

Home > Supplication In the Eyes of the Ahl al-Bayt (as) > Definition of Prayer > Asking one's Needs from Other than Allah

Definition of Prayer

The Meaning of Prayer

Prayer (*du'a'*) means the asking of a servant for his needs from Allah, the Exalted. On analyzing this definition, we find that it can be reduced to the following four elements:

1. The One called upon (*al-mad'uww*), i.e. Allah, the Exalted.
2. The Supplicant (*ud-Da'i*), i.e. a human being.
3. Prayer (*ad-du'a'*), i.e. the act of asking from Allah.
4. The Object of Prayer (*al-maduww lahu*), i.e. the need which one presents before Allah by means of prayer.

The following is an explanation of each of the above four elements.

1. The One called upon (al-mad'uww)

The one called upon during prayer is Allah, the Exalted; the One who is:

- a. Absolutely Self-sufficient and to whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth.

"Do you not know that to Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth."¹

"To Allah belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever is between them. He creates whatever He wishes."²

- b. Whose kingdom does not diminish by His bestowal.

"This is indeed Our provision, which will never be exhausted."³

"To these and to those- to all We extend the bounty of your Lord. All do We help, these as well as

those, out of the bounty of your Lord, and the bounty of your Lord is not confined.⁴

A phrase in the supplication of *al-iftitah* reads, “And the frequency of giving increases Him not but in generosity and kindness.”

c. In whose divinity there is no stinginess. He is not miser in answering the needs of His servants. Therefore, there is no reason that He should not answer the prayer of His servants when they pray to Him regarding that which is of importance to them, be it great or small, as He {himself} has said,

“Call Me, I will answer you”⁵;

except if the response (*istijabah*) is not to the benefit of the supplicant, as he is not aware of what is beneficial to him in reality and what is not, whilst Allah is All-knowing.

With regard to this, a phrase in the supplication of *al-iftitah* reads:

“If there was a delay {in Your response}, I would blame You, due to my ignorance; while perhaps that which has {been} delayed is good for me, as You know the outcome of all affairs. I have not seen a more generous master, so patient with a wretched slave, than You are with me.”

2. The Supplicant (ud-Da'i)

The supplicant is the servant who is needy (*faqir*) in all respects, even in his awareness of being needy to Allah:

“O mankind! You are the ones who stand in need of Allah, and Allah –He is the All-sufficient, the All-laudable.”⁶

“...Allah is the All-sufficient, and you are all-needy.”⁷

Nothing can elevate a person to Allah, the Exalted, better than his neediness (*faqr*) to Him. ‘Neediness to Allah’ is among the stations (*manazil*) of the mercy of Allah.

The more a person is aware of his neediness to Allah, the closer he is to His mercy. On the contrary, the more arrogant he becomes, not realizing his neediness and dependency on Allah, the farther he shall be from His mercy.

3. The Act of Asking (ad-Du'a')

The more persistent a person is in his petition to Allah, the closer he shall be to His mercy. The climax of asking from Allah is when one is in need of Him desperately (*idtirar*), such that he has no other choice but that Allah should answer his prayer.

By *idtirar* we mean a state in which a person loses all other means of attaining his wish, and there

remains for him only one choice; a choice whose affair lies solely in the hand of Allah and not in his hand. Subsequently, he turns to Allah, the Exalted, in desperation. It is in such a condition that a servant is the nearest of all things to Allah's mercy:

“Is He not who answers {the call of} the distressed {person} when he invokes Him and removes his distress...?”⁸

In fact, there is no separation (*fasl*) at all between the supplication of the distressed and the response from Allah in removing his distress.

This state of being in desperate need of Allah (*idtīrar*) during supplication implies detachment (*inqīṭaʿ*) from all other than Allah, and turning to Him alone; otherwise the act of supplicating and asking from Allah would no longer be considered as stemming from desperate need toward Him.

However, prayer does not dispense with the need for effort and action, as the endeavour by the supplicant for attaining his wish does not dispense with prayer and petition to Allah.

