

Fast 18: Prayer (continued)

- There are many other places in the Quran which require prayer to be performed, not as a mere ritual, but with the involvement of the mind and heart. It is said at the beginning of the 23rd chapter:

“Successful indeed are the believers,
who are humble in their prayers” —
ch. 23, v. 1–2

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١﴾ الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي صَلَاتِهِمْ
خٰشِعُونَ ﴿٢﴾ ...

“...and those who keep a guard on
their prayers.” — ch. 23, v. 9

وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَى صَلَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ ﴿٩﴾

Being “humble” in prayer is the first requirement here. The “guarding” of prayers in verse 9 means to protect prayers from being wasted. They could be wasted by not paying attention during the prayers, or by acting and behaving in your life in a way that is contrary to what you learnt in the prayers. “Guarding” also includes performing prayers meeting all the physical requirements, such as adhering to the time of prayer, doing the ablution and other cleanliness, going into various postures properly, etc.

- Guarding of prayer is also mentioned in the following verse:

“Guard the prayers and the most
excellent prayer, and stand up truly
obedient to Allah.” — ch. 2, v. 238

حٰفِظُوا عَلَى الصَّلَوَاتِ وَالصَّلَاةِ الْوَسْطَىٰ وَقُومُوا لِلَّهِ
قٰنِتِينَ ﴿٢٣٨﴾

The word translated as “the most excellent” is *wusta*, which more commonly means the “middle”. Taking it as “the middle prayer”, many consider this to be the *Asr* (عصر) prayer as it is in the middle of the five daily prayers. But there seems to be no reason for singling out the *Asr* prayer. Maulana Muhammad Ali writes that perhaps “it does not refer to any particular prayer and means simply attending to prayer in the most excellent form. The guarding of prayers is not simply the observance of the outward form; it is both the form and the spirit to which attention is drawn.” He adds: “and it is absurd to jump to the conclusion that because Islam requires an external form to be kept up, the Islamic prayer is devoid of spirit.”

Muhammad Asad, in his English translation of the Quran, quotes the view that “the middle prayer” in this verse may mean: “the noblest kind of prayer — that is, a prayer from the fullness of the heart, with the whole mind turned towards God, inspired by awe of Him, and reflecting upon His word.”

- There is also the following passage, again in chapter 2:

“And seek assistance through patience and prayer, and this is hard except for the humble ones, who know that they will meet their Lord and that to Him they will return.” — ch. 2, v. 45–46

وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ وَإِنَّهَا كَإِصْرَةٌ إِلَّا
عَلَى الْخَاشِعِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾ الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُم مُّلتَقُوا رَبَّهُمْ وَ
أَنَّهُم إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

Seeking assistance by means of words of prayer cannot be done except by presenting a heart-felt plea through those words. And it requires an attitude of humility. None of this is possible by a rote, ritual prayer, and counting how many *rakats* were said.

- A portrayal of true believers is as follows in the Quran:

“(15) Only they believe in Our messages who, when they are reminded of them, fall down prostrate and celebrate the praise of their Lord, and they are not proud.* (16) They forsake (their) beds, calling upon their Lord in fear and in hope, and spend (on good works) out of what We have given them. So no soul knows what joy of the eyes is hidden for them: a reward for what they did.” — ch. 32, v. 15–16

إِنَّمَا يُؤْمِنُ بِآيَاتِنَا الَّذِينَ إِذَا ذُكِرُوا بِهَا حَمَزُوا سَجْدًا وَ
سَبَّحُوا بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ ﴿١٥﴾ تَتَجَافَى
جُنُوبُهُمْ عَنِ الْمَضَاجِعِ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا
وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنفِقُونَ ﴿١٦﴾ فَلَا تَعْلَمُ نَفْسٌ مِّمَّا أُخْفِيَ
لَهُمْ مِنْ قُرَّةِ أَعْيُنٍ جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٧﴾

Those described here are *the only ones* who are real and true believers. Their “forsaking of the beds” refers to their getting up from sleep during the night to say prayers, “in fear and in hope”. The meaning of “fear” and “hope” was explained in the last Study (“fear” meaning that they are acutely aware of their shortcomings and faults, and “hope” meaning they hope for forgiveness). Such is their attraction for prayer that they give up the comfort of their beds for it.

Upon listening to the Quran, or reciting it, especially during prayers, they cannot help falling prostrate before God and celebrating His praise. Before Him, they feel not an ounce of pride, and the performance of prayers doesn’t create pride in their hearts. Their prayers, and the consequent spending on good works, is felt by their souls as *the joy of the eyes*. All these are states which can only be attained by the involvement of the heart.

*Note: Ch. 32, v. 15 above is a “prostration” verse of the Quran. If you are reciting it in Arabic, you need to bow or prostrate when you reach the end of this verse.