

Fasting: Its Nature and Purpose

Believers, fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you, so that you may remain God-fearing, (Fast) a certain number of-days. But whoever of you is ill, or on a journey, shall fast instead the same number of days later on. Those who find fasting a strife too hard to bear may compensate for it by the feeding of a needy person. He who does good of his own account does himself good thereby; for to fast is to do yourselves good, if you but know it.

(The Cow, "Al-Baqarah" :2;183-4)

By Adil Salahi

Fasting is a manifestation of man's determined will and his relationship with his Lord which is based on total obedience and submission to him. It is also a demonstration of man's deliberate disregard of all his physical needs. He willingly forgoes these needs in order to achieve his aim of winning the pleasure of Allah and earning his reward.

These are necessary elements in the training of the believer so that they are able to bear the pressures and hardships of the way they have chosen. It is the thorny way, full of obstacles. On both sides of it there are all sorts of pleasures and temptations which beckon it's travellers, trying to force them off their course.

We may add also that fasting has numerous advantages for health which continue to be discovered as time passes. I am personally not inclined to relate religious duties and directives, especially in matters of worship, to their apparent physical advantages.

The underlying purpose of all such duties and directives is to equip man adequately to fulfill his role in his life and to prepare him for the achievement of the standard of perfection designed for him in the hereafter.

Nevertheless, I do not deny any benefit which, we may observe, or scientists may discover to result from the fulfillment of such religious duties and directives. It goes without saying that Allah takes into consideration the physical constitution of man before He lays down his duties for him.

Allah knows that man requires help and motivation in order to respond to duty and fulfill it regardless of its benefits.

It takes time for man to get used to a certain duty and to be convinced of its wisdom. Hence, the decree of fasting starts with the address made to the believers which reminds them of their essential quality, that is, they believe in Allah. They are then told that fasting has always been a duty required of the believers in all religions. Its principal aim is their education and training so that their hearts acquire a high standard of sensitivity and purity and that the fear of Allah is well established in them: "Believers, fasting is decreed for you as it was decreed for those before you, so that you may remain God-fearing."

To fear Allah, then, is the great aim of fasting which looms large before our eyes. As the believers fulfill this duty, in total obedience to Allah and in pursuit of His pleasure, they feel the quality of fearing Allah to be a life within them. This is indeed the quality which guards their hearts against spoiling their fasting by indulging in sin, even if it is of the type which only passes through the mind.

Those who are addressed by the Qur'an are fully aware of the value Allah attaches to this quality of fearing Allah and being conscious of Him. Fasting is a tool with which it is achieved, or we may say, a way which leads to it. Hence, the Qur'an raises it before them as a noble objective which they try to achieve through fasting.

They are then told that fasting is prescribed only for a certain number of days. It is not to be practised every day in their lives. Exempted from it, however, are the ill until they have recovered, and the travellers until they have settled: "Fast a certain number of days. But whoever of you is ill, or on a journey, shall fast instead the same number of days later on."

Taken at its face value, the statement concerning the exemption of the ill and the travellers is general, unrestricted. Hence any illness or journey is a good reason for exemption from fasting, provided that compensation is made when the case which justifies the exemption no longer exists. This is my understanding of this general, unqualified Qur'anic statement. Moreover, it is more in line with the Islamic concept of relieving the strain and causing no hardship.

The exemption is not related to the severity of the illness or the hardship of the journey; it is related to sickness and travelling generally. The purpose of the exemption is that it is Allah's wish to make things easy, not hard, for man. We cannot claim to have full knowledge of the divine wisdom behind relating this exemption to sickness and travelling generally. There may be some considerations known to Allah and unknown to man in these two cases. There may be some hardships which may not immediately appear to us or we may tend to overlook. Since Allah has not attached this exemption to any particular reason, we refrain from making any judgment concerning it.

We obey any statement Allah has made, even if its wisdom does not appear immediately to us. What is certain is that there is a wisdom behind it, although we may not necessarily recognize it.

Islam does not compel people to be obedient. Its method is to implant in them the fear of Allah so that they obey Him. The acquirement of the quality of fearing Allah is the particular aim of this type of worship. He who tries to make use of a certain concession made by Allah in order to evade fulfilling a duty is, in the first place, devoid of goodness. With such an attitude, the aim behind the religious duty cannot be fulfilled. We must not forget that Islam is a religion laid down by Allah, not man-made. Allah knows best that this religion achieves a perfect balance between the relaxation of certain duties and strict adherence to duty.

As for the exemption from fasting in cases of illness, it appears to me that the exemption applies to every case which may be reasonably described as illness, regardless of its nature or intensity. It is compulsory for anyone who makes use of this exemption to compensate for the days of Ramadan which he does not fast because of illness or travelling. Each day is compensated for by fasting one day at any time during the year. The weightier opinion is that there is no need to fast on consecutive days when one fasts in compensation for the days he did not in Ramadan.

Dawn Has Come - Al-Ahzab (The Confederates) - Chapter 33: Verse 43

"He it is Who sends blessings on you, as do His angels, that He may bring you out from the depths of Darkness into Light: and He is Full of Mercy to the Believers."



So often we find that the darkest times in our lives are followed by the most precious. Often, it is at the moment when everything looks broken that something least expected lifts us and carries us through. Did not Prophet Ayoub (peace be upon him) lose everything one by one, before it was all given back and more?

Yes. For Prophet Ayoub, the night was real. And for many of us, it seems to last forever. But Allah does not allow an endless night. In His mercy, he gives us the sun. Yet there are times when we feel our hardships won't cease. And maybe some of us have fallen to such a spiritual low in our *deen* (religion) that we feel disconnected from our Creator. And maybe for some of us, it's so dark, we don't even notice.

But like the sun that rises at the end of the night, our dawn has come. In His infinite mercy, Allah has sent the light of Ramadan to erase the night. **He has sent the month of the Qur'an so that He might elevate us and bring us from our isolation to His nearness.** He has given us this blessed month to fill our emptiness, cure our loneliness, and end our soul's poverty. He has sent us the dawn that we might find from darkness — light.