



# Why Does God Ask People to Worship Him?

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## Author Biography

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## In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

*This question has been a recurrent criticism among antagonists of religion. It has even stirred doubts in many theists who have been worn down by its relentless repetition, or who have simply lost hope in ever having it answered to their satisfaction. This paper is based on a book (with the same title) by Dr. Sami Ameri<sup>1</sup> that provides a compelling critique of this question as well as a variety of responses to it.*

The arguments of atheists have been so loud and ubiquitous that they may appear to be many and profound. However, upon closer examination, one soon realizes that they are, in fact, few in number and largely recycled. They usually involve unsubstantiated assumptions about realities beyond our finite realm, such as the eternity of matter or God's qualities and actions. Of course, the latter are more complicated than the former because they involve the non-tangible world, to which we have no direct access.

One common question posed by atheists pertains to the wisdom behind God asking His creation to worship Him. Usually, it is phrased something like this: *Why does God ask us to worship Him, when He has no need for our worship? How does God benefit from our prayers, supplications, and fasting?* Some may first ask: *What is the wisdom for which God created us?* But the moment they are told that it is for worship, they immediately object: *But what does He gain from us worshipping Him?* By that, we are brought back to the original question. This paper begins by offering three reasons why this question—"Why does God ask for worship?"—is inherently problematic. It then addresses the more pertinent question, "Why do we need to worship God?"

## Deconstructing the Question

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<sup>1</sup> Sami Ameri, Ph.D., is a professor of Islamic Studies, a prolific author on Islam and philosophy, and a co-founder of the Academic Research of Comparative Religion Initiative.

Understanding the question correctly is necessary because many atheistic arguments are phrased to conceal their inherent fallacies. Attending to the wording of the question itself reveals its presuppositions. It is important to establish the internal inconsistency of the question before gathering arguments to debunk it. An internal inconsistency exists when the premises that the questioner takes for granted are actually not as “common sense” as they claim.

## 1. Our Limitations in Comprehending the Divine

The Prophet ﷺ said, “*His (God’s) veil is light. Were He to remove it, the glory of His Face would incinerate everything that His eyesight reaches (i.e., all that exists beside God).*”<sup>2</sup>

Passing a verdict on something requires first comprehending it. Since human beings are finite creatures, they are incapable of fully comprehending the reality of an eternal God and grasping His perfection. After all, they do not have direct access to God, nor the visual or mental capacity to handle such access were it granted, nor do they have access to anything comparable that would allow their imaginations to construct a mental image. Hence, the necessary antecedent for critiquing God—comprehending God—does not exist. The Most High said, “*There is nothing like unto Him, and He is the Hearing, the Seeing*” [ash-Shūrā 42:11]. Elsewhere, Allah reiterates, “*Allah knows what is [presently] before them and what will be after them, but they do not encompass Him in knowledge*” [ṬāHā 20:110]. For this reason, we say that it is beyond the human mind to describe God on its own, independently, without revelation. Humans can and should think deeply about the signs of God, inferring from them *some* undeniable truths about the Creator and His attributes. However, this must be done with awareness that veils have been lowered between their minds and the full essence of God’s nature. Intelligence here involves realizing the limits of one’s intelligence.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (179); Muslim, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī. ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955) 1/161

For instance, examining the magnitude and magnificent design of our universe allows us to infer the greatness and graciousness of the One who brought it into existence. Thus, God says, *“Those who remember Allah while standing or sitting or [lying] on their sides and give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth, [saying], ‘Our Lord, You did not create this aimlessly; exalted are You [above such a thing]’”* [Al-‘Imrān 3:191]. However, our minds are limited in what they can decipher from these signs, and we must therefore refrain from trying to completely comprehend what is locked behind an impregnable door.

These human limitations are also why the Quran kept the discussion on God—though quite elaborate—limited to certain divine traits, due to the mind’s limited ability to grasp the Divine. Given these limitations, it is inappropriate for a human being to casually question God’s wisdom in asking to be worshipped.

## **2. Presuming the Humanness of God is a Flawed Premise**

Where does this question regarding the Creator’s “need” for worship come from? Why does the issue of how worship “benefits” Him represent a central theme of those asking this question? These questions stem from the human tendency for anthropomorphism (likening non-humans to humans). This is a well-known historical phenomenon found across civilizations, one which idol-worshippers embraced wholeheartedly. Those who presume that God asks due to some need or deficiency have retained the ancient pagan mindset, wherein their mythological gods resemble mortals who ask due to dependency, who deprive them out of jealousy, and who ignite wars between them in order to secure dominance over the cosmos. The celebrated Greek philosopher, Xenophanes (d. 475 BC) commented on how the people of his time anthropomorphized their gods, saying, “The Abyssinians (Ethiopians) see their god as flat-nosed, while the Thracians give him red hair and blue eyes... What is even stranger is that these gods partake in the most heinous acts that are contrary to upright character, such as killing, stealing, and looting, just as their worshippers do... And if cows and horses and lions had

hands, and were capable of drawing, the horses would draw gods in horse form, and the cows would in cow form.”<sup>3</sup>

One major problem with anthropomorphism is the assumption that God is analogous to the human being in every respect, with no dissimilarity whatsoever. Such an overextended analogy may unfold in the following fashion: people’s actions and requests are generated by need, therefore all actions and requests result from need, including the actions and requests of God.

