

Seeking Assistance from Prayer and Fasting

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In Islamic scriptures, prayer and fasting are considered to be two precious gifts offered by God to His servants. Prayer is a form of worship designed by God in a very special way. Prayer, being a very beautiful act of worship, is full of profound meanings and, simultaneously, an artistic masterpiece in the way in which it has been devised. Thus, prayer is not only a matter of uttering some words and performing various movements; rather, it is a mixture of thoughts, words and actions. It is also related to timing, social relations and so on. Fasting holds a similar position in Islam. In this series of papers, we will try to reflect on spiritual aspects of prayer and fasting. In this part, we will study their significance and how to seek assistance by means of them.

There are three verses in the Glorious Qur'an to the effect that gaining divine assistance is conditional on prayer and patience, two of which are Chapter 2, verses 45 and 46. They read as follows:

وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ ۚ وَإِنَّهَا لَكَبِيرَةٌ إِلَّا عَلَى الْخَاشِعِينَ

And take recourse in patience and prayer, and it is indeed hard except for the humble. Who are certain that they will encounter their Lord, and that they will return to Him. (2:45-46)

Certainly, each and every person often faces situations in which a need is felt for someone's help and assistance, since one's own power and energy are not sufficient to solve all problems. According to the above-mentioned verses, God advises His servants to gain such assistance through patience and praying. Based on many narrations, patience here refers to fasting. Although this interpretation does not limit the broad meaning of patience, it does confirm the fact that fasting should be regarded as one of the best manifestations of patience.

So, how do these two practices help us to deal with the challenges we face in our daily lives?

According to the explanations of Muslim scholars, we need two things: to maintain our own confidence, integrity and courage and at the same time to be connected to God as the ultimate source of power. In modern psychology, too much emphasis is placed on self-esteem, self-reliance and self-confidence, whereas Islam favours a balanced position. Islam teaches us that we should indeed have a very strong personality, courage and self-confidence, but in a way that does not lead us to forget God. Bravery is a good quality but only if it does not require neglecting our duties towards God. We should be courageous but at the same time rely completely on God.

Referring to the history of early Islam, we come to the conclusion that the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) was the strongest man of his time. He stood alone against his entire tribe. He never gave up despite the many efforts of his enemies, through promises or threats, to force him to compromise. History narrates that these enemies went to his uncle, Abu Talib, and asked him to prevent his nephew from preaching, telling him that they were ready to give Muhammad whatever he desired whether it was the most beautiful woman, abundance of wealth, the best position in society and so on. When Abu Talib conveyed this message to his nephew, the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) stated: "If they put the sun on my right hand and the moon on my left hand I would not give up!"² Surprisingly, such a powerful man was however the most humble man in front of God. Therefore, we believe that strength of personality is highly dependent on one's connection to God.

If we are connected to God, nothing will be able to shake our resolve or force us to give up. Thus, *sabr* is the patience that we must have in our hearts in order to be persistent and not give up and *salat* is our connection with God.

To illustrate this more clearly, imagine that you are in a group of soldiers attacked by a great number of enemies. Under such circumstances, first of all you do your best to mobilise all your efforts to fight back against the enemy. However, at the same time you contact headquarters and ask them to send in reinforcements. Therefore, you must take both actions into consideration. On one hand, if you do nothing and just wait for support to come from headquarters, then you will certainly be defeated. On the other hand, if you keep relying solely on yourself, the outcome would be the same.

In the same way, whenever we face a problem we have to be patient and persistent and simultaneously keep praying to God to support us and provide us with more guidance.

The verse continues:

And it is indeed hard except for the humble.

According to some exegetes of the Glorious Qur'an, in this part of the verse, "it" may refer to either prayer (salah) or seeking assistance (isti'anah). However, Allamah Tabataba'i, in his Al-MizOn is of the opinion that it refers to the former. According to this interpretation, prayer needs humility and indeed Ayatullah Dastghayb has written a book on this subject called Salat Al-Khashi'in (The Prayer of the Humble). Obviously, in itself, it might seem to be an easy task to say prayers, but it is far more difficult to say prayers in a way that results in receiving divine help and assistance. Many Muslims may routinely recite their prayers but this is not the way in which we are expected to worship God.

Each and every prayer is unique and it is a mistake to think that this opportunity will definitely be given to us repeatedly. Each prayer is like a person we meet just once. If we are to meet a person just once in our lifetime, we will be extra careful and will try to meet with them in the best possible way. Accordingly, if we come to believe that each individual prayer is a unique opportunity given to us to be connected to our Lord, then we will perform it in the most humble and attentive way possible.

