

## ANSWER

وَإِذَا حُيِّتُمْ بِتَحِيَّةٍ فَحَيُّوا بِأَحْسَنَ مِنْهَا أَوْ رُدُّوهَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ حَسِيبًا

*And when you are greeted with a salutation, greet with one better than it, or return the same. Surely, Allah is the reckoner over everything [4:86]*

### BRIEF COMMENTARY (entailing the rules)

Verse 4:86 of the Holy Qur'ān which says: '*And when you are greeted with a salutation, greet with one better than it, or return the same*', was explained by the Holy Prophet ﷺ through his own action in the following manner.

Once someone came to the Holy Prophet ﷺ and said: '*As-Salāmu 'Alaikum Yā Rasūlullāh*' (peace be on you, O Messenger of Allah). While returning the greeting, he added a word and said: '*Wa 'Alaikumus-Salām wa Rahmatullāh*' (And peace be on you, and the mercy of Allah). Then someone else came and offered his salām using the following words: '*As-Salāmu 'Alaikā Yā Rasūlullāh wa Rahmatullāh*.' In response, he added yet another word and said: '*Wa 'Alaikumus-Salām wa Rahmatullāh wa Barakātuh*' (And peace be on you too, and the mercy of Allah, and His blessings). Then came a third person. He combined all three salutations in his initial *salām* and greeted him by saying the whole thing, that is: '*As-Salāmu 'Alaikā Yā Rasūlullāh wa Rahmatullāh wa Barakātuh*.' In response, the Holy Prophet ﷺ said only one word '*Wa 'Alaik*' (and on you). Disappointed in his heart, he said: 'Yā Rasūlullāh, ransomed be my parents for you, you said many words of prayer while returning the greeting of those who came before me. But, when I greeted you with all those words, you limited your response to '*Wa 'Alaik*' (and on you).'. He said: 'You left nothing for me to add in the response! Since you used up all those words in your initial *salām*, I found it sufficient to return your greeting on the principle of like for like in accordance with the teaching of the Qur'ān.'

This narration has been reported by Ibn Jarīr and Ibn Abī Hātim with different chains of authorities.

There are three things we find out from this hadīth:

1. Words appearing in the verse under comment mean that a *salām* offered should be returned by adding more words to it. If someone says *As-salāmu 'Alaikum* (peace be on you), you respond by saying *Wa 'Alaikumus-Salām wa Rahmatullāh* (And peace be on you, and the mercy of Allah). If he says *As-Salāmu 'Alaikum wa Rahmatullāh* (peace be on you, and the mercy of Allah), then, in response, you say *Wa 'Alaikumus-Salām wa Rahmatullāh wa Barakātuh* (And peace be on you, and the mercy of Allah, and His blessings).

2. This addition of words is restricted to three words only as a *masnūn* act, that is, conforming to the blessed practice of the Holy Prophet ﷺ. Going beyond that is not *masnūn*. The logic behind it

is obvious. The occasion for *salām* requires that the verbal exchange be brief. Any excess in this connection which interferes with ongoing business or which becomes heavy on the listener is not appropriate. Therefore, when the person visiting the Holy Prophet ﷺ combined all three words in his very initial *salām*, he elected to abstain from any further addition of words. This was further explained by Sayyidnā 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās radī'allāhu 'anhu, by saying that the Holy Prophet ﷺ stopped the man who went beyond the limit of the three words with the following statement: (It means that *salām* ends at the word, barakah) (Mazharī from al-Baghawī). Saying anything beyond that was not the practice of the blessed Prophet ﷺ. (Ibn Kathīr)

3. If someone makes his *salām* with three words spoken at the same time, returning it with only one word will be correct. That too comes under the principle of like for like and is sufficient in obedience to the Qur'anic command (or return the same) as the Holy Prophet ﷺ has, in this hadīth, considered a one-word response as sufficient. (Tafsīr Mazhari)

In summation, we can say that it is obligatory on a Muslim to return the *salām* offered to him. If he fails to do so without any valid excuse admitted by the Shari'ah of Islam, he will become a sinner. However, he has the option to choose the mode. He can either respond with words better than those used in offering the *salām*; or, the response could be in identical words.

Some more detailed explanations of this Qur'anic injunctions about *salām* and its answer have been given by the Holy Prophet ﷺ, which the reader may wish to know briefly.

