

Fast 1: Fasting — Introduction

- The Holy Quran says:

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

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

- Thanks be to Allah for granting us to see another month of Ramadan in the year 2022.
- As stated in the above verse, fasting is a spiritual practice to be found in all religions. In fact, the great Founders of various faiths (Buddha, Moses, Jesus, etc.) practised quite rigorous fasting as a preliminary to attaining their first experience of spiritual enlightenment and communion with God. Moses 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 it is written in the Gospel of Matthew that he “fasted forty days and forty nights” (4:2) before beginning his preaching, 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)

- 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 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, 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, fasting helps but this is *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.
- 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:

يَتْرُكُ طَعَامَهُ وَشَرَابَهُ وَشَهْوَتَهُ مِنْ أَجْلِي، الصَّيَّامُ لِي، وَأَنَا أَجْزِي بِهِ، وَالْحَسَنَةُ بِعَشْرِ أَمْثَلِهَا

“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)