

Understanding Islam **Series Two: Standing before God**

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Part Four: The discipline of fasting

One of the things that has entered into most people's understanding of Islam is the association with Ramadan being a month of fasting for Muslims. In fact, Ramadan is the name of the ninth month in the Arab calendar, which was designated as the month of fasting by the Qur'an [Q. 2:185]. As with many ancient calendars worldwide, the Arab calendar was regulated by the moon. In any desert climate, with clear skies at night, it is easy to observe the phases of the moon and thus measure the passing of time. The Qur'an laid down the moon as the measure of time for Muslims [Q. 10:5]. Each month begins with the sighting of the new moon and runs until the next new moon is sighted.

A lunar or moon month is technically 29.5 days long and a lunar year is 354 days long. This makes it eleven days shorter than a solar year, so when time is measured by the solar calendar, any event in the lunar calendar appears to fall approximately eleven days earlier each year. This means that Ramadan, like all other lunar events, moves through the seasons, advancing by approximately eleven days each year. In countries at some distance from the equator, the length of the day varies considerably with the seasons. This means that an event like Ramadan, which requires daylight fasting, can see the length of the fast vary considerably from winter, when it can be as little as around eight hours, to summer, when it can be as much as nineteen hours. In countries that are so close to the earth's poles that the normal rhythm of day and night cannot be seen, Muslim scholars have devised solutions based on taking timings from other countries where the natural rhythm can be observed.

It is not practical to have months of 29.5 days in length, so in practice lunar months are either 29 or 30 days long. At the end of the 29th day, reliable people go out to attempt to sight the new moon, if they see it, then the next day is the first of the new month; if they do not, then the next day is the 30th of the current month and the day after is automatically the first of the next month. In the days before mass communication, this could mean that one village, where the new moon was sighted, would be on the first of the new month, while a village some distance away, where perhaps they did not sight the new moon, would be on the 30th of the old month. The difficulty is compounded when one considers that the new moon would normally be faint, low down near the horizon and might only be visible for a matter of minutes due to the curvature of the earth.

In modern, technically advanced societies, it is possible to make astronomical calculations precisely to say whether the new moon might have been visible in a given place on a particular day. This leads to some complexity of calculations and scholarly opinion about the start of each month. If one particular community was unable to

sight the moon with the naked eye, due to cloud cover or local mountain ranges, can they take the word of another community in the same country or a neighbouring country, where the moon was sighted? National boundaries are arbitrary, so how should proximity be judged: the same landmass, or the same continent, or the same hemisphere? The situation is rendered more complex still in countries where there is habitual cloud cover and much light pollution from electric lighting, which makes physical new moon sighting almost impossible. Some groups of Muslims have come to rely on astronomical data to say that the new moon would have been visible if one could have penetrated the cloud and light pollution. Some Muslim-majority countries that have to set things like airline schedules well in advance have come to rely heavily on such scientific data. All these complexities mean that it is not unusual for different groups of Muslims, even within the same school of Islam and in the same country or city, to be operating on different calendars for Ramadan and other months. Hence we see different days for the start and end of Ramadan in spite of attempts to standardise these dates.

Fasting commanded by God

The Qur'anic verses commanding Muslims to fast [Q. 2:183-186], make it clear that this is part of the essential guidance of God for humanity, which was commanded by earlier revelations too, so that human beings may grow in God-consciousness (*taqwa*). So the fast is something owed directly to God, who alone sees the inner disposition of the one fasting, as well as something of benefit to human beings.

The Qur'anic command is for a fast of total abstention from food, drink and sexual activities from before dawn (first light) until after the sun has set [Q. 2:187]. First light is spoken of as streaks of light in the dark sky and was traditionally determined by there being sufficient light to distinguish between a black thread and a white thread. Different schools of Islam understand sunset as the disappearance of the disk of the sun or "nightfall" understood as the disappearance of the reflected light of the sun in the sky, which is generally some minutes later. Before the days' fasting begins, it is recommended to drink plenty and eat sustaining, non-salty foods; this meal is called *sahur*. Fasting is the act of a free and competent person, so it is necessary for one fasting to declare their intention (*niyya*) to fast; some schools require this to be done each day whilst others permit that one declaration of intention will suffice for the whole month. The time between stopping eating and the pre-sunrise prayer (*fajr*) is usually spent in quiet reading of the Qur'an. The end of the fasting day is marked precisely by taking liquids and something light to eat; the tradition of Muhammad was to eat a few dates. This is followed by the prayer after sunset (*maghrib*) and then one can proceed to eat a more substantial meal. The meal that breaks the fast is called *iftar* and this is often taken communally, with people inviting friends and neighbours to break the fast with them.

