

Secrets of Prayer, Part VI: Recitation of Surat al-Hamd, Ruku' and Sujud

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It is an essential part of prayer to recite *Surat al-Hamd*, as indicated by several narrations, the most famous of which is the following Prophetic *hadith*:

No prayer is valid without [reciting] *Surat al-Hamd*. (Nuri
1408 AH, 4:158)

Prayer with all its various parts has been designed by God in the most beautiful way. The person who is performing prayer is in fact talking to God, and, interestingly, the words he uses in such a great conversation are God's own words. This conversation begins with

In the Name of God, the All-Merciful, the Most Merciful.

Based on many narrations, this verse, which is called *basmala*, is the greatest verse of the Holy Quran and a part of every *sura* (except *surat al-Tawba*). Some scholars hold that the *basmala* of each *sura* is different from that of another *sura*, since each *basmala* means the beginning of its respective *sura* in the name of God. So, in our prayers, we start with the Name of the All-Merciful and ask Him for assistance.

The next verse of this *sura* reads as follows:

All praise belongs to God, Lord of all the worlds.

Every imaginable good thing comes from God, and the more we understand about God, the more thankful and humble we will be before Him. Of course, our acknowledgment that “all praise belongs to God” is not comparable to that of the Holy Prophet (s), because our knowledge is not comparable to his. We cannot perceive completely how great God's creation is. Those who have greater share of knowledge understand this praise more deeply.

Thus, the Quran reads,

Only those of God's servants having knowledge fear Him.
(Quran 35:28)

So the more one understands the greatness of God and His creation, the more one will praise God. It should be mentioned that no one can reach the very highest level of such understanding other than God Himself, because He understands His own greatness more than anyone else. Therefore, the perfect praise for God comes from Himself when He says, “All praise belongs to God” or “Glorified be He.”

After God's understanding of Himself, the best understanding belongs to the Holy Prophet (s) and then the Holy Imams (a) and other Prophets (a). Thus, there exists a hierarchy, and everyone praises God according to his level of understanding.

It could be suggested that the greatest thing for which all creatures must praise God is God Himself. We must praise Him for having Him as our Master and Lord. This is much more important than anything else.

Thus, in his supplication, Imam Ali (a) says,

My utmost dignity is that I am your servant, and my
supreme honour is that you are my Lord. (Majlisi 1403AH,
74:402)

All praise belongs to God, since we have been created by Him and not by anyone else. Furthermore, we are not created by chance; rather, God has created us deliberately. This origin makes us very valuable: we are all created by God, belong to Him, and will return to Him. Our especial relation to

God and the fact that we have been directly created by Him is emphasized in the story of Adam (a), where God says to Satan,

O Iblis! What keeps you from prostrating before that which I have created *with My [own] two hands*? Are you arrogant, or are you [one] of the exalted ones? (Quran 38:75)

Besides this, all the numerous and wonderful bounties that we enjoy in this world call us to praise God, because He is the Source of everything. His blessings upon us are so great that if we praised Him continuously from this moment until the end of our life, we would not be able to thank Him enough.

The Mercy of God

The next verse of *sura al-Hamd*, reads

The All-Beneficent, the All-Merciful.

God does not treat His creatures mercilessly with the excuse that He has created so many creatures that He does not need to care about what happens to each one of them. Every one of us has been created by God deliberately, and He has plans for each of us. God is not like a father with five children who has to divide his time in such a way that he can pay enough attention to each of them. Although all creatures are absolutely dependent on Him, God is always there for each one of them. He does not compare one person's request to another's in order to fulfill the one which is more important. On the contrary, God has taught us to ask Him whatever we need, even the least important things, such as the salt in our food. We read in a *hadith* that God said to Prophet Moses (a),

O Moses! Ask me whatever you need, even the grass for your sheep and the salt for your food. ('Amili 1988, 7:32)

Sometimes, we are in need of a reason to talk to God. This fact has been illustrated in an interesting way in the story of Moses (a) in the Holy Quran:

[God said,] “Moses, what is that in your right hand?” He said, “It is my staff. I lean upon it, and with it I beat down leaves for my sheep; and I have other uses for it.” (Quran 20:17)

Without a doubt, God knew what Moses (a) had in his hand. Nevertheless, He asked him about it because He wanted to give Moses (a) an opportunity to speak to Him. Prophet Moses (a), being a wise man, did not content himself with only saying that he was carrying a stick; rather, making the most of such an auspicious opportunity, he prolonged his answer in order to speak to his Lord more. Thus, we should take the opportunity to speak to God and He will be there, waiting for and listening to us.

