

Supplication: An Islamic Viewpoint

ALIREZA MAKTABDAR

Translated by Mahdi Rastani

Introduction

The most beautiful relation between God and human beings takes place during *dua* (supplication). Apart from the relation man has with God due to his existence, man also feels the need for a voluntary relation with God; a relation that can quench his God-seeking thirst; a relation through which he can converse with his kind Creator whenever he wishes. Supplication can be the answer to this need and strengthen the relation between God and man. God insists on such relation and commands his servants to remember Him and talk to Him at times of difficulty and ease. The spirit of servitude manifests itself through prayer and, as one of the rings in the chain of cause and effect, prayer can help man reach his wishes.

Lexical and Technical Definition

In Arabic, the word *dua* means to call. Explaining its meaning, Ibn Faris says, “*Dua* is to attract something to yourself through your words and voice” (Ibn Faris 1404 AH, 2:279). The technical definition of *dua* is “to

ask a favor from someone who is higher in rank than you” (Tabataba'i 1374 Sh, 2:31) or in other words “to attract the attention of someone to yourself with the intention of gaining a benefit or repelling a harm” (Qadi ‘Abd al-Jabbar 1422 AH, 485). In the Quranic usage, *dua* has different meanings, all derived from its lexical root.

DUA in the Qur’an and Hadith

In the Quranic perspective, *dua* has a significant role, so much so that God’s attention to a servant depends on his or her supplication and prayer. God says in the Qur’an: “Say [O Muhammad to the disbelievers], ‘My Lord pays attention to you only because of your invocation to Him’” (Quran 25:77).

Supplication or prayer is the bridge that connects man to his Creator. By calling God, we can have the help of the Creator of the universe in our life. God says to His messenger: “And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad], concerning Me—indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me. So let them respond to Me [by obedience] and believe in Me that they may be [rightly] guided” (Quran 2:186).

Through prayer, man’s servitude is perfected as man shows his humbleness and weakness by asking God for help. This is why those who, out of their arrogance, refuse to pray and humble themselves before God are given the promise of punishment. The Qur’an reads:

Your Lord has said, “Call upon Me, and I will hear you[r supplications]! Indeed those who are disdainful of My worship will enter hell in utter humility.” (Quran 40:60)

Imam Baqir (a) explains this verse by saying that the word “worship” mentioned in the verse refers to supplication and that supplication is the best form of worship (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:466). On another occasion, the Imam (a) was asked which of the two was better: reading the Qur’an or supplicating. The Imam chose supplication and then recited this verse of the Quran: “My Lord pays attention to you only because of your invocation to Him [25:77]” (Hilli n.d., 19). A person who is stuck in the tough challenges of life and sees no escape from them can find a way out through prayer, for it is only God “who answers the call of the distressed [person] when he invokes Him and removes his distress” (Quran 27:62).

The beautiful point about this verse is that it shows there is no interspace between a servant’s prayer and God’s answer. All one has to do is to call God. If a person does not feel the support of God in his life, it is because he has turned his back to God; as soon as he turns towards God, he will find God waiting for him. This is why God tells the Prophet (s) that “when My servants ask you concerning Me, indeed I am near. I respond to the invocation of the supplicant when he calls upon Me” (Quran 2:186).

Let us now study some of the narrations we have received from our Imams (a) regarding supplication.

Succeeding to pray, in itself, is a blessing from God and a sign that one’s prayer is going to be answered. It is also a means of salvation for the supplicatory, as the Prophet (s) explains in the following narration: “When God allows a person to supplicate, soon out of His mercy, God will answer him. He who prays will not perish” (Daylami 1412AH, 1:148).

God likes it when a person prays and calls upon Him. The Prophet (s) said, “There come times when God afflicts a person to hear his prayers and supplications” (Daylami 1412AH, 1:148).

Supplication leads to good in this world and in the hereafter. There are three things that have this effect. The Prophet (s) said, “Three traits bring about good in this world and in the hereafter: gratefulness regarding God’s blessings, patience at times of difficulty, and supplication when calamities befall” (Daylami 1412AH, 1:148).

Some believe that in the beginning of creation God decreed a certain destiny for the universe and everything is acting out according to that plan. Therefore, there is no point to pray, since victory and loss, wellness and illness, death and life, wealth and poverty, and heaven and hell are all pre-destined. If what we are praying for is in line with the plan, it will happen even if we do not pray. And if what we are asking for is out of line with destiny, it will not make any difference and we will never achieve it. However, the Imams (a) have pointed out the fault in this belief on different occasions. Imam Ali (a) is quoted as saying, “Supplication changes irrevocable divine decree” (Daylami 1412AH, 1:148).