1. According to a hadīth in al-Bukhārī and Muslim, the person riding should himself offer *salām* to the person walking; and the person walking should offer *salām* to the person sitting; and a small group of persons walking near a larger group should be the first to offer *salām*.

2. According to a hadīth in Tirmidhi, when a person enters his house, he should offer *salām* to the members of his family as this act of grace will bring blessings for him as well as for his family.

3. According to a hadīth in Abū Dāwūd, when one meets a Muslim more than once, he should offer *salām* every time; and the way offering *salām* is masūn (a requirement of sunnah) at the time of the initial meeting, so it is at the time of seeking leave when offering *salām* is in line with the practice of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and a source of reward as well. This rule of guidance appears in Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd as narrated by Sayyidnā Qatādah and Abū Hurairah radī'allāhu 'anhu.

Now a note of caution about the rule: It is obligatory to answer *salām* - however, there are certain exceptions to it. For instance, if someone says *salām* to a person who is offering *salāh*, an answer is not obligatory. Indeed, it is a spoiler of *salāh*. Similarly, a person may be delivering a religious sermon, or is busy in reciting the Holy Qur'ān, or is calling the *adhān* or *iqāmah*, or is teaching religious texts, or is busy with his human compulsions - in all such conditions, even offering the initial *salām* is not

permissible, and he is not responsible for answering it as a matter of obligation either.

Towards the end of verse **86**, it was said: *(Surely, Allah is the Reckoner over everything)*. It means that with Allah rests the reckoning of everything which includes all human and Islamic rights such as *salām* and its answer. These too will have to be accounted for before Allah Almighty.

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## LENGTHY COMMENTARY

### Salām and Islām: The Bliss of Muslim Greeting

In verse **86** which begins with the words: *And when you are greeted with a salutation, greet with one better than it*, Allah Almighty tells us the etiquette of offering and returning greetings known as *Salām* among Muslims.

Lexically, '*Tabiyyah*' means saying, '*Hayyakallah*', that is, 'may Allah keep you alive'. In pre-Islam Arabia, when people met, they used to greet each other by saying '*Hayyakallah*' or '*An'amallahu bika 'aynan*' or '*An'im sabāhan*' or other expression of this nature. When Islam came, it changed this style of greeting and replaced it with a standard form of greeting which is '*As-Salāmu 'Alaikum*'. Commonly, though incompletely, translated in English as 'peace be on you', the greeting means: 'May you remain safe from every pain, sorrow and distress.'

In *Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, Ibn 'Arabī says: *The word Salām is one of the good names of Allah Almighty and 'As-Salāmu 'Alaikum' means 'Allāhu Raqībun' that is, Allah Almighty is your guardian and caretaker.*

### The Islamic greeting is unique

All civilized people around the world have the custom of saying something to express mutual familiarity or affection when they meet each other. If compared with these broadmindedly, the Islamic form of greeting will stand out significantly for its comprehensiveness because it does not simply restrict itself to an expression of affection alone. It rather combines it with the fulfillment of the demands of love and affection. It means that we pray to Allah that He keep you safe against all calamities and sorrows. Then, this is no bland prayer for long life alone as was the way with pre-Islam Arabs. Instead of that, here we have a prayer for good life, that is, a life which is secure against all calamities and sorrows. Along with it, the Islamic *salām* is an expression of the reality of our relation with Allah Almighty - that we, the greeter and the greeted, are all dependent on Allah Almighty needing Him all the time and no one can bring any benefit to someone else without His will and leave. Taken in this sense, this form of greeting is an act of worship in its own right and, quite functionally indeed, a medium of reminding a brother-in-faith of Allah Almighty, the object of his obedience and love.

Staying with this line of presentation, let us imagine a person praying to Allah that his acquaintance remain safe against all calamities and sorrows. When doing so, is it not that he is sort of making a promise as well that the person being greeted is safe against his own hands and tongue. In other words, he is saying that he, in his place, is the guardian and protector of the person's life, property and honour.

