

The Islamic Sharī‘ah of Fasting

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I Introduction

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Believers! Fasting has been made obligatory for you as it was made for those before you so that you become fearful of God. These are but a few days, but if any one among you is ill or on a journey, let him fast a similar number of days later; and those who have the capacity [to feed a needy] should feed a needy in place of it. Then he who does a virtuous deed of his own accord, it is better for him and if you fast, then this is even better for you if you but knew. It is the month of Ramaḍān in which the Qur'ān was revealed, as a book of guidance for mankind and in the form of manifest arguments which are a means of total guidance and a means of distinguishing right from wrong. Therefore, whoever among you is present in this month, he should fast. And he who is ill or on a journey should fast a similar number of days later on. [This leniency is because] God desires ease for you and not discomfort. And [the permission given to travelers and the sick to feed the needy has been withdrawn because] you can complete the fasts [and thus not be deprived of the blessings of fasting] and [for this purpose the month of Ramaḍān has been fixed so that in the form of the Qur'ān] the guidance God has bestowed to you, you glorify God and express your gratitude to Him. (2:183-185)

After the prayer, the fast is the next important worship ritual of Islam. In the Arabic language, the word used for it is (*sawm*), which literally means “to abstain from something” and “to give up something”. In Arabia, when horses were kept hungry in order to train and instruct them, the Arabs called this state as the of the horses. As a term of the Islamic *shari'ah*, it refers to the state of a person in which he is required to abstain from eating and drinking and from marital relations with certain limits and conditions.

A person expresses himself through deeds and practices; hence when his emotions of worship for the Almighty relate to his deeds and practices then these emotions, besides manifesting in worshipping Him, also manifest in obeying His commands. Fasts are a symbolic expression of this obedience. While fasting, a person, at the behest of His Lord, gives up things which are originally allowed to him to win the pleasure of his Lord; he thus becomes an embodiment of obedience and through his practice acknowledges the fact that there is nothing greater than the command of God. So if the Almighty forbids him things perfectly allowed by innate guidance, then it is only befitting for a person who is the servant of his Creator to obey Him without any hesitation whatsoever.

A little deliberation reveals that this state of a person in which he experiences and acknowledges the power, magnificence and exaltedness of the Almighty is a true expression of gratitude from him. On this very basis, the Qur'an says that the fast glorifies the Almighty and is a means through which gratitude can be shown to Him: The Qur'an says that for this very purpose the month of Ramaḍān was set apart because in this month the Qur'an was revealed as a guide for human intellect having clear arguments to distinguish right from wrong so that people could glorify God and express their gratitude to Him. The words are:

(and so that you glorify God and express your gratitude to Him). While referring to this essence of the fast, it has been said that a fast is for Allah and only He will reward a person for it. In other words, when without any reason a person merely at the command of his Creator also forbids himself things which are not forbidden, then the

Almighty out of His graciousness will reward him without measure and such will be this immense reward that he will flourish and prosper. It is narrated from Abū Hurayrah (rta) that whatever pious deed a person does, he is rewarded from ten to seven hundred times but the fast is an exception to this. The Almighty says: (It is for Me and only I will reward [a person] for it because he gave up eating and drinking and abstained from sexual desires for My sake).¹ It is also reported that for persons who fast, there are two occasions of happiness: one when they break their fast and the other when they will meet their Lord.² It is evident from these narratives how important the fast is to the Almighty. The Prophet (sws) is reported to have said:

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The smell of the mouth of a person who fasts is more pleasant to God than musk. (*Bukhārī*; No: 1894)

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There is a door in Paradise called “Rayyān”. People who fast will enter Paradise from this door on the Day of Judgement. No other person will be able to pass through this door. It shall be asked: “Where are the people who fast?” Then they will enter [Paradise] through it and after the last of them will pass through it, it shall be closed. None after them would be able to pass through it. (*Muslim*, No: 1152)

According to the *sharī'ah*, the pinnacle of this ritual of worship is that while fasting a person imposes certain other restrictions on himself and confines himself to a mosque for a few days to worship the Almighty as much as he can. In religious terminology,

1. *Bukhārī*; No: 1795; *Muslim*, No: 1151.

