

Understanding Islam **Series Two: Standing before God**

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Part Two: Focus on *salat*

During the early years of the Muslim community in Makka, Muhammad was taken on his mysterious night journey to Jerusalem, from where he ascended into heaven and had an audience with God (*mi'raj*). One of the things that he was told on this occasion was that Muslims should pray the *salat* five times each day. The form of the *salat* was shown to him by the angel Gabriel. Observing the *salat* is a central, obligatory element of Islam for all men and women after the age of puberty, although many young children will catch the habit much earlier.

The *salat* is always performed in Arabic and has the same basic form world-wide. This is part of the universal character of Islam, so that a Muslim could join a congregation anywhere on earth and be at home. There are minor variations between the different schools of Islam but the basic structure is common. The use of Arabic means that even those who do not know the language will learn the prayers phonetically and appreciate their meaning in their own language. Similarly, when the Qur'an is recited during *salat*, it must be done in Arabic and from memory not read from a book, which means that every Muslim who is active in prayer will have learnt some verses of the Qur'an in Arabic by heart.

Prayer times

The times for *salat* are set according to the passage of the sun. This means that Muslims do not need to be rich enough to own a watch or be able to read one; everyone can see the sun moving through the sky. In the same way, no adult needs someone else to tell them when it is time for prayer; each is responsible for their own observance without the prompting of a religious leader. These are two signs of the equality of human beings in Islam. Many mosques now publish prayer timetables as times change from week to week according to the seasons of the year. As the sun rises and sets at different times in different places, a prayer timetable must be worked out for each location.

The five times for *salat* are:

Salat al-Fajr before sunrise

Salat al-Zuhr a little after the sun has passed its midpoint

Salat al-'Asr in the late afternoon when the shadows lengthen

Salat al-Maghrib directly after sunset

Salat al-'Isha at night-time.

For each *salat*, there is flexibility about the precise timing. This allows people to arrange their lives so that the prayers naturally fit it. It is a principle of Islamic law

that God does not want to make life difficult for people [Q. 2:185, 286]. The various schools of Islam have rules about how these prayers can be grouped together (e.g., the Shi'a habitually combine the five prayers into three occasions but Sunnis only permit this in exceptional circumstances), shortened (e.g., when travelling) or caught up if they have to be delayed, depending on circumstances. *Salat* can be performed alone or together with others. Fulfilling the duty as part of a congregation does have additional blessings and benefits, being an occasion for communal meeting and support. If people are going to join the congregation in a mosque, then there needs to be an agreed time, which is usually at the start of the allowable period, so that people know when to attend. These times of prayer are drawn to people's attention by the call to prayer or *adhan*. This is called in Arabic from a tower or *minaret* by a man called a *mu'azzin*. These days this can be done with loud-speakers and some mosques even play a beautiful recording. Even if people do not stop what they are doing for prayer, the *adhan* acts as a reminder that they should pray. For example, in some schools of Islam, the *adhan* for the early-morning prayer includes the line "Prayer is better than sleep."

There are minor variations in the form of the *adhan* between the different schools of Islam but the basic formula is as follows, with each line being repeated:

Allahu akbar – God is most great

Ashhadu an la ilaha illa allah – I bear witness that there is no god but God

Ashhadu anna muhammadan rasul allah – I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of God

Hayya 'ala al-salat – Hurry to prayer

Hayya 'ala al-falah – Hurry to success

Allahu akbar – God is most great

La ilaha illa allah – There is no god but God

The place and direction of prayer

Muhammad said that the whole world is a mosque and this spirit still survives in the fact that any place can be used for prayer – as long as it is clean [Q. 2:115, 177]. "Clean" here in two senses: it does not have an unclean use, like a toilet, and it is physically swept out and cleaned. We often associate prayer mats with Muslim prayer and these are used to transform a space into a clean surface for prayer. If someone is going to pray in the office, on a floor on which people walk with their street shoes, then the prayer mat can be rolled out so that it can be used for prayer. Mosques are usually carpeted and shoes removed to maintain their cleanliness. In many cultures around the world, Muslims leave their shoes at the door of the house so that all the carpets can be kept clean for prayer. Sunni Muslims prostrate directly onto the carpet but Shi'a men and women prostrate so that their foreheads rest on a small tablet of dry unbaked clay, called a *turba*. This dates back to the time of Muhammad when people would take a small portion of the sand or pebbles on which they were to pray and cool it by running it through their hands, then making a little mound and using it for prostration so that their foreheads would not be burnt. Many *turba* today are made