4. The Object of Prayer (al-mad'uww lahu)

The object of supplication is anything that a supplicant prays to his Lord for, of his needs and wishes. And there is absolutely no objection in that a supplicant should ask from Allah whatever he wants, however great it might be; as this does not render Allah incapable, nor does His kingdom diminish because of this, nor is there any miserliness in His divinity.

Similarly, it does not matter if he were to pray to Allah even for the smallest of his wishes, “even for the band of his shoes, the fodder of his cattle, and the salt of his bread”, as it has appeared in a Divine Narration (*hadith al-qudsi*).

For Allah loves His servant to be constantly in contact with Him with respect to everything, small or big, of his needs, and that his small needs should not veil him from Allah due to their insignificance, nor should the enormity of his needs separate him from Allah. He, the Exalted, likes to see the hands of His servant stretched toward Him for every need, and his heart continuously in remembrance of Him, in every state, in ease and in adversity.

Beside this, there is nothing like prayer and need in interlocking a human being with Allah.

The Value of Prayer

The Qur'an says:

“Your Lord has said, ‘Call Me, I will answer you. Indeed those who are disdainful of My worship will enter hell in utter humility.’⁹

Prayer implies the turning (*iqbal*) of a servant toward Allah. Turning toward Allah constitutes the essence (*ruh*) of worship (*'ibadah*), whilst worshipping Allah is the goal of the creation of mankind.

These three points mentioned above reveal to us the value of prayer as well as its reality. So let us start with the third point and work our way upward to the first one.

The Qur'an is very clear in that worship (*'ibadah*) is the aim behind the creation of the human beings.

He, the Exalted, says:

"I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me."¹⁰

This is precisely what the third point entails; a concept which is of utmost importance in Islam.

The value of worship lies in that it ties and links the human being to Allah. It is due to this very reason that the intention of getting closer to Allah (*qasd at-Taqarrub*) is an essential element in the realization of *'ibadah*, without which the action performed would not be considered as *'ibadah*.

Hence, the reality of *'ibadah* is the journey toward Allah, turning to Him, aspiring His face, and seeking His pleasure. This is the second point which is, in fact, an illustration of the first point.

The first point implied that prayer is a state of turning toward Allah, as it is one of the most distinct instances of connection and link with Allah. Among the different acts of devotion (*'ibadah*), there is no act which can take man closer to Allah than *du'a'*.

Sayf at-Tammar is narrated to have said, "I heard Abu 'Abdillah as-Sadiq ('a) saying, 'I enjoin prayer (*du'a'*) upon you, for there is nothing which will get you closer to Allah than *du'a'*.'"¹¹

The greater one's need (*hajat*), desperation (*idtirar*) and dependency (*faqr*) on Allah, the more profound is his state of turning (*iqbal*) toward Him. There is a proportional relation between one's feeling of dependency and his being in need of Allah desperately, and one's turning toward Allah; for need and desperation prompts one to take resort in Him. And the *iqbal* of a person toward Allah, the Exalted, would be according to the degree of his perception of his own neediness, as the opposite is also correct.

He, the Exalted, says in this regard:

"Indeed man becomes rebellious when he considers himself without need."¹²

Indeed man rebels and turns away from Allah as much as he sees himself to be needless. On the contrary, he turns toward Allah as much as he perceives his indigence and need toward Him. The Qur'an is precise in its words, ***'when he considers himself without need'***.

In actual fact, no human being is needless of Allah, rather the whole of man's existence is absolute neediness (*faqr*) to Allah:

"O mankind! You are the ones who stand in need of Allah, and Allah –He is the All-sufficient, All-

laudable."¹³

Nevertheless, it seems to him that he has become needless, and it is the arrogance (*ghurur*) of man that creates this impression in him.

When it appears to him that he is needless, he becomes disregarding and turns aside and transgresses. But when distress touches him and he feels himself to be in need of Allah, then he comes back and turns toward Him.

