks everything except itself, as it becomes too hard. Unless our hearts have the capacity to crack, if not break, then we can't recognize the Divine presence. Abdul Qadir Jilani writes on this subject:

Allah allows us knowingly to wander astray, but if we gain knowledge for the sake of creatures, we will work for the sake of creatures. If we acquire knowledge for the sake of Allah, we will work for His sake. And if we acquire knowledge for the sake of this world, we will work for the sake of this world. If we acquire knowledge for the sake of the hereafter, we will work for the sake of the hereafter. The branches are based upon the roots. As you pay allegiance, so shall allegiance be paid to you.

What makes the heart soft, and what builds the best relationships, and what makes us understand the apparent cause and effect we get from one relationship to another and relatedness to another? There is nothing that can do that other than gratitude for the favors of our Lord, *khidma* (service), *ibadaa* (worship), and *ta'a* (obedience). I wish to note that this word *ta'a* from t-w-'a ... has the meaning of a willing and voluntary obedience. As Allah Swt , repeats over and over again as in Sūratu-r-Rahmān in Sūrat-ash-Shu'arā:

“ Fa- t- Tau llaha wa ‘ati’un. So guard yourselves for Allah, and ward off evil and heed (obey) Me.” 26: 108, 110, 126,131 144, 150 etc.

Nothing is a substitute for the real thing, if we put garlic in a bowl and chop it up, we will not smell roses in that bowl. Service begets service, and worship allows us to feel the Divine presence, and we can only expect obedience if we obey. So too, gratitude for the favors of Allah brings His favors into focus in our hearts and minds. Take any qualities of the Divine, and it will be the same. It will become how we think and how we act, how we treat others, how we treat our environment. We have the choice and influence of the Divine all around us, but how do we choose to live, and how do we choose to think?

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR PART

This planet is only a very small part of a very vast creation, which is all Allah's. People are worried that we might find life on Mars, or find proof of evolution, or develop artificial life, and that somehow will blow religion out of the water. I don't think so. We have the knowledge today that clearly affirms from the smallest element to the vastness of the universe that all things are interlinked and all things come from and return to Allah. Even at huge distances, there are forces that affect our lives, whether rays that come from distant suns or the effect of the moon on the tides on our planet. As it says in Sūratu-r-Rahmān: **“The sun and the moon [move] according to [a] precise reckoning.”** (55:5).

The universe has its effect on us. Why should we be surprised then that we have an effect on those who are nearest and dearest to us, let alone everything that we come into contact with, either in our thoughts or actions. The protective atmospheric shell around this earth, which is held by gravity, is proportionately no thicker than the skin of an organic potato. We are, in fact, being carried along in a sea of space in a very finely engineered, self-regulating spaceship.

We, as *khalifas* of the Almighty on this planet, we have done more to destroy our system than to sustain it and its viability. So, who are we to expect that we should be healthy, and have peace of mind when we are destroyers? Why should we expect and think we have the right to be calm and serene, and that our emotions should not be affected when we don't address our own behavior, our own actions and thoughts? Are we not also *khalifas* of our own selves? How have

we polluted our own environment? Destroyed our own rainforests, neglected and abused the favors of Allah?

And Allah is all merciful and compassionate, Ar-Rahman, Ar-Raheem. **And which of the favors of our Lord to do we deny?** We see around us people acting aggressively towards this earth, people who are strangers, or our nearest and dearest, or even ourselves. If we are, as many think, at the highest point of human civilization in terms of science and technology and intellects, and if we are, as some people think we are, at the highest point of our development (not to say that we can't get higher, which is important in the West) then why are we so willing to destroy ourselves and corrupt our life-support systems, our health, and mental balance? Why are we so anxious to destroy the venues that have been given to us for happiness and contentment? Why are we so willing to destroy the future, as we indulge in the luxuries of our desires and wants, and even the luxuries of our fears and differences?

Everything you say and do has its effect on others. We can now identify the effect from the other side of the world. As more people get video and audio along with the Internet, with a local call we will be able to identify the affect with the effect, and see it right in our faces. We fight inwardly and outwardly the tendencies for destruction every day. They further and further remove us from the art of living in a state of *fitra*. *Fitra* is that which is natural, in balance and harmony with creation and Allah's will. In a state of *fitra* we come towards things, we respond to things, we react to and evaluate things from a position of belief, not doubt. Yet, there are probably people sitting in this room who think that doubt and criticism is the natural thing to do. It's not. Faith and submission is natural, but when Hazrat Adam as and Hawa used their 'consciousness' in the way they did it began a process of normalizing disobedience i.e. unwillingness to trust and a re-defining voluntary action from voluntary obedience to 'doing what I want'. So that, again and again, we demand of Allah and of our guides and *shaykhs* new proofs of the reality of life, proof of the favors of Allah, proof of Allah's Mercy.

Our hearts, which are the ultimate litmus paper for truth and happiness, have become confused by the luxuries and indulgences in this world, and we are so tuned into our own personal well-being that our adaptive capacity has mutated. Our understanding has mutated. It's

been mutated by ourselves, and by complex constructs that have re-defined happiness and fulfillment, contentment and meaning, and what it means to be I-centered, selfish. We think this is not only normal, but natural. The community of beings who are affected by this are no other than us.

Everything is related and connected with each other, with the whole. Just think about how many things happen in the evaporative process of sun and rain, or how many species are inter-connected in the food chain. But we don't tend to see ourselves as part of the cause and effect process. How can we begin to accept (not deny) the favors of our Lord, unless we see ourselves as part of the larger, physical process of responding to knowledge and to truth?

WHERE DO THE FAVORS BEGIN?

