

Istikharah The Guidance Prayer

We are humans, powerless in this sphere of life, knowledgeable only enough to survive. So why shouldn't we turn to Allah and seek His perfect help whenever we require it? Allah responds to the call of His servant when he asks for guidance, and we are after all seeking to do something in order to please Him.

Istikharah means to ask Allah to guide you to the path best for you concerning an affair with two halal options. In matters that are wajib (obligatory), haram (forbidden) or makruh (disliked) there is no need to pray Istikharah. Salaat-ul-Istikharah should only be used for matters that are mubah (allowed) or in matters that are mustahabb (liked or encouraged), in which there is a decision to be made as to which one should be given priority (i.e. get married or go to grad school).

Many wrong notions exist concerning istikharah. Many Muslims will pray, read the du'a, and run to bed expecting to see a dream showing them their future wife, what her favourite colour is, and some other weird fantasy. That is not the purpose of this salat.

The results of an istikharah can take many forms. Basically, you go by your feelings, whether you now feel more favourable or not. Also, you may notice events have changed, either for or against you. Note that you must follow the results of an istikharah, because not doing so is tantamount to rejecting Allah's guidance once you've asked for it. Also, you should firstly clear your mind, not have your mind already decided, and then afterwards follow the results willingly.

It is a sunnah that, if one must choose between permissible alternatives, one may pray two non-obligatory rak'at, even if they are of the sunnah prayers or a prayer for entering the mosque, and so on, during any time of the day or night, and to recite therein whatever one wishes of the Qur'an after reciting al-Fatihah. Then one praises Allah and sends salutations to the Prophet and recites the supplication in the Hadith below.

The description of Salaat-ul-Istikharah was narrated by Jabir ibn 'Abd- Allah al-Salami (may Allah be pleased with him) who said:

"The Messenger of Allah used to teach his companions to make istikharah in all things, just as he used to teach them surahs from the Qur'an.

He said: 'If any one of you is concerned about a decision he has to make, then let him pray two rak'ahs of non-obligatory prayer, then say:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَسْتَخِيرُكَ بِعِلْمِكَ ، وَأَسْتَقْدِرُكَ بِقُدْرَتِكَ ،
 وَأَسْأَلُكَ مِنْ فَضْلِكَ الْعَظِيمِ فَإِنَّكَ تَقْدِرُ وَلَا أَقْدِرُ ،
 وَتَعْلَمُ وَلَا أَعْلَمُ ، وَأَنْتَ عَلَّامُ الْغُيُوبِ ، اللَّهُمَّ إِنْ كُنْتَ
 تَعْلَمُ أَنَّ هَذَا الْأَمْرَ — Mention your Need here — خَيْرٌ لِي فِي دِينِي
 وَمَعَاشِي وَعَاقِبَةِ أَمْرِي فَاقْدِرْهُ لِي وَيَسِّرْهُ لِي ثُمَّ بَارِكْ
 لِي فِيهِ ، وَإِنْ كُنْتَ تَعْلَمُ أَنَّ هَذَا الْأَمْرَ شَرٌّ لِي فِي دِينِي
 وَمَعَاشِي وَعَاقِبَةِ أَمْرِي فَاصْرِفْهُ عَنِّي وَاصْرِفْنِي عَنْهُ
 وَاقْدِرْ لِي الْخَيْرَ حَيْثُ كَانَ ثُمَّ أَرْضِنِي بِهِ .

'O Allah, I seek Your guidance [in making a choice] by virtue of Your knowledge, and I seek ability by virtue of Your power, and I ask You of Your great bounty. You have power, I have none. And You know, I know not. You are the Knower of hidden things. O Allah, if in Your knowledge, this matter (then it should be mentioned by name) is good for me both in this world and in the Hereafter (or: in my religion, my livelihood and my affairs), then ordain it for me, make it easy for me, and bless it for me. And if in Your knowledge it is bad for me and for my religion, my livelihood and my affairs (or: for me both in this world and the next), then turn me away from it, [and turn it away from me], and ordain for me the good wherever it may be and make me pleased with it."

The Prophet added that then the person should mention his need. [Sahih Bukhari]

Salat-ul-Istikharah is just two rakats of a non-obligatory prayer, prayed at anytime during the day, with a specific dua at the end. While reciting the dua, you should be thinking about the situation you want to be advised about with pure intentions and from the bottom of your heart. And Allah says that whenever he guides a heart aright it can never be misguided. Afterwards, you should 'have a good feeling'

about one of your options. Whatever option you feel is best right after you say the dua should be your decision. If you're still in doubt, you can repeat.

An-Nawawi holds that

"...after performing the istikharah, a person must do what he is wholeheartedly inclined to do and feels good about doing and should not insist on doing what he had desired to do before making the istikharah. And if his feelings change, he should leave what he had intended to do, otherwise he is not completely leaving the choice to Allah, and would not be honest in seeking aid from Allah's power and knowledge. Sincerity in seeking Allah's choice, means that one should completely leave what he himself had desired or determined."

Some people mistakenly wait for a dream to give a clear sign as to what decision to make, but this is not true, and often times it never really happens. In fact, dreams may lead you away from what Allah wants you to do, as Shaytan might try to deceive you in your dreams.

Salat-ul-Istikharah is for everybody. It's a way for all of us to implore Allah for divine guidance and mercy. It is yet another invaluable resource from Allah to keep us on the straight and narrow Sirat al-Mustaqim. The Prophet told all Muslims about Istikharah, not just the scholars. Despite this gift, too many of us take the advice of our friends and parents, or accept the norms of our society and act without ever wondering what Allah wants us to do. We must stop looking to the dunya for guidance. We must begin to consult Allah.

I cannot provide a better conclusion than saying that you must put your trust in Allah. You must have trust in His concern for us, and His ability to help us. Allah says:

"Put your trust in Allâh, certainly, Allâh loves those who put their trust (in Him)."
[Surah Al-Imran Ayah 159]