2. *Bukhārī*; No: 1805; *Muslim*, No: 1151.

this is called (*i'tikāf*). Though this worship ritual is not incumbent upon the believers like the fasts of Ramaḍān, it occupies great importance viz-a-viz purification of the soul. The cherished state which arises by combining the prayer and the fast with recitals of the Qur'ān and the feeling of being solely devoted to the Almighty having no one around helps achieve the objective of the fast in the very best way. For this very reason, the Prophet (sws) would sit in *i'tikāf* in the *Masjid-i Nabawī* every year³ in the last ten days of Ramaḍān and would devote all his time to praying to the Almighty, kneeling and prostrating before Him and reciting the Qur'ān. Ā'ishah (rta) narrates:

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When the last ten days of Ramaḍān would arrive, the Prophet (sws) would fully prepare himself to worship the Almighty. He would worship the Almighty late in the night and would wake up his family members for this as well. (*Bukhārī*, No: 2024)

The ritual of the fast is incumbent upon the Muslims in the month of Ramaḍān. No doubt, one is caught up by many lures and attractions of this world; the Prophet (sws), however, has informed us that in this month the Almighty out of His grace stops the Satan among the Jinn-folk from misleading mankind. It is narrated: “When Ramaḍān comes the doors of Heaven are opened and the doors of Hell are closed and the devils are enchained”.⁴ Consequently, there is an opportunity in this month for every person to strive to attain success and salvation without any external hindrance. Some narratives mention the reward of fasting as forgiveness of all the sins of a person. This is in accordance with the general principle of repentance as mentioned in the Qur'ān. However, specifically regarding Ramaḍān, the Prophet (sws) has given glad tidings of fasting in the following words:

3. *Bukhārī*; No: 1922; *Muslim*, No: 1172.

4. *Bukhārī*, No: 1800.

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A person who fasts in Ramaḍān with faith and while holding himself accountable to God, his previous sins are forgiven. (*Bukhārī*, No: 1901)

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A person who prays during the night in Ramaḍān with faith and while holding himself accountable to God, his previous sins are forgiven. (*Bukhārī*, No: 37)

Precisely, the same glad tidings are given for praying at night during the *laylah al-qadr*.⁵ It was in this night that the revelation of the Qur'ān began and the Almighty has informed us that angels and Gabriel descend in this night with permission in all affairs. Since important decisions are made in this night, the extent of the blessings and favours of the Almighty and His nearness which can be achieved in this night cannot be achieved in a thousand other nights. On these very grounds, the Qur'ān says: (Better is this night in which destinies are decided than a thousand months) The Prophet (sws) is reported to have said that one should try to seek the *laylah al-qadr* in the last ten days of Ramaḍān particularly in the nights which begin with an odd number.⁶

What is the importance of fixing certain periods of time for worship? Imām Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī answers this question in the following words:

Just as in this material world seasons, climates and time occupy importance, they do so in the spiritual world as well. Just as in this material world there is a certain season and climate in a certain part of the year in which the seeds of a particular crop must be sown if they are to sprout, and any negligence to these factors will not yield the required produce in some other periods of time however much one tries; likewise, in the spiritual world also, there are special days and times of the year which are set aside for special

5. *Bukhārī*; No: 1802; *Muslim*, No: 760.

6. *Bukhārī*; Nos: 1913, 1914, 1917; *Muslim*, Nos: 1165, 1166, 1167.

acts of worship. If they are offered during them, only then the required results are obtained, and any ignorance in this regard cannot be compensated for in other periods of time even if their span is extended. A few examples will make this matter more clear: to offer the Friday prayers, a certain day has been set aside; similarly, a particular month has been fixed for fasting; for the offering of the *hajj* and its rites too certain days have been appointed by the Almighty. The time for standing in 'Arafah has also been fixed by the Almighty. All these acts of worship have been made conditional to certain periods of time, during which their performance yields a reward that cannot be estimated. If these times are not utilized for these acts of worship, they fail to reap the blessings they have.⁷

II History of the Fast

Like the prayer, the fast is also an ancient ritual of worship. In the above quoted verses of *Sūrah Baqarah*, it is mentioned that fasting has been made obligatory for the Muslims, just as it was made so for earlier peoples. Consequently, this is a reality that as a ritual of worship that trains and disciplines the soul, it has existed in various forms in all religions.

