

## Virtues of Mharram and fasting on "Ashura"

**SALIH AL-MUNAJJID**

Abu Bakarah (*may Allah be pleased with him*) reported that the Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) said: "*The year is twelve months of which four are sacred, the three consecutive months of Dhul-Qa'dah, Dhul-Hijjah and Muharram, and Rajab Mudar which comes between Jumadah and Sha'ban.*"

*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, and peace and blessings be upon our Prophet Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets and Chief of the Messengers, and upon all his family and companions.*

Allah's sacred month of *Muharram* is a blessed and important month. It is the first month of the *Hijri* calendar and is one of the four sacred months concerning which Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

**"Verily, the number of months with Allah is twelve months (in a year), so it was ordained by Allah on the Day when He created the heavens and the earth; of them, four are sacred. That is the right religion, so wrong not yourselves therein ... "***Al-Qur'an* 9:36

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*Muharram* is so called because it is a sacred (*muharram*) month and to confirm its sanctity. Allah's words (interpretation of the meaning): "**... so wrong not yourselves therein ...**" mean do not wrong yourselves in these sacred months, because sin in these months is worse than in other months. It was reported that Ibn 'Abbas said that this phrase referred to all the months, then these four were singled out and made sacred, so that sin in these months is more serious and good deeds bring a greater reward.

Qatadah said concerning this phrase that wrongdoing during the sacred months is more serious and more sinful than wrongdoing at any other time. Wrongdoing at any time is a serious matter, but Allah gives more weight to whichever of His commands He will. Allah has chosen certain ones of His creation. He has chosen from among the angels Messengers and from among mankind Messengers. He chose from among speech the remembrance of Him (*dhikr*). He chose from among the earth the mosques, from among the months *Ramadhan* and the sacred months, from among the days Friday

and from among the nights *Laylatul-Qadr*, so venerate that which Allah has told us to venerate. People of understanding and wisdom venerate the things that Allah has told us to venerate. [Summarized from the *Tafsir* of Ibn Kathir, *may Allah have mercy on him. Tafsir of Surah at-Tawbah, ayah 36*]

## **The Virtue of Observing More *Nafil* Fasts During Muharram**

Abu Hurayrah (*may Allah be pleased with him*) said:

"The Messenger of Allah (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) said: '*The best of fasting after Ramadhan is fasting Allah's month of Muharram.*'" Reported by Muslim, 1982

The phrase "*Allah's month*", connecting the name of the month to the name of Allah in a genitive grammatical structure, signifies the importance of the month. Al-Qari said: "The apparent meaning is all of the month of *Muharram*." But it was proven that the Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) never fasted any whole month apart from *Ramadhan*, so this *hadith* is probably meant to encourage increasing one's fasting during *Muharram*, without meaning that one should fast for the entire month.

It was reported that the Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) used to fast more in *Sha'ban*. It is likely that the virtue of *Muharram* was not revealed to him until the end of his life, before he was able to fast during this month. [*Sharh an-Nawawi 'ala Sahih Muslim*]

## ***Ashura'* in History**

Ibn 'Abbas (*may Allah be pleased with him*) said: "The Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) came to Madinah and saw the Jews fasting on the day of '*Ashura'*. He said, '*What is this?*' They said, '*This is a righteous day, it is the day when Allah saved the Children of Israel from their enemies, so Musa fasted on this day.*' He said, '*We have more right to Musa than you,*' so he fasted on that day and commanded [the Muslims] to fast on that day." [Reported by al-Bukhari, 1865] "This is a righteous day" – in a report narrated by Muslim, [the Jews said:] "This is a great day, on which Allah saved Musa and his people, and drowned Pharaoh and his people." "Musa fasted on this day" – a report narrated by Muslim adds: " ... in thanksgiving to Allah, so we fast on this day." According to a report narrated by al-Bukhari: " ... so we fast on this day to venerate it." A version narrated by *Imam Ahmad* adds: "This is the day on which the Ark settled on Mount Judi, so Nuh fasted this day in thanksgiving," and "commanded [the Muslims] to fast on that day" – according to another report also narrated by al-Bukhari: "He said to his Companions: '*You have more right to Musa than they do, so fast on that day.*'"

The practice of fasting on '*Ashura*' was known even in the days of *Jahiliyyah*, before the Prophet's mission. It was reported that 'A'ishah (*may Allah be pleased with her*) said: "The people of *Jahiliyyah* used to fast on that day ... "

Al-Qurtubi said: "Perhaps *Quraysh* used to fast on that day on the basis of some past law, such as that of Ibrahim, *upon whom be peace*."

