

“It was in the month of Ramadan that the Quran was revealed as guidance for mankind ... distinguishing between right and wrong. So any one of you who is present that month should fast, and anyone who is ill or on a journey should make up for the lost days by fasting on other days later. God wants ease for you, not hardship. He wants you to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him for having guided you, so that you may be thankful.”
(Quran 2:185)



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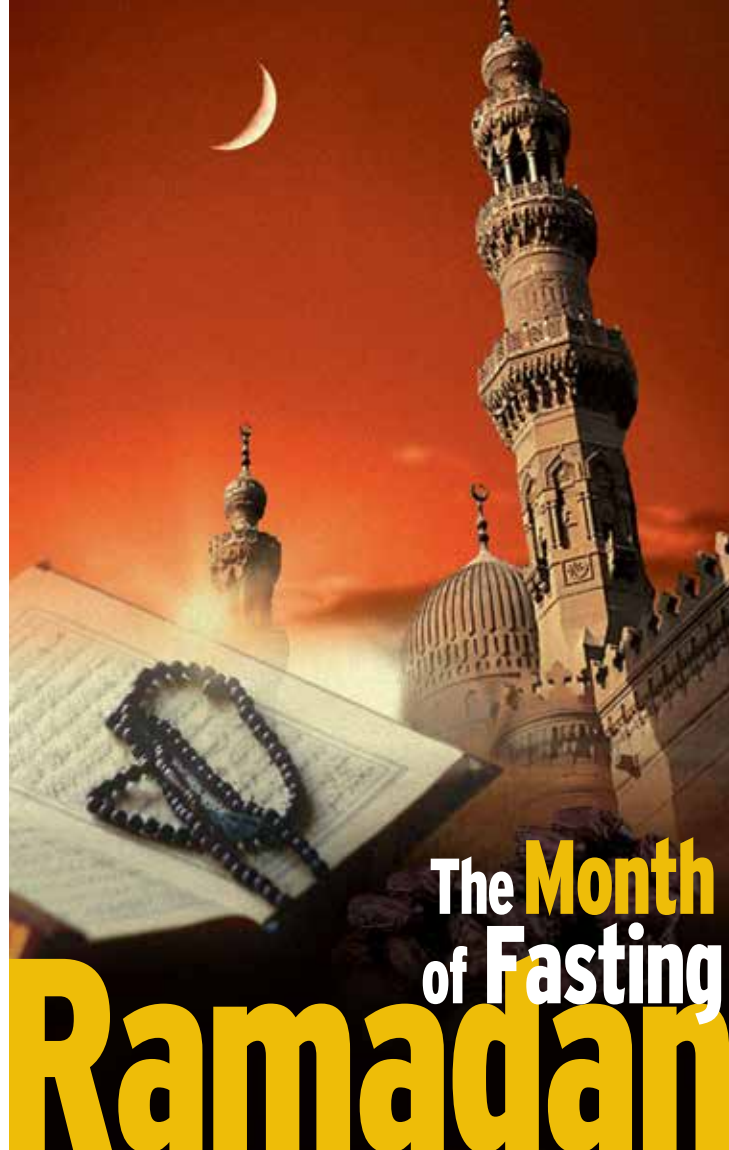
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In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Fasting is a common form of worship among the various religions across the world. Its spiritual benefits are widely recognized even though its frequency, practice and duration may differ from faith to faith. Islam places great importance on the act of fasting, calling it one of the pillars of worship, along with prayer, charity and pilgrimage.

God says in the Quran, the holy book of Islam, “*You who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of God*” (Quran 2:183).

Islam teaches that God (Allah in Arabic) sent many prophets since the beginning of the human race, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (peace be upon all of them). Hence, Islam shares core values such as belief in God as well as a commitment to justice and virtue with Christianity and Judaism; similarly, fasting in one form or another is common to all three Abrahamic faiths and, indeed, to the vast majority of religions across the world.

In Islam, fasting is one of the major acts of worship and a means of attaining God-consciousness. Along with the physical aspects of fasting, its spiritual dimensions purify the soul, instill self-reflection and inspire virtuous living.

RAMADAN: AN ANNUAL RETREAT

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, which begins with the sighting of the new moon. During this month, Muslims worldwide are obligated to abstain completely from food, drink and sexual relations from dawn to dusk, culminating in a release of restrictions at sunset. The fast, as per the teachings of Prophet Muhammad^P, is broken with dates followed by a meal which varies from culture to culture.

However, fasting is not mandatory on those for whom it would constitute a difficulty. For instance, people who are sick or traveling can postpone their fast until their illness or journey is over. The elderly, the weak, the mentally ill and those who have a chronic illness that prevents them from fasting, are all exempted during Ramadan. They may feed a needy person for every missed day, if they can afford to do so.

Fasting is observed as an act of obedience to God, one for which He has reserved special blessings. The fasting person is rewarded manifold for all good deeds. In addition, according to a saying of Prophet Muhammad^P, whoever fasts and prays during Ramadan with pure intentions will have their past sins forgiven.

At the same time, Prophet Muhammad^P taught his followers to remain conscious of the deeper significance behind their fast, saying, “Whoever does not abandon falsehood in word and action, then God has no need that they should leave their food and drink.” Therefore, fasting is multidimensional – along with the physical aspects of fasting, one must nurture the social and spiritual elements as well in order to fully benefit from fasting.

In essence, fasting in the month of Ramadan is a yearly opportunity for Muslims to physically and spiritually revive themselves. Fasting redirects the heart away from worldly affairs and towards the remembrance of God. During Ramadan, Muslims focus on strengthening their

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relationship with their Creator. The self-restraint practiced in Ramadan makes the heart and mind accustomed to the remembrance of God and to the obedience of His commandments.