Imam Sadiq (a) told Muyassir, “Pray and do not say that our destiny has been already planned. Indeed, there is a place before God that cannot be achieved by anything other than supplication. If one shuts his mouth and does not pray, he will not receive anything. Thus, pray so that they give you. Any door that is knocked at will be opened eventually” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:467)

As it was mentioned earlier, supplication is one of the best forms of worship. When Imam Baqir (a) was asked about the best form of worship, he replied by saying, “There is nothing more liked by God than being asked to give from what He has, and no one is more detested by God than he who refuses to worship Him and ask for what He has” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:466).

It does not matter whether one is at ease or in difficulty. One has to call upon God all the time. Imam Sadiq (a) said, “He who wishes to have his request granted at times of difficulty has to pray a lot at times of ease” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:466).

According to Islamic teachings, the fulfillment of our needs—be they insignificant or great—is only in the hands of God. Imam Sadiq (a) said, “Always supplicate, for you cannot approach God by anything as you can through supplication. Let not the insignificance of your wish stop you from asking for it; the one who grants small wishes is the same one who grants great wishes” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:467).

The Reality of Supplication

The most important point regarding supplication is that before we start to supplicate, we have been called and invited by God to talk to Him. Therefore, praying to God is accepting His invitation. God says in the Qur’an:

So they have to respond to Me, and have faith in Me, so that they may fare rightly. (Qur’an 2:186)

Therefore, the reality of supplication is God’s attention to us, the permission He gives us to talk to Him, and then in the next level our attention to this call. It needs no explanation that the strength of our attention to God depends on the knowledge we have of God and the love we have for Him. No wonder the saying reads: “The one who knows God most is the one with the more requests” (Tamimi al-Amidi 1366 Sh, 192). When man sees his countless needs and God’s absolute richness, he will naturally tend to pray to God. Then, the more serious his needs are, the stronger his supplication will be.

There is also another reason due to which we need to pray to God. If we consider God's greatness, generosity, kindness, and blessings, it will be clear to us that the worship we perform is not worthy of Him; and if we are to rely on our worship alone, we are not heading anywhere. Therefore, we have no other way but to engage in supplication.

Of course, prayer and supplication does not always entail asking for worldly needs; we can ask for God Himself. This is the highest level of prayer, which is best manifested in the supplications of the Infallibles (a):

O Lord, I beseech You for Your love and the love of those who love You, and the love whatsoever brings me to Your love. O Lord, make my love for you stronger than my love for myself and for my family.
(Khurramshahi and Ansari 1997, 188)

It now becomes clear why prayer and supplication are the best forms of worship. A person who prays to God is confessing to his weakness and countless needs on the one hand, and to the fact that no one but God can help him on the other hand. In other words, his supplication testifies to God's power, guardianship, ownership, and generosity. This is why the prophet (s) counted supplication as the core of worship (Hilli n.d., 29).

Conditions for Supplicating

The followings are some of the conditions required if a prayer is to be answered:

i. Genuine Request

Naturally, the first condition is to feel the genuine need for the subject of our request. Our supplications should be rooted in our hearts and should not be a mere utterance of words. Therefore, although prayers are answered without any limitation, there should be a genuine and heart-felt prayer first. Words can be untruthful, but what a heart says is always true. So when the heart wants something and feels the need for it, the prayer will be effective.

2. Faith and Certitude

The other condition is to have faith in the absolute mercy of God and to believe that there is no limitation in His giving. His mercy does not exclude anyone; if there is any problem, it is surely from our side. One who prays to God while having his hopes high is more likely to have his prayers answered; as the hadiths says, “When praying for something, believe that it is already at your door” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:473).

3. To live in accordance with the purpose of creation

One who supplicates has to live in line with the purpose of creation and also with the divine legislation. One has to have an honest heart, a pure income, and pay back to people the debts to them. Imam Sadiq (a) said, “Whenever one of you wants his prayer to be answered, he has to purify his income and try to pay back to people what he owes to them, for the prayer of he who has illegitimate income does not elevate towards God” (Majlisi 1403AH, 90:321).

4. Making Efforts along with Supplication

In life, there are many occasions where one should do more than praying: he has to use the power and means that God has provided him so that his effort complements his prayer. For each of our needs, God has set a way that we can pursuit to fulfil them. Prayers are answered

when we make use of the means at our disposal. One who prays for something has to also put all his efforts and power to achieve it, but since our will and decision are not enough alone and there are many other factors involved, we ask God to help us achieve what we want.

