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Perspective of a Believer
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Belief

A NURSI READER

Prayer

an inexhaustible treasure for the human spirit

There are two Arabic words that describe the nature of prayer. The word "salat" describes prayer through words and performance, such as bowing and prostrating. The word "dua" describes prayer through words, such as asking God to fulfill one's needs.

Nursi frames his view on prayer by making use of the following verse from the Qur'an, which shows the paramount importance of prayer.

Say (O Muhammad, unto the unbelievers):
My Lord would not care for you were it not
for your prayer. (Furqan 25:77)

In the Islamic tradition, prayer is considered the most significant and mysterious means of relationship between humans and the Creator. Nursi considers prayer as the spirit of servanthood. Accordingly, all creatures in their own tongues pray to God, both consciously and unconsciously. Humans, angels, and the jinn (invisible creatures that are parallel to humans) all pray to God. Nursi divides prayer, basically, into four types.

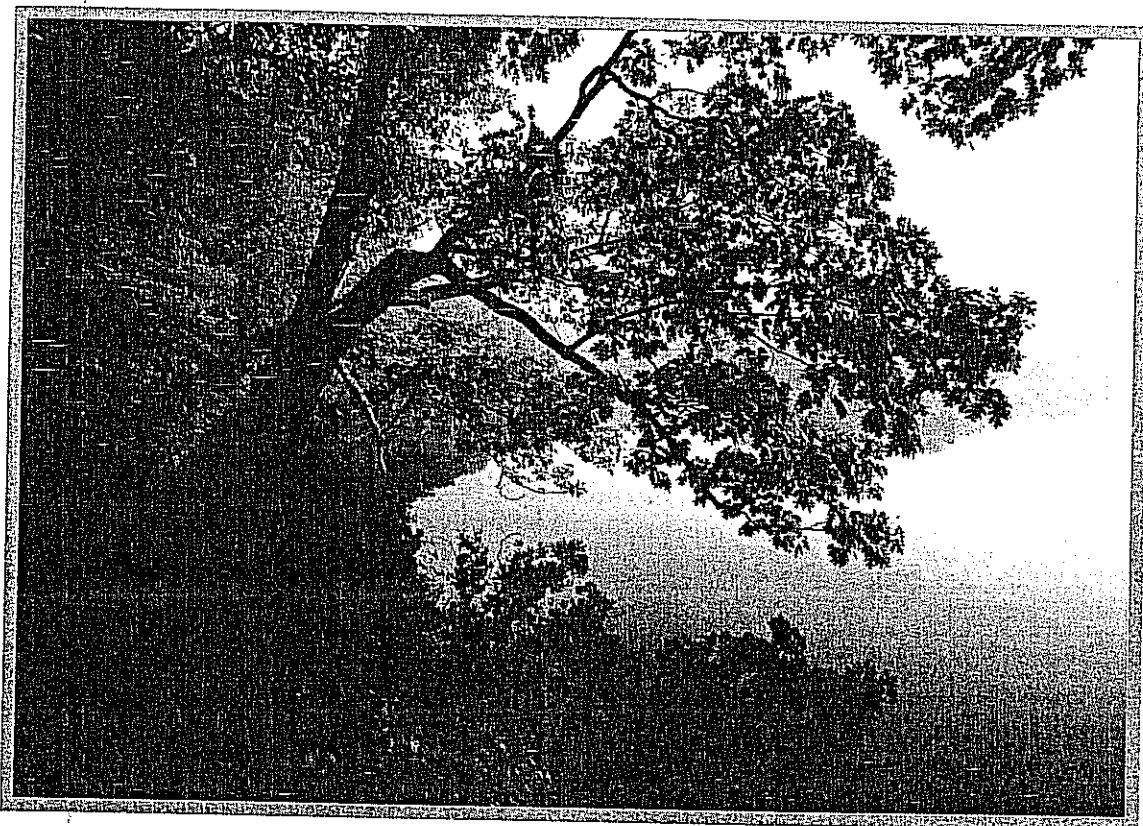
The first type of prayer is a prayer through the *language of capacity*. This is the prayer of all kinds of seeds and grains. They pray to the Lord through the lan-

guage of their capability by saying the following:

O Lord, grow us to express the beauty of
Your names in a detailed manner. Change
our small reality to the reality of a big tree.

