

RAMADAN & ADVENTISTS:

Understanding It and Ministering to Muslims

by Dr. Abdel Nur Idriza

Have you ever fasted for an entire day? Many Adventists engage in an entire Sabbath fast when there is a call for a mission-wide or global day of fasting. How about an entire week? I know some people who, for health reasons, have fasted for a week. But fasting for one month? Not an easy feat! How many Adventists do I know who have done that? Umm... No comment. 😊

For Muslims, fasting (Arabic, *sawm*) for one month is a yearly experience. During the lunar month of Ramadan, they are obligated to abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. That must be such a difficult requirement.

Historical Background: How did the month-long fasting come about? Islamic historian W. Montgomery Watt states that during the Hijra (or the migration of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina), the day-long Jewish fast of *Ashura*¹ was what was required for the Muslims. However, after the conflict and the eventual rift with the Jews, Muhammad abandoned the original Jewish fast day and required month-long fasting.²

The month of Ramadan may have been initially selected as a yearly time of individual spiritual renewal as a sort of month-long thanksgiving for Muhammad's victory at the Battle of Badr or in commemoration of Muhammad's Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr*). Tradition relates that it was during the final ten days of Ramadan—while Muhammad was fasting for a month—that he received the Quran.³

While there are other days that are recommended for Muslims to fast, *sawm*, or fasting during the twenty-nine or thirty days of the 9th month of the Islamic calendar or Ramadan is the only required fasting for every Muslim who is: 1) above the age of adolescence, 2) with a sound mind and body, and 3) who can fast without harming their health.⁴ It is a lifelong yearly duty that is



¹ Watt, Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an, 1970, p. 163. This is enjoined in Surah 2:183.

² Machatschke, 1990, p. 14. This is enjoined in Surah 2:185.

³ Zepp, 1992, p. 120. "According to tradition, the night the Qur'an 'came down' – the Night of Power – occurred in Ramadan. The month of fasting builds up to the Night of Power, which generally falls on 27 Ramadan but is dependent on the timing of the new moon" (Baldock, 2004, p. 53. See also Machatschke, 1990, pp. 14, 15; Zepp, 1992, p. 120).

⁴ Mondays and Thursdays are recommended days of fasting (per Muhammad's personal practice (Emerick, 2002, p. 149), as well as 6 days after Idu'l Fitr and 3 days of each month – namely, 13th, 14th, and 15th day (Hughes, Fasting, 1965, p. 124). "Voluntary fasting is recommended on various occasions, especially on the 10th of the month of Muharram [day of

enjoined by the Quran for every faithful Muslim.⁵ Failure to observe the Ramadan fast without a valid excuse is considered “an unpardonable sin with eternal effects.”⁶

Exemptions: The only ones who are exempted from the fast of Ramadan are 1) young children (below puberty), “the permanently sick, the elderly who are too weak, and the mentally challenged.”⁷ Others may also be temporarily exempted at some point during the fast of Ramadan, such as 1) women who happened to be menstruating, pregnant, in labor or nursing, 2) those who are sick, 3) soldiers who are on duty, travelers, 4) and those doing heavy manual labor. These may temporarily postpone the fast, but once circumstances have changed to allow them to resume fasting, they have to compensate for the days they missed during the other times of the year.⁸ In the absence of any of these conditions, an adult Muslim man or woman must observe the month-long fast of Ramadan.

Observing Ramadan: The fast calls for total abstinence from food, liquids, smoking, sexual activity, even the drinking of non-emergency oral medicine or vitamins, from sunrise to sunset during the 29-30 days of the month of Ramadan.

As a month of extreme religious devotion and as a time of self-denial, it involves other sunrise-to-sunset regulations such as no gambling, no cursing, no gossiping, no fighting, no arguing, no lying, and no doing of other sins. Evil or sensual thoughts and desires must also be avoided at all costs, including violent movies, loud music, bad smells, or sweet perfumes. Also, during the month of Ramadan, Muslims are required to read, recite or listen to the Quran meditatively every day, to daily perform a good deed to the neighbors, and to give charitable contributions.⁹



Celebrating Ramadan & Eid ul-Fitr: Muslims look at Ramadan not only as a time of renunciation and self-denial but also as a time of joy. The good thing about fasting is the breaking of it. After sunset, the family and friends gather for a meal which can be a joyful social occasion. The

Ashura], the month of Sha’ban, on alternate days, etc.” (Adamec, Fasting, 2003, p. 94) “There are numerous traditions of voluntary fasting in Islam to seek forgiveness of sins, satisfy vows, and for general reasons of piety, but Islamic tradition forbids successive days of fasting that would harm the body” (Newby, Sawm, 2004, p. 192). See also Lewis, 1997, p. 27, Emerick, 2002, p. 145 and Newby, Sawm, 2004, p. 192.

⁵ Caner & Caner, 2002, p. 127. Sura 2:183-185 gives “the rationale for fasting” (Zepp, 1992, p. 120).

⁶ Zepp, p. 128. “One scholar notes, ‘Abu Hurairah reports the Messenger of Allah said: ‘Whoever breaks one day’s fast of Ramadan without an authorized permission from Allah, he will never be able to redeem it (with another) day’s fast, even if he fasts for eternity.’ The sin of abandoning this duty, therefore, is irreversible.” (Zepp).

⁷ Emerick, 2002, p. 145.

