

The Acceptable Fast

How will God accept our
fasting?

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The Benefits of Fasting

Fasting undoubtedly has many benefits in many areas, among which are bodily, personal, familial, social, emotional, mental, and spiritual benefits. Scientists all over the world agree on this. From the standpoint of health, fasting helps to cleanse the intestinal tract and to heal digestive diseases. Personally, it helps reduce or stop bad or harmful habits, like smoking. Concerning family relationships, fasting brings the family together at the breaking of the fast, and strengthens love between members of the family. As for the society, fasting strengthens social bonds between neighbors, relatives and friends, and creates solidarity as a united, integrated society. Mentally, fasting helps a person think and concentrate better, because it increases the amount of blood available for the brain. Spiritually, fasting is also beneficial. One who abstains from food and drink, which are both lawful and allowed, will find that God helps him resist evil and sinful, unlawful desires. In addition, those who fast will feel God's presence more and see more answers to their prayers.

Why has God commanded Fasting?

Many times we hear, "May God accept your fasting and reward you." But how can we know whether or not God will accept our fasting? Under what circumstances will God accept it? Only if His purposes for fasting are accomplished. We have mentioned above some of the many benefits of fasting, but what are God's major purposes for fasting?

Some answer that God has commanded us to fast so that we can empathize with the poor. But those who give this answer forget that God commanded fasting for the rich as well as for the poor, who obviously have no need to empathize with themselves. So even under superficial examination, this answer is wrong.

Others say that God commanded us to fast so that we can earn forgiveness for the sins we have committed. But this is also a wrong answer. If God forgives sins based on fasting or other good deeds man has done, then forgiveness is no longer a result of God's mercy and kindness, but something we earned and a payment that God owes us. The Koran says "*God is forgiving*" (Baqara 182), but it never calls God a payer of wages that he owes us. The Koran also says, "*We have given you an obvious victory, so that God may forgive your past and future sins.*" (Fath 1-2) These verses tell us clearly that God gave this victory in order to forgive sins, not because we deserve forgiveness. God willed to do that, and he did it because he wanted to do it. God's forgiveness springs from his mercy, as the Koran says: "*God is forgiving and merciful.*" (Baqara 182) Praise be to God, who forgives sins because of His mercy and not because of human works. But in addition to being wrong, this answer is also illogical, as the following illustrates:

The Wise Hermit

There once was a man who was always seeking, but could never find a way to get forgiveness for his sins. He was very religious, praying, fasting, and giving alms to the poor. He did good works whenever he could. But he was never sure that God would forgive him on the Day of Judgment. One day he heard of a wise hermit, who knew many secrets, so he decided to ask him for the answer so he could calm his soul. The journey was long and he was thirsty and tired when he arrived. The hermit welcomed him and he immediately blurted out, "How can I get forgiveness for my sins?" The hermit calmed him down and said, "Please sit down. I'll bring you something to drink." The hermit brought him a glass of cold water, but before offering it to him, took out his pen and added a drop of black ink. The man was shocked and said, "Why did you do that?" "I was just answering your question," said the hermit. "You were disgusted by one drop of ink and refused the whole glass of cold, refreshing water because of it. And yet you expect God, who is Holy and Righteous, to accept your good works, though you have ruined them with the sins of your heart and mind." The man thanked the hermit for teaching him that there is no connection between good works and forgiveness, for just as one drop of ink spoiled the whole glass of pure water, so one evil deed, word or thought makes good deeds unacceptable to the Holy God.

What, then, is God's purpose for fasting?

The Generous Koran mentions the month of Ramadan only once (in Baqara 185) "The month of Ramadan, in which the Koran was revealed as guidance for man, and clear verses of guidance, and criterion, so let him who sees the month, fast it." But one of God's purposes for fasting is explained in the following verses.

