

Ramadan and Fasting

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In Ramadan, the ninth month in the lunar calendar, all Muslims enter a season of intensive worship characterized by fasting, praying, giving charity, and training in self-control and self-discipline.

Ramadan became sacred when the first verses of the Holy Qur'an were revealed to Muhammad (pbuh) for the first time around 610 CE. Muslims have been fasting in Ramadan for more than 1,442 years, since God decreed: *Oh you who believe! Fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you, so that you may learn self-restraint* (2:183). This verse shows that Muslims were not the first ones to fast. Allah prescribed fasting on many nations before Muhammad (Blessings & Peace be upon him) was sent as His messenger. The Qur'an tells us that when Zachariah (Peace be upon him) prayed and asked God to give him a child, God told him to fast for three days by abstaining from talking. He ordered Maryam (Peace be upon her) to observe the same type of fast when she became pregnant with Jesus (Peace be upon him). Our Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) told us that David (Peace be upon him) used to fast every other day. Jesus (Peace be upon him) once fasted for forty days and forty nights, as we read in Matthew 4:2. Fasting had been always one of the observances of pious people.

Fasting, one of Islam's five pillars, has unique moral and spiritual characteristics. The other pillars are the profession of faith; performing the five daily prayers (dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night); giving zakat or alms, an obligatory charity to be paid once a year (2.5% of one's wealth) to the poor and the needy; and making the pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able to do so. These religious obligations are stations at which the believer charges his/her soul with love of God and desire for righteousness. As we nurture our bodies with food and drink at different times of the day, we nurture our souls five times a day by praying, meditating, doing good deeds, and helping others. We go through the same process when we listen to the Friday sermon and then pray in congregation, when we perform the pilgrimage to Makkah, and when we fast the whole month of Ramadan.

What is fasting?

Literally defined, in Islamic terms fasting means to abstain completely from eating and drinking, engaging in sexual intercourse during the day, and committing any sin during Ramadan. This does not mean that fasting cannot be performed at other times of the year. There is great virtue in fasting in general, but during this sacred month it is one of God's commandments, which should be fulfilled by every Muslim who has reached puberty and is, of course, physically and mentally able to undertake it. Those who cannot observe it, such as those who have some difficult medical conditions or those who are traveling, are not required to do so; however, they still have to control themselves and avoid committing sins. After Ramadan is over, however, they have to make up the days missed or pay a certain amount in either money or goods. Even though



they are not fasting, they can live and share the spiritual experience with their fellow Muslims.

The spiritual experience

Fasting in Ramadan is a great spiritual experience, an occasion for reflection and spiritual enrichment, an occasion to express gratitude for God's countless blessings and guidance. It is also a time to show one's commitment and submission to God Almighty. In addition to being a month of mercy, tolerance, forgiveness, and purification from past sins and mistakes, it is both a time of awareness of human frailty and dependence on God as well as an eye-opener and self-experience of what the less fortunate, the poor, and the hungry endure and experience every day.

Fasting in Ramadan is a practical school

In this institution, the faithful learn the principle of sincere love. Fasting equips individuals with a fervent hope in God; imbues them with the virtues of effective devotion, honest dedication, and closeness to God; teaches them patience and unselfishness; and provides them with an effective lesson in applied moderation and willpower. In addition to all of that, it gives them a transparent soul to transcend their everyday reality, a clear mind to think, a light body to move and act. It bestows an atmosphere of equality and unity upon those who are fasting, shows them a new way of wise saving and sound budgeting, and encourages them not to waste food and other things. Indeed, fasting is a school for learning righteousness, self-discipline, and self-control.

Fasting and self-control

For eleven months, Islam requires Muslims to eat and drink in moderation. But during Ramadan, they renew their self-control and habit modulation in order to resist – instead of becoming enslaved to – their desires. Those who are fasting must overcome their temporary feelings of hunger and thirst and keep their desires under control. Many sins and crimes are caused by one's failure to silence or control these desires, whether they are physical or emotional. Sinners and criminals are usually those people who found themselves weak in front of their lusts and desires. The school of Ramadan trains those who fast how to overcome their base sensuality.

Fasting and health

We believe that human beings consist of bodies and souls. While fasting purifies the soul, it also cleanses the body. Fasting has many health benefits and results in many advantages for the body. For example, it gives the digestive system opportunity a chance to rest. Just as many physicians also say, people should limit meals or decrease the quantity of food consumed. Following this advice not only reduces the amount of fat and excess energy stored in the body, but also to positive weight loss. Fasting is an excellent preventive measure or remedial treatment for the digestive system and the colon, where





the accumulation of faecal matter causes problems for many people. In fact, doctors and other medical professionals have shown that fasting is effective when used against some illnesses related to the stomach and the intestines.

Finally

Muslims greet the advent of Ramadan with great joy and always lament its end; however, there is always the consolation that it will certainly come again the following year. May God Almighty bless us and forgive our previous sins during this sacred month! May He give us the strength to fast in the proper way!

