

Fast 4: Fasting in Islam — The month of Ramadan

- The Holy Quran says:

“The month of Ramadan is that in which the Quran was revealed, a guidance to people and clear proofs of guidance and the Criterion. So whoever of you is present in the month, he shall fast in it, and whoever is sick or on a journey, (he shall fast) a (like) number of other days. Allah desires ease for you, and He does not desire hardship for you...”
— ch. 2, v. 185

شَهْرُ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى
لِّلنَّاسِ وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِّنَ الْهُدَىٰ وَالْفُرْقَانِ ۚ فَمَنْ شَهِدَ
مِنكُمُ الشَّهْرَ فَلْيَصُمْهُ ۖ وَمَنْ كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَىٰ
سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ ۗ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ الْيُسْرَ
وَلَا يُرِيدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ

- This particular month has been chosen for fasting because it is the month in which the Quran was revealed. It is well-known that the Quran was revealed in portions *during a period of twenty-three years*; therefore, by its revelation in the month of Ramadan is meant that the revelation *first took place* in that month in a certain year.
- The first revelation came to the Holy Prophet when he was 40 years old during one of the nights towards the end of the month of Ramadan when he was in the cave of Hira. As the Quran says:

“Surely We revealed it on the Night of Majesty.” — ch. 97, v. 1

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةِ الْقَدْرِ ﴿١﴾

According to reports in Hadith, this was a night in the last ten nights of Ramadan (Bukhari, hadith 2020). Of course, fasting in Ramadan for Muslims, as we practise it, was only prescribed several years later after the migration to Madinah.

- The greatest spiritual experience of the Holy Prophet had taken place in that month. So it was considered to be the most suitable month of the year for the spiritual discipline of the Muslim community through fasting.
- If a particular time had not been specified, the discipline would have lost all its value. Because of choosing a fixed month, when that month begins the whole Muslim world, from one end of the earth to the other, has the same experience. All sections of Muslim society suddenly change the course of their lives when Ramadan begins.
- People who are exempted from fasting are specially mentioned either in the Holy Quran or in the Hadith. The Quran mentions the sick and those on journey in the above verse, and also in the verse before it as follows:

“But whoever among you is sick or on a journey, (he shall fast) a (like) number of other days. And those who find it extremely hard may effect redemption by feeding a poor one.”
— ch. 2, v. 184

فَمَنْ كَانَ مِنْكُمْ مَّرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ
أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَهُ فِدْيَةٌ
طَعَامِ مَسْكِينٍ

The sick person and the traveller who miss any fasts are required to fast afterwards, when the sickness has gone or when the journey ends, and to complete the missed fasts after Ramadan. Those who have a long-term illness are allowed to effect a redemption by feeding one poor person for every fast missed. According to Hadith, old people, pregnant women, and women suckling a child, are exempt from fasting and should feed a poor person instead (Bukhari, heading to hadith 4505). Those who cannot afford to feed a poor person can perform some other act of charity, such as helping someone in need in some other way. People engaged in hard manual labour may postpone fasting to a time of the year when it is possible for them to fast.

- The sick person and the traveller have the option of keeping the fast if they do not find it hard, since if the fasts are not kept the number of days must be completed afterwards when the sickness or the journey is over. The permissive nature of the words of the Quran is reflected in many of the most reliable Hadith reports. There are reports showing that the Holy Prophet himself kept a fast while on a journey. In one hadith it is stated that on a certain journey on a very hot day, only the Prophet and one other man kept the fast:

“We set out with the Prophet on one of his journeys on a day so hot that a man would put his hand over his head due to the extreme heat, and no one among us was fasting except the Prophet and Ibn Rawāḥah” (Bukhari, hadith 1945).

- The Holy Prophet was once questioned by a person whether he should or should not stop fasting when on a journey, his own inclination being for fasting. He replied: “If you wish you can fast and if you wish can break it” (Bukhari, hadith 1942–1943).
- When people travelled with the Holy Prophet, those who kept the fast did not find fault with those who broke it, nor did those who broke the fast find fault with those who kept it. There is a saying of the Holy Prophet: “It is not a virtuous act to fast on a journey” (Bukhari, hadith 1946). But he said this to a man who was in severe distress because of his fast, and people had gathered around him to provide shade for him from the heat.
- In all cases in which fasts have to be made up after Ramadan, a person can do it when he or she likes, before the coming of the next Ramadan (Bukhari, heading to hadith 1950).