

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, most Kind, most Merciful



Surat an-Naml, 27:93

وَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ سَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ
فَتَعْرِفُونَهَا
وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِغَافِلٍ عَمَّا تَعْمَلُونَ

And say: 'All praise belongs to Allah. Soon He will show you His signs, and you will recognise them.' And your Lord is not unaware of what you do.

Learning Objectives

- To explain the meaning of *ma'rifah*
- To identify at least three different ways of knowing Allah
- To reflect on what prevents us from knowing Allah

Key Words

مَعْرِفَة

Ma'rifah

recognition; knowledge

إِنْسَانٌ كَامِلٌ

Insan kamil

perfect human being

عِرْفَانٌ

Irfan

knowing; the science of Islamic spirituality

Why is it important to know Allah?

Ma'rifah of Allah

In the first sermon of *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Imam Ali (a) makes a very profound statement:

The foremost thing in religion is to know Him [Allah].

The word Imam Ali (a) uses in this statement is *ma'rifah* which means 'to know'.

What Imam Ali (a) is saying is that the primary and most important thing in our religion is to know Allah.

Why do you think *Imam Ali* (s) said this?

Ma'rifah of Allah is more than just knowing Allah through mere knowledge. Consider the following example:

- Somebody walks into your classroom; you know that someone is there
- The teacher tells you their name; you have knowledge of his identity
- The teacher tells you that he is a businessman; you have knowledge of his profession
- The teacher tells you that he is the one who donated money to building the classroom; you are appreciative of what he has done and that because of him you have a nice building where you can learn
- The teacher tells you that this person has done many good works; you are inspired to also do similar good deeds

The more you know about the person who entered your room, the more you realised and appreciated them.

The knowledge inspired you to also be like them. That inspiration was not there when you just simply knew their name; it came when you realised and appreciated who they were.

Similarly, *ma'rifah* of Allah is more than just knowing Allah through facts such as His names, His attributes, and His qualities. It is **realising, recognising and appreciating** Him for Who He is, to the extent that it transforms us. It is an inner knowledge of the heart. The more we know Allah, the more we believe in Him. The more we believe in Him, the more we do good deeds and try to adopt His qualities in our lives. The more we do this, the more we get closer to Him, and the more we get closer to becoming an *insan kamil* (perfect human being).



DID YOU KNOW?

In a well-known *hadith al-qudsi*, Allah tells us why He created everything:

I was a hidden treasure and wanted to be known. Hence I created the creation so that I would be known.

In one of his sermons, Imam Ali (a) describes Allah as follows:



Praise is due to Allah...
He, whom the highest of intellectual efforts
cannot comprehend and the deepest dives
of understanding cannot grasp.



According to this passage, it is clear that Allah is so great that it is not possible for us to fully comprehend Him. However, the more we strive to gain *ma'rifah* of Allah, the closer we can become to Him. One way to do this is through the practice of *irfan*. The word *irfan* comes from the same root as the word *ma'rifah*. *Irfan* is the science of Islamic spirituality, also known as mysticism or gnosis. It is important to remember that the practice of *irfan* is not the same as sufism.



EXTRACT FROM *DU'A SHA'BANIYYAH*

"My Lord, grant me exclusive devotion towards You, and enlighten the eyes of our hearts with a light that can look towards You, so that they penetrate the veils of light, reaching the source of greatness, and so that our souls are attached to the glory of Your sanctity."



DID YOU KNOW?

The word *arafah* comes from the same root word as the word *ma'rifah*. Scholars have said that one of the main reasons of the stay at *Arafah* during hajj is to reflect, ponder, know, and recognise Allah. At different stages and times of our lives, we will recognise Allah in different ways. Whether we are young or old, whether we are in difficulty or ease, whether we are in sickness or in health, Allah is always there. To help us realise this, Imam Husayn (a) summarises this in his amazing *du'a* for the Day of *Arafah*, in which he calls out to Allah: Oh my God, I have known through a variety of signs and changes of phases, that Your desire from me is that You introduce Yourself [to me] in all things, so that I will ignore You in nothing!



