

The Merits of Fasting and the Month of Ramadan *Mohammad Ali Shomali*

The significance of fasting in Islam can be deduced from many verses of The Holy Qur'an. For example, the verses 2:45 reads:

And take recourse in patience and prayer, and it is indeed hard except for the humble.

Based on several narrations, "patience" has been interpreted as fasting due to the fact that fasting, consisting of abandoning certain acts such as eating and drinking for part of the day is one of the best forms of patience. Muslims have been advised by the narrations to resort to fasting when confronted with challenging problems and difficulties.

Although fasting is deeply connected to the month of Ramadan, it is an important act of worship by itself that can be performed outside Ramadan as well. Except for two forbidden days, fasting is a recommended deed throughout the year, especially in certain months such as Rajab and Sha'ban and on certain days such as Mondays and Thursdays. Moreover the month of Ramadan, regardless of fasting, provides a great opportunity to give even to those upon whom fasting is not incumbent an opportunity to benefit from countless merits of this month. Interestingly, this opportunity is not confined to mature people, for Islamic narrations state that a fetus in his/her mother's womb or an immature child can participate in this banquet of Allah (SWT). Furthermore, sleeping is not regarded as an impediment for one's share of the excellence of the month of Ramadan.

Month of Ramadan as described by the Holy Prophet of Islam

In a well-known sermon delivered by the Holy Prophet of Islam (S) in the last Friday of the month of Sha'ban, he emphasized:

Oh people! Month of Allah has come toward you bringing divine blessing, mercy and forgiveness.¹

The subtle point in this phrase is the fact that these three divine offerings are not granted to the people at the end of this month; rather, these are the special gifts of the month of Ramadan from the very day it begins.

The Holy prophet continued:

This is the month in which you have been invited to the banquet of Allah.²

According to the wording of the above phrase, people are "*invited*" to this banquet. Therefore, in order for one to enter such an auspicious banquet, he should accept this invitation and act upon it.

Generally speaking, while "banquet" is understood as requiring something to eat, drink and may also include some kind of entertainment, the "banquet of Allah" is essentially different. Fasting is a condition for one in order to receive the special gifts granted by Allah (SWT) in this banquet.

Essential elements of a banquet

For grasping the character of divine banquet, we should first note that every banquet consists of four essential elements:

1. When you are invited you will not be rejected. Thus, the host is expected to welcome his guest; otherwise, an "*invitation*" is meaningless when the invitee is denied of reception. Accordingly, when Allah (SWT) invites His servants to the banquet of Ramadan, the gates of His mercy will be opened to those who accept the invitation.
2. When you enter the venue of the banquet, you will be treated with honor and respect. Although every person who has been let in is not competent of being respected, the same is not true for the one who has been *invited* as a guest. In light of this fact, one may understand the following statement in the above-mentioned sermon:

In this month, you are made of those people whom Allah respects and honours.³

3. When you go to a banquet you will be given or shown something without payment. In other words, you expect to gain something without return. Correspondingly, in the banquet of Ramadan, Allah (SWT) not only rewards our actions generously, but also entertains His guests with various bounties without them doing something so much so that He counts the sleep of His guests as an act of worship and their breaths as His glorification, as explicitly stated in the same sermon:

Your breaths in it (the month of Ramadan) are glorification (of God) and your sleep in it is worship.⁴

4. When you are invited to a party, you naturally expect to meet the host and consider his absence as a humiliation. Accordingly, when Allah (SWT) invites His servant to His

banquet, by nature, He is ready to show Himself to His guests and meet them.

"This is the month in which you have been invited to the banquet of Allah.." This part of the sermon inspires the fact that this blessing has been dedicated to the month of Ramadan. The Holy Prophet of Islam added:

In the sight of Allah, this month is the best month, its days are the best days, its nights are the best nights and its hours are the best hours.⁵

Although this month's prominence over others involves that its days, nights and hours are the best as well, by mentioning these three phrases independently, the Prophet emphasized that every portion of this month is better than its counterpart in every other month.

Recommendations for the month of Ramadan

The sermon continues by several instructions:

Oh people! The gates of heaven are open in this month. So ask your Lord not to close them.⁶

The phrase, 'the gates of heaven being open' has at least two meanings:

I The chance of the one to deserve entering heaven is more in this blessed month than the other months.

II Due to the openness of heaven's gates, all kinds of divine mercy in heaven are ready to encompass the servants in this world, angels are permitted to come to their presence and the breeze of heaven blow into this world. These make the sleep and breaths of the faithful in the month of Ramadan like the inhabitants of heaven glorification of God and worship.

Although the gates of heaven are open, the Holy Prophet warns people that if they do not appreciate such a great opportunity, subsequently Allah (SWT) will close them. The situation of the gates of fire is quite the contrary:

And the gates of the fire are closed. So ask your Lord not to open them.

Along these lines, the condition of satans is described as follows:

And satans are in chains. So ask your Lord not to dominate them over you.

Although Satan and his assistants are chained up in this month, committing sins results in releasing them. Therefore, while the month of Ramadan is the best month in itself, for a group of people, this month is worse than the other months just as the Holy Qur'an is "a cure and mercy for the faithful; and it increases the wrongdoers only in loss" (17:82).

