

Meaning and Blessings

OF FASTING

The second act of worship that Allah enjoins upon Muslims is *Sawm* or fasting. It means abstaining from dawn to sunset from eating, drinking and sex. Like Prayer, this act of worship has been part of the teachings of all the Messengers. Their followers fasted as we do. However, the rules, the number of days, and the periods prescribed for Fasting have varied from one *Shariah* (the revealed, or canonical, law of Islam) to another. Today, although Fasting remains a part of most religions in some form or other, people have often changed its original form by accretions of their own.

"O Believers! Fasting is ordained for you, even as it was ordained for those before you." (The Qur'an 2:183). Why has this particular act of worship been practiced in all eras?

Life Of Worship

Islam aims to transform the whole life of man into a life of worship. He is born a slave; and to serve his Creator is his very nature. Not for a single moment should he live without worshipping, that is surrendering to Him in thoughts and deeds. He must remain conscious of what he ought to do to earn the pleasure of Allah (SWT) and what he ought to avoid. He should then walk on the path leading to Allah's pleasure, eschew that leading to His displeasure just as he would avoid the embers of a fire.

Only when our entire lives have become modeled on this pattern can we be considered to have worshipped our Master as is His due and as having fulfilled the purport of "I have not created jinn and men except for My Ibadah (complete submission and obedience)."

Rituals Lead To Worship

The real purpose of ritual acts of worship - Salah, Zakah, Sawm and Hajj - is to help us to come to that life of total worship. Never think that you can acquit yourselves of what you owe to Allah only if you bow and prostrate yourselves five times a day, suffer hunger and thirst from dawn to sunset for thirty days in Ramadan and, if wealthy, give alms and perform the Pilgrimage once in a lifetime. Doing all this does not release you from the bondage to Him, nor make you free to do whatever you like. Rather, one of the underlying purposes of enjoining these rituals upon you is to develop you so that you can transform your whole lives into the Ibadah of Allah.

The Private Worship

All acts of worship include some outward physical movement, but not Fasting. In Prayer you stand, sit, bow down and prostrate yourselves; all these acts are visible to everybody. In Hajj you undertake a long journey and travel with thousands of people. Zakah, too, is known to at least two persons, the giver and the receiver. None of these acts can remain concealed; if you perform them, other people will come to know about them.

But Fasting is a form of Ibadah that is entirely private. The all-knowing Allah alone knows that His servant is Fasting. You are required to take food before dawn (Suhur) and abstain from eating and drinking anything till the time to break the Fast (Iftar). But, if you secretly eat and drink in between, nobody except Allah will know about it.

Sure Sign Of Faith

The private nature of Fasting ensures that you have strong faith in Allah as the One who knows everything. Only if your faith is true and strong, will you not dream of eating or drinking secretly: even in the hottest summer, when your throats dry up with thirst, you will not drink a drop of water; even when you feel faint with hunger, when life itself seems to be ebbing, you will not eat anything. To do all this, see what firm conviction you must have that nothing whatsoever can ever be concealed from Allah! How strong must be His fear and love in your hearts. You will keep your Fast for about 360 hours for one full month only because of your profound belief in the reward and punishment of the Hereafter. Had you the slightest doubt that you have to meet your Maker, you would not complete such a Fast. With doubts in the hearts, no such resolves can be fulfilled.

Month-long Training

In this way does Allah put to the test a Muslim's faith for a full month every year. To the extent you emerge successful from this trial, your faith becomes firmer and deeper. The Fasting is both a trial and training. If you deposit anything on trust with somebody, you are, as it were, testing his integrity. If he does not abuse your trust, he not only passes his test, but at the same time, also develops greater strength to bear the burden of greater trusts in the future. Similarly, Allah puts your faith to a severe test continuously for one month, many long hours a day. If you emerge triumphant from this test, more strength develops in you to refrain from other sins. This is what the Qur'an says: "O Believers! Fasting is ordained for you, even as it was ordained to those before you, that you might attain to Allah-consciousness." (The Qur'an 2:183).

