



September 14, 2007

Ramandan: The Islamic Month of Fasting

YESTERDAY more than 1 billion people began fasting all the daylight hours, from when the light begins to glow on the eastern horizon until the glow is gone in the west. And they're doing it today, too. And they will every day for 30 days...from September 13 until October 12th.

Of several Muslim fasts, the most important is the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. This fast is a requirement for Muslims:

"Oh ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint."
 ~ Qur'an 2:183

Based on a reported saying of Muhammad, Muslims believe that the gates of paradise are opened and the gates of hell closed during Ramadan. All people who keep the fast will be pardoned for their excusable sins.ⁱ

Eating, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse are not allowed between dawn and sunset. During Ramadan, Muslims are also expected to put more effort into following the teachings of Islam by refraining from violence, anger, envy, greed, lust, angry and sarcastic retorts, and gossip. People are meant to try to get along with each other better than they normally might. All obscene and irreligious sights and sounds are to be avoided. Purity of both thought and action is important. The fast is an exacting act of deep personal worship in which Muslims seek a raised level of closeness to God. The act of fasting is said to redirect the heart away from worldly activities, its purpose being to cleanse the inner soul and free it from harm.ⁱⁱ

Ramadan brings out a special feeling of emotional excitement and religious zeal among Muslims of all ages. Though fasting is mandatory only for adults, children as young as eight willingly observe fasting with their elders. Children look forward to the excitement of sighting the moon and eating special meals with their families.

The last ten days of Ramadan are considered highly blessed, especially the 27th night which is also called the 'Night of Power', or the 'Night of Destiny'. It is believed that on this night the prophet Muhammad received the first revelation of the Qur'an. For many Muslims, this period is marked by a heightened spiritual intensity and they may spend these nights praying and reciting the Qur'an.ⁱⁱⁱ

References:

- I. What Christians Need to Know About Muslims, by David K. Irwin. ©1987 by CMM.
- II. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ramadan>
- III. <http://www.30-days.net/aboutus/download/30d-ramadan.rtf>

Commentary:

In the Bible, we do not find any one method of fasting required of us, but the Lord Jesus did say however, "*when you fast...*" (Matthew 6:16), seeming to assume that His followers would imitate His own example. We fast as an outward symbol of our devotion to God, being willing to deny ourselves food for His sake. Fasting adds intensity to our prayer and often leads to breakthroughs. We do not fast to convince or persuade Him, but rather to identify with His broken heart and with His desire for all mankind to know Him. "*Is this not the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free and that you break every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out.*" (Isaiah 58:6 & 7)ⁱⁱⁱ

It is my sincere hope that as you read this you *don't* read it as mere information, but rather that as you read this your heart and mind you is illumined, realizing the significance of what Muslims are doing and that you are burdened by the Holy Spirit to pray and to fast for Muslims.

Remember Cornelius in Acts 10 & 11? Remember what it says about him? He was a Roman centurion – thus in New Testament terminology he was a pagan, not a Jew or Christian. Yet, he was "devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly."

Wow! Do you realize the significance of this?! An angel appeared to him and said, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God." Because of his earnest seeking of God and doing what he new was right toward God (seeking Him and submitting every aspect of his life to God), God saw, sent an angel, sent an apostle, and brought him into the Kingdom of God!

Here we are today with 1.3 billion Muslims bowing, praying 5 times a day, and fasting...all to be closer to the only revelation of God they know. Could it be that as we pray and fast for *their* salvation, God will hear and answer their cries? Will He send



them an angel? Will Jesus appear to them in a dream? Will He send his apostles today (you, me and Christian workers throughout the Islamic world) to share His truth with them and lead them into the Kingdom?!

I believe He will. And I believe He is doing just that. Will you join me in prayer daily during Ramadan?! I believe we will see great things happen in Muslim's lives as a result of our faithfulness.

October 5, 2007

Ramadan, part 2: What is the month of fasting really like?

Seven days from now Ramadan – the Islamic month of fasting – will come to an end. We've already looked at some of the mechanical do's and don'ts they observe: No eating, drinking (not even water), smoking, or sexual relations from the first light of dawn until darkness has fallen.

With all these very challenging restrictions, why are the vast majority of Muslims so devoted to carrying out this month of fasting?

The answer to this starts to dawn upon us as we consider what the Hadiths – the Traditions – record Muhammad saying about the fast:

It is recommended that children ten to twelve years old be trained to fast. Fasting is one of the legalistic works that must be done in order to have one's sins forgiven. "Allah's Apostle said, 'Whoever fasts during the month of Ramadan out of sincere faith, and hoping to attain Allah's rewards, then all his past sins will be forgiven.'"