The fourth Holy Imam, Imam Sajjad, (A) in his farewell supplication for the holy month of Ramadan declares:

Oh month of Ramadan! Peace be upon you! How long you were for wrongdoers and how awesome you were in the hearts of the faithful!
(Al-Sahifah Al-Sajjādiyyah, supplication no. 45)

As implied by this supplication and as proved by the experience, the month of Ramadan, for those who do not fast deliberately and without any religious excuse, seems like a whole year and every moment of it is a kind of torture for them. On the contrary, those who do their best to appreciate this month find it passing quickly

and are concerned about losing a second without taking the full benefit of it.

Another instruction offered by the Holy Prophet in his Sh' baniyyah sermon is:

When you feel hungry and thirsty in this month remember the hunger and thirst of the Day of Judgment.

Tolerating thirst and hunger in this world is so difficult. We must then ponder upon the fact that the thirst and hunger in the hereafter last for years and years or for some groups of people forever. Additionally, in this world, death may be regarded as a solution for intolerable thirst and hunger, but in the next world, eternal life turns this solution into a useless one. In this regard, Chapter 43 Verse 77 reads:

They will call out, " O Mālik! [the name of the guardian of the hell] Let your Lord finish us off!" He will say, " Indeed you will stay on.

According to the Holy Qur'an, there is no death for wrongdoers in the hereafter and even when their skin is burnt a new one will be replaced so the punishment of the hereafter is always experienced as a fresh one! Chapter 4 Verse 56 reads:

Surely those who disbelieved in Our Signs and Miracles, We shall cast them into the Fire. As often as their skins are roasted wholly, we shall change them for other skins that they may taste the punishment. Verily, Allah is the Invincible-Mighty, Wise.

Thus, when compared to the chastisement of the doomsday,

worldly pains can be regarded as nothing. It has been recorded in history that during the caliphate of Imam Ali (A), when his blind brother 'Aqil asked him to grant him an additional portion of public treasury due to his severe poverty, the Holy Imam (A) brought a hot piece of metal near 'Aqil. Feeling the hotness of it, 'Aqil protested: "Are you going to burn me?" "No!" Imam replied. "You cried because of a metal made hot by a human being for fun. Then, how do you expect me not to cry for the fire prepared by Allah (SWT) due to His anger?"

Beside reminding us of the hereafter, the thirst and hunger during the month of Ramadan reminds those who fast of poor people experiencing the same feelings during whole days of their life and encourages those who fast to spend some portion of their properties in the way of Allah (SWT) and for the sake of needy people.

Some narrations regarding fasting

The Holy Prophet of Islam (S) is quoted as saying:

Verily Allah (SWT) has appointed some angels only in order to pray for the people who fast. Gabriel has informed me that Allah (SWT) has said: "I have not commanded my angels to pray for one of my creatures, unless I have accepted their prayers for him."¹⁰

The sixth Holy Imam, Imam Sadiq (A) has stated:

When a person fasts on a hot day for the sake of Allah and becomes thirsty, Allah SWT sends 1000 angels to touch his/her face and give him/her glad tidings up to the time of breaking the fast when Allah (SWT) tells him/her: "How nice you smell! What a pleasant soul you possess! Oh my angels! Bear witness that I have forgiven him/her."¹¹

Based on narrations like this, everything that seems bad in this world is not necessarily the same in the hereafter and vice versa. Therefore, although the person who fasts his mouth may smell bad in this world, he has a pleasant odour for Allah (SWT) and the residents of heaven. On the other hand, a woman smelling nicely for non-mahram men will not be the same in the world to come. Thus, realities are not necessarily what appear to us in this world.

- According to a very famous tradition narrated by both Sunni and Shi'ite scholars, the Holy Prophet said:

Allah (SWT) said: "fasting is for me and I am the one who rewards for it".¹²

The content of this narration has been widely discussed among the scholars. While all worships are for Allah (SWT) and rewarded by Him, the Almighty, why has fasting been appropriated a special position in this narration?

Three answers might be suggested here:

1. The first reason is that fasting is the abandoning of some acts; thus, it is the only worship that is not seen or known by anyone.
2. Another reason, as suggested by some scholars, is the fact that during the history, all kinds of worship (praying, pilgrimage, giving alms, sacrifice, and so on) have been offered to idols and false gods and the only exception among the acts of worship is fasting since no one has ever fasted for anyone or anything other than Allah (SWT).
- 3.
4. The third reason is the special relationship between fasting and Allah swt just as we call some days as the days of Allah (SWT) and some places as the house of Allah (SWT) , even though every time and place belong to Him. This meaning implies the special mercy of Allah (SWT) for those who fast. The same implication is true with the next phrase which says: "and I am the one who rewards for it." When some

workers are employed by a person he may give their wage to his agent to distribute among them. However, if the job is a special one he may personally hand the wages out to them. Similarly, Allah

(SWT) without any mediation rewards those who fast.

It is noteworthy to mention that the Arabic term "أَخ- " in the above-mentioned narration can be read in both active and passive forms. According to the latter, the narration gives another meaning:

"Fasting is for me and I am its reward!"

Thus, the one who fasts has Allah (SWT) with him/her as the reward of his/her act of worship just as the guest of a banquet who expects the host to welcome and meet him/her.

¹ Al-Amāli by Saduq, p. 93.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 95.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 93.

¹⁰ Wasā'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 10, p. 396.

¹¹ *Ibid.* P. 409

¹² *Ibid.* p.400