

The Divine Mercy of God (part 1 of 3): God the Most-Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy



If someone were to ask, ‘Who is your God?’ A Muslim response would be, ‘The Most-Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy.’ According to Islamic sources, the prophets, while emphasizing God’s judgment, also proclaimed His mercy. In Muslim scripture, God introduces Himself as:

“He is God, other than whom there is no deity, Knower of the unseen and the witnessed. He is the Most-Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy.” (Quran 59:22)

In Islamic vocabulary *ar-Rahman* and *al-Raheem* are the personal names of the Living God. Both are derived from the noun *rahmah*, which signifies “mercy”, “compassion”, and “loving tenderness”. *Ar-Rahman* describes God’s nature of being All-Merciful, while *ar-Raheem* describes His acts of mercy dispensed to His creation, a subtle difference, but one which shows His all encompassing mercy.

“Say, ‘Call upon God or call upon the Most-Merciful (*ar-Rahman*), whichever name you call – to Him belong the most Beautiful Names....’” (Quran 17:110)

These two Names are some of the most frequently used Names of God in the Quran: *ar-Rahman* is used fifty seven times, while *al-Raheem* is used twice as much (a hundred and fourteen).^[1] One conveys a greater sense of loving-kindness, the Prophet said:

“Indeed, God is Kind, and loves kindness. He grants with kindness what He does not grant with harshness.” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

Both are also divine attributes signifying God’s relationship with creation.

“Praise be to God, the Lord of All the Worlds; the Most Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy.” (Quran 1:2-3)

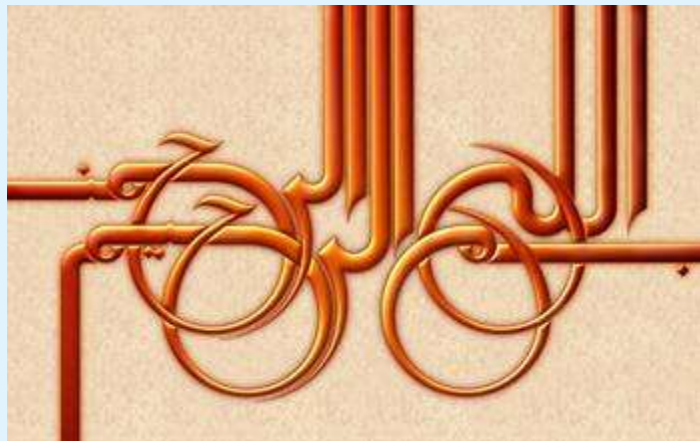
In a prayer which Muslims recite at least seventeen times a day, they start with saying:

“In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy. Praise be to God, the Lord of All the Worlds; the Most Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy.” (Quran 1:1-3)

These powerful words evoke a divine response:

“When the servant says: ‘Praise be to God, the Lord of All the Worlds,’ I (God) say: ‘My servant has praised Me.’ When he says: ‘the Most Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy,’ I (God) say: ‘My servant has extolled Me.’” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

These names continuously remind a Muslim of divine mercy surrounding him. All but one of the chapters of Muslim scripture begins with the phrase, ‘*In the Name of God, the Most-Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy.*’ Muslims begin in God’s Name to express their ultimate dependence upon Him and remind themselves of divine mercy every time they eat, drink, write a letter, or perform anything of importance. Spirituality blossoms in the mundane. The invocation at the beginning of every mundane act makes it important, calling down divine blessing upon this act and consecrates it. The formula is a popular motif of decoration in manuscripts and architectural ornamentation.



“In the Name of God, the Most-Merciful, the Dispenser of Mercy.” Calligraphy by Yousef, a Dutch artist.

Dispensing mercy requires someone to whom mercy is shown. The one who is shown mercy must be in need of it. Perfect mercy is caring for those in need, whereas boundless mercy stretches to those in need or not in need, extending from this world to the wonderful life after death.

In Islamic doctrine, human beings enjoy a personal relationship with the Loving, Merciful God, ever ready to forgive sins and respond to prayers, but He is not merciful in the human sense of feeling sorrow and pity for one in distress. God does not become human to understand suffering. Rather, God's mercy is an attribute befitting His holiness, bringing divine aid and favors.

God's mercy is vast:

“Say: ‘Limitless is your Lord in His mercy....’” (Quran 6:147)

Stretching to all existence:

“...but My mercy encompasses all things....” (Quran 7:156)

Creation itself is an expression of divine favor, mercy and love. God invites us to observe the effects of His mercy around us:

“Behold, then, (O man,) these signs of God's mercy - how He gives life to the earth after it had been lifeless!...” (Quran 30:50)

God Loves the Compassionate

God loves compassion. Muslims view Islam to be a religion of mercy. To them, their Prophet is God's gift of mercy to all humanity:

“And (thus, O Prophet) We have sent you as [an evidence of Our] mercy towards all the worlds.” (Quran 21:107)

Just as they believe Jesus was God's mercy to people:

“And that We may make him a symbol unto mankind and an act of mercy from Us.” (Quran 19:21)

