

# An Introduction to Fasting

**Description:** A lesson on the Islamic view of fasting and its virtues as compared to the primitive societies and other religions.

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## Prerequisites

- An Introduction to Pillars of Islam & Articles of Faith (2 parts).

## Objectives

- To understand the concept of fasting in primitive societies, Judaism and Christianity.
- To understand the concept of fasting in Islam.
- To learn the virtues of the month of *Ramadan* and fasting.

## Arabic Terms

- *Ramadan* - The ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It is the month in which the obligatory fasting has been prescribed.
- *Salah* - the Arabic word to denote a direct connection between the believer and Allah. More specifically, in Islam it refers to the formal five daily prayers and is the most important form of worship.
- *Laylat al-Qadr* - a blessed night in the last ten days of *Ramadan*, the month of fasting.

## Preview of Fasting

Fasting is not unique to Muslims. It has been practiced for centuries in connection with religious ceremonies by Christians, Jews, Confucians, Hindus, Taoists, Jains, and others as Allah says:

**“O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may become righteous.”  
(Quran 2:183)**

But like other rituals fasting was also altered and corrupted.

## Fasting in Primitive Societies

Fasting was made part of the fertility rites in primitive ceremonies which were held at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes and survived for centuries. Some primitive societies fasted to avert catastrophe or to serve as penance for sin. Native North Americans held tribal fasts to avert threatening disasters. The Native Americans of Mexico and the Incas of Peru observed penitential fasts to appease their gods. Past nations of the Old World, such as the Assyrians and the Babylonians, observed fasting as a form of penance.

## Fasting in Judaism and Christianity

Jews observe fasting as a form of penitence and purification annually on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur, which corresponds to the tenth of Muharram ('*Ashura*) of the Islamic calendar. On this day neither food nor drink is permitted.

Early Christians associated fasting with penitence and purification. During the first two centuries of its existence, the Christian Church established fasting as a voluntary preparation for receiving the sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism and for the ordination of priests. Later, these fasts were made obligatory, as other days were subsequently added. In the 6th century the Lenten fast was expanded to 40 days, on each of which only one meal was permitted. After the Reformation, fasting was retained by most Protestant Churches and was made optional in some cases. Stricter Protestants like the Puritans, however, condemned not only the festivals of the Church, but its traditional fasts as well.

In the Roman Catholic Church, fasting may involve partial abstinence from food and drink or total abstinence. The Roman Catholic days of fasting are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday.

In the United States, fasting is observed mostly by Episcopalians and Lutherans among Protestants, by Orthodox and Conservative Jews, and by Roman Catholics.

## Secular Fasting: The Hunger Strike

From being an empty ritual, fasting went to another extreme in the West: the hunger strike, a form of fasting, which in modern times has become a political weapon after being popularized by Mohandas Gandhi, leader of Indian struggle for freedom, who undertook fasts to compel his followers to obey his precept of nonviolence.

## Fasting in Islam

Islam has prescribed and retained the ritual of fasting throughout centuries as a means for purifying the soul of a man in order to draw near to his Creator by selfish motives and base desires of self. It has a special status among all the devotional worships because it is difficult to perform. It puts a bridle on the most uncontrolled, savage human emotions.

The most unruly human emotions are pride, avarice, gluttony, lust, envy, and anger. These emotions, by their nature are not easy to control, thus a person must strive hard to discipline them. Fasting helps do that.

The Islamic calendar consists of twelve lunar months. Muslims measure their year by the cycles of the moon rather than the sun, so the Muslim lunar year is eleven days shorter than the Christian solar year. Muslims are forbidden to adjust their year by adding an extra month, as the Jews do to keep their lunar calendar in synch with the seasons. Hence, the months of the Muslim year do not relate to the seasons. Each month lasts 29 or 30 days and occurs during different seasons of the year. A new month begins when the evening new moon is sighted. The ninth month is called *Ramadan* and is dedicated to fasting. It is pronounced *Ramazan* by Indo-Pakistanis.

Below we list the virtues and rewards of this month and fasting in general. In the next lesson we will learn how to fast. In the third and final installment, we will discuss the social aspects of *Ramadan*. In the fourth and last lesson, we will learn about the end of month activities.

## Virtues of the Month of *Ramadan*

To motivate us and to prepare ourselves for the month of *Ramadan*, let us learn the great virtues of *Ramadan* as described in the Quran and by Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him.

- (1) Fasting in *Ramadan* is one of the pillars of Islam like *salah*. It is the only Islamic month mentioned by name in the Quran.
- (2) The Glorious Quran was revealed in *Ramadan*.
- (3) A single night falls in the last ten days of *Ramadan* so virtuous that worship done on it is superior to a thousand months. An entire chapter of the Quran is named after the special night called *Laylat al-Qadr*.
- (4) Fasting *Ramadan* is considered equivalent to fasting ten months.[\[1\]](#)
- (5) All previous sins are forgiven to whoever fasts *Ramadan* out of faith and with the hope of reward.[\[2\]](#)
- (6) When *Ramadan* begins, the gates of Paradise are opened and the gates of Hell are closed, an indication of intensified divine grace. The devil chiefs are chained, so evil is reduced in the month.[\[3\]](#)

## Virtues of Fasting

- (1) Allah has chosen fasting for Himself and He will reward it in multiples beyond measure.[\[4\]](#)
- (2) Fasting has no equivalent.[\[5\]](#)

- (3) The supplications of the fasting person will not be refused.[\[6\]](#)
- (4) The fasting person has two moments of joy: one when he breaks his fast and the other when he meets his Lord and rejoices over his fasting.[\[7\]](#)
- (5) The smell that might come from the mouth of a fasting person due to an empty stomach is more pleasing to Allah than the scent of musk.[\[8\]](#)
- (6) Fasting is a protection and a strong fortress that keeps a person safe from the Fire.[\[9\]](#)
- (7) Allah will distance a person who fasts a single day for the sake of Allah seventy years distance from the Fire.[\[10\]](#)
- (8) Whoever fasts one day seeking divine pleasure will enter Paradise if it is the last day of his life.[\[11\]](#)
- (9) One of the Gates of Paradise, *al-Rayyan*, is dedicated for the fasting people, and no one else will enter through it; it will be locked after them.[\[12\]](#)
- (10) At the breaking of every fast, Allah, in His boundless grace, chooses people to deliver from Hellfire.[\[13\]](#)

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Endnotes:

[\[1\]](#) *Saheeh Muslim*

[\[2\]](#) *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[\[3\]](#) *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[\[4\]](#) *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[\[5\]](#) *Nisai*

[\[6\]](#) *Bayhaqi*

[\[7\]](#) *Saheeh Muslim*

[\[8\]](#) *Saheeh Muslim*

[\[9\]](#) *Saheeh Ahmad*

[\[10\]](#) Saheeh Muslim

[\[11\]](#) Saheeh Ahmad

[\[12\]](#) Saheeh Al-Bukhari

[\[13\]](#) Ahmad

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