It was also reported that the Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) used to fast on '*Ashura*' in Makkah, before he migrated to Madinah. When he migrated to Madinah, he found the Jews celebrating this day, so he asked them why, and they replied as described in the *hadith* quoted above. He commanded the Muslims to be different from the Jews, who took it as a festival, as was reported in the *hadith* of Abu Musa (*may Allah be pleased with him*), who said: "The Jews used to take the day of '*Ashura*' as a festival [according to a report narrated by Muslim: the day of '*Ashura*' was venerated by the Jews, who took it as a festival. According to another report also narrated by Muslim: the people of Khaybar (the Jews) used to take it as a festival and their women would wear their jewellery and symbols on that day]. The Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) said: '*So you [Muslims] should fast on that day.*' "[Reported by al-Bukhari] Apparently the motive for commanding the Muslims to fast on this day was the desire to be different from the Jews, so that the Muslims would fast when the Jews did not, because people do not fast on a day of celebration. [Summarized from the words of *al-Hafidh* Ibn Hajar – *may Allah have mercy on him* – in *Fath al-Bari Sharh 'ala Sahih al-Bukhari*]

Fasting on '*Ashura*' was a gradual step in the process of introducing fasting as a prescribed obligation in Islam. Fasting appeared in three forms. When the Messenger of Allah (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) came to Madinah, he told the Muslims to fast on three days of every month and on the day of '*Ashura*', then Allah made fasting obligatory when He said (interpretation of the meaning): "**... observing the fasting is prescribed for you ...**" [*Al-Qur'an*2:183] [*Ahkam al-Qur'an* by al-Jassas, part 1]

The obligation was transferred from the fast of '*Ashura*' to the fast of *Ramadhan*, and this one of the proofs in the field of *Usul al-Fiqh* that it is possible to abrogate a lighter duty in favour of a heavier duty.

Before the obligation of fasting '*Ashura*' was abrogated, fasting on this day was obligatory, as can be seen from the clear command to observe this fast. Then it was further confirmed later on, then reaffirmed by making it a general command addressed to everybody, and once again by instructing mothers not to breastfeed their infants during this fast. It was reported from Ibn Mas'ud that when

fasting *Ramadhan* was made obligatory, the obligation to fast '*Ashura*' was lifted, i.e., it was no longer obligatory to fast on this day, but it is still desirable (*mustahabb*).

## The Virtues of Fasting '*Ashura*'

Ibn 'Abbas (*may Allah be pleased with them both*) said:

"I never saw the Messenger of Allah (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) so keen to fast any day and give it priority over any other than this day, the day of '*Ashura*', and this month, meaning *Ramadhan*." Reported by Al-Bukhari, 1867

The meaning of his being keen was that he intended to fast on that day in the hope of earning the reward for doing so. The Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) said: "*For fasting the day of 'Ashura', I hope that Allah will accept it as expiation for the year that went before.*" [Reported by Muslim, 1976] This is from the bounty of Allah towards us: for fasting one day He gives us expiation for the sins of a whole year. *And Allah is the Owner of Great Bounty.*

## Which Day is '*Ashura*'?

An-Nawawi (*may Allah have mercy on him*) said:

"'*Ashura*' and *Tasu'a*' are two elongated names [the vowels are elongated] as is stated in books on the Arabic language. Our companions said: '*Ashura*' is the tenth day of *Muharram* and *Tasu'a*' is the ninth day. This is our opinion, and that of the majority of scholars. This is the apparent meaning of the *ahadith* and is what we understand from the general wording. It is also what is usually understood by scholars of the language." *Al-Majmu'*

'*Ashura*' is an Islamic name that was not known at the time of *Jahiliyyah*. [*Kashshaf al-Qina'*, part 2, *Sawm Muharram*]

Ibn Qudamah (*may Allah have mercy on him*) said: "'*Ashura*' is the tenth day of *Muharram*. This is the opinion of Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib and al-Hasan. It was what was reported by Ibn 'Abbas, who said: 'The Messenger of Allah (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) commanded us to fast '*Ashura*', the tenth day of *Muharram*.' [Reported by at-Tirmidhi, who said, a *sahih hasan hadith*] It was reported that Ibn 'Abbas said: 'The ninth,' and reported that the Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) used to fast the ninth. [Reported by Muslim] 'Ata' reported that he said, 'Fast the ninth and the tenth, and do not be like the Jews.' If this is understood, we can say on this basis that it is *mustahabb* (encouraged) to fast on the ninth and the tenth, for that reason. This is what Ahmad said, and it is the opinion of Ishaq."

