

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن

قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

Al-Baqara (The Cow) 2:183

O You Who Believe!

- Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you.
- That you may (learn) self-restraint.

Commentary

Allamah Taba Tabai (AR)

(On verses 183-18) Obviously, the first sentences have been revealed to prepare minds for the final ones. The first two verses are like a preparatory statement, with which a speaker tries to keep the audience calm and quiet, and this ensures that they do not become restless on hearing the tough commandment which he is to announce shortly. All these sentences in these two verses gently lead the hearer's mind to the ordinance of the fast of Ramadan. They mention such things as to remove gloom and anxiety, cheer the soul and imperceptibly assuage the mood of unruliness and disobedience. They point to various concessions and indulgences which have been incorporated in the commandment. And all this is in addition to the goods of this world and the next which may be earned by following the law.

It is for this reason that the sentence *O you who believe! Fasting has been prescribed for you* if followed by the phrase *as it was prescribed for those before you* – hinting that you should not think it as a heavy burden nor should you feel gloomy, for it is not a new command for which you have been singled out; it was ordained for previous peoples also.

It further encourages them by pointing out: by following this command you may get which you aim at by your faith – and that is piety (taqwa) which is the best thing for those who believe in Allah and the Day of Judgment – and you are believers. This is the import of the phrase so that you may guard yourselves (*tattaqun*, from the same root as taqwa).

Moreover, this worthy action, which inspires the hope of piety in you (as it did in your predecessors) does not involve all your time, nor even most of it. It is only for a counted number of days. The word days (*ayyaman*) is a common noun, and it shows insignificance. Its adjective, “counted”, hints that the number is very easy (as we see in the words of Allah in the Qur'an, 12:20 *And they sold him for a small price, some counted pieces of silver*).

This mode of address reminds them of a virtue (faith, belief) which encourages them to accept whatever order is given to them by their Lord, even if it is against their desires and habits.

“Siyam” and “Sawm” are infinite verbs meaning to abstain from an action, like abstaining from eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, talking, walking, etc. Also it is said that it means abstaining from desirable and coveted things. Later in religion, it was mostly used for abstaining from some specified things from dawn-break up to sunset with intention.

Those before you means the nations that came before the advent of Islam: the followers of the previous prophets, like the followers of Musa and Isa etc. It is the meaning understood from this phrase wherever it occurs in the Qur’an.

The comparison as it was prescribed for those before you is not general; it does not cover all the peoples, nor all the details of the Islamic fast. In other words, it does not mean that the fast was prescribed for the followers of all previous prophets, nor that the fast ordained for them was like the Islamic fast in all the details, like period, rules and other particulars. The comparison is only in the principles of fasting and abstaining from some things – without any regard to the particulars.

Idol-worshippers fasted to please their deities, or, on committing a sin, to extinguish their deities’ anger, or to get their prayers granted. This turns the fast into a trade or barter; the man performs what is needed by the deity and the deity in its turn grants the prayers of the man; the worshipper pleases the deity so that the deity may do what will please the worshipper.

There is no doubt that one may achieve piety through fasting. Everyone naturally feels that for union with the sublime world of holiness and for rising to the height of perfection and spirituality man should first of all restrain himself from gratifying material desires. He should keep away from satisfying the body’s lust and inclinations, and purge his soul from the love of worldly affairs. In short, he should guard himself against all such things which may carry him away from his Lord. This is piety (taqwa) which is achieved through abstinence from lust and desires.

Even more beneficial and more effective for the common man is the abstinence from common lawful desires like food, drink and sex. This trains him to keep away from unlawful things; and creates in him the will to guard himself against sin and evil, and to come nearer to Allah. Obviously, when he accepts the words of Allah by abstaining from lawful desires, and heeds to and obeys His commandment, he will be more needful and obedient to His words in connection with sins and unlawful things.

As-Sadiq (AS) said:

The Messenger of Allah, in the early days of his prophethood, used to fast continuously so that people would think that he would not leave a single day's fast, and then to leave the fast continuously so that they would say he would not fast again.

Then he changed this regime and began fasting on alternate days, and this was the fast of Dawud.

Then he changed it and started fasting three bright days (ie., 13th, 14th and 15th of the lunar month when the moonlight is the brightest).

Then he again divided the three days – one day each in every ten days, the first and the last Thursdays and the Wednesday in the middle.

And he continued with this regime till he left this world.
(al-Kafi)

Mir Ahmed Ali (AR) and Aqa Mahdi Puya (AR)

Fasting is a means of restraining and controlling the *nafs*, so that contentment (*rida*), and all the other blessings of this great discipline may be experienced.

- The fasting of the ordinary man is to withhold only from food and drink.
- The fasting of the pious man is to curb sensory desires, to refrain from looking at the unlawful, hearing the harmful, and thinking about the distasteful, or about what stimulates the lower nature.
- The fasting of a true believer is to seal the heart from paying any attention to other-than-Allah (*ghayrallah*), and safeguard himself with thorough awareness of the divine laws.

Fasting (*sawm*) is one of the obligatory functions of the faith, next only to the prescribed 5 times a day prayers (*salat*), in importance. It trains the Muslims to guard themselves against evil as well as conditions them to suffer physical affliction and exercise self control in the defence of faith and the faithful.

Fasting, although not as perfectly regulated and decisive as in Islam, was prescribed for the followers of the previous prophets also, and was also in vogue, in varying forms, in different parts of the world. Among the Jews it was done in times of sorrow and affliction. Among the Hindus in India, fasting is undertaken as a penance or to achieve spiritual power. The Sabians were also prescribed fasting for one full month and the object of fasting among them was almost identical to Islamic fasting.

