

In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Selections from Imam Ali's *Nahj-ul-Balagha* (The Peak of Eloquence)

CHAPTER 1

In Praise of God, His Oneness, and Description of His Divine Attributes

Introduction: Islam's concept of God is strictly and purely monotheistic. The concept of Oneness of God in Islam is derived from the revealed scripture, the Qur'an, and from the teachings of the Prophet of Islam (P).

Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (P) lived 1400 years ago, during the advent of Islam in Arabia. He was a cousin of Prophet Muhammad (P), the Messenger of God. He was privileged to have the Prophet raise him in his own household and teach him. Additionally, he was a scholar of the Arabic language and had deep knowledge and understanding of the Qur'an.

The following is a collection of his various sermons and discourses on the concept of God. The sermons were delivered over several years. The excerpts are presented here in an abridged and topical format in modern English and rephrased where necessary. It is hoped that the reader will find this presentation enjoyable as well as enlightening.

His Praising and Glorifying God:

Praise is due to God, Whose worth cannot be described by the describer, Whose bounties cannot be counted by enumerators and Whose claim cannot be fulfilled by those who attempt to do so. The height of intellectual courage cannot appreciate Him, and the depths of understanding cannot reach Him; for His description no limit has been laid down, no eulogy exists, no time is ordained, and no duration is fixed. (Sermon 1)

Exalted is God, Whom the limits of endeavors cannot reach and intelligence cannot find. He is the First, having no limits, lest He would be confined within those limits. Nor does He have an end, such that He could cease (to exist).

(Sermon 93)

Praise be to God Who is praised by all His creation, Whose hosts are over-powering and Whose Exaltation is High. I praise Him for His successive favors and His abundant gifts. His forbearance is much, so that He forgives, and He is just in His decisions. He has knowledge of the present and the past. He designed the creation with knowledge, and brought it into existence with His unlimited intelligence, without need for learning, without following any previous example, without committing any mistake, and without any help.

(Sermon 190)

I praise God seeking completion of His Blessings, submitting to His Glory, and expecting safety from disobeying Him. I invoke His help and I depend on Him alone. He, whom He guides, does not go astray; He, with whom He is angry, loses His protection. He, whom He supports, gets his needs fulfilled. He is the most weighty of all that is weighed and the most valuable of all that is treasured.

(Sermon 1)

* The abbreviation (P) represents "peace and blessings," as a token of respect.

O my God! Praise be to You for what You take and what You bestow; what You cure; or with what You afflict; a Praise that is most acceptable to You, the most liked by You, and that is most dignified; a Praise which is equal to all Your creation; a Praise that reaches You; and, a Praise that is everlasting.
(Sermon 159)

His Advice to the People to Praise and Thank God:

I advise you, O people, to be God-conscious and to praise Him abundantly for His favors, bounties, and trials upon you. See how He chose you for His favors and dealt with you with Mercy. You committed sins openly, but He kept them hidden. You behaved in a way to incur His punishment, but He allowed you more time (to repent).
(Sermon 187)

Oneness and Uniqueness of God:

The foremost (duty) in religion is the acknowledgement of Him; the perfection of acknowledging Him is to bear witness to Him; the perfection of bearing witness to Him is to believe in His Oneness; the perfection of believing in His Oneness is to regard Him as pure; and, the perfection of His purity is to deny Him attributes, because every attribute is a proof that it is different from that to which it is attributed, and everything to which something is attributed is different from the attribute.

Thus, whoever attempts a description of God, creates His like; and whoever creates His like, regards Him as two; and whoever regards Him as two, recognizes parts for Him; and whoever recognizes parts for Him, mistook Him; and whoever mistook Him, faulted Him; and whoever faulted Him, admitted limitations for Him; and whoever admitted limitations for Him, enumerated Him (i.e., denied His oneness and uniqueness).

