Ramadan: Obligatory And Voluntary Fasting

Introduction

Humans have an innate yearning to live for something greater than themselves and Islam as a divine religion allows Muslims to achieve just that. Islam expects its adherents to live a life of righteousness while being aware of Allah in every action, behavior, and aspect of their lives. Muslims have been prescribed many obligatory and recommended acts of worship in order to constantly improve themselves while getting closer to and aiming for a lofty status with Allah. Fasting, just like prayer, is one of those methods and an act of deep and sincere devotion to Allah. In addition to restraining oneself from drinking, eating, and marital relations, it also involves contemplation and controlling oneself from doing, seeing, and listening to things that Allah detests and has prohibited. It allows one to develop and improve physical and spiritual disciplines by controlling uncontrolled desires, temptations, and unethical behavior while becoming more God-conscious through self-evaluation. Consequently, helping amend and improve one's behavior and actions to align themselves in accordance with what has been ordained by Allah in Quran and Sunnah.

Obligatory Fasting

"O you who have believed, decreed upon you is fasting as it was decreed upon those before you that you may become righteous" (Qur'an 2:183). Fasting is an act of worship that requires self-control, reflection, and discipline, and is a requirement for Muslims for the whole month of Ramadan. The term fasting (sawm or siyam) means "abstention from something, whatever it happens to be" (Al-Jazri, 2009, p. 725). Jurisprudentially speaking fasting in Islam is refraining from all things which break the fast; including, eating, drinking, and marital relations, from sunrise to sunset (Qur'an 2:187). It has been prescribed as a way for Muslims to achieve self-control and discipline and to attain a degree of realization and awareness regarding the suffering and needs of the hungry and the poor (Asad, 2003, p. 49, fn:155)

"Whoever observes Saum (fasts) during the month of Ramadan out of sincere faith, and hoping to attain Allah's rewards, then all his past sins will be forgiven". After fasting a whole month, one can realize and appreciate various benefits secured from being in obedience to Allah. Fasting in Ramadan brings blessings in one's life through a heightened awareness of The Creator, by curtailing desires, temptations, and needs of the physical body and attaining a spiritual high. To maintain similar levels of awareness of Allah or to increase it, one should not ignore the voluntary fasts recommended by the Prophet Muhammad so as not to miss out on the spiritual benefits and rewards throughout the year. Like supererogatory prayers, one can increase in status with Allah through voluntary fasting and have sins expiated throughout the year while maintaining and reaping the gains of discipline that one learns during the month of Ramadan. (Al-Ghazali, 2010, pp. 84-88)

Voluntary Fasting

Indeed, the reward for all good deeds is ten of the same up to seven hundred times. Yet, the

reward for fasting is so unique and superior to all other forms of worships and deeds that Allah declared, 'Every (sinful) deed can be expiated, and As-Sawn (the fasting) is for Me; so I will give the reward for it .” It is true that it is relatively easier to fast during the month of Ramadan since Muslim ummah is doing it together as a unit but becomes hard when one tries to do a voluntary fast during the rest of the year while everyone else is eating. Nevertheless, one is assured, encouraged, and inspired by the words of Prophet Muhammad: “Whosoever observes Saum (fast) for one day in Allah's Cause (to seek His good pleasure), Allah will keep his face away from the (Hell) Fire (a distance covered by a journey of) seventy years.'

There are many commendable and praiseworthy non-mandatory days recommended for fasting from the Sunnah. Prophet Muhammad recommended fasting for three days every month. Since the reward for each good act is multiplied by ten, fasting three days will equal a full month in reward. Therefore, if one were to fast the month of Ramadan and three days every month till the next Ramadan then their reward will equal a whole year of fasting. These could be any three days of the month. In other traditions; however, it has been mentioned that Prophet Muhammad encouraged his companions to fast the three “white days”; 13th, 14th, and 15th, of every lunar month. Other times, He would fast on the first Monday and the next two Thursdays of the month. Or first Thursday and next two Mondays of the month.

Moreover, Prophet Muhammad encouraged weekly fasting on Mondays and Thursdays and emphasized it further by mentioning that everyone’s deeds are shown to Allah on these days. He elevated Monday over other days by mentioning that Monday is a day when he was born and received the revelation.

If done right, a fasting person will have two moments to be happy about. The first is that one completes his/her fast by eating and drinking knowing that he/she has spent the entire day restraining oneself from this as a form of obedience to Allah and to gain Allah’s pleasure and knowing that his/her reward is with Allah. This joy one can experience throughout the year and every evening in Ramadan. As for the second moment, pure joy and happiness will be felt when one meets Allah on the Day of Judgement and sees what Allah has in store for him/her because of the fasts kept in this world. On that day, this person will rejoice and reap the benefit of fasting from this earthly life.

Conclusion

Fasting is not a meaningless ritual of starving oneself from sunrise to sunset, rather it is one of the best means of acquiring and nurturing stronger faith and spiritual excellency. Most of all, it aids one in drawing closer to Allah. Prophet Muhammad said, “…Observing Saum (fast) is a shield or protection (from the Hell-fire and from committing sins)…”. Therefore, when done with the right cognizance and intention, fasting helps one shield oneself from disbelief, sin, and all that leads to sin by controlling the faculties of seeing, hearing, taste, and limbs. One’s focus becomes Allah and all that leads to pleasing Allah.