

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate

Chapter 2: AL-BAQARA (The Cow 238)

﴿ عَلَى الصَّلَوَاتِ وَالصَّلَاةِ الْوُسْطَىٰ وَقَوْمُوا لِلَّهِ حَافِظُونَ ﴾ قَانِتِينَ

“Maintain with care the [obligatory] prayers and [in particular] the middle prayer and stand before Allah, devoutly obedient.”

The word /hafizu/ is derived from the root /h-f-z/ which means to keep, guard, protect, take care of something; prevent it from perishing or becoming lost; and denotes being careful, mindful, and attentive as an opposite of neglect and forgetfulness. The word /salah/ is given three meanings: it means showing mercy and conferring blessings if used for Allah, denotes asking forgiveness and pardon if used for angels, and means praying, petitioning and supplicating if used for men. It is a name commonly used to denote ritual daily prayers offered in a special format. The word /wusta/ is derived from the root /w-s-t/ which means to become in the middle, or in the midst of something. It also denotes being just and away from the extremes, and being the most excellent among others. Finally, the word /qaanit/ is the active present participle (/ism-i fail/) of the verb /q-n-t/ which denotes being constantly and devoutly obedient, being humble and submissive, and performing the command of God. In addition, the word also denotes such meanings as keeping quiet and silent, and the act of supplicating and praying (while standing).

Man is the unique creature (besides jinn) who is given the will power in the whole existence. The rest of the creation humbly submissive to, and performs all the commands of God. Quran portrays the universe with all its celestial bodies, and all its large and small creatures as a huge army that constantly carries out what they are commanded by God. Read: *“Then He directed Himself to the heaven while it was smoke and said to it and to the earth: Come [into being], willingly or by compulsion. They said: We have come willingly.”* (2:116) The large and the small, the mighty and the weak, the few and the many are equal when it comes to obeying the all penetrating Divine Will: *“And to Him belongs whoever is in the heavens and earth. All are to Him devoutly obedient.”* (30:26)

Quran invites man to join in to this major symphony of obedience by his free will; that is required of his rank as the deputy of God on earth. Those who do not obey and submit fall way below their ranks. Read: *“Is one who is devoutly obedient during periods of the night, prostrating and standing [in prayer], fearing the Hereafter and hoping for the mercy of his Lord, [like one who does not]? Say: Are those who know equal to those who do not know? Only they will remember [who are] people of understanding.”* Those who submit completely to His will act on His behalf on the face of the earth, and save themselves from submitting to and worshipping any other powers and wills; no matter how mighty they may appear. In other words, the obedience to Allah is the true meaning of, and a synonym for the real freedom.

The obedience (/qunut/) emphasized as a virtue and meritorious quality in general for both men and women in Quran in several places such as: *“Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the*

charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their modesty and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward.” (33:35) The highest level of this virtue is represented by the saints and the prophets, peace be upon them all. Read: *“Indeed, Abraham was a [comprehensive] leader, devoutly obedient to Allah, inclining toward truth, and he was not of those who associate others with Allah.”* (16:120) We read Quran speaking about Mary, peace be upon her, in the same terms: *“And [the example of] Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who guarded her chastity, so We blew into [her garment] through Our angel, and she believed in the words of her Lord and His scriptures and was of the devoutly obedient.”* (66:12)

The companions offered variety of explanations about what the middle prayer (/salat al-wusta/) referred to in this verse. The semantics of the word explained above implies that the term may refer to the ‘middle prayer’ or the ‘excellent prayer’. There are as many as 17 explanations for the term in commentaries including: the afternoon prayer, the noon prayer, the Friday prayer, the sacrifice festival (/ead al-adha/) prayer, etc.; the strongest of which is the first one. Hamdi Yazir suggests that the middle prayer is not specified so that believers perform all their prayers most attentively with great care.

Similarly, the semantics of the word /qunut/ indicates certain conditions required for a valid, acceptable, perfect prayer. It denotes the standing (/qiyam/) in prayer, for example, which is a mandatory condition in any ritual prayer. The recitation of Quran during the standing is also referred to as /qunut/. A tradition commends prolonging the standing and recitation in the following terms: *“The best /salah/ is the one performed with the longest standing and recitation.”* Other connotations of the root word /qunut/ indicate that keeping quiet, and standing still are other conditions of the prayer. Ibn Mas’ud and other companions said that they used to speak with each other when they performed /salah/ until this verse was revealed. They used to greet Rasulallah, for example, and he responded back while praying. Those who joined the prayer late asked others how many units (/rak’ah/) they prayed, and a response was given. After this verse, however, Rasulallah forbade all speech other than the recitation of Quran, and supplications taken from authentic /hadith/. In an authentic tradition we read Rasulallah instructing Muawiyah that: *“The ordinary speech of people is not appropriate during the prayer. The prayer involves only /tasbih/ (praising Allah), /takbir/ (magnifying Allah), and /dhikr/ (remembering Allah).”*

In addition, we see incidents in traditions that a companion turned from one side to another, looked up and down, walked his gaze around during prayer before this verse and some other similar verses instructed to keep quiet, and stand still in prayer. One should not move his limbs during the prayer, and should not look around as such acts distract his concentration.

Exegeses list further conditions of a devoutly obedient prayer. The prayers should be performed on their prescribed times, and should be offered in complete humility and consciousness before Allah. Once Ibn Mas’ud asked Allah’s messenger *“Which deed is the dearest (to Allah)?”* He replied *“The prayers offered at their prescribed times.”* He then asked *“What is the next (in goodness)?”* He said *“To strive in the way of Allah.”* He asked again for a third time *“What is the*

next (in goodness)?” Rasulallah responded saying that it is “To be good and dutiful to your parents.” The /hadith/ emphasizes the significance of offering prayers on time in strongest terms.

The prayer (/salah/) is the title of communicating with the Divine as His deputy on earth. It should be offered in full consciousness of the poverty and the weakness of the worshipper before Allah on one hand, and in observance of His infinite might, glory and grandeur on the other. It should be performed as if one sees Him, and communes with Him (which is the meaning of /ihsan/ given in the /Jibril hadith/). The prayer should be offered as a universal supplication where the deputy gathers all praises from the creation, and offers them consciously on their behalf to the All-Powerful Creator.

Here is what Badiuzzaman says about this level of consciousness: *“The use of the first person plural in “do we worship (/na’budu/)” in prayer has three aspects: Firstly, we worship, all of us -members and atoms of the microcosm- that is myself, by offering the thanks expressed by all these members and atoms complying with that which they have been commanded. Secondly, all of us –monotheists- we worship You through obedience to your commands. And thirdly, all of us –beings- we submit totally to your supreme laws of creation, and we prostrate in bewilderment and love at the throne of your awesomeness and power.”*

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May Allah help us understand the mysteries of /salah/ and perform it as Rasulallah performed his, and favor us with certainty of faith and sincerity of worship. May peace and blessings of Allah be upon His messenger, his pure family and companions, and his noble brothers in the office of messengership.