

Fasting in the Qur'an

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Fasting and Ramadhan

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ †
أَيَّامًا مَّعْدُودَاتٍ فَمَن كَانَ مِنكُم مَّرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَهُ
فِدْيَةٌ طَعَامُ مِسْكِينٍ فَمَن تَطَوَّعَ خَيْرًا فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَهُ وَأَن تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ †
شَهْرَ رَمَضَانَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ فِيهِ الْقُرْآنُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ وَبَيِّنَاتٍ مِّنَ الْهُدَى وَالْفُرْقَانِ فَمَن شَهِدَ مِنْكُمُ
الشَّهْرَ فَلْيَصُمْهُ وَمَن كَانَ مَرِيضًا أَوْ عَلَى سَفَرٍ فَعِدَّةٌ مِّنْ أَيَّامٍ أُخَرَ يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ بِكُمُ الْيُسْرَ وَلَا يُرِيدُ
بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ وَلِتُكْمِلُوا الْعِدَّةَ وَلِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَى مَا هَدَاكُم وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ †

O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard (against evil).

(Fasting is) for a fixed number of days; and if any of you is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed number (Should be made up) from days later, and for those (who miss the fast for illness or travel) who are able to do it, is a ransom of feeding one that is indigent. But he that will give more, of his own free will, it is better for him. And it is better for you that you fast, if you only knew.

The month of Ramadhan in which was revealed the Qur'an, guidance for mankind, and clear proofs of the guidance, and the Criterion (of right and wrong). And whosoever of you is present, let him fast the month, and whosoever of you is sick or on a journey, (let him fast the same) number of other days. Allah desires ease for you; He does not desire hardship for you; and (He desires) that you should complete the period, and that you should magnify Allah for having guided you, and that peradventure you may be thankful.

Qur'an (2:183-185)

General

- Fasting was prescribed for us to gain God consciousness.
- Fast the month of ramadhan, you know its beginning and end by the moon phase where you are (e.g., see 2:189 and 6:96).
- Fasting is for the 30 days of the month of ramadhan, these are the fixed days.

Purpose

- Allah desires ease for us and not hardship, so this can be kept in mind. Fasting is not supposed to be a damaging experience.
- We should complete the period of fasting and glorify Allah. It is better to fast so always make the effort and do not look to try and avoid it without good cause(s).

Exception(s)

- If you are on a journey or you are sick then you can make up any missed days later.
 - Further to this, if you are able or can afford it, is the feeding of a poor person (and more if you can). This act is a ransom to be paid, if you can, for missing days in ramadhan, even if you make the days up at a later point.

It has been considered that this ransom is for one who finds it difficult to fast, and so does not and feeds people instead. But the word **يُطِيقُونَهُ** is really more easily understood as ‘having the ability to’... and so does not comfortably fit such an understanding... Further to this, verses 184 and 185 reiterate their contents, and in 185, no mention is made of feeding someone in the context either of missed days due to difficulty in fasting or due to missed days from illness or travel. If we understood that there was a third category mentioned in 2:184, then it would have also existed in 2:185.

However, the reality is that there are circumstances beyond illness or travel that may indicate that we can miss days and make them up. If we consider the two cases mentioned by Allah in the verse, illness and travel, we can derive further understanding.

Illness: This implies that you physically are incapable of fasting on one or more days. In the case that your illness is perpetual, then no making up of the days exists, however feeding the poor if you can remains. This implies that in the circumstance that it could be deemed physically damaging or just unduly taxing due to an illness to fast, then we can make use of the allowance. To be noted, this category appears to deal with challenges to fasting rooted in your own body.

Travel: This implies that if fasting acts to make a routine/normal job/task/circumstance dangerous/impractical or unduly difficult, then we can make use of the allowance. To be noted, this category appears to deal with challenges to fasting rooted in your environment and/or circumstances.

We have therefore in these two categories enough leeway to deal with any circumstance which may make fasting a trial and an undue challenge, rather than a means to God consciousness.