Why does Allah ask us over and over again in Sūratu-r-Rahmān: “What of these favors of your Lord do you deny?” The favors of Allah is a very deep subject. The acceptance of the favors of God lies in reality in gratitude and thankfulness. It is a way of looking at our life, our situation. Sūratu-r-Rahmān is telling us to look with the eyes of gratitude, not the eyes of discontent, with the eyes of acceptance, not denial. There is not situation, no circumstance, that one cannot be grateful for, in which one is not indebted to Allah.

The beauty is that this is one of the common teachings one finds in spiritual traditions throughout history. It is a core teaching of the Prophet Isa, the Prophet Musa, and the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon them all). We find it in the stories of Harun and Daoud, and Yacub, of Yahya. The core of these stories is about gratitude, patience, perseverance, and trusting in Allah. Where does the story begin? You can say the story begins with Sidna Musa (as) when he is placed in a basket and put in the river—or with Sidna Isa in the womb of his mother. You could say it starts with Sidna Yusef and the torment by his brothers. For each, it starts at the very beginnings of their life, as they discover and uncover their destiny. The Prophet Mohammed (sal) didn't discover his destiny right away but his destiny was written in his birth. Each of these people accepted their destiny. To accept the will of God is the foundation for gratitude. Otherwise, you can pick and choose where you start the story. But the truth is, it starts at your birth. None of us would be sitting in this room if it wasn't in our destiny.

And yet, sometimes we have a hard time accepting the *nai'ma*, the blessing and grace, and the *fadl*, bounties of Allah. We have to be reminded that our life is a favor of Allah to us. By his Mercy, Compassion and Grace we are favored by Allah. When one learns to accept the favors of Allah (Swt), one receives incredible *baraka* from the unlimited oceans of *baraka*. Do we accept them or deny them? We have to learn how to swim in the ocean of *baraka*. We can't be distracted by fear, the allurements and temptations of *dunya*, the uneducated opinions of others who are not among those who are the beloved of Allah, or who are not walking on the *siratal mustaqim*. We must not let life's distractions keep us from standing strongly, firmly, and enjoining and embracing and calling upon the endless treasure house of the favors of Allah. If you read *Sūratu-r-Rahmān*, you can become overwhelmed not just with all the favors of Allah but with the concept of *Rahmān* itself as an unlimited well to drink from.

DIVING INTO THE HIDDEN MEANINGS OF SURA RAHMAN

Each of these favors, as it is described, is symbolic of the countless favors of Allah, like the *Asma ul-Husna*, the 99 beautiful names of Allah, are both real and symbolic. There are countless unknown attributes. The favors of Allah are already in our lives, from our birth, in our relationships and our destiny. Our health is a favor of Allah—our education, our careers, our thoughts, our emotions. Our words can reflect the favors of Allah. Yet many, many people, most people in this world, don't recognize the favors or bounties of Allah, and do not enjoy the favors of Allah, because they are not actively stimulating their *iman* or developing their *ihsan*. They are not consciously depending on Allah (Swt).

Let us dive more deeply into just one of the 'āyat from *Sūratu-r-Rahmān*. Allah says in this *sūrah* that He established balance. **“And He has raised up the sky and set the balance—that you might not transgress the balance. And [so] weigh with justice and not not skimp the balance.”** (55:7-9). We have to be faithful in trying to maintain harmony and balance in our lives, because Allah established that balance. He says, don't make the measure deficient. *Khasarah* is to lose something. If we lose the balance, we lose ourselves, because we have allowed the *nafs amarra* to act according to its orientation of imbalance. We are in denial.

We don't believe what's in front of us. We are in disbelief. What is this state of denial? The denial of the Universal Mercy and Singularly Compassionate Nature of Allah (Swt).

If we lose the balance then we suddenly find the world is upside down. Creation is raining over us...reigning over us. In that state, we have no access to the purpose of creation, to the purpose of life; we have no access to history, to the future in a proper way, which also means we don't have access to Al Qur'an. We find ourselves in endless reaction to circumstances and people, with only limited goals. We can't read our heart anymore. We are incapable of seeing the *ayat ul illah*. One teacher said, "*When a man is in darkness, the Qur'an becomes to him like a dark tomb or derelict house. It gives him no nourishment or support.*" This is the case with the majority of human kind. They have lost the *mīzān*. Al Mīzān is also one of the names of the Qur'an.

The clear way to capture the direction of Sūratu-r-Rahmān, as I have said, lies in *shukr*. The underlying theme or current of what have been talking to you today is gratitude, gratitude as the way to see and accept the favors of Allah. Gratitude is the way to bring the scale back into balance. We can't do that by saying, "O thank you God," and walking away. What Allah (swt) is telling us in this *'āyat* is to value *mīzān*. We can arrive there vis a vis the doorway of *shukr*. Leave all that other stuff. A human being is supposed to be concerned, conscientious, aware, in remembrance (*dhikr*). To know if we are in balance and gratitude, we must ask the questions of our self: "Do you know what you are doing and why you are doing it?" "Do you know your own intentions?" "

There is a powerful *hadith* of Prophet Mohammed (sal). "**What corrupts iman is anger, as vinegar corrupts honey.**" Human beings build things and then corrupt them, because we don't give importance to *mīzān*. What weight do we give to the meaning of the words in Sūratu-r-Rahmān, "**Do not make this measure deficient?**" The balance is that which is absolutely right, moving along the path from the womb to the tomb. Balance is about recognizing that one is in the *barzakh*; that one is in this world but not of this world. And that we come here only to go from here. And of what we accomplish here, the most important thing is our record, our Legacy, our "account." There is a balance to being here, with Allah (Swt), alive and yet every

Shaykh Ahmed Abdur Rashid

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time we close our eyes, willing to be in the tomb. What of these favors of the Lord will we deny? Such is one 'āyat of Sūratu-r-Rahmān, *Alhamdulillah*.