One of the daughters of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, sent him the news of his ailing son. He reminded her that God is the One who gives, He is the One who takes, and everyone has an appointed term. He reminded her to be patient. When the news of his son's death reached him, tears of compassion ran in his eyes. His companions were surprised. The Prophet of Mercy said:

“This is compassion God has placed in the hearts of His servants. Of all His slaves, God only has mercy on the compassionate.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy, as Prophet Muhammad said:

“God will not have mercy on one who is not compassionate towards people.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

He also said:

“The Merciful shows mercy to those merciful. Have mercy to those on earth, and the One above the heavens will have mercy upon you.” (At-Tirmidhi)

Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#) On the contrary, the ‘Merciful’ does not appear as a divine name in the Bible. (Jewish Encyclopedia, ‘Names of God,’ p. 163)

(part 2 of 3): Its Warm Embrace

Divine mercy wraps all existence in its fold, forever enduring. The caring Lord of mankind is merciful to them, full of compassion. The name of God, *Ar-Rahman*, suggests His loving mercy is a defining aspect of His being; the fullness of His compassion is limitless; a bottomless ocean with no shores. Ar-Razi, one of the classical Islamic scholars wrote, ‘It is unimaginable for creation to be more merciful to itself than God!’ Indeed Islam teaches that God is more merciful to a human being than his/her own mother.

In God’s abounding mercy, He sends down rain to produce fruits from orchards to provide for the human body. The soul as well needs intense spiritual nourishment the same way the body needs food. In His abounding mercy, God sent prophets and messengers to human beings and revealed scriptures to them to sustain the human spirit. Divine Mercy displayed itself in the Torah of Moses:

“...In the writing whereof there was guidance and mercy for all who stood in awe of their Lord.” (Quran 7:154)

And the revelation of the Quran:

“...This [revelation] is a means of insight from your Lord, and to provide guidance and, mercy unto people who will believe.” (Quran 7:203)

Mercy is not granted to some merit of one’s ancestors. Divine Mercy is granted for acting on the Word of God and listening to its recitation:

“And this (Quran) is a Book which We have bestowed from on high, a blessed one: follow it, then, and be conscious of God, so that you might be graced with His mercy.” (Quran 6:155)

“Hence, when the Quran is recited, listen to it, and listen in silence, so that you might be graced with [God’s] mercy.” (Quran 7:204)

Mercy is a result of obedience:

“Hence, (O believers!) be constant in prayer, and render the purifying dues, and obey the Messenger, so that you might be graced with God’s mercy.” (Quran 24:56)

God’s mercy is man’s hope. Consequently, the believers beseech God for His mercy:

“Affliction has befallen me: but You are the most merciful of the merciful!” (Quran 21:83)

They beseech God’s mercy for the faithful:

“O our Lord!, let not our hearts swerve from the truth after You have guided us; and bestow on us the gift of Your mercy: verily, You are the [true] Giver of Gifts.” (Quran 3:8)

And they beseech God’s mercy for their parents:

“...O my Lord!, Bestow Your mercy upon them, even as they brought me when I was a child!” (Quran 17:24)

Allotment of Divine Mercy

Divine mercy clasps in its arms the faithful and the faithless, the obedient and the rebel, but in the life to come it will be reserved for the faithful. *Ar-Rahman* is merciful to all creation in the world, but his mercy is reserved for the faithful in the life to come. *Ar-Raheem* will dispense His mercy to the faithful on Judgment Day:

“...With My chastisement do I afflict whom I will - but My Mercy overspreads everything: and so I shall confer it on those who fear Me and spend in charity, and who believe in Our messages - those who shall follow the [last] Messenger, the unlettered Prophet whom they find described in the Torah that is with them, and in the Gospel....” (Quran 7:156-157)

Divine allotment of mercy is described by the Prophet of Islam:

“God created a hundred portions of mercy. He placed one portion between His creation due to which they have compassion on each other. God has

stored the remaining ninety nine portions for Judgment Day to grace His slaves.” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim, Al-Tirmidhi, and others.*)

A mere portion of divine mercy fills the heavens and the earth, humans love one another, beasts and birds drink water.

Also, the divine mercy which will be manifested on Judgment Day is vaster than what we see in this life, just as divine punishment will be more intense than what we experience here. The Prophet of Islam explained the dual extreme of these divine attributes:

“If a believer were to know what punishment God has stored, he will despair and not a single one will anticipate making it to Paradise. If an unbeliever were to know the abounding mercy of God, not a single one will despair to make it to Paradise.” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim, Al-Tirmidhi*)

Yet, in Islamic doctrine, divine mercy supersedes divine anger:

“Indeed, My mercy supersedes my punishment.” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

(part 3 of 3): The Sinner

God’s mercy is intimately close to everyone of us, awaiting to embrace when we are ready. Islam recognizes human propensity to sin, for God has created man weak. The Prophet stated:

“All the children of Adam constantly err...”