The civilizations of Nineveh and Babylon are very ancient. Once these places were inhabited by the Assyrians. The Prophet Jonah (sws) was sent to them. Initially, these people rejected Jonah (sws) but later professed faith in him. On this occasion, their repentance and turning back has been mentioned in the Bible in the following words:

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: By the decree of the king and

7. Islāhī, Amīn Aḥsan, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'ān*, 2nd ed., vol. 9 (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1986), 468.

his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. (Jonah 3:5-8)

In the Arabia of pre-Islamic times, the fast was a well known ritual of worship. The mere existence of the word (*ṣawm*) in Arabic is evidence enough to show that the Arabs were fully aware of it. Dr Jawwād 'Alī writes:

Some historical narratives mention that the Quraysh used to fast on the day of 'Āshūrah. On this day, they would gather together, celebrate 'īd and enshroud the Ka'bah. According to the historians, they fasted on this day to atone for a sin they had committed in the days of *jāhiliyyah* – a sin whose burden laid heavily upon them. They would fast on this day to express their gratitude to God for saving them from the evil consequences of this sin. It is mentioned in certain narratives that Muhammad (sws) would also fast on this day before his prophethood ... another reason that historians have cited for this fast observed by the Quraysh is that when once they were struck with famine, the Almighty saved them from it, and in order to show their gratitude to Him they started to observe this fast.⁸

In the *sharī'ah* of the People of the Book too, the fast is a common worship ritual. The Bible mentions fasts at a number of places and besides using this word it has used certain other expressions like “to sadden one's self” and “self denial” to connote it.

It is recorded in Exodus:

Then the LORD said to Moses: 'Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel'. Moses was there with

8. Dr Jawwād 'Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī Tārīkh al-'Arab Qabl al-Islām*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm al-Malāyīn, 1986), 339-340.

the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant – the Ten Commandments. (34:27-28)

It is recorded in Leviticus:

This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must sadden and not do any work – whether native born or an alien living among you – because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a sabbath of rest, and you must sadden yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. (16: 29-31)

It is recorded in Judges:

Then the Israelites, all the people, went up to Bethel, and there they sat weeping before the LORD. They fasted that day until evening and presented burnt offerings and fellowship offerings to the LORD. (20:26)

It is recorded in Samuel:

They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. (2 Samuel 1:12)

David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and went into his house and spent the nights lying on the ground. (2 Samuel 1:12)

It is recorded in Nehemiah:

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. (9:1-2)

It is recorded in the Psalms:

Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting. When my prayers returned to me unanswered. (35:13)

It is recorded in Jeremiah:

So you go to the house of the Lord on a day of fasting and read to the people from the scroll the words of the Lord that you wrote as I dictated. (36:6)

It is recorded in Joel:

The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. (2:11-13)

It is recorded in Zechariah:

Again the word of the LORD Almighty came to me. This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.' (8:18-19)

It is recorded in Matthew:

When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (6:16-18)

It is recorded in Acts:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said: 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. (13:2-3)

This is a brief history of the ritual of the fast. It is evident from this overview that like the prayer, the fast too was well known to the Arabs. They were fully aware of its religious status and its details viz-a-viz its requisites and stipulations. Consequently, when the Qur'an directed them to fast, these requisites and stipulations were not unknown to them: in fact, the words in which this directive was given, shows that they should observe it as an obligatory ritual which they knew as an age old ritual and an age old Sunnah of the prophets. Viewed thus, the source of the fast is the consensus and *tawatur* (practical perpetuation) of the Muslims. The only thing that the Qur'an did was to make the fast an obligatory ritual, stipulating certain principles of lenience for the sick and for the travelers and to answer certain questions which were raised by the Muslims regarding the fast.

