

Some Thoughts on Prayer

BY THE NAME OF ALLAH, THE MOST BENEFICENT, THE MOST MERCIFUL

Among the central tenets of Islam are the daily prayers. Muslims turn towards Mecca five times a day and bow themselves in humility before their Creator. The Qur'an states:

We have seen the turning of thy face to heaven (for guidance, O Muhammad). And now verily We shall make thee turn (in prayer) toward a qiblah which is dear to thee. So turn thy face toward the Inviolable Place of Worship, and ye (O Muslims), wheresoever ye may be, turn your faces (when ye pray) toward it. Lo! Those who have received the Scripture know that (this revelation) is the Truth from their Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what they do. [2:144]

Logic dictates that Allah cannot be confined to any one place. The Qur'an states:

Unto Allah belong the East and the West, and whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah's Countenance. Lo! Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing. [2:115]

The Ka'abah (the Black Stone) in Mecca merely serves as a unifying point and pivot around which the Muslim Ummah (nation) revolves.

Muslims perform these daily prayers at prescribed times, corresponding with the different phases of the day (e.g. dawn, mid-day, dusk, etc.). The prayers must be made in a clean place, but it is preferable to perform them in a mosque alongside fellow Muslims. This communal undertaking acts as a reminder that all Muslims are equal, with prince and pauper praying side by side. When many people pray together, it becomes clear that colour, economic status, social position, education, and all other artificial distinctions have no importance to Allah, for all Muslims are commanded to stand together, shoulder to shoulder, and prostrate themselves before Him. Exceptions are made only for the elderly, the ill, and the physically challenged. The daily prayers help to lift the individual to a higher plane of morality, and serve as a means of direct communication with the Almighty. They also have a purifying and protective effect. As the Qur'an states:

...establish regular Prayer: for Prayer restrains from shameful and unjust deeds; and remembrance of Allah is the greatest (thing in life) without doubt. And Allah knows the (deeds) that ye do. [29:45]

How to Pray?

Muslims have been commanded to follow the *Sunnah*, or example, of the Prophet Muhammad (May Allah's peace be upon him and his progeny) in all their affairs. Muslims believe the correct way to perform the daily prayers is to perform them the way he did. Over time, different schools of jurisprudence emerged as the result of differences in interpretation of the *Sunnah*. As a result, slight variations in the prayer were introduced into the daily prayers. For example, some Muslims will pray with their arms folded while others will keep them down at their sides. Some Muslims will recite the *Bismillah*, or introductory line, of the prayer silently, while others will recite it aloud. Amongst the schools of thought there exists a group whose jurisprudence can be traced directly to the Prophet Muhammad (May Allah's peace be upon him and his progeny) himself. Unlike the imams of the Ahle Sunnah wa'l Jammah, the group known as the Shi'as derive their jurisprudence from the 6th Imam, Ja'far as-Sadiq, who was a direct descendent of the Prophet. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq, and indeed all of the Shi'a Imams emphasized that the daily prayers should be performed in a certain way. These Imams maintained that the *sajdah*, or prostration before Allah, is to be performed only on the pure earth, and that it is permissible to join the two sets of prayers together. In addition to their own theological arguments, there is much evidence to support these two claims in the books of ahadeeth, or Prophetic sayings, belonging to the Ahle Sunnah wa'l Jammah themselves.

