

The Best Time for Prayers

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

صَلَّى اللّٰهُ عَلٰى مُحَمَّدٍ وَّآلِهِ الْاَطْهَارِ

The ritual prayer (*ṣalāh*, pl. *ṣalawāt*) is perhaps the most integral practice of a Muslim’s daily life. It is well known to Muslims and non-Muslims alike that throughout the day a Muslim will stop whatever they are doing, turn towards Mecca, and commune with their Lord. The *ṣalāh* is prescribed to be performed with certain preliminaries and in a particular method. Among these preliminaries is performance of the prayers in their specified times, as Allah alludes to in the Qur’an: “Verily the *ṣalāh* is a timed prescription upon the faithful.”^{[1][2]}

The Prophet (ﷺ) and Imams (‘a) stressed the obligation of dutifully observing our prayers and making sure we pray them within their prescribed times. al-Kulaynī reports the following hadith from Abān ibn Taghlib, a notable jurist from the companions of Ahl al-Bayt (‘a):

I was praying in congregation behind Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (‘a) in Muzdalifah; when he finished, he turned to me and said, “Abān, whoever establishes the five obligatory prayers with their requirements and takes care to pray them in their allotted times shall meet Allah on the Day of Reckoning with a covenant that will bring him into paradise. However, whoever fails to establish them with their requirements and neglects their prescribed times shall meet Allah with no covenant. If He wishes, He can punish him, and if He wishes, He can pardon him.”^[3]

Naturally, one would then wonder what are these prescribed times for each of the daily prayers. Of the Qur’anic verses that speak about the times of prayer, one encompasses all five daily *ṣalawāt*: “Establish *ṣalāh* from the sun’s decline until the darkness of the night and [establish] the recitation of dawn. Verily the dawn recital is witnessed.”^[4] This verse mentions three times: the sun’s decline (*dulūk al-shams*), the darkness of the night (*ghasaq al-layl*), and dawn (*fajr*). Some Shī‘ī Muslims, often in the context of polemics, try to argue that this verse has only defined three timings for the *ṣalawāt*—namely to argue that the five obligatory prayers have only three times that are established by Allah. This is, however, not what is understood from the verse, linguistically. The verse calls for us to establish prayer within a particular stretch of time—from *dulūk al-shams* until *ghasaq al-layl*—and at one particular time, *fajr*. It does not say to pray at noon, pray at night, and pray at dawn.

The main source for establishing the specific timings for each prayer within that stretch of time is the reported traditions from the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a). In the issue of the timings of the daily prayers, the *fuqahā’* (jurists) of the school of Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) have a near consensus on the prayer times. They are as follows:

The time of *ẓuhr* and ‘*aṣr* is from noon until sunset. However, the very beginning of this time, for the duration of time it would take to pray *ẓuhr*, is specific to *ẓuhr*. The end of the time, just before sunset, is similarly specific to ‘*aṣr*. Whatever is between these two times is shared. The time of *maghrib* and ‘*ishā*’ is from sunset until midnight (literally, when half the night has passed). However, the beginning of this time, for the length of time it would take to pray *maghrib*, is specific to *maghrib*. The ending time—just prior to midnight—is similarly specific to ‘*ishā*’. Whatever is between these two times is shared.[5]

These given times are the basic boundaries for the prayers to be considered “on time,” termed *waqt al-ijzā*’. It is these times that are most well-known among the Shi’a today. Many people perform the prayers in “sets”; that is, they perform ‘*aṣr* immediately after *ẓuhr*, and ‘*ishā*’ immediately after *maghrib*. This practice of consistently combining prayers is foreign to Sunni Muslims. Generally, Sunnis believe that these prayers cannot be prayed back-to-back without cause, such as traveling or illness. The issue of combining prayers in this manner—without special circumstance—has become a sectarian issue and emblematic of differences between the Shi’a and the Sunnis.

As members of the two communities constantly interact, ideas and views passively transfer between them. As Sunnis make up a majority of the Muslim community, they tend to set the tone and ethos behind many issues, and their culture defines which views are seen as normative. The dint of this hegemony enforces a culture of stringency on separating the prayers—in a particular way—as ideal, while combining is seen as lax and even deviant. Sometimes this passive absorption of values or a sudden urge to follow the prophetic *sunnah* in full capacity drives practicing Imāmī Shi’a to separate their prayers and feel as though their community’s general practice is in opposition to the *sunnah* of the Prophet (ṣ), even if they affirm the permissibility of combining prayers.