In another *hadith*, we read,

God Almighty said, “Neither My earth nor My sky can contain Me; rather, it is the heart of a believing servant of Mine that is able to contain Me.” (Ibn Abi Jumhur 1405AH, 4:7)

It can be inferred from this narration that when we open our heart to God, He comes to our heart completely, not partially, and thus He totally fills our heart. He is the Beloved who never tells us that He has many other lovers; rather, if we want Him, He can be entirely and completely available for each of us. But how ungrateful we are that we put conditions for such a great Beloved!

God delivers mercy to us and even creates opportunities for us to gain such mercy. And when He gives, nothing is detracted from His wealth:

O the one whose abundant bestowal increases His generosity and munificence. (Majlisi 1403AH, 83:123)

Thus, when God gives us more, we become qualified to receive even more. So His generosity increases, not in His Essence, but in the meaning that He can give us more. And as we increase our capacity, God shows more mercy to us. The only thing that deprives us of His mercy is failing to ask Him and closing our hearts and minds to His munificence. Otherwise, there is no

limitation from His side. We are indeed so fortunate to have such a Lord whose aim is embracing His servants with His mercy.

Mastership of the Day of Judgment

The next Verse of Chapter *al-Hamd* reads:

Master of the Day of Retribution.

The next world is another manifestation of the mercy of God and no one but God Himself will be in charge on that day. If someone goes to hell despite the vast mercy of God, it is due to the fact that there is no other choice; in reality, such a person himself is hellish to the extent that even in this world other people can feel that he/she is like hell, as the person makes life hell for others.

In the supplication of Kumayl, Imam Ali (a) says,

Had it not been that You decreed punishment for those who deny You and permanent torture for your enemies, You would have made the whole of hell cool and safe, but You, Holy are Your Names, made a vow to fill the hell with all the disbelievers from amongst human beings and *jinn*. (Ibn Tawus 1376 Sh, 3:336)

Interestingly, hell could be filled by even one person, and there is no need for a certain number of people to be put there in order for it to be filled. Therefore, we read in the Quran,

The day when We shall say to hell, "Are you full?" It will say, "Are there any more?" (Quran 50:30)

Hell does not say, 'No.' Perhaps this means that hell does not have a fixed capacity; it can be filled by one person and it can also contain as many people as are thrown into it.

If someone works very hard to keep his honor in this world, his honor will be much more protected in the Hereafter. In *Munajat Sha'baniyya*, we read,

My Lord, You have concealed many of my sins in this world, and I am in greater need of their being concealed in the next. (Ibn Tawus 1376 Sh, 3:297)

Once a Bedouin went to the Holy Prophet (s) and asked him about the Day of Judgment and who is in charge of that day. “God,” the Holy Prophet (s) replied. “God Himself?,” the Bedouin asked. Hearing the positive response of the Holy Prophet (s), the Bedouin joyfully said, “Then I have no worry about that day” and then he left. The companions of the Holy Prophet (s) were astonished by the man’s behavior. However, the Holy Prophet (s) stated, “He left while possessing proper understanding of Islam.”¹

Thus, when God is in charge of the Hereafter, one should not be worried about the judge, since there will be no mistreatment or injustice from His side. We should only be worried about our own actions in this world. We should worry that we might be in such a bad situation that if God were to save us, His justice would be questioned. Let us imagine that we are accused of a crime and brought to a court, whose judges are our parents. Obviously, they would do their best to acquit us of that accusation. However, sometimes our actions are very bad, so much so that even our parents would feel ashamed to defend us before others. God is far more merciful to us than our parents, but we need to be qualified to receive His mercy. In a supplication, we read,

O My Master! When I look at my sins I am terrified, but when I see your generosity I covet [your forgiveness].
(Majlisi 1403AH, 95:82)

¹ Ghazali in his *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, the Book of Fear and Hope narrates the hadith as follows:

أن الأعرابي قال يا رسول الله من يلي حساب الخلق فقال الله تبارك وتعالى قال هو بنفسه قال نعم فتبسم الأعرابي فقال صلى الله عليه وسلم مم ضحكت يا أعرابي فقال إن الكريم إذا قدر عفا وإذا حاسب سامح فقال النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم صدق الأعرابي ألا لا كريم أكرم من الله تعالى هو أكرم الأكرمين ثم قال فقه الأعرابي.

When we look at our hands we see that they are empty, but we become hopeful when we remember that God gives to those who are empty-handed. The only problem is when we think we do not need God.