Times of Fasting

وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا حَتَّى يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ الْخَيْطُ الْأَبْيَضُ مِنَ الْخَيْطِ الْأَسْوَدِ مِنَ الْفَجْرِ ثُمَّ أَتُمُوا الصِّيَامَ إِلَى
اللَّيْلِ

... and eat and drink until the white thread (of light) becomes distinct to you from the black thread (night/darkness) of the dawn. Then strictly observe the fast until/to the **night** ...

Qur'an (2:187)

A big problem in the fasting of Ramadhan has become that people fast until sunset, which is مغرب, instead of night which is ليل. Now some people try to claim that night starts from sunset, in reality there is no Qur'anic reason to accept this as in the Qur'an the word ليل is used to mean night and is always used to mean a period of darkness.

In dictionaries of Qur'anic Arabic the following is the meaning given to the words ليل and نهار:

نهار: Day as opposed to Layl (night). It tends to be defined as from sunrise to sunset or from dawn until sunset. Though some defined it as the time of the spreading and dispersion (some say 'its collecting together') of the sight giving light, which is the proper Qur'anic use of it.

ليل: Night. It tends to be defined as from sunset to dawn or from sunset to sunrise. Though if we define it as the opposite of the time of the spreading and dispersion of the sight giving light, then it would mean the time when there is no sight giving light in the sky.

It is clear that there is no unanimous and unequivocal meaning assigned to this word in the Arabic dictionaries. I am of the opinion that these meanings are affected by what became the practice of fasting, as notice that both the definitions of night and day conveniently can have the night starting and day ending at sunset whereas the night ends and the day starts at dawn. This is an oddly unbalanced and unsymmetrical understanding of day and night.

In the following I hope to analyse the Qur'anic usage of the term *layl* and apply it to the relevant verse on fasting.

تُولِجُ اللَّيْلَ فِي النَّهَارِ وَتُولِجُ النَّهَارَ فِي اللَّيْلِ وَتُخْرِجُ الْحَيَّ مِنَ الْمَمِيتِ وَتُخْرِجُ الْمَمِيتَ مِنَ الْحَيِّ
وَتَرْزُقُ مَنْ تَشَاءُ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

You cause the night to enter into the day, and You cause the day to enter into the night. And You bring forth the living from the dead, and You bring forth the dead from the living. And You give sustenance to whom You choose, without stint.

Qur'an (3:27)

- Night entering into day: Dawn-Fajr (فجر)
- Day entering into night: Sunset-Maghrib (مغرب)
- We have 2 distinct phases in the day and the night, just like life and death are 2 distinct phases. The analogy Allah makes should be noted well. Day and night are as distinct as life and death.

هُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ لِتَسْكُنُوا فِيهِ وَالنَّهَارَ مُبْصِرًا إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّقَوْمٍ يَسْمَعُونَ

He it is who has appointed for you the night that ye should rest therein and the day giving sight. Surely, herein are signs for a folk that heed.

Qur'an (10:67)

- The distinctive essence of day is that it enables vision/perception; you can see things during day. You can see things during and after sunset but not as the night sets in. One of the meanings defined for day above fits in with this perfectly.
 - Therefore, you can know if it is night where you are if it becomes dark in your area. Obviously lamps, moon and stars need to be considered at this point.

وَالشَّمْسُ وَضُحَاهَا ۚ وَالْقَمَرُ إِذَا تَلَاهَا ۚ وَالنَّهَارُ إِذَا جَلَّاهَا ۚ وَاللَّيْلُ إِذَا يَغْشَاهَا

*By the sun and its **brightness**, by the moon when it follows it, by the day when it displays it, by the night when it covers it*

Qur'an (91:1-4)

- By the sun **AND its brightness/light**, the brightness which is concealed/covered by the night. It is important to realise that it is not just the sun which is covered by the night (which would imply that night started at sunset), but also its brightness!

