

# Voluntary Fasts

**Description:** Basics of the voluntary or *nafl* fasting will be taught in this lesson.

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## Objectives

- To appreciate the difference between *nafl* and *fard* worship.
- To learn the most important *nafl* fasts.
- To learn the important differences between the obligatory fasts (like Ramadan) and the voluntary fasts.

## Arabic Terms

- *Nafl* - a voluntary act of worship
- *Muharram*, *Sha'ban*, *Ramadan*, *Shawwal*, *Dhul-Hijjah* - names of some important Islamic months. *Muharram* is the 1st month of the Islamic calendar, *Sha'ban* the 8th, *Ramadan* the 9th, *Shawwal* the 10th and *Dhul-Hijjah* the 12th.
- *Yaum ul-Arafah* - Day of Arafah when pilgrims gather at a place called Arafah.
- *Ashura* - the 10th day of the Islamic month of *Muharram*.
- *Eid* - festival or celebration. Muslims celebrate two major religious holidays, known as *Eid-ul-Fitr* (which takes place after *Ramadan*) and *Eid-ul-Adha* (which occurs at the time of the *Hajj*).
- *Fard* - an obligatory duty.
- *Fajr* - the morning prayer.
- *Hadith* - (plural - *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.
- *Hajj* - A pilgrimage to Mecca where the pilgrim performs a set of rituals. The *Hajj* is one of the five pillars of Islam, which every adult Muslim must undertake at least once in their life if they can afford it and are physically able.
- *Rakah* - unit of prayer.
- *Ramadan* - The ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It is the month in which the

obligatory fasting has been prescribed.

The first thing to understand is the difference between what is known as *fard* and what is known as *nafl*. *Fard* is obligatory, it is what Allah requires us to do, and leaving it is a sin and we will be held accountable for it. An example is two *rakah* of *Fajr* prayer and the fasts of *Ramadan*.



*Nafl* literally means extra. *Nafl* worship is voluntary, it is not required from a Muslim, rather it is up to the individual to offer it. It is optional and voluntary. The Muslim is not sinful for neglecting *nafl*, but is rewarded for doing it. Therefore, *nafl* worship is recommended. Examples of *nafl* fasts will be covered in this lesson.

Many times a new Muslim is anxious about fasting the whole month of *Ramadan* (9<sup>th</sup> Islamic month). Voluntary fasts provide an excellent opportunity to practice fasting while earning rewards before *Ramadan* approaches. At the same time, one must remember not to burn out, but to be gradual without being negligent.

## The Most Important *Nafl* Fasts

### 1. Six Days in the Month of *Shawwal* (the month following *Ramadan* or the 10<sup>th</sup> Islamic month)

The Prophet said,

“Whoever fasts during the month of *Ramadan* and then follows it with six days of *Shawwal* will be (rewarded) as if he had fasted the entire year.”[\[1\]](#)

It is forbidden to fast on the day of *Eid* or *Eid-ul-Fitr* to be specific. You can keep these six fasts anytime after the day of *Eid* and they do not have to be kept consecutively. If you wish you can fast them separately as long as they are completed within the month of *Shawwal*.

### 2. Fasting the Ninth Day of *Dhul-Hijjah* (12<sup>th</sup> Islamic month)

The Islamic month in which the *Hajj* is performed is known as *Dhul-Hijjah*. *Yaum ul-Arafah* or the “Day of Arafah” is the ninth day of that month.

It is recommended for those not performing the *Hajj* pilgrimage to fast this day as the Messenger of Allah said: “Fasting on the day of Arafah is an expiation for two years, the year preceding it and the year following it.”[\[2\]](#)

### 3. Fasting the Tenth Day of the Islamic Month of *Muharram* (1<sup>st</sup> Islamic month)

*Muharram* is the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar. The tenth day of this month

has a special name - “*Ashura*.” What does one get for fasting it? The Prophet informed us, “Fasting the day of *Ashura* is an expiation for the past year.” [3]

#### 4. Fasting Mondays and Thursdays

Abu Hurairah, the close companion of Prophet Muhammad, reported that the Prophet would fast on Mondays and Thursdays. When asked about that, the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, said: **“The actions are presented on every Monday and Thursday. Allah forgives every Muslim or every believer, except for those who are boycotting each other. He says (about them): ‘Leave them.’”** [4]

When the Prophet was asked about fasting on Mondays, he said: “That is the day on which I was born and the day on which I received revelation.” [5]

#### 5. Fasting most of the month of Sha’ban (8<sup>th</sup> Islamic month)

*Sha’ban* is the name of the Islamic month that comes before *Ramadan*. The Prophet would fast most of the month of *Sha’ban*.

‘Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, said: “I never saw the Messenger of Allah fast a complete month except for *Ramadan*, and I have never seen him fast more in a month than he did in *Sha’ban*.” [6]

## Differences Between Fasts of *Ramadan* & Voluntary Fasts

1. The intention for a voluntary fast can be made during the day

Let us say that you woke up and prayed *Fajr*. You did not have the intention to fast that day and you also did not eat, drink, have intercourse, or otherwise do anything that would break a person’s fast.

Later in the day, you can make the intention for a voluntary fast if you have not done any of those things that break the fast. This is based on ‘Aishah’s *hadith*: **“The Prophet came to us one day and said: ‘Do you have any (food)?’ We said, ‘No.’ He said: ‘Therefore, I am fasting.’”** [7]

You must have the intention the night before to fast the next day for *Ramadan* fasts.

2. It is permissible for one who is performing a voluntary fast to break his fast

The Prophet said: “The one who is fasting voluntarily is in charge of himself. If you wish you may fast and if you wish you may break your fast.” [8]

Abu Sa’id al-Khudri said: “I prepared food for the Prophet. He came to me with some of his companions. When the food was laid out, one of the men said: ‘I am fasting.’ The Messenger of Allah said: ‘Your brother has invited you and incurred expenses in your behalf.’ Then he asked him, ‘Break your fast and fast another day in its place if you wish.’” [9]

Breaking a day of fasting during the month of *Ramadan* without a legitimate reason, on

the other hand, is a serious sin even if the person makes it up later.

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Endnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Muslim*

[2] *Saheeh Muslim*

[3] *Saheeh Muslim*

[4] *Musnad*

[5] *Saheeh Muslim*

[6] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

[7] *Saheeh Muslim, Abu Dawud*

[8] *Musnad*

[9] *Baihaqi*

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