Ibn Taymiya (d. 1328) says, “For this reason, the way of the Quran—which is also the way of the great Imams and earliest Muslims—is to refrain from using *qiyās shūmūl* (categorical syllogism), which assumes identical subparts, and *qiyās tamthīl* (deductive analogy), with regards to the Divine. Instead of these, they use *qiyās awlā* (*a fortiori* analogy)—for belonging to Allah is the loftiest description.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Quran and earliest Muslims rejected anthropomorphic interpretations of God as such interpretations involve humans as the prism through which to understand the qualities of God. Instead, they understood the qualities of God through greater analogy, meaning that if human beings possess a praiseworthy trait that God also possesses, then a greater form of it is understood about God, one more befitting of His Uniqueness and Perfection. To illustrate, humans possess the praiseworthy trait of “life,” and God also possesses life, so the life of God must be understood as different and greater (e.g., His life has no beginning and no end). Likewise, humans possess the praiseworthy trait of “knowledge,” and God also possesses knowledge, though the knowledge of God is complete. So, whenever God and human share a trait, that does not necessitate identity, but only a similarity in the names used to describe that trait. Just as the leg of a race is not the leg of a dog, and the eye of a storm is not the eye of a human, the traits of humans are only poor facsimiles of the greater and more perfect traits of God.

<sup>3</sup> H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Berlin: 1903, (pp. 15-16)

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Taymiya, *Dar’ Ta’āruḍ al-‘Aql wan-Naql*, Dar al-Kunūz al-Adabiyya (Riyadh, KSA: 1391H), (4/35)

*Qiyās shūmūl* is categorical reasoning; using a rule to draw a conclusion about a particular item that fits in the larger category. *Qiyās tamthīl* is a simple analogy; comparing one item to a similar item. *Qiyās awlā* is stronger analogy; using a property of a particular item to draw a conclusion about that which is greater or logically more necessary.

Thus, those who think that God asks for worship in order to fulfill a need or to compensate for some deficiency are essentially anthropomorphizing the Divine. Such people imagine that all requests are generated by the desire to fill a void because their lifetime of experience with humans suggests that this is why people request things. However, extending that motive to God when we do not fully comprehend His nature is clearly fallacious, especially when what we do understand of His nature—through reason and revelation—indicates that He does not have any needs.

### **3. Not Every Request is Prompted by the Requester's Need**

Even among humans, not all requests communicate need. Consider a physician who asks a patient to open his mouth in order to administer medicine. This physician would love for the patient to obey this request, not for personal benefit, but because obeying will result in benefit for the patient. Similarly, Allah's love for worship points to the benefits that worship entails for humans. Consider a wealthy person who asks a beggar to extend his hand and loves that he complies so that he may hand him money. These examples are better analogies for God's desire to be worshipped; His loving to be worshipped and obeyed does not necessitate His need for it, nor is any request—even among people—always associated with a desire for more of something.

Indeed, some requests may be pure acts of graciousness on the part of the requester who wishes for others to actualize their interests and attain their goals. Other requests serve the purpose of teaching and modeling. These and many other examples demonstrate that merely requesting something does not indicate a need for that thing; requests are used for a variety of communicative intentions, many of which do not involve any need on the part of the requester. As for Allah, the most perfect essence and traits belong to Him. He is not increased by people's worship in the least; rather, opportunities to worship and do good are ultimately offerings from God (the Glorified) to humans—considering He gifted them the ability to do good in the first place. The Most High said, “*And to Him belongs whatever is in the*

*heavens and the earth, and to Him is [due] worship constantly. Then is it other than Allah that you fear? And whatever you have of favor it is from Allah” [an-Nahl 16:52-53].*

## Addressing the Question

Having demonstrated the erroneous premises behind the question at hand, we now proceed to demonstrate *why* worshipping God is necessary and beneficial.

