

Explaining the Month of Ramadan

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic Lunar calendar and the holiest of the four holy months. It begins with the sighting of the new moon after which all physically mature and healthy Muslims are obliged to abstain from all food, drink, gum chewing, any kind of tobacco use, and any kind of sexual act from the pre-dawn to the post-sunset times. However, that is merely the physical component of the fast; the spiritual aspects of the fast include refraining from gossiping, lying, slandering and all traits of bad character. All obscene and irreligious sights and sounds are to be avoided. Purity of thought and action is paramount. Ordained in the Holy Quran, the fast is an exacting act of a deeply personal worship in which Muslims seek a raised level of God-consciousness. The act of fasting redirects the hearts away from worldly activities, towards the Divine.

The Holy month of Ramadan is a time for spiritual reflection, prayer, doing good deeds and spending time with family and friends. The fasting is intended to help teach Muslims self-discipline, self-restraint and generosity. It also reminds them of the suffering of the poor, who may rarely get to eat well. It is common to have one meal (known as the Sahoor), just before sunrise and another (known as the Iftar), after sunset. This meal will commonly consist of dates, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him. Because Ramadan is a time to spend with friends and family, the fast will often be broken by different Muslim families coming together to share in an evening meal.

Ramadan derives from the Arabic root: ramida or ar-ramad, meaning scorching heat or dryness. Since Muslims are commanded to fast during the month of Ramadan, it is believed that the month's name may refer to the heat of thirst and hunger, or because fasting burns away one's past sins. Muslims believe that God began revealing the Holy Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad during Ramadan (in the year 610AD). The Holy Qur'an commands: "O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint...Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting..." (Sura 2, v. 183-185). Fasting during Ramadan did not become an obligation for Muslims until 624AD.

Another aspect of Ramadan is that it is believed that one of the last few odd-numbered nights of the month is the Laylat ul-Qadr, the "Night of Power" or "Night of Destiny." It is the holiest night of the holiest month; it is believed to be the night on which God first began revealing the Holy Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Jibril (Gabriel). This is a time for especially fervent and devoted prayer, and the rewards and blessings associated with such are manifold. Muslims are told in the Holy Qur'an that praying throughout this one night is better than a thousand months of prayer. No one knows exactly which night it is; it is one of God's mysteries. Additionally, Muslims are urged to read the entire Qur'an during the month of Ramadan, and its 114 suras have been divided into 30 equal parts for this purpose.