Synopsis of Friday Sermon
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Ramadan – A Historical View

Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on July 08, 2011

Today’s sermon discusses the concept of fasting (siyam) and its historical background. During the Meccan period of the prophetic era, we observe that instilling of faith (iman) in people’s minds and hearts through Qur’anic revelations took precedence over prescribing rituals of worship (ibadat) to them. That is why we find that even the rulings of the five daily prayers (salah) were prescribed in the tenth year after prophethood. As for fasting, there were no injunctions to observe it up until the believers’ emigration from Mecca to Medina. Although the pagan Quraish of Mecca believed in Allah (SWT), yet this belief was tainted with shades of disbelief (kufr) and polytheism (shirk) as the pure monotheism (tawhid) inherited from their predecessors Ibrahim (AS) and Ismail (AS) had been perverted beyond recognition. Thus it became necessary that they be reintroduced to Allah (SWT) and the concept of tawhid all over again.

The subject matter of two-thirds of the Qur’an that was revealed during the Meccan period revolved around three main topics: belief in Allah (SWT), belief in the institution of prophethood and revelation, and belief in the hereafter. The force and diction of the divine text was preparing the believers for something more; not only to worship Allah (SWT) in the ritualistic sense but to make Him supreme for the sake of establishing a just social order based on divine guidance, even if it meant putting their lives at stake.

After their emigration to Medina, the ayah pertaining to fasting was revealed. “O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of God” (al-Baqarah, 2:183). It should be understood, however, that believers are at different levels of faith. There are those true believers of the like of the four righteous caliphs and other great companions of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Then there are others who are Muslims and have surrendered themselves to the will of Allah (SWT) but iman has not yet reached their hearts. Imam Ibn Taymiyyah commenting on this ayah said that there is a condition according to the Qur’an whereby one professes Islam while he may not have iman. He bases his exegesis on the ayah “The desert Arabs say, ‘We have iman.’ Say: ‘You do not have iman. Say rather, ‘We have become Muslim’ for iman has not yet entered into your hearts” (al-Hujurat, 49:14). Then there are the hypocrites (munafiqun) who also are legally and technically Muslims as they have uttered the testimony of faith. In fact, it is Allah (SWT) alone who is aware of the state of faith of a person.

What is the main objective of fasting? It is to develop God-consciousness (taqwa). The purpose and timing of the revelation pertaining to fasting has to be understood in the backdrop of the difficult situations the companions had to encounter at Mecca before their emigration to Medina. These among others included oppression, persecution, starvation, social and economic boycott and living in a climate of fear. After the hijrah, the believers had to be made ready for further challenges. They had to be organized into a jama‘ah (party) that could bravely and successfully engage with the polytheists of Mecca who had evicted them from their houses and deprived them of their belongings.

There was no practice among the Arabs to fast. However, they knew what fasting implied. They often used to make their horses fast in the scorching heat of the desert. This enabled the horses to endure long hours without eating and drinking during battles. The believers had now to be trained through fasting to bear the hardships of wars when fighting their enemies. This can be appreciated from the ayah of Surat al-Baqarah that talks about fighting the disbelievers (kuffar) and the polytheists (mushrikun). “Fight in the Way of Allah against those who fight you, but do not transgress. Allah does not like the transgressors” (al-Baqarah, 2:190). This was the introduction of fasting in Islam during the Medinan period of the prophetic era.

Initially, fasting was a voluntary act (tatawwu”) and not mandatory. It used to be only for a few days, which according to some scholars, “Ayyaman Ma’dudat - for a specified number of days…” is a number between three and nine. Others are of
the opinion that ‘a few days’ were the three white days (ayyam al-beedh) corresponding to the 13th, 14th, and 15th of every lunar month. It is also narrated that the Prophet (SAW) found the Jews in Medina to be fasting on the 10th of Muharram (Ashura) to commemorate the day of their emancipation from the bondage of Firaun (Pharaoh), and to thank Allah (SWT) for that. Henceforth, the Prophet (SAW) commanded the Muslims to fast on that day and another day preceding or following that day.