### 1. Only God is Worthy of ‘*Ibāda*

Since many people think of “worship” as consisting of mechanical rituals performed by the limbs, we must first pinpoint the emotion lying at the core of the Quranic term *‘ibāda* (usually translated as worship or devotion). The erudite linguist ar-Rāghib al-Aṣfahāni (d. 1108) explains that *‘ibāda* denotes the epitome of humility and brokenness.<sup>5</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350), an expert theologian, explains that *ta‘abbud* (commitment to *‘ibāda*) is the highest level of love, wherein a person is rendered powerless before their beloved.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Ibn al-Qayyim elucidates: “Complete *‘ubūdiyya* (servitude) is a byproduct of complete love, and complete love is a byproduct of the beloved’s perceived perfection. As for Allah (the Glorified), He possesses such absolute perfection that even imagining Him flawed is impossible. And whoever is like that, their hearts would not consider anything dearer to them than Him, so long as their natures and minds remain sound. And if this [love] is the dearest thing to them, then loving Him will absolutely necessitate serving Him, obeying Him, pursuing His pleasure, and exhausting every effort to worship Him and seek nearness to Him. This stimulus is the strongest and best driving force behind *‘ubūdiyya*. Even if this [feeling] was not accompanied by commands, prohibitions, rewards, and punishments, one would

<sup>5</sup> ar-Rāghib al-Aṣfahāni, *Mufradāt Alfādh al-Qurān*. (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 2009), p. 542

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr. *Madārij as-Sālikīn Bayna Manāzil Īyāka Na‘budu Wa Īyāka Nasta‘īn*. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1996), 3/28



still expend [their] capacity and dedicate [their] heart to the One truly worthy of *'ibāda*.”<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, *'ibāda* involves a state that is manifested in the surrender of the heart and the limbs. It stands on two pillars: absolute love and absolute humility. These emanate from understanding the perfection of God’s qualities and recognizing God’s favors (generating love), as well as recognizing one’s own flaws compared to His flawlessness (generating humility). One can say that *'ibāda* is the phenomenon necessitated by observing the dual nature of existence: Creator and creation, Giver and given, Blessing and blessed. *'Ibāda* is not a burdensome task, nor mere labor that results in wages, but rather a gracious gift attained through spiritual insight and sincere effort. The more a person becomes acquainted with the greatness of God and His innumerable dispensations, the more he or she comes to terms with the necessity of *'ibāda*. *'Ibāda* represents a declaration of love for God, for “worshipping” God without loving Him first is not *'ibāda*, and the more one ascends the staircase of love, the more comfortable they become in the gardens of servitude.

In the opening chapter of the Quran (*al-Fātiḥa*), it is meaningful that God placed the phrase “*Only You do we worship*” after the verses praising and extolling Him. This sequence captures how servitude is an offshoot of recognition, and hence a Muslim is moved to worship God both internally and externally. The external motivation is the revealed command of God which obligates people to perform ritual worship, while the internal motivation results from appreciation of God’s perfection and one’s own imperfection and appreciation of His benevolence. Thus, you find the Messenger of God ﷺ (the best of humanity) standing in the night prayer (the best of times for ritual devotion) to say in his prostration (the best state for declaring surrender and obedience), “*I cannot praise You enough; You are as You have praised Yourself*.”<sup>8</sup> Even the angels who fill every inch of the skies and earth in prostration and surrender will say on the Day of Resurrection, “*Glorified*

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad. *Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa‘ādah Wa Manshūr Wilāyat Al-‘Ilm Wal-Idārah*. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 2002), 2/88-89

<sup>8</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (486), 1/352

*are You; We have not worshipped You as You deserve to be worshipped.”*<sup>9</sup> These noble beings created from light who devote themselves to God without interruption, in perpetual obedience, know that His Majesty (Glory be to Him) could never be adequately recognized by created beings.

Allah was worthy of *‘ibāda* before He created, and even if He had not created at all, His sublime nature itself entitles Him to be the direction of our heart’s devotion. Even if we had not received anything from Him, He would still deserve this, so how about when a torrential downpour of blessings comes to us from Him each moment of our lives? Venerating Him is necessary because this entire world and the next belong to Him, and because He will judge in perfect justice on the Last Day, and reward the righteous beyond measure. Allah says, “[All] praise is [due] to Allah, to Whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth, and to Him belongs [all] praise in the Hereafter. And He is the Wise, the Acquainted” [Saba’ 34:1]. Venerating God is also necessary since every atom in this stunning universe points to Him. “It is Allah who has created seven heavens and of the earth the like of them. [His] command descends among them so you may know that Allah is over all things competent and that Allah has encompassed all things in knowledge” [aṭ-Ṭalāq 65:12].