These verses of *Surat al-Hamd* indicate that the mercy of God is available in every place and at all times, before the creation, on the Day of Judgment, and afterwards. Therefore, His servants' only duty is what has been referred to in the following verse:

You [alone] do we worship, and to You [alone] do we turn
for help.

Since this world belongs to God who is the most merciful and is in charge of the next world, we should worship Him alone and ask help only from Him and not from anyone else.

Divine Guidance

The next verse of *Surat al-Hamd* reads,

Guide us on the Straight Path.

In this verse, we ask God to show us the way that connects this world to the Hereafter in the best possible way, which is “the Straight Path.” We are not alone on this path because there are also other people on it as implied by the last verse of this *sura*:

The path of those whom You have blessed, such as have not
incurred Your wrath, nor are astray.

Quran 4:69 describes those whom God has blessed as follows:

Whoever obeys God and the Apostle they are with those
whom God has blessed, including the Prophets and the
truthful, the martyrs and the righteous, and excellent
companions are they!

So we are not alone on this path. This is also the path of the others whom God has blessed. We can look at them and learn from them. They do not go ahead and leave us behind. In the above verse, the word رفيق means a kind and concerned companion on our journey to God. The best examples of such people are the ones mentioned in the above verse.

Etiquette of Reciting the Holy Quran

Concerning the etiquette of reciting the Holy Quran, Imam Sadiq (a) says,

The reciter of the Holy Quran needs three things: a humble heart, a relaxed body, and a quiet place. When God makes a person's heart humble, Satan, the accursed, will avoid him. God has said, "When you recite the Quran, seek the protection of God against the outcast Satan" [Quran 16:98]. When a person's soul is not preoccupied by [worldly] matters, his heart will be free for recitation, and nothing will distract and deprive him of the blessing of the light of the Quran and its benefits. Thus, after acquiring humbleness of heart and relaxation of body and finding a quiet place, secluded from people [for recitation], his soul and the depth of his heart will enjoy intimacy with God and will taste the sweetness of God's conversation with His virtuous servants and will perceive His grace to them... If a person drinks a cup of this sweet drink, they would not prefer any state or time to that state and time; rather, they would even prefer it to other types of worship, since it involves direct conversation with the Lord. Therefore, watch how you recite the Book of your Lord. (Imam Sadiq 1400AH, 28)

According to this narration and many others, the pleasure experienced by the Friends of God during prayer is not comparable to any other pleasure in this world. For them, no time is better than the time of prayer, nothing is sweeter than reciting God's words and conversing with Him. It is a personal

encounter with God that gives the deepest peace and contentment to the heart.

According to some narrations, the children of Imams (a) would wait for the arrival of the time of prayer in order to play inside the house, because during this time when the Imams (a) were praying, they could make as much noise as they wished, since the Imams (a) were concentrating so very much on their prayers that they did not notice such noises and were not bothered by them. It has also been reported that once, when Imam Sajjad (a) was saying his prayer, a part of his house caught fire, so his family tried to extinguish the fire. However, the Imam (a) became aware of what had happened only after he finished his prayer.

Thus, the Imams (a) were so deeply absorbed in prayer and in conversing with God that they did not understand what was going around them unless it was related to God. This is illustrated by the story of the poor man who attended the mosque in Medina and asked people to help him, but no one helped him. However, Imam Ali (a), whilst saying his prayer and being in the state of *ruku'*, indicated to the poor man to come and take his ring. This event was the occasion for the revelation of Quran 5:55:

Your guardian is only God, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down.

We occasionally experience such concentration in our daily affairs. For example, when we read a very interesting book, we may not feel hungry when it is the time for eating. However, if the book is not enjoyable, we get bored and sleepy after reading only a small portion of it. Therefore, the degree of our concentration in an activity depends on the kind of experience we have when we engage in that activity. For some of us, the prayer is boring, because we do not experience any joy in our prayer, which in turn is due to the fact that we do not understand it properly; just like a person who does not understand a book and thus does not enjoy reading it.

RUKU' and SUJUD in Prayer

Basically, *Ruku'* (bowing down) is a sign of humbleness, since one's sense of pride is more obvious when one stands compared to when they bow down. *Ruku'* is a state that prepares one for the state of *sujud* (prostration). Thus, a person does not go directly from standing position into prostration before God; rather, there is a necessary, preparatory stage before it, which aids the process of achieving humbleness. In spiritual wayfaring, we cannot start at the first stage and then suddenly go to higher stages.

