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Tawassul (Intercession) and Its Permissibility in Islam

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{ وَلِلَّهِ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَىٰ فَادْعُوهُ بِهَا }

"Allāh has the Most Beautiful Names. So call upon Him by them." (Sūrah Al-A'rāf: 180)

In Islam, *Tawassul* (intercession) and *Wasīlah* (a means) refer to asking Allāh ﷻ for something through the means of certain actions, attributes, or individuals. The concept is rooted in the belief that by seeking the blessings of good deeds or the status of righteous individuals, one's supplication may be more likely to be accepted by Allāh ﷻ. *Tawassul* has been widely practiced throughout Islamic history, and its permissibility is supported by various Qur'ānic verses, *Aḥādīth*, and the actions of early Muslim scholars and companions of the Prophet ﷺ.

It is important to clarify that *Tawassul* involves asking Allāh ﷻ alone, while using righteous individuals as a means for one's *Du'ā'* to be accepted. It does not imply that these individuals are being worshipped or are independently capable of granting requests. Those who misunderstand *Tawassul* may conflate it with the impermissible act of seeking help directly from the deceased or attributing divine powers to them. This would indeed constitute *Shirk* (polytheism), as it involves attributing partners to Allāh ﷻ in His unique role as the Provider. Allāh ﷻ states in Sūrah al-Mā'idah:

"يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ"

"O you who believe, fear Allāh and seek a means (*wasīlah*) to Him." (Sūrah al-Mā'idah, 5:35)

This verse instructs believers to adopt *Taqwā* (God-consciousness) and seek closeness to Allāh ﷻ through an appropriate means or intermediary (*Wasīlah*), which includes anything that brings one closer to Him, such as righteous deeds, supplications, or, as seen in Islamic tradition, seeking blessings through pious individuals.

A well-known example of *Wasīlah* practiced by the *Ṣaḥābah* is the story of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (RA) seeking rain during a drought. When there was a severe drought in Madinah, 'Umar (RA), who was the Caliph at the time, approached 'Abbās ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib (RA), the uncle of the Prophet ﷺ, and requested that he make *Du'ā'* (supplication) on behalf of the people for rain. 'Umar (RA) said:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنَّا كُنَّا نَتَوَسَّلُ إِلَيْكَ بِنَبِيِّنَا فَتَسْقِينَا، وَإِنَّا نَتَوَسَّلُ إِلَيْكَ بِعَمِّ نَبِيِّنَا فَاسْقِنَا

"O Allāh, we used to ask our Prophet to pray for rain, and You blessed us with rain. Now, we seek intercession through the uncle of our Prophet, so grant us rain." (Ṣaḥīh Bukhārī: 1010)

Upon 'Abbās's (RA) prayer, Allāh ﷻ granted rain to the people, and the drought ended. This Ḥadīth demonstrates that the companions sought *Wasīlah* not only through the Prophet ﷺ but also through other righteous individuals close to him, even after the Prophet's passing.

This example, alongside the Qur'ānic verse, reinforces the concept that seeking *Wasīlah* through pious individuals and their supplications is an acceptable way to seek Allāh's help and mercy. 'Umar's (RA) choice to approach 'Abbās (RA) highlights the understanding that the piety and relationship of such individuals with Allāh can serve as a means of drawing divine blessings and relief for the community.

Forms of *Tawassul*

There are several recognised forms of *Tawassul*, which are generally accepted by the majority of scholars. These forms include:

1. *Tawassul* through Good Deeds

One permissible form of *Tawassul* is asking Allāh ﷻ to accept one's *Du'ā'* based on a righteous action performed. This is supported by the well-known Ḥadīth of Saḥīḥ Bukhāri, where three men were trapped in a cave by a large rock. Each of them made a *Du'ā'* asking Allāh ﷻ to move the rock, citing a specific good deed they had done. Allāh ﷻ accepted their *Du'ās* and saved them from their predicament. (Saḥīḥ Bukhāri: Book 34, Ḥadīth 162)

2. *Tawassul* through Allāh's ﷻ Names and Attributes

The Qur'ān instructs believers to call upon Allāh ﷻ using His beautiful names: "And Allāh has beautiful names, so call upon Him through them." (Sūrah Al-A'rāf, 7:180) For example, one might say: "O Allāh, I ask you by Your mercy, through Your beautiful attributes, to grant my request."