from the clay of Karbala in Iraq where Imam Husayn and his companions were massacred.

Salat is performed facing in the direction of the *ka'ba* in Makka. Direction in Arabic is *qibla*. Muslims find the *qibla* by using a compass and then mark it for the future, whether in a mosque, at home or at work. All over the world Muslims turn towards the *ka'ba* for prayer. This means that the *ka'ba* is like the hub at the centre of a wheel. Worshippers are united by this orientation and there are traditions that speak of a heavenly *ka'ba* corresponding to that in Makka. Prayers are timed by the passage of the sun, which is rising and setting somewhere on earth at every minute. This means that there is no moment in any day when there are not Muslims somewhere on earth turning towards the *ka'ba* in prayer. Not just today but back through history and on into the future. Each time that Muslims turn to face the *ka'ba*, they are united with all other Muslims on earth, in heaven and throughout the ages. This united community of believers is called the Muslim *umma*. *Salat* raises awareness of the *umma* and reminds people of their responsibility for one another.

In the early period in Makka, Muhammad and (sometimes) the infant Muslim community would assemble for prayer at the *ka'ba*. When they moved to Madina, an area was set aside for prayer and Muhammad orientated his congregation towards Jerusalem until a verse of the Qur'an was revealed that set the *qibla* on the *ka'ba* [Q. 2:144]. This then became the communal place for people to assemble for *salat*. This set a pattern of praying in congregation with others; in Madina these prayers were led by Muhammad himself unless he named a substitute during periods of absence. Chaos and individualism in congregational *salat* are disliked in Islam; when two or more people gather to pray, one leads and the others follow. This applies anywhere, not just in a mosque. One of the particular responsibilities given to married women in Muslim society is to establish the rhythm of prayer at home, where they may be joined by other women and children from the family. This not only invokes God's blessing on the home but it also sets a pattern for young children to join in and adopt. This is not to suggest that women should not attend the mosque, quite the opposite, they have had their own place in the mosque since the time of the Prophet in Madina.

Preparation for prayer

Just as the place of prayer must be clean, so must the worshipper – both physically and ritually. Physically, the body in general must be cleaned if necessary by, for example, showering or bathing. Under particular circumstances, e.g., after sexual activity or menstrual bleeding, ritual cleansing requires a full bath (*ghusl*). At other times ritual cleansing is achieved by washing or *wudu* – of the hands, face (mouth, nose, ears), head, arms and feet, although the precise manner varies between the different schools of Islam. There are washing facilities in the mosque for this purpose. This is symbolic in the sense that it involves cleansing the parts of the body that we use as part of our working lives, and thus breaking off to spend time with God. We might also use these parts to commit sin and so the washing gives us a chance to think of those things for which we need to ask God's forgiveness. The state of being

ritually clean is broken by various bodily activities, such as sleeping, visiting the toilet or vomiting. It is possible to retain a ritually clean state from one prayer time to another provided that it has not been broken by any of these activities. If water is not available for *wudu* or if someone's illness prevents its use, then a ritually clean state is attained by dry ablutions (*tayammum*). This involves striking the hands on clean dust, sand or stone and then wiping them on the face, hands and forearms.

The final preparation for *salat* is a pure intention. Muslims silently declare their intention (*niyya*) to draw closer to God through an act of obedience and generally indicate the nature of the prayer that they are about to perform, i.e., obligatory (*fard*) or an act of devotion following the custom of Muhammad (*sunna*), before each prayer begins.

