

## **THE MEANING OF THE DIFFERENT TIMES OF PRAYER**

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Glory be to God whenever you reach evening and whenever you rise in the morning, and all praise is for Him in the heavens and on earth, and in the late afternoon and whenever you reach the noon. (30:17)

You ask me the reasons for the apportioning of the daily prayers into five definite durations. I'll take up just one of very many reasons.

Each occasion of prayer is not only the opening of a significant turning point but also is a mirror to Divine disposal of power and to the universal Divine bounties within that disposal. We are enjoined to perform the prescribed prayers at these defined times so as to give more adoration and glory to the All-Powerful One of Majesty and to give more thanks to Him for all the bounties that have been accumulated between any two occasions. That is the meaning of the prescribed prayers. To comprehend a little this subtle and profound meaning, consider the following points:

### **First point**

Each particular prayer stands for praising and glorifying God and feeling grateful to Him. That is, it is to glorify Him by uttering subhan-Allah (Glory be to God) by word and action in the awareness of His Majesty. It is to exalt and magnify Him, by uttering Allahu akbar (God is the Greatest), through word and act in the awareness of His Perfection. Thirdly it is, by uttering al-hamdu li-llah (All praise be to God) with the heart, tongue, and body, to offer thanks to Him in the awareness of His Grace. From this we conclude that glorification, exaltation, and praise and thanksgiving are the heart of prayer. It is for this reason that these three things are present in all parts of the prayer, in all its actions and words. Further, following each prayer, these three holy phrases are repeated thirty-three times each, in order to confirm and complete the objectives of prayer. The meaning of prayer is pronounced consecutively with these concise utterances.

### **Second point**

The meaning of worship is this: Man, a servant of God, being aware of his defects, weakness and poverty in the Divine presence, prostrates himself in love and wonderment before the perfection of His Lordship, His Divine Might, on which every creature relies, and His Divine Compassion. In other words, the Sovereignty of His Lordship demands devotion and obedience. His Holiness also requires us human beings to see our defects and ask for His pardon, to proclaim that He is free

from any defect and from the false judgments of unaware people and beyond all the failings of His creatures.

The Perfection of His Might requires that the servant, in the realization of his weakness and the helplessness of all other creatures, proclaims God is the Greatest in admiration and amazement before the majesty of His works. Bowing in deep humility, he seeks refuge in Him and places his trust in Him.

And the boundless treasury of the Lord's Compassion demands that the servant declares his own needs and those of all creatures by praying and asking for His help, and that he proclaims His blessings through praise and gratitude, uttering al-hamdu li-llah. In short, the words and actions of the prescribed prayers comprise all these meanings, and were therefore ordered and arranged by God.

### **Third point**

Mankind is a miniature of the whole universe. In the same way, the first sura (chapter) of the Quran, the Fatiha, is an illuminated miniature of the whole Book. The prayer is a bright index, involving all ways of worship, and a sacred map, hinting at the diverse kinds of worship of all species of living things.

### **Fourth point**

The consecutive divisions of day and night, the years and phases of each individual's life in the world, are, as it were, an immense time-piece whose parts function like the wheels and levers of a clock which, as they move, calculate seconds, minutes and hours. For example:

The time of Fajr (the early morning) was appointed for the morning prayer until sunrise. It may be likened to the birth of spring, or the moment when sperm takes refuge in the protective womb, or to the first of the six consecutive days during which the earth and the sky were created. It recalls how God disposes His Power and acts in such times and events.

The time of Zuhr (just past midday) may be likened to the completion of adolescence, or the middle of summer, or the period of man's creation in the lifetime of the world. It too points to God's compassionate manifestations and abundant blessings in those events and periods of time.

The time of 'Asr (afternoon) resembles autumn, and old age, and the time of the Last Prophet, known as the Time of Happiness. It calls to mind the Divine acts and the favors of the All-Compassionate in them.