Is Combining Prayers Less Preferable?

To answer this question, one must take a step back and look into the conclusions of experts. Sayyid ‘Alī al-Sīstānī and the late Sayyid al-Khū’ī (d. 1992) say that the recommendation of separating (*tafrīq*) two prayers with overlapping timings is unestablished and problematic, respectively.[6] Sayyid Khū’ī states that the discouragement (*karāhah*)[7] for combining prayers in and of itself—meaning for two prayers of a shared time to follow one after another successively—is not supported by any evidence and that the recommendation of *tafrīq* itself is baseless. Rather, what is established is the *karāhah* of performing a prayer in the *waqt al-faḍīlah* (pl. *awqāt al-faḍīlah*)[8] of another prayer.[9] So there is no established merit in, say, praying *ẓuhr* at noon and then delaying ‘*aṣr* until slightly before sunset. The standard is not separating the prayers; it is praying them in their recommended times.

After establishing that, naturally we need to know when are these *awqāt al-faḍīlah*. The *fuqahā*’ differ due to the variety of reports regarding the issue. The general consensus of the jurists is that the *waqt al-faḍīlah* for *maghrib* is from sunset until the disappearance of the redness in the western sky (*shafaq*). This disappearance of the *shafaq* is the beginning of ‘*ishā*’s recommended time that continues until the first third of the night ends. Below is a chart outlining the three predominant views regarding the timings for *ẓuhr* and ‘*aṣr*. These times are measured by the length of an object’s shadow in relation to the actual

object's height. As the day moves forward from sunrise towards noon, an object's shadow will shorten. Once that shadow stops shortening and starts to grow again, the time of *ẓuhr* has begun. As the day goes along and the sun nears dusk, the length of the object's shadow will grow. This is what is intended by "shadow length." So if a 7-foot pole were placed under the sun, it would reach a shadow length of 1/1 when the shadow is 7 feet longer than what it was at the very start of *ẓuhr*.

	Faḍīla of Ẓuhr		Faḍīla of 'Aṣr	
	Beginning	End	Beginning	End
Opinion 1 [10]	Noon	Shadow Length 1/1	Shadow Length 1/1	Shadow Length 2/1
Opinion 2 [11]	Noon	Shadow Length 4/7	Shadow Length 2/7	Shadow Length 6/7
Opinion 3 [12]	Noon	Shadow Length 1/1	Noon	Shadow Length 2/1

For those familiar with the supererogatory prayers that accompany each of the daily prayers—termed *nawāfil*, *nāfilah*, or *rawātib*—note that there seems to be an intimate relationship between these preferred prayer times and the supererogatory prayers. For example, some opinions leave a gap between the beginning of *ẓuhr* and the *waqt al-faḍīlah* of 'aṣr, which would leave appropriate time for the *nawāfil* of 'aṣr to be prayed. There is an internal logic to this issue; this time allotment encourages the performance of each *ṣalāh* with its *nawāfil* and tries not to create any competition between rituals. So for one who is going to pray these *nawāfil*—a total of sixteen cycles (*raka'āt*, sing. *rak'ah*) of prayer—naturally the two prayers will be separated.

At first glance, it may seem surprising that there would be variant timings for the prayers, and that the jurists would put forward differing views. However, these timings and their variances offer a more holistic picture of the rules and recommendations, and allow for flexibility when people are working, tired, ill, praying in congregation, alone, pregnant, etc.

al-Shaykh Muḥammad al-Sanad, a jurist and teacher in the Najaf seminary, pulls together the various narrations as follows:

It is not unlikely (*lā yab'ud*) that there are three times for the *faḍīlah*. For the person praying individually, who anticipates an unexpected task or impediment to the prayer, or that his enthusiasm will fade, the best time for *ẓuhr* is one-seventh shadow length and two-sevenths for 'aṣr. However, for others, especially those who will pray in congregation, the best for the two prayers is two-sevenths and then four-sevenths, respectively. That is the regularly-practiced *sunna* of the Prophet (ṣ) where he would pray the *nawāfil*, then pray *ẓuhr* in congregation when the shadow length reached two-sevenths. Then he would pray the *nawāfil* for 'aṣr, followed by praying 'aṣr in congregation when the shadow length reached four-sevenths. Four-sevenths and six-sevenths are the least excellent of the *awqāt al-faḍīlah* for *ẓuhr* and 'aṣr, respectively.

