

### Fast 17: Prayer — Form and Spirit

“Guard the prayers and the most excellent prayer, and stand up truly obedient to Allah.” (2:238)

حِفْظُوا عَلَى الصَّلَوَاتِ وَالصَّلَاةِ الْوُسْطَىٰ وَ  
تُومُوا لِلَّهِ قَانِتِينَ ﴿٢٣٨﴾

“O you who believe, bow down and prostrate yourselves and serve your Lord, and do good that you may succeed.” (22:77)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ارْكَعُوا وَاسْجُدُوا وَ  
اعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمْ وَافْعَلُوا الْخَيْرَ لَعَلَّكُمْ  
تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٧٧﴾

- The Arabic word for prayer is *ṣalāt*, which originally means ‘praying’ or ‘the making of a supplication’, and was employed in this sense before Islam. In the Holy Quran, the word is used both in the technical sense of Divine service as established by Islam, and in the general sense of simply *praying* as in “surely your prayer is a relief to them” (9:103), i.e., that the prayer of the Holy Prophet for his followers brings comfort to them.
- The “guarding of prayers (*ṣalawāt*, plural of *ṣalāt*)”, mentioned above in 2:238, is not simply the observance of the outward form; it is both the form and the spirit to which attention is drawn in “guarding”. Some think that by “the most excellent prayer” is meant a particular prayer (for example, some say it is the *aṣr* prayer). But it probably means that we must attend to prayer in the most excellent way, both as regards the form and the spirit.
- In the technical sense the word *ṣalāt* is almost always used with one of the derivatives of the word *iqāmah* which means ‘keeping a thing in a right state’. It is this combination in the Quran which is translated as “keeping up prayer”. The *iqāmah* of *ṣalāt* really means the *keeping of the prayer in a right state*, which includes both the proper observance of the outward form and maintaining its true spirit.
- The purification before prayer, the mosque, the fixing of times and finally the settling of the form, are all parts of the outward organization, without which the spirit could not have been kept alive. Hence a form has been fixed for the institution of the Islamic prayer, the individual having, in addition, liberty to pray to God in accordance with the desire of his own soul, when and where and as he or she likes. Like the times of prayer, the form was revealed to the Holy Prophet by the Holy Spirit or Gabriel.
- The outward form is not, however, the end; it is only a help. Thus in the Holy Quran, the observance of the form of the prayer is spoken of as being meant to free a person from evil:

“And keep up prayer at the two ends of the day and in the first hours of the night. Surely good deeds take away evil deeds” (11:114).

Only they are said to attain self-development, or success, who are true to the spirit of the prayer:

“Successful indeed are the believers, who are humble in their prayers” (23:1–2).

Mere form without the spirit is condemned in one of the earliest revelations:

“So woe to the praying ones, who are unmindful of (the spirit of) their prayers, who do good to be seen, and refrain from acts of kindness.” (107:4–7)

- The postures of prayer are as follows:
  - Standing (*qiyām*) — in a reverential position, having the feeling that one is standing before the Holy and Majestic Presence.
  - Bowing down (*rukūʿ*) — showing humility while uttering words declaring Divine glory.
  - Prostration (*sajdah*) — a posture of the utmost humility is assumed, while words declaring the Divine glory and Divine greatness are on the lips of the worshipper.
  - Sitting (*qaʿdah*) — saying various words of prayer.
- The different postures are sufficient to inspire the heart of the worshipper with true awe of the Divine Being, and to bring before his or her mind a picture of the great majesty and glory of God, as he stands up, then bows down, then places his forehead on the ground. Different postures of the body have a corresponding effect on the mind, and Islam seeks to make the spiritual experience of the Muslim perfect by making him assume one position of reverential humility after another, so that he may pass from one experience to another.
- The law of Islam allows modifications in certain cases; as, for instance, when a person is sick, he may say his prayers in a sitting position, or if unable to sit down, he may say them while lying down, dispensing with even bowing down and prostration if necessary. On a journey, a person is allowed to say his prayers while riding or travelling in any vehicle. The postures adopted in all such cases must be subject to the requirements of the situation. Even the direction of prayer may not be towards the *Qiblah*. However, without necessity, one may not make a departure from the form prescribed by the Holy Prophet.

- Corresponding to the different postures of humility which the worshipper assumes in saying his prayers, he is commanded to give expression to the praise and glory of God, to His great attributes of love, mercy, forgiveness, etc., to confess his own weakness, to pray for Divine help to support him in his weakness and for Divine guidance to lead him aright and make him achieve the goal of his existence. All such expressions are known in Arabic by the one name *dhikr*, which is generally translated as *remembrance*. The whole of prayer is called in the Holy Quran *dhikr Allāh*, or the remembrance of Allah. The Quran itself is also frequently referred to as *dhikr*. Hence, whether a portion of the Quran is recited in prayer, or words giving expression to Divine glory and greatness are uttered as taught by the Holy Prophet, all goes by the name of *dhikr*.