God commanded fasting for those who kill another believer by accident (Nisa 92), for those who swear an oath and then don't fulfill it (Maida 89), for those who disobey God by hunting while on pilgrimage (Maida 95), and for those who send their wives away and then decide they want them back (Mujadila 4). In all four of these instances, when a person commits a sin, God prescribes fasting. We have seen above that forgiveness comes from God's mercy, and not from what we deserve. Why does God prescribe fasting, then? **Fasting is God's method to make sinners feel their sin, be sorry for it, repent, and not do it again.**

Therefore, everyone who has committed a sin must admit that he has sinned and must be sorry about it, repent, and not do them again, or else his fasting will be worthless. But we are all sinners, as the Generous Koran tells us:

"God is never unjust toward man, but men were unjust toward each other." (Yunis 44)

"If God were to punish men for their injustice, there would be no one left." (Nahl 61)

"He is sinful and ignorant." (Ahzab 72)

"Mankind are sinners and unbelievers." (Ibrahim 34)

"Man was killed; how ungrateful he is!" (Abasa 17)

"Man is truly sinful." (Hajj 66)

"*Man is obviously truly sinful.*" (Zakhrif 15)
"So man is truly sinful." (Shora 48)
"And man was sinful." (Isra 67)
"The human soul truly incites toward evil." (Yusif 53)

Thus, all of us human beings are unjust, sinful, and have souls that incite them to evil. Since every person has committed sins, as these verses have made clear to us, every person needs to admit his sins of all kinds and be sorry for them. This is why God commanded fasting for everyone. As the Generous Koran says:

"*God commanded fasting for you just as he commanded it for those who were before you so that you would be upright.*" (Baqara 183)

Do you admit that you are a sinner, as the Koran describes you in the verses above? Are you sorry for your sins? If your answer to both questions is yes, then you have accomplished God's first purpose for fasting. But is admitting our sins and being sorry for them enough? The Generous Koran warns us about our situation with the following words:

"*The unjust, however, are in permanent torture.*" (Shora 45)
"The unjust have painful torture as their future." (Ibrahim 22)
"They will both be punished in hell eternally. That is the reward of the unjust." (Hashar 17)
"Sinners have shameful torture laid up for them." (Baqara 90)
"Sinners will have painful torture." (Baqara 104)
"We have prepared for sinners a shameful torture." (Nisa 37)
"We have prepared for sinners a shameful torture." (Nisa 151)
"God has prepared for sinners a shameful torture." (Nisa 102)
"God will gather the sinner and hypocrites together in hell." (Nisa 140)
"Sinners will have the tortures of hell." (Anfal 14)
"God has promised the hypocrites and sinners to remain eternally in the fires of hell. It is their just due. God has cursed them and they will have torture forever." (Toba 68)
"And the punishment of sinners is hellfire." (Raad 35)
"We have made hell for sinners to dwell in." (Isra 8)
"We will surely make sinners taste severe torture, and punish them worse than their deeds." (Sajda 27)
"The punishment of those who did evil was evil." (Roum 10)
"Truly those who do evil, and are caught in their sins, will be in hellfire eternally." (Baqara 81)
"God caught them in their sins and God is harsh in his punishment." (Al Imran 11)

If God punishes all sinners, and we are all sinners, then each one of us will be punished by God in hell. **What then can we do to be saved from the painful punishment we deserve for our sins?**

Part 2

How does God want us to fast?

In Part 1, we understood that we are all sinners, either in deed or word or thought, that trusting in our own selves is useless because our souls incline us to evil, and that bad deeds ruin good deeds. Agreeing with these truths is the first step toward pleasing God in our fasting. Now we must ask this important question: How does God want us to fast?

It is written in the Generous Koran:

"God commanded fasting for you just as he commanded it for those who were before you so that you would be upright." (Baqara 183)

God wants uprightness from us, but what kind of uprightness does He want? God, who hears and sees all, knows our hearts and no one can deceive him. But some people fast only so that others will see them. These hypocrites call out loudly, "Praise God, I'm fasting," so that others will commend them. These people have truly gotten their reward already from the people that they fasted in front of. God will not reward them.

There is another group of people who boast, "In Ramadan, I don't steal, cheat, tell lies, or look lustfully at girls." They think that by doing these things they are especially righteous. But they have no basis at all for thinking this because God prohibited evil deeds all year around and not just in the month of fasting. This kind of person doesn't understand anything and will not get any reward.