In Ahkām al-Qur'ān, Ibn al-'Arabī has reported the following saying of Imām Ibn 'Uyaynah: *Do you know what salām is? The greeter by salām says: 'You are safe from me.'*

To sum up, it can be said that this Islamic form of greeting has a universal comprehensiveness as it is a medium of the remembrance of Allah while reminding the person greeted of Him. It is a vehicle of expressing love and affection for a brother-in-faith and, in fact, a wonderful prayer for him. Then, it also carries a commitment that the greeted will in no way face harm or discomfort from the greeter as it appears is a sound hadith where the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: *A Muslim is the one from whom all Muslims remain safe - (safe) from his tongue and (safe) from his hands.* (Tirmidhī, Kitābul-Īmān)

At this point one may fondly wish that Muslims would not utter the words of this greeting as some sort of habitual custom which commonly prevails among other people of the world. How beneficial it would be if this greeting is offered out of a full understanding of its reality which, perhaps, may turn out to be enough for the reform of whole community. This is the reason why the Holy Prophet ﷺ laid great emphasis on popularizing the practice of Muslims in greeting each other with salām, and he identified it as the best of deeds and took time to explain its merits, graces, blessings and rewards. In a hadith of Sahīh Muslim narrated by Sayyidnā Abū Hurairah radī'allāhu 'anhu, the Holy Prophet ﷺ has been reported to have said: *You cannot enter Paradise until you are a believer and your belief cannot be complete until you love each other. I tell you something which, if you put it in practice, will establish bonds of love among you all, and that is: Make salām a common practice among you which should include every Muslim, whether an acquaintance or a stranger.*

Sayyidnā 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar radī'allāhu 'anhu says that someone asked the Holy Prophet ﷺ: *'Out of the practices of Islam which is the worthiest?'* He said: *'Feed people and spread the practice of salām, whether you know or do not know a person.'* (Bukhārī and Muslim)

The Musnad of Ahmad, Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd report from Sayyidnā Abū Umāmah radī'allāhu 'anhu that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: *Nearest to Allah is the person who is the first one to offer salām.*

A hadith from Sayyidnā 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd radī'allāhu 'anhu appearing in Musnad al-Bazzar and al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr of al-Ṭabarānī reports that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: *Salām is one of the names of Allah Almighty with which He has blessed the people of the earth. So, make salām a common practice among you because, when a Muslim goes to a gathering of people and offers his salām to them, he is blessed with a station of distinction in the sight of Allah Almighty as he reminded everyone of Salām, that is, reminded everyone of Allah Almighty. If people*

*in the gathering do not return his greeting, others will respond who are better than the people of this gathering, that is, the angels of Allah Almighty.*

In another hadīth from Sayyidnā Abū Hurairah radī'allāhu 'anhu the Holy Prophet ﷺ, is reported to have said: *A big miser is the man who acts miserly in offering salām. (Tabarānī, al-Mu'jīm al-Kabīr)*

The effect that those teachings of the Holy Prophet ﷺ had on his noble Companions can be gauged from a narration about Sayyidnā 'Abdullāh ibn 'Umar radī'allāhu 'anhu who would frequently go to the bazar just for the single purpose of having a chance to meet any Muslim there in the hope of offering salām to him and thus become deserving of the reward of an act of worship. Incidentally, he never intended to buy or sell anything while there. This narration from Sayyidnā Tufayl ibn Ubayy ibn Ka'b radī'allāhu 'anhu appears in Mu'attā' of Imām Mālik.

## Verse 86:

It will be noticed that this verse very clearly states that returning a *salām* is obligatory but it is not explicit on the nature of offering a *salām* initially. However, in the Qur'anic expression **(And when you are greeted .. )** there does lie a hint pointing towards this rule of conduct. That this statement is in the passive voice without identifying the subject precisely could be suggestive of *salām* being something all Muslims already do habitually and commonly.

The Musnad of Ahmad, al-Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd report that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: *'Nearest to Allah is the person who is the first to offer salām.'* So, from the emphasis on *salām* and its many merits you have learnt from the teachings of the Holy Prophet ﷺ cited earlier, we get to understand that offering the initial *salām* has also been emphasized as part of the practice of the Holy Prophet ﷺ. According to Tafsīr al-Bahr al-Muhīt, the initial *salām* is actually a sunnah mu'akkadah (emphasized practice of the Prophet of Islam) as held by the majority of 'Ulama. And Hasan al-Basrī rahimahullāh said: that is, *'the initial salām is voluntary while returning it is an obligation.'*

**End.**

