

Pillars of Islam- Siyam (Fasting)

5.8 Siyam (Fasting)

Host: 'What is the month of Ramadan and its significance to Muslims?

Jamal Badawi:

In the Quran in (2:185) 'Ramadhan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (Between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting, but if any one is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed period (Should be made up) by days later. Allah intends every facility for you; He does not want to put to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period, and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful.' It continues in (2:186) 'When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way.'

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It is apparent from these two verses in the [Quran](#) that there are two basic elements that are significant to the month of fasting.' One is historical and the other is spiritual and moral.

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From the historical aspect the month of [Ramadan](#), the ninth month in the Islamic calendar which follows the lunar year is the month in which the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) when he was meditating in the cave of Hira'a outside of Mecca.' This took place about 1400 years ago.' The importance of the month of fasting is not only limited to Muslims but it is very essential event in the history of the world at large.

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For the first time in history God chose to send a prophet not to a particular tribe, not to a particular ethnic group and not for a particular time but rather a universal prophet for all mankind and for all times.’ It is also significant that threw the last Prophet, God chose to reveal His complete will, guidance and way of life to mankind.’ This was done in the final scripture which is never to be changed or mixed with the philosophies of people.’ This scripture is authentic and is available till today in exactly the same way and language it was revealed to Prophet Muhammad.’ As the Quran itself indicates that the revelation of the Quran was very important in the history of mankind because it culminates the essential message that was preached by all prophets from Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and finally Muhammad in one final and complete scripture.’ It also corrects misinterpretations or mixing of previous scriptures given to previous prophets.’ In that sense the revelation of the Quran represents an event for which not only Muslims but the entire world should be thankful for.’ I don’t think that anything in the world is worthy of thanks more than guidance than being brought from the state of philosophical and theological riddles to the simple strait forward path of truth.’ Nothing is better than going ‘from the darkness unto the light’ as the Quran calls it.

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The other aspect of Ramadan, as has been shown in the second verse I mentioned above, is mainly spiritual in nature.’ In this verse God talks about how close He is to mankind and to those who are earnest in seeking his guidance.

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Host:’ How is fasting in the Muslim context observed?

Jamal Badawi:

As a general rule the month of Ramadan is observed by abstaining from food, drinks, [smoking](#) and sex from dawn (approximately 75 to 90minutes before sunrise) till sunset.’ When we talk about abstinence we are talking about total and complete abstinence.’ There is no restriction (other than what is not permissible in Islam) and all foods and drinks are permissible between sunset and dawn.’ It is only the restriction of common sense that exists during this period for people to avoid indulgence which is contrary to the wisdom and wisdom behind fasting (learning self control) and even the Islamic teachings about eating.

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Host:’ Why does Ramadan come in different months and seasons?

Jamal Badawi:

The month of Ramadan is an Islamic month so it follows the Islamic Calendar which follows the lunar year.’ In the lunar year every month is about twenty nine and a half days.’ When the days are totaled the lunar year is about 10-11 days shorter than the solar year.’ This means that every year the month of fasting, Ramadan, come about 10-11 days earlier than the previous year.’ For example if this year Ramadan starts on July 13th next year it would start around July 3rd, the following year would start late in June and so on.’ This is how Ramadan rotates threw different seasons and months of the solar calendar.’ In a way one could say that it is advantageous if all fasting only occurred in December which would mean that one would fast for only 11 hours every time from dawn till sunset but if it always occurs in July one would fast between 16-18 hours.’ By rotating the month of Ramadan through different seasons and months the Muslim experiences the discipline of fasting under all kinds of conditions in all kinds of seasons.

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Host:’ What do people who live by the polls or in Scandinavia who have months of continuous sunshine or darkness?

Jamal Badawi:

Islamic law in its nature has endless adaptability and flexibility when it comes to the application in particular situations.’ Of course we can’t tell the people that they can’t break their fast during the times of sunshine because night never comes and it doesn’t mean that when it is always dark that they can’t fast!’ Both situations are unreasonable and contradictory to the aspect of Islamic law that says one shouldn’t fast continuously for days without food or drink.’ The solution for people who live in these places is that they can fast a number of hours that is equivalent to the number of hours fasted by people who are close to them or they can fast the number of hours fasted in Mecca being the place where the Quran was revealed.’ There should not be a problem with this as the people in those areas workout a schedule for working hours and sleeping hours so they can just work with that and make approximations and their fasts will be acceptable.

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Host:’ Is fasting compulsory on all Muslims?

Jamal Badawi:

The general rule is that fasting is prescribed on every Muslim male or female who have reached the age of puberty.’ Since fasting is an act that requires a fair amount of discipline and sacrifice it is desirable for children who are not required to fast to start training gradually so they can get used to fasting.’ For example in many Muslim countries and even in Canada and the US the children usually start by fasting from dawn to noon or from breakfast to lunch which gets them somewhat used to the concept.’ As the child grows older and becomes more interested in it they might try fasting a full day or a few days and the following year he may increase the number of days.’ This kind of gradual learning should be done with lots of motivation and encouragement rather than pressure.’ With my personal experience as a father my children ask to be woken up in the morning so that they can fast.’ This kind of practicing allows it to become normal for them by the time they reach the age of adolescence.

