

Meaning of Prayer

Prayer (*salat*) literally means: Supplication, invoking Allah's blessings, asking His exaltation and forgiveness. This word '*salat*' (prayer) appears several times throughout the Qur'an in its general sense, as for instance the Prophet (S) was addressed:

خُذْ مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ صَدَقَةً تُطَهِّرُهُمْ وَتُزَكِّيهِمْ بِهَا وَصَلِّ عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ إِنَّ صَلَاتَكَ سَكَنٌ لَهُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

“Take charity out of their property, you would cleanse them and purify them thereby, and pray for them; surely your prayer is a tranquility to them, and Allah is Hearing, Knowing”. (9: 103)

Here the word prayer acquired the meaning of supplication for goodness, benediction and purification.

There is also a call to the faithful presented by way of exhorting the believers to offer their blessings and obedience to the Prophet (S):

إِنَّ اللَّهَ وَمَلَائِكَتَهُ يُصَلُّونَ عَلَى النَّبِيِّ ۗ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا صَلُّوا عَلَيْهِ وَسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيمًا

“Surely Allah and His angels bless the Prophet; o you who believe offer your blessings on him and submit to him in full submission”. (33:56)

The meaning of the verse is clear. The context of prayer here defines and clarifies the scope of Allah's compassion and blessings on the Prophet. In addition, the angels invoke Allah to purify and forgive the Prophet, while exhorting the believers to offer their blessings on him. Thus, the believers say “O Allah, may Your blessings be upon Muhammad and his descendants.”

The Holy Prophet (S) used the word 'prayer' in his traditions and instruction in its literal sense, e.g. supplication, and invoking Allah's good and blessings. The Prophet (S) said:

“Whoever of you is invited to food, let him accept the invitation, if he is fasting, he should offer his prayers”.¹

This is to invoke Allah's good and blessing on the hosts.

The Qur'an developed the meaning of prayer from the literal definition of supplication into a special usage, referring specifically to the Islamic rite consisting of particular actions and recitations in a formula related by the Prophet (S) and outlined clearly by him. This is precisely the form of devotion which the Prophet called upon the Muslims to safeguard its content. meaning and dynamic objectives. The Prophet (S) said:

*"Perform your prayer as you have seen me performing it."*²

The Qur'an refers to this mode of prayer in several verses such as:

وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

"And keep up the prayer and pay zakat (the poor-due) and obey the Messenger that you may be graced with mercy." (24:56)

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ كَانَتْ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ كِتَابًا مَوْقُوتًا

"...surely prayer is a timed ordinance for the believers". (4: 103)

¹. Al-Raghib al-Isfahani, Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur'an (also by Abu Dawud in his works of traditions), Part 3, P. 340.

². Al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari, Section of the Adhan 18.