يُقَلِّبُ اللَّهُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَعِبْرَةً لَأُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ

Allah alternates the night and the day. Indeed in that is a lesson for those who have vision.

Qur'an (24:44)

- Two separate phases are alternated. Night and day. Again, sunset and dawn must be a part of one of these. Why?
 - Because both sunset and dawn share the same characteristics. They must logically belong to only one of the two available phases.
- This alternation is something observable.

خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ بِالْحَقِّ يُكَوِّرُ اللَّيْلَ عَلَى النَّهَارِ وَيُكَوِّرُ النَّهَارَ عَلَى اللَّيْلِ وَسَخَّرَ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ كُلٌّ يَجْرِي لِأَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى أَلَا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْغَفَّارُ

He created the heavens and earth in truth. He wraps the night over the day and wraps the day over the night and has subjected the sun and the moon, each running [its course] for a specified term.

Unquestionably, He is the Exalted in Might, the Perpetual Forgiver.

Qur'an (39:5)

- Night speeds around ('wraps around') the world as the world spins, so while it will be night where you are, it will not yet be so, further off towards the horizon away from you. This can make sense when you consider that you fast from the point that a line of light in the horizon is framed against the night. Up to and at this point, there is light in the sky in the vicinity and surrounding area of the horizon. If we then consider 10:67, the key becomes that it is night at the point where you are.

فَأَسْرِ بِأَهْلِكَ بِقِطْعٍ مِّنَ اللَّيْلِ وَلَا يَلْتَفِتْ مِنْكُمْ أَحَدٌ إِلَّا أَمْرَاتَكَ إِنَّهُ مُصِيبُهَا مَا أَصَابَهُمْ إِنَّ

مَوْعِدَهُمُ الصُّبْحُ أَلَيْسَ الصُّبْحُ بِقَرِيبٍ

... So set out with your family during a portion of the night and let not any among you look back - except your wife; indeed, she will be struck by that which strikes them. Indeed, their appointment is

[for] the morning. Is not the morning near?

Qur'an (11:81)

- Following on from the previous point, it is clear that Lut is in the night here with the Angels, however they are able to tell when the day is approaching. This is likely because as the day is approaching and the night departing, light begins to enter the horizon until we get the white thread and the black thread etc... So while it is still night where you are, you can see that far off the day is approaching.

وَهُوَ الَّذِي جَعَلَ لَكُمْ النُّجُومَ لِتَهْتَدُوا بِهَا فِي ظُلُمَاتِ الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ قَدْ فَصَّلْنَا آيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

And it is He who placed for you the stars that you may be guided by them through the darknesses of the land and sea. We have detailed the signs for a people who know.

Qur'an (6:97)

- The stars will be clear to us at the time of night/darkness.

فَلَمَّا جَنَّ عَلَيْهِ اللَّيْلُ رَأَى كَوْكَبًا قَالَ هَذَا رَبِّي فَلَمَّا أَفَلَ قَالَ لَا أُحِبُّ الْآفِلِينَ

*So when the night covered him [with darkness], he saw a **planet**. He said, "This is my lord." But when it set, he said, "I like not those that disappear".*

Qur'an (6:76)

- At the onset of the night Ibrahim was able to clearly see a planet in the sky.

وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ طَرَفَى النَّهَارِ وَزُلْفًا مِّنَ اللَّيْلِ إِنَّ الْحَسَنَاتِ يُدْهِنُ السَّيِّئَاتِ ذَلِكَ ذِكْرَى لِلذَّاكِرِينَ

Establish salaah at the two ends/edges of the day, and in (the period of) nearness to the night. Surely, good deeds annul ill deeds. This is a reminder for the mindful.

Qur'an (11:114)

- The two ends of the day are in fact the two ends of night but from the direction of the day, and we are told to pray at those times at both ends of the day are approaching the night. To be noted, these are the periods of light before sunrise and after sunset, as at these points the light of the day is decreasing as the night is approaching. Of further note is that these times are not called night, rather (the period) approaching the night! You do not approach what you have already reached.

أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِدُلُوكِ الشَّمْسِ إِلَى غَسَقِ اللَّيْلِ وَقُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ إِنَّ قُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ كَانَ مَشْهُودًا

*Establish prayer at setting of the sun until the **darkness** of the night. And the recitation of dawn, indeed, the recitation of dawn is ever witnessed.*

Qur'an (17:78)

- Here we clearly see how sunset is differentiated from night, which correctly puts it into a phase of the day. Why a phase of the day? Because the Qur'an always mentions day and night, no other phase is mentioned along with them. Furthermore, if we link this with 11:114 we see that the prayer is valid until the night is very dark.

فَلَنْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ جَعَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكُمُ اللَّيْلَ سَرْمَدًا إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ إِلَهٌ غَيْرُ
اللَّهِ يَأْتِيكُمْ بِضِيَاءٍ أَفَلَا تَسْمَعُونَ

*Say: Have you thought, if Allah made night everlasting for you till the Day of Resurrection, who is a
God beside Allah who could bring you light? Will ye not then hear?*

Qur'an (28:71)

- Light and night are placed in contradiction to each other.

وَآيَةٌ لَهُمُ اللَّيْلُ نَسْلَخُ مِنْهُ النَّهَارَ فَإِذَا هُمْ مُظْلِمُونَ

A sign for them is night. We strip it of the day, and surely they are in darkness.

Qur'an (36:37)

- Strip the day (light) from the night and you are in ظلم, which is darkness, or the absence of light. Night and day are perfectly defined here.

When does the day become too long?

This is a challenging topic for many muslims, however there may be a way to calculate this directly from the Qur'an.

وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا حَتَّى يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ الْخَيْطُ الْأَبْيَضُ مِنَ الْخَيْطِ الْأَسْوَدِ مِنَ الْفَجْرِ ثُمَّ أَتَمُوا الصِّيَامَ إِلَى
اللَّيْلِ

*... and eat and drink until the **white thread (of light) becomes distinct to you from the black thread
(night/darkness) of the dawn**. Then strictly observe the fast until/to the night ...*

Qur'an (2:187)

The ability to see the white thread against a dark night sky is likely limited by the length of the day, in very long days, the night sky may not actually become dark at any point. For example, when there is no longer astronomical twilight (the sun does not go 18 degrees below the horizon) the sky never quite gets dark. Muslims should calculate at what point (how many degrees below the horizon) the sky stops being dark, and this will define the maximum length of the day acceptable for fasting.

Days that are longer than this should not be fasted (as you will not have actually witnessed the start point as per 2:187) and charity/feeding of the poor should take place instead for those who can.

Summary: -

- It is always night and day that are mentioned, and not some other category along with them, therefore, sunrise and sunset must be a part of one of them.
- Night and day are as different as life and death. 3:27
- The night conceals the sun and its brightness/light. 91:1-4
- The period of sunset and sunrise are described as periods close to the night. 11:114
- Remove the day (nahar) and you are left with the darkness that is night. 36:37
- Night is ‘wrapped/coiled’ around the globe of the planet, so night can have reached you and not yet reached your furthest horizon. 39:5
- At the onset of night (for you), stars and potentially planet(s) are clearly visible (subject to clouds) to the naked eye, and are associated with darkness in your vicinity (considering lamps, lights and moonlight etc).
- While it is still night for you, you can still make out the onset of day in the horizon. 11:81, 39:5
- The sign of night *الليل* is darkness and that of day is being able to see. 10:67
- The isha prayer is from the setting of the sun until the darkness of the night *غسق الليل*. The time of sunset is made distinct from night and its (complete/intense) darkness. 17:78

Finally, the verse we are specifically discussing: -

وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا حَتَّى يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ الْخَيْطُ الْأَبْيَضُ مِنَ الْخَيْطِ الْأَسْوَدِ مِنَ الْفَجْرِ ثُمَّ أَتُمُوا الصِّيَامَ إِلَى اللَّيْلِ

... and eat and drink until the white thread becomes distinct to you from the black thread of the dawn. Then strictly observe the fast until night...