There are other exemptions which are temporary and others which are permanent.’ Examples of temporary exemptions are people who are ill where fasting might aggravate their illness or delay their cure.’ It is not one of the objectives of Islamic law to put people in greater difficulty or endanger their like it was mentioned in the verse I cited.’ So sick people may not fast till they are cured and then they can make up the days they missed.

Obviously another of the compassionate teachings of the Quran is that women during their monthly cycle (they probably feel weaker or tired), women who are pregnant, postnatal time and mothers who are breastfeeding their infants are also not required to fast provided that they can make up for the days at a later time when the reason for the exemption has been removed.

As far as permanent exemptions they apply to people who would not be able to make up even in the future to make up for their missed days.’ An example would be a very old person, who would just keep getting older and weaker.’ In this case a person can substitute for fasting by providing two meals per day for a person.’ A person who is chronically ill and fasting is harmful to his health can also make this substitution.

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Host:’ How would you respond to a person who finds it difficult to contemplate this kind of fasting?

Jamal Badawi:

If one tries to fast it might be a little hard and difficult in the beginning but once one gets used to fasting it gets easier.’ Even those who fast year after year find that the first couple of days are a little difficult and that one has to give up bad habits like smoking and drinking coffee.’ Fasting is a little hard at the very beginning but as one’s system adjust to the fast it stops being that hard.’ Of course it requires a lot of discipline but it is not really impossible or unreasonable for a number of reasons.’ First of all one is permitted to eat and drink whatever they like between sunset and dawn.’ If one wakes up as late as possible, and as close as possible to dawn or roughly 75min before sunrise and have a meal it could really help sustain one for the rest of the day.’ The key point is to train early for fasting because once the person starts training little by little they get used to it and they actually get pleasure out of fasting.’ Sometimes we undermine how adaptable our body is to certain conditions but we have to have the courage to try it.

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Host:’ Sometimes we hear that in the media that everything comes to a stand still because of Ramadan in the Middle East and other Muslim countries.’ How accurate are these reports?

Jamal Badawi:

These reports are grossly exaggerated.’ There is no doubt that the observation of fast may cause a slight slow down in the way that business or other functions are preformed especially if Ramadan falls in the hot and long days of the summer.’ I was born and brought up in the Middle East and what happens is that employees of the government may be permitted to work one to two hours less especially for those who wake up late at night to observe the prayers.’ Sometimes they adjust the working hours so that they start a little earlier and going home early so that they can take a nap in the afternoon.’ As far as businesses the go on as usual.’ The main sector that is affected at least superficially is restaurants, but even then they pick up after sunset.’ In this case it is simply a readjustment of the business hours rather than bringing everything to halt.

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People keep talking about the places where Muslims are a majority but what about the millions of Muslims who are in Europe, United States and Canada?’ This whole program has been prepared while everyone is fasting.’ Personally as an individual I have gone through all kinds of experiences while fasting such as working, teaching, preparing for exams and everything else without much difficulty.

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Host:’ What is the significance of fasting as a religious duty for Muslims?

Jamal Badawi:

As a religious duty fasting is an act of worship, submission, obedience to the will of God, it's a kind of dedication and commitment of one's life to the commandments of God and it takes the love of God beyond just a slogan but into an actual practice and sacrifice of lawful things.' If there is nothing in fasting but this it would suffice.' In addition to this we find that it is a very important moral lesson that is learned from fasting.' If one gets training and is able to restrain themselves from the lawful things in life such as food and drinks then they would be more likely to restrain themselves from committing unlawful acts.' One verse in the Quran in (2:183) 'O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint.'

In addition to this we find that fasting teaches other moral virtues as the Prophet of Islam Muhammad (PBUH) was quoted in one Hadith as narrated in [Bukhari](#) 'whomever does not abstain from falsehood in words and deeds God has no need for him to give up his food and drink.' Thus fasting is not just to stop eating and drinking but to teach one's self to be virtuous in other respects of life.' In addition the month of fasting is a chance for a person to rededicate his life or atone for forgiveness from God for previous sins and mistakes and that is why the Prophet of Islam says as narrated in Ahmad 'whomever fasts Ramadan with faith and in the pursuit of God's pleasure his previous sins will all be forgiven.' In a sense then fasting is a form of Jihad or struggle against the domination of our low desires and their hold on us.' Fasting is an annual spiritual cleansing.

Host: Is there a celebration after the month of Ramadan is over?

Jamal Badawi:

One important aspect that relates to this question is the social aspect (as there is no separation between secular and religious) and that when people fast they feel more compassion for the poor and needy.' One can talk for as long as they want on how it feels to be hungry but it is very different when it one's self who is hungry.' This is why both in the month of Ramadan and immediately after it ends there is a great celebration of compassion for the poor.' There is a charity immediately after Ramadan that is required to be given to the poor and the regular charity (other than the Ramadan charity) is also encouraged to be paid for during the month of fasting.' The first morning after the month of fasting which is the first day of the next month a Muslim is encouraged to wake up early in the morning, take a shower, put his best clothes on (or new clothes), go to the mosque for the congregational prayer of Eid (Muslim holiday after fasting).' At the prayer people chant glorifications and give thanks to God which is followed by prayers then a short speech is to be given.' After that people can go visit friends and relatives and exchange gifts.