3. *Tawassul* through the Status of Righteous Individuals

This form of *Tawassul* involves asking Allāh ﷻ for something through the rank and position of a pious individual, such as the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, or other saints and righteous people. For example, one may say: "O Allāh, I ask you through the status of Your beloved Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ to grant my request." This form of *Tawassul*, while accepted by the majority of scholars, has faced some opposition, especially from later scholars starting in the 7th century of Islam.

4. Asking a Living Righteous Person to Make *Du'ā'*

Another unanimously accepted form of *Tawassul* is requesting a pious person to make *Du'ā'* on one's behalf. The companions of the Prophet ﷺ would often ask him to supplicate for them during his lifetime.

The practice of *Tawassul* is supported by numerous authentic narrations from the Ḥadīth and the actions of the companions and scholars. Below are some significant examples:

1. The Blind Man's *Du'ā'*

Sayyiduna 'Uthmān ibn Ḥunayf (RA) narrates that a blind man came to the Prophet ﷺ requesting his *Du'ā'* for his sight to be restored. The Prophet ﷺ instructed the man to make *Wuḍū'* and recite a specific *Du'ā'*:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَسْأَلُكَ وَأَتَوَجَّهُ إِلَيْكَ بِنَبِيِّكَ مُحَمَّدٍ نَبِيِّ الرَّحْمَةِ

"O Allāh, I ask you and turn to you through your Prophet, the Prophet of mercy"

This Ḥadīth, found in Sunan Tirmidhi, Musnad Aḥmad, and other collections, has been authenticated by numerous scholars, and clearly demonstrates *Tawassul* through the Prophet ﷺ.

2. Sayyiduna 'Uthmān ibn Hunayf After the Prophet's Demise

After the passing of the Prophet ﷺ, Sayyiduna 'Uthmān ibn Hunayf (RA) taught this same *Du'ā'* to someone in need, showing that *Tawassul* was practiced even after the Prophet's death. The person's need was fulfilled after following this advice, further proving the legitimacy of *Tawassul* through the rank of the Prophet ﷺ.

(Mu'jam al-Ṣaghīr vol. 1, pg. 184; Mu'jam al-Kabīr vol. 9, pg. 17; Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah of Imām Bayhaqī vol. 6 pg. 167-168). Imām Ṭabarānī has mentioned that this Ḥadīth is authentic.

3. Tawassul at the Grave of the Prophet ﷺ

During a severe drought in the time of Sayyiduna 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (RA), a man went to the grave of the Prophet ﷺ and asked for his intercession to bring rain. Shortly thereafter, the drought ended, and rain came down. This incident, narrated by several scholars including Imām Bayhaqī, is another example of *Tawassul* through the Prophet ﷺ after his demise. (Muṣannaf ibn Abī Shaybah vol. 12, pg. 31-32; Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah of Imām al-Bayhaqī vol. 7, pg. 47). Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Kathīr has stated that the chain of narrators is "good and strong." (Musnad al-Fārūq vol. 1, pg. 223)

4. Tawassul Through the Right of the Prophet ﷺ for Fāṭimah bint Asad (RA)

Sayyiduna Anas ibn Mālīk (RA) reports that when the mother of Sayyiduna 'Alī (RA) passed away (Fāṭimah bint Asad-RA), the Prophet ﷺ made the following *Du'ā'* before burying her:

اللَّهُمَّ الَّذِي يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ وَهُوَ حَيٌّ لَا يَمُوتُ، اغْفِرْ لَأُمِّي فَاطِمَةَ بِنْتِ أَسَدٍ وَلَقِّنْهَا حُجَّتَهَا وَوَسِّعْ عَلَيْهَا مَدْخُلَهَا بِحَقِّ نَبِيِّكَ وَالْأَنْبِيَاءِ مِنَ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِي بِأَنَّكَ أَرْحَمُ الرَّاحِمِينَ

"O Allāh, The One who gives life and death, and Who is living and will never die, forgive my mother Fāṭimah bint Asad (RA) and make her proofs known to her, i.e., make the answering of *Munkar* and *Nakīr* easy, and make her grave spacious for her. (I ask you) through the right of your Prophet and all the Prophet's before me, for verily You are Most Merciful." (Mu'jam al-Awsaṭ vol. 1, pg. 152; Ḥilyah vol. 3, pg. 121)

In this narration the words: "*Bi Ḥaqqi Nabīyyika*" (through the right of your Prophet) comprehensively establish *Tawassul*. This narration is classified as authentic according to the standards of Imām Ibn Ḥibbān and Ḥākim.

