

Ahadith and Wisdom Behind the Sunnah Prayers

One aspect of our deen that has been chipping away is that of the sunnah prayers. Although not from the five obligatory prayers, the Prophet ﷺ was habitual on these prayers, and considering Allah ﷻ's numerous commands in the Qur'an to follow and obey the Prophet ﷺ, it behooves the Muslims to adopt these prayers.

We know that there are twelve rakats of daily emphasized sunnah prayers as explained by the Prophet ﷺ, **“Whoever prays twelve units of non-obligatory salah on a daily basis, Allah Almighty will build for him a house in Jannah.”**¹

The most emphasized of the sunnah prayers is that of the Fajr prayer. ‘Aishah ؓ narrates, **“The Prophet ﷺ would not omit four units before the Zuhr prayer, nor two units before the Fajr prayer.”**²

She also states, **“The messenger of Allah ﷺ was not more steadfast upon any optional prayer as he was upon the two units before Fajr.”**³

The Prophet ﷺ himself stated, **“The two units (of sunnah prayer) prior to the Fajr prayer are better than the entire world and whatever it contains.”**⁴

‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ud ؓ said regarding the four units before Zuhr, **“Nothing is equivalent to the night prayer (tahajjud) from the (optional) day prayers except for the four units before Zuhr. The virtue of these (four units) compared to the rest of the (optional) day prayers is like the congregational prayer compared to one praying by himself.”**⁵

The twelve units of prayer performed by the Prophet ﷺ regularly were described by ‘Aishah ؓ in the following narration, **“The Prophet ﷺ used to pray four units in my house prior to the Zuhr prayer, then he would leave (for the masjid), lead the (zuhr) prayer, and then come back and pray two units. Later (in the day), he would lead the Maghrib prayer, then come back and pray two units. He would then lead the Isha prayer, then come back and pray two units.”**⁶

These sunnah prayers are part of the Prophetic schedule of worship. Furthermore, abandoning these sunnah prayers without a valid excuse leads to blame, dislike, and misguidance, which lead to sin.

Imam ibn ‘Abidin (d. 1252) ؓ writes, “Legally recognized actions are of four categories: Fard, Wajib, Sunnah, and Nafl. If the action is such that a definitive (*qati*) proof shows that doing it

¹ *Sahih Muslim* 728

² *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1182

³ *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1169

⁴ *Sahih Muslim* 725

⁵ *Mu'jam Kabir* of al-Tabarani 9/9446; authenticated by Hafiz al-Mundhiri in *al-Tarhib wa al-Tarhib* 842. Also see: *Majma' al-Zawaid* 3329.

⁶ *Sahih Muslim* 730

is better than abstaining, along with a prohibition against leaving it, then that is fard. If the aforementioned has been established through speculative (*zanni*) proof, then it is wajib. If there isn't a prohibition against leaving it but is something the messenger of Allah ﷺ or the rightly guided successors practiced regularly, then it is classified as sunnah. Otherwise, it becomes nafl or mandub.”

He continues, “Then sunnah is of two types:

1. **Sunnah al-Huda:** leaving such acts entails a level of misguidance and dislike, such as not praying with congregation, or leaving the azan/iqamah, etc. (the emphasized sunnah prayers (*sunnah muakkadah* e.g. two rakats before Fajr) are included here).
2. **Sunnah al-Zawaid:** leaving such acts does not entail sin. One who engages in them will be rewarded and the one who leaves them will not incur any blame.”⁷

Imam ‘Abdul Aziz al-Bukhari (d. 730) ﷺ says with reference to Imam Abu al-Yusr al-Bazdawi (d. 493) ﷺ, “The ruling (of sunnah) is that one is rewarded for engaging in it and incurs blame for leaving it, along with a small amount of sin.”⁸

A few pages later, he says that Imam Abu Yusuf (d. 182) ﷺ was of the view that those who abandon the sunnah should be disciplined (by the government).⁹

Imam ibn Nujaim al-Misri (d. 970) ﷺ writes, “Sin is attached with the abandonment of wajib and emphasized sunnahs.”¹⁰

From the above we see that leaving the emphasized sunnah prayers leads to sin. What about the wisdom of these sunnah prayers?

Qadi Abu Zaid al-Dabusi (d. 430) ﷺ says, “Supererogatory (nafl) prayers have been legislated to make up for any deficiency found in the obligatory prayers. No matter how great of a slave one may be, there will always be deficiency.”

Imam Qadi Khan (d. 592) ﷺ says, “The sunnah prayers have been legislated to cut off the devil’s hopes (who says), ‘If he cannot obey me in that which has not been made obligatory, then how will he obey me in leaving that which is obligatory?’”

‘Allamah Tahtawi (d. 1230) ﷺ adds, “As for the prophets, then the sunnah prayers have been legislated for them as a means of increasing their ranks even further, as there are no deficiencies in the prayer of the prophets.”¹¹

⁷ Hashiyah ibn ‘Abidin 1/340; Farfur edition.

⁸ *Kashf al-Asrar Sharh Usul al-Bazdawi* 2/563

⁹ Ibid 2/568.

¹⁰ *Al-Bahr al-Raiq* 1/527

¹¹ For these three quotes of Qadi Abu Zaid, Qadi Khan, and ‘Allamah Tahtawi see: *Maslak al-Najah Ila Maraqi al-Falah* 2/32.

From the above we find two wisdoms for the sunnah prayers (for non-prophets):

1. They make up for deficiencies in our obligatory prayers. Whoever abandons the sunnah prayers, then it is as if he feels that his obligatory prayers are perfect. None but the prophets have a right to this claim.
2. By being particular about these sunnah prayers, we leave the devil little to no chance of tempting us to leave the obligatory prayers.

We have heard our mashaikh say on numerous occasions: whoever leaves the sunnah prayers, will leave the wajib prayers, and whoever leaves the wajib prayers, will leave the fard prayers. The devil, slowly yet steadily, tries to remove the love for salah from our hearts until we abandon the fard prayers, at which point there will be little standing between us and kufr. May Allah allow us to be steadfast on all of our prayers.