In our everyday lives, we feel compelled to acknowledge people’s exceptional achievements and moral excellence. How then can we not acknowledge the unparalleled actions of the Creator, and His endowing people with a *fiṭra* (pure nature) from which everything admirable about them radiates? People who claim that they alone deserve credit for their accomplishments are seen by us as conceited ingrates. Should this sentiment not multiply beyond measure regarding those who refuse to thank God—He who drenches them in blessings they recognize and blessings they are unaware of, and makes available to them innumerable means of comfort and enjoyment?

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<sup>9</sup> Collected by aṭ-Ṭabarāni in *al-Awsaṭ* (4/44), al-Marwazi in *Ta’dhīm Qadr aṣ-Ṣalāt* (1/267), Ibn Kathir in *at-Tafsīr* (8/297), and authenticated by al-Albani in *as-Silsila aṣ-Ṣaḥīḥa* (941)

## 2. God is Exceedingly Benevolent

Allah loves that His servants devote their lives to Him in worship and obedience because this worship is of benefit to *them*. And as the Prophet ﷺ said, Allah is more delighted with a servant’s repentance than someone lost in the desert finding another chance at life after being certain that his demise was imminent.<sup>10</sup> But if there is no harm nor benefit to Him, then what makes God request this of us? God Himself directly answers this question by saying, “*What would Allah do with your punishment if you are grateful and believe? And ever is Allah Appreciative and Knowing*” [an-Nisā’ 4:147]. It is because Allah is *ash-Shakūr*, the Most Appreciative, who gives without measure, and appreciates the smallest effort. It is because Allah is *ar-Rahmān*, the Infinitely Merciful, who is more compassionate to, and protective of, His servants than any mother is with her newborn baby. It is because Allah is *al-Karīm*, the Most Generous, who loves giving and forgiving even those who spend a lifetime getting and forgetting. He loves to see His servants prosper, and hence He loves to see them worship Him in order to achieve that prosperity. The following subsections explain how worship can result in human flourishing in a number of ways.

### ***‘Ibāda* is Required for Inner Peace and Self-Actualization**

*‘Ibāda* allows people the inner peace and delight of directly engaging with the Magnificent, the Most Near. This devotional engagement gives the spirit proximity to Him and a serenity and fulfilment that nothing else can provide. This proximity is either attained through conscious recollection (*dhikr*: remembrance of God) or the physical actions this mindfulness prompts (obedience to God). Therefore, worshipping God involves a return to one’s self through spirituality, and provides clarity which makes life meaningful and provides an escape from existential anxiety.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6309), *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2747); al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 8/68; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955), 4/2104

Within every person is a restless craving for spiritual fulfillment. Without it, the soul faces severe thirst followed by tormenting hallucinations of one mirage after another, each giving it momentary hope of an oasis before yet another letdown. This is the tragedy of the human experience whenever it seeks inner peace from the outer world or when it seeks to self-actualize through materialism. The reality is that we are spiritual beings living in physical bodies, not physical beings with a spiritual component, nor beings that are equally physical and spiritual. God invites people to worship and obey Him to discover and address our dual nature adequately. Just as our bodies need nutrition to thrive, our spirits have an even greater need for *'ibāda* in order to survive and flourish. Whenever this *'ibāda* is absent, a person is not just unfulfilled, they are essentially not truly living. The Prophet ﷺ said, “*The difference between the one who remembers his Lord (God) and the one who does not remember his Lord is the difference between the living and the dead.*”<sup>11</sup>

It is no wonder that modern societies are facing frightening increases in suicide rates, with multitudes who consider their lives not worth living. Indeed, Gallup polls have consistently demonstrated that countries with lower religiosity have higher suicide rates<sup>12</sup> and studies have confirmed that “religion plays a protective role against suicide in a majority of settings where suicide research is conducted.”<sup>13</sup> Without authentic worship of God, people are plagued by emotional and behavioral ills that suffocate them and those around them. Allah (the Most High) says, “*And whoever turns away from My remembrance indeed, he will have a suffocating life*” [TāHā 20:124]. Just as oxygen is necessary for the body to breathe, loving God and remembering Him is necessary for the spirit to breathe. Those who comprehend this and connect with their Creator in worship ascend a unique spiritual mountain where the air is particularly invigorating, where tragedy does not lead to despair, where social relationships are not paralyzing, and where temptations cannot compromise one’s moral fortitude.

<sup>11</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6407), 8/86; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (779), 1/539

<sup>12</sup> Brett Pelham and Zsolt Nyiri, "In More Religious Countries, Lower Suicide Rates," Gallup News, July 3, 2008: <http://news.gallup.com/poll/108625/more-religious-countries-lower-suicide-rates.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> Wu A., Wang J.Y., Jia C.X. Religion and Completed Suicide: a Meta-Analysis. *PLoS One*. 2015 Jun 25;10(6):e0131715. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26110867>

Worship in Islam therefore represents the definitive roadmap for actualizing human excellence, beginning internally in the form of spirituality and extending externally in the form of exceptional character. Without worship, humans are destined for psychospiritual ills and behavioral dysfunctions. For this reason, and contrary to how most people perceive ritual worship, the Quran indicates that among the profound functions of the daily prayers is to deter evil and indecency [29:45]—just as the ritual fast cultivates integrity [2:183], and just as giving charity serves to purify one from greed and unethical earnings [9:103].