## It is *Mustahabb* (Encouraged) to Fast *Tasu'a'* with '*Ashura*'

'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas (*may Allah be pleased with them both*) said: "When the Messenger of Allah (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) fasted on '*Ashura*' and commanded the Muslims to fast as well, they said, 'O Messenger of Allah, it is a day that is venerated by the Jews and Christians.' The Messenger of Allah (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) said, '*If I live to see the next year, in sha Allah, we will fast on the ninth day too.*' But it so happened that the Messenger of Allah (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) passed away before the next year came." [Reported by Muslim, 1916]

Ash-Shafi'i and his companions, Ahmad, Ishaq and others said: "It is *mustahabb* to fast on both the ninth and tenth days, because the Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) fasted on the tenth, and intended to fast on the ninth."

On this basis it may be said that there are varying degrees of fasting '*Ashura*', the least of which is to fast only on the tenth and the best of which is to fast the ninth as well. The more one fasts in *Muharram*, the better it is.

## The Reason Why it is *Mustahabb* to Fast on *Tasu'a'*

An-Nawawi (*may Allah have mercy on him*) said:

"The scholars – our companions and others – mentioned several reasons why it is *mustahabb* to fast on *Tasu'a'*: The intention behind it is to be different from the Jews, who only venerate the tenth day. This opinion was reported from Ibn 'Abbas ... The intention is to add another day's fast to '*Ashura*'. This is akin to the prohibition on fasting a Friday by itself, as was mentioned by al-Khattabi and others. To be on the safe side and make sure that one fasts on the tenth, in case there is some error in sighting the crescent moon at the beginning of *Muharram* and the ninth is in fact the tenth."

The strongest of these reasons is being different from the People of the Book. *Shaykh ul-Islam* Ibn Taymiyyah (*may Allah have mercy on him*) said: "The Prophet (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) forbade imitating the People of the Book in many *ahadith*, for example, his words concerning '*Ashura*': '*If I live until the next year, I will certainly fast on the ninth day.*'" [*Al-Fatawa al-Kubra*, part 6, *Sadd adh-Dhara'i' al-Mufdiyyah ila'l-Maharim*]

Ibn Hajar (*may Allah be pleased with him*) said in his commentary on the *hadith* "*If I live until the next year, I will certainly fast on the ninth day*" and "What he meant by fasting on the ninth day was probably not that he would limit himself to that day, but would add it to the tenth, either to be on the

safe side or to be different from the Jews and Christians, which is more likely. This is also what we can understand from some of the reports narrated by Muslim." [Fath, 4/245]

## **Ruling on Fasting Only on the Day of 'Ashura'**

*Shaykh ul-Islam* said: "Fasting on the day of 'Ashura' is an expiation for a year, and it is not *makruh* to fast only that day ... " [Al-Fatawa al-Kubra, part 5] In *Tuhfat al-Muhtaj* by Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, it says: "There is nothing wrong with fasting only on 'Ashura'." [Part 3, Bab Sawm at-Tatawwu]

## **Fasting on 'Ashura' even if it is a Saturday or a Friday**

At-Tahawi (*may Allah have mercy on him*) said: "The Messenger of Allah (*peace and blessings of Allah be upon him*) allowed us to fast on 'Ashura' and urged us to do so. He did not say that if it falls on a Saturday we should not fast. This is evidence that all days of the week are included in this. In our view – *and Allah knows best* – it could be the case that even if this is true (that it is not allowed to fast on Saturdays), it is so that we do not venerate this day and refrain from food, drink and intercourse, as the Jews do. As for the one who fasts on a Saturday without intending to venerate it, and does not do so because the Jews regard it as blessed, then this is not *makruh* ... " [Mushkil al-Athar, part 2, Bab Sawm Yawm as-Sabf]

The author of *Al-Minhaj* said: "It is disliked (*makruh*) to fast on a Friday alone ... But it is no longer *makruh* if you add another day to it, as mentioned in the *sahih* report to that effect. A person may fast on a Friday if it coincides with his habitual fast, or he is fasting in fulfilment of a vow, or he is making up an obligatory fast that he has missed, as was stated in a *sahih* report."