In conclusion, the reality of prayer is 'turning toward Allah' (*iqbal*). Whoever wishes to call on Allah and implore Him, he must turn toward Him earnestly. And it is this state of 'turning' which constitutes the reality and essence of prayer and makes it valuable.

Four Ways of Reaching Allah in the Qur'an

Supplication is among the most important ways ordained by Allah for His servants in order for them to arrive at Him.

Apart from this, Allah, the Exalted, has stated in the Qur'an four ways of arrival at Him.

Imam as-Sadiq ('a) is reported to have said, "There are four things in favour of man, and not against him; faith (*Iman*) and thankfulness (*shukr*), for Allah, the Exalted, says: **'Why should Allah punish you if you give thanks and be faithful?'**¹⁴; seeking forgiveness (*istighfar*), as He, the Exalted, says: **'But Allah will not punish them while you are in their midst, nor will Allah punish them while they plead for forgiveness'**¹⁵; and prayer (*du'a'*), for He, the Exalted, says: **'Say, My Lord would not care for you were it not for your supplication?'**¹⁶¹⁷

Mu'awiyah bin Wahab narrates from Abu 'Abdillah as-Sadiq ('a), "O Mu'awiyah! Whosoever is given three {things} shall not be deprived of the {other} three. Whoever is given prayer (*du'a'*) shall {also} be given the response (*ijabah*). Whoever is endowed with thankfulness (*shukr*) shall {also} be endowed with enhancement (*ziyadah*). And whoever is granted reliance on Allah (*tawakkul*) shall {also} be granted sufficiency (*kifayah*), for Allah, the Exalted, says in His Book, **'And whoever puts his trust in Allah, He will suffice him'**¹⁸; and He says: **'If you are grateful, I will surely enhance you {in blessing}'**¹⁹; and He says: **'Call Me, I will answer you.'**²⁰²¹

'Abdullah bin Walid al-Wasafi reports from Imam as-Sadiq ('a), "{There are} three things with which nothing can cause harm {to a person}; prayer (*du'a'*) during hardships, seeking forgiveness (*istighfar*) after committing a sin, and thankfulness (*shukr*) when one is given a blessing."²²

These are in fact channels of communication with Allah. Nonetheless, the channels of communication with Allah are many, such as repentance (*tawbah*), fear (*khawf*) and awe (*hashyah*) of Allah, love (*hubb*) and yearning (*shawq*) for Allah, and hope in Allah (*raja'*).

However, man's relation with Allah must be structured on a well-arranged collection of the above elements, as Islam does not approve the theory of there being only a single way of communication with Allah.

Prayer is one of the most significant means of communication with Allah and turning toward Him. This is because nothing inspires people to take resort to Allah the way their neediness (*hajat*) and indigence (*faqr*) prompt them to do so. Hence, *du'a'* is among the widest of the doors of communication with Allah.

In his supplication at dawn, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin ('a) says: "All praise is due to Allah whom I call for my need whenever I wish, and confide to Him my secrets whenever I will –without a mediator, and He fulfills my need."

Prayer: the Essence of Worship

Du'a' is the essence and spirit of *ibadah*. This is because the purpose behind the creation of mankind is to worship Allah, and the goal of worship is to tie man to Allah, the Exalted, and prayer actualizes this goal in an extensive manner and through the strongest of means.

The Holy Prophet (S) is related to have said, "Supplication is the essence (*mukkh*) of worship. One who maintains supplication shall never perish."²³

He (S) has also said, "Flee to Allah for your needs, and take refuge with Him in your calamities, and entreat Him and call on Him; for *du'a'* is the kernel of *'ibadah*. There is no believer (*mu'min*) who calls on Allah except that He answers him; He will either speed up {in granting him} his request in this world, or He will delay it for him to the Hereafter, or He will expiate of his sins as much as he has implored Him, so long as he does not pray for a wrong deed."²⁴

The above narration illustrates for us the path of the journey of man toward Allah in prayer, and the manner in which he should turn toward Him. Just ponder on these statements: 'Flee to Allah for your needs', 'take refuge with Him in your calamities' and 'entreat (*tadarru'*) Him'.