Ibn Rajab (d. 1393), a great Hanbalite theologian, said, “There is no well-being for the hearts until there settles in them the recognition of God and His greatness, love of Him, fear of Him, awe of Him, hope in Him, reliance upon Him, until they become filled with all of that. This is the reality of monotheism and the actual meaning of *lā elāha illā Allāh* (none worthy of worship except God). There is no soundness for the hearts until the god they adore, intimately know, love, and fear, is Allah alone without any partner... As the Most High said, ‘*Had there been within the heavens and earth gods besides Allah, they would have both been ruined*’ [al-Anbiyā’ 21:22]. This indicates that there is no welfare in neither the upper nor lower worlds until the actions of their inhabitants are entirely for Allah. Given that the activity of the body follows the activity and will of the heart, only when the heart’s activity and will is for Allah alone can it become sound, and consequently the activity of all the limbs will become sound as well. But when the heart’s activity and will are for other than Allah (the Most High), then it has become corrupt, and the limbs will also become corrupt in proportion to the corruptness of the heart’s activity.”<sup>14</sup>

### ***‘Ibāda is Liberating***

Human beings are specifically designed to invest their lives in serving a purpose. Being purposeful is an inescapable facet of our functionality as it is hardwired in our *fiṭra*—call it our metaphysical DNA. However, the purpose that we serve can

<sup>14</sup> Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi’ Al-‘Ulūm Wal-Ḥikam*, (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 1/211-212.

be God, or it can be our carnal desires, egos, or social pressures. Serving the True God protects us from psychospiritual mayhem—from being torn apart by trying to simultaneously serve countless contending forces in our lives. Allah (the Most High), says, “*Allah presents an example: a slave owned by quarreling partners and another belonging exclusively to one man—are they equal in comparison? Praise be to Allah! But most of them do not know.*” [az-Zumar 39:29]. It is from that perspective that worship of, and servitude to, God liberate humanity from being subjugated and shackled by inferior pursuits.

When people devote their lives to their Creator, they feel empowered by worshipping the only One Who deserves worship. Surrendering one’s heart and limbs to the True God represents the pinnacle of honor, while surrendering to the merciless and powerless creation is demeaning. Embracing a lifestyle of being captivated by God is therefore the truest form of liberation, for it ultimately serves a person’s greatest needs and interests; allowing oneself to become the captive of anything else is voluntarily condemning oneself to slave-dungeons. On this point, the Prophet ﷺ said, “*Wretched is the slave of gold, silver, fine clothes, and garments. If he is given, he is pleased, but if he is not given, he is displeased.*”<sup>15</sup> This is why, upon encountering prison, and before eventually dying therein, Ibn Taymiya said, “The real prisoner is the one whose heart is locked away from its Lord, the Most High, and the real captive is the one held captive by his desires.”<sup>16</sup>

Among the socially privileged around us, it is not difficult to observe how much more miserable the prisoners of riches and celebrity are compared to those of a relatively more minimalist lifestyle. Studies show that hedonistic populations who [perceive life as carrying little meaning save carnal pursuits](#)—despite access to them—are the most likely to end their own lives. This class suffers from a uniquely pitiful dilemma: although they have access to everything money can buy, they find themselves neither happy with their riches nor capable of relinquishing them. Why is that? Simply put, it is because they believe their happiness is *dependent* on these material goods. As for the devotees of God, they only serve the God of Might; they

<sup>15</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6435), 8/92.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Wābil aṣ-Ṣayyib min al-Kalim at-Ṭayyib*, (Damascus: Dār al-Bayān, 1973), p. 69.

enjoy the pleasures of the material world within bounds but are not enslaved by them.

### ***‘Ibāda Provides the Foundation of Principled Morality***

Humans need to remember that they were created to serve a very particular aim, and were deliberately placed on earth by God. Without this correct perception, moral debates rage on without any consensus on key issues. In terms of moral motivation, so many people behave morally to look good in the eyes of others, or for the feel-good endorphin response, and may cease behaving morally if these motivators are not present. But when one sees oneself as a subject of God (*‘abd/servant*), and recognize that moral rules come from Him and that the only perception that matters is His, then one’s moral behavior will be principled and consistent. Lacking this perception can lead to conflicted feelings that are largely alien to practicing Muslims, for their self-image as an *‘abd* in God’s kingdom remains vivid by virtue of their regular *‘ibāda*.

