



The Sunnah's Balance: Prayer & Dhikr In Their Proper Times

Worship (‘ibādah) in Islam is not left to human reasoning or desire. It is defined and perfected through the Qur’an and Sunnah. Among the greatest signs of the Sunnah’s wisdom is its balance: it sometimes prohibits certain acts of worship at specific times while opening other doors of worship, ensuring that devotion remains in harmony with divine guidance.

One of the clearest examples is in prayer (ṣalāh) and remembrance (dhikr). The Prophet ﷺ restricted voluntary prayers at certain times but encouraged dhikr, du‘ā’, and Qur’an during those same periods. This balance highlights the Sunnah’s perfection and protects worship from confusion, excess, and innovation.

The Times When Prayer is Discouraged

The Prophet ﷺ said:

«لا صلاة بعد الصبح حتى ترتفع الشمس، ولا صلاة بعد العصر حتى تغرب الشمس»

There is no prayer after Fajr until the sun has risen, and there is no prayer after ‘Aṣr until the sun sets.”¹

Scholars added other narrations which clarify additional times:

- At sunrise until it rises fully.
- At zenith before Ṣuḥr.
- At sunset until it disappears.

¹ al-Bukhārī & Muslim

These are times when nawāfil prayers without cause are discouraged.

Exceptions for Ṣalāt with a Cause

The prohibition does not apply to prayers that have a specific reason (dhāt as-sabab). Examples include:

- Tahiyat al-Masjid (greeting the masjid).
- Ṣalāt al-Janāzah (funeral prayer).
- Repeating a missed farḍ prayer.
- Ṣalāt al-Kusūf (eclipse prayer).

Thus, the balance remains: what is unrestricted is paused, but what has a clear reason is maintained.

Dhikr, Du‘ā’, and Qur’an in These Times

When prayer is paused, dhikr is encouraged for example after Fajr until sunrise: The Prophet ﷺ would remain in his place of prayer making dhikr until the sun rose:

«كان إذا صلى الغداة جلس في مصلاه حتى تطلع الشمس حسناً»

“When he prayed Fajr, he would remain in his place of prayer until the sun had risen completely.”²

Before Maghrib at sunset; The Prophet ﷺ emphasized adhkār at sunset — reciting the evening supplications, seeking refuge from Shayṭān, and reading the Mu‘awwidhāt. This shows that the encouragement of adhkār and dua remain central at this time.

The Wisdom of Balance

The Sunnah’s balance is clear: at times when ṣalāh is paused, the heart is not left empty — it is filled with dhikr, du‘ā’, and Qur’an.

² Muslim

Worship is furthermore protected from excess, resembling the ways of Ahl al-Bid‘ah who invent times and forms of prayer. Rather, the true believer (on the Sunnah) is guided to distribute his acts of devotion according to divine timing and not personal desire.

Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله said:

(وأما أوقات النهي عن الصلاة فالدعاء والذكر وقراءة القرآن فيها مشروع غير منهي عنه)

“As for the times when prayer is prohibited, du‘ā’, dhikr, and recitation of Qur’an remain legislated and not prohibited.”³

Shaykh Ibn Bāz رحمه الله likewise explained:

(النهي خاص بالصلاة النافلة، أما قراءة القرآن، والذكر، والدعاء فلا نهى فيها)

“The prohibition is specific to voluntary prayers. As for Qur’an recitation, dhikr, and du‘ā’, there is no prohibition.”

This is the Sunnah’s balance: a prohibition that is not a closure but a redirection. At times when ṣalāh is paused, the Sunnah opens the door to dhikr, du‘ā’, and Qur’an. This harmony demonstrates the perfection of Islam — a Dīn that balances every act of worship, guiding the believer to what benefits his soul most at each time. True worship is therefore only through ittibā‘ as-Sunnah, for in it lies wisdom, balance, and the perfection of the Sharī‘ah.

Statements From The Salaf:

Ibn al-Qayyim رحمه الله said:

وكان من هديه ﷺ أن ينهى عن الصلاة بعد الفجر حتى تطلع الشمس، وبعد العصر حتى تغرب، وأما الذكر والدعاء وقراءة القرآن فلم ينه عنها في هذه الأوقات

“From his ﷺ guidance was that he prohibited prayer after Fajr until the sun rose, and after ‘Aṣr until it set. As for dhikr, du‘ā’, and reciting

³ Majmū‘ al-Fatāwā 22/305

the Qur'an — he did not prohibit these at these times.”⁴

Ibn Rajab رحمه الله noted:

المنهي عنه الصلاة لا الذكر، ولهذا كان السلف يذكرون الله في هذه الأوقات ويقرؤون القرآن

“What is forbidden is prayer, not dhikr. For this reason, the Salaf used to remember Allah and recite the Qur'an during these times.”⁵

al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn 'Abd al-Barr رحمه الله said:

وأما الدعاء والتسبيح والتهليل فلا أعلم أحداً من أهل العلم نهى عنه في هذه الأوقات

“As for du‘ā', tasbīḥ, and tahlīl — I do not know of any scholar among the people of knowledge who prohibited it during these times.”⁶

Ṣalāh in Its Proper Times

Just as the Sunnah prohibits voluntary prayers in certain periods, it also obligates the five daily prayers in their precise, fixed periods. To delay them without excuse is a major sin. This is also a balance in the Sharī'ah: no ṣalāh in forbidden hours, while not neglecting ṣalāh in its appointed and fixed times.

