5410 - What to Do If You Cannot Read Al-Fatihah in Prayer

the question

I am a native English speaker trying to learn Arabic, In Sha Allah. When I, Alhamdu lillah, embraced Islam, I memorized Surah Al-Fatihah from a transliteration of the Arabic. This fall I began to study more about salah (prayer) and in a book of fiqh I read that if a person omits or mispronounces 1 letter or vowel of Al-Fatihah in salah, his recitation is invalid. When I read this I became so worried, because although I am studying Arabic, there are some Arabic letters I still cannot pronounce at all, and some I cannot pronounce well. I started to listen to a taped recitation of Al-Fatihah and I love to hear it recited, but I feel discouraged because my recitation is so poor compared to the Qari's. Since I read that ruling, I have become so nervous in my recitation of Al-Fatihah in salah that instead of focusing on the meaning, I think about how poor my pronunciation is. When I hear myself mispronouncing letters, I go back over the ayat, trying to correctly pronounce them again. But what happens is that I either make the same mistakes again or make new ones! Often I end up reciting Al-Fatihah more than once or a certain ayah more than once because I feel so worried that my prayers are not being accepted because I can't pronounce some of the letters. I have become so nervous that sometimes I even mispronounce letters I usually can pronounce during my recitation. What should I do? May Allah reward you for any help you can give me.

Summary of answer

Whoever is unable to pronounce al-Fatihah properly because of some defect in his tongue or because he is not an Arabic-speaker must learn to correct his pronunciation as much as he can. If he cannot, then he is relieved of this obligation.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Is reciting al-Fatihah essential in prayer?

Reciting Surat al-Fatihah is a pillar or essential part of prayer – according to the correct scholarly view – and it is obligatory upon the imam who leads the prayer, the one who prays behind an imam and the one who prays on his own.

It was narrated from Abu Hurayrah that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Whoever offers a prayer in which he does not recite Umm al-Kitab (i.e., al-Fatihah), it is defective” – and he said it three times. It was said to Abu Hurayrah, (What if) we are behind the imam? He said, Recite it to yourself, for I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) say, “Allah said: I have divided prayer between Myself and My slave into two halves, and My slave shall have what he has asked for. When the slave says: Al-hamdu lillahi rabbi l-alamin (All the praises and thanks be to Allah, the Lord of the ‘Alamn (mankind, jinn and all that exists), Allah says: My slave has praised Me.

And when he says: Ar-Rahman ir-Rahim (The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful), Allah (mighty and sublime be He) says: My slave has extolled Me

and when he says: Maliki yawm id-din (The Only Owner (and the Only Ruling Judge) of the Day of Recompense (i.e. the Day of Resurrection)), Allah says: My slave has glorified Me - and on one occasion He said: My slave has submitted to My power.

And when he says: Iyyaka na’budu wa iyyaka nasta’in (You (Alone) we worship, and You (Alone) we ask for help (for each and everything)), He says: This is between Me and My slave, and My slave shall have what he is asking for.

And when he says: Ihdina’s-sirata’l- mustaqim, sirat alladhina an’amta alayhim ghayril-maghdubi alayhim wa la’ d-dallin (Guide us to the Straight Way. The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not (the way) of those who earned Your Anger, nor of those who went astray), He says: This is for My slave, and My slave shall have what he has asked for.” (Narrated by Muslim)

So the worshipper must recite Surat al-Fatihah properly in Arabic, because we are commanded to read and recite the Quran as it was revealed.

What to do if you are unable to pronounce al-Fatihah properly

Whoever is unable to pronounce al-Fatihah properly because of some defect in his tongue or because he is not an Arabic-speaker must learn to correct his pronunciation as much as he can.

If he cannot, then he is relieved of this obligation, because Allah does not burden people with more than they are able to bear. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Allah burdens not a person beyond his scope.” [Al-Baqarah 2:286]

Ruling on one who is unable to recite al-Fatihah at all

If a person is unable to recite al-Fatihah at all or is unable to learn it, or he has just become Muslim and the time for prayer has come and there is not enough time for him to learn it, then he is given a way out in the following hadith:

It was narrated that ‘Abd-Allah ibn Abi Awfa said: “A man came to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and said: “O Messenger of Allah, teach me something of the Quran that will suffice me, for I cannot read.” He said, “Say: Subhan-Allah wa’l-hamdu Lillah wa la ilaha ill-Allah wa Allahu akbar wa la hawla wa la quwwata illa Billah (Glory be to Allah, praise be to Allah, there is no god except Allah and Allah is Most great, there is no god except Allah and there is no power and no strength except with Allah).” The man made a grabbing gesture with his hand (indicating that he had learned a lot) and said, “This is for my Lord, what is there for me?” He said, “Say: Allahumma ighfir li warhamni wahdini warzuqni wa ‘afini (O Allah, forgive me, have mercy on me, guide me, and grant me provision and good health).” He made another grabbing gesture with his other hand and stood up.” (Narrated by al-Nasai, 924; Abu Dawud, 832. Its isnad was classed as jayyid by al-Mundhiri in al-Targhib wa’l-Tarhib, 2/430. al-Hafiz Ibn Hajar indicated that it is hasan in al-Talkhis al-Habir, 1/236)