Another aspect of this first type of prayer is through the *relationship between cause and effect*. Causes come together to bring about the result or the effect, and this is considered a prayer. The interconnectedness of the two forms a prayer. Causes, by their collective language, ask the Most Powerful Lord for the result. For example, water, air, earth, and fire come together through their collective language and ask the Lord to make a certain seed a tree or a plant. The cooperation of causes to create a result is a prayer. Because the result is so wonderfully organized and prepared, there cannot be the effect of unconscious causes in reality.

The second type of prayer is through the *language of natural need*. This is the prayer of all living creatures who receive their needs and their wishes in an unexpected way at an appropriate time, with no delay or interruption. According to the Islamic tradition, one of the ninety-nine names of God is the Most



Compassionate. Creatures are unable to provide their needs if it is not provided by the Most Compassionate Creator. Therefore, utmost necessity is their prayer to the Lord. That means this is a mercy from the Lord as a result of this prayer. All living creatures are included in this category. For example, a fish in the dark of the sea will receive its sustenance. A bird receives its sustenance in an appropriate way. Humans receive their sustenance at an appropriate time and in an appropriate way. And all receive the most expensive one in the cheapest way. For example, humans breathe air, which is the most important thing, for free. The universe is prepared and given to humans according to their needs. There is an amazing relationship between the capacity of the human eye and sunlight. This is a prayer through the language of the natural needs of creatures. Therefore, Nursi says, "There is a constant prayer rising to the court of the Divine from the entire universe."

The third type of prayer is through the *language of desperation*. Every living creature in the time of extreme anxiety needs a safe haven. Through a desperate prayer, this refuge becomes its unknown protector and as a result "it faces toward the Most Merciful."

The fourth type of prayer is the *prayer of humans*. It is divided into two parts. The first part is through the language of human efforts

for their utmost needs. All efforts of scientists for the benefit of humanity are considered to be prayers and, therefore, are rewarded by God. For example, the scientific discoveries and technological advances of all times are a direct result of this collective prayer of scientists.

The second part is the common prayer that we know. This also has two types, according to Nursi's understanding. The first type is called *prayer through action*. The second type is *prayer through words*. Both are necessary for achievement. For example, to farm, to sow seeds, is a prayer to God to receive a plentiful harvest. This is a prayer through action. Therefore, the person who farms does not expect his sustenance from the soil, but he thinks that the soil is a door to the mercy of the Creator. Through farming, people knock at this door to request their sustenance from the Lord. In Islam, the prayer through action is very significant and is often misunderstood. Prayer through words, if related to an action, has to accompany the prayer through action as well. If a student prays to the Lord and asks for a good grade instead of working and studying hard, this is fruitless. Instead, the student must work hard, study, and pray to the Lord for a good result. Therefore, whatever action is necessary for a good result must be used in conjunction with a prayer through words.

Prayer through words is the most common prayer amongst people. The Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam, teaches Muslims how to supplicate and communicate with God by showing examples of this type of prayer. Believers use this type of prayer to turn to the Eternal, Merciful, and Compassionate God. The Qur'an describes such believers and their attribute of the essential element of humility in the following verse:

Call on your Lord humbly and secretly; surely He does not love those who exceed the limits... call on Him fearing and hoping; surely the mercy of God is nigh to those who do good. (A'raf 7:55-56)

Another Qur'anic verse suggests that God is close, and He accepts the prayer of His servants:

(O Muhammad) when My servants ask you concerning Me, then surely I am very near; I answer the prayer of the suppliant when he calls on Me, so they should answer My call and believe in Me that they may walk in the right way. (Baqara 2:186)

The Qur'an suggests that every prayer is answered. Therefore, no one returns empty-handed from His court, because in Islamic perspective, when people pray, they ask the One who can meet all of their needs, just as they would complain to a doctor who can heal all illnesses. When people pray to God, their mind, intelligence, and senses must be in a receptive state, in a state that they know surely that their prayer is heard.

Nursi brings to mind that in addition to being sincere while praying, believers should search for favored moments and seconds during which prayer is accepted. For example, the Holy Month of Ramadan and the Holy Days and Nights are important times for prayer. The Qur'an speaks of some Holy Days and Nights. One of them is called the Night of Power (Qadr), in which the Holy Qur'an was revealed. Another example is Friday, which is considered a Holy Day. Believers are expected to make full use of these moments. These are the times when divine blessings pour forth.

The Qur'anic way of prayer is to glorify God first, as it is presented in the first chapter of the Qur'an, "Praise be to the Lord of the Universe." In the middle of the chapter, the suppliant asks their Lord for guidance to the right path.

