

August 19, 2009

Wednesday

Title: [Ramadān: The Meaning of Fasting](#)

DVD title: Lessons for Ramadān:  
Guidelines to Prepare for Ramadān and Removing what is Harmful

Dinner blessing: O Allah, we are very grateful to You for our safe journey and our return. We pray and ask You, Allah, that those who are from our community who are still traveling have safe journeys home, and come in time for the blessing of Ramadān. O Allah, make this a time for us for reflection, for charity, for service, and a time for serving You by serving our own soul, reaching deeply within our own hearts and souls to remember that Divine Presence as You manifest as compassion and mercy, love and understanding, peace, tolerance, and justice, things that are sorely needed in this world. Your Presence needs to be awakened in the hearts of all people, of all paths, of all places so that they may find themselves at peace with You in whatever way they seek You or name You. *Amin.*

Sohbet: *Bismillah ir Rahman ir Raheem.* I have two themes I want to discuss in the next few nights that have to do with Ramadān. We saw the beautiful last sliver of the month of Sha'bān over the ocean. It was very, very nice. Often this month has the planet Jupiter nearby so it looks like the crescent and the star. Allah Swt says in the Holy Qur'an, "**O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you even as it was prescribed for those before you that you may ward off evil.**" (2:183) It's a very definitive statement of why. Yet, we are told by Rasulallah (sal), and in the Qur'an, and many people who have made *tafsir* on this, that we fast *fī sabīlallah*. Why would Allah Swt say this if it was a fast for Him? Why is it to ward off evil (which Allah says) and then we say the fast is for Allah

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Swt, not for ourselves? Like many things in Islam, you do this for one reason, but the result is for another. We are given both sides of the picture. You do it *fi sabīlallah*, but this is what will happen. If you do it for this reason, then it's different. If you do it to ward off evil, then the purpose is not being met. Keep that in mind.

There are two things I want to discuss with you again. I have discussed them with you before, but that's all right. If it was sufficient to say things once only, it would be sufficient to fast once in your life. It is sufficient to make Hajj once in your life, because it is difficult to make Hajj. It would be sufficient to brush your teeth once in your life, or eat once. That's not the way it works. For those of you who have memorized this (I'm sure many of you have not), I will speak about it again. One thing is preparing for Ramadān. There are very clear guidelines for preparing for Ramadān as you know. Hopefully, you have contemplated this for two months, Rajab and Sha'bān, if not longer—at least through the month of Sha'bān, at least since the middle of Sha'bān, at least since yesterday, at least contemplate it until tomorrow.

Secondly, I want to talk about how to remove the things that are harmful. Because in this month it is very important to spend some time trying to understand some of the wisdom and lessons we can learn. We can open up a book and try to learn those lessons from a book, but what about the book of your life from the last year? Is there anything you can learn from the book of your last in the last year? Is there anyone here who can't learn anything from the last year? Do you think you know everything, and there is nothing you can learn from your own life's experiences this past year? So many things you can learn: about how to keep healthy, how to eat properly, how to stay out of trouble! There are many, many things we can think about from this past year. We all have something. Pick one.

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Unfortunately, many Muslims come to this month, as the Prophet (sal) said, ***“Let it not be that the day you fast and the day you break the fast be equal.”*** I would like you to remember that. The day you begin and end the fast should not be equal. You should have changed. Something should have changed in you, and not just because time has gone by, and not because you are hungry. Most of you don’t get very hungry during the fast, probably, the ones of you who still fast. One of the most difficult things about the fast is when you don’t get hungry. What’s going to remind you? The fact that you don’t have your cup of coffee in the morning? No. We have to try very hard to give ourselves some reason to see progress; to gain knowledge and wisdom. Prophet Mohammed (sal) said, ***“Seek out wisdom as far as Kyrgyzstan.”*** I mean, China. It’s *daif*, but it’s okay. He did say, ***“Seek out wisdom from the cradle to the grave.”***

This is a month for seeking out knowledge and wisdom, not book knowledge and wisdom; to be honest with your heart in a positive way, not a negative or critical way; a month of *muhasabat*. If you don’t take the time, how is it going to happen? Allah Swt has given us the framework – the month – but has not given us the time. We have to give ourselves the time. This is the responsibility of the human being, to make choices. But there is no choice. We should fast if we can. If we cannot fast, there are other things to be done, but they must be done.