Whoever said, "In what is He?" held that He is confined; and whoever said "on what is He?" held He is not on something else. He is a being, but not through the phenomenon of coming into existence. He exists, but not from non-existence. He is near to everything, but not in physical proximity. He is distinct from everything, but not separated (by distance). He acts, but without the need of movement or need of instruments. He sees, even when there is nothing to be looked at from among His creation. He is One, such that there is none with whom He may keep company or none whose company He may miss.
(Sermon 1)

I stand witness that there is no god but God, the One. No one is like Him. (It is) a testimony that has been tested in its frankness and its essence is our belief. We shall cling to it as long as we remain (alive), shall store it, facing the tribulations that overtake us, because it is the firm determination of belief, the first step towards good actions and Divine pleasure. It is the means to keep Satan away.
(Sermon 2)

He who assigns to Him (different) states, does not believe in His Oneness; or he who likens Him (to any of His creation), has not grasped His reality. He who pictures Him in his imagination, has meant (someone) other than Him. He works but not with the help of tools. He assigns measures but not with the need of deliberation. He is rich but not through acquisition (of wealth).
(Sermon 185)

He is One, but not in a numerical sense. He is everlasting, without a limit. He exists, but without support. He is big, but not in a physical sense. He is big in position and great in authority.
(Sermon 184)

Divinely Revealed Attributes of God:

It is my belief that He is the First and He is the Manifest. I seek guidance from Him, as He is close (to me), and He is the Guide. I seek His help, as He is Mighty and He subdues (all troubles). I depend upon Him, as He is the Sufficer and the Supporter.

(Sermon 82)

Praise be to God, for Whom one condition does not precede another condition, such that He may be considered first or last, or He may be considered manifest before being hidden. Everyone enjoying honor is humble before God, and everyone (considered) powerful is weak compared to Him. Every owner is (in fact) owned by Him.

Everyone knowledgeable other than God is a learner (student). Everyone with skills may lose those abilities, except for Him. Everyone with hearing, except Him, is unable to hear faint and distant sounds, while loud sounds may make him deaf. Every seer, other than Him, is blind to hidden or tiny objects. Everything that He made manifest is insignificant compared to Him, and everything hidden by Him is incapable of becoming manifest.

What He created was not to fortify His authority, nor for fear of the consequences of (passage of) time, nor fearing an agitating partner, nor a competing rival. Rather, all creatures are nourished by Him and are humbled (before Him). He is not inside anything, so that it may be said that He exists therein, nor is He separated from anything, so that it may be said that He is away from it. The act of creation did not fatigue Him and no disability afflicted Him. No misgiving ever occurred to Him in His resolve. His verdict is certain, His knowledge is definite, and His governance is overwhelming. He is sought at times of distress, and one needs to be God-conscious even when bounties abound.

(Sermon 64)

Praise be to God, who is High above all things, yet is near (to the creation) through His bounties. He is the Bestower of all rewards and distinctions, and Dispeller of all calamities and hardships. I praise Him for His increasing mercy and His abundant bounties.

(Sermon 82)

Praise be to God, Who is not (kept) rich by withholding bounties, and Whose munificence and generosity do not make (Him) poor. Everyone who gives, loses (to that extent), except Him. He obliges through beneficial bounties and plentiful gifts. The whole creation is dependent on Him (for sustenance). He has guaranteed their livelihood and ordained their sustenance. He has prepared the way (to success) for those who turn to Him and those who seek what is with Him. He generously grants the requests and bestows bounties freely even when not requested. He is the First, such that nothing existed prior to Him. He is the Last, such that nothing will remain after Him. He prevents the eyes from seeing or perceiving Him. (Passage of) time does not affect Him whatsoever, nor cause any change in Him. He is not in one particular place, so as to require Him to move (to another).

He is so powerful that, when imagination shoots its arrows to comprehend the extent of His power, when the mind tries to reach Him in the depths of His realm, when the hearts long to grasp the realities of His attributes, and when intellect attempts to secure knowledge about His Being, crossing the pitfalls of the unknown; they would all be turned back. They would return defeated, acknowledging that the reality of His essence cannot be grasped by such random efforts...