~ Hadith 1:37

About the fasting person Allah says, "He has left his food, drink and desires for my sake. The fast is for Me. So I reward for it and the reward of good deeds is multiplied ten times."

~ Hadith 3:118¹

Here we begin to see the motivation Muslim's have toward this fast: "...in order to have one's sins forgiven...then all his past sins will be forgiven...the reward of good deeds is multiplied ten times."

Islam is a religion of legalism and works. It takes works (good deeds) to "pay off" or outweigh their bad deeds in order to – hopefully – be acceptable to Allah and receive mercy on the Day of Judgment. With no Intercessor nor an Advocate nor a Redeemer as we have in Jesus, they are left on their own to try and work their way into paradise. And can all be cast to the wind by Allah's capriciousness and unfathomable will.

So what is life like during Ramadan?

David Goldmann, author of "Islam and the Bible: Why Two Faiths Collide," shares this:

During the many Ramadan months we observed during our years in North Africa, my family and I were able to experience firsthand the activity during this month of fasting. Muslims usually consume more food during this month than at other times. Restaurants and cafes are closed during the day, open at sunset and are busy until 1 or 2 a.m.

In the early hours before sunrise, "callers" move through the deserted streets calling aloud for the faithful to rise, prepare food, and eat before sunrise. For a woman who also works during the day, this can be a most exhausting month. The last ten days are usually the most difficult, as everyone is tired and patience wears thin.

Many Muslims become more zealous in their faith as a result of keeping Ramadan, and some try to make up for shortcomings of the previous year. Christian minorities living in countries where Islam is the state religion often face more persecution during this time. A close friend of mine went to prison because an important man in his village asked what he thought were sincere questions about Christianity and fasting. My friend explained that he didn't have to fast because Jesus Christ loved him and paid the penalty for his sin, so he didn't have to earn God's favor. This man brought a charge of apostasy against him and he was sentenced to six months in prison.ⁱⁱ

Some friends working in a Middle East nation sent me this just days ago:

"Ramadan is almost over - only about ten days left. For a bit, while I was writing this, a blind beggar was sitting on the steps outside our door loudly singing out Qur'anic verses and praises to God. I thought of the spiritual blindness that most in this city have. May God open their eyes to see and may they sing praises to Jesus.

We've had some visits but not as many as we would have liked. We have been able to spend some extra time in prayer this month though, which has been very good. A special night is coming soon - the "Night of Power" (most likely it will be October 9). During this night, Muslims believe that heaven is opened and all prayers that are said will be answered. Many spend all night in the mosques or in their homes praying and chanting the Quran."ⁱⁱⁱ

In conclusion, please follow these prayer points as my friend outlined for us:

- Pray for many to encounter Jesus.
- Pray that the deepest desire of their hearts will be answered.
- Pray for an outpouring of God's Spirit on this nation and across the Muslim world.
- Thank you for your prayers for us and for this nation and her peoples.ⁱⁱⁱ

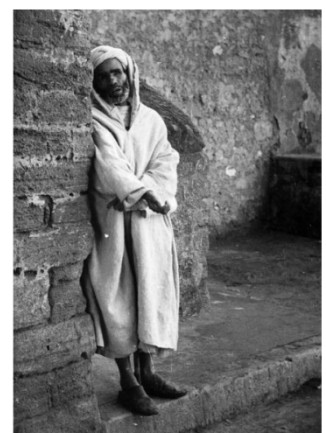
Next week: The significance of *Eid al-Fitr*, celebrating the end of Ramadan.

References:

- IV. Islam and the Bible, by David Goldmann. Moody Press, Chicago. ©2004 P. 117
- V. Ibid, Pp. 117-118
- VI. Private newsletter, October 3, 2007.



Ramadan is meant to be a time of worship and contemplation. When daylight fades the fast is broken with prayer and a meal called the iftar. Following the iftar it is customary for Muslims to go out visiting family and friends. The fast is resumed the next morning. They also must perform a special prayer, called the Taraweeh, in addition to the five daily prayers.



Ramadan, part 3: The Feast of Eid al-Fitr

As you read this, Muslims are celebrating what is likely the highest holiday of the Islamic calendar – the Feast of Eid al-Fitr, or the Feast of Fast Breaking. This is usually a three-day feast at the end of Ramadan. After the twenty-nine or thirty days of fasting this is a time of merrymaking when family members visit each other and gifts are often distributed to children during this feast.