Our behavior, our attitude, our outlook should not be the same whether we fast or not unless we are fasting in some way. A fast that has no effect on us physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually is not a fast. That’s why we need to reflect on some of the principles behind the fast and try to fulfill our commitment that we make to ourselves to fast, to observe this month with piety and with effort, not entering into fearfully. “If I fast

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I'll get sick." "If I fast I'll get dizzy and fall over and hit my head and have a brain concussion and an animal will come and bite my head off." Don't fantasize. Don't make yourself sick. "I'm going to fast and I'm going to have the pleasure of the company of some percentage of 1.2 billion people who are enjoined to fast." Maybe it's 850 million who fast; who knows. It doesn't matter. But you and I know that when the month of Ramadān is over, and you have to make up some days, it's a lot harder to do it when it's not the month of Ramadān. It's not because your life is changed so much. You go to work, to school, and do what you do every day. That's not changing. You're adding to that.

We made this commitment many years ago, and your word is your bond. If you didn't make the commitment, make it. Why not? You can look at life in many ways. You can look at life as if there are all these terrible evils and traps out there waiting to get you with your name on them, waiting to trip you up. Therefore, you go through life fearing and being defensive and doubting your own capability and capacities, or acting arrogantly but underneath it is fear. Under arrogance is always fear. The most generous, kind, and faithful people are the most fearless people, the most trusting people. Or you can go through life realizing that Allah Swt has given you strength and willpower/*irāda*, care and concern, compassion and love, whether there are times of happiness or difficulty, whether things are going well for you or apparently not so well for you.

Every year you have made an investment, and sometimes the market goes up and sometimes it goes down. Theoretically, if you hold on to your investment, you earn (eventually). (We're not too sure about that anymore). So maybe you should invest in things like your heart, your soul. But if at the end of the time you haven't done the things that are beneficial, if you haven't followed the admonitions and striven to purify your

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heart and to develop the kind of potential you have to develop, it's like having to sell at a loss. All the years you worked and all the things you invested go down the drain because the thieves have stolen all the money. You put your trust in the evil ones, and the Madoffs, and they made off with the money—or the insurance companies. Or you can go through life with the confidence that if you persevere and trust in the long run, there is a great deal of *thawab* you will gain.

Of course, Allah Swt legislates fasting for gaining *taqwa*. *Taqwa* in this case is a shield. Piety is a shield. Maybe people don't see that. Some people think that people who are pious are weak people, always depending on Allah, something outside of themselves. They are weak and need something to depend on. "That's not American! Gotta depend on yourself, be rugged individualists." No. The arrogant and fearful people are like that. They need to carry their guns to the President's meeting. They don't really believe in the Constitution. They don't really believe in the *dīn* of Islam, if you are a Muslim. You have to go out and think that you are protecting Islam. Allah protects Islam. He doesn't need you or me. Just like we don't need gun-toting citizens to go out there and protect the Constitution while they shred it.

Human beings take whatever is the momentary reality and do the same thing over and over again. Go back to the Roman Empire, or the Byzantine empire, or as far back as you want to go. You'll find people who think it is their responsibility. Their responsibility is to "protect Islam." No. The responsibility is to practice Islam, not to protect Islam. Our responsibility is to protect the trust that Allah Swt has given us. Isn't it interesting that the trust Allah Swt has given us was rejected by the two most powerful elements in the world: the mountains and the seas. The sea, which can knock me off my feet in a second, would not take up this trust; and the mountains would not, but weak little human beings

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take up the trust—with what power? The only power we have is the power of our piety, our trust. We take this *amanat* with our *tawakkul*. That is the most powerful.

This piety is a shield. *Taqwa* is not fear. Just like the *hijab* is piety. It's a shield. Just like the *dīn* as you know it and learn it is a shield. Love is a shield. Respect is a shield. Submission is a shield. Allah Swt legislates this act and says that if you're sick, if you are a nursing mother, if you are elderly and can't do it, okay. But that's a minority of people. Don't go out and make yourself sick because you have a hard time fasting. If you can't fast from food, fine. Pray to Allah Swt that you get healthy, so that one more time in your life you can fast. If not this year, then double and triple your efforts in your piety. Don't feel upset or ashamed, but be honest. Triple your efforts. This *taqwa*, this fast, these symbols that we find in life are not guns and force in the name of Islam that fearful people use to intimidate others and make them fearful also—like these cowards in Washington or many other capitals in the world. It is the power of your *dīn*, our faith, your *iman*. That takes courage. It's not that it takes courage to fast; it takes courage to understand the meaning of it and to fulfill it.