(Sermon 90)

He is the Creator, but not through activity or toil; He is the Hearer, but not by means of any physical organ; He is the Seer, but not by raising the eyelids; He is the Witness, but not by proximity; He is Distinct, but not by measurement; He is Manifest, but not by visualizing; and He is Hidden, but not in a bodily sense. He is Distinct from things (created), because He overpowers them and dominates over them, while created things are distinct from Him because of their subjugation to Him and because they turn to Him.

God speaks, but not through speech and without the need of a tongue. He hears, but without the need of ears or listening aids. He remembers, but does not need to memorize. He determines, but without the need of mental faculties. He loves but without suffering sentimentally. He entertains dislikes and gets angry without experiencing emotion or pain.

(Sermon 185)

About His Might, Greatness, Sublimity, and Omniscience:

Praise be to God, Who pervades all hidden affairs, and towards Whom all manifest things point. He cannot be seen by the eye of a seer, but the eye, which does not see Him, cannot deny Him, while the mind that proves His existence cannot perceive Him. He is so high in sublimity that nothing can be more sublime than Him, while in nearness, He is so near that no one can be nearer than He. However, his sublimity does not distance Him from anything of His creation, nor does His nearness bring them on an equal level to Him. He has not informed the (human) intellect about the extent of His qualities. Nevertheless, He has not prevented it from securing essential knowledge of Him. Therefore, He is such that all signs of existence bear proof of Him, until the denying mind also believes in Him. God is sublime beyond what is described by those who compare Him to things, or those who reject Him.

(Sermon 47)

Everything submits to Him and everything exists because of Him. He is the wealth of the poor, the honor of the lowly, the energy of the weak, and the shelter of the oppressed. Whoever speaks, He hears him, and whoever does not speak, He knows his secrets. The livelihood of everyone depends on Him, and to Him everyone will return.

(O God!) The eyes have not seen You, but You existed before Your describers were created. You did not create (the whole of creation) due to (any feeling of) loneliness, nor did You make them for any gain. He whom You apprehend cannot escape You. He who disobeys You does not decrease Your authority, and he who obeys You does not add to Your authority. He who disagrees with Your judgment cannot change it, and he who turns away from Your command cannot do without You. Every secret is manifest to You, and everything unknown (to others) is known to You.

(Sermon 108)

If He gives away all that the mines of the earth and the treasures in the mountains, gold, silver, pearls, and coral from the oceans, it would not affect His munificence, nor diminish what He possesses. He has such treasures and bounties which will not decrease by providing for the demands of the creatures. He is such a generous being Whom giving to the beseechers does not diminish (His bounties), nor does the persistent asking of beseechers make Him tight-fisted.

(Sermon 90)

This world and the next world have submitted to Him, and the skies and earth have surrendered to Him as well. The trees worship Him (unknown to man) in the morning and evening, fire is produced from them (by His Will), and they produce ripe fruits (by His Will).

(Sermon 132)

Praise be to God who has displayed His Authority, Glory, Sublimity and Might through the wonders of His creation, that dazzle the eyes and the minds, that are far removed from appreciating the reality of His attributes. I stand witness that there is no god but God, by virtue of belief, certainty, sincerity, and conviction.

(Sermon 197)

He joins diverse things and separates things that are joined together. He is not confined by any limits (of time and space). He is far beyond the sight of the seers.

(Sermon 185)

Presence or lack of motion does not occur in Him; how can it? It is He who has caused motion to come into existence. How could He be subjected to something that He himself set in motion? How could

something appear in Him that He himself created? Had it been so, He would be subject to diversity, His Being would have become divisible (into parts), and His reality would have been prevented from being Eternal. If He had a front, then He would also have a back. He is far above being affected by things that affect (those) other than Him.

(Sermon 185)

God is aware of the calls of the beasts in the forests, the sins that people commit in privacy, the movement of the fish in the depths of ocean, and the rising of the water by tempestuous winds.