⁸ Lewis, 1997, p. 27. “If the fast adversely affects one’s health, that person is exempted. Pregnant, nursing, and menstruating women are exempted and may compensate for their lost days during other times in the year” (Zepp, 1992, p. 121). See also Newby, Sawm, 2004, p. 192.

⁹ Caner & Caner, 2002, p. 127. Muhammad is said to have commented that “Every good act that a man does shall receive from ten to seven hundred rewards, but the rewards for fasting are beyond bounds, for fasting is for God alone, and He will give the rewards.” (Adamec, Fasting, 2003, p. 94) It is further believed that during Ramadan, the recording angels “record each good deed as doubled or trebled or more” (Emerick, 2002, p. 147. See Zepp, 1992, p. 122).

celebratory atmosphere is carried on during the month and reaches its climax during *Eid ul-Fitr* (Feast of the Breaking of the Fast). Some Christians consider Ramadan as an “antithesis to Christmas” because “it pits the revelation of the Holy Bible against the revelation of Qur’an.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, there is a striking similarity to the festive mood of this Muslim feast and holiday with Christmas. The *Eid ul-Fitr*—the festival that ends the month of Ramadan—is the Muslims' annual time for family reunions, gift-giving, exchanging of cards, and much visiting of relatives and friends.¹¹

Benefits of the Ramadan Fast. The benefit of *sawm* is dependent on the intention of the one fasting. If any of the “normally undesirable behaviors.”¹² are engaged in during *sawm*, a person’s fasting is unacceptable to God. This is a sad situation because “if God doesn’t accept your fasting, you may not go to heaven no matter what other good deeds you did.”¹³

Various authors cite the life-changing benefits of the long and demanding practice of Ramadan: 1) it reminds and trains one for a life of sacrifice and dependence on God. 2) It leads one to be pious, submitted, and committed to God. 3) It is the best remedial measure for vices. 4) It develops understanding, sympathy, and empathy for the poor. 5) It deepens “love, honesty, devotion, generosity, and social concern.”¹⁴ 6) It helps participants to become more enlightened and to gain deeper spiritual awareness.¹⁵ 7) It increases one’s intimacy and knowledge of the Islamic faith. 8) It helps one to “avoid sins throughout the rest of the year” through “intense modification of...habits.”¹⁶ 9) It gives one a new appreciation for eating and drinking. To top all of these, Emerick comments,

The real reward for a successful Ramadan is no less than the forgiveness of all our sins.... So, in addition to all the improvements Ramadan can make in our character and health, we get the slate erased and can start over.¹⁷

Ramadan is a time of self-purification for Muslims.¹⁸ With these inducements, many non-Muslims in North America are now learning to observe Ramadan fast.¹⁹



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¹⁰ Caner & Caner, 2002, p. 127.

¹¹ During this festival, they “greet each other...with ... ‘Eid Mubarak!’ ... ‘A Blessed ‘Eid to you!’ Gift giving is common, especially for children, and cards are exchanged” (Emerick, 2002, p. 149).

¹² Emerick, 2002, p. 146.

¹³ Emerick.

¹⁴ Zepp, 1992, p. 121.

¹⁵ According to the Quran, the purpose of fasting is to “gain more spiritual awareness” (Emerick, 2002, p. 146. See Surah 2:183).

¹⁶ Emerick, 2002, p. 148.

¹⁷ Emerick, p. 149.

¹⁸ Zepp, 1992, p. 120.

¹⁹ Emerick, 2002, p. 149. However, it should be noted that Muslim scholars consider the fast of a Christian unacceptable to Allah. “Fasting is not obligatory on a non-Muslim because he is not commanded to fast and even if he decides to fast and follows all the regulations, it will not be accepted by Allah (SWT). If he or she wants to fast the Islamic fast, he has to declare the *Kalimah* first, and only then will the fast be accepted” (Shu’aib). Also see Caner & Caner, 2002, p. 127.

Ministering to Muslims During Ramadan

GC AMR Associate Director Samuel Lumwe gives some very helpful suggestions on how Adventists can minister to their Muslim neighbors and friends during this time. I have synthesized his suggestions into seven tips.



1. Pray for Muslims. Identify and make a list of Muslims to pray for every day.

5. Pray with Muslims. Depending on the level of your relationship with your Muslim friend, you could invite him or her for a virtual prayer session with them.

2. Connect with Muslims. Find ways to communicate with Muslims at least once a week. Be friendly and try to encourage them if they have problems, worries, or needs. For purposes of connecting, you may use the GCAMR Ramadan cards. They are designed to be shared via email or social media each day of the fasting month to your Muslim friends and acquaintances. These cards may open a spiritual conversation.

3. Look for Ways to Help Muslims. Once you have identified their needs, you can look at how you or your church can address those needs. You can create a list of all needy Muslims who need help in kind or cash. You could also establish a chain of supply, allocated funds, and other resources that can be used to meet the basic needs of those on your list.

4. Involve the Local Church. One or more local churches can band together to pull their resources and address the identified basic needs of Muslims in their communities. You may use WhatsApp or any other social media platform that is encrypted for church members to share the identified needs of Muslim friends and organize intercessory prayers for them.

6. Share Videos or Audio Materials. If some available videos or audios can provide messages of hope and encouragement in the local language, send the links to your Muslim friends every week. This is also a good time to share gospel films that are freely available on YouTube. Some of them (like the Jesus Film) are available in different languages.

7. Offer Bible Study. If you see a positive response to messages and conversations about the love of God, the Bible, or God's truth, try to nurture this interest and openness by sharing Bible materials either through videos, online Bible courses, or documents.