The shield is what we put between ourselves and the dangers that will attack this *nafs*, the evil that Allah Swt is talking about. *Taqwa* means a consciousness and piety, but not a piety of such a measure that only very few people can attain to it. Quite the contrary, it's a piety that we all have within us at some point in our lives: before you got too sick to fast or whatever, you had it. It was given to you. It's part of us. It's not just for the 100<sup>th</sup> of 1% of people who might be able to do this, and then be the greatest people in the world because they can fast. It's for everybody. Now, why would Allah Swt legislate anything for everybody that most people couldn't do? It would be like me going home tonight and asking my youngest daughter to drive the car into Lynchburg at night, when she can't

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reach the pedals. Rationality is part of Islam. Allah Swt is not a person. Allah is a Reality, is Rational.

Nothing would be asked of us that the majority of us couldn't do. Yet it's the highest reward. Not that you are doing it for a reward, but the reward is there. Remember how I started. Why? Because that kind of piety that we all can realize, that is within all of us, we can experience it. We can have the opportunity to realize it. If the seed sits up on the shelf, Mustafa doesn't have a garden. "I bought all the seeds for the garden this year, Shaykh. Do you think I should plant them, or should I leave them sitting on the shelf?" "Let's see. Plant." "Oh, okay, thanks for the advice." That kind of conversation would reveal two stupid people: the one who asked the question and the one who gave the answer. The potential is there. We say we trust in Allah Swt, or do our best. We think and filter things in our lives through the cultural, intellectual and experiential filters that we gather in our life. Still, we know how things really should be (though they might not always turn out to be that way), how life can and should be, and we should strive for that. We may not see it this year or in two years, or even 15 or 20. But one day, you see it. Eventually, the olive tree bears edible olives.

How many of you have seen an olive tree? Is it a straight, hardy tree? No. It's twisted and grows on rocky ground, usually, in very unfavorable circumstances. Yet, its fruit will help prevent you having heart disease. Is it a sweet fruit when it is ripe? No, it is very bitter. Who would have thought to take this bitter thing from an ugly tree and come up with some process to make it sweet and tasty? Necessity. Allah doesn't provide anything that is not useful, that doesn't have meaning. Even a cockroach is a good Homeopathic remedy for respiratory ills. The reward will come. You are not doing it for the reward, but the reward will come. But if you say, "Well, no reward has come. I just

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do this, but I don't really understand why I do it. I do it because I'm supposed to," and all that kind of crazy, old-time thought.

If you do what you do for the sake of the Truth, for the sake of what is right, real, and good, and transcend all the limitations of this world, and take out the arrogance [because] you think you are doing it because you represent Islam, because you are the one who will straighten the world out for Islam, no. You just do it because it's right. Then we will see the tyrants fall in Iran, and in all the places in the world where people are being oppressed. Can you imagine? Just yesterday those two Serb soldiers got life imprisonment and one got 30 years for burning alive women and children and men in the war. Out of what, fear of Islam, political reasons? We have to go so far beyond this. Allah Swt tells us that you fast, you take this month seriously. You do know that this is just an extension of what I have been talking to you about your practices. The practices are every day. Ramadan is one month a year.

We have to ask ourselves, when we go into fasting and every day when we break our fast, has this day of fasting made me more aware of myself, more aware of that Divine Presence? Has the result of it been that I feel that even though it may have been a strain for me, or not easy, that I have more protection from that which would distract me from the real purpose of life? Fasting is a blink of the eye. Allah Swt has given us this example. He gives examples of absolutely everything in the universe. In the physical world, we have all the examples of astrophysics, complexity theory, chaos theory and quantum mechanics. Everything is in the practical realm. What is the example in time differences? How long does a fruit fly live? 24 hours. Their whole life is in 24 human hours: birth, reproduction, death. Tell me there are not different calculations and time references.