III Objective of the fast

The objective of the fast as delineated in the above quoted verses of *Sūrah Baqarah* is to create the fear of God in a person. The Qur'ānic words used are (that you may attain *taqwā*). In the parlance of the Qur'an, *taqwā* means that a person should spend his life within the limits set by Allah and should keep fearing Him from the depth of his heart that if ever he crosses these limits there will be no one except God to save him from its punishment.

How does the fast engender *taqwā* in a person? To understand the answer to this question, three things are necessary.

Firstly, the fast revives with full force the concept in the mind of the person that he is God's servant. As soon as certain natural desires of the body are given up, the feelings of servitude spring forth and continue to enhance. These feelings totally overwhelm a person at the time of breaking the fast. Right from *fajr* to this time, a person does not consume a single bite of food or a single drop of water merely because his Lord has directed him to

refrain from them. When the ritual of the fast is observed every year with vigilance, a profound reality is infused in a person and in fact becomes ingrained in his instincts: he is a servant of his Lord and it is only befitting for him that in other affairs of life he submit to Him and fully accept his authority by making his concepts and deeds totally subservient to the Almighty. With this awareness, a person's faith in the Almighty becomes a living and vibrant phenomenon. It is because of this that he does not merely believe in God but in fact believes in an All-hearing, All-seeing, All-knowing and All-wise Being Who is just and is fully aware of what a person conceals and reveals and in no circumstances can a person shun obedience. This is the foremost requirement for engendering *taqwā*.

Secondly, the fast is a means of making a person appreciate the fact from the bottom of his heart that one day he will be held accountable before the Almighty. Although all Muslims believe in this accountability, yet while fasting when the onslaught of thirst, hunger and carnal desire make life difficult for a person it is only this awareness of being accountable before the Almighty that stops him from fulfilling these needs. For hours during the whole month of Ramaḍān, he abstains from these needs merely because one day he will have to face the Almighty. In the scorching heat of summer when his throat becomes totally dry he refrains from ice and water which he can easily access and consume; when spasms of hunger unsettle him, he desists from food which is at hand and when a husband and wife can easily satisfy their carnal desires they abstain from doing so – all in order to please the Almighty. This abstention requires a lot of effort. Thus the awareness of being answerable to God is fully implanted in a person. A little deliberation shows that this is the second most important thing in engendering *taqwā*.

Thirdly, patience is necessary for *taqwā* and it is the fast that produces patience in a person. In fact, to be trained in the trait of patience, perhaps there is no easy and effective a way than the fast. In a nutshell, the trial that we have been put through is that on the one hand we are pulled by our physical and carnal desires and on the other hand we are required by the Almighty to live a life within the limits set by Him. This trial requires that we exercise patience at every step of our life. If the traits of honesty, veracity, justice, forbearance, forgiveness, keeping promises,

perseverance on the truth, avoiding evil and eschewing lust are not present in a person, *taqwā* has no basis and without patience these traits cannot be espoused in a person.

It is this *taqwā* which is the objective of the fast and the month of Ramaḍān has been fixed for it. It has been referred to above that the reason for this is that the revelation of the Qur'ān started in this month. What is the relationship of the Qur'ān with the fast? Imām Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī answers this question in the following words:

A person who reflects will easily reach the conclusion that intellect is perhaps the greatest gift of the Almighty to man and the Qur'ān is even a greater gift because the intellect receives real guidance from the Qur'ān. Without the Qur'ān, intellect will continue to stumble in darkness even if it is equipped with the eyes of science. It was only befitting that the month in which this great gift was given to mankind should be devoted to thank the Almighty and to glorify Him so that people are able to constantly acknowledge this favour. To express this gratitude and to glorify the Almighty, the ritual of fast was divinely ordained which is a means of engendering *taqwā*. It is *taqwā* upon which rests the basis of religion and its continued existence in this world and for whose followers this Qur'ān was revealed as guidance ... in other words, the wisdom of the Qur'ān should be understood in the sequence that only they can truly benefit from the Qur'ān who have *taqwā* and one special way of attaining it is through the fast. For this reason the Almighty stipulated fasts for this month in which the Qur'ān was revealed. In other words, the Qur'ān is spring for this world and the Ramaḍān is the season of spring and the crop which this spring nurtures and develops is the crop of *taqwā*.⁹

9. Iṣlāḥī, Amīn Aḥsan, *Tadabbur-i-Qur'ān*, 2nd ed., vol. 9 (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 1986), 451.