Furthermore, we have been recommended to pray each salat as if it is our last so that we perform it in the best possible way. For example, Imam Ja'far Sadiq (a) is quoted as saying:

إذا صليت صلاة فريضة ، فصلها لوقتها صلاة مودّع يخاف أن لا يعود إليها
أبداً ، ثم اصرف ببصرك إلى موضع سجودك ، فلو تعلم من عن يمينك وشمالك
لأحسنيت صلاتك ، واعلم أنك بين يدي من يراك ولا تراه

When you are going to say your obligatory prayer say it in its time like the one who is saying his farewell prayer fearing that he may never be able to return back to it (prayer). Then stare at the place of your prostration. If you know who stand on your right and left (angels) you will say your prayer properly. And know that you stand before the One Who is seeing you, but you do not see Him.³

The Noble Prophet's Attitude to Prayer

In a beautiful narration, Imam Sadiq (a) quotes the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) as saying:

جعل قرّة عيني في الصلاة

My joy rests in prayer.⁴

When the time for prayer was approaching, the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) was as excited as a very hungry and thirsty person is when the time for eating a meal approaches. The prophet told Abu Dharr:

يا أباذر: جعل الله جل ثناؤه قرّة عيني في الصلاة. وحبب إلي الصلاة كما
حبب إلي الجائع الطعام ، وإلى الظمآن الماء. وإن الجائع إذا أكل شبع وإن
الظمآن إذا شرب روى ، وأنا لا أشبع من الصلاة.

Oh Abu Dharr! God, the Exalted, has made my joy and rest in prayer and has made me love prayer like food for a hungry person and water for a thirsty one. However, the hungry and thirsty person no longer feels hungry and thirsty after eating and drinking, but my hunger for prayer never gets over.⁵

As soon as the time for praying arrived, the Prophet (s) used to say to Bilal:

أرحنا يا بلال

Oh Bilal! Give us comfort please!⁶

This comfort was the call to prayer (adhan) as a preparation for starting prayer. This shows that even though the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) was constantly remembering God, however his feelings before, during and after prayer were different. Although he always felt himself to be in the presence of God, however prayer was something special and unique for him.

The characteristics of humble people

According to the verse 2:45 mentioned at the beginning of this article, only those who are humble and do not have any arrogance are able to have such feelings towards prayer. The next verse describes those who are humble:

الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُلَاقُوا رَبِّهِمْ وَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

Who are certain that they will encounter their Lord, and that they will return to Him. (2:46)

Thus, if we forget that we will die and will return to God then we will not feel humble. According to a narration from the Noble Prophet of Islam (s), if it were not for death, poverty and illness then people would not have worshipped God.⁷ Many people are religious due to the fact that they witness these

three things in the society in which they live and therefore, they perceive that they are limited in ability and capacity and very much in need of a higher source of power which is limitless and infinite. Thus they become more humble.

The meaning of humility

It can be understood from Islamic hadiths, that *khashi'in*, as mentioned in the verse, are those who are very humble when saying their prayers and this humility can be seen in their physical features, although real humility resides in their heart. In Arabic, "khushu" is different from "khudu". While the latter appears in the body, the former relates to the heart. Of course, having humility in the heart automatically leads to having humility in the body as well.

The one who has the most humility in prayer is the one who most welcomes their prayer and the greatest examples of this are the Noble Prophet (s) and his household (a). According to hadiths, the Noble Prophet (s) and holy Imams (a) were not in their normal condition whilst praying: the colour of their face changed and they were shaking because they knew the status of 'the One' before whom they were praying. This is even more astonishing when we remember that it is reported that they never felt fear in battle even when confronted by thousands of enemies. It should be mentioned that their special condition at the time of praying was out of their love for God not due to a feeling of fear. This fact is confirmed by the following narration in which the Noble Prophet of Islam (s) has been quoted as saying:

أفضل الناس من عشق العبادة فعانقها واحبها بقلبه وباشرها بجسده وتفرغ لها
فهو لا يبالي على ما أصبح من الدنيا على عسر أم على يسر

The best amongst people is the one who loves worship and embraces it, likes it with his heart, touches it with his body and makes himself free and available for it. Then he does not worry whether the worldly life is easy or difficult.⁸

Although the root "ishq" (love) and its derivatives are not found in the Glorious Qur'an and occur in only a few narrations, in this tradition this word has been mentioned. Based on this narration, the best type of worship is when both the heart and the body of the worshipper are involved. Therefore, it is not enough to sit somewhere and just think about worshipping God. There are some people who, denying the necessity of prayer, hold that contemplation can be regarded as a substitute for prayer. Of course, contemplation per se is needed, but it can never replace prayer. Prayer involves every aspect of a person including his mind, his body and his soul.