Ibn Qudamah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“If a person does not know any Quran, and he cannot learn it before the time for prayer is over, then he must say Subhan-Allah wa’l-hamdu Lillah wa la ilaha ill-Allah wa Allahu akbar wa la hawla wa la quwwata illa Billah (Glory be to Allah, praise be to Allah, there is no god except Allah, Allah is Most great and there is no power and no strength except with Allah), because Abu Dawud narrated that a man came to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and said, “I am not able to learn anything of the Quran, so teach me something that will suffice me.” He said, “Say, Subhan-Allah wa’l-hamdu Lillah wa la ilaha ill-Allah wa Allahu akbar wa la hawla wa la quwwata illa Billah.” The man said, “This is for my Lord, what is there for me?” He said, “Say: Allahumma ighfir li warhamni warzuqni wahdini wa ‘afini (O Allah, forgive me, have mercy on me, grant me provision, guide me, and give me good health).” But he does not have to do more than say the first five phrases, because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) only said that, and he only told him more when he asked for more.”

But if a person is able to recite part of al-Fatihah only, he should recite that which he is able to recite. And he has to repeat what he can recite well (i.e., so that the total number of what he recites will be seven verses, equivalent to the number of verses in al-Fatihah).

Ibn Qudamah said:

“It may be sufficient for him to say alhamdu-Lillah (praise be to Allah), la ilaha ill-Allah (there is no god but Allah) and Allahu akbar (Allah is most great), because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Whatever you know of Quran, recite it, otherwise praise Allah, proclaim His Oneness and magnify Him.” (Narrated by Abu Dawud)” (Al-Mughni, 1/289, 290)

What you have read about the prayer being invalid if the worshipper mispronounces a single letter of al-Fatihah cannot be taken as general in meaning. Not every mistake in al-Fatihah invalidates the prayer; rather it cannot be invalidated unless something is omitted from al-Fatihah, or the pronunciation is changed in a way that distorts the meaning. Moreover, this ruling on the prayer becoming invalid applies to those who are able to recite al-Fatihah correctly or who are able to

learn it but do not.

As for those who are unable to do so, they should recite it as best as they can, and that does not affect them, because Allah does not burden a soul beyond its scope. One of the basic principles established by the scholars is that nothing is obligatory when a person is unable to do it. (See al-Mughni, 2/154)

In this case, a person should recite al-Fatihah as best as he is able, and then glorify Allah, praise Him, magnify Him and proclaim His Oneness (by saying Subhan-Allah wa'l-hamdu Lillah wa Allahu akbar wa la ilaha ill-Allah), so that this will make up for whatever he has missed out of al-Fatihah. (See al-Majmu', 3/375)

Does a mistake in reciting al-Fatihah invalidate prayer?

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked:

Is the prayer of one who mispronounces al-Fatihah valid or not?

He replied:

"If a person mispronounces al-Fatihah in a way that does not distort the meaning, his prayer is valid, whether he is leading others in prayer or is praying alone.

But with regard to the kind of mispronunciation that distorts the meaning, if the person knows the meaning, such as if he says 'Sirat alladhina an'amtu 'alayhim [meaning "The way of those on whom I have bestowed my grace", instead of the correct version an'amta (The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace)], and he knows that this verbal form is wrong, then the prayer is not valid. But if he does not know that he is distorting the meaning, and he thinks that this form is second person singular rather than first person, then there is a difference of scholarly opinion on this point. And Allah knows best." (Majmu' al-Fatawa 22/443)

He was also asked about when a person ends a word with –i that should end in –a when praying (or renders it genitive when it should be accusative).

He replied:

“If he is aware of what he is doing and he does it deliberately, then his prayer is invalid, because he is playing about in his prayer. But if he is unaware of that, then his prayer is not invalid, according to one of the two scholarly views.” (Majmu’ al-Fatawa, 22/444)

So you must try hard and keep practising it. You can do this by reciting it to another Muslim sister who can recite it well, and by listening to surahs recited by skilled reciters on tapes or broadcasts.

There is no need to feel nervous and anxious, because Allah knows what is in people’s hearts, and He knows who is trying hard and making the effort, and who is lazy and heedless.

The difficulty that you find in reciting Quran will increase your hasanat (good deeds) and rewards. It was narrated that ‘Aishah (may Allah be pleased with her) said: The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “The one who is skilled in reciting Quran will be with the noble and obedient scribes (i.e., angels) and the one who reads the Quran and struggles with it because it is difficult for him will have two rewards.” (Narrated by Muslim, 798)

Al-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“The one who struggles with it is the one who is hesitant in his recitation because he is not able to memorize it well. He will have two rewards: the reward for reciting it and the reward for his efforts in reciting it.

There is no need to repeat verses more than once, because this is not what the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) did or taught. Rather that opens the door to waswas (whispers from the Shaytan), detracts from the prayer, makes you lose your focus, distracts you from pondering the meaning of the verses and makes the Shaytan happy, because from that he can find a way to make you suffer so that you will ultimately give up praying. But Allah is Most Gracious and Most Merciful, and He is more merciful towards us than we are to ourselves, and He does not burden us with more than we can bear.”

And Allah knows best.