Therefore, prayers are not to replace our efforts. Inspired by a famous hadith (Majlisi 1403AH, 90:356), Ayatollah Mutahhari explains that the prayers of a person who is walking next to a wall that is about to collapse but does not go away and yet constantly prays to God to be kept safe, or a person who has lent money to someone without keeping any record or evidence and keeps praying to God to bring his money back while he should have taken a proof in the first place are not answered. The same is a person who remains at home and does not work, but asks God for sustenance. (Mutahhari 2008, 23:785-90).

However, there are times when all conditions are there, yet our prayers are not answered. What is the reason?

The answer lies in faith in God's wisdom. Sometimes God, who knows the interests and harms of affairs, does not give one what he prays for due to certain reasons and instead gives him a worthy substitute. The Prophet (s) said, "When a Muslim prays for something other than a sinful wish or cutting kinship ties, God answers his prayer in one of the three forms: either his prayer will be accepted, or it will be reserved for him till he is rewarded for it in the hereafter, or harms will be repelled from him because of it" (Tabarsi 1412 AH, 269).

Prayer and Causality

Is the fulfilment of prayers against causality? Is it not an exception to the fixed rules of God?

The answer is no. The fulfilment of prayers is the same as prophetic miracles (*mu'jiza*). Miracles are also rules of God but they can override natural and ordinary rules. In the same way, the fulfilment of prayers is also an overriding rule of God. There is no doubt that causality is an unexceptional, necessary principle; however, there is difference between accepting the general principle of causality and restricting it to the ones we know. These two must not be confused. Every effect could have causes that are unknown to us. And, although we still do not completely know how prayer functions, according to the Holy Qur'an, prayer is one of those causes. In other words, the same way God has chosen electricity, gravity, heat, medicine, and so forth for some roles in the world of causes and effects, the Almighty has bestowed prayers with the role of helping humans to reach their wishes (Husayni Bihishti 1390 Sh, 96).

Manners of Prayer

Prayer is talking to God and imploring His mercy, and the one who prays should act in right manners, as explained in the Holy Qur'an and our traditions. Some of these manners are as follows: Having true faith, not to put hope in others and to let God be the only hope, repenting of sins beforehand, having halal income, praying whole-heartedly, almsgiving before prayer, beginning the prayer by praising God and remembering His blessings, praying for others before asking for one's own good, raising hands while praying (Ha'iri 1386 Sh, 7:518).

Special Places and Times of Prayer

Of course we can call God whenever and wherever we want, yet, according to hadiths, some special times and places are helpful in having prayers answered. Some of these times are the day and night of Friday,

the Night of Decree (*laylat al-qadr*) and its day, all nights of Ramadan, *'id al-fitr* and *'id al-adha*, when Adhan is being called, and when the Qur'an is being recited.

Some of the special places of prayer include mosques, Masjid al-Haram, beside *Hijr* of Isma'il and *Maqam* of Ibrahim in Masjid al-Haram, inside Ka'ba, Masjid al-Sahla in Najaf, and Mina and 'Arafat near Mecca (Ibid.).

According to one hadith, all prayers done under the dome of the shrine of Imam Husayn (a) are answered: "God the exalted has given four special gifts to Imam Husayn because of his martyrdom ... and all prayers are answered under his dome" (Hilli n.d., 57).

Obstacles to a Successful Prayer

1. Paying attention to others

The prayers of a person who truly prays and asks no one but God are answered without any exception. Thus, unanswered prayers are due to lack of some conditions or the presence of some hindrances, one of which is counting on others and not praying whole-heartedly. This is why our tradition instructs us to "trust in God more than what you have in your hands" (Majlisi 1403AH, 74:87).

2. Praying for something that is not in one's best interest

Those prayers that are not good for the one who prays are not answered. Of course, poverty, illness, and the like are not good in themselves; however, sometimes they are relatively good, because they repel some grave dangers. According to a hadith, God has said,

Among My faithful servants, some cannot be helped but by poverty; and if I made them rich, they would seek the wrong way. And there are some whose felicity passes through health; and if I made them sick, they would seek the wrong way. These are all in my hands, and I manage their affairs to their best interests and I am fully aware of, and gracious to, them. (Majlisi 1403AH, 68:140)

3. Inadequate knowledge of God

One of the hindrances to prayer is having weak knowledge of God and His attributes. When asked why some prayers are not answered, Imam Sadiq (a) replied, “Because you call the one whom you do not know” (Shaykh al-Saduq 1398 AH, 289). Indeed, we consider God as a cause among others not as the only cause upon which all other causes and their effects depend.