FIQH FACTS

There are several obligations when performing hajj. One of these is to be present at *Arafah* on the 9th of Dhil-hijjah (known as the Day of *Arafah*), from *dhuhr* until *maghrib*, with the *niyyah* of achieving closeness to Allah.



Arafah

The different ways we can know Allah

In previous lessons, we looked at different ways to prove Allah exists. This is the first step to knowing Allah. However, there are many other ways we can develop and increase our *ma'rifah* of Allah. These include:

ALLAH'S ATTRIBUTES

Everything in creation reflects and manifests the different names of Allah. We know Him through these. For example:

- When we see the love and affection of our parents towards us, we are reminded of *al-Rahman* (the All-Merciful) and *al-Wadud* (the Loving)
- When we eat food and earn money, we know that it is *al-Razzaq* (the Sustainer) who has blessed us with food and wealth
- Our hearing and vision are just manifestations of Allah's qualities of *al-Basir* (All-Seeing) and *al-Sami* (All-Hearing).

THE EXTERNAL SIGNS OF ALLAH

Allah is recognised through His signs present in the world around us. When we see the beautiful and intricate creation around us and the harmony with which everything in nature works, we know that all these things could not have occurred by chance, and that they require a wise creator.

Ways of knowing Allah

Surat an-Naml
27:93

THE QUR'AN AND THE AHLUL BAYT

Allah has sent us the *Qur'an* and the *Ahlul Bayt* as guides to help us live our lives in the best possible way, and to help us understand Allah better and get closer to Him.

Surah Saba 34:6

وَيَرَى الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ
الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ
هُوَ الْحَقُّ وَيَهْدِي إِلَى
صِرَاطٍ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ

And those who have been given knowledge see that what has been sent down to you from your Lord is the truth and [that] it guides to the path of the All-Mighty, the Praised.

وَقُلِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ
سَيُرِيكُمْ آيَاتِهِ فَتَعْرِفُونَهَا

And say: 'All praise belongs to Allah. Soon He will show you His signs, and you will recognise them.'

OUR NATURAL INSTINCT

Human beings are born with the natural instinct to believe in Allah because that is how Allah created us. We have seen in previous lessons how societal influence, sinning, and other factors block this natural instinct of ours.

OBEDIENCE TO ALLAH

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a) said:

We do not attain closeness to Allah except through His obedience.

HUNGER

Rasulullah (s) has said:

Keep your stomachs hungry and thirsty and make your bodies used to hardship, perhaps your hearts will then have a chance of seeing Allah's glory!

One reason why fasting is so recommended in Islam is because it lets us perceive Allah more through our hearts.

OUR SELVES

Imam Ali (a) said:

He who knows himself, knows his Lord.

We can understand this saying in 3 ways:

- 1 When we understand how beautifully Allah has created us, right down to our amazing cells, we realise what a wonderful and wise Lord we have.
- 2 When we know what motivates us in life, then we know who our lord truly is. For example, if we wake up every morning with the sole intention of just making money, then money is what controls us. But if we go to work, knowing that Allah has commanded us to earn *halal* income and look after our families, then Allah is our Lord.
- 3 When we reflect in our soul or *nafs*, which is an immaterial being, and see how it controls all our limbs simultaneously, from the movement of the toes to direction of the eyes, from functioning of our internal organs to the movement of every cell, we can understand how God who is an immaterial being controls everything in the physical universe.

THROUGH TESTS AND TRIALS

Allah says in the *Qur'an*:



Surat al-A'raf 7:168

وَبَلَوْنَاهُمْ بِالْحَسَنَاتِ
وَالسَّيِّئَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

We tested them with both prosperity and adversity so that they may come back.

Through tests and trials by what we like and what we dislike our soul shows the extent of its patience and thankfulness. These two qualities bring us closer to God and move us away from focusing on our limited selves.