Allah تعالى says:

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ كَانَتْ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ كِتَابًا مَوْقُوتًا

“Indeed, the prayer has been decreed upon the believers at fixed times.” [an-Nisā' 4:103]

Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله explains: “Meaning: it is made obligatory at known, appointed times.”

⁴ Zād al-Ma'ād (1/305)

⁵ Fath al-Bārī (commenting on al-Bukhārī)

⁶ al-Istidhkār (2/210)

Allah also says:

حَافِظُوا عَلَى الصَّلَوَاتِ وَالصَّلَاةِ الْوُسْطَى وَقُومُوا لِلَّهِ قَانِتِينَ

“Guard strictly the prayers, especially the middle prayer, and stand before Allah in devotion.” [al-Baqarah 2:238]

The command to “guard” indicates praying on time, with true worship and devotion, not allowing delay or neglect.⁷

⁷ The command [حَافِظُوا عَلَى الصَّلَوَاتِ] “guard strictly the prayers” does not only mean to pray hastily at the correct time. Rather, as the Salaf explained, it means to establish (iqāmah) the prayer in its fullest sense — safeguarding: Its time – the right of ṣalāh on you. Its pillars (arkān) – such as standing, recitation, bowing, and prostration. Its obligations (wājibāt) – tashahhud, takbīrāt, etc. Its conditions (shurūṭ) – wuḍū’, purity of body/clothes/place, facing the qiblah. Its khushū’ and devotion – true presence of heart before Allah, humility, and obedience. Ibn Kathīr رحمه الله said regarding this verse: “Meaning: guard strictly their times, their boundaries, their pillars, and their obligations, and do not neglect them.” [Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr on 2:238]. Thus, the verse implies more than punctuality: it commands complete establishment of ṣalāh.

The Obligation to Learn Prayer Correctly: If it is a major sin to delay ṣalāh beyond its fixed time without excuse, then how much more serious is it to pray without knowing its pillars and obligations? The Prophet ﷺ said to the man who prayed poorly: «ارجع فصل فإنك لم تصل» “Go back and pray, for indeed you have not prayed.” [al-Bukhārī 757, Muslim 397] This shows that ṣalāh is invalid if not performed correctly. Learning how to pray properly is an obligation (fard ‘ayn) upon every Muslim — just as praying on time is obligatory. Shaykh Ṣāliḥ al-Fawzān حفظه الله said: “Prayer is not valid except by knowing its manner and what is obligatory in it. This is an individual obligation upon every Muslim.” [Sharḥ al-Mulakhkhaṣ al-Fiqhī]

Establishing vs. Merely Performing: To simply “pray on time” without learning and applying its rulings is not enough. To “establish the prayer” means praying on time with correctness, fulfilling its rights inwardly and outwardly. There is no value in hastening to ṣalāh but then praying badly your entire life.

Allah تعالى says: “Indeed, successful are the believers, those who are humble in their prayers.” [al-Mu’minūn 23:1–2] — indicating that true righteousness is in khushū’ and correctness, not just punctuality. With the correct understanding of establishing the ṣalāh we can see how much emphasis and importance is given to its due time.

The Prophet ﷺ said when asked about the most beloved deed to Allah: “Prayer at its proper time.”⁸

In another narration: “Prayer in its appointed time.” — showing the emphasis on punctuality in ṣalāh.

He ﷺ also said: “Whoever catches one rak‘ah of the prayer has caught the prayer.”⁹ — indicating the importance of performing the ṣalāh within its valid time frame.

‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb رضي الله عنه said in one of his letters: “The most important matter to me is the prayer. Whoever guards it has guarded his religion, and whoever wastes it will be more wasteful of other matters.”¹⁰

Conclusion

The Sunnah shows us the perfect balance: there are times when voluntary prayers are withheld, but never a time when the believer’s heart is left empty. Dhikr, du‘ā’, and Qur’an remain open at all hours, filling the soul with light and guidance. At the same time, the obligatory prayers stand as pillars of the religion — fixed at their appointed times, never to be delayed, never to be neglected.

This is the justice and perfection of the Sharī‘ah: it neither allows neglect nor excess, but establishes worship upon divine wisdom. To safeguard the prayer is to safeguard one’s entire Dīn; to neglect it is to ruin everything else.

So hasten to the prayer, guard it in its times, and establish it with knowledge, humility, and devotion. Let not a lifetime pass rushing to ṣalāh yet praying it incorrectly. Learn its pillars, fulfill its conditions, and perform it with khushū‘. For indeed, the ṣalāh is the first deed you

⁸ al-Bukhārī 527, Muslim 85

⁹ al-Bukhārī, Muslim

¹⁰ Mālik, al-Muwatṭā

will be asked about on the Day of Judgment, and it is the key to your success in this life and the next.

With the correct understanding of establishing the ṣalāh — at its fixed times, with its due rights — we see how central it is in the balance of worship. And whoever safeguards his ṣalāh has safeguarded his religion.

