This section describes the prayer ritual, or sacrament of canonical prayer, which is obligatory for Muslims five times per day and a visible religious practice in Turkey.

The sacrament of prayer is a response to a divine call, or commandment, that appears dozens of times in the Kur’an, the holy book of Islam:

Continue the sacrament of prayer and the midday prayer. Stand in an attitude of reverence and submission before Allah.

(2:238)

We were commanded to submit to the Lord of the Worlds and to do the prayer sacrament and to revere Him. It is to Him that you will be resurrected.

(6:71–2)

Commit yourself to what is revealed to you from the Book, and properly do the sacrament of prayer, for the prayer prevents evil and hateful things. And calling on Allah is more worthy than anything. And Allah knows what you do.

(29:45)

Righteousness is not found in turning your faces in a ritual direction. Righteousness is found in the act of one who puts faith in Allah, in the Last Day, in the Angel, in the Book, and in the prophets. It is found in the one who grants valuable possessions to relatives, orphans, the destitute, travellers in need, and beggars. It is found in the act of liberating slaves. It is found in doing the sacrament of prayer, in almsgiving, in keeping one's promises, and in those who
patiently endure hardships, poverty, and times of trial. Such people have proved truthful, and they are the saved.

(2:177)

We see you turn your face up into the sky. We will no doubt turn you in a direction that pleases you. Now, then, turn your face in the direction of the Holy Place of Prostration. And wherever you are, turn your face toward it. Those who were given the Book will certainly recognize that this is the truth from their Lord.

(2:144)

This last verse suggests that the worshipper should be directed toward the Holy Mosque, the Kaaba, in Mecca. The Prophet Muhammad brought the prayer sacrament from Allah as a gift and taught it to his community. Muslims commonly know the story of this gifting as the narrative of the Night Journey:

One night, the Prophet Muhammad was sleeping next to the house of pilgrimage in Mecca [the Kaaba], when the Angel Gabriel awoke him and led him to a winged beast. Mounted on this beast, with Gabriel alongside, the Prophet was borne through the sky to Jerusalem. There he prayed [the prayer sacrament] with the Prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others, at the site of the ruined Jewish temple, the Temple Mount.

Then carried by Gabriel, the Prophet rose to heaven from the rock of the Temple Mount.¹ He ascended to the Divine Presence through seven heavens. At the summation of the ascent was the limit of Being before the Absolute. There the Prophet received the command from Allah that people should do the [canonical] prayer 50 times each day.

When the Prophet descended back down through the heavens, he met Moses, who advised him to return and ask that the number be reduced to one that was more within his people’s capabilities. After several such requests on the Prophet’s part, the number was finally reduced to five.²

In this story of the Night Journey the canonical prayer is both a divine commandment and a gift from Allah to the people of the Prophet Muhammad. The story also depicts ritual prayer itself as an interfaith gathering point for the established religious traditions. It communicates to Muslims the Prophet’s awareness of the personalities and practices of Christians and Jews.