



Month of Fasting Ramadan

Why are more than a billion people around the world

abstaining from eating, drinking, smoking, and sex from dawn to sunset this month?

They are Muslims who are fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Fasting is one of the Five Pillars of the religion of Islam and one of the highest forms of Islamic worship. Abstinence from earthly pleasures and curbing evil intentions and desires is regarded as an act of obedience and submission to God (Allah is the Arabic word referring to "the one God") as well as an atonement for sins, errors, and mistakes. Called Ramadan (or Ramazan), Muslims fast during this month from the moment when it first starts to get light until sunset. They fast as an act of faith and worship towards God, seeking to suppress their desires and increase their spiritual piety. Fasting together as a worldwide community (Ummah) affirms the brotherhood and equality of man before God.

Muslims follow a lunar calendar which is approximately 10 or 11 days shorter each year. The month of Ramadan is the ninth month and officially begins with a combination of the sighting of the new moon and astronomical calculations. Some Muslim authorities rely more heavily on the physical sighting of the new moon than on scientific calculations. An Imam (Muslim holy man) will declare the exact time of Ramadan just prior to its commencement. The fasting period ends upon the sighting of the next new moon, which occurs after 29 or 30 days.

In 2002, Ramadan begins in the entire U.S. on Tuesday, November 5, and concludes on Wednesday, December 4. In some other parts of the world it begins November 6 and ends December 5. The exact date is not the same in all parts of the world because the actual time when the "new moon" begins varies around the world. So that we might initiate our prayer focus when Muslims first begin Ramadan, we will start November 5, 2002.

The name Ramadan is derived from the Arabic word ramida or ar-ramad, denoting intense scorching heat and dryness, especially the ground. From the same word there is ramdaa, meaning "sunbaked sand" and the famous proverb kal mustajeer minar ramadaa binnar - to jump out of the frying pan into the fire. Some say it is so called because Ramadan scorches out the sins with good deeds, as the sun burns the ground.

Ramadan brings out a special feeling of emotional excitement and religious zeal among Muslims of all ages. Though fasting is mandatory only for adults, children as young as eight willingly observe fasting with their elders. Children look forward to the excitement of sighting the moon and eating special meals with their families. Adults appreciate the opportunity to double their rewards from God and seek forgiveness for past sins. As Ramadan emphasizes Muslim brotherhood and community, all feel a particular closeness towards their Creator and amongst their family and friends.

Muslims must adapt themselves both physically and emotionally during these 30 long days of fasting. A typical day of fasting begins with getting up early, around 4:30 a.m. and sharing a meal called sahur together before the fast begins at dawn, about 5:10 a.m. As dawn breaks, Fajr, the first of five daily prayers is offered.

As the day proceeds, fasting Muslims are constantly bombarded with messages from their stomachs that it is time for breakfast, snack, lunch, and so on. And each time, Muslims remind themselves that they are fasting for the sole purpose of pleasing God and seeking his mercy. They offer the second and third prayers during early and late afternoon, respectively. Fasting helps one to experience how a hungry person feels and what it is like to have an empty stomach. It teaches one to share the



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sufferings of the less fortunate. Muslims believe that fasting leads one to appreciate the bounties of God, which are usually taken for granted - until they are missed!

Throughout the day Muslims are encouraged to go out of their way to help the needy, both financially and emotionally. Some believe that a reward earned during this month is multiplied 70 times and more. For this reason, Ramadan is also known as the month of charity and generosity.

To a Muslim, fasting not only means abstaining from food, but also refraining from all vice and evils committed consciously or unconsciously. It is believed that if one voluntarily refrains from lawful foods and sex during Ramadan, he will develop self-restraint and be more able to avoid unlawful things and acts the rest of the year.

The fast is broken at sunset. The Prophet Muhammed recommended breaking the fast with a meal of dates. Muslims are urged to invite others to break the fast with them. These gatherings are called iftar parties.

Just after breaking the fast but before dinner, Muslims offer the fourth of the five daily prayers, which is called the Maghrib prayer. After dinner, Muslims go to their houses of worship, called mosques, to offer the Isha prayer, which is the last of the five daily prayers. The day ends with a special voluntary prayer, the Taraweeh, offered by the congregation reciting the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam.

The last ten days of Ramadan are considered highly blessed, especially the 27th night which is called laylat al-qadr - the "Night of Power," or the "Night of Destiny." It is believed that on this night the prophet Muhammed received the first revelation of the Qur'an. For many Muslims, this 10-day period is marked by a heightened spiritual intensity, and they may spend these nights praying and reciting the Qur'an.

After 30 days of fasting, the end of the month of Ramadan is observed with a day of celebration called Eid-ul-Fitr. On this day, Muslims gather in one place to offer a prayer of thanks. It is traditional to wear new clothes, visit friends and relatives, exchange gifts, eat delicious dishes prepared for this occasion, and wait patiently for the next year.

In the Bible, we do not find any one method of fasting required of us, but the Lord Jesus did say however, "when you fast..." (Matthew 6:16), seeming to assume that His followers would imitate His own example. We fast as an outward symbol of our devotion to God, being willing to deny ourselves food for His sake. Fasting adds intensity to our prayer, and often leads to breakthroughs. We do not fast to convince or persuade God, but rather to identify with His broken heart and with His desire for all mankind to know Him. "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out?" (Isaiah 58:6-7)

To read more about what Muslims say about Ramadan, visit some Islamic websites, such as :
www.submission.org/ramadan
www.islam.org/ramadan