Prayer in the Viewpoints of Islamic Scholars

“They have said that prayer is a comprehensive word which includes twenty virtues in itself ... and those are worship, sincerity, praise, thankfulness, praise, negating all Lords but God, believing in absolute uniqueness of God, asking, longing, fear, calling, pleading, whispering with a soft and broken heart, humbly begging, servitude, humbleness, submission, surrender and obedience, imploring, modesty, and seeking refuge. God Almighty has summarized all of these in one word and said, ‘Pray (call Me) so that I answer you’ [Qur’an 40:60]. So if you pray, God Almighty will reward you for twenty virtues at the same time” (Maybudi 1371 Sh, 2:326).

Prayer in the Viewpoint of Mystics

Bayazid Bastami was asked about the greatest name of God. He answered, “Clean others off your heart and then call God with whatever name you liked.”

Yahya Bin Mu‘adh said, “Seek the owner of the name instead of the name!”

Abu al-Hasan al-Warraq said, “In prayers, observe God’s right more than your own benefits, for He knows your own good better” (Ghazali 1996, 218-9).

Motivation for Prayer

It brings us to implore God when we think of our weakness, on the one hand, and see His greatness and power to fulfil all our spiritual and material needs, on the other hand. On the other side of the coin, arrogance weakens our motivation for prayer and thus prevents us from gaining the unique benefits and advantages of prayer.

Social and Personal Fruits of Prayer

The fruits of prayer include both personal and social aspects of our lives:

Personal Results

1. Knowing God

This knowledge is the base and root of all happiness and perfections. We come to know God better through calling Him by His beautiful names, for it teaches us His attributes and deepens that knowledge in our hearts.

2. Perfection of the soul

It is necessary to act according to God's will and obey His commandments, if we want to establish a connection to God and pray. The Holy Qur'an says, "He responds to those who believe and perform honourable deed" (Qur'an 42:26).

So, prayer requires a pure heart and righteous deeds. The one who needs God—and we all do—should be careful about his deeds, because one of the conditions for the fulfilment of payers is having righteous deeds and restraining from impiety, all of which lead us to reaching our spiritual perfection.

3. Cleanliness

Purity of clothes and halal food are among the manners of prayer, and if one wants his prayers to be answered, one should observe the purity of inside and outside. The Prophet (s) said, "The one who wants his prayer to be answered should purify his food and income" (Hilli n.d., 139).

4. Inner peace

One of the most important results of prayer is inner peace and self-esteem. According to recent researches, religious people experience mental disorders much less than the less religiously committed people.

Those who rely on and seek God's help never get depressed or mentally disordered, whether they confront and experience problems or when

their lives go smoothly. These people see God nearer to themselves “than jugular vein” (Qur’an 50:16). Imam Sajjad (a) says, “O My God! If I get sad, you are the one who brings peace; if I get rejected, you are my treasure; and if I face any calamity, you are my shelter” (Imam al-Sajjad (a) 1376 Sh, 98).

5. Glory and Honour

It makes us feel humbled and humiliated to ask from others but it is an honor to ask God and pray to Him. The Friends of God enjoy prayer more than anything else. By conversing with and asking the real Beloved, they earn honour and reach their goals.

Social Results

1. Safety from Disasters

Human world is always subject to accidents such as earthquake, flood, and so forth. Prayers can have an effective role in repelling some types of these disasters. Imam Ali (a) said, “Deflect waves of calamities from yourselves with prayer before they befall. I swear by the Creator of people and the Opener of seeds that calamities befall a believer sooner than the flood comes down a hill and faster than the running of horses” (Shaykh al-Saduq 1983, 2:621).

2. Developing Altruism

Prayer is not just a personal matter; rather, in prayer, caring for others should come first. The Prophet (s) said, “Whenever one of you prays, he shall make it general [and pray for everyone], for it will be more likely answered” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:487). And Imam Sadiq (a) said, “The

prayer of whoever prays for forty believers before praying for himself will be answered” (Shaykh al-Saduq 1400 AH, 456).

3. Respecting Others’ Rights

A true believer knows very well that one condition of the fulfilment of prayers is to respect and acknowledge other people’s rights. This very fact encourages people to respect each other’s rights. Imam Ali (a) said, “God revealed to Jesus that ‘... I do not hear the prayer of he who violates the rights of others’” (Mufid 1404AH, 133).

Conclusion

God is the source of all good, and everything is dependent on, and in need of, Him. Every creature calls God with its very existence, as we read in the Holy Qur’an, “Everyone in the heavens and earth asks Him” (55:29). The final and ultimate perfection of creatures is closeness to God, and prayer is the way to reaching such perfection.

God has all perfections and is free from any imperfection or deficiency. Therefore, He is the true Beloved of all perfection-seekers. All wise humans who love goodness feel an inner attraction to converse with, and get close to, Him. And prayer is the perfect means for this.

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