(Sermon 197)

Had they pondered over the greatness of His power and the vastness of His bounties, they would have returned to the right path (of acknowledging Him as God) and would fear the punishment (for rejecting Him); but, hearts are afflicted and eyes are closed. Do they not see the tiny creatures He brought into existence, how He strengthened their bodily functions, gave them hearing, sight, made their body parts, and their tiny and delicate bodies?

(Sermon 184)

He brought into existence His creation without (following) any example and He did not need any assistance.

He created the earth and suspended it without effort, held it in position without support, raised it without pillars, and protected it against destruction. He fixed mountains on it like pegs, solidified the rocks, caused streams to flow, and opened wide valleys. Whatever He made did not suffer from any flaw.

When He intends to create something, He says to it, "Be!" and it is, but this is not through a voice that strikes (the ears). The act of creation was through His Word, "Be!" and it was.

(Sermon 185)

Praise be to God Who is recognized without being seen and Who creates without experiencing any difficulty. The monarchs submit to Him, acknowledging His Might.

He exercises superiority over the great and mighty through His generosity. It is He, who made His creation to populate the earth and sent His messengers to warn of pitfalls, to present good examples, to advise them (the people) of their shortcomings. The messengers came to warn (humanity) about what is lawful and what is unlawful, the reward and punishment (i.e., Heaven and Hell) of God for the obedient and the rebellious, respectively. I praise Him, for He likes His creation to praise Him. He has fixed for everything a measure, for every measure set a time limit, and for every time limit there is documentation.

(Sermon 182)

About God's Knowledge:

His knowledge does not leave anything (outside His realm); it is (preserved) in a document, which does not omit anything. We believe in Him, like the belief of one who has seen Him (through eyes of the heart) and has secured the promised rewards (of the hereafter); a belief, the purity of which keeps one away from associating partners with God, and a belief with conviction that removes all doubts.

(Sermon 113)

His knowledge is without learning from anyone, and He ordains all matters without (the need of) reflection upon it or pondering.

(Sermon 212)

He is not pre-occupied by (attending to) any matter. The passage of time does not bring any change in Him, He is not confined to any one place, and the tongues are unable to describe Him. The number of drops of water (in the ocean), the number of stars in the sky, or the (whereabouts of the) currents of winds are known to Him, so are the movements of ants on the rocks, or the resting place of grubs in the

dark night. He possesses the knowledge of the place where the leaves fall, and He is aware of the stealthy movements of the eyes.
(Sermon 177)

The knowledge of hidden things means knowledge of the Day of Judgment, as explained in this verse:

Verily, God is He, with Whom is the knowledge of the Hour... Qur'an (31:34)

Therefore, God alone knows what is there in the wombs, whether male or female, ugly or handsome, generous or miserly, mischievous or pious, and who will be doomed to Hell and who will be in the company of the Prophets in Paradise. The knowledge of the hidden things is not known to anyone, save God, except the knowledge that God passed on to Prophet Muhammad (P). (Note: Imam Ali also said that he was privy to that knowledge, transmitted to him by the Prophet).
(Sermon 127)

God, the Glorified and Sublime; nothing is hidden from Him of whatever people do in their nights or days. He knows all the details, and His knowledge covers them. Your limbs are a witness, the organs of your body constitute an army (against yourself), your inner self serves Him as eyes (to witness your wrongdoings), and when you are alone, He is with you.
(Sermon 198)

God Did Not Give Birth to a Son, nor was He Born of Anyone:

He does not have a form, and thus there is no possibility of any change whatsoever. He did not beget, lest He be regarded as having been begotten. He was not begotten, otherwise He would be subject to limitations. He is too exalted to have a son. He is too sublime to have consorts. Human imagination, perception, and senses cannot reach His essence to assign Him a numerical quantity. He is beyond understanding and beyond imagination. He does not pass from one state to another. Passage of nights and days do not cause Him to age. Light and darkness do not affect Him.
(Sermon 185)

God Will Bring an End to this World, and then Resurrect as He Wills:

He will end the earth, as it presently exists, so that everything on it will become non-existent. Bringing end to the world after its creation would not be anything (more) strange (for Him) than was its initial construction. How could it be? Even if all His creation, including all humanity, using their intellect, were to join forces to create (even) a single mosquito, they would not be able to do so. They would be bewildered and frustrated. Their plans and powers would fail, and they would end up disappointed and tired, acknowledging their failure, admitting their inability to accomplish it, and realizing that they were too weak (even) to destroy it (the mosquito), against God's will.