This narration implies that those who love worship make themselves free and available for it. If a person loves someone and is informed that their beloved is coming to them, then they will make themselves free

for their beloved. Keeping in mind that saying a prayer only takes a few minutes, we have to plan our life in a way that in such a limited amount of time we make our body and soul completely free for our beloved. This means that our mind should not be preoccupied with thoughts of our work, activities, appointments, and so on.

Furthermore, when we are with our beloved, we make great efforts to be very careful about our words and actions and pay utmost attention to our beloved so that we do not say or do anything which causes suffering to their heart or which might give the impression that we do not love them enough. So, we should be even more concerned to be like this regarding our worship.

The last part of the narration indicates that loving worship makes us unconcerned with worldly affairs. When we are with our beloved, then we do not worry about what has happened to us in the past or what will happen in future.

Thus, when we say that the Noble Prophet (s) and the Imams (a) felt very different during prayer, it was not because they were frightened, rather it was due to the humility and joy that they felt.

According to what has already been said, we need to gain this appreciation of prayer and fasting so that they can give us support and assistance in this world.

Some narrations regarding prayer and fasting

When someone has prayer and fasting as their constant companions, they feel strong. We live in a society in which we need endless support, since this society may not appreciate our faith and many things are not favourable to our faith. Sometimes we may experience the feeling of being alone in society and so we need some help. Thus, if we know how to approach prayer and fasting properly, they will be two great sources of help and assistance for us. Imam Sadiq (a) says:

ما يمنع أحدكم إذا دخل عليه غم من غموم الدنيا أن يتوضأ ثم يدخل المسجد
فيركع ركعتين يدعو الله فيهما، أما سمعت الله تعالى يقول: واستعينوا بالصبر
والصلاة

Whenever you have some grief and you are very sad, make ablution and go to the mosque and say two units of prayer, calling God in it, since God has said: "And take recourse in patience and prayer."⁹

So if we have any problem with our family, in our job and so on, we should seek divine assistance through prayer. Abu Basir narrates that Imam Sadiq (a) said:

كان علي (عليه السلام) إذا هاله شيء فزع إلى الصلاة، ثم تلا هذه الآية:
{وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ}

Whenever something was making Imam Ali (a) worried, he used to say prayers. Then Imam Sadiq (a) recited the verse: "And take recourse in patience and prayer."¹⁰

A narration in Al-Kafi reads:

عن أبي عبد الله عليه السلام في قول الله عزّ وجلّ: ﴿وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ﴾
قال: "الصبر الصيام، وقال: إذا نزلت بالرجل النازلة والشديدة فليصم فإن الله
عزّ وجلّ يقول: ﴿وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ﴾ يعني الصيام

Imam Sadiq (a) regarding the verse "Take recourse in patience," said: "Patience is fasting; when a disaster or some great difficulty happens to someone, he should fast since God says: 'And take recourse in patience,' which means fasting."¹¹

Thus, Muslim scholars have suggested that one of the cases in which fasting is recommended (mustahab) is when we have some difficulty.

According to a tradition narrated by 'Ayyashi in his Al-Tafsir, interpreting the above-mentioned verse, Imam Kazim (a) said:

الصبر الصيام، و قال: إذا نزلت بالرجل النازلة الشديدة فليصم. إن الله عز و
جل يقول: و استعينوا بالصبر يعني الصيام

Patience means fasting; whenever a calamity or disaster occurs for somebody, he should fast since God says: "And take recourse in patience and prayer" and patience is fasting.¹²

Prayer as a light

Finally, we have to remember that the only thing that can give us light is remembrance of God. There are some types of light that God has given us at the very beginning of our life, but gaining more light is dependent on remembering God. Every act of worship, whether it be prayer, fasting, giving charity and so on, only gives us more light if it results in our remembrance of God.

God is the Absolute Light and remembrance of Him exposes us to this light. So we are not creating our own light, rather we are trying to gain light from God in much the same way that when we are cold we try to go near a source of heat and expose ourselves to it in order to gain warmth and energy from it. In the same way, if we want to gain knowledge, we try to go to a scholar and open our hearts and minds to their knowledge by listening to them and paying attention to their words.

Along the same lines, Chapter 20, verse 14 reads:

أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذِكْرِي

Establish prayer for my remembrance.

Thus, prayer is intended to help us remember God. Furthermore, Chapter 29, verse 45 reads:

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَى عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ ۗ وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ

Indeed prayer prevents indecencies and wrongdoing, and the remembrance of Allah is surely greater.

Prayer is the best way of remembering God and remembrance of God is the only source for gaining light from Him. Thus, prayer is the best method for attaining divine light.