Other people are meticulous to observe all the external regulations for fasting but their daily moral lives are not affected in any way. For example, shopkeepers cheat their customers during the days of the fast just as they cheat them on other days. They swear "By God!" as they tell lies in Ramadan just as they do on the rest of the days. They quarrel with their children on fasting days just as they do at other times, or maybe more. Children complain about their parents in Ramadan just like they do in other months. Drivers curse and honk their horns at other drivers in Ramadan just like they normally do, or worse. Everyone thinks about his own interests and not others' interests just like normal. Men look at women and girls lustfully as is their habit. Women gossip with each other on fasting days as is their habit. Women gossip about each other just like they do all the time. This kind of fasting is described by the following:

The fast that pleases God

During your fast you're busy with your selfish life,
 You don't stop mistreating your workers,
You are involved in unjust fighting and violence,
 Will God accept this fasting, when you only humble yourselves and kneel?
Of course not! The fast God approves is freeing those unjustly imprisoned,
 Treating the poor fairly, feeding the hungry,
Sheltering homeless strangers,
 Clothing the naked, and doing good to your neighbors and relatives.

How many of us have experienced that fasting does not benefit our daily moral life? The Generous Koran condemns us and condemns this kind of fasting, because it says, "*So that you would be upright.*" By this the Koran tells us what God wants from fasting: uprightness. If practical uprightness doesn't result from fasting, in spite of all our efforts, then this fast is not acceptable to God.

If we truly have admitted our sinfulness, then we know that we, who have souls inclined to evil, are unable to live a life pleasing to God or to fast acceptably. What shall we do then? And as we asked at the end of part 1 of "The Acceptable Fast," "What then can we do to escape the awful punishment we deserve for our sins?"

Saved from destruction

The newspapers reported that a fire broke out in an old hotel in a large city. Most people escaped, but a young girl ran from her room up to the roof of the hotel. There she screamed to those on the street, "Save me, save me!" The fire department saw her, but could find no way to save her because of the thick smoke. However, a man on the street saw her and decided to save her. He entered the building next-door to the hotel and ran up to the roof. From there he motioned to the girl to come to the edge of the roof. He asked her, "Can you jump across to this building?" She said, "No, I can't." The man knew that the only way to save the girl would require him to sacrifice his life. So he told her, "I will make a bridge for you out of my body so you can cross to safety." So he flung himself across to reach the edge of the hotel, so that his hands were on the edge of the hotel and his feet still on the other building. After he had done this he said, "Now you can cross." But the girl was afraid. Finally, he convinced her that she could cross safely and escape and she did. But the man couldn't return to the roof because he was so tired, and he fell to the ground and died.

Our situation is just like this girl's; each one of us needs someone to save us and mediate with God for us.

But who does God Almighty permit to intercede for us?

The answer may surprise you.

Part 3

Who can intercede with God for us?

So far we have understood that we need a mediator for our fasting to be acceptable to God. But who can be a mediator? As the Koran says:

"Who can intercede with him except with his permission?" (Baqara 255)

Interceding is a process that requires the following two qualifications:

1. He must be on good terms with both parties.
2. He must have a close relationship with both parties, so be able to persuade them.

As far as the first qualification, some people say that all prophets are sinless. If this were correct, it would mean that the prophets could intercede with God, providing they fulfill the second condition.

But on what basis can they say this? What God has revealed says the opposite. For what does the Generous Koran say?

"God is never unjust toward man, but men were unjust toward each other." (Yunis 44)

"If God were to punish men for their injustice, there would be no one left." (Nahl 61)

"He is sinful and ignorant." (Ahzab 72)

"Mankind are sinners and unbelievers." (Ibrahim 34)

"Man was killed; how ungrateful he is!" (Abasa 17)

"Man is truly sinful." (Hajj 66)

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The Koran does not make an exception in these verses for the prophets. All humans are sinners – we just as the prophets and messengers – and we all need an intercessor. Now, let us search more deeply and be certain what the Koran says about some of the prophets (May God's peace be upon them all) in this regard.