In another tradition, the Holy Prophet (S) says: "Supplication is the weapon (*silah*) of a believer and the pillar (*'imad*) of religion."²⁵

The reason behind prayer being the pillar of religion is that the foundation of religion is the journey toward Allah, whilst prayer is turning toward Him, and commencing this journey. And since the reality of prayer is turning toward Allah, it is the most liked and the most revered of things in the eyes of Allah.

The Holy Prophet (S) says: "There is no thing more honourable (*akram*) in the eyes of Allah than *du'a'*."²⁶

Hannan bin Sudair relates from his father, "I said to al-Baqir ('a), 'Which act of worship is the best?' He

(‘a) replied, ‘Nothing is more lovable to Allah than that He should be asked and besought of what He possesses. There is no one more disliked by Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, than him who is disdainful of His worship and does not ask Him of what He possesses.’²⁷

In his supplication for the day of Wednesday, Amir al-Mu’minin ‘Ali bin Abi Talib (‘a) says: “All praise is due to Allah whose pleasure (*mardat*) is in petition to Him and begging for what is with Him, and whose anger is in lack of insistence in imploring Him.”

A phrase in the supplication of *kumayl* reads, “...For you have decreed upon your servants to worship You, and have commanded them to supplicate You and assured them that they would be answered; so to You, O my Lord, I have turned my face, and toward You, O my Lord, I have extended my hand...”

Disregard for Prayer is to Turn Away from Allah

Allah, the Exalted, says:

“Your Lord has said, ‘Call Me, I will answer you. Indeed those who are disdainful of My worship will enter hell in utter humility.”²⁸

According to this verse, being disdainful (*istikbar*) of worship (*‘ibadah*) implies disregard for prayer, as the context of the verse exhorts to prayer when it says: ***‘Call on Me’***, and immediately after this it says: ***‘those who are disdainful of My worship will enter hell in utter humility.’***

Hence, disregard of prayer according to the above verse is tantamount to being arrogant in worship; as it implies turning away (*i’rad*) from Allah. The same has been reported from Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) regarding the interpretation of the above verse. He (‘a) says: ***“{Supplication} is, by Allah, the worship (‘ibadah), it is -by Allah- the worship!”***

Hammad bin ‘Isa reports from Imam as-Sadiq (‘a), “Supplication is indeed the worship (*‘ibadah*). Allah, the Exalted, says: ***‘Those who are disdainful of My worship will enter hell in utter humility.’***^{29 30}

Man holds no status in the eyes of Allah but by virtue of supplication and to the extent that he prays to Allah. And Allah, the Exalted, cares for His servant as much as he implores Him and turns toward Him,

“Say, ‘What store my Lord would set by you were it not for your supplication?’”³¹

This is because the reality of supplication is equivalent to turning toward Allah (*iqbal*), as disregard for it is turning away (*i’rad*) from Him. And Allah does not care for one who turns away from Him, nor will he hold any status in His eyes.

Imam al-Baqir (‘a) says in a narration, “No one is more hated by Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, than he who shows arrogance in worshipping Him and does not ask Him for that which lies with Him.”³²

The Holy Prophet (S) is reported to have said, “You must implore Allah or else He will be wrathful at you. Indeed Allah has servants who do {righteous} deeds, so He gives them {of His mercy}; and there are others who sincerely ask Him, so He grants them. Thereafter, He will gather all of them in the Heaven. So those who performed {good} deeds shall say, ‘Our Lord, You gave us because we acted {righteously}, but why did You give to these {people}?’ He will say, ‘These are my servants. I gave you your reward without wasting anything of your deeds. These people besought Me, hence I gave them and enriched them; this is My grace, I give it to whomsoever I desire.”³³

Allah Yearns for the Supplication of His Servant

When a servant turns toward Allah by way of supplication, then he is loved by Allah. And if he turns away from Him, He is disliked by him.