Practicing Obedience

The Fasting has another characteristic. It makes us obey the injunctions of the Shariah with sustained intensity for prolonged periods of time. Salah lasts only a few minutes at a time. Zakah is paid only once a year. Although the time spent on Hajj is long, it may come only once in a lifetime. In the school of Fasting, you are trained to obey the Shariah of Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him), for one full month, every year, day and night.

You have to get up early before dawn for Suhur, stop all eating and drinking precisely at a certain time, do certain activities and abstain from certain activities during the day, break your Fast (Iftar) in the evening at exactly a certain time. Then, for a few moments only you relax, before you hurry for long late evening prayers (Tarawih).

Every year, for one full month from dawn to dusk and from dusk to dawn, you, like a soldier in an army, continuously live a disciplined life. You are then sent back to continue your normal duties for eleven months so that the training you have received for one month may be reflected in your conduct, and if any deficiency is found it may be made up the next year.

Communal Fasting

Training of such profound nature cannot be imparted to each individual separately. In just the way an army is trained, everyone has to act at the same time at the sound of the bugle so that they may develop team spirit, learn to act in unison, and assist each other in their task of development.

The month of Ramadan is earmarked for all Muslims to fast together, to ensure similar results. This measure turns individual Ibadah into collective Ibadah. Just as the number one, when multiplied by thousands, becomes a formidable number, so the moral and spiritual benefits accruing from the Fasting by one person alone are increased a million fold if a million people fast together.

The month of Ramadan suffuses the whole environment with a spirit of righteousness, virtue and piety. As flowers blossom in spring, so does Taqwa (fear and love of Allah) in Ramadan. Everyone tries extra hard to avoid sin and, if they lapse, they know they can count on the help of many brothers and sisters who are Fasting with them. The desire automatically arises in every heart to do good works, to feed the poor, to clothe the naked, to help those in distress, to participate in any good work being done anywhere, and to prevent evil.

For this reason the Messenger (pbuh) said: "Every good deed of a man is granted manifold increase, ten to seven hundred times. But says Allah: 'Fasting is an exception; it is exclusively for Me, and I reward for it as much as I wish.' " (Bukhari, Muslim).

All good deeds grow, then, in proportion to both the intention of the doer as well as their results, but that there is a limit to their growth. Fasting, however, has no such limit. In Ramadan, in the season for the flourishing of good and piety, not one but millions of people jointly water this garden of virtue. The more you sincerely perform good deeds in this month and the greater you avail yourselves of its blessings, the more you sustain the impact of fasting on your life during the subsequent eleven months, the more will our garden flourish, and flourish without limit. Should its growth become inhibited, the fault must lie with you.

Where Are The Results?

After snapping the vital links between various parts of Islam and injecting into it many new things, we cannot expect the same results as from the whole.

A second reason is that we have practically changed the meaning of Ibadah. Many of us believe that mere abstention from food and drink, from morning till evening, amounts to Ibadah; once you do all these things you have worshipped Allah. A greater majority of the Muslims is unmindful of the real spirit of Ibadah that should permeate all our actions. That is why the acts of Ibadah do not produce their full benefit. For everything in Islam depends on intention and understanding.

The True Spirit Of Fasting

Essentially every work that we do has two components. The first is its purpose and spirit; the second, the particular form which is chosen to achieve that purpose. Take the case of food. Our main purpose in eating is to stay alive and maintain our strength. The method of achieving this object is that we take a piece of food, put it in our mouth, chew it and swallow it. This method is adopted since it is the most effective and appropriate one to achieve our purpose. But everyone knows that the main thing is the purpose for which food is taken and not the form, the act of eating takes.

How would we react if someone tried to eat a piece of sawdust or cinder or mud? You would say that he was mad or ill. That he would not have understood the real purpose of eating and would have erroneously believed that chewing and swallowing constituted eating. Likewise, we would also call someone mad who thrust his fingers down his throat to vomit up the food he had just eaten and then complained that the benefits said to accrue from taking the food were not being realized. Rather, on the contrary, he was getting thinner day-by-day. This person blames the food for a situation that is due to his own stupidity. Thus the purpose of eating cannot be achieved by merely fulfilling these outward actions.