Fasting during Ramadan is, therefore, a spiritual regimen and a reorientation for the body and mind. It is a time for spiritual reflection, prayer and good deeds. The spiritual cleansing during the month of Ramadan results in renewed determination to worship God throughout the year.

BENEFITS OF FASTING

Fasting is intended to instill self-discipline, empathy and compassion in the individual. Muslims are motivated to increase their generosity during this month. They are encouraged to share the blessings that God has provided them by giving generously in charity because wealth is regarded as a trust from God.

Indeed, fasting makes people more aware of the many bounties of God. Experiencing hunger and thirst allows us to feel the desperation of hunger and leads us to empathize with those who don't know when they will eat their next meal. "Fasting allows us to experience once a year what many throughout the world experience almost daily. Hunger, for them, is not a choice; it is simply a fact of life," says Hamza Yusuf, a renowned Muslim leader based in California.

Fasting also reminds us of the importance of appreciating what we have and minimizing waste. From His generosity, God continuously graces us with His favors, and fasting reinforces the concept that wasting the Creator's bounties is a sign of ingratitude to Him.

Fasting builds endurance. As the lunar year continually shifts, Muslims encounter Ramadan in varying seasons –

from the sluggishly long summer days to the short, crisp wintry weeks. Muslims of all walks of life manage their work duties irrespective of the weather and the fast, although often on a shortened schedule; this includes professionals as well as manual workers such as peddlers and day laborers. In countries where Muslims are a minority, they maintain a full workload on empty stomachs, balancing their added worship in the early mornings, evenings and weekends along with their normal work routines.

Muslim athletes keep up with practice and play games despite fasting. Hakeem Olajuwon, a retired NBA professional basketball player, was widely recognized for not only playing basketball during Ramadan, but also playing well. In February, 1995, he was named the NBA Player of the Month; incidentally, Ramadan that year began on Feb. 1st. Olajuwon has been the inspiration for many other players who manage to perform on the field or in the court with gusto even when they last had any water or food hours ago.

When the month of Ramadan arrives, it brings a heightened sense of community with it. Muslim families often wake up together before sunrise for an early breakfast. They also invite one another to break their fast together, which creates friendship and stronger ties among neighbors, families and friends. Many people also bring meals to mosques to share with the community, especially the poor, the needy, the travelers and those who do not have families. Together, they also make it a point to go to the mosque for the nightly Ramadan prayers.

THE MONTH OF QURAN

God began revealing the Quran to Prophet Muhammad^P during Ramadan in the year 610 C.E. The Quran, the final revelation from God, is often read and memorized in its original Arabic language, preserving the divine order and structure of this book. In Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to focus as much

time as possible on reading, listening and understanding the Quran as a means of coming closer to God.

One of the ways Muslims become nearer to the Quran during Ramadan is through extended congregational prayers offered in the late evening after the breaking of the fast. Over the course of the month, the entire Quran is commonly recited in these night prayers. This is an opportunity for Muslims to become spiritually connected to God and reflect on His words of guidance.

As Abdul Wahid Hamid explains in his book, *Islam, the Natural Way*:

Ramadan is a month of heightened devotion. In it, prayer is performed with greater intensity. There are extra prayers on Ramadan nights... In the last ten days of Ramadan, some retreat to the mosque to perform Itikaf (seclusion) at the local mosque, a period of intense reflection and devotion, seeking guidance and forgiveness, and reading the Quran. Ramadan is a great opportunity to get closer to the blessed guidance of the Quran which was revealed in this month. Ramadan is also called the month of the Quran.

Muslims believe that the last ten nights of Ramadan are the holiest of all, and strive to increase their worship during that time even more. The most sacred night of all, the Night of Power, falls on one of the odd-numbered nights in the last third of Ramadan. God mentions in the Quran that the Night of Power is better than one thousand months (Quran 97:3). In other words, the worship of this one night is worth more than the worship of a thousand months. As a result, Muslims seek this special night by staying awake in worship during the odd-numbered nights from the last ten days of Ramadan.

Although fasting may seem severe and difficult, it is truly a gratifying time for Muslims. Every year, Muslims experience a unique excitement and jubilation as Ramadan approaches. Homes are cleaned, groceries are stocked, children are prepped – and, above all, many resolutions are made.

Even as the day's routine of work and home continue,

Muslims make extra time for spiritual nourishment and self-introspection. Commitments ranging from the recitation and study of Quran to increased charity to nightly attendance of additional prayers are commonly made to reap the rewards of the fasting month.

And, as the month draws to a close, a sense of sadness overcomes the worshippers, wistful at the departure of the blessed month which seemed to have flown by.

EID AL-FITR CELEBRATION

The end of Ramadan is marked by the sighting of the new moon, which is followed by a day of celebration known as *Eid al-Fitr*. Families wake up early in the morning, put on their best clothes and go to the mosque for a brief *Eid* sermon and congregational prayer. They thank God for giving them the opportunity to experience the holy month of Ramadan. The day is filled with celebration, socializing, festive meals and modest gift-giving, especially to children.

Before attending the Eid prayer, the head of the household or guardian gives a special charity on behalf of each dependent family member called *Zakat al-Fitr*. This is the giving of a meal to a needy person to make sure that none are excluded from this happy occasion and to encourage people to continue the spirit of generosity after Ramadan as well.

The *Eid* celebration is not merely about feasting and socializing. There is a deep significance for those who truly observed the holy month with their fasting, abstaining from all bad habits and striving hard to earn the pleasure of God. Muslims feel a sense of happiness and a renewed energy to face the rest of the year with faith and determination – until next Ramadan!

Note: The superscript "P" next to Prophet Muhammad^P represents the invocation Muslims say with his name:

May God's peace and blessings be upon him.