Nevertheless, Allah, the Exalted, may delay in responding to the prayer of his servant so that his standing before Him, his turning toward Him, and his entreating Him may be prolonged; for Allah loves to hear the imploration of His servant and yearns for his prayer and secret conversation with Him (*munajat*).

Imam al-Kazim (‘a) is reported to have said, “Verily, Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, delays in answering a believer out of desire for his imploration and says: ‘This is a voice I love to hear.’ And He quickly responds to the prayer of a hypocrite and says: ‘This is a voice I hate.”³⁴

Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) says: “Pray to Allah frequently, for Allah loves His believing servants to call on Him and He has indeed promised them the response.”³⁵

Imam ‘Ali (‘a) is related to have said, “The most lovable of acts to Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, on this earth is supplication.”³⁶

It has been reported that Imam al-Baqir (‘a) used to say, “When a believer entreats Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, for a need, He delays in responding to him quickly, out of love for {hearing} his voice and listening to his lamentation.”³⁷

Abu ‘Abdillah as-Sadiq (‘a) says: “{It so happens that} a servant makes supplication and Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, says to the two angels, ‘I have indeed answered him, but confine him to his need, for I love listening to his voice.’ And {at times} a servant makes a petition and Allah, the Blessed, the Exalted, says: ‘Grant his need quickly, for I hate his voice.’”³⁸

Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) is reported to have said, “When a servant –who is a friend of Allah, implores Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, for a matter which concerns him, then it is said to the angel appointed over him, ‘Fulfill the need of My servant, but do not hurry, for I long to listen to his voice and call.’ And when a servant –who is a foe of Allah, the All-mighty, the Majestic, calls on Allah regarding a matter which concerns him, it is said to the angel appointed over him, ‘Fulfill his need and make haste, as I dislike to

listen to his voice and call.”³⁹

Asking one’s Needs from Other than Allah

Allah, the Exalted, dislikes the pleading of people with one another for their needs, as He loves a believer to honour his self and his hand by refraining from begging from others. Besides, He, the Exalted, loves to be beseeched by the believers, and loves their imploration and supplication to Him.

The Holy Prophet (S) says: “Indeed Allah has loved one thing for Himself and has abhorred it for His creatures. He has disliked for His creatures {their} pleading {with one another}, and has loved for Himself to be entreated {by them}. There is nothing more beloved to Allah than that He should be besought. Hence, none of you should be ashamed of asking Allah of His bounties, even if it is for the strap of a sandal.”⁴⁰

Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) is reported to have said, “Allah loves a servant to ask from Him {even} for {committing} a great sin, and He hates a servant who takes lightly the smaller sins.”⁴¹

Muhammad bin ‘Ajlan relates:

“I was caught in a great poverty and constraint, and he who is in constraint has no friend. I was also in a great and heavy debt and was under pressure to repay it. So I set out toward the house of Hasan bin Zayd –who was then the governor of Madinah, as we used to know each other. Muhammad bin ‘Abdillah bin ‘Ali bin al-Husain (‘a) –whom I knew well for long– realized from my condition where I was heading toward. He met me on the way and took hold of my hand and said, ‘I have come to know of what you are intending to do. Who do you entertain hope in to remove what has befallen you?’

‘Hasan bin Zayd’, I replied.

He said, ‘In this case, he is not going to fulfill your need, nor will your request be granted. You must ask One who is capable of doing that, One who is the Most Generous of those who are generous. Seek from Him what you are hoping for; for I have heard my cousin, Ja’far bin Muhammad, narrating from his father, who related from his grandfather, who reported from his father Husain bin ‘Ali (‘a), who narrated from his father ‘Ali bin Abi Talib (‘a), who reported the Holy Prophet (S) saying:

‘Allah revealed to some of His prophets in some of His revelations saying, ‘By My might and majesty, I will indeed sever the hope of one who entertains hope in other than Me with despair, and I will clothe him with the dress of humiliation among the people, and I will distance him from My salvation and bounties. Does My servant entertain hope in other than Me during hardships, while all the hardships are in My hand?