Thus, through *ruku'*, a person obtains some degree of humbleness and prepares himself for *sujud*. Interestingly, every prayer starts with standing, but the greatest merit we gain is when we go to *sujud*.

In a very meaningful narration regarding *sujud*, Imam Sadiq (a) says,

The closest station for a servant before God is when he is in the state of *sujud*, crying. ('Amili 1988, 7:75)

Sujud is the state of absolute humbleness. In *sujud*, we are required to put our forehead on earth or earthly materials. In a physical sense, this implies that earth is our origin and our destination, as we read in the holy Quran,

From it did We create you, into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you forth another time. (Quran 20:55)

In a prophetic narration, the earth has been called our "mother" (Muhaddith Nuri 1408AH, 2:528). Therefore, we have been created physically from the earth and will return to it. In between these two stages, we have a short time to prepare ourselves for the Day of Judgment. As indicated in the same hadith, we should also touch the earth in our sajdah as a sign of respect to our mother earth that has been kind with us.¹ This match between the world of nature and the world of spirits is magnificent.

¹ The Arabic text of hadith is as follows:

From another perspective, our existential and spiritual origin is God and to Him is our return, as we read in Quran 2:156,

Indeed we belong to God, and to Him do we indeed return.

In the state of *sujud*, we prostrate ourselves twice, signifying the fact that we are created by God and we return to Him.

In the Shi'ite *fiqh* it is necessary to put one's forehead on the earth or earthly materials in the state of *sujud*. The most important of these reasons may be spiritual in that a person should place one's forehead on something natural, like the earth which is the physical origin, rather than on a man-made substance. This then makes us feel more humble and at the same time closer to our Creator, as it reminds us of our creation.

The Significance of SUJUD

It has been narrated that once a person went to the Holy Prophet (s) and said, "Please pray for me in order for me to go to Paradise." The Holy Prophet (s) replied,

Help me by prostrating a lot. ('Amili 1988, 4:44)

This narration implies that although the Holy Prophet (s) would try to help him e.g. by praying for him, the man also had to strive for his salvation, and one of the most valuable actions for that purpose is *sujud*.

In addition to the *sujuds* in their prayers, people should also perform long *sujuds* at various different times and places. Regarding this, Imam Sadiq (a) has been quoted as saying:

تَمَسَّحُوا بِالْأَرْضِ فَإِنَّهَا أُمَّكُمْ وَ هِيَ بِكُمْ بَرَّةٌ

Lengthen [your] *sujuds* since it is amongst the traditions of the penitents. ('Amili 1988, 6:381)

In his sermon in the month of Sha'ban, the Holy prophet (s) said,

Your backs are burdened by sins, so remove your burdens by long *sujuds*. ('Amili 1988, 10:313)

SUJUD as an Independent Act of Worship

In Islam, *sujud* is an act of worship in itself and can be performed outside the prayer, whereas *ruku'* is to be performed only in the prayer.

Regarding the incident when Imam Ali (a) gave his ring to a poor man whilst he was in the state of *ruku'*, the Quran reads,

Your guardian is only God, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the *zakat* while bowing down. (Quran 5:55)

Some people have claimed that this verse can be applied to anyone who pays *zakat* in the state of *ruku'*. However, this is not acceptable, since the only person who has paid *zakat* whilst he was in the state of *ruku'* was Imam Ali (a).

Other people have assumed that the phrase "bowing down" is a third attribute for "the faithful," not a condition for the phrase "give *zakat*" and therefore the faithful have three characteristics: they maintain prayer, give *zakat*, and bow down before God. This interpretation is also be rejected, since, as was mentioned earlier, *ruku'* is not prescribed outside the prayer in Islam.

Wisdom behind Repetition in Prayer

After the *sujuds* of the first *rak'a*, one is required to stand up and repeat the essential acts of recitation, *ruku'*, and *sujud*. There are several explanations regarding the necessity of this repetition. Perhaps standing up for the second

time is to teach us that life always goes in cycles. We should not expect to attain all good things in one day. Gradual improvement is of great importance. If a person does his best to improve daily, he can be sure that God is pleased with him. On the other hand, to regress, or even to stop at a particular stage, is a great loss. Imam Ali (a) says,

The person for whom two days are the same (i.e. without any spiritual improvement) is a loser." ('Amili 1988, 16:94)

Every day, week, month, and year we should make a step forward; we should never give up or become disappointed; we should not expect to be able to remove all our vices in one go. It is being in the process of spiritual improvement that plays the key role here.