At the same time, God lets us know He forgives sins. Continuing the same hadeeth:

“...but the best of those who constantly err are those who constantly repent.” (*Al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, Ahmad, Hakim*)

God says:

“Say, ‘O My servants, who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins, for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most-Merciful.’” (Quran 39:53)

Muhammad, the Prophet of Mercy, was charged to convey the good news to all people:

“Tell My servants that I am indeed the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Quran 15:49)

Repentance attracts Divine Mercy:

“...Why do you not, rather, ask God to forgive you your sins, so that you might be graced with His mercy?” (Quran 27:46)

“...God’s mercy is ever near unto the doers of good!” (Quran 7:56)

Since ancient times, God’s saving mercy has rescued the faithful from pending doom:

“And so, when Our judgment came to pass, by Our mercy We saved Hud and those who shared his faith...” (Quran 11:58)

“And so, when Our judgment came to pass, by Our mercy We saved Shu’ayb and those who shared his faith...” (Quran 11:94)

Fullness of God’s compassion towards the sinner can be seen in the following:

1. God Accepts Repentance

“God does wish to turn to you, but the wish of those who follow their lusts is that you should turn away (from Him), - far, far away.” (Quran 4:27)

“Know they not that God accepts repentance from His votaries, and receives their gifts of charity, and that God is indeed He, the Oft-Forgiving, Most-Merciful.” (Quran 9:104)

2. God Loves The Sinner Who Repents

“...For God loves those who turn to Him constantly....” (Quran 2:22)

The Prophet said:

“If mankind were not to commit sins, God would create other creatures who would commit sins, then He would forgive them, for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most-Merciful.” (Al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah, Musnad Ahmed)

3. God is *Delighted* When the Sinner Repents Because He Realizes He Has a Lord Who Forgives Sins!

The Prophet said:

“God is more delighted with the repentance of His slave when he repents, than any of you would be if (he found his) camel, which he had been riding in a barren desert, after it had escaped from him carrying his food and drink. After he despaired of it, he came to a tree and laid down in its

shade. Then while he was despairing of it, the camel came and stood by his side, and he seized its reins and cried out in joy, ‘O God, You are my servant and I am your Lord!’ – making this mistake (in wording) out of his excessive joy.” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

4. Gate of Repentance is Open Day and Night

Divine mercy extends forgiveness every day and every night of the year. The Prophet said:

“God extends His Hand at night to accept the repentance of one who has sinned during the day, and He extends His Hand during the day to accept the repentance of one who has sinned during the night – until [the day comes when] the sun rises from the West (one of the major signs of the Day of Judgment).” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

5. God Accepts Repentance Even If Sins Are Repeated

Repeatedly God shows His compassion to the sinner. God’s loving-kindness to the Children of Israel can be seen before the sin of the golden calf had been committed, God dealt with Israel according to His compassion, even after their sinning, He dealt with them in mercy. *Ar-Rahman* says:

“...and when We appointed for Moses forty nights [on Mount Sinai], and in his absence you took to worshipping the [golden] calf, and thus became evildoers: yet, even after that, We blotted out this your sin, so that you might have cause to be grateful.” (Quran 2:51-52)

The Prophet said:

“A man committed a sin, and then said, ‘O my Lord, forgive my sin,’ so God said, ‘My slave has sinned, then he realized that he has a Lord who can forgive sins and can punish him for it.’ Then the man repeated the sin, then said, ‘O my Lord, forgive my sin.’ God said, ‘My slave has sinned, then he realized that he has a Lord who can forgive sins and can punish him for it.’ The man repeated the sin (the third time), then he said, ‘O my Lord, forgive my sin,’ and God said, ‘My slave has sinned, then he realized that he has a Lord who can forgive sins and can punish him for it. Do what you wish, for I have forgiven you.’” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

6. Entering Islam Erases All Previous Sins

The Prophet has explained that accepting Islam wipes off all previous sins of the new Muslim, no matter how serious they were with one condition: the new Muslim accepts Islam purely for God. Some people asked God’s Messenger, ‘O

Messenger of God! Will we be held responsible for what we did during the days of ignorance before accepting Islam?’ He replied:

“Whoever accepts Islam purely for God will not be held to account, but one who does so for some other reason will be accountable for the time before Islam and after.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)

Although God’s mercy is sufficient to cover any sin, it does not free man from his responsibility to behave rightly. Discipline and hard work is required along the path to salvation. The Law of Salvation in Islam takes into account faith *and* keeping to the Law, not mere belief in God. We are imperfect and weak and God created us this way. When we fall short in keeping to the sacred Law, the Loving God is ready to forgive. Forgiveness is received simply through confessing one’s sins to God alone and begging of His mercy, having a firm intention not to return to it.. But one should always remember that Paradise is not earned by virtue of one’s deeds alone, but is awarded by divine mercy. The Prophet of Mercy made this fact clear:

“Not one of you will enter Paradise by his deeds alone.’ They asked, ‘Not even you, O Messenger of God?’ He said, ‘Not even me, unless God covers me with His grace and mercy.” (Saheeh Muslim)

Belief in God, keeping to His Law, and good works, are considered the *reason, not the price* for admission into Paradise.