And does he anticipate from other than Me, while I am the All-sufficient and the Generous? In my hand are the keys of the closed doors, and My door is open for one who calls on Me. Do you not know that when one is afflicted with a calamity, then none other than Me has the ability to remove it from him?

Then how come I find him hoping for its removal by turning away from Me, while I have given him out of My generosity and grace what he did not ask from Me?

Still he turned away from Me and did not beseech Me, rather he beseeched other than Me during his hardships, while I am *Allah*, I begin endowment before request (*mas'alah*). Can it be that I am asked but I do not give generously? Never. Are not generosity and kindness particular to Me? Are not this world and the Hereafter in My hand?

If all the inhabitants of the seven heavens and the earth were to ask Me and I were to grant each of them his request, this would not diminish My kingdom by the like of a fly's wing! And how can a kingdom whose custodian is Me diminish? So wretched be he who disobeys Me and is not conscious of Me.'

So I said to him, 'O son of the Prophet of Allah! Repeat this narration for me.' So he repeated it three times. Then I said, 'By Allah, I am not going to ask anyone for a need after this.' And it was not long before Allah granted me a provision (*rizq*) from Him."⁴²

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1. Qur'an, 2:107.
 2. Qur'an, 5:17.
 3. Qur'an, 38:54.
 4. Qur'an, 17:20.
 5. Qur'an, 40:60.
 6. Qur'an, 35:15.
 7. Qur'an, 47:38.
 8. Qur'an, 27:62.
 9. Qur'an, 40:60.
 10. Qur'an, 51:56.
 11. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.93, pg.293.
 12. Qur'an, 96:6 7.
 13. Qur'an, 35:15.
 14. Qur'an, 4:147.
 15. Qur'an, 8:33.
 16. Qur'an, 25:77.
 17. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.93, pg.291.
 18. Qur'an, 65:3.
 19. Qur'an, 14:7.
 20. Qur'an, 40:60.
 21. See: al-Khisal-of as-Saduq, vol. 1, pg.50; al-Mahasin of al-Barqi, pg.3; and al-Kafi, vol.2, pg.65.
 22. Al-Amali of at-Tusi, pg. 127.
 23. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.93, pg.300.
 24. Ibid., pg. 302.
 25. Ibid., pg. 288.
 26. Makarim al-Akhlaq, pg. 311.
 27. Ibid, pg.311. See also al-Mahasin of al-Barqi, pg.292.
 28. Qur'an, 40:60.
 29. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol.4, pg.1083.

30. Imam as-Sajjad ('a) says in Sahifat as-Sajjadiyyah, supplication no.45, "And You have said, 'Call Me, I will answer you. Indeed those who are disdainful of My worship will enter hell in utter humility.' Hence You have named supplicating You 'worship' and refraining from it 'disdain', and You have threatened that the refraining from it would yield entrance into hell in utter humility." {Trns.}
31. Qur'an, 25:77.
32. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol.4, pg.1084, hadith no.8604.
33. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol.4, pg.1084, hadith no.8609.
34. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.97, pg.296.
35. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol.4, pg.1086, hadith no.8616.
36. Ibid, pg.1089, hadith no.8639.
37. Qurb al-Asnad, pg.171; and Usul al-Kafi, pg.526.
38. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol.4, pg.1112, hadith no.8731; and Usul al-Kafi, pg.526.
39. Usul al-Kafi, pg.527; and Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol.4, pg.1112, hadith no.8732.
40. Furu' al-Kafi, vol.1, pg.196; and Man la Yahduruhu al-Faqih, vol.1, pg.23.
41. Al-Mahasin of al-Barqi, pg.293; and Bihar al-Anwar, vol.93, pg.292.
42. Bihar al-Anwar, vol.93, pg.303 304.

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