IV Wrongdoings and their Remedies

The above mentioned objective is necessarily achieved through the fast. However, for this, it is essential that those who fast must refrain from certain wrongdoings which root out the blessings of fasting. Although these wrongdoings are numerous, all those who fast must at least be aware of some of them.

The first of these wrongdoings is that people tend to make the Ramaḍān a month of savoring their taste buds. They are of the opinion that they will not be held accountable before the Almighty whatever they spend in this month. If such people are affluent too, then this month becomes a month of partying and festivity. Instead of making this month a means of disciplining their desires, they make it a means of nurturing them and spend all their time in preparing meals for the *ifṭār*. Throughout the time of fasting they keep thinking of the delicious food that would fill their bellies once they break their fast. The result of this attitude is that they do not gain anything from fasting and if ever they do, they lose it.

One way to tackle this bad habit is to desist from making eating and drinking one's prime concern in life. One should eat and drink to sustain one's self and to gather enough energy for work and not make these needs one's goal. A person should eat whatever foodstuff is easily available to him and thank God for this provision. Even if he is served with something he does not like, he should not get angry. If he has been blessed with wealth, he should spend it on the poor and the needy instead of spending it on savoring his taste. Such spending will indeed add to the blessings of his fast. The practice of the Prophet (sws) in spending in the way of God is precisely this. Ibn 'Abbās says that even in normal times, the Prophet (sws) was the most generous; however, in Ramaḍān, he would become an embodiment of generosity.¹⁰

The second wrongdoing is that since hunger and thirst make a person short tempered, some people instead of making the fast a means to control their temper make it an excuse to vent it on

10. *Bukhārī*; No: 6;/ *Muslim*, No: 2308.

others. They lose their temper on their wife and children and servants in very trivial matters. They seldom control their tongue and if the situation gets worse they don't hesitate in hurling abuses and insults on others. So much so, at times they even thrash their servants. After such bouts of battering they end up comforting themselves by saying that such things do happen in the fast.

The Prophet (sws) has advised a remedial measure for such an attitude: the fast should be used as a shield on such occasions instead of making it an excuse for being enraged. Whenever a person gets infuriated he should remember that he is fasting. The Prophet (sws) is reported to have said that the fast is a shield; whoever among you fasts should not indulge in lewd talk nor be overcome by his emotions; then if anyone abuses him or initiates a fight he should respond by saying: "I am fasting, my brother, I am fasting."¹¹ It is a proven reality that if a person who is fasting reminds and checks himself in this manner on every occasion he is annoyed, he will see that gradually he is able to control the devil within him and he will be seldom overcome by it. The feeling of being victorious over the devils of his desire will produce satisfaction and a sense of superiority and this reminder initiated by the fast will become a means of his reformation. He will then express his anger on instances which really entail such expression. No one will be able to annoy him on all occasions.

The third wrongdoing is that people try to find replacements for the food and drinks and other things that they have given up – replacements which in their opinion do not harm the fast in any way thinking that they make it easy for them to spend the time of the fast. They will play cards, read novels and plays, listen to songs, watch movies and gossip with their friends and if they are not able to do these, they would end up backbiting and besmearing others. When a person's stomach is empty, he relishes the meat of his brother in the form of backbiting. The consequence of this attitude is that at times people begin these activities in the morning and only at the time of breaking the fast do they leave them.

One way of tackling this failing is that a person should consider silence to be among the etiquette of keeping the fast and he should try to refrain from loose talk. The Prophet (sws) is

11. *Bukhārī*; No: 1793; *Muslim*, No: 1151.

reported to have said: "A person who does not desist from lying and practicing it, then the Almighty does not need him to abandon eating and drinking."¹²

Another remedial measure is that a person should spend his spare time in studying the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth and in understanding Islam. He should make good use of this opportunity by learning some supplications mentioned in the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīth. In this way, he will be able to save himself from trivial involvements and later these learnt supplications would help him in constantly remembering the Almighty.