The prohibition of food, drink and sexual relations does not in any way imply that these are bad or impure activities. They are permitted during the hours of darkness. They represent some of the most powerful urges that human beings have, so by

exercising control and abstaining from these, one learns self-discipline, which is a benefit to human beings in all aspects of life. The key to understanding fasting during Ramadan is that it concerns discipline and not torture; it is forbidden, for example, to extend the fast – discipline requires that one submits to the divine command. Muslims observe the time of fasting with minute attention to detail, not only as regards the timing but also by refraining from activities that might break the fast unintentionally, such as showering or brushing one's teeth.

Why fast?

First of all, fasting is a command of God to be observed by all who would live in obedience to God's commands. It is an important part of religious training, promoting a sense of *taqwa*. It increases our awareness of the hunger and thirst that millions of people experience every day. They do not choose to go hungry; it is just a fact of life. Part of the injustice of our world is that some go hungry and others have too much to eat and become ill. Fasting makes us aware of how dependent we are on things beyond our control, like the sun and rain. It reminds us that all our habits can be broken at God's command, which frees us from becoming slaves to our desires. It prepares people to face times of hardship and prevents us from taking things for granted. It reminds people of their higher selves; we are more than just bodies, thus it strengthens the spiritual dimension of the human being by allowing us to be more like the angels, who neither eat nor drink.

The month of the Qur'an

Ramadan is a sacred month for Muslims because it was during this month that the revelation of the Qur'an began in the year 610. The Qur'an is God's greatest gift to humankind because it contains the final guidance on how to live a truly human life. Attention is given to Qur'anic reading and study during this month. Muslims observe the tradition of listening to the entire Qur'an being recited during Ramadan. Those who have both memorised the whole Qur'an (*hafiz*) and mastered the art of beautiful reciting (*qari*) are in demand to give communal recitations. The Qur'an has been divided into thirty parts, one to be recited each day during Ramadan. Sunni Muslims have the tradition of doing this recitation combined with communal prayers (*tarawih*) during the night-time, whilst the Shi'a attend communal recitations and pray privately.

A community activity

Islam knows two traditions of fasting; the communal, during Ramadan, and individual fasting at other times and for various reasons. The communal aspects of Ramadan are important. The whole community strengthens its bonds by fasting together and supporting one another. The pattern of life in Muslim societies is altered during this month. People rise early for the pre-dawn meal and then set about their daily activities. Business is often conducted only during the morning with people returning home to rest in the afternoon. After sunset, it is common for shops and offices to re-open so that people can buy what they need and complete the day's work. Families

help one another through the hardest times. It's a time for healing old disputes and looking forward to a better future. People reflect on their actions, facing up to their faults and failings and seeking forgiveness. The overall effect is to stimulate the individual's awareness of God in their lives and reinforce their sense of living in harmony with God and all creation.

Individuals chose to fast at other times of the year. Some follow the *sunna* of Muhammad by fasting on certain days each week or month, or during other months of the year. As fasting strengthens discipline, it is used at times of temptation, if one is aware of a tendency to sin. Adults who are prevented from marriage, for example, through poverty or because they have set aside some time to pursue studies, who feel themselves tempted to illicit sexual activities, would be counselled to fast to strengthen their resolve not to sin. Those who have broken an oath might make recompense through fasting [Q. 5:89]. Those who have broken the command not to hunt or kill animals during the Hajj season [Q. 5:95], who are making restitution for killing someone [Q. 4:92] or for illicitly setting aside their wife [Q. 58:4] will undertake a prolonged fast. Those who are seeking God's guidance on a particular question (*istikhara*) prepare themselves by three days of fasting.