In the various domains of his life, the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم displayed a consistent awareness of his reality as an *‘abd* before God. For instance, he صلى الله عليه وسلم would say each morning and evening, “*O Allah, You are my Lord, none has the right to be worshipped except You; You created me and I am Your servant, and I abide by Your covenant and promise as best I can; I take refuge in You from the evil which I have committed. I acknowledge Your favor upon me and I acknowledge my sin, so forgive me, for certainly none can forgive sin except You.*”

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A person’s moral compass informs their values and responsibilities, and *‘ibāda* represents the ontological grounding of these values through a relationship with the Divine. A person traverses the struggles of life by coming closer to God through embodying qualities that reflect His Names and Attributes such as Compassion, Kindness, Love, and Generosity. That is why whenever individuals perform an act of virtue, such as helping the needy or defending the vulnerable, without intending

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<sup>17</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6306), 8/67

by this act closeness to the Creator, they ignore the very basis of these virtues. Furthermore, there is a strong moral responsibility owed to the One who granted life and showered humanity with blessings worth incalculable fortunes. Instead of acknowledging this fundamental moral duty, such individuals enjoy the fruits of this world without raising their palms in grateful supplication, attempting to live virtuously while ignoring their moral responsibility toward God. This is similar to strolling into a mansion belonging to a person of great wealth and power—though belonging to Allah alone is the loftiest description—and lounging on his extravagant chair and sleeping on his expensive bed (without dirtying either). Once the mansion owner returns and becomes appalled by this man’s trespassing, and his use of these luxuries without permission, he is told by the intruder, “I did not ruin anything. I even kept it clean!” He neither acknowledged the affluent man’s virtue, nor his authority over his grand mansion. This is precisely the attitude of those who perform acts of virtue in this world without acknowledging the foundation of these virtues or the authority of its Owner.

*‘Ibāda* also qualifies moral actors for reward in the sight of God. The basic tools required to be good are one’s existence, good will, and the various faculties (limbs, wealth, etc.) needed to enact good. Since all these are endowed by God, refusal to recognize God by worshipping Him is, in essence, a plagiarized goodness. Neither God nor people see plagiarized works, no matter how impressive, as rewardable. But when *‘ibāda* exists, rewards for the past and the reinforcements for the future can be requested. The Prophet ﷺ said, “*The nearest a servant is to God is when he/she is in prostration, so make much supplication [then].*”<sup>18</sup> Prostrating one’s face on the ground is an act of *‘ibāda* and a manifestation of the utmost humility to God, which is why making requests of God then has the greatest potential. Those too proud to engage in *‘ibāda* are in essence declining God’s invitation, and thus Allah says, “*And your Lord says, ‘Call upon Me; I will respond to you.’ Indeed, those who disdain My worship will enter Hell [rendered] contemptible*” [Ghāfir 40:60].

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<sup>18</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (482), 1/350



## ***'Ibāda Refreshes Faith***

Ritual *ibāda* in Islam ties the heart to its Lord around the clock. The Quran calls for remembering God prior to sunrise and sunset, and to devoting a portion of the night to intimate night dialogue with Him. It calls the Muslim to remember God through the five daily prayers, through *wudu'* (ritual washing) and invocations preceding those prayers, through a month of annual fasting, through a periodic read-through of the entire Quran, etc. This splendid cycle keeps hearts in tune with the reality of creation, constantly pondering over their fundamental relationship with the Creator.

The heart (*qalb*) is inherently unstable (*mutaqallib*), prone to forgetting and being dragged into a heedless and agitated state; *'ibāda* serves to keep the heart polished and illuminated. When one awakens from the heedlessness of sleep, one remembers God; praying *fajr* (the dawn prayer) fortifies the spiritual psyche in preparation for a new day. Uttering the remembrance of God when leaving the house immunizes one against the difficulties of dealing with the material world. Praying *duḥa* (the forenoon prayer) recharges the torch lit by the previous prayer that may have begun to weaken. Midday, as the spirit's preoccupations with worldly engagement have almost consumed it, praying *dhuhr* (the noon prayer) returns it to its original shine. Just when heedlessness begins to hover anew, praying *aṣr* (the afternoon prayer) stirs in the heart its earlier craving for its Lord. At sundown, a person finds refuge in praying *maghrib* (the sunset prayer), which calms his exhausted and anxious spirit. Before settling back into sleep, the Muslim offers *ishā'* (the night prayer), closing the day with consistency. This is how minimal *'ibāda* evokes reflection and refreshes one's faith, rinsing away any stains and keeping the heart alive and invigorated. Without it, people might never escape the devastating feelings of loneliness and estrangement they feel *even* when surrounded by family and admirers. *'Ibāda* reserves a person's autonomy and the right to be more than a mere gear in the merciless grind of life, and the ability to secure renewed life from the King of the Cosmos.

