

# The Meaning of Ramadan

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## HOW THE FAST DEVELOPED

Ramadan is the name of the ninth month in the Islamic (*Hijra*) calendar and is also known as the Month of Fasting. It was in this month that the Muslims' holy book, the *Qur'an*, was first revealed to Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh* – the abbreviation for “peace be upon him”). Unlike the conventional Gregorian calendar based on the solar cycle, the *Hijra* calendar is based on the lunar cycle. The significance and rationale of this is elaborated upon later.

Fasting is not a new concept unique to Islam; in fact,

the practice of fasting is common in many religions, including Christianity and Judaism. In Islam, however, it has special importance and is mandatory for all adult Muslims, except those who are old or have health problems, pregnant women and nursing mothers, and those on a journey. Several verses in the *Qur'an* refer to this. For example, in Sura II, verses 183 and 184, God says, “O Believers, fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, [so] that you may [learn] self-restraint. The fast is to be observed for a fixed number of days . . . .” Further on, in verse 185, God says, “. . . therefore from now on, whosoever witnesses it [the Month of Fasting], it is obligatory on him to fast *the whole month* . . . .” Fasting for a fixed number of *days* in the former verses and *the whole month* in the later may seem confusing, but a consideration of the temporal aspect of the revelation of these verses clarifies the point.

Islam proceeded step-by-step and by degrees in the imposition of most of its obligatory duties; the same happened in the case of fasting. At first, Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) was directed by God to advise Muslims to fast three days in a month, but without making it mandatory. Then, in the second year of *Hijra*, the command to fast during Ramadan was revealed. Even then, people who otherwise were able to fast were given the option not to fast provided they could feed a poor person as an expiation for one day's fast. Then, after some time, the final commandment, contained in verse 185, modified this by withdrawing the concession for able-bodied persons but retaining it for old, sick, and wayfaring persons, pregnant women, and nursing mothers. In addition, fasting for one full month during Ramadan was made obligatory, canceling the ear-

lier directive of fasting for three days in any month. Thus was established, in a gradual and psychologically acceptable manner, the requirement for month-long fasting during Ramadan. This practice constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam and is followed by over one billion Muslims around the world.

## THE BEGINNING AND END

The onset of the month of fasting is based on the sighting of the new moon. The month of Ramadan begins from that time and, depending upon the appearance of the new moon in its next cycle, lasts for 29 or 30 days. The following discussion of the Islamic lunar calendar highlights the rationale, significance, and marvel of this unique system.

Since the lunar year consists of 354 days, it is 11 days shorter than the solar year (12 in a leap year). Ramadan, as all other months in the Islamic calendar, moves back by about 11 days each year. This means that, if Ramadan began from, say, May 21 in 1985, it would begin on May 10 in 1986, April 29 in 1987, and April 18 in 1988, etc. Thus, we see that in three years it has moved back by over a month. This, in turn, means that the month of Ramadan will rotate through all seasons — winter, spring, summer, and fall. In winter the days are short and cooler, making fasts very easy (only about nine or so hours long); but in the summer, the days are hot and long (over 16 hours), making fasting more difficult. Spring and fall represent intermediate conditions.

Furthermore, the seasons do not remain the same in all parts of the world; winter in the northern hemisphere means summer in the southern hemisphere. If Ramadan were not based upon the lunar cycle, Muslims in a particular geographic location would have to be perpetually fasting in the same month and in the same season. A lunar cycle obviates this problem. Muslims, whether they live in North America or Australia, become accustomed to fasting in all seasons, sometimes with greater ease and sometimes with greater hardships. Another significant point about the lunar calendar is the fact that a new moon can be sighted by a nomad in the desert as well as by a city dweller — by one who is illiterate or by one who can read a calendar.

Ramadan ends with the sighting of the new moon. The

شَهْرُ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ فِيهِ  
الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ  
وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِّنَ الْهُدَىٰ وَالْفُرْقَانِ  
فَمَن شَهِدَ مِنْكُمُ الشَّهْرَ فَلْيَصُمْهُ  
وَمَن كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَىٰ سَفَرٍ  
فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ  
الْيُسْرَ وَلَا يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ  
وَلِتُكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ  
وَلِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَىٰكُمْ  
وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ

*Qur'an*, Sura II, Verse 185

first day after Ramadan, called *Eid al-Fitr*, one of the two major Muslim festivals, is marked by offering congregational prayer in the morning. All Muslims are required to give to charity to help the less fortunate members of society, who do not have the means to feed and clothe themselves or their family members. The day of Eid is a day of rejoicing and includes visits to friends and relatives, sharing food and sweets, and merry-making.