The form of *salat*

Each obligatory (*fard*) *salat* is made up of a number of cycles of prayer or *rak'at*. The number of these varies depending on the time of day:

Salat al-Fajr before sunrise – two cycles

Salat al-Zuhr a little after the sun has passed its midpoint – four cycles

Salat al-'Asr in the late afternoon when the shadows lengthen – four cycles

Salat al-Maghrib directly after sunset – three cycles

Salat al-'Isha at night-time – four cycles

Each *rak'a* comprises recitation of the Qur'an, bodily postures and prayers, said aloud or silently. The sequence is:

1. Raising of the hands in a gesture of submission and withdrawal from the world, accompanied by the words *Allahu akbar* (God is most great)
2. Recitation of the opening chapter of the Qur'an
3. Recitation of a selection of verses from the Qur'an
4. Bowing from the waist to acknowledge the guidance of God in the Qur'an, the worshipper saying in Arabic, 'All glory be to my Lord, the Greatest' (three times)
5. Standing in silent prayer in praise of God
6. The first prostration with the forehead and palms of the hands placed on the floor in submission to God during which the worshipper says 'All glory to my Lord, the Highest' (three times). To prostrate with the head, hands, knees and feet on the floor before God is the ultimate sign of humility and submission.
7. Sitting back on the feet
8. A second prostration of praise and glorifying God
9. Returning to a standing position

Surat al-Fatiha (the opening chapter of the Qur'an) reads as follows:

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Praise be to God, the Lord of Creation,

*The Compassionate, the Merciful,
Master of the Day of Judgement.
You alone do we worship and to you alone we pray for help.
Guide us to the Straight Path,
The path of those whom you have favoured,
Not of those who have incurred your wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.*

At the end of the prescribed number of *rak'at*, the Muslim recites the two-part statement of faith (*shahada*): "I bear witness that there is no god but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God," and calls for God's blessings upon Muhammad and his family and Abraham and his family.

At the end, the *salat* concludes with the worshippers greeting their immediate neighbours with *al-Salamu alaykum* (Peace be with you) and this is extended to the angels and the whole of creation. It is customary that there now follows a time of intercession (*du'a*).

Final points

The verses recited from the Qur'an are always in Arabic and must be spoken from memory and not read from a book. Every Muslim is required to have memorised some verses of Qur'an in order to be able to pray. The more one has in one's memory, then the wider the selection that can be made. New Muslims are encouraged to attend congregational prayer where the *imam* recites on behalf of all. The length of each period of recitation is determined by the person praying, provided that it is more than three verses. Those who have more time at their disposal are at liberty to include longer portions. Those leading congregational prayers are encouraged not to lengthen the Qur'anic recitation unduly so as not to inconvenience those who pray with them but do not have so much free time. Each *salat* will last in the order of five to ten minutes, giving a combined total during the day of around forty-five minutes.

The performance of *salat* is obligatory and should not be abandoned, even if physical movement is limited. Someone who needs to remain seated for *salat* can indicate prostration by moving their upper body; someone who needs to lie down can move an arm; ultimately even the movement of an eyelid will suffice, with the right intention.

Many Muslims follow the customary example of Muhammad (*sunna*) and perform additional voluntary (*nawafil*) prayers before and after *salat*. These take the same form but it was the practice of Muhammad to change his position to indicate that these were not obligatory and so Muslims follow this example and move to another position after the end of formal prayers. The precise number and arrangement of these additional voluntary prayers varies from one school of Islam to another.

The *Salat al-Jum'a* or Friday Prayer is the principal congregational prayer of the week and is celebrated collectively, with everyone gathering at main mosques if at all

possible. It replaces the normal prayer in the middle of the day but the prayer is shortened so that an address or *khutba* can be given by a *khatib* or learned person. Friday is not a day of rest in Muslim societies and people go back to work after prayers.