About Adam and Eve: *"We have wronged ourselves and if you don't forgive us and have mercy on us we will surely be lost."* (Aaraf 23), and

"Adam disobeyed his Lord and went astray." (Taha 121)

About Noah: *"If you don't forgive me and have mercy on me, I will be lost."* (Houd 47), and

"Lord, forgive me and my parents and whoever enters my house believing." (Nouh 28)

About Abraham: *"I sincerely hope that God will forgive my sins on the Day of Judgment."* (Shuaraa 82), and

"*Lord, forgive me and my parents and the believers on the Day of Judgment.*"
(Ibrahim 41)

About Moses: " *He struck him and killed him and said, 'This is a work of Satan.'*"
(Qusas 15)

About Aaron: " *Don't follow me, for you disobeyed my command.*" (Taha 93)

About both Moses and Aaron: "*He said, 'Lord, forgive me and my brother.'*" (Aaraf 151)

About David: " *He asked forgiveness from his Lord.*" (Sad 24)

About Solomon: "*I have loved things more than mentioning my Lord. Lord, forgive me.*" (Sad 32)

About Jonah: " *I have sinned.*" (Anbiya 87), and
" *And the whale swallowed him because he had done wrong.*" (Safaat 142)

About Mohamed: "*That God may forgive your past and future sins.*" (Fatah 2), and
"*Ask forgiveness for your sin*" (Mohamed 19), and
"*Ask forgiveness for your sin and sing the praises of your Lord.*" (Mumin/Ghafir 55),
and
"*Ask forgiveness from God*" (Nisa 106), and
"*He frowned and turned away when the blind man came to him.*" (Abasa 1-2), and
"*Sing the praises of your Lord and ask forgiveness from Him*" (Nasr 3) , and
"*We have taken your burden (sin) away*" (Inshirah 2), and
"*And say, 'Lord, forgive me have mercy.'*" (Muminin 118)

We see that none of the prophets mentioned above is able to intercede, because there is a breach in their relationship with God. Even the first prerequisite is lacking, much less the second. The prophets and messengers are not sinless, as some mistakenly think, but they need forgiveness from God for their sins like we do. Those who still refuse to believe this truth, despite all these proofs in the verses mentioned above, are like the farmer in the following story.

The Farmer and the Tax

During the Ottoman Empire, there was a poor farmer, who owned nothing but one coin and a tiny farm barely big enough to feed his family. He had inherited both from his father, who had gotten them from his grandfather. Many times, the farmer would take out his coin and look at its golden shine, imagining how much it was worth and how much selling it could relieve him of his poverty. But he refused to sell it, because it was his inheritance from his father and grandfather. One day, a decree was issued from the Ottoman government requiring every resident in the Empire to pay a gold Ottoman dinar, or its equivalent in gold. Any poor person who was too poor to pay had to swear an affidavit and request an exemption. The punishment for those who falsely claimed poverty, as well as those who failed to declare before the day of

payment and then did not pay, was the same: they would be arrested and thrown in prison, to be tortured until they paid the debt. The news of the decree reached the poor farmer, who immediately decided to make his declaration, since he had no more than three dirhams.

Before he made a declaration, he remembered his coin that he had hidden. Before the day of payment, he was talking with his fellow farmers about the tax and their declarations, and they asked him why he had not declared. He said, "I have a coin I inherited from my father and grandfather, and I will pay the tax with it." They all were amazed and asked to see the coin. He took it out and showed it to them, and a neighboring farmer asked, "Is this real? It's ring is strange." He answered, "I inherited it from my father and grandfather, and you think it is not real? Impossible." Another said, "It doesn't shine like gold; maybe it is counterfeit." But the farmer insisted, "This is my inheritance from my father and grandfather. How could it be counterfeit?" Yet another said, "It is lighter than gold. Are you sure?" The farmer answered, "100%."

The farmer awakened on payment day, opened his box, carried the coin in his hand, and went to the local government office to pay. When his turn came, he gave his name, where he lived, and handed the official the coin. The tax collector frowned and said, "What is this?" The farmer said, "It is a gold coin I inherited from my father and grandfather, and I brought it to pay the tax." The official said, "But it is not gold." The farmer answered, "Of course it is, for I inherited it from my father and grandfather." The official answered, "I don't care who you inherited it from, but I do care that it be gold, and this is not gold. Go and bring another one." So he went to the market to sell it to the traders, but they answered, "We won't buy it, because it isn't real. He went to every trader in the whole market to find someone to buy it, but no one would. So he went back to the tax collector to ask him again. The collector said, "I am sorry, but I have not choice. I have to send you to jail."

This is what people are like who believe a thing is true because it came from a loved source, but neglect to check out its truthfulness.