## RULES OF FASTING

Making the intention to fast for the sake of God and to seek His pleasure is the prerequisite. Fasting is from dawn to sunset. It is strongly recommended by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to partake of a small meal or a nourishing snack, called *suhoor*, before dawn. From dawn until sunset a person is prohibited from eating, drinking, smoking and, for married persons, sex. At sunset one breaks the fast, usually with dates, juice or fruit. Breaking the fast is called *iftar*, and is followed by offering the evening prayer. One can partake of permissible food and drinks after *iftar* and before *suhoor*. About 75 to 90 minutes after sunset comes the time for the night prayer, which in Ramadan is followed by a special, 20-units long *Traweeh* prayer.

Despite the limited intake of food and requirement of additional prayer and predawn rising for *suhoor*, a Muslim is to carry on his normal work obligations. In other words, Ramadan does not mean relaxing at home and staying away from work. Such an idea is totally un-Islamic.

## MEDICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The human body is very complicated . . . The digestive system stores and processes food, and performs the unique function of converting food into energy, enzymes, fats and other components needed to sustain all of one's activities. This process of conversion is continuous and operates throughout one's entire life. However, during the month of Ramadan, when food intake is very low, the digestive system functions at a very low level, thereby providing it with

needed rest and reprieve. Allan Cott (1975) in his *Fasting as Way of Life* notes, "Fasting brings a wholesome physiological rest for the digestive tract and central nervous system and normalizes metabolism."

Modern medicine recognizes that breakfast is the most important meal of the day because it provides energy throughout the day. Similarly, the *suhoor* provides energy to carry a person through the entire day. And that may be the reason why Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) so strongly recommended it.

*Traweeh* prayer involves considerable standing, bending, bowing and sitting, in a sequential manner for at least 30 minutes — generally longer. Dr S Athar (1984) in his article, "Therapeutic Benefits of Ramadan Fasting," stated that *Traweeh* prayer burns up 200 calories. He writes, ". . . *salat* (including *Traweeh*) is a better form of physical exercise than aerobic exercises because it is mild and uses all the muscles and joints of the body."

## SUMMARY

In conclusion, Ramadan teaches the individual to achieve control and exercise restraint over one's basic instincts for food, drink, and sex. It makes one actually ex-

perience the pangs of hunger and thirst rather than merely know about them. This great self-regulatory process brings about mental peace and tranquility to the individual.

Thus, by observing the commands of God, Muslims not only please the Creator but also acquire the physiological, psychological and physical advantages that enable them to lead a moral and balanced life. It also makes them more compassionate toward the have-nots of the society.

*Editor's Note: This year (1426 AH, 2005 CE) Ramadan is expected to begin Oct 4 or 5, and Eid al-Fitr is expected for Nov 3.*

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### From Governor Graves' 1997 Proclamation

Whereas the citizens of the State of Kansas enjoy the blessings of the heritage of religious liberty, and

Whereas the people of the State of Kansas observe many traditions of faith, and

Whereas each community of faith deserves the recognition, respect, and protection of all others, and

Whereas the citizens of the Muslim faith are sincere and proud Americans serving their communities in many capacities, and . . .

Whereas Muslims observe [the holy month of Ramadan] by fasting from sunrise to sunset in order to remind themselves that others hunger, and to relieve the hunger of others, to practice discipline through self-denial, to nurture family relationships, and to strengthen commitment to God, and

Whereas Muslims also commemorate . . . Ramadan by recalling the first revelations of the Qur'an by God to the Prophet Mohammed over 1400 years ago, and

Whereas observing the month of Ramadan is one of the Five Pillars of Islam,

Whereas many citizens of the State of Kansas are not acquainted with the meaning of Ramadan to their Muslim neighbors,

Now, therefore, I, Bill Graves, Governor of the State of Kansas, declare [Ramadan] a month of special assistance to the needy, . . . and call upon citizens of the state of Kansas to recognize the dedication and service of Muslims as an important part of the fabric of religious pluralism which enriches us all.