

Salat — Contact Prayer

The Contact Prayer, or *Salat*, is known as the second pillar of Islam. It is a beautiful gift to us from God. It is the best means in my experience of keeping God foremost in your thoughts and your life.

Ever since I can remember prayer has been special for me. Probably my first truly spiritual experience was when I was praying at about the age of eight.

I grew up next to a wash. It was called a river, but only had water in it after a heavy summer storm or when the snows on the nearby mountains were melting. Most of the time it was like a huge sand box for the neighborhood children to play in. When I was out of school I practically lived in this wash. It was my special refuge when I was upset.

The day I am remembering was one of those upset times. I do not remember what had happened, but I do remember sitting in the warm sand sobbing my heart out, praying to God, and wishing that I could be like the little lizard a few feet away who was the only other breathing creature in sight. Suddenly a deep peace descended upon me and I felt God's healing presence engulf me.

I recognized that feeling immediately when I began to do the Contact Prayers. It was as if my soul were being watered again after a long drought.

But the traditional understanding of a woman's ability to perform this most important practice was a major "bull of inequity" for me.

The Contact prayer is an obligatory practice, which every Muslim should perform at five specific times in the day. Even in times of war, when attack could be imminent, Muslims are

commanded to pray (4:103-4). God provides for situations when the prayer cannot be done in its normal manner, then it can be done while walking or riding (2:239). He makes the religion easy for us, and wishes for us convenience, not difficulty (5:6).

But I was told I could not perform the Contact Prayer when I was menstruating, because I was not clean. Unhappily I accepted this indignity, not knowing what else to do. However, this edict kept a friend of mine from becoming Muslim. She simply would not accept that she could not pray during the time of the month when she needed it the most.

Like the situation discussed a couple of chapters ago, the problem here seems to lie with a misinterpretation of the Qur'anic verse forbidding intimate relations between spouses during the wife's menstruation.

In vain I looked for verses in the Quran that told me not to pray. Instead I found verse after verse telling me just the opposite, and making it very clear that I must pray regularly. Here is one such verse.

*Recite what is sent
Of the Book by inspiration
To thee, and establish
Regular Prayer: for Prayer
Restrains from shameful
And unjust deeds;
And remembrance of God
Is the greatest (thing in life)
Without doubt. And God knows
The (deeds) that ye do.
(The Holy Quran XXIX:45 [29:45])*

Here I am commanded to establish regular prayer. And I'm told that the prayer restrains me from doing wrong. Am I not as much in need of this restraint when I am menstruating? And more importantly, how regular would my prayer be if I did not pray for one week out of four?

The believers are described as praying regularly:

*And they observe their Contact Prayers
(Salat) regularly.
(Quran: The Final Testament 23:9)*

Perhaps one might argue that this just applies to men. However, the following verse makes it clear that this argument is incorrect.

*The Believers, men
And women, are protectors,
One of another: they enjoin
What is just, and forbid
What is evil: they observe
Regular prayers, practise
Regular charity, and obey
God and His Apostle.
On them will God pour
His mercy: for God
Is Exalted in power, Wise.
(The Holy Quran IX:71 [9:71])*

Both men and women must pray regularly. This makes sense not only on an individual level, for each woman's soul, but also in the society. Since the mother almost always takes care of the children while they are very young and the most impressionable, her regular prayer is a critical modeling for future generations. It would be most confusing for young ones if sometimes she prayed and sometimes she did not.

Then I found the following series of verses. To me they make it clear I should not follow the wishes of someone telling me not to pray.

*Have you seen the one who enjoins.
Others from praying?
Is it not better for him to follow the guidance?
Or advocate righteousness?
If he disbelieves and turns away.
Does he not realize that God sees?*

*Indeed, unless he refrains,
we will take him by the forelock.
A forelock that is disbelieving and sinful.
Let him then call on his helpers.
We will call the guardians of Hell.
You shall not obey him;
you shall fall prostrate and draw nearer.
(Quran: The Final Testament 96:9-19)*



For those of you who are not familiar with the Contact Prayers, or *Salat* in Arabic, let me try to describe them.