Surely, after the end of the world, God the Glorified will remain alone with nothing else except Him. He will remain after the extinction of the world, just as He was before its creation. At that moment, time, periods, places, and intervals would cease to exist. There will remain absolutely nothing except God, the One, and the All-Powerful. To Him is the return of all things. The creation was not due to its own power, and prevention of its extinction is not in its power either. If any of the creation had the power to prevent its own destruction, then it would have continued to exist indefinitely.

When He made a thing, the creation of it did not cause Him any difficulty, and the act of creation did not fatigue Him. He did not create in order to increase His authority nor for any fear of loss or harm, nor to seek help against an overwhelming foe, nor to guard against any adversary, nor to extend His domain, nor because He felt lonely and desired to seek company.

He will end all the creation, not because of any worry that has overcome Him in regards to its upkeep and administration, nor because He will derive any pleasure from it. The (long) duration of earth's existence does not make Him weary. However, God the Glorified has nurtured it with His kindness, kept it intact with His command, and perfected it with His power. Then after its destruction, He will resurrect it, but not because He needed it, nor to attain any honor or power.
(Sermon 185)

God's Mercy, Forgiveness, and Bounties:

Praise is due to God in Whose Mercy no one loses hope, of Whose Bounty no one is deprived, in Whose Forgiveness no one is overlooked, and for Whose worship no one is too great. His Mercy never ceases and His Bounty is never exhausted.
(Sermon 45)

Know, O creatures of God, that He has not created you for nothing, and has not left you (completely) free. He knows the extent of His favors and the amount of His bounties to you. Therefore, ask Him for success and for the attainment of your desires. Beseech Him and invoke His generosity. No curtain hides you from Him, nor is any door (of communication) closed between you and Him. He is present at every place, at all times, and in every moment. He is (at all times) with every human and jinn. Giving does not cause diminution of His bounties.
(Sermon 194)

About God's Eternity:

I stand witness that there is no god but God; He is One, and He has no partner; He is the First, such that nothing existed before Him; He is the Last (Eternal), such that there is no End to His existence. Division or splitting into parts of His entity is not possible. Hearts cannot comprehend His nature. Eyes cannot envision Him.
(Sermon 84)

Praise be to God, Who existed from before the coming into existence of the seat of His throne (the universe), the sky, the earth, the jinn, or the human beings. He cannot be perceived by imagination nor measured by understanding. He who begs from Him does not divert His attention (from others), nor does giving away cause Him diminution (in His bounties). He does not see by means of an eye, nor can He be confined to a particular place. He cannot be said to have companions. He does not create with (the help of) limbs. He cannot be perceived by senses. His being is beyond the estimation of humans.
(Sermon 181)

His Being preceded (the creation of) time. He existed when nothing existed (whatsoever); this is an indication that He is above them all. By His creating the sense organs, it is clear that He has no need of such sense organs. By the (existence of) opposites in His creation, it becomes known that He does not have an opposite, and by the existence of similarities among the created things, it becomes known that there is nothing in His creation that is similar to Him. He has made the light opposite of the darkness; the brightness opposite of the gloom; the dryness opposite of the moisture; and, the heat opposite of the cold. He causes affinity among antagonistic things.

It cannot be said that He came into being after He had been in non-existence, because in that case the attributes of the created things would be assigned to Him; there would then remain no difference between Him and His creation, and He would then have no clear distinction over His creation. Thus, the Creator and the created would be on an equal footing, and the Initiator and the initiated would be considered at the same level.
(Sermon 185)