Now let us return to who can be a mediator, and ask, what does the Koran say about Christ Jesus son of Mary? First of all, the Koran never mentions any sin or reason to ask forgiveness in connection with Jesus. Not only does the Koran never mention any sin about him or attribute any sin or wrong doing to him, but it also affirms that the exact opposite is true: "*That I may give you a sinless boy.*" (Maryam 19)

Thus Jesus fulfills the first requirement. Does he fulfill the second condition, too?

He who would persuade must also have a close relationship with the party he wants to persuade. Who enjoys that kind of a relationship with God? Only those who share something of God's divine nature. The Koran mentions only two, Adam and Jesus, into whom God breathed his spirit.

About Adam, the Koran says, "*Then he made him and breathed into him of his spirit.*" (Sajda 9) But it also says: "*Adam disobeyed his Lord and went astray.*" (Taha 121) Because of his disobedience, Adam is disqualified from being an intercessor, because he did not have both of the necessary qualities for being an intercessor.

But about Jesus, let us look at what the Koran says. Besides affirming the sinlessness of Christ Jesus, "*That I may give you a sinless boy.*" (Maryam 19), the Koran also says:

"She protected her virginity and we breathed into her of our spirit and made her and her son a miracle to all mankind." (Anbia 91)

This verse says that Christ was formed from a breath of God's spirit into Mary. Thus, he has a nature that came from God's spirit in addition to his human nature, which he got from his mother. As a result, he is the only one who has both conditions for being an intercessor between God and man.

And truly the Generous Koran clearly talks about there being only one intercessor who can intercede between God and man. For it says: "*Who is he who intercedes with Him except by his will?*" (Baqara 255) in the singular, not (Who are those who intercede with Him except with his permission?) in the plural. So Jesus is that intercessor.

We also see that the Koran confirms an important quality of an intercessor by saying: "*Who is he who intercedes with Him except by his will?*" (Baqara 255). Thus, an intercessor must do what he does according to God's will. Now the Koran also says about Christ Jesus:

"I will create a bird out of clay, breathe into it and it will be a real bird by God's will and I will heal those born blind and lepers and give life to the dead by God's will." (Al-Imran 49), and

"You create a bird out of clay by my will, and breathe into it and it will be a real bird by my will, and you heal those born blind and lepers by my will, and raise the dead by my will." (Maida 110)

Here, the Koran assures us six times that Christ Jesus did everything that he did by God's will. It is clear, then, that the Koran is referring to Jesus when it says: "*Who is he who intercedes with Him except by His will?*" (Baqara 255)

Who is he who intercedes? It is "*Christ Jesus, son of Mary, God's messenger, and his word which he sent to Mary and a spirit from him.*" (Nisa 171) He is the only one who can intercede with God.

This agrees with the confession in the holy Injeel: "*There is only one God, and only one intercessor between God and man: Christ Jesus son of Mary.* (1 Timothy 2:5)

To summarize, none can fast acceptably unless they put their trust in our Lord Jesus to intercede for them. This is God's path to an acceptable fast. Praise God, who gave us Christ Jesus as an intercessor, or else acceptable fasting would be impossible.

Where is your trust, O reader? Are you trusting in yourself when your soul is inclined to evil? Or are you trusting in people or things that cannot help intercede with God? Or are you trusting in "*Christ Jesus, son of Mary, God's messenger, and his word*

which he sent to Mary and a spirit from him." (Nisa 171), who alone can intercede with God the Merciful? Is your fast acceptable, O reader? I hope so.

Do you really want your fasting to be acceptable to God? Do you acknowledge and admit your sins, your unrighteousness, and your soul that leads you to do evil? Are you sorry for having disobeyed God? Do you repent from these sins? Do you know that were it not for the mercy of God that your sins, unrighteousness, and soul that leads you to sin will lead you to the eternal fires of hell? Do you want to escape from this painful torture? Do you see your need for someone to save you from this fate? Do you want an intercessor who can intercede with God? Do you see that no person other than Christ Jesus son of Mary can intercede with God most High? If you answered these questions "Yes," pray the following prayer to God:

God, I want you to accept my fast.
Lord, I admit my sins and my unrighteousness.
I'm sorry for all the times I disobeyed you.
Please accept my repentance.
I have nothing with which I can justify myself.
I need someone to save me.
Thank you that you have appointed Jesus as an intercessor because he is sinless.
I now take Christ Jesus son of Mary as my intercessor.
I trust in his intercession with you on my behalf
From now until the Day of Judgment. Amen.