Up to this time, fasting was a sunnah and not a fard (an obligatory act). The revelations encouraged the believers to fast and provided certain concessions in hardships. “(Fasting is) for a specified number of days. But any of you who are ill or on a journey should fast a number of other days. For those who are unable to fast, their fidya (expiation) is to feed the poor. And if someone does good voluntarily, it is better for him. And if you fast, it is better for you, if you only know” (al-Baqarah, 2:184). It was better to fast in order to be prepared for the upcoming challenges. It may be recalled that the Battle of Badr took place on the 17th of Ramadan, the very next year.

Allah (SWT) then prescribed fasting for the entire month of Ramadan. “It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur’an was revealed as guidance for mankind, clear messages giving guidance and distinguishing between right and wrong. So any one of you who is present that month should fast, and anyone who is ill or on a journey should make up for the lost days by fasting on other days later. God wants ease for you, not hardship. He wants you to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him for having guided you, so that you may be thankful” (al-Baqarah, 2:185). Glorification (takbir) of Allah (SWT) in this ayah refers not only to glorify Him during Eid and at other times, but to make Him supreme on earth for having guided us to the great and noble deen of Islam. This guidance distinguishes between right and wrong, between good and evil, and between truth (haq) and falsehood (batil).

In reality, fasting does not weaken a person; rather it strengthens him in all respects—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Ramadan is a blessed month for all people and communities from Adam (AS) to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). It was in the month of Ramadan that the Taurat, Zabur, Injeel, and Qur’an were given to Prophets Musa (AS), Dawud (AS), ‘Isa ibn Maryam (AS), and Muhammad (SAW) respectively. It is believed that the entire Qur’an, which is part of the mother book that contains other divine scriptures in the ‘Preserved Book’ (Lawh al-Mahfoudh), was sent down to the first earthly heaven on the 27th night of Ramadan, also known as the night of power, “Truly We sent it down on the Night of Power” (al-Qadr, 97:1). Thereafter, under Allah (SWT)’s command, it was revealed bit by bit by Angel Jibril (AS) to Muhammad (SAW) over a period of 23 years of his prophethood, the first ayah being that of Surat al-’Alaq, “Read in the name of your Lord who created” (al-’Alaq, 96:1) and the last ayah being that of Surat al-Ma’idah, “…This day I have perfected for you your faith, completed My favor upon you, and I am pleased with Islam as your Deen (complete way of life)…” (al-Ma’idah, 5:3). The sequence of revelation we have in the Qur’an is not the same sequence that was chronologically revealed to the Prophet (SAW), but is in accordance with the compilation based on the instructions of Allah (SWT) to the Prophet (SAW) through Jibril (AS). The Prophet (SAW) used to recite and review the Qur’an every Ramadan with Jibril (AS) up to the portion that had been revealed till then in the order that Allah (SWT) wanted. In his last Ramadan, the Prophet (SAW) reviewed the entire Qur’an twice with Jibril (AS).

It should be well understood that the Qur’an is the verbatim word of Allah (SWT). The orientalists and other scholars have subjected the Qur’an to rigorous historical criticism in order to prove that it has undergone a process of revision and editing and hence cannot be authentic. All their efforts, however, have been to no avail. The human intervention, manipulation, and fabrication the Bible has gone through do not apply to the Qur’an. This last gift that was meant to guide the entire humanity is protected. This protection has been undertaken by Allah (SWT) Himself. “It is We Who have sent down the Remembrance and it is We Who will preserve it” (al-Hijr, 15:9).

Fasting has been ordained upon every sane, mature and adult Muslim who is able to fast. The virtues and greatness of the month of Ramadan should never be underestimated. It is not only the month of fasting but also the month of Qur’an, which should be read, understood, and acted upon. Ramadan is the month of mercy, piety, patience, charity, forgiveness and thankfulness to Allah (SWT). We should not let this month pass away without doing our utmost to please Allah (SWT). The month of Sha’ban, which precedes Ramadan is also a blessed month. It has been reported that the Prophet (SAW) would fast most of Sha’ban. We should also make the best use of it by fasting as many days as possible.

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