Interestingly, everything that serves prayer would have the same function. Accordingly, many narrations consider ablution as light and making another ablution, when one already has it, as light on top of light.¹³ So every ablution that we make provides us with more light. For example, if we enter a room and turn on one light then turn it off and then on again, we will have the same amount of light. But if we turn on additional lights, we will experience extra light. The reason why ablution provides this light, when it only takes a few seconds and consists of a few simple actions, and yet something like swimming for a long time completely immersed in water does not have the same result, is that making ablution is done for the sake of prayer. We seek purity through ablution and by this we prepare ourselves for gaining further purity through prayer. Ablution is like a noble person who serves a nobler person.

In the same way the place where we regularly say our prayers becomes significant to such an extent that, according to some narrations, if someone is at the point of death, we are advised to take them to the place where they used to say their prayers in order for them to die peacefully and easily. We should endeavor to make a very personal relationship with prayer so that it becomes a close and supportive companion to us throughout our life, at the moment of death and beyond.

The fact that the masjid is a sacred place comes from the same philosophy, it is a place dedicated to prayer. The Imam of the masjid is important because he leads the prayer. Therefore, prayer can give value to everything because, as mentioned earlier, it is the best way of remembering God; and so anything that assists us with it or is associated with it, is also valuable.

It should also be mentioned that prayer is regarded as remembrance of God as long as we are concentrating during prayer and our mind and soul are fully connected to God. If we are neglectful of our connection with God during our prayer, it is not a real or an acceptable prayer, although our prayer may be ritually valid and we would not be subject to punishment for abandoning prayer. However, we may not gain light from those parts of our prayer in which we forget God.

As suggested by some narrations, by virtue of the Mercy of God, saying recommended prayers (nawafil) can compensate for the moments in prayer during which we did not have concentration or presence of heart and therefore we did not remember God. For example, Abu Hamzah al-Thumali reports:

رَأَيْتَ عَلِيَّ بْنَ الْحُسَيْنِ عَلَيْهِمَا السَّلَامُ يُصَلِّي فَسَقَطَ رِدَاؤُهُ عَنْ مَنْكَبَيْهِ قَالَ فَلَمْ يَسُوهُ حَتَّى فَرَغَ مِنْ صَلَاتِهِ قَالَ: فَسَأَلْتُهُ عَنْ ذَلِكَ فَقَالَ: وَيْحَكَ أَتَدْرِي بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مَنْ كُنْتُ؟ إِنَّ الْعَبْدَ لَا يَقْبَلُ مِنْهُ صَلَاةٌ إِلَّا مَا أَقْبَلَ مِنْهَا، فَقُلْتُ جَعَلْتَ فِدَاكَ هَلَكْنَا فَقَالَ: كَلَّا إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى يَتِمُّ ذَلِكَ بِالنَّوَافِلِ

Abu Hamzah saw Imam Sajjad (a) saying his prayer while his cloak dropped from his shoulders, but Imam did not put it back on his shoulder and continued his prayer. After Imam's prayer finished, he asked Imam about the reason and Imam replied:

وَيْحَكَ أَتَدْرِي بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ مَنْ كُنْتُ ، إِنَّ الْعَبْدَ لَا يَقْبَلُ مِنْ صَلَاتِهِ إِلَّا مَا أَقْبَلَ عَلَيْهِ مِنْهَا بِقَلْبِهِ ، فَقَالَ الرَّجُلُ : هَلَكْنَا ، فَقَالَ : كَلَّا ، إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّوَجَلَّ يَتِمُّ ذَلِكَ بِالنَّوَافِلِ

Woe to you! Do you know before whom I was standing? Truly none of one's prayer is accepted except the one in which his heart has been present.

At this point Abu Hamzah told Imam that if this is the case then we are finished, but Imam replied: "Nay! Truly God the Almighty completes that with the nawafil (recommended daily prayers)."14

The rituals after prayer known as ta'qibat, such as the tasbih (rosary) of Lady Fatimah Zahra (a) and various supplications, may also have the same function. For example there is a supplication in which we

ask God to put right any problem or deficiency that might have occurred in our prayer.

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1. This is the transcript of the first lecture of a series of lecture on "Secrets of Prayer and Fasting" by the author in London in July 2001. The transcription is made by Mrs Aliya Azam and Mrs Zaianab Rezavi.
 2. Tafsir-e Nemuneh, vol. 11, p. 14
 3. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 5, p. 474.
 4. Ibid., vol. 20, p. 22
 5. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 74, p. 78; vol. 79. p. 232.
 6. Ibid., vol. 79, p. 193
 7. Ibid. vol. 5, p. 316.
 8. Al-Kafi, vol. 2. p. 83.
 9. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 8, p. 138.
 10. Al-Kafi, vol. 3, p. 480.
 11. Ibid, vol. 4, p. 63.
 12. Al-Tafsir of 'Ayyashi, vol. 1, p. 43.
 13. Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 1, p. 377.
 14. Tahdhib al-Ahkam, vol.2, p. 342.

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