Prostration Must be Performed on the Earth

Narrated Abu Said Al-Khudri:

... On the night of the 21st, the sky was covered with clouds and it rained, and the rain-water started leaking through the roof of the mosque at the praying place of the Prophet. **I saw, with my own eyes, the Prophet at the completion of the morning prayer leaving with his face covered with mud and water.** [Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 3.235]

...It rained that night and the roof of the mosque dribbled as it was made of leaf stalks of date-palms. **I saw with my own eyes the mark of mud and water on the forehead of the Prophet** (i.e. in the morning of the twenty-first). [Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 3.244]

I saw Allah's Apostle prostrating in mud and water and saw the **mark of mud on his forehead.**" [Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 1.798]

Abu Hazim narrates:

Sahl bin Sa'd was asked about the (Prophet's) pulpit, as to what was it made of. Sahl replied: No one is still alive among the people who knows about it better than I... When it was constructed and placed (in the mosque), the Messenger of Allah stood on it, facing the Qibla, and said, "Allahu Akbar", and the people stood behind him (in prayer). He recited and bowed, and the people behind him bowed. Then he raised his head, stepped back, descended and **prostrated on the ground**. He then again ascended the pulpit, recited, bowed, raised his head, stepped back, descended and **prostrated on the ground**. This is what I know about the pulpit. [Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 1.374]

Hazrat Maimuna said:

The Messenger of Allah used to pray on a Khumra (a palm leaf mat large enough to place one's face, while in prostration). [Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 1.378]

Jabir bin Abdullah narrates that the Messenger of Allah (May Allah's peace be upon him and his progeny) said:

The earth has been made a place of prostration for me, and a place to perform Tayammum. Thus, my followers can pray wherever (i.e. in any lawful place) they like, when the time of prayer is due. [Sahih Al-Bukhari Hadith 1.429]

There are many other ahadeeth that show that when the Prophet (May Allah's peace be upon him and his progeny) prostrated, he exhibited traces of mud on his forehead. Other hadeeth show that the only exception to not prostrate directly on the earth was when one faced extreme discomfort, such as the burning heat of the sun's rays on the ground. These ahadeeth clearly show that the early Muslims preferred to prostrate directly on the earth. In fact, according to authentic sources, the Prophet gave Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib the title "Abu Turab" (Father of Dust) because he used to prostrate on the earth so much.

On Joining the Prayers

Regarding the specific times for the daily prayers, Allah, the All-Knowing, says in the Qur'an:

Establish regular prayers at the Sun's decline till the darkness of the night, and the recital of the Quran in the morning prayer; for the recital of the dawn is Witnessed. [17:78]

This verse lists only three specific times for prayer: (1) The Sun's Decline, (2) Darkness of the Night, and (3) the Morning Prayer. Muslims unanimously agree that it is *mustahhab*, or preferable, to perform the prayers in five unique times of the day, but permission has been given to join the two afternoon prayers (i.e. to perform Dhohr and 'Asr together) and the evening and night prayers (i.e. to perform Maghrib and 'Isha together). Consider the following from Sahih Muslim:

Ibn Abbas reported: The messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) observed the noon and the afternoon prayers together, and the sunset and Isha prayers together without being in a state of fear or in a state of journey.

[Sahih Muslim, Chapter CCL, Tradition #1515]

Ibn Abbas reported that the messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) combined the noon prayer with the afternoon prayer and the sunset prayer with the Isha prayer in Medina without being in a state of danger or rainfall. And in the hadith transmitted by Waki (the words are): "I said to Ibn Abbas: What prompted him to do that? He said: So that his Ummah should not be put to (unnecessary) hardship."

[Sahih Muslim, Chapter CCL, Tradition #1520]

Abdullah b. Shaqiq reported: Ibn Abbas one day addressed us in the afternoon (after the afternoon prayer) till the sun disappeared, and the stars appeared, and the people began to say: Prayer, prayer. A person from Banu Tamim came there. He neither slackened nor turned away, but (continued crying): Prayer, prayer. Ibn Abbas said: May you be deprived of your mother, do you teach me sunnah? And then he said: I saw the messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) combining the noon and afternoon prayers and the sunset and Isha prayers. Abdullah b. Shaqiq said: Some doubt was created in my mind about it. So I came to Abu Huraira and asked him (about it) and he testified his assertion.

[Sahih Muslim, Chapter CCL, Tradition #1523]

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PAMPHLET No. 11