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WHY FASTING IS PRESCRIBED

By Shaykh Zulfikar Ahmad

The fast is for Me and I am its reward [Hadith Qudsi]

O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed upon you as it was prescribed on those before you so that you may learn self-restraint [2:183]

Why Fasting is Mandatory

The glorious verse above clarifies why Muslims are required to fast. Allah ﷻ neither wishes to punish His subjects nor starve them because neither of these benefits Him. Further examination of this verse reveals that fasting builds righteousness and humility.

The Wisdom Behind Fasting

Cultivation of righteousness and humility is the wisdom behind fasting. A Companion once asked Hadrat Ibn Ka'ab رضي الله عنه the meaning of righteousness (*taqwa*), and in reply Hadrat Ibn Ka'ab رضي الله عنه asked, "Have you ever walked a dangerous and thorny path?" The questioner said yes. Then, Hadrat Ibn Ka'ab رضي الله عنه asked him how he would traverse such a path. The Companion answered, "I gather all my loose clothing around me and hold it tight so that nothing gets

entangled or torn, and thus I walk very carefully.” Hadrat Ibn Ka’ab رضي الله عنه answered that this is the very definition of righteousness, to protect oneself at every moment in life so one does not slip and fall into sin.

Fasting in Ramadan is one means to protect oneself and keep oneself righteous. Fasting is not merely abstinence from food and drink, but all the organs of the body must be in a state of fasting. The fast of the eyes is not to look at what is forbidden; the fast of the tongue is not to lie and slander and likewise, every organ must stay away from wrong. A Muslim in Ramadan must be in a state of fasting from head to toe.

The Pinnacle of Fasting

The pinnacle of a fast is not realized until a Muslim fasts from head to toe. A person might abstain from food and drink, but during the course of the day or month, he slanders someone else or even steals from someone. This is why the Messenger ﷺ of Allah said that some people gain nothing from fasting but hunger.

Etiquette of Fasting

There are different types of fasts and each requires certain etiquette. One type is the fast of the common people that is to simply abstain from food and drink. Another type of fasting, observed by a special class of people closer to Allah ﷻ, requires abstinence not only from food and drink, but also requires keeping the organs away from anything that is sinful, such as controlling the tongue from backbiting and slander.

It is obvious that Muslims must always strive for the second type of fasting and be in a complete state of fasting.

Hunger and Thirst

Fasting serves to build righteousness and elevates the righteous even higher. Consequently, those who obey Allah ﷻ and abstain from sin during their fasts do not feel the intensity of hunger and thirst during the day as do those who unfortunately fail to stay away from sin.

Abstaining from Backbiting

Throughout the Prophet's ﷺ lifetime, Allah ﷻ presented circumstances and examples to serve as lessons for the Muslims to follow.

Two women were fasting and came near to death because of sheer hunger. This problem was presented before the Messenger ﷺ of Allah who advised that the women should rinse their mouth, which they did. Thereafter, the women vomited small pieces of meat. These women were astonished because they had not eaten anything because they were fasting. The Messenger ﷺ of Allah revealed that the women had been guilty of backbiting during their fast, a sin synonymous with eating dead flesh. Allah ﷻ preserved this incident in time so that future generations may learn a lesson from it.

A Shield for Faith

In the event that someone who is fasting encounters someone quarrelsome or one who would lead them down a bad path, the fasting individual should say the words “I am

fasting” three times. This will serve as a shield for safeguarding his faith and the fast will *inshaAllah* be regarded as a successful one by Allah ﷻ.

Various Purposes of Fasting

Fasting has been ordained to cultivate righteousness in mankind. A child may want candy, but knowing its harmful effect a mother will refuse to indulge the child, not because she wishes to see her child cry but for the child’s own good. Likewise, Allah ﷻ does not wish suffering upon those who fast, but ordains it so that they may become righteous and pure. The command of fasting does not benefit or take away from the glory of Allah ﷻ but is only for the benefit of those who fast.

Fasting and Medical Proof

Fasting not only has spiritual benefits but it also has immense physical benefits as well. The medical community acknowledges that regular fasting flushes poison from the body, thus purifying it.

The bathrooms in the luxurious homes of certain wealthy individuals alone cost more than the entire home of a poor family. If it were not for the holy month of Ramadan, such wealthy people would be oblivious to the suffering of the poor and hungry. By ordaining the fast, Allah ﷻ blessed mankind in that at the end of a day without food and drink, one can perhaps gain some insight into the daily life of the homeless and hungry.

Tending to Neighbors and the Sick

Hadith literature records that a man shall be raised on the Day of Judgment and Allah ﷻ will say, “I was hungry. Yet, you did not feed Me. I was sick but you did not visit Me.”

The man will say in astonishment, “O Allah ﷻ, You are the Supreme Creator above all such needs and ailments such as hunger and sickness. How could I have fed you or visited you?”

Then, Allah ﷻ will say, “Back in the world, your neighbor at one time was hungry and sick but you failed to tend for him. If you had fed him and looked after him in his time of need, it would have been as if you were feeding Me.”

It will only be then that this man will realize the tremendous reward of empathy towards his fellow human beings. Today the worst feuds occur between neighbors because people remain ignorant of the rights of neighbors. At one time the Messenger ﷺ of Allah said that Hadrat Jibril ؑ used to bring so many revelations regarding the rights of neighbors that the Messenger ﷺ of Allah thought that the neighbor would be included in the last will and testament of the deceased.

A Strange Turn of Events

Two brothers were very fond of each other but their wives did not get along. One of them invited his brother and sister-in-law to dinner and laid the table in front of them. However, when the host's wife found out she angrily took the plate from in front of her brother-in-law and said, “We are not feeding this man!”