Qur'an (2:187)

- Fast from when the first thread of light becomes apparent on the horizon, continue fasting while you have light from the sun at your location; eat and drink from when your location is dark.

The Prophet Would Not Have Taught Otherwise

You will hear some Muslims saying “Yes yes, Layl means night, but... the from the actual sunnah of the prophet (allegedly) we interpret the time when we break our fast as sunset and not night”.

The prophet would never have done this:

أَفَغَيْرَ اللَّهِ أَبْتَغِي حَكْمًا وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكُمُ الْكِتَابَ مُفَصَّلًا وَالَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ
يَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ مُنَزَّلٌ مِّن رَّبِّكَ بِالْحَقِّ فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْمُمْتَرِينَ

*Shall I then seek a Ruler other than Allah? When He it is Who has revealed to you
the Book (which is) distinctly elucidated;*

Qur'an (6:114)

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيِّمًا عَلَيْهِ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَا
أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ

*And We have sent down the Book to you with truth, confirming and conserving the
previous Books. So judge between them by what Allah has sent down and do not
follow their whims and desires deviating from the Truth that has come to you...*

Qur'an (5:48)

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَتَّبِعُ مَا يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ مِنْ رَبِّي هَذَا بَصَائِرٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِّقَوْمٍ
يُؤْمِنُونَ † وَإِذَا قُرِئَ الْقُرْآنُ فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ وَأَنْصِتُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

*Say: I follow only that which is inspired in me from my Sustainer (Qur'an). This (Qur'an) is
insight from your Sustainer; and a guidance and a mercy for a people that believe.*

*And when the Qur'an is recited, give ear to it and pay heed, that you may obtain
mercy.*

Qur'an (7:203-204)

The basis for the prophet to make any proclamation was the Qur'an, to imagine that he would then change (in practice) Layl to maghrib for fasting is impossible. And please note the general warnings of Allah in the Qur'an:

وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْكَافِرُونَ

*“... If any do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah has **revealed**, they are (no
better than) Unbelievers (Kaafiroon).”*

Qur'an (5:44)

وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

“... If any do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah has **revealed**, they are (no better than) Wrong Doers (Zalimoon).”

Qur'an (5:45)

وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

“... If any do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah has **revealed**, they are (no better than) those who rebel (Faasiqoon).”

Qur'an (5:47)

وَأَنزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيِّمًا عَلَيْهِ فَاحْكُم

بَيْنَهُمْ بِمَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ

“And We have revealed to you the Book (Qur'an) with the truth, verifying what is before it of the Book and a guardian over it, therefore judge between them by what Allah has **revealed**, and do not follow their low desires (to turn away) from the truth that has come to you; ...”

Qur'an (5:48)

وَأَنِ احْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِمَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ وَأَخَذَرَهُمْ أَن يَفْتِنُوكَ عَنِ بَعْضِ

مَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ أَن يُصِيبَهُم بِبَعْضِ ذُنُوبِهِمْ

وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ النَّاسِ لَفَاسِقُونَ

“So judge between them by that which Allah has **revealed**, and follow not their desires, but beware of them lest they seduce thee from some part of that which Allah has revealed unto thee. And if they turn away, then know that Allah's Will is to smite them for some sin of theirs. Indeed many of mankind are defiantly disobedient.”

Qur'an (5:49)

أَفَحُكْمَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ يَبْغُونَ وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ مِنَ اللَّهِ حُكْمًا لِّقَوْمٍ يُوقِنُونَ

“Is it a judgement of the time of (pagan) ignorance that they are seeking? **Who is better than Allah for judgement to a people who have certainty (in their belief)?**”

Qur'an (5:50)

There is never an excuse to take anyone else's opinion or guidance against the word of Allah.
Fasting is until night, and no one has the authority to change that.