### ***‘Ibāda* Harmonizes Humans with the Universe**

The entire universe lies prostrate in the sense that it surrenders to God’s will at all times. Allah says, “*And to Him belongs whosoever is in the heavens and earth. All are to Him devoutly obedient*” [ar-Rūm 30:26]. God (the Exalted and Majestic) informs us further that this obedient universe was created to serve the human being. Therefore, all that exists around us has been subdued for the human being, not because humanity is entitled to any of it, but so that they can actualize *ibāda*, completing the universal alignment that spans the tiniest atom to the widest galaxy. Allah says, “*So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere to] the fitra of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know*” [ar-Rūm 30:30]. A person’s voluntary conformity with God’s will mirrors the universe’s involuntary conformity with God’s will, and this harmony benefits humanity with its synergy and stability in ways that the earliest generations of Muslims portrayed best.

## **3. God Loves to Hear and Converse with His Servants**

Worship is seen by some skeptics of religion as a one-sided conversation. The Quran, however, informs us that the essence of ritual worship is intimate dialogue between servants and their Lord, and that the Lord of Might responds to these acts of seeking nearness to Him by extending mercy and affection. The Prophet ﷺ described this two-way relationship by explaining that God replies to each verse of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*<sup>19</sup> multiple times in each of the five daily prayers. Every time a Muslim prays with an alert heart, he/she finds God listening intently and responding with gifts that only the never-depleting treasures of the Most Generous can afford.

Outside of prayer, a Muslim remains invited to connect with God and experience His nearness at every moment, for the Most Compassionate has said, “*I am as My*

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<sup>19</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (395), 1/296.

*servant expects Me [to be]and I am with him as he remembers Me. If he remembers Me in private, then I will remember him in private. If he mentions Me in a gathering, then I will mention him in a greater gathering. When he draws near to Me by the span of his hand, I draw near him by the length of a cubit. When he draws near Me by the length of a cubit, I draw near him by the length of a fathom. When he comes to Me walking, I will go to him running.”<sup>20</sup>*

These and similar texts underscore that this is no cold belligerent god who relishes cruel domination, nor even a god who reciprocates endearment. Rather, He is the Supreme Creator—without needs—who simply loves connecting with His servants more than they love connecting with Him, and seeks nearness to them more than they seek nearness to Him, and rushes to them faster than they rush to Him.

#### 4) *‘Ibāda* is the Perfect Exam Question

Allah (the Glorified and Exalted) said, “*And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community [upon faith]; but they will not cease to differ—except those whom your Lord has granted mercy, and for that He created them*” [Hūd 10:118-119].

God Almighty created the human being for devotion to Him, sending down scriptures and dispatching messengers for that objective. However, He also created them with different leanings, as well as a considerable degree of free rein by which the righteous ascend and the wicked plummet. Within this autonomy granted by God, one group engages in *‘ibāda*, leading to their salvation, and another group rejects *‘ibāda*, leading to their doom. As az-Zamakhshari (d. 1143) said, Allah has enabled people “to have a choice, which is the fundamental basis [necessary] for accountability. For that reason, He said, *‘They will not cease to differ—except those whom your Lord has granted mercy,’* meaning except those whom Allah has graced and guided, and so they agreed upon the true religion and did not differ regarding it. [Allah then said] *‘and for that He created them.’*... so that He may

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<sup>20</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (7405), 9/121; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2675), 4/2061

reward the choosers of truth for their good choice, and punish the choosers of falsehood for their evil choice.”<sup>21</sup>

However, it is clear in the Quran that God desires mercy for His creation, not punishment. Allah says, “*As for Thamud, We guided them, but they preferred blindness over guidance*” [Fuṣṣilat 41:17]. Reflecting upon the many and varied means of attaining forgiveness in Islam, it is clear that God wishes to give bounties to His servants for the slightest reason, and accepts nearly any excuse to forgive them. The Prophet ﷺ informs us that saying “*subhānAllāhi wa biḥamdih*” a hundred times forgives one’s sins even if they are as numerous as the ocean’s foam,<sup>22</sup> and that saying “*subhānAllāh*” a hundred times earns one a thousand good deeds.<sup>23</sup> How then can anyone have a negative opinion of God? Realizing that every moment of *‘ibāda*, even a momentary reflection or forgotten whisper, will be rewarded perpetually in Paradise is a striking reminder of God’s ultimate benevolence and grace.