The fourth wrongdoing is that sometimes a person does not fast for God; he fasts merely to protect himself from the criticism and condemnation of his family members and sometimes he undertakes the hardship of fasting to feign religiosity. This too damages the real objective of the fast.

One way to rectify this tendency is that a person should always keep reminding himself of the importance of the fast and also reminding himself of the fact that if he has left so many cherished things of life, he should do this for the sake of the Almighty. Moreover, he should also try to keep some optional fasts besides the obligatory ones of Ramaḍān and he should try to conceal these optional fasts as far as possible. It is hoped that in this way the obligatory fasts too would one day be kept by him purely for the sake of Allah.

Following are the optional fasts which the Prophet (sws) himself kept or urged others to do so:

The Fast of 'Āshūrā (10th of Muharram)

Āḥadīth mention the blessings of this fast.¹³ The Prophet (sws) generally kept this fast¹⁴ and before the fasts of Ramaḍān were made incumbent, he would necessarily keep it and would urge and direct people to keep it and would show vigilance on them in this regard.¹⁵ According to history, one of the reasons for which this fast was kept was that the Quraysh used to keep it¹⁶ and

12. *Bukhārī*; No: 1894.

13. *Bukhārī*; No: 1902; *Muslim*, No: 1162.

14. *Bukhārī*; No: 1899; *Muslim*, No: 1129.

15. *Bukhārī*; No: 4234; *Muslim*, No: 1128.

16. *Bukhārī*; No: 1894; *Muslim*, Nos: 1125-1126.

another reason recorded is that the Jews would keep it. When the Prophet (sws) asked the Jews, they replied: 'This day has great significance for them; the Almighty liberated Moses (sws) and his people on this day and drowned the Pharaoh and his people in the sea; it is to express gratitude to the Almighty that Moses (sws) fasted on that day'. At this, the Prophet (sws) said: 'We have deeper relations with Moses (sws) than you'. Consequently, he fasted on this day and also asked people to fast.¹⁷

The Fast of 'Arafah (9th of Dhū al-Ḥajj)

Every Muslim is aware of the blessings of this day. The Prophet (sws) is reported to have said that if a person fasts on this day then hopefully the Almighty will forgive his previous and next year's sins.¹⁸ However, while offering the *hajj*, the Prophet (sws) did not keep this fast.¹⁹ A probable reason for this is that he did not prefer to add it to the hardship of the *hajj*.

The Fasts of Shawwāl

The blessings of these fasts are also mentioned in Aḥādīth. The Prophet (sws) is reported to have said that whoever kept the fasts of Ramaḍān and then followed them up with six fasts in Shawwāl is like a person who kept fasts all his life.²⁰

The Three Fasts of each Month

The Prophet (sws) has urged Muslims to keep these fasts and has expressed the same words he said regarding the fasts of Shawwāl referred to above²¹. Ā'ishah (rta) narrates that the Prophet (sws) himself used to keep these fasts. However, days were not fixed for them. He would fast any three days of the month he wanted to.²² He, however, directed certain companions (rta) to keep these fasts on the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth of each month.²³

17. *Bukhārī*; No: 1900; *Muslim*, No: 1130.

18. *Bukhārī*; No: 1902; *Muslim*, No: 1162.

19. *Bukhārī*; No: 1578; *Muslim*, No: 1123.

20. *Muslim*, No: 1164.

21. *Bukhārī*; Nos: 1875, 1880; *Muslim*, No: 1162.

22. *Muslim*, No: 1160.

23. *Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 2449.