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What is this one month? In which realm are we talking? Of course, it's in our realm prescribed for one month. Can you imagine a god, sitting on a throne somewhere (like the Wahabis say), thinking, "I'm going to give them a lot of problems. I'll make them fast for a month." In the reference of Allah Swt, what is one month? The blink of a Divine Eyelash? It's a nothing. It is said the Prophet (sal) ascends to within two bows lengths of the Arsh, and what happens? Allah says to pray 25 times a day. We've done the calculations before. By the time you do *wudu* and pray 25 times a day, assuming you sleep (like I do, 4 hours a night; and like you do, 8 hours), you have only 16 hours left to do 25 prayers with *wudu*. You'd be praying all the time. What does that mean? Allah is telling you that the purpose of life is piety, *ibāda*. That's what that means. He negotiated it down to five, of course on the recommendation of a good Jewish negotiator, Sidna Musa. "Go, make a deal. Is that what he offered, only 15? Go back, talk to him again." "No, I'm embarrassed!" "No, go back!" He got it down to five. He said, "That's it, five." "He must still be making a profit at 5." What does it really mean? That people were created on this earth to be putting their heads up and down on the ground all the time? I don't think so.

When would they even have time to make things like prayer carpets? You wouldn't have any time. No time to cook dinner. That would be a very, very short life. In 25, 30 years, there would be no more people. What does "make your life *ibāda*" mean? [It means to] remember Allah Swt. Remember Allah Swt when sitting, standing, and lying on your side. Does that mean it's okay for me to pray while I'm lying down? If you're sick and can't get up, of course. But that's not what it means. When you are sitting, standing or lying on your side, is there anything else you could possibly be doing with your body? Maybe lying on your back or stomach, but it's not as poetic in Arabic.

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This is a month of *ibāda*, of remembering that your life is one of worship, not about making money. Yes, you have to make money. It is not about opening up your new school. Yes, you have to open up your new school. It is not about teaching in our school. Yes, you have to do that. It is not about traveling, about this or that. It is not about complaining, or kvetching. It's about *ibāda*. You see your clients: it's an act of worship. Cooking a meal is an act of worship. I'm telling you this so I remember it. This shield is between ourselves and danger. There are people who go diving with sharks. Then there are smart people who go down in a cage. You can dive with sharks. We all do that every day. You just don't know it. The criminals, the corrupt politicians, the nasty people, the ignorant people, the people who would harm you because of your religion, or your name, or your race—we are swimming with those sharks all the time.

Your piety is your shield. What does *taqwa* mean? In this case, it means consciousness. Not just the consciousness a few people have, but that we are all given. When we filter things in our own lives to the way we know they really should be, though they may not be that way, then we can over time gain the benefits. Of course, fasting is also an opportunity to come closer to Allah Swt and is achieved in many ways. But the way to come closer to Allah Swt is not to think that Allah Swt is somebody that you'd like to meet sometime and have a supper with. You are meeting Allah Swt all the time in each other.

This is why I say to you, use the month of Ramadān to begin the practice, not because it's Ramadān. But begin the practice of *suḥbet* in your own home around your own table. To never end until somebody says, "Oh, I miss those dinners at so-and so's house. We had them forty years before they passed. We used to have the best discussions. That person

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was really a friend of mine.” [That person was] not just another person, not just a person who lived in the community, but a friend. You see, there are histories in this community that tell you what the effect of not having that has been. People can just pick up and leave, and it is as if they left nothing because they were not the depth of friendships.

Ramadān is the time for Taraweeh prayer also. Taraweeh prayer is not that you must read the Qur’an all the way through. You have to; otherwise, you are going to go to hell. No. The Prophet (sal) did not pray Taraweeh prayer every day in public purposefully, so it didn’t become *fard* or even *sunnah*. It doesn’t have to be reading the whole Qur’an from the beginning to the end and standing for 45 minutes to an hour. Some places read the whole Qur’an every night! But Allah Swt says to make it easy, not hard for people. Don’t make your religion something you disdain because it’s painful. Shaykh Batawi (ra) used to pick his favorite *sūrahs* each night, and those were his Taraweeh. That’s how he did it. Don’t fall into these cultural traps. We begin by doing this, but we read Qur’an often twice a week through. Do you know the Qur’an well enough to know your favorite *sūrahs*? That’s something you could do during Ramadān: read the Qur’an for your favorite *sūrahs* and write them down. You could even write them down in Arabic and English transliteration, if that’s what you need to do.

