

Salah Timing in Islam

فَإِذَا قُضِيَتْ الصَّلَاةُ فَادْكُرُوا اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِكُمْ فَإِذَا اطْمَأْنَنْتُمْ فَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ كَانَتْ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ كِتَابًا مَّوْقُوتًا

...The salah is enjoined upon the believers at appointed times.” [Q, 4: 103]

The Salat – five-time daily obligatory prayers – is the most momentous engagement of a Muslim’s daily life when a devotee turns exclusively toward his Creator to refresh his bond with Him and recommit his loyalty to Him. Each salah must be offered at its appointed time. The salah times are divinely established by Allah’s decree for all Prophets from Adam to Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) with some variation through ages and times.

Describing the universal principle, Allah (ﷻ) commands:

أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذُلُوكِ الشَّمْسِ إِلَىٰ غَسَقِ اللَّيْلِ وَقُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ إِنَّ قُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ كَانَ مَشْهُودًا

“Establish salah from the declining of the sun to the darkness of the night; and hold fast to the recitation of the Qur’an at dawn, for the recitation of the Qur’an at dawn is witnessed.” [Q, 17: 78].

Because of its central position in the Islamic structure of life, Allah(SWT) did not leave the salah times even up to His trusted Messengers to be determined.

The above verse hints at the times for the five obligatory prayers which were prescribed on the occasion of the Prophet’s Mai’raj (Ascension). According to this verse, the first prayer – Fajr – should be offered before sunrise and the remaining four should be offered between time beginning with the ‘decline of the sun’ through to the ‘thickening of the night. With this specification in the Qur’an, there is absolutely no room for opinion or discrepancy in fixing the salah times. They are fixed.

As the earth orbits around the sun, it causes seasonal changes and variations in the daylight hours from day to day. Islam uses a rotational strategy for its followers across the globe to uniformly experience these variations in practicing

their religious duties by combining the lunar and solar systems. Thus, while it follows the lunar calendar for the beginning of the month, it follows the solar system for the management of time for various activities on a single day of the calendar. The benchmarks or the reference points in time on a day are the sunrise and sunset. As the earth rotates around the sun, these reference points also shift marginally every day of the calendar. But for a given location and on a given day, they are constant from year to year. For example, on December 10th, the sun rises at 7:00 AM in the Boston area and sets at 4:13 PM. These times on December 10th for the Boston area are constant, regardless of the year. This allows developing a chart of salah times for the whole year in each geographical area that can be used year after year. In fact, this is what we have by location as prayer timetable, and is also programmed in electronic devices for convenience. We simply need to follow the local timetable strictly and with confidence.

The time for each salah, however, is not a point in time. Allah (SWT) has provided flexibility by defining a range of time – earliest time and latest time – for each salah with the exception of salat-ul Maghrib (when most people wind down for the day). Each salah must be offered within its specified time window. Though preferable to offer as early as possible within the range, it's equally acceptable to offer it any time before the range expires, nevertheless. A salah is neither due nor does it become obligatory prior to its earliest time. A particular salah becomes obligatory on a person only if/when that person witnesses the time period for that particular salah and lives through it; and, therefore, it cannot be performed in advance. If offered sooner than the commencement of its time-zone, it could be considered a nafil (optional) salah for reward, but it will not discharge the obligation when it actually becomes due at the start of its designated time interval. It must be repeated then.

On the other hand, if a salah is not offered before its time window expires, it becomes 'Qada' (delayed). It must be offered before the next salah (or immediately after the next salah if the next salah is already in progress as a congregation, or if the next salah is also about to become Qada). Though already offered (as Qada), it would still be considered a sin, unless the delay occurred due to circumstances beyond control.

Travelers need to offer Qasr salah. That is, they need to reduce salat-ul Zuhr, salat-ul Asr, and salat-ul Isha to two rakah each. They still get the full reward though, because it is so decreed by Allah SWT. There is an opinion that travels can combine Zuhr and Asr by offering Asr within the Zuhr time window or vice versa. The same applies to salat-ul Maghrib and salat-ul Isha. But this is not a unanimous position and a discussion of this difference of opinion is beyond the scope of this write-up.

The cut-off points for salah intervals are also determined by Allah SWT, again leaving no room for speculations. With a momentary buffer zone, for Zuhr, Asr, Maghrib, and Isha, the range for each salah begins as the range for the previous one ends. When the directive for salah was initially issued to the Prophet (ﷺ) it was immediately elaborated further by Allah SWT through Gabriel who provided the Prophet SAW with information concerning the time of each prayer. He was sent down to the Prophet SAW two days consecutively to lead him in to each salah. He did that first day at the earliest times and the second day at the latest times; thus, establishing the time range for each salah .The Prophet SAW further explains:

On the authority of Ibn ‘Abbas, the Prophet SAW said: “Gabriel was twice leader of the prayer which I offered near the Ka’bah. On the first occasion he offered the Zuhr prayer when the sun had just passed the meridian no more than the thong of a shoe. Then he led the Asr prayer when the shadow of everything was equal to its size. Then he led Maghrib prayer at the time when the sun had just set and a man breaks his fast. Then he led the Isha prayer as soon as the red glow of twilight (shafaq) disappeared. Then he offered the Fajr prayer when the morning light had just appeared, at the time when eating becomes forbidden for him who fasts. On the second occasion he led the Zuhr prayer when the shadow of everything was equal to its size and Asr prayer when the shadow of everything became double its size, and Maghrib prayer at its previous time; and offered the Isha prayer when a third of the night had passed; and he offered the Fajr prayer when there was a fair amount of light to make the earth visible. Gabriel turned to me and said: ‘Muhammad, these are the times of the prayers as observed by the Prophets before you; the right time of each prayer is between the two time-limits.’ [Abu Da’ud and al- Tirmidhi]

Gabriel offered salat-ul Maghrib at the same time on both visits. That is, for salat-ul Maghrib, it is a point in time, not a range. The implication is that, unlike other prayers, there is no flexibility of choice within the range, as there is no range. It must be performed as it becomes due or in the first opportunity if hindered by conditions beyond control.

Genuine diversity, according to the Prophet SAW, is a favor of Allah SWT for intellectual growth and inclusivity. Based on the understanding of the above Hadith, sources of information, and the measurement techniques used, Imam Hanafi and Imam Shafaie have arrived at different computations of the earliest time for salat-ul Asr. In the Shafaie School, on the average, the time for Asr starts about 50 minutes sooner than the Hanafi time. The actual difference varies from day to day. It is actually a zero sum game. The extended time for Asr is at the expense of the time window for Zuhr which is reduced by the same amount. A careful person, above any bias or judgment, may avoid the overlap (gray zone) between the two views (50 minutes, average) for Zuhr and Asr to be

on the safe side. That is, offer Zuhr early after the time begins and do Asr little late; all conditions will be met. However, timetables for both are available and one may follow any of choice, but consistently. If joining a congregation, just follow the timing set by your Masjid.