*‘Ibāda* is the gauge by which people’s virtue is tested. Testing requires a degree of challenge to filter those being evaluated, and *‘ibāda* often requires resisting the inborn fondness for relaxation and ease. Thus, Allah says, “*Lord of the heavens and the earth and whatever is between them—so worship Him and be steadfast in His worship. Do you know of any [thing] similar to Him?*” [Maryam 19:65]. It should be noted here that what appears to involve avoiding “adversity” is actually misleading. With continuous effort expended in worship, Ibn al-Qayyim says, “...the door of sweetness of worship is opened for him such that he nearly cannot get enough of it; he finds in it much greater pleasure and comfort than he had found in the pleasures of distraction, play, and fulfillment of desires.”<sup>24</sup> Because God wishes for humanity an easier climb, and sweeter returns, He asked them to worship Him.

<sup>21</sup> az-Zamakshari, *al-Kashf ‘an Ḥaqā’iq at-Tanzīl wa ‘Uyūn al-Aqāwīl fī Wujūh at-Ta’wīl*, Dār al-Ma’rifa, Beirut: 2009, p. 502.

<sup>22</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (6405), 8/86

<sup>23</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (2698), 4/2703

<sup>24</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr. *Madārij as-Sālikīn Bayna Manāzil Īyāka Na’budu Wa Īyāka Nasta’in*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1996), 3/352.

There is no method of assessment that can ever compare with *‘ibāda*. First of all, *‘ibāda* carries within it an intrinsic reward system: recognition of God leads to adoration, which leads to willing servitude, which then increases recognition and adoration, leading to even more acts of servitude, creating a positive feedback loop that results in greater and greater spiritual advancement. Second, the rational appeal of *‘ibāda* lies in its intrinsic meaning. Had the test of life been to carry an enormous boulder from the lowest point in a valley to the apex of a mountain, and then return it there whenever it tumbled downwards, human beings would naturally rebel against such a pointless and painful mission. The difficulties involved in *‘ibāda* are actually blessings in disguise, subtle in their sweetness. The *‘ibāda* of Islam is unique in that it grants worshippers bursts of divine mercy, is intrinsically valuable, and fuels productivity by combining a firm footing on the earth with a firm gaze towards the heavens and the life to come.

## Conclusion

Coming full circle, let us reiterate what is mentioned throughout the Quran: that the sublime nature of God negates the possibility of Him ever acting without purpose. God, the Glorified and Majestic, knowing that suspicions may sometimes creep into the minds of His creation concerning the apparent lack of wisdom in certain events, says, “*We did not create the heavens and earth and what is between them in play. We did not create them except in truth, but most of them do not know*” [ad-Dukhān 44:38-39]. Allah also says, “*Did you think that We created you without purpose and that to Us you would not be returned? So exalted is Allah, the Sovereign, the Truth; there is no deity except Him, Lord of the Noble Throne*” [al-Mu’minūn 23:115-116]. The greatness of the Creator is indicated by the greatness of His creation; indeed, creation’s impeccable design points to a Creator Who is purposeful and unique in wisdom—not one who acts in ways devoid of wisdom or benefit.

The Quran also asserts, in no uncertain terms, that God has no need for worship. Allah says, “*And whoever is guided is only guided for [the benefit of] himself*” [an-Naml 27:92]. The verse most frequently cited in this regard is Allah’s statement, “*I did not create the jinn or human except to worship Me [alone]*” [adh-Dhāriyāt 51:56]. It is important to note that the very next verses explicitly negate God’s need for this worship: “*I do not want from them any provision, nor do I want them to feed Me. Indeed, it is Allah who is the [continual] Provider, the firm Possessor of Strength*” [adh-Dhāriyāt 51:56-58]. Dozens of passages in the Quran highlight that God (the Glorified and Exalted) does not gain anything through being worshipped, but rather He is the Gracious Giver to doers of good and evil-doers alike. Other verses establish that the disbelievers’ rejection of Him does not harm Him in the least, just as the faith of the believers does not benefit Him in any way. The Most High said, “*Moses said, ‘If you should disbelieve, you and whoever is on the earth entirely—indeed, Allah is free of need and praiseworthy’*” [Ibrāhīm 14:8].

Without affording sufficient thought to the nature of the Almighty Creator, and without access to His revealed words, a person misperceives the Divine as a needy or narcissistic manifestation of ancient mythology—the gods of pathetic mortal yearnings for self-fulfillment. Insisting that the Divine is egotistically driven to demand devotional service is neither common sense nor sound logic. Rather, it results from a faulty image of God—a god who asks out of need, or who asks pointlessly without need. As for the Muslim, he or she is blessed to understand that God loves to be worshipped and obeyed by His creation, not because of a need for validation or servitude, but because He loves to see the benefit we achieve from it. And all praise is due to Allah, the compassionate Lord of all the worlds.