This is for whoever wishes to pray the *nawāfil* before each of the prayers. If one is not going to

do so, then it is best to hasten in praying [both successively] in the very beginning time, regardless of the situation.[13]

Again we see the intimate connection between the performing of prayers in their *awqāt al-faḍīlah* and the *nawāfil* prayers. So much so that one who is not going to pray the *nawāfil* should, in fact, pray *‘aṣr* immediately after *zuhr*. Why might this be the case? The virtue of performing righteous deeds earlier rather than later is a known Islamic principle. In a report from Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir (‘a), the esteemed jurist and companion of Ahl al-Bayt (‘a), Zurārah b. A‘yan, reports:

I said to Imam Bāqir (‘a): ...Is the beginning, middle, or ending time for the *ṣalāh* the best? He said, “The beginning. The Prophet (ṣ) said: Verily Allah loves the good that you hasten to.”[14]

Some jurists, such as al-Shaykh Fayyāḍ, declare this to be the case not only for *zuhr* and *‘aṣr*, but also for *maghrib* and *‘ishā’*. In a question-answer regarding whether it is recommended to separate or combine *zuhr* and *‘aṣr*, and likewise *maghrib* and *‘ishā’*, he replied that successive praying of the two obligatory prayers in the beginning of their time is superior for anyone who is not going to pray the *nawāfil*. [15]

This may seem to be very confusing. How does one even figure out two-sevenths of a shadow length? Why does that matter if my *marjī’* say this rather than that? It does not seem that the Imams (‘a) stressed precision in any of these matters with their followers. Rather, they made things easier for them and expected from each person according to their own ability and knowledge. A group of jurists and narrators from the companions of Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) were once in the presence of Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (‘a) trying to measure out what would be two-sevenths shadow length in Medina. The Imam says to them:

Shall I not inform you of something clearer than this? When the sun begins its descent, then it is time to pray *zuhr*. However, you have in front of you *nawāfil* and that is up to you. If you would like, lengthen them. If you would like, shorten them.[16]

The companions of the Imams (‘a) themselves had difficulty with these issues and were confused regarding the timings. There were, apparently, such discussions going on among the jurists that they would specifically ask about this issue, often times in the form of letters. Imam ‘Alī al-Hādī (‘a) was written to about prayer times; it was mentioned to him that all of these different lengths and times have been reported from the late Imams (‘a) and that they were unsure of what to do. The Imam (‘a) replied that it’s neither this measurement nor that measurement—as if to move them away from complicating the issue –and states:

When the sun begins its descent, then it is time to pray *zuhr*. However, you have in front of you *nawāfil* that is eight cycles. If you would like, lengthen them. If you would like, shorten them. Then pray *zuhr*. When you’re done, between *zuhr* and *‘aṣr* are *nawāfil* that are eight cycles. If you would like, lengthen them. If you would like, shorten them. Then pray *‘aṣr*. [17]

A strong emphasis on upholding these specifics between prayer times at all costs neither appears in the

traditions from Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) nor the *sīrah* (way or lifestyle) of the *fuqahā’*, especially for the general public. However, the emphasis of praying *ṣalawāt* in their beginning time and avoiding unnecessary delay is clear and established without doubt. In a report narrated in *al-Kāfī*, one of Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq’s (a) close students said that he heard the Imam say:

For each *ṣalāh* there are two times and the best of those times is the first of them. It is not for anyone to take the second time for himself without reason, unless he has an excuse.[18]

In fact, several early Shī‘ī scholars limited the prayers to their earlier times—based on narrations like the above—and believed it was not admissible to delay them unnecessarily, especially with the first of two prayers in each set. For example, Taqī al-Dīn b. Najm al-Dīn Abū Ṣalāh al-Ḥalabī (d. 447 AH), one of our preeminent jurists from among al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī’s students, believed that the time of *ẓuhr* ended at four-sevenths shadow length for a person without a pressing need, and the time of ‘*aṣr* ended when the shadow length equaled the length of the standard.[19] Therefore, according to Abū al-Ṣalāh, if you were to delay *ẓuhr* and ‘*aṣr* after these times without good reason, you would have committed a sin.

The open nature of the prayer timings is a mercy and blessing for Muslims. There may be a more preferred way in certain situations and contexts, but our world and schedules are constantly changing, and the lifestyle of one society is different from another. Combining the prayers need not be a cop-out, nor should it be seen as choosing what is easier; rather it is a principled decision derived from the sources of knowledge. It is this openness that allows us to dutifully fulfill the most integral pillar of our faith after *walāyah*. All of this is part of the tradition and practice that the Prophet (ṣ) himself established.

Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (‘a) said: “The Prophet (ṣ) prayed *ẓuhr* and ‘*aṣr* together successively with the people in congregation when the sun began its descent, without any reason; and he prayed *Maghrib* and ‘*Ishā’* together successively with them in congregation before the disappearance of the *shafaq*, for no reason. The Prophet (ṣ) only did this so that time would not be a burden [upon his nation].”[20]

[1] Qur’an, *al-Nisā’* 3:103. إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ كَانَتْ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ كِتَابًا مَّوْقُوتًا

[2] According to several narrations from the Imams (‘a), “time” (مَوْقُوتًا) means a lasting obligation, not that the prayer can only be performed at its onset. See: Mashhadī, *Tafsīr Kanz al-Daqa’iq wa Baḥr al-Gharā’ib*, vol. 3 (Tehran: Shams al-Ḍuḥā) 553-4.

[3] al-Kulaynī, “*Kitāb al-Ṣalāh*” (“*Bāb man Ḥāfaẓa ‘alā Ṣalātih aw Ḍayya’ahā*”) in *al-Kāfī fī ‘ilm al-Dīn*, vol. 3, Hadith 1.

[4] Qur'an, *al-Isrā'* 17:78. "أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذُلُوكِ الشَّمْسِ إِلَى غَسَقِ اللَّيْلِ وَقُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ ۖ إِنَّ قُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ كَانَ مَشْهُودًا"

[5] Sīstānī, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāh* ("A'dād al-Farā'id wa-Nawāfilihā wa-Mawāqītihā: al-Faṣl al-Thānī"), *Minhāj al-Ṣāliḥīn*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Mu'arrikh al-'Arabī, 2013) 154.

[6] Sayyid Muḥammad Kāẓim Yazdī, *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā bi-Hāmishihā*, vol. 2. (Qum: Mu'assasah Fiqh al-Thaqalayn al-Thiqāfiyyah) 24.

[7] Literally hatred, abhorrence. It is a technical legal term to referring to permissibility, but avoidance being better. An act with this status is deemed *makrūh*.

[8] Literally time of virtue or excellence. This terms refers to the recommended time to perform a particular prayer.

[9] al-Khū'ī, *al-Mustanad fī Sharḥ al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, vol. 1, 225.

[10] This is the view of Shaykh Makārim Shīrāzī and is usually deemed as the popular (*mashhūr*) view.

[11] This is the view of Sayyid 'Alī Sīstānī and of the late Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh. However, Sayyid Sīstānī adds that it is even better if *ẓuhr* is completed before 2/7th and 'aṣr completed before 4/7th.

[12] This is the view of the late Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim al-Khū'ī, Sayyid Rūhallāh Khumaynī, and of Shaykh Waḥīd Khurasānī.

[13] Sanad, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāh* ("Awqātuhā"), *Minhāj al-Ṣāliḥīn*, vol. 1, *mas'alah* 504.

[14] al-Kulaynī, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāh* ("Bāb al-Mawāqīt Awwalihā wa-Ākhirihā wa Afḍalihā") in *al-Kāfī*, vol. 3, hadith 5.

[15] Ishāq al-Fayyadh, "Question and Answer", accessed: September 20, 2016, <http://alfayadh.org/ar/#post?type=post&id=5698>.

[16] al-Kulaynī, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāh* ("Bāb Waqt al-Ẓuhr wa-l-'Aṣr") in *al-Kāfī*, vol. 3, hadith 4.

[17] Ḥurr al-'Āmilī, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāh* ("Abwāb al-Mawāqīt: Bāb istiḥbāb ta'khīr al-mutanaffil al-Ẓuhr wa-l-'Aṣr") in *Wasā'il al-Shī'ah*, vol. 4, hadith 13.

[18] al-Kulaynī, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāh* ("Bāb al-Mawāqīt Awwalihā wa-Ākhirihā wa Afḍalihā") in *al-Kāfī*, vol. 3, hadith 3.

[19] al-Ḥalabī, *al-Kāfī fī al-Fiqh* (Najaf: Maktabh Imām Amīr al-Mu'minīn) 137.

[20] al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Kitāb al-Ṣalāh* (“Abwāb al-Mawāqīt: Bāb Jawāz al-Jam‘ bayn al-Ṣalātayn li-ghayr al-ʿudhr ayḍan) in *Wasā’il al-Shī’ah*, vol. 4, hadith 8.