They are a practice that was originally given to the prophet Abraham. They consist of five prayers said within specific time frames. The first is said during the dawn before the sun rises, the second a little after noon, the third later in the afternoon, the fourth after sunset before it is dark and the fifth after it is dark. Sometimes Muslims combine prayers, but it is my understanding from the following verse that they should always be said within these specific ranges of time.

*...Celebrate God's praises,
Standing, sitting down,
or lying down on your sides;
But when ye are free
From danger, set up
Regular Prayers:
For such prayers
Are enjoined on Believers
At stated times.
(The Holy Quran IV:103 [4:103])*

Thus, the prayers should be done “*at stated times,*” and not combined.

Each prayer consists of a set number of units: the dawn has two, the noon has four, the afternoon has four, the sunset has three and the night has four.

Each unit begins in the standing position with the recitation in Arabic of the very short first chapter of the Quran (quoted below). Then you bow and repeat an Arabic phrase glorifying God. Then you go into prostration, and again repeat an Arabic phrase glorifying God. If this is an odd numbered unit, you will stand up again. If it is even numbered, you will repeat the *Shahada*, bearing witness that only God is God and that He has no partners.

As you move from position to position you say “*Allahu Akbar*” meaning “God is great.”

Many have asked why the Contact Prayer must be said in Arabic. My honest answer is that I believe it is better to do it in English, or your native tongue, rather than not do it at all. However, from my own experience I believe that it should eventually be done in Arabic. I have tried both. There were a number of months that I did it all in English. When I went back to my pitiful Arabic, there was a difference somehow. Perhaps it is that, especially in the case of the first chapter of the Quran, you are speaking God’s words as they were revealed. It is not a translation, or an interpretation, but God’s actual words.

I’ve also heard it said that the actual sounds of Arabic act as a combination to open the contact with God, like the combination of a safe. Whatever the reason, as I mentioned above, there was a distinct difference for me, a deepening in the prayer of sorts. I’m not sure how else to describe it. Perhaps you have felt it yourself.

Here is the English translation of that first chapter of the Quran, known variously as the Opener or the Key, or *Al-Fatehah* in Arabic.

*In the name of God, Most Gracious,
Most Merciful.
Praise be to God,
The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
Master of the Day of Judgment.
Thee do we worship,*

*And Thine aid we seek.
Show us the straight way,
The way of those on whom
Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace,
Those whose (portion)
Is not wrath,
And who go not astray.
(The Holy Quran 1:1-7 [1:1-7])*

Here is Rashad Khalifa's translation of this important chapter:

*In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful
Praise be to God, Lord of the universe.
Most Gracious, Most Merciful.
Master of the Day of Judgment.
You alone we worship; You alone we ask for help.
Guide us in the right path;
the path of those whom You blessed;
not of those who have deserved wrath,
nor of the strayers.
(Quran: The Final Testament 1:1-7)*

Most Muslims recite other portions of the Quran besides the first chapter in some of their units. I am not comfortable doing so because to me the Contact Prayer is direct contact with my Creator. I feel like I am addressing Him directly, and most of the Quran is addressed to us, not to Him. It doesn't feel right to address God and then recite something totally disconnected, like a verse about Moses and Pharaoh. Also, recitation of any verses that address anyone other than God breaks the commandment in the following verse.

*"And the places of worship
Are for God (alone):
So invoke not any one
Along with God;
(The Holy Quran LXXII:18 [72:18])*

So you certainly do not want to recite any verses that address anyone other than your Creator in the Contact Prayer.

In the sitting position many Muslims pray for the families of Muhammad and Abraham. However, this practice is like adding the name of Muhammad to the *Shahada*, as mentioned in the last chapter. It makes a distinction among God's messengers, and I am not comfortable doing so. Besides, we know from the following that our prayers will not help them.