In his youth, the great mystic, Ayatollah Mulla Husayn Quli Hamadani, felt that he was not improving in his spiritual journey and thought that he was not a suitable person for that path. Feeling very sad, he went to the shrine of Imam Ali (a) in Najaf and sat in one of the rooms in the courtyard where he caught sight of a bird that was trying to pick up a piece of bread. Due to the heaviness of the piece of bread, the bird was not able to pick it up. However, the bird kept trying and trying until it finally managed to take the piece. Contemplating upon what he had seen, Ayatollah Mulla Husain Quli Hamadani came to the conclusion that he should not regard himself less capable than the bird and should keep trying. He made a firm decision and strived so hard for his goal and became one of the greatest mystics, who trained outstanding pupils, among whom is Ayatollah Sayyid 'Ali Qadi who was the teacher of Allamah Tabataba'i and Ayatollah Bahjat. This story also shows us the importance of taking lessons from everything around us.

Thus, we should never give up if we have failed in doing certain good actions or developing good habits, including our prayer. If we did not do well in the first *rak'a*, we should use the opportunity of the second *rak'a*. If we failed to benefit from Morning Prayer, we should do our best to benefit from Noon Prayer, and so on.

Furthermore, we can compensate for the deficiencies in our daily prayers by performing the supererogatory prayers (*nawafil*). Regarding this, it is

reported that once Imam Sajjad (a) said that only those parts of the prayer in which one has true presence of heart are accepted. On hearing this, one of his companions became very worried and said, "If that is the case, we are destroyed." Responding to him, the Imam (a) said, "No! God compensates those [imperfections in your prayers] by your supererogatory prayers" ('Amili 1988, 5:478).

In the process of self-purification, we should behave like children who are learning to walk. They may fall down many times but they keep getting up and trying until they finally become able to walk. Falling down is a problem, but the greater problem lies in not getting up and trying again.

Steadfastness in Spiritual Journey to God

Regarding persistence in this path, the Quran says,

If they are steadfast on the path [of God], We shall provide them with abundant water. (Quran 72:16)

The water mentioned in this verse is a symbol for light, knowledge and wisdom.

Along the same lines, we read in the Quran,

Indeed those who say, "Our Lord is God!" and then remain steadfast, the angels descend upon them, [saying,] "Do not fear, nor be grieved! Receive the good news of the paradise which you have been promised." (Quran 41:30)

Thus, the sequence and repetition of the *rak'as* of prayer teaches us the lesson that we should never stop, go back, or give up; rather, we must keep on going until we finally reach the goal. We should persist in saying our prayers, *rak'a* by *rak'a*, day by day, week by week, year by year, and gradually progress to such an extent that the prayer becomes an integral part of our life and personality.

It has been said that in the last hours of his life, Imam Khomeini (r) was physically unconscious and could not answer anyone. However, according to Ayatollah Kashani, one of his students, when he told Imam Khomeini (r) that it was time for prayer, he witnessed that Imam Khomeini's lips started moving. This shows that prayer had become an essential part of his personality.

The same is true with the Holy Quran; Imam Sadiq (a) says,

The one who recites the Holy Quran while he is faithful and young, the Holy Quran will mix with his flesh and blood.
(Kulayni 1407AH, 2:603)

Obviously, when the prayer and the Quran are mixed with our flesh and blood, the fire of the Hell will never be able to harm us. However, if we consider the prayer and the Quran as merely some words to be recited without pondering upon them, then they will not become truly part of us and we will forget them. For this reason, some Muslims who have said their prayers and recited the Holy Quran in their lifetime without due care and attention, will not be able to remember the name of their Lord when they die. It is due to this that it is recommended to dictate (*talqin*) articles of faith to a dead person who has just been put in grave. The pressure of death and resurrection is very great. These pressures are enough to make a person forget everything that they have merely memorized.

The magnitude of such pressure has been illustrated in the Holy Quran:

O mankind! Be wary of your Lord! Indeed the quake of the Hour is a terrible thing. The day that you will see it, every suckling female will neglect what she suckled, and every pregnant female will deliver her burden, and you will see the people drunk, yet they will not be drunken, but God's punishment is severe. (Quran 22:1-2)

What will remain then is only what is absorbed into one's personality and is securely placed in their heart and has become an integral part of their being.

So we must practice consistency and persistence in our prayers and in our repetition of actions and recitations both during prayer and after it so that they will settle in our heart and form an essential part of our personality. The prayer has been designed by Allah (swt) in such a way that eventually those who say their prayers should be able to reach such a precious goal.

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