Surat al-Baqarah 2:155-156



وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ
وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ
وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ
الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمْ مُصِيبَةٌ
قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

And We will surely test you with a measure of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth, lives, and fruits; and give good news to the patient, those who, when a misfortune befalls them, say: 'Indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him do we surely return.'

What prevents us from knowing Allah?

There are two things in particular that prevent us from recognising Allah. These are:

1 The deceit of Shaytan

When Shaytan was expelled from the company of the angels by Allah for refusing to bow down to Nabi Adam, he swore an oath that he would make it his mission to turn people away from Allah.



Surah Sad 38:82-83

قَالَ فَبِعِزَّتِكَ لَأُغْوِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ
إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمْ الْمُخْلِصِينَ

[Shaytan] said: by Your power, I will misguide them all [mankind], except Your sincere servants from among them.

There are two interesting points to note with regards to this *ayah*. Firstly, even Shaytan has some *ma'rifah* of Allah because he takes an oath in the name of Allah's might! This shows us that *ma'rifah* which does not convert into good action does not have any benefit. Secondly, Shaytan himself acknowledges that he will not be able to misguide those who are purified by Allah.

2 The hardness of our hearts caused by sinning

When we sin, our hearts begin to harden. When this happens, our hearts have less and less capacity to recognise Allah. There is a very interesting *hadith al-qudsi* in which Allah says:



I cannot be contained by My earth or by My sky, but what can contain Me is the heart of My believing servant.



There is a *hadith* from *Rasulullah* (s) that states that sins cause black spots to appear on our hearts. If we beg forgiveness from Allah, then He will make the spots disappear from our hearts. If we repeat the sin then the black spot increases in size. The more our hearts are blackened, the less *ma'rifah* of Allah we will have.



Allah has given us many examples in the Qur'an of people who were misguided by Shaytan and had incorrect *ma'rifah* of Allah.

In *Surat an-Naml*, Allah tells us of the travels of the hoopoe bird (*hudhud*). Nabi Sulayman had sent him on a scouting mission and he came across a particular group of people, ruled over by a queen named Bilqis. He found her and her people praying to Allah and also praying to the sun! Hudhud reported this back to Nabi Sulayman.



Hoopoe bird

From this we can clearly see that a bird realised that the instinct of most people is rightly guided to worshipping Allah, but that Shaytan misleads them into praying to things other than Him. He does this because he is jealous of the special position of human beings with Allah.



Faith in Action

Ma'rifah of Allah goes hand in hand with the *ma'rifah* of Rasulallah (s) and the Ahlul Bayt (a). Allah commands Rasulallah (s) to tell the believers:

قُلْ لَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا
إِلَّا الْمَوَدَّةَ فِي الْقُرْبَى

Say: 'I do not ask you any reward for it except love of [my] relatives.'

Surat ash-Shura 42:23

Therefore, we must love the Ahlul Bayt (a). How much we love someone depends on how much our *ma'rifah* of that person is. That is why Rasulallah (s) has also said:

“ One who dies without gaining the *ma'rifah* of the Imam of his time, dies the death like that of the age of ignorance. ”

We should always pray to Allah to grant us His *ma'rifah* so that we do not go astray. One way we can do this is to recite *Du'a al-Ma'rifah* of Imam al-Mahdi (a).

Try and learn this short *du'a* by heart and recite it at least once after your daily prayers this week.

HIGHER LEVEL



In this lesson we have looked at various ways of knowing Allah. One of these is through our natural instinct. Humans have always believed in a higher power. Read verse 49:7 with its translation, and explain your key learning from this verse.



KEY POINTS

- 1 *Ma'rifah* means to know Allah, but by more than just knowledge. It is to recognise Him with the heart.
- 2 *Ma'rifah* of Allah can be achieved in a number of ways, including knowing Allah through His attributes, through His signs, and by obeying His commands.
- 3 *Shaytan* and sinning can prevent us from knowing Allah.





1 What does the word *ma'rifah* mean?

2 List at least three ways you can try to gain *ma'rifah* of Allah.

3 Name two things that prevent us from gaining *ma'rifah* of Allah.


