

Tawassul & Shafā'ah

Learning Objectives

- Understand the difference between Tawassul and Shafā'ah.
- Understand the role and importance of Tawassul and Shafā'ah.
- Be acquainted with various Qur'ānic verses relating to Tawassul and Shafā'ah.
- Memorise verse 5:35

The words *Tawassul* and *Shafā'ah* are both often translated into English as "intercession". This concept refers to asking any of Ma'sūmīn (A) to pray on our behalf to Allāh (SWT) to forgive our sins or to grant us our needs. When we ask for intercession in this world, it is referred to as *Tawassul* and the intercessor is our *wasīlah*. If we ask for intercession in the Hereafter, it is called *Shafā'ah* and the intercessor is our *Shafī'*.

Tawassul

Some people at times question why we perform *Tawassul*. Why should we need to ask for our needs through the Ma'sūmīn (A)? Should we not be asking from Allāh (SWT) directly?

1) It is not the case that we cannot or should not ask from Allāh (SWT) directly. We certainly can. In fact, we should be in the remembrance of Allāh (SWT) continuously throughout the day and we should be speaking to Him as much as possible. Allāh (SWT) is the closest to us and asks us to call Him:

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ ۖ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ ۗ
فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ

And 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.
[2:186]

Similarly, in many of the supplications taught to us by the Ma'sūmīn (A), such as Du'ā' Kumayl, we speak and pray directly to Allāh (SWT).

2) However, Allāh (SWT) has also taught us another way to reach Him and to get our prayers answered:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَابْتَغُوا إِلَيْهِ الْوَسِيلَةَ وَجَاهِدُوا فِي سَبِيلِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

O you who believe! be careful of (your duty to) Allah and seek means of nearness (wasīlah) to Him and strive hard in His way that you may be successful. [5:35]

3) The first to use *wasīlah* was Allāh (SWT) Himself. Allāh (SWT) decided to guide us through the means (*wasīlah*) of the Ma'sūmīn (A). When performing *Tawassul*, we are using this very means to get back to Him. The Holy Prophet (S) and the *Ahl al-Bayt* (A) are the closest and most beloved of all creatures to Allāh

(SWT). By requesting them to pray to Allāh (SWT) on our behalf, Allāh (SWT) can accept our prayers faster, for their sake.

In our every lives, we also often use *Tawassul* to get what we want. For example, when we do something wrong and our dad is angry with us, he is more likely to forgive us faster if we go through our mum and ask her to request dad to forgive us.

4) In fact, in the Qur'an, Allāh (SWT) tells us that if we sought forgiveness from Allāh (SWT) and then also requested the Holy Prophet (S) to pray for forgiveness on our behalf, Allāh (SWT) will then forgive us:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا لِيُطَاعَ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ ۚ وَلَوْ أَنَّهُمْ إِذْ ظَلَمُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ
جَاءُوكَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا اللَّهَ وَاسْتَغْفَرَ لَهُمُ الرَّسُولُ لَوَجَدُوا اللَّهَ تَوَّابًا رَحِيمًا

And We did not send any apostle but that he should be obeyed by Allah's permission; and had they, when they were unjust to themselves, come to you and asked forgiveness of Allah and the Apostle had (also) asked forgiveness for them, they would have found Allah Oft-returning (to mercy), Merciful. [4:64]

5) Even if the Holy Prophet (S) and the Imāms (A) have physically passed away, they are spiritually alive. They can still see our deeds and hear our supplications, in the same way as when they were physically alive. Allāh (SWT) says in the Qur'an:

وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْواتًا ۚ بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ

And reckon not those who are killed in Allah's way as dead; nay, they are alive (and) are provided sustenance from their Lord. [3:169]

6) A good example of requesting the *Ma'sūmīn* (A) to be our *wasā'il* (plural of *wasīlah*) to Allāh (SWT) is Du'ā' al-Tawassul, which is recommended to be recited on Tuesday nights.

Shafā'ah

1) The Qur'an tells us that the Day of Judgement will be a very difficult time for those that disobeyed Allāh (SWT) in this world. For this reason, we often hope and pray for the *Ma'sūmīn* (A) to do *Shafā'ah* for us on the Day of Judgement so that we may enter *Jannah*.

2) The idolaters of Makkah used to also believe that the idols they worshipped would do *Shafā'ah* for them on the Day of Judgement. The Qur'an clearly rejects this idea in many places. For example:

وَلَقَدْ جِئْتُمُونَا فُرَادَى كَمَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَتَرَكْتُمْ مَا خَوَّلْنَاكُمْ وَرَاءَ
ظُهُورِكُمْ ۗ وَمَا نَرَىٰ مَعَكُمْ شُفَعَاءَكُمُ الَّذِينَ زَعَمْتُمْ أَنَّهُمْ فِيكُمْ شُرَكَاءُ ۗ لَقَدْ
تَقَطَّعَ بَيْنَكُمْ وَضَلَّ عَنْكُمْ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَزْعُمُونَ

And certainly you have come to Us alone as We created you at first, and you have left behind your backs the things

which We gave you, and We do not see with you your intercessors about whom you asserted that they were (Allah's) associates in respect to you; certainly the ties between you are now cut off and what you asserted is gone from you. [6:94]

3) Being able to intercede of others on the Day of Judgement is a very special position that Allāh (SWT) grants to only those who are close to him, such as the *Ma'sūmīn* (A). Not everyone has this privilege:

لَا يَمْلِكُونَ الشَّفَاعَةَ إِلَّا مَنْ اتَّخَذَ عِنْدَ الرَّحْمَنِ عَهْدًا

On that Day none will have the power to intercede for them except those who received a sanction from the Most Compassionate Lord. [19:87]

Class Activity

Using verse 4:64, can you think of one reason why people go for the *ziyārah* of the Holy Prophet (S) and the *Ahl al-Bayt* (A)?

Did You Know?

For the *Ma'sūmīn* (A) to be able to do *Shafā'ah* for us on the Day of Judgment, there are certain conditions that we must fulfil. According to a *ḥadīth* of Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (A), those of us who do not give importance to our *ṣalāh*, will not be able to benefit from the *Shafā'ah* of the *Ma'sūmīn* (A) on the day we will need it the most!

Key Points

- 1- *Tawassul* refers to asking any of *Ma'sūmīn* (A) to pray on our behalf to Allāh (SWT) to forgive our sins or to grant us our needs.
- 2- *Shafā'ah* refers to the *Ma'sūmīn* (A) interceding on our behalf on the Day of Judgment such that we may enter *Jannah*.
- 3- Allāh (SWT) tells us in the Qur'ān to use *wasīlah* to reach Him.
- 4- Only certain special servants of Allāh (SWT) will have the authority to do *Shafā'ah* for others on the Day of Judgment.

Summary Questions

- 1- What is the difference between *Tawassul* and *Shafā'ah*?
- 2- Why do we use the *Ma'sūmīn* (A) as our intercessors with Allāh (SWT)?
- 3- Apart from our 12th Holy Imām (A), how can the rest of the *Ma'sūmīn* (A) help us since they are no longer physically alive?
- 4- What is one of the conditions for us to be able to benefit from *Shafā'ah*?