The permissibility of *Tawassul* has been affirmed by numerous scholars throughout Islamic history. Some examples include:

- **Imam Shāfi'i (RA):** He was known to visit the grave of Imām Abū Ḥanīfah (RA) and make *Tawassul* through him. (Tarīkh Baghdād)
- **Imam Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (RA):** He encouraged *Tawassul* through the Prophet ﷺ in one's *Du'ās*, as recorded in various *Fatāwā*. (Fatāwā ibn Taimīyyah vol. 1, pg. 140, Mafāhīm pg. 137)
- **Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Hajar Al-Haytami (RA):** He considered the chain of narrators for many *Tawassul*-related *Aḥādīth* to be sound.

- **‘Allāmah Nawawi (RA):** He stated that from among the etiquettes of visiting the grave of the Prophet ﷺ one should make *Tawassul* through the Prophet ﷺ to Allāh ﷻ so that he accepts his *Du’ās*. Thereafter, ‘Allāmah Nawawi states: “And one of the best things that one could do is what has been related by ‘Allāmah al-Māwardi (RA), al-Qāḍi Abū Ṭīb (RA) and all our ‘*Ulamā’* and they have all regarded it as commendable, and that is the incident of Imām al-‘Utbi (RA) where he said: “I was once seated by the grave side of *Rasūlullāh* ﷺ, when a bedouin came and said, ‘Peace be upon you, O Messenger of Allāh. O Messenger of Allāh, I have heard Almighty Allāh say in the Qur’ān, ‘And if they, when they had been unjust to themselves, had come to you (Muḥammad) and begged Allāh’s forgiveness and the messenger had begged forgiveness for them, indeed they would have found Allāh All-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (Sūrah al-Nisā’: 64) Hence, I have come to you in a state that I seek forgiveness of my sins by seeking your intercession by my Lord’, thereafter he recited a few couplets and departed.”

Imām al-‘Utbi (RA) states: “I then fell asleep and I saw *Rasūlullāh* ﷺ instructing me by the words, ‘O ‘Utbi, go to that bedouin and give him the glad tidings that Almighty Allāh has forgiven him.” (Al-Majmū’ vol. 8, pg. 456 and Manāsik Imām Nawawi pg. 498-499).

Moreover, Ḥāfiz Sakhawi (RA) emphasised in his work *al-Qawlul Badī’* that *Du’ās* made through *Tawassul* with the Prophet ﷺ have often been accepted, further highlighting the long-standing acceptance of this practice among scholars.

Tawassul is a deeply rooted practice in Islamic tradition, supported by the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth, and the actions of the early Muslim community. While some forms of *Tawassul* have faced opposition from later scholars, the overwhelming majority of Islamic jurists, Ḥadīth scholars, and theologians have affirmed its permissibility. As long as one’s belief remains focused on Allāh ﷻ as the sole source of help, and the intermediary is merely a means to seek Allāh’s favour, *Tawassul* remains a valid and effective practice in Islam.

This is particularly evident when considering the widespread acceptance of *Tawassul* among the companions of the Prophet ﷺ and the great scholars of Islam, who practiced and advocated for this form of intercession.

To conclude, the permissibility of *Tawassul* lies in asking Allāh ﷻ for a particular need while using the name of an honourable personality as a means (*Wasīlah*) **without believing that this person is being supplicated to or has the power to fulfill the need**. If, however, one directly asks from the deceased and believes that the Prophets or the pious possess independent power to provide, then this constitutes *Shirk* (polytheism), as it attributes the divine quality of "providing" to others besides Allāh ﷻ.

Unfortunately, some contemporaries have conflated these two distinct practices of directly asking the deceased, and asking Allāh ﷻ alone through the medium of a deceased person. They have applied the ruling of *Shirk* to both forms, which is a significant misunderstanding.

References:

- Al-Miftāḥ, The Issue of *Tawassul* in *Du’ā’*. See: <https://al-miftah.com/the-issue-of-tawassul-in-dua/>
- Tārīkh Baghdād
- Mu’jam al-Kabīr & Mu’jam al-Ṣaghīr