*...Every soul draws the meed
of its acts on none
But itself: no bearer
Of burdens can bear
The burden of another....
(The Holy Quran VI:164 [6:164])*

Not only will our prayer not help them, but praying for the families of Muhammad and Abraham means that you are praying for Abraham's father who threatened to kill him and Muhammad's uncle Abee Lahab who was the leader of the opposition against the early Muslims.

Before the contact prayer is begun, you perform a symbolic ablution, washing your face, arms to the elbows, wiping your head and washing your feet to the ankles. (See 5:6.) If there is no water available, or you are ill, you can perform the dry ablution as described in the following.

*O you who believe, do not
observe the Contact Prayers (Salat)
while intoxicated, so that you know
what you are saying.
Nor after sexual orgasm without bathing,
unless you are on the road, traveling;
if you are ill or traveling,
or you had urinary or fecal-related excretion
(such as gas), or contacted the women (sexually
and you cannot find water,
you shall observe Tayammum*

*(dry ablution) by touching clean dry soil,
then wiping your faces and hands therewith.
God is Pardoner, Forgiver.
(Quran: The Final Testament 4:43)*

Note that the first part of this verse is the only place where God gives us conditions for not praying. That is only when we are intoxicated, which we never should be if we are following the Quranic injunctions against intoxicants (see 2:219 and 5:90).

Please also notice that this verse describes what things nullify the ritual purity needed for prayer. It also indicates that if you are ill you should still pray but you can do the dry ablution rather than washing.

This verse thus answers the final argument I was given for why I could not pray during my period. I was told that at this time it was like I was ill, and God was making it easy for me by allowing me to skip my prayer. This verse indicates that I should be praying even if I am ill.

To me there is nothing in the whole Quran that indicates I should not be praying during my period. On the contrary, there are many verses that indicate I should pray regularly. Also, the above verses have shown that we should pray when we are ill, if we are afraid we will be attacked during times of war, even if we must do it while walking or riding. It seems to me that there is never any reason not to do our Contact Prayers.



There is one other issue for women related to the Contact Prayers, and that has to do with the congregational prayer on Fridays, known as the *Salat Al-Jumu'ah*, or just *Jumu'ah*, or the Friday Prayer. In many parts of the Muslim world women are not welcome in the mosque and do not attend the Friday congregational prayer. A large portion of my friends had never gone to the Friday Prayer, even though they were born and raised to be Muslim women.

However, the following verse tells all believers to participate in this weekly event.

*O ye who believe!
When the call is proclaimed
To prayer on Friday
(The Day of Assembly),
Hasten earnestly to the Remembrance
Of God, and leave off
Business (and traffic):
That is best for you
If ye but knew!
(The Holy Quran LXII:9 [62:9])*

All believers, not just men, should follow this commandment to “*Hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of God.*”

In our community the Friday Prayer is a wonderful time. It is the one time in the week that the entire community is together. The services are kept short so that those who are coming from work do not have to take much, if any, extra time for their lunch break. But those who can, stay after the prayer to visit a bit.

A different brother leads the prayer each week, giving two short talks, known as *khutbahs*. These talks are given on Quranic topics or topics of community concern with examples from the Quran. They substitute for two of the units of the noon *Salat* (Contact Prayer). Between the talks, we turn to God in silent repentance. After the second talk the brother leads two units of *Salat*.

If you find yourself alone or in a community where you are not welcome in the mosque for the *Jumu'ah* prayer, please consider starting one yourself. All you need is one other person to follow this important commandment of God. You can rotate giving the *khutbahs*, just reading from the Quran to each other, if nothing else. Who knows, you may find a community growing. Many of my friends have found just that.

In our community we get together again on Friday evenings for a Quran study lead by one of the sisters. (Of course anyone can lead a Quran study. We have just chosen to give the sisters a chance Friday nights to lead the study in rotation, like the brothers who do the *khutbahs* in rotation at noon.)

Most people come for both the Friday Prayer and the Quran study. So Friday is a wonderful community day for us, and my favorite day of the week.