This woman's saddened but quick thinking husband tried to salvage the situation and said to his brother, "Once I too was at your house and you placed food in front of me. One of your chickens ran across the room and tipped the curry. Hence I could not enjoy the meal. I could have been angry at that time but controlled myself, so please do not be angry now if my wife hastily took away the plate."

His brother calmed down and said, "Surely I can extend you the same courtesy that you showed for my chicken." Hence, a potentially dangerous situation was defused very quickly because of the brothers' love and pure intentions towards each other. In contrast, if parties have bad intentions from the start, then it is easy for minor quarrels to become long term feuds.

Good Character

It has been narrated in hadith that the Messenger ﷺ of Allah came to teach humanity *to* humanity. Among the lessons of good character that the Messenger ﷺ of Allah brought is good will and etiquette towards one's neighbor. This is something that has been relatively forgotten nowadays.

Living as brothers and sisters and as neighbors has become virtually alien to us, but we need to remember that neighbors are merely a mirror image of ourselves.

The True Purpose of Fasting

The true purpose of fasting is to value the tremendous blessings of Allah ﷻ and realize that a large percentage of people in the world do not have what we take for granted

every day. Hopefully a person will carry this realization throughout his or her life and become a better person and member of the community.

People rarely ponder upon the blessings of Allah ﷻ that they are showered with every single day. Before wheat bread is served for a meal, a seed is sown into the ground. This seed is then nourished by the sun and the rain before it grows big enough that a farmer can reap it. The wheat is then cleaned and sold in the market where it is bought and cooked as wheat bread. Indeed, it is unfortunate that people do not ponder upon these miraculous events that bring this food to their table nor do they thank Allah ﷻ for this blessing.

A Fascinating Tale

Hadrat Fazal Ali Quraishi (May the mercy of Allah ﷻ be upon him) would plough, sow, and reap his own fields. He would bring the harvest home where both he and his wife would prepare the wheat to be cooked and made into bread. The bread would then be served to the students in Hadrat's madrasa.

Hadrat Quraishi had a strong work ethic and insisted on doing everything himself. As part of his noble habit, he was constantly in a state of ablution, as was his household. One day, Hadrat served the meal as usual in the madrasa and the seekers sat down to eat. Hadrat used to address his seekers as *faqir*, and so he said, "Oh Faqirs, for the bread that is before you, a field had to be ploughed and this was done in a state of *wudu* (ritual purity). Next, a seed was sown and cultivated, all in a state of *wudu*. The wheat was then

reaped, cleaned and cooked, all in a state of *wudu*. Now that it is before you, my only hope is that you eat it in a state of *wudu*.”

Etiquette of the Meal

Every morsel that a person consumes comes through many different routes as detailed above. Allah ﷻ likes the person who respects and values His blessings.

The Messenger ﷺ of Allah used to eat with great humility, giving food proper respect. He would not eat like the arrogant who eat while walking and slouching. He would sit down for a meal with the humility of a servant in front of his master, and would value every morsel as a blessing from Allah ﷻ.

Warning Signs For the Wise

A millionaire once posted an advertisement in a newspaper promising a huge sum of money to the doctor who could treat his illness so that he would be able to eat a bite on his own. This person was a millionaire with apparently every material thing at his disposal. Yet, health was not on his side to the extent that he could not even eat by himself.

Being healthy enough to sit up and eat is a tremendous blessing on its own that people take for granted. We need to realize the greatness of these blessings and to be grateful to Allah ﷻ.

A Story From Hadrat Sulayman's Life ﷺ

Allah ﷻ had given Hadrat Sulayman ﷺ kingship over humankind, jinn, the animal kingdom and all the forces of

nature. One day, Hadrat Sulayman عليه السلام supplicated to Allah ﷻ that he wanted to invite all creation to a feast and wanted no food to go to waste. Allah ﷻ readily permitted this and so Hadrat Sulayman عليه السلام commanded the jinn to start preparing the food for such a feast.

The jinn toiled at giant cauldrons for years and kept storing the food until such a day that Hadrat Sulayman عليه السلام became satisfied that there was enough food for all of Allah's ﷻ creation. Then, he once again requested permission to invite the guests and Allah ﷻ gave him permission for this. Hadrat Sulayman عليه السلام asked whether he should invite the land creation first or the creatures of the sea, and Allah ﷻ suggested the sea creatures since the sea was very close by.

A fish swam up and opened its mouth, into which the jinn started emptying the food. This fish was so large that it alone consumed everything that had been cooked. Allah's ﷻ creation is so awesome that it baffles the imagination.

Certain fish are so large that airplanes have been reported to have mistaken them for airstrips and actually attempted landings. Once, I was flying from France to another country and as the airplane rose and crossed over water, I saw a fish swimming thousands of feet below that seemed the size of a car. I marveled at what the actual size of the fish must be if it appeared as big as a car from such a height.

So the fish that the jinn were feeding still had its mouth open even though the jinn had fed it the entire feast. Hadrat Sulayman عليه السلام was amazed and exclaimed to the fish, "You ate so much!" To this, the fish replied, "O Beloved of Allah ﷻ, I bear witness that Allah ﷻ feeds me every day three times what you have fed me today!"

Distribution of Sustenance (*Rizq*)

Allah ﷻ does not forget to provide for humankind despite the millions of other species that make up creation. Hence people should be grateful rather than complain when given such food that may be distasteful, because Allah ﷻ could have easily overlooked such a tiny portion of creation such as humankind in the distribution of sustenance (*rizq*). The purpose of Ramadan is to develop gratefulness for Allah's ﷻ blessings so that man may become humble and righteous.

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