Ash-Sharih said in *Tuhfat al-Muhtaj*: "If it coincides with his habitual fast – i.e., such as if he fasts alternate days, and a day that he fasts happens to be a Friday, if he is fasting in fulfilment of a vow, etc." – this also applies to fasting on days prescribed in *Shari'ah*, such as 'Ashura' or 'Arafah. [Tuhfat al-Muhtaj, part 3, Bab Sawm al-Tatawwu]

Al-Bahuti (*may Allah have mercy on him*) said: "It is *makruh* to deliberately single out a Saturday for fasting, because of the *hadith* of 'Abdullah ibn Bishr, who reported from his sister: 'Do not fast on Saturdays except in the case of obligatory fasts' [reported by Ahmad with *ajayyid isnad* and by al-Hakim, who said: according to the conditions of al-Bukhari], and because it is a day that is venerated by the Jews, so singling it out for fasting means being like them ... except when a Friday or Saturday coincides with a day when Muslims habitually fast, such as when it coincides with the day of 'Arafah or the day of 'Ashura', and a person has the habit of fasting on these days, in which case it is

not *makruh*, because a person's habit carries some weight." [*Kashshaf al-Qina'*, part 2, *Bab Sawm al-Tatawwu'*]

## What Should be Done if there is Confusion about the Beginning of the Month?

Ahmad said: "If there is confusion about the beginning of the month, one should fast for three days, to be sure of fasting on the ninth and tenth days." [*Al-Mughni* by Ibn Qudamah, part 3 –*as-Siyam – Siyam 'Ashur'*]

If a person does not know when *Muharram* began, and he wants to be sure of fasting on the tenth, he should assume that *Dhul-Hijjah* was thirty days – as is the usual rule – and should fast on the ninth and tenth. Whoever wants to be sure of fasting the ninth as well should fast the eighth, ninth and tenth (then if *Dhul-Hijjah* was twenty-nine days, he can be sure of having fasted *Tasu'a'* and *'Ashura'*).

But given that fasting on *'Ashura'* is *mustahabb* rather than *wajib*, people are not commanded to look for the crescent of the new moon of *Muharram* as they are to do in the case of *Ramadhan* and *Shawwal*.

## Fasting *'Ashura'* – For What Does it Offer Expiation?

*Imam* an-Nawawi (*may Allah have mercy on him*) said: "It expiates for all minor sins, i.e., it brings forgiveness of all sins except major sins." Then he said (*may Allah have mercy on him*): "Fasting the day of *'Arafah* expiates for two years, and the day of *'Ashura'* expiates for one year. If when a person says *'Amin'* it coincides with the *'Amin'* of the angels, he will be forgiven all his previous sins ... Each one of the things that we have mentioned will bring expiation. If there are minor sins for which expiation is needed, expiation for them will be accepted; if there are no minor sins or major sins, good deeds will be added to his account and he will be raised in status ... If he had committed major sins but no minor sins, we hope that his major sins will be reduced." [*Al-Majmu' Sharh al-Muhadhdhab*, part 6, *Sawm Yawm 'Arafah*]

*Shaykh ul-Islam* Ibn Taymiyyah (*May Allah have mercy on him*) said: "*Taharah*, *salah*, and fasting in *Ramadhan*, on the day of *'Arafah* and on *'Ashura'* expiate for minor sins only." [*Al-Fatawa al-Kubra*, part 5]

## Fasting 'Ashura' When One Still has Days to Make Up From Ramadhan

The *fuqaha'* differed concerning the ruling on observing voluntary fasts before a person has made up days that he or she did not fast in *Ramadhan*. The Hanafis said that it is permissible to observe voluntary fasts before making up days from *Ramadhan*, and it is not *makruh* to do so, because the missed days do not have to be made up straight away. The Malikis and Shafi'is said that it is permissible but is *makruh*, because it means that one is delaying something obligatory. Ad-Dusuqi said: "It is *makruh* to observe a voluntary fast when one still has to make up an obligatory fast, such as a fast in fulfilment of a vow, or a missed obligatory fast, or a fast done as an act of expiation (*kafarah*), whether the voluntary fast which is being given priority over an obligatory fast is something confirmed in *Shari'ah* or not, such as 'Ashura' and the ninth of *Dhul-Hijjah*, according to the most correct opinion." The Hanbalis said that it is *haram* to observe a voluntary fast before making up any fasts missed in *Ramadhan*, and that a voluntary fast in such cases does not count, even if there is plenty of time to make up the obligatory fast. So a person must give priority to the obligatory fasts until he has made them up. [*Al-Mawsu'ah al-Fiqhiyyah*, part 28, *Sawm at-Tatawwu'*]

Muslims must hasten to make up any missed fasts after *Ramadhan*, so that they will be able to fast 'Arafah and 'Ashura' without any problem. If a person fasts 'Arafah and 'Ashura' with the intention from the night before of making up for a missed fast, this will be good enough to make up what he has missed, for the bounty of Allah is great.