

Introduction to Fasting

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

Preview of Fasting

Fasting is not unique to Muslims. It has been practiced for centuries in connection with religious ceremonies by Christians, Jews, Confucians, Hindus, Taoists, Jains, and others as Allaah says:

["O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may become righteous."]¹

But like other rituals fasting was also altered and corrupted.

Fasting In Primitive Societies

Fasting was made part of the fertility rites in primitive ceremonies which were held at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes and survived for centuries. Some primitive societies fasted to avert catastrophe or to serve as penance for sin. Native North Americans held tribal fasts to avert threatening disasters. The Native Americans of Mexico and the Incas of Peru observed penitential fasts to appease their gods. Past nations of the Old World, such as the Assyrians and the Babylonians, observed fasting as a form of penance.

Fasting In Judaism and Christianity

Jews observe fasting as a form of penitence and purification annually on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, which corresponds to the tenth of Muharram ('Aashoora) of the Islaamic calendar. On this day neither food nor drink is permitted.

Early Christians associated fasting with penitence and purification. During the first two centuries of its existence, the Christian Church established fasting as a voluntary preparation for receiving the sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism and for the ordination of priests. Later, these fasts were made obligatory, as other days were subsequently added. In the 6th century the Lenten fast was expanded to 40 days, on each of which only one meal was permitted. After the Reformation, fasting was retained by most Protestant Churches and was made optional in some cases. Stricter Protestants like the Puritans, however, condemned not only the festivals of the Church, but its traditional fasts as well.

¹ Qur'aan [2:183]

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In the Roman Catholic Church, fasting may involve partial abstinence from food and drink or total abstinence. The Roman Catholic days of fasting are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

In the United States, fasting is observed mostly by Episcopalians and Lutherans among Protestants, by Orthodox and Conservative Jews, and by Roman Catholics.

Secular Fasting: The hunger strike

From being an empty ritual, fasting went to another extreme in the West: the hunger strike, a form of fasting, which in modern times has become a political weapon after being popularised by Mohandas Gandhi, leader of Indian struggle for freedom, who undertook fasts to compel his followers to obey his precept of nonviolence.

Fasting In Islaam

Islaam has prescribed and retained the ritual of fasting throughout centuries as a means for purifying the soul of a man in order to draw near to his Creator by selfish motives and base desires of self. It has a special status among all the devotional worships because it is difficult to perform. It puts a bridle on the most uncontrolled, savage human emotions. The most unruly human emotions are pride, avarice, gluttony, lust, envy, and anger. These emotions, by their nature are not easy to control, thus a person must strive hard to discipline them. Fasting helps do that.

The Islaamic calendar consists of twelve lunar months. Muslims measure their year by the cycles of the moon rather than the sun, so the Muslim lunar year is eleven days shorter than the Christian solar year. Muslims are forbidden to adjust their year by adding an extra month, as the Jews do to keep their lunar calendar in synch with the seasons. Hence, the months of the Muslim year do not relate to the seasons. Each month lasts 29 or 30 days and occurs during different seasons of the year. A new month begins when the evening new moon is sighted. The ninth month is called Ramadhaan and is dedicated to fasting. It is pronounced Ramazan by Indo-Pakistanis.

Virtues of the Month of Ramadhaan

To motivate us and to prepare ourselves for the month of Ramadhaan, let us learn the great virtues of Ramadhaan as described in the Qur'aan and by Prophet Muhammad (*May the peace and blessings of Allaah the Most High be upon him*).

(1) Fasting in Ramadhaan is one of the pillars of Islaam like Salaah. It is the only Islaamic month mentioned by name in the Qur'aan.

(2) The Glorious Qur'aan was revealed in Ramadhaan.

(3) A single night falls in the last ten days of Ramadhaan so virtuous that worship done on it is superior to a thousand months. An entire chapter of the Qur'aan is named after the special night called Layla tul-Qadr.

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(4) Fasting Ramadhaan is considered equivalent to fasting ten months.²

(5) All previous sins are forgiven to whoever fasts Ramadhaan out of faith and with the hope of reward.³

(6) When Ramadhaan begins, the gates of Paradise are opened and the gates of Hell are closed, an indication of intensified divine grace. The devil chiefs are chained, so evil is reduced in the month.⁴

Virtues of Fasting

(1) Allaah has chosen fasting for Himself and He will reward it in multiples beyond measure.⁵

(2) Fasting has no equivalent.⁶

(3) The supplications of the fasting person will not be refused.⁷

(4) The fasting person has two moments of joy: one when he breaks his fast and the other when he meets his Lord and rejoices over his fasting.⁸

(5) The smell that might come from the mouth of a fasting person due to an empty stomach is more pleasing to Allaah than the scent of musk.⁹

(6) Fasting is a protection and a strong fortress that keeps a person safe from the Fire.¹⁰

(7) Allaah will distance a person who fasts a single day for the sake of Allaah seventy years distance from the Fire.¹¹

(8) Whoever fasts one day seeking divine pleasure will enter Paradise if it is the last day of his life.¹²

(9) One of the Gates of Paradise, al-Rayyan, is dedicated for the fasting people, and no one else will enter through it; it will be locked after them.¹³

(10) At the breaking of every fast, Allaah, in His boundless grace, chooses people to deliver from Hellfire.¹⁴

² Saheeh Muslim

³ Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

⁴ Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

⁵ Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

⁶ Nisaa'ee

⁷ Baihaqee

⁸ Saheeh Muslim

⁹ Saheeh Muslim

¹⁰ Saheeh Ahmad

¹¹ Saheeh Muslim

¹² Saheeh Ahmad

¹³ Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

¹⁴ Ahmad