Ayatullah Sayyid Kamal Faqih Imani and a Group of Muslim Scholars

Next to several important ordinances of Islam stated in the former verses, these current verses refer to another ordinance, i.e. fasting, which is one of the most serious acts of worship. The Qur'an, with the same tone of emphasis that was applied for the previous verses, says:

"O you who have Faith! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, ..."

Then, immediately after this, it refers to the philosophy of this humanizing worship and, in a short but meaningful sentence, says:

"...so that you may guard yourselves (against evil),"

According to what the Late Kulayni (AR) says in his famous book (Al-Kafi), *piety is rendered into one's restriction from sin*. Most sins originate from wrath and lust.

Fasting brings the extravagance of this instinct under control, which, consequently, decreases corruption and increases piety.

From the point of various affects that fasting may spiritually and materially produces in the unity of man; it has different dimensions that can be discussed. The ethical dimension and the philosophy of fasting are the most important of all.

Indeed, the most important philosophy of fasting is this very spiritual status of it. A person who has many kinds of food and drinks available at his reach to use of them whenever he is hungry or thirsty cannot be so tolerant at the time he is in lack of them. But the one who observes the fast is like a plant which grows in a dry desert. It resists when water is rare, stands steadfast against strong storms and intense cold. Such people can deal with deprivations when they are challenged with them, and, therefore, can be firm and perseverant.

Fasting trains the soul of a person. With temporary restrictions, fasting gives man perseverance, authority in will, ability of challenging with severe deprivations, and, since it controls restive instincts, it showers light and inner purity into the heart.

However, fasting causes man to promote from the animate nature so that he can ascend unto the rank and the world of angels.

And, also, the famous tradition from Imam al-Sadiq (AS) is another hint to the same matter which says:

Fasting is a protector from Fire.

Another tradition narrated from Arnir-ul-Mu'mineen Ali (AS) says that the Prophet (S) was asked what they would do that Satan be banished, and he (S) answered:

Fasting blackens his face; charity breaks his back; the love in (the path of) Allah, and persistence in righteous deeds put an end to him, and seeking (Allah's) forgiveness cuts his aorta.

When Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS), stating the philosophy of worship, speaks about fasting and he, says:

(Allah has laid down) fasting as a trial of the people in their sincerity...

In another tradition, the holy Prophet (S) has said:

Verily, there is a door for (entering) Heaven by the name of *Al-Rayyan*, (quenched of thirst) none enters therein but fasting ones.

Explaining this tradition, the late Sadduq cites in his book Ma'aniul-Akhbar the reason that this name has been taken for that door of Heaven is that much of the toil of a fasting person is because of his thirst. So when the fasting ones enter this door, they will be so saturated that they will never become thirsty thereafter.

It is narrated from Imam al-Sadiq (AS) in a well-known tradition that Hisham ibn Hakam asked him about the reason for the divine legislation of this ordinance when he (AS) said:

Allah has enjoined fasting in order to settle equivalence between the rich and the poor, and this is for the sake that the rich feel the taste of hunger and, consequently, be merciful toward the poor (by giving them their rights). And, since the things are usually available for the rich, then Allah, the Exalted, is pleased when equivalence is erected between His servants. So, He, thereby, has ordained that the rich feel the taste of hunger and pain so that they feel sympathy for the weak and be merciful toward the hungry.

Alexy Sufurin, a Russian scientist, writes in his book that by means of fasting a specific result can be obtained in treating diseases such as: anemia, dyspepsia, chronic extended enteritis, furuncle and inner abscess, consumption, rheumatism, gout (padagra, chiragra, gonagra), dropsy, sciatica, some ophthalmic diseases, diabetes, skin diseases, renal diseases, and so on.

Treatment through fasting is not limited to the foregoing diseases alone, but also the sicknesses concerning the fundamentals of the body involving the bodily cells like cancer, syphilis, and plague can be cured by means of fasting.

The holy Prophet (S) is narrated to have said in a famous tradition:

Fast to be healthy.

Again, in another tradition he (S) has said:

The stomach is the site of all ailments, while dietary (abstinence) is the head of all remedies.

The existing Torah and Bible indicate that the Jews and the Christians had fasting, too, (Math.6:16, 17; and Luke 5: 33-35). The followers of some other religions used to fast in times of sorrow and affliction.

In the Lexicon of the Bible it is cited that fasting, in general, has always been practiced among every nation and in any religion at the time of an unexpected sorrow or disaster.

It is also caught from the Torah that Moses (a) had forty days of fasting. It is cited in the Old Testament thus:

When I was gone up into the mount to receive the tables of stone, even the tables of covenant which the Lord made with you, then I abode in the mount forty days and forty nights, I neither did eat bread nor drink water.

Also, at the time of repentance and seeking the pleasure of the Lord, the Jews fasted. So, it is cited in the Lexicon of the Bible that when the Jews got the opportunity that they wanted to state their weakness and humility before the Lord, they fasted in order that they confess their faults and to obtain the pleasure of His Essence by means of that fasting and repentance.

It is probable that the *Great Fasting with atonement*, which was for one particular day a year, was common among the Jewish people. They had, of course, some other temporary days to fast in remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem, etc., too.

As the Bible indicates, Jesus (AS) had also forty days of fasting. It says thus:

Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. 2) And when he had fasted forty days and nights, he was afterward an hungred.

It is also understood from the Evangel that the disciples of Jesus used to fast. It says:

And they said unto him, *Why do the disciples of John fast often and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink?* And he said unto them, *Can you make the children of the bride chamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?* But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast those days.

Again, it is cited in the Lexicon of the Bible that the lives of disciples and believers, in old times, were full of negation of pleasure and tremendous toils accompanied with observing the fast.

Thus, the Qur'anic sentence saying:
... as it was prescribed for those before you ...

is also confirmed with many historical religious evidences existing in other divine religions even after they had been perverted.