The time of Maghrib (sunset) reminds of the decline of very many creatures at the end of autumn, and man's death. It thus forewarns us of the destruction of the world at the beginning of the Resurrection and also teaches us how to understand the manifestation of God's Majesty and in this way wakes us from a deep sleep of neglect.

The time of 'Isha (nightfall), calls to mind the world of darkness veiling all the objects of the daytime with its black shroud, and winter covering the surface of the dead earth with its white cerement. It brings to mind, also, the remaining works of the dead being wholly forgotten, and points out to us the inevitable, complete decline of this world which is a place of testing. Thus 'Isha time proclaims the awesome acts of the Over-powering One of Majesty.

As for the nighttime, by putting in his mind the winter, the grave, and the Intermediate World, it reminds man how much his spirit really needs the Mercy of the All-Merciful One.

The tahajjud prayer, in the later, deeper part of the night, reminds and warns us how necessary a light this prayer will be in the darkness of the grave. In this way, by recalling the infinite bounties of the True Bestower granted to man within the sequence of all these extraordinary events, it proclaims how worthy He is of praise and thanks.

The next morning is a time that points to the morning following the Resurrection. As reasonable, necessary and certain it is that morning follows night, and spring comes after winter, so the morning of the Resurrection or a spring following the Intermediate Life is equally certain to come.

We now understand that each appointed occasion for the five daily prayers is itself the beginning of a vital turning-point and a reminder of greater revolutions or turning-points in the life of the universe. Through the awesome daily disposals of the Eternally Besought One's Power, the times of the prayers call to mind the miracles of Divine Power and the gifts of Divine Mercy in every year, every age and every epoch. So, the prescribed prayers, which are an innate duty and the basis of worship and an unquestionable obligation of man, are most appropriate and fitted for these times.

### **Fifth point**

**Doing the daily prescribed prayers each at its time is an essential need for human spirit**

Man is created rather weak, yet everything involves, affects and saddens him. Also he is utterly lacking in power, yet the calamities and enemies that afflict him are numerous. He is also extremely poor and has many needs. In addition, he is indolent and incapable, yet the burden of life is very heavy. Being a human being, he is connected with the rest of the world, yet the vanishing of the things he loves and with which he is familiar, and the grief that this can cause, repeatedly hurt him. Finally, his mentality and senses inspire him toward glorious objectives and point him to eternal gains, but he is unable, impatient, powerless, and has rather a short life time.

Thus, it can be clearly understood how essential it is for a spirit in this state at the time of Fajr-the early morning-to present a petition, through prayer and supplication, to the Court of an All-Powerful One of Majesty, an All-Compassionate One of Grace. Man must seek success and help from Him. How necessary a point of support it is so that he can bear and endure the troubles and burdens that he might face in daytime.

Zuhr (noon) is the period of time when the day is at its zenith, and starts to move forward to complete its course. It is a time when people retire to have a temporary rest from business and other affairs, and when the spirit needs a pause from the heedlessness and insensibility caused by hard work, and Divine bounties are fully manifest.

It is difficult, then, to regard a man as truly human who does not realize how good, necessary, agreeable and proper it is to perform the noon prayer. Man, in a relief from the pressures of daily life and from heedlessness, stands in humility in the presence of the Real Bestower of the blessings, expresses his gratitude and prays for His help. He also bows to demonstrate his helplessness before His Glory and Might, and prostrates to proclaim his wonder, love, and humility before His everlasting Perfection and matchless Grace.

As for the time of 'Asr in the afternoon, it resembles and calls to mind the sad season of autumn and the mournful state of old age, and the distressing period at the end of time. It is the time when the tasks of the day are brought toward completion, and the Divine bounties received that day, like health, safety and good service in the way of God, have accumulated to form a great total. It is also the time when we witness the sun fade down the horizon proving that everything is impermanent: here today and gone tomorrow. Now man who longs for eternity and who is created for it, and shows reverence for favors to him, but who is sad on account of particular separations, stands up, performs ablution, and after that, the appointed prayer. Thus, anyone who is truly human, may understand what an exalted duty, what an appropriate service, what a reasonable way of paying a debt of gratitude, indeed, what an agreeable pleasure it is to perform the afternoon

prayer. For by offering supplications at the Eternal Court of the Everlasting, by seeking refuge in His infinite Mercy, and by offering thanks and praise for His countless bounties, he has peace of mind. By bowing humbly before the Might and Glory of His Lordship, and by prostrating himself in utter humility before His Eternal Divinity, he finds true consolation and ease of spirit.

