

Ramadan Daily Quran Studies, compiled by Dr Zahid Aziz, 2026

Derived largely from the writings of Maulana Muhammad Ali

*Produced by:*

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# **Study 14: Prayer — Form and Spirit**

- The Arabic word for prayer is *ṣalāt*, which originally means ‘praying’ or ‘the making of a supplication’. This word was used in this sense before Islam.
- In the Holy Quran, this word is used both in the technical sense of the Divine service as established by Islam, and in the general sense of simply *praying* as in:
  - “surely your prayer (*ṣalāt*) is a relief to them” — 9:103.

The meaning here is that the prayer of the Holy Prophet ﷺ for his followers brings comfort to them.

- The Quran says to Muslims:

حِفْظُوا عَلَى الصَّلَوَاتِ وَالصَّلَاةِ الْوُسْطَىٰ وَقُومُوا لِلَّهِ قَانِتِينَ ﴿٢٣٨﴾

“Guard the prayers (*ṣalawāt*) and the most excellent prayer (*ṣalāt al-wuṣṭā*),  
and stand up truly obedient to Allah.” — 2:238

- This “guarding of prayers” is not simply the observance of the outward form. It is both the form and the spirit. The “most excellent prayer” (*ṣalāt al-wuṣṭā*) is not a particular prayer (though some say it is the *aṣr* prayer because *wuṣṭā* means “middle” as well). It means that we must attend to prayer in the most excellent way, both as regards the form and the spirit.

- In the sense of the prescribed prayer, the word *ṣalāt* is almost always used with a word derived from *iqāmah* which means ‘keeping a thing in a right state’.
- It is this combination in the Quran which is translated as “keeping up prayer”. For example, *iqīmuṣ-ṣalāt* used in several places is the command to “keep up prayer”.
- The *iqāmah* of *ṣalāt* really means the *keeping of the prayer in a right state*, which includes both the proper observance of the outward form and maintaining its true spirit.

- The fixing of the times of prayers is also a part of the external form of prayer. The Quran says:

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ كَانَتْ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ كِتَابًا مَّوْقُوتًا ﴿١٠٣﴾

“Prayer indeed has been enjoined on the believers at fixed times.” — 4:103

أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِدُلُوكِ الشَّمْسِ إِلَى غَسَقِ اللَّيْلِ وَقُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ إِنَّ قُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ كَانَ مَشْهُودًا ﴿٢٨﴾

“Keep up prayer from the declining of the sun till the darkness of the night,  
and the recital of the Quran at dawn.

Surely the recital of the Quran at dawn is witnessed.”

— 17:78

- The Quran does not explicitly state the times of prayer, but it does give indications of these times.
- The Holy Prophet Muhammad, by his practice and his teaching, showed Muslims what those times are. He was taught those times by Allah.
- In a hadith the Holy Prophet ﷺ related how once he was led in all the prayers by the angel Jibreel over two days, from the midday prayer to the next morning's prayer. (Abu Dawud, hadith 393)
- On the first day the Holy Prophet was shown the earliest time of each prayer, and on the second day the latest time.

- Of course, the Holy Prophet ﷺ saw the angel in a state of vision, not that the angel was a physical being who was present there bodily.
- The limits of those prayer times were as follows:
  - *Zuhr*: when the sun begins to decline **till** *aṣr*
  - *Aṣr*: when the sun is about midway on its course to setting **till** it begins to set
  - *Maghrib*: after the sun sets **till** the disappearance of the red glow in the west
  - *Ishā*: after the disappearance of the red glow **till** midnight
  - *Fajr*: after dawn **till** sunrise.

- Maulana Muhammad Ali adds the following comment after quoting this hadith:

“Where the days are too short, the *ḡuhr* and the *aṣr* prayers may be combined, and where the nights are too short, the *maghrib* and the *ishā* may be combined. Where the days or nights extend over 24 hours, the times of prayer may be fixed in accordance with the times of work and rest: thus the morning prayer may be said on rising from sleep, the *maghrib* and the *ishā* when going to bed, and the *ḡuhr* and the *aṣr* in the middle of the day’s work.”

(*A Manual of Hadith*, ch. ‘The Institution of Prayer’, footnote 3)

- The postures of the prescribed prayer are as follows:
  - Standing (*qiyām*): in a reverential position, having the feeling that you are standing before the Holy and Majestic Presence of Allah.
  - Bowing down (*rukūʿ*): showing humility while uttering words declaring glory of Allah.
  - Prostration (*sajdah*): a posture of the utmost humility is assumed, while words declaring the glory of Allah and His greatness are on the lips of the worshipper.
  - Sitting (*qaʿdah*): saying various words of prayer.

- Islam allows the modification of these postures in certain cases. For instance, when a person is sick, they may say their prayers in a sitting position, or if unable to sit down, they may say them while lying down, without even bowing down and prostration if necessary. On a journey, a person is allowed to say their prayers while riding or travelling in any vehicle.
- The postures adopted in all such cases must be subject to the requirements of the situation. Even the direction of prayer may not be towards the *Qiblah* but in the direction of travel. However, without necessity, one may not make a departure from the form prescribed by the Holy Prophet ﷺ.

- The outward form of prayer is not, however, the purpose; it is only a help. Thus in the Holy Quran, the observance of the form of the prayer is said to be meant to free a person from evil:

وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ طَرَفِي النَّهَارِ وَزُلْفَا مِنَ اللَّيْلِ ط  
 إِنَّ الْحَسَنَاتِ يُذْهِبْنَ السَّيِّئَاتِ ط ذَلِكَ ذِكْرِي لِلذَّاكِرِينَ ﴿١١٤﴾

“And keep up prayer at the two ends of the day and in the first hours of the night.  
 Surely good deeds take away evil deeds.” — 11:114

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿١﴾ الَّذِينَ هُمْ فِي صَلَاتِهِمْ خَاشِعُونَ ﴿٢﴾

“Successful indeed are the believers, who are humble in their prayers”  
 — 23:1-2

- Corresponding to the different postures of humility which we adopt in saying our prayers, we are commanded to express the praise and glory of God, to mention His great attributes of love, mercy, forgiveness, etc., to confess our own weakness, to pray for Divine help to support us in our weakness and for Divine guidance to lead us aright and make us achieve the goal of our existence.
- All the words that we use for this are known in Arabic by the one name dhikr, which is generally translated as *remembrance*. The whole of prayer is called in the Holy Quran as dhikr Allāh, or the remembrance of Allah.

- Mere form without the spirit is condemned in one of the earliest revelations:

أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يُكَذِّبُ بِالْإِيمَانِ ﴿١﴾ فَذَلِكَ الَّذِي يَدُعُّ الْيَتِيمَ ﴿٢﴾ وَلَا يَحْضُ عَلَىٰ طَعَامِ الْمِسْكِينِ ﴿٣﴾  
فَوَيْلٌ لِلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٤﴾ الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ ﴿٥﴾ الَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَاءُونَ ﴿٦﴾ وَيَمْنَعُونَ الْمَاعُونَ ﴿٧﴾

“Have you seen him who denies religion?

That is the one who is rough to the orphan,  
and does not urge the feeding of the needy.

So woe to the praying ones, who are unmindful of their prayer,  
who do (good) to be seen, and refrain from acts of kindness!”

— ch. 107

*END OF STUDY 14*