Nursi advises that the prophetic and the Qur'anic formats of prayer are the closest to acceptance. In the second chapter, the Qur'an teaches humans what to ask from God. It says, "Our Lord, grant us good in this world and good in the hereafter" (Baqara 2:201). The second chapter also shows people how to pray when they face difficult conditions. "Our Lord, pour down upon us patience. Make our steps firm" The chapter ends with the following prayer:

Our Lord, do not punish us if we forget or make a mistake. Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden as You did on those before us. Our Lord, do not impose upon us that which we have not the strength to bear. Pardon us, forgive us and have mercy upon us. You are our protector. Give us victory over the unbelieving people.

The third chapter of the Qur'an reminds believers of a very significant prayer:

Our Lord, do not let our hearts deviate now after You have guided us. Grant us mercy from Your presence, for You are the granter of bounties without measure.

After a few verses, the chapter mentions the prayers of the pious:

Our Lord, we have indeed believed. Forgive us our sins and save us from the agony of the Fire.

These verses draw our attention to the prayer of Jesus' apostles:

Our Lord, we believe in what You have revealed, and we follow the Messenger. So write us down with those who bear witness. (Al Imran 3:53)

Toward the end of this chapter, there is a wish for a good end:

Our Lord, lo we have heard a cry calling unto faith. "Believe in your Lord." So we believed. Our Lord, therefore, forgive our sins. Blot out all our evil deeds, and make us die the death of the righteous. (Al Imran 3:193)

The Qur'an essentially suggests that prayer and humble supplications lead to salvation in this life and also in the afterlife. Therefore, the Prophet of Islam, whose life was in total compliance with the Qur'anic ideal, is known as the Sultan of Prayer. He would open hands, turn to his Lord, overflow with thanks and glorification, bow and double himself up in prayer, and constantly pray to God. He did this throughout his life. He woke up every morning and performed his daily prayers, including prescribed and voluntary prayers. He would stay in God's presence at night and spend most of his night in prayer. He would continue his prayer even while eating, going to bed, traveling, returning from a campaign, confronting an enemy, experiencing worldly or heavenly disasters, witnessing miraculous events, and suffering from illnesses or troubles. There are specific books dedicated to the Prophet's prayers, which give more details about all of his supplications. For every occasion, the prophet used to say a special prayer. These prayers began to be used by Muslims and have continued throughout the history of Islam.

Nursi answers a question about the acceptance of prayer. The question is as follows: "We have prayed many times, but it seems like it is not accepted. Does this conflict with the general idea of the Qur'an, which suggests that every prayer is answered?" Answering this question, Nursi says the following: "To answer the prayer and to accept the prayer as we wish are different. God answers all prayers, but sometimes, He gives what He wants, not what we want. This is like someone who asks a doctor to look at them, and the doctor asks them what they want. They ask to be given medicine that tastes good, but the doctor, who knows the nature of their illness, sometimes does not give them what they want. What he gives them is something better for them than what

they want, although it may not be as tasty."¹

According to Islamic belief, all prayers are answered by God. Muslim theologians give this example: A person prays to God to give him a son, but God does not give him a son, He gives him a daughter like Mary, the Mother of Jesus. This does not mean that his prayer has not been answered; it has just been answered in a better way because a regular son cannot be compared to Mary.

According to Nursi, Muslims have to be conscious that prayer is a sign of servanthood. It has to be done, not for the sake of result, but for the sake of prayer. For example, in the time of drought, Muslims are expected to pray to God for rain because it is the time of prayer, just as the sunset is the time for the sunset prayer. Even when God's cosmic work has already been astronomically predicted, in the form of lunar and solar eclipses, Muslims are expected to pray because it is the time of prayer. This prayer is not for a resolution, but instead they pray to God, who has shown His Majesty through such cosmic events. Natural disasters and calamities are also times for prayer. If these calamities are lifted through their prayer, this is wonderful, but if they are not lifted, Muslims are expected to continue prayer because the time of prayer has not yet passed.

In conclusion, Islam accepts that humans are weak and poor before God, and they need constant prayer to fulfill their achievements and to meet their needs. Nursi states that prayer is an inexhaustible treasure for the human spirit whose needs are not limited. Through prayer, humans, being the supervisors over all creatures in this universe, represent both their prayers and the prayers of all other creatures to the Creator. All believers collectively say, as it is indicated in the Qur'an, "You, O Lord, alone we ask for help." Through prayer, the human spirit feels that there is someone that can hear its wishes, solve all problems, and meet all needs, which gives it utmost strength. ■

Footnote

- ¹ Nursi, S., *The Words*, Kaynak A.S., Izmir, 1997 Twenty-third Word, pp. 412-415