To give you a comparison of the significance of this Feast to them, consider how much Christmas or Easter means to you; that's how important this is to your Muslim friend.

We need to understand, however, the similarities and differences of Muslim festivals. So I share the following from David Goldmann's excellent book, *Islam and the Bible: Why Two Faiths Collide*.

Both Christians and Muslims observe festivals and holidays to commemorate important events in their faiths. This human nature to commemorate was sanctioned by God as early as the night before the exodus in Egypt, when the Jews observed a special meal while the angel of death spared their firstborn children during the "Passover" dinner (Exodus 12:1-14).

Yet, "Islamic holidays differ in both essence and meaning from the holy days that Christians observe." As Ergun and Emir Caner point out in *Unveiling Islam*,

First, and most important, Christian holidays remember divine intervention, while Islamic celebrations are based on human accomplishment. In Christianity, we celebrate Easter as the resurrection of our Lord Jesus and His completion of the sacrifice for our sins. In Islam, "Eid ul-Adha" celebrates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Ishmael, not Allah's substitution of the Ram in the thicket. In Christianity we celebrate the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ, for our redemption. Islam celebrates Mawlid al-Nabi, the birth date of Muhammad, their warrior. Christianity and Judaism recognize Passover as the work of God sparing the firstborn children of the Israelites. Muslims mark the end of their own personal sacrifice in Ramadan with "Eid ul'Fitr." The complete inversion of the purpose of holy days cannot be overstated.

Second, the communal activities and meals celebrated in Islam are exclusively for Muslims. In Christian terminology, Muslims believe emphatically in "closed communion"... Non-Muslims...are unwelcome at Muslim celebrations.¹

As I shared last week, Islam is a religion of legalism and works. It takes works – meaning a person's good deeds and religious observances – to "pay off" or outweigh their bad deeds in order to *hopefully* be acceptable to Allah and receive mercy on the Day of Judgment. Since in their faith Allah does not provide a Savior, an Advocate nor His Holy Spirit to work on their behalf in this life, it is all left up to the individual to strive to understand Allah's will, comply and fulfill it all in human effort alone. Thus you and I can understand that all their religious celebrations glorify not Allah, but human actions – theirs or some else's.

Our Muslim friends may complete Ramadan and Eid feeling quite satisfied with their accomplishments. Yet we must also consider that in the deep spiritual center of their beings they are still feeling empty, since they cannot personally connect with Allah. They may be feeling unfulfilled, sensing something is still missing in their life. And they may be inwardly searching for something more.

All our religious works are ultimately unsatisfying. If our religious works truly left us fulfilled, we wouldn't need to continually go back to work and rework them again and again.

Our Muslim friends, however, will probably not be quick to admit the emptiness, lack of fulfillment and desire for something more. They may feel very proud of their accomplishment, or they fear the perception that their religion – supposedly the final, complete and perfect religion – is inadequate. They would certainly fear another Muslim perceiving their weakness and the questioning of their faith.

Yet the Spirit of God is not limited as we are. He can and does continue His quiet and effective work in the hearts and minds of our Muslim friends – especially as we continue to pray for them. Please do!

As you converse with your Muslim friend, ask questions. How was their Ramadan fast? How was Eid? What do they feel was the highlight(s) of this year's experience for them? Was it difficult? How do they feel now that it is over? What do they feel they have accomplished through the fast? Do they feel they have grown spiritual through the experience? If so, what kind of spiritual growth was it?

Ask these questions over a meal – invite them over. Have your own "Eid" feast for them! Ask them to help you purchase "halal" meat so they can eat it with you in your home. Now that Ramadan is over, this is a great time to reach out and renew your fellowship with them in this way. And by doing so, you build the bridge of friendship across which the Gospel may travel into their hearts.

References:

1. *Islam and the Bible*, by David Goldmann. Moody Press, Chicago. ©2004 Excerpts taken from pp. 123 – 125. (David Goldmann quotes: Ergun Mehmet Caner and Emir Fethi Caner, *Unveiling Islam*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002. P. 159)



This beautiful little girl in Kenya celebrates Eid in her new dress. Here, as in many places worldwide, Muslims will parade through the streets with drums and tambourines, celebrating the end of the Fast of Ramadan in Eid al-Fitr. Just as many Christians might give their children a new set of clothes for Christmas or Easter, Muslims do the same for their children at this Feast.