Evening time reminds us of the beginning of winter and of the sad farewells of the fragile creatures of summer and autumn. It reminds also of the sorrowful separation of man from his beloved ones through death. Again, it calls to mind the time when the lamp of the sun of the earth, this place of testing, will be extinguished and the inhabitants of this world will emigrate to the other world following the collapse resulting from the final, fated earthquakes. It is also a severe warning for those who adore transient, ephemeral beloveds, each of whom is certain to die one day.

At the time of evening prayer, the human spirit, which by its nature longs for an Eternal Beauty, turns towards the Eternal Being, Who creates and frames all these events and phenomena, Who commands huge heavenly bodies. It is the time when the human spirit refuses to rely on anything finite and cries out Allahu akbar—meaning God is the Greatest. Then, in His presence, pronouncing al-hamdu lillah, all praise be to God, man praises Him in the awareness of His faultless Perfection, matchless Beauty and Grace and infinite Mercy. Afterwards, by declaring, You alone do we worship, and from You alone do we beg help (1:5) he offers his worship for, and seeks help from, His unassisted Lordship, unpartnered Divinity, and unshared Sovereignty. Then, man bows before God's infinite Greatness, limitless Power, and perfect Honor and Glory, thus demonstrating, together with all of the creation, his weakness and helplessness, and humility and poverty, and says, 'Glory be to my Lord, the Mighty.' Following this, prostrating himself before Him in the awareness of the undying Beauty and Grace of His Essence, His unchanging sacred Attributes, and his constant everlasting Perfection, man proclaims, through detachment from all other than Him, his love and servanthood in wonder and self-abasement. He finds an All-Beautiful, Permanent, All-Compassionate Eternal One, and through saying, 'Glory be to my Lord, the Most Exalted,' he declares his Most Exalted Lord to be free of any declining or fault.

After that, man sits reverently and offers, on his own account, to the Eternal, All-Powerful and All-Majestic One, the praises and glorification of all creatures, and prays God to bestow peace and blessings on His holy Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings. By doing so, he renews his allegiance to God's Messenger and proclaims his obedience to his commands and renews and strengthens his faith. In the observation of the wise order in this palace of the universe, he testifies to the Oneness of the Creator and the Messengership of Muhammad. The Prophet is the herald of the sovereignty of God's Lordship, proclaimer of those things

pleasing to Him, and the interpreter of the signs or verses of the Book of the Universe. How then can a man be truly human who does not realize what an agreeable duty is the evening prayer? It is a valuable and pleasurable act of service, a fine and beautiful form of worship, and a serious matter. What a significant conversation with the Creator, and what a permanent happiness it is in this transient guesthouse!

The time of 'Isha (nightfall), being the time when the last traces of the day remaining on the horizon disappear, and night covers the earth, reminds us of the mighty disposals of God's Lordship as the Changer of Night and Day. It recalls to us the Divine activities of the All-Wise One of Perfection as the Subduer of the Sun and the Moon. They can be observed in His turning the white page of day into the black page of night, and in His changing the beautifully colored script of summer into the frigid white page of winter. This time of the day also recalls the acts of God as the Creator of Life and Death in the complete passage of the remaining works of the dead to another world in the course of time. It is a time that calls to mind the majestic disposals and the graceful manifestations of God as the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth. We can see these in the utter destruction of this narrow, mortal and lowly world with tremendous uproars and convulsions, and in the unfolding of the broad, eternal and majestic World of the Hereafter. It also warns that only the One, Who can so easily turn the day into night, winter into summer, and this world into the other world, can be the Owner and the True Master of the universe, alone worthy to be worshipped and truly loved.