A review of life

Ramadan is not just about fasting. It is also about a review of one's whole life. It is a time of annual stock-taking: Do I fulfil my family duties properly? Do I play my part in the life of the community? How do I earn and spend my money? Do I give enough time to prayer and study? Am I careful about what I read and look at? Do I gossip or tell lies? Do I give a proper proportion of my surplus money to those in need? Ramadan is the time of year when many Muslims calculate their annual contributions to the welfare of others (*zakat* or *khums*).

When not to fast

The fast during the month of Ramadan (*sawm*) is obligatory for all Muslims after the age of puberty. Some people do not fast because it would injure their health. Those who are too young or too old, those who are sick or travelling are exempt. Women do not fast when they have their periods and are excused during pregnancy and while breast-feeding. Fasting requires a mental decision, so those who do not have the mental capacity to decide for themselves do not fast. Older people decide when they are too old to fast. Fasting is not required of children before puberty but many like to take part in some measure of fasting during Ramadan before that. They just want to be part of things! Those who miss days of fasting for some temporary reason, like travelling or illness, catch up on missed days later. Those who are prevented permanently, like those with certain types of illness that require a regular controlled intake of food, join in the spirit of fasting by feeding those who are in need and observing the other elements of Ramadan.

Islamic law sets out certain recompenses that must be made by those who break the fast and these differ in severity according to the deliberate or accidental nature of the act. However the Islamic principle of God wanting our ease and not our hardship applies so that under certain conditions of extreme hardship it is permitted to break the fast or if there is a sudden unforeseen emergency. In such circumstances the missed day would be caught up later or, if that is not possible, charitable acts are prescribed.

A time of spiritual intensity

Fasting during Ramadan is regarded as a major way of showing one's contrition for any sins committed during the year and seeking God's forgiveness. Spiritual practices are to the fore. Muslims will spend additional time in private prayer, meditation, reflection and making resolutions for the future. The nights are especially used for spending time in prayer and traditionally the month is divided into three thirds, each devoted to consideration of God's mercy, seeking forgiveness and salvation from hell-fire.

The odd-numbered night towards the end of Ramadan when the first revelation took place is called Lailat al-Qadr, the Night of Power or Destiny. This is considered by many to be the 27th night but some groups of Muslims will observe several of the odd-numbered nights in the last third of the month. Many pious Muslims will try to spend the whole of this night in prayer and listening to any message from God that might be spoken in their hearts. Ramadan is "the Month of God" when God is the host and people the guests gathering in God's presence. Muhammad said that the gates of heaven are wide open during this month for our prayers to ascend and God's messages to be sent down to us. At the same time, the gates of hell are closed and the *Shaytan* (Satan) is chained so we are spared his temptations.

Muhammad set the example of spending time in seclusion seeking the presence of God. He was observing such a period of seclusion when the first revelation of the Qur'an took place and he used to observe such periods later during the time in Madina. From this the practice grew of some people observing the last ten days of the month as a time of seclusion in the mosque (*i'tikaf*). Some mosques will make provision for small retreat booths for people wishing to observe this, with people only leaving them for formal prayers and to answer calls of nature.

The Festival of Fast-breaking

The first day of the month after Ramadan is a special day of celebration called 'Id al-Fitr. Muslims take a day off work or school. Because the date is fixed by the sighting of the new moon and there can be variations in this, employers might need to be flexible in allowing the holiday. It begins with everyone taking a shower and putting on clean clothes. They take breakfast after dawn followed by the whole community gathering for festival prayers, either in the largest mosques or in the open air. Gifts are given, especially to children. Families gather for a celebration meal and food is shared with neighbours. Before this festive day, charity must be given to those in need (*zakat*

al-fitr) to make sure that they have enough to celebrate too. How could a person celebrate knowing that a poor neighbour does not have enough money to buy food or give their children presents? There is much visiting of friends and family, including visits to the graves of loved ones. Often there are sports and games for the children. Ramadan is over for another year and people miss its special character and look forward to its arrival again next year.