

Some aspects of Fasting – 4

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 30 April 2021

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ



“O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you **as it was prescribed for those before you**, so that you may guard against evil.” — ch. 2, v. 183

I would like to turn back to this first verse of the Holy Quran about fasting and refer to a particular aspect of it. It tells us that fasting was a spiritual practice to be found in all religions before Islam. Not only in the established religions, but it is reported in Bukhari that the Quraish, from pre-Islamic times, used to keep a fast on the 10th of Muharram (hadith 1893), and the Holy Prophet too fasted on that day before fasting in Ramadan was ordained. The Quraish probably took that practice from the Jews. When the Holy Prophet came to Madinah he asked Jews why they fasted on that day and they replied that it was an auspicious day for them as it was the anniversary of the day God liberated them from the Pharaoh, and Moses had fasted on that day. The Holy Prophet replied: “We have more right to commemorate Moses than you.” So he ordered Muslims to fast on that day as well (hadith 2004). But after fasting in Ramadan was prescribed, the Holy Prophet gave up fasting on that day and said that Muslims could fast on that day if they wished, or not fast if they wished (hadith 1893, and 2000–2002).

In fact, the great Founders of various faiths (Moses, Jesus, Buddha, etc.) practised quite rigorous fasting as a preliminary to attaining their first experience of spiritual enlightenment and communion with God. The Holy Prophet himself, before his appointment as Messenger of God, undertook rigorous devotions in the cave of Hira every year in the month of Ramadan. According to the Holy Prophet’s biography by Muhammad Husayn Haykal: “In that cave Muhammad used to spend the whole month of Ramadan. He would satisfy himself **with the least provisions**, carried to him from

time to time by a servant, while devoting himself uninterruptedly to his spiritual pursuits in peace, solitude and tranquility. His devotion often caused him to forget himself, **to forget his food**, and, indeed, to forget the whole world around him. ... In his retreat he prayed day and night **and fasted long periods.**” (The bolding is ours.)

About Moses we read in the Bible that he told his followers: “When I went up into the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant which the Lord made with you, then I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water” (Deuteronomy, 9:9). Similarly, about Jesus, who appeared about fourteen centuries after Moses, it is written in the Gospel of Matthew that he “fasted forty days and forty nights” (4:2) before beginning his ministry, and he explained the purpose of fasting by quoting from the scripture of Moses as follows:

“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’.” (Matthew, 4:4)

So the Word of God gives a human being another kind of life, besides his physical life which relies on food like bread. That is the life we seek through fasting.

Apart from the very rigorous fasting by Founders of religions, there was also fasting by ordinary people. The purpose of fasting was self-purification, as mentioned in the Quran in the verse I quoted above. There was a prophet Jonah (*Yunus*) who was commanded by God to tell the people of the city of Nineveh that they would be destroyed in forty days for their sins. Their story in the Bible says:

“The people of Nineveh believed God’s warning. So they decided not to eat any food for a while. And all of them put on the rough clothing people wear when they are sad. That is what everyone did, from the least important of them to the most important.” (Jonah, 3:5)

The king himself did the same:

“Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh. He got up from his throne. He took off his royal robes. He also dressed himself in the clothing of sadness. And then he sat down in the dust.” (Jonah, 3:6)

He issued the same instructions to his people:

“People and animals must not eat or drink anything. Let people and animals alike be covered with the clothing of sadness. All of you must call out to God with all your hearts. Stop doing what is evil. Don’t harm others. Who knows? God might take pity on us. He might not be angry with us anymore.” (Jonah, 3:7–9)

As can be seen above, this fasting was meant so that people may “stop doing what is evil and don’t harm others” and God would have mercy on them. But it came to be wrongly believed that if you inflict suffering on yourself by fasting, God would feel sorry for you and avert His punishment from you. So when some disaster came upon people, because it was considered as a punishment, people would fast as a way of showing God their self-inflicted pain and their mourning, so that feeling sorry for them He would remove their troubles.

Islam *rejected entirely* the idea that people, in order to avert God’s anger and get His compassion, should inflict some voluntary suffering or punishment on themselves. Instead of this wrong idea, Islam introduced regular fasting in a fixed month, regardless of whether people were facing some trouble or not at that time. So, fasting is not a way of averting God’s punishment on particular occasions of disaster, whether such disaster has come due to people’s sins or not, but it is a regular practice for the development of the inner human faculties.

In times of distress, Muslims do have recourse to fasting. But fasting helps *not* because God, seeing people suffering due to fasting, takes pity on them. It is because through fasting they improve their moral behaviour, turn away from selfishness and turn towards helping others. Thus, they gain God’s mercy and favour.

In the teachings of the earlier prophets, one can read about the true significance of fasting as taught by Islam. Jesus gave his followers these instructions in his famous Sermon on the Mount: “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad appearance (i.e., looking in distress). For they disfigure their faces that they may

appear to men to be fasting... But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” (Matthew, 6:16–18).

There is a good lesson in this for Muslims also. What Jesus has said in the words beginning “but to your Father who is in the secret place ...”, is the same as what the Holy Prophet Muhammad told Muslims. The Holy Prophet told them that God says about the person who is fasting: “He refrains from food and drink and lustful desires to seek My pleasure: **fasting is for Me only and I will grant its reward**; and a virtue brings reward ten times like it.” (Bukhari, hadith 1894)

There was a prophet of the Bible called Isaiah, between the times of Moses and Jesus. His people, i.e. the Israelites or the Jews, complained to him that God had not seen or noticed that they had been fasting, and had not removed their troubles. God gave Isaiah the answer to their complaint, and it was this:

“Look, at the same time you fast, you satisfy your selfish desires, you oppress your workers. Look, your fasting is accompanied by arguments, brawls, and fistfights. Do not fast as you do today, if you are trying to make your voice heard in heaven. Is this really the kind of fasting I want? Do I want a day when people merely humble themselves, bowing their heads like a reed and stretching out on sackcloth and ashes? Is this really what you call a fast, a day that is pleasing to the Lord?

No, this is the kind of fast I want. I want you to remove the sinful chains, to tear away the ropes of the burdensome yoke, to set free the oppressed, and to break every burdensome yoke. I want you to share your food with the hungry and to provide shelter for homeless, oppressed people. When you see someone naked, clothe him! Don't turn your back on your own flesh and blood! Then your light will shine like the sunrise; your restoration will quickly arrive; your godly behaviour will go before you, and the Lord's splendour will be your rear guard. Then you will call out, and the Lord will respond; you will cry out, and

he will reply, ‘Here I am.’ You must remove the burdensome yoke from among you and stop pointing fingers and speaking sinfully. You must actively help the hungry and feed the oppressed. Then your light will dispel the darkness, and your darkness will be transformed into noonday.” (Isaiah, 58:3–10)

This, then, is the kind of fasting that prophets of Allah taught, and of course the same kind of fasting is required by Islam, as stated in the Quran and as shown by the Holy Prophet Muhammad in his life.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَنَاوَكُمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالْآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-