Thus, at nightfall, man's spirit, which is infinitely helpless and weak, and infinitely poor and needy, and tossed hither and thither by diverse circumstances and whirling onward into a dark, unknown future, performs 'Isha prayer. His doing so has this meaning: Like Abraham, man is saying, 'I do not love those that set,' and through his prayers he seeks refuge at the Court of the Ever-Living, and the Ever-Worshipped, the Eternal Beloved One. From the transient life in this dark, fleeting world and dark future he begs from the Enduring, Everlasting One, and for a moment of unending conversation, a few seconds of immortal life. He asks to receive the favors of the All-Merciful and Compassionate, and the light of His guidance, which will throw light on his world and illuminate his future and bind up the hurts from the decline of all creatures and friends.

Briefly, man forgets the world, which has left him for the night, and pours out his heart's grief at the Court of Mercy with tears. Before sleep comes, which resembles death, and since anything may happen, he performs his day's 'last' duty of worship. In order to close favorably the record of his day's actions, he gets up to pray. That is, he rises to enter the presence of the Eternal Beloved and Worshipped One rather than the mortal ones he has loved all day. He seeks the presence of the All-Powerful and Generous One rather than the impotent creatures

from which he has begged all day. He takes refuge in the presence of the All-Compassionate Protector in the hope of being saved from the evil of the harmful creatures before which he has trembled all day.

He starts with the Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Quran, that is, instead of flattering and being indebted to flawed, needy creatures, which is improper, he extols the praise of the Lord of the worlds, Perfect and Self-Sufficient, Compassionate and All-Generous. Then he progresses to address, 'You alone do We worship.' That is, despite his insignificance and his being alone, through man's connection with the Owner of the Day of Judgment, Who is the Eternal Sovereign, he attains to the status of an indulged guest and important officer in the universe. Through the declaration, 'You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help,' he presents to Him, in the name of all creatures, their worship and pleads for His assistance for the whole, mighty congregation of all creatures. Then, by saying, 'Guide us to the Straight Path,' he asks to be guided to the Straight Path, which leads to eternal happiness and is the radiant way.

It is now the turn of saying, 'God is the Greatest,' and bowing down in contemplation of the Grandeur of the Majestic One. Like the sleeping plants and animals, the hidden suns and 'waking' stars are like individual soldiers subject to His command, and lamps and servants in this guesthouse of the world. He thinks now of the great prostration of all creatures. At the command of 'Be! and it is,' all the varieties of creatures of every age and epoch-even the earth and the universe-like a well-ordered army of obedient soldiers, each discharged from its duty, that is, sent to the World of the Unseen, through the prostration of de cease and death in perfect orderliness, each declares, 'God is the Greatest,' and bows down in prostration. As they are raised to life in the spring, at an arousing, life-giving trumpet-blast from the command of 'Be! and it is,' they rise up and are girded ready to serve their Lord. Insignificant man too, following them, declares, 'God is the Greatest,' in wonder-struck love and eternity-tinged humility and dignified self-effacement, and bows down in prostration. He achieves a sort of Ascension. And certainly you will now have grasped how agreeable, becoming, happy, and elevated, how noble and delightful, reasonable and appropriate a duty, service, and act of worship, and what a serious matter it is to perform the 'Isha prayer.

Thus, since each of these five times is a pointer to a mighty revolution, a sign to the tremendous activity of the Lord, and a token of the universal Divine bounties, the prescribed prayers, which are a duty and an obligation, being specified as they are is perfect wisdom.

Glory be to You. We have no knowledge save what You have taught us. Surely You are the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

O God! Bestow blessings and peace upon the one You sent as a teacher to Your servants to instruct them in knowledge of You and worship of You, and to make known the treasures of Your Names, the interpreter of the signs or verses of Your Book of the Universe, and a mirror, through his worship, to the Grace of Your Lordship, and upon all his family and Companions, and have mercy on us and all believing men and women. Amen. For the sake of Your Compassion, O Most Compassionate of the compassionate!