

A Salient Quality of the Pious

By Muaz Billoo

Allah ﷻ describes the various qualities of His friends throughout the Qur'an. As believers who aspire to become the friends of Allah ﷻ one day, we have to strive to ensure that we have implemented these qualities into our lives. One such quality has been discussed in Surah Ali 'Imran, ayah #17, and in Surah al-Dharyat, ayah #18:

“*And those who seek forgiveness prior to dawn*”

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What is the timeframe for “prior to dawn”? The word used in the Qur'an here is الأَسْحَار, which is the plural of سَحْر, from which the word سُحُور is also derived. This word is known by nearly every Muslim, as it denotes the time wherein we engage in the pre-dawn meal in Ramadan. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said,

“Engage in the pre-dawn meal (*suhur*) for indeed, there is blessing in the pre-dawn meal (*suhur*).”¹

The start time of سَحْر can be denoted as the last sixth of the night.² In order to determine the last sixth of the night, one would have to take the start time of the Maghrib salah along with the start time of the Fajr salah, and evenly divide the time in between into six parts. The last sixth will be the time of الأَسْحَار (prior to dawn) mentioned in the two ayahs cited above.

Returning to the original discussion, in these verses Allah ﷻ labels those who seek His forgiveness during the last sixth of the night as among those who are His special servants. Thus, if we are awake at that time, then we should devote some time in dua and seeking Allah ﷻ's forgiveness. This is an extremely valuable time for us to present all of our needs before Allah ﷻ. Hafiz ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله writes that the companions and predecessors would spend the night in salah, and thereafter would sit during the last sixth of the night for *istighfar*, thereby completing their nightly prayers by seeking forgiveness.³

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Allah Almighty descends (in a manner befitting His majesty) to the skies of the world when one-third of the night remains, declaring: ‘Is there anyone asking (for anything) so I may give him? Is there anyone supplicating so that I may answer him? Is there anyone seeking forgiveness so that I may forgive him?’”⁴

‘Aisha رضي الله عنها says that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ used to spend his nights standing in prayer until his feet would swell. She would ask, “You do this even though Allah has forgiven you for everything you have ever done and everything you will ever do?” The Messenger of Allah ﷺ replied, “Should I not desire to become a grateful servant?”⁵

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ also said, “Glad tidings for the one who finds an abundance of *istighfar* (seeking forgiveness from Allah) in his register of deeds.”⁶

¹ *Sahih Muslim* 1095, *Sahih ibn Khuzaimah* 1936

² See: *Fathul Mulhim* under Hadith #1095, and *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* 3:185

³ *Al-Jami' Li Kalam al-Imam ibn Taymiyyah fi al-Tafsir* 2:39

⁴ *Sahih al-Bukhari* #1145, *Sahih Muslim* # 758

⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari* #1130, *Sahih Muslim* 1819

⁶ *Sunan ibn Majah* 3818; authenticated by Imams al-Munziri and al-Busiri.

‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar رضي الله عنه used to spend his nights in prayer. As dawn approached, he would ask his student, Nafi’, if the last sixth of the night had approached. If not, he would resume his prayers. If it did, he would sit down for *istighfar* and *dua* until the time of Fajr had entered.⁷

Anas ibn Malik رضي الله عنه is reported to have said: “We were instructed to seek Allah’s forgiveness seventy times during the last sixth of the night whenever we spent the night in prayer.” ‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ud رضي الله عنه has also been observed engaging in *dua* and *istighfar* at this time.⁸

‘Allamah ibn ‘Ashur رحمته الله says that this is a time in which one will be more sincere in worship, and that this is a time wherein most people are overpowered by sleep. Thus, prayer and *istighfar* will be more pleasing at this time because it requires a greater exertion against the base desires. Furthermore, the Arabic word used to denote the last sixth of the night in the aforementioned verses is in the plural form (الأسحار), suggesting that the servants of Allah devote this time for *istighfar* regularly, as opposed to doing it only once in a lifetime.⁹

There is another significant, practical point to be taken from these verses: the pious servants of Allah stand in worship at a time wherein it is difficult to get out of bed, fighting against their carnal instincts. Yet, they still end their night seeking forgiveness from Allah ﷻ, ensuring that their egos are not inflated due to their having spent the night in worship. Instead, they humble themselves before Allah ﷻ even further, acknowledging their inability to worship Allah ﷻ as He deserves to be worshipped.

‘Allamah Alusi رحمته الله writes, “in spite of their sleeping little, and standing for *Tahajjud* in abundance, they are perpetual in their *istighfar* at the last sixth of the night... the ayah provides an indication towards their increased humility while not being deceived by their worship (into arrogance).”¹⁰ In other words, when a person exerts himself in worship, he may be duped into a sense of superiority and self-conceit because of his excessive worship. However, the pious servants of Allah, even after exerting themselves, continuously humble themselves before Allah ﷻ. We see this in Ibrahim عليه السلام and Ismail عليه السلام, who, after raising the foundations of the Ka’bah, beseeched Allah for acceptance and forgiveness.¹¹ Furthermore, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Whoever humbles himself for Allah, then Allah will elevate him.”¹²

Among the greatest opportunities to become a part of these special servants of Allah is to engage in *istighfar* and *dua* in the last sixth of the night. A simple formula for doing this is to isolate 5 minutes of our time when we normally make up for *suhur* when fasting, and specifically devote it for *dua* and *istighfar*. May Allah ﷻ include us among His pious servants.

⁷ *Tafsir ibn Abi Hatim* #247

⁸ *Tafsir ibn Kathir* 2:22

⁹ *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* 26:350

¹⁰ *Ruh al-Ma’ani* 27:14

¹¹ See: Qur’an 2:127-128

¹² *Sahih Muslim* 2588