To make *dhikrullah* doesn’t mean to just say “Allah, Allah, Allah,” and sitting in the *masjid*. It means to remember Allah Swt all the time during Ramadān, so that you can remember Allah Swt after Ramadān, sitting among those with knowledge in the *halkah*. For those who can make *umrah* or *itikāf*, we should do it and leave as much as we can of our worldliness behind us; to keep ourselves as much as possible in the *masjid*, thinking of Allah Swt; and to strive for that *hasana, ihsan*, to strive to look at the world as if you are seeing Allah Swt and know that Allah Swt is seeing you. How is Allah Swt seeing

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you? Through the trees, the birds, the compassion, the mercy, the friendships, through the love. Come closer to the truth behind the truth, to the essence of compassion and piety, the essence of mercy, forgiveness, love, and peace, the essence of patience, perseverance, and justice. Keep yourself, when you are not in the *masjid*, in the *masjid* of your heart.

When you get up in the morning, before you go out to work, or come in to work, before you go out to do your shopping, or whatever you have to do, plan it out. Think about how you are going to do it. This is Ramadān. Make it such a habit in 30 days that it will never leave you. When we are not balanced, and when our thoughts are not right, and something came out of our mouth that shouldn't, we feel some distance from Allah Swt. Then the other aspects of *taqwa* come, and the fear of separation comes. Then we might find it difficult and we may have to redouble our effort. The obedient worshiper, the *'abd* feels closer to Allah and wants to worship more.

Of course there is much more to say. Increase your patience. Increase your will. Seventy times or more, Allah Swt speaks of *sabr* in the Qur'an. How many times does He say the name of Prophet Mohammed (sal)? Four. That's not to diminish the value of the Prophet (sal). It is to tell you that He speaks about what everyone can do, not what just one person who is *masoom* can do. If He kept saying, "O Prophet, O Prophet" over and over again, what would happen? People wouldn't pay any attention to the Qur'an because it was only for him. That's what would happen. It's not just about giving up food and drink and all the rest we are asked to do, but to deepen our patience, perseverance, and restraint. Allah Swt knows when we look at the state of the *ummah* today, we know that the men and women who are Muslims are very strong willed and very easily misguided, like sheep, or some cow with a ring in its nose wanting to be told what to do.

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No one can manipulate a real believer, no one. Christian, Jew, Hindu, Muslim, we are all children of Adam. Nobody can manipulate a true believer. Your belief comes from you, not from someone telling you. The role of a *shaykh* like I am is to tell you what you can do, not what I can do for you. We know the same people need to have more patience than the average human being. Not because they are Muslim, but because of the way the world looks at Islam. We can say that Allah Swt has given us ample opportunity and many challenges. But if we need to be more patient and if our will needs to be stronger, and if we need to be more tolerant than the average human being, then why wouldn't we see that as a blessing. It's not a curse. We don't need cadres of people who call themselves Muslims to go out and fight some battle. We don't need people who can run in the streets, waving flags and wearing bands on their heads yelling slogans; although, at times it is useful, if it's a peaceful protest like in Iran.

We need people who are clear and calm, patient and tolerant, and real examples of spiritual democracy. When the time comes to stand up for something in firm way, it shouldn't be people who cried wolf too often. It should not be thought of as, "Oh, there are those Muslims again making noise and causing trouble, blowing themselves up, killing innocent people." It's a tautology. But [we should be thought of as] people who are always quiet, who speak sincerely, who people listen to when they speak. We don't have to waver from our position.

And another final lesson for tonight to bring to Ramadān: is to strive for righteousness and sincerity, staying away from arrogance and showing off, and agreeing with one another. Don't feel if someone says, "Good morning" to you that you have to give them a discourse on what good morning means. Don't think if someone says to you, "I'm going

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to put wood on the floor in the school,” that you have to give a lecture on carpet. Not everybody is asking for an opinion when they say something. Contain yourself. Refrain. Listen. Every statement is not an invitation for commentary. You can say, “I have my thoughts, would you like to have my opinion?” If the other person says, “No,” fine. If they say, “Yes but I might not listen,” fine.

Let me go back for a moment to the subject of *ihsan*, worshiping Allah Swt as if we see Him. We should realize we are seeing Allah Swt. “*Wheresoever you turn, there is the countenance of Allah*”. “*Wheresoever you turn, Allah is the Lord of east and west.*” What does that mean? Hasan Al Basri (ra) said, “*By Allah, in the last twenty years, I have not said a word, or taken something with my hand, or refrained to take something with my hand, or stepped forth or stepped back except that I have thought before I have done any action: does Allah love this action? Is Allah pleased with this action?*” In fasting, if Allah says, “**Fasting is for Me and I reward it,**” you’ll find out. *Asalaamu aleikum.*