The Fasts of Monday and Friday

The Prophet (sws) kept fasts on these two days as well. When people asked the reason, he replied: 'the accounts of people are presented [to the Almighty] on these days'.²⁴ He also said: 'Monday is the day of my birth and on this very day began the revelation of the Qur'ān to me'.²⁵

The Fasts of Sha'bān

Besides Ramaḍān, it is this month during which the Prophet (sws) would fast the most. 'Ā'ishah (rta) says that she did not see the Prophet (sws) fast in any month to the extent he did in Sha'bān.²⁶

Apart from the above mentioned optional fasts, people can keep optional fasts whenever they want to. The Prophet (sws) directed the people who wished to fast more to follow the way of the Prophet David (sws) who would fast on alternate days.²⁷ The Prophet (sws) did not like people to only fast on Fridays²⁸ nor fast all the year round²⁹. He also did not like people to fast during Eid³⁰ days.³¹

V The Directives of Fasting

The Almighty has directed Muslims to fast in accordance with the *shari'ah* which has always existed regarding the fast in the religions of the Prophets. The Qur'ān has stated that the fast has been made obligatory for the Muslims in the same manner as it was made obligatory for earlier peoples. A few number of days

24. *Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 2436.

25. *Muslim*, No: 1162.

26. *Bukhārī*; Nos: 1868-1869, 1880; *Muslim*, No: 1156.

27. *Bukhārī*; No: 1875; *Muslim*, No: 1159.

28. *Bukhārī*; Nos: 1883-1884; *Muslim*, Nos: 1143-1144.

29. *Bukhārī*; Nos: 1874; *Muslim*, No: 1162.

30. *Bukhārī*; Nos: 1889-1890; *Muslim*, No: 1137-1138.

31. The reason for the first of these is that after sometime it would have become a *bid'ah* (religious innovation), for the second is that it would have spoiled the balance in life and for the third is that it would have been totally out of place in such a poised religion.

have been fixed for this ritual. This last statement is meant to raise the spirits. The implication being that if the blessings of Ramaḍān are kept in consideration, then 29 days or 30 days are not a long period; they are a relatively short period and a person instead of becoming anxious should make himself ready to fully reap their benefits.

After these introductory statements, the real directive is mentioned. It is said that people who are unable to fast because of illness or travel should make up their missed fasts by either fasting later or by feeding a poor person. This directive ends with the words:

(Then he who does a virtuous deed of his own accord, it is better for him and if you fast then this is even better for you, if you but knew it). In other words, this atonement for not fasting is a minimum requirement which should be fulfilled. However, if a person feeds more than one needy person or does some other virtuous deed as well, then this will prove better for him. And to Allah even better is that a person instead of feeding others makes up the missed fasts in other days.

However, the very next verse beginning with the words shows that the permission to feed a needy for a missed fast was later revoked. Consequently, the whole directive has been repeated after this verse while omitting the words beginning with and ending with

. Since it is difficult to fast in days other than Ramaḍān, the Almighty did not make it incumbent until people got used to it. Hence, it has been said in the Qur'ān that feeding the needy for missed fasts has been revoked so that people could keep their missed fasts and are thus not deprived of the blessings hidden in them.

This then is the real directive of the fast. It seems that after receiving this law, certain questions arose in the minds of the Muslims. One of these questions related to having sexual intercourse with the wife in the nights of the Ramaḍān. This notion probably originated because among the Jews, the next fast would start right after one had broken his fast and they would consider eating and drinking and having sexual intercourse with the wife as prohibited. Muslims thought that they too would have to follow the Jews in this matter. However, some Muslims in

spite of thinking so deviated from the view they held. This was something unseemly because if a person considers something to be a requisite of religion and still does not act according to it regardless of the fact that it is actually a requisite or not, then this is not permissible to him. The Qur'ān has called this attitude as deceiving one's conscience and has clarified:

(:)

It is now lawful for you to lie with your wives on the night of the fast; they are apparel to you as you are to them. God knew that you were deceiving yourselves. He has relented towards you and pardoned you. Therefore, [without any hesitation] you may now lie with them and [without any hesitation] seek what God has ordained for you. And eat and drink until the white thread of the dawn is totally evident to you from the black thread of night. Then complete the fast till nightfall and do not lie with them [even at night] when you are stationed for *i'tikāf* in the mosques. These are the bounds set by God: do not approach them. Thus He makes known His revelations to mankind that they may attain righteousness. (2:187)

After this clarification made by the Qur'ān, the statutes on which the law of the fast and the *i'tikāf* are based are as follows:

1. The fast is abstention from eating and drinking and from having sexual intercourse with the wife with the intention that a person is going to fast.
2. This abstention is from *fajr* to nightfall; hence eating and drinking and having sexual intercourse with the wife during the night is permitted.
3. The month of Ramaḍān has been fixed for fasting; hence it is

obligatory for every person who is present in this month to fast.