Outward Replaces Real

Perhaps we can now understand why our Ibadah has become ineffectual and empty. The greatest mistake of all is to take the acts of Prayer and Fasting and their outward shape as the real Ibadah. Otherwise, how can we explain, that a person who is Fasting, and is thus engaged in the Ibadah of Allah from morning till evening, in the midst of that Ibadah, tells a lie or slanders someone? Why does he quarrel on the slightest pretext and abuse those he is quarreling with? How dare he encroach on other people's rights? And how can he claim, having done all these things, that he has still performed the Ibadah of Allah? Does this not resemble the actions of that person who eats cinders and mud and thinks that by merely completing the four requirements of eating he has actually done the job of eating?

How, too, can we claim to have worshipped Allah for many long hours throughout Ramadan when the impact of this whole exercise in spiritual and moral upliftment vanishes on the first day of the next month? During the Id days we do all that pagans do in their festivals, so much so that in some places we even turn to adultery, drinking and gambling. And I have seen some degenerates who Fast during the day and drink alcohol and commit adultery at night. Most Muslims, Alhamdulillah, have not fallen so low. But how many of us still retain any trace of piety and virtue by the second day of Id?

The Perspective

This form has been prescribed to create in us such fear of Allah and love, such strength of will and character, that, even against our desire, we avoid seemingly profitable things which in fact displease Allah and do those things which possibly entail risks and losses but definitely please Allah. This strength can be developed only when we understand the purpose of Fasting and desire to put to use the training we have undergone of curbing our physical desires for the fear and love of Allah only.

Just as the physical strength cannot be obtained from bread until it is digested, transformed into blood, which spreads through every vein, so spiritual strength cannot be obtained from Fasting until the person who keeps the Fast is conscious of its purpose and allows it to permeate his heart and mind and dominate his thoughts, motives and deeds.

Fasting As A Way To Piety

This is why Allah, after ordaining fasting, has said that Fasting is made obligatory on you, so that you may attain to Allah-consciousness. Note that there is no guarantee that you will definitely become Allah-conscious and righteous. Only someone who recognizes the purpose of Fasting and strives to achieve it will receive its blessings; someone who does not, cannot hope to gain anything from it.

Conditions Of Fasting

The Messenger (pbuh) has said: "If one does not give up speaking falsehood and acting by it, Allah does not require him to give up eating and drinking." (Bukhari).

On another occasion, he said: "Many are the people who Fast but who gain nothing from their Fast except hunger and thirst; and many are those who stand praying all night but gain nothing except sleeplessness." (Darimi).

Faith And Self-Scrutiny

The Messenger (pbuh) draws attention to another aim of Fasting thus: "Whoever observes the Fast, believing and counting, has all his past sins forgiven." (Bukhari, Muslim).

Believing means that faith in Allah should remain alive in the consciousness of a Muslim. Counting means that you should seek only Allah's pleasure, constantly watching over your thoughts and actions to make sure you are doing nothing contrary to His pleasure, and trusting and expecting the rewards promised by Allah and the Messenger. Observing these two principles brings the rich reward of all our past sins being forgiven. The reason is obvious: even if we were disobedient, we will have now turned, fully repentant, to our Master--and "a penitent is like one who has, as it were, never committed a sin at all" as said the Messenger (pbuh).

Shield Against Sins

The Messenger (pbuh) said: "The Fast is like a shield [for protection from Satan's attack]. Therefore when one observes the Fast he should [use this shield and] abstain from quarreling. If anybody quarrels with him, he should simply say: 'Brother/Sister, I am fasting.'" (Bukhari, Muslim).

Hunger for Goodness

The Messenger (pbuh) once directed that a man, while Fasting, ought to do more good works than usual and ardently desire to perform acts of kindness. Compassion and sympathy for his brothers should intensify in his heart because, being himself in the throes of hunger and thirst, he will all the more be able to realize the misery of other servants of Allah who are destitute. "In Ramadan, whoever provides food to a person who is Fasting to break that Fast will earn forgiveness for his sins, deliverance from the Fire and as much reward as the one who is Fasting, without any reduction in the recompense of the latter." (Baihaqi).

Abdullah Ibn Abbas said the Messenger (pbuh) used to become unusually kind and generous during Ramadan. No beggar in that period went empty-handed from his door, and as many slaves as possible were set free. (Baihaqi).

By S. A. Mawdudi

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