4. If owing to sickness, travel or any other compelling reason a person is not able to keep all the fasts of Ramaḍān, it is incumbent upon him to make up for this in other months by keeping equal number of the fasts missed.

5. The pinnacle of the fast is the *i'tikāf*. If a person is given this opportunity by God, he should seclude himself from the world for as many days as he can in a mosque to worship the Almighty and he should not leave the mosque except because of some compelling human need.

6. During *i'tikāf*, a person is permitted to eat and drink during the night but he cannot have sexual intercourse with his wife. This has been prohibited by the Almighty.

This law regarding the fast is substantiated by the consensus of the Muslims and by their perpetual adherence to it and the Qur'ān too has explained it to a great extent. Following are the explanations afforded by the words and deeds of the Prophet (sws) regarding the fast:

i. The Ramaḍān should begin with the sighting of the moon and it should end with it too. The Prophet (sws) is reported to have said: "Begin the fast with the sighting of the moon and break the fast with sighting it too. Then if the weather is not clear, end the month of Sha'bān by completing thirty days."³²

ii. Fasts should not be kept just one or two days before the Ramaḍān begins. The Prophet (sws) did not approve of this practice and remarked that the only exception to this is the person who keeps fasting.³³

iii. One should eat the *sahūr* (pre-fast meal) before beginning the fast. The Prophet (sw) asked people to eat it because eating it brings blessings.³⁴

iv. If the *adhān* begins and a person has a plate in his hand, then he should go on to finish what he is eating; there is nothing wrong in this.³⁵

v. During the fast a person can be intimate with his wife in

32. *Bukhārī*; No: 1810; *Muslim*, No: 1081.

33. *Muslim*, No: 1082.

34. *Bukhārī*; No: 1823; *Muslim*, No: 1096.

35. *Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 2350.

whatever way he chooses except for having sexual intercourse with her. 'Āi'shah (rta) narrates that during the fast the Prophet (sws) would kiss her and press her closely to him.³⁶

vi. The fast can be kept in the state of *janābah* (ceremonial uncleanness). 'Āi'shah (rta) narrates that the Prophet (sws) sometimes would begin the fast in this state and then do *ghusl* (the ceremonial bath) after the time of *fajr*.³⁷

vii. If a person eats forgetfully then this does not break the fast. The Prophet (sws) remarked that it is Allah who has fed him.³⁸

viii. The Prophet's way of observing *i'tikāf* was to sit in a central mosque during the last ten days of the Ramaḍān. 'Āi'shah (rta) narrates that a person who has sat for *i'tikāf* should not go to visit the sick, nor participate in a funeral procession nor go near his wife nor go out of the mosque except for some compelling human need.³⁹

ix. Intentionally breaking the fast is a grave sin. If a person commits this sin he should atone for it. The atonement which the Prophet (sws) prescribed was the same as the one the Qur'ān has prescribed for *ḡihār*. However, it is evident from the Ḥaḍīth that when the person expressed his inability the Prophet (sws) did not insist on it.⁴⁰

x. The supplication ascribed to the Prophet (sws) for breaking the fast is:

“The thirst has been quenched, the canals are brimming with water and if God wills then the reward of this [fast] has also been acknowledged”.⁴¹

36. *Bukhārī*; No: 1826; *Muslim*, No: 1106.

37. *Bukhārī*; No: 1829; *Muslim*, No: 1109.

38. *Bukhārī*; No: 1831; *Muslim*, No: 1155.

39. *Bukhārī*; No: 1921; *Muslim*, No: 1171; *Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 2473.

40. *Bukhārī*; No: 1834; *Muslim*, No: 1111.

41. *Abū Dā'ūd*, No: 2357.

