

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the name of the ninth month of the *Hijri* (Islamic) calendar. Every day during this month, Muslims around the world spend the daylight hours in a complete fast.

During the blessed month of Ramadan, Muslims all over the world abstain from food, drink, and other physical needs from dawn until sunset. As a time to purify the soul, refocus attention on God, and practice self-sacrifice, Ramadan is much more than just not eating and drinking.

Ramadan lasts 29 or 30 days and Muslims are meant to fast for the whole month. This is not easy, but there are many good things that fasting bring with it. If someone is sick or if fasting will be bad for their health then that person does not have to fast. The beginning and end of the month depends on the moon.

What is fasting?

The word *sawm* (fasting) literally means “to abstain” which means to stop yourself from doing something. When we fast, we have to stop ourselves from eating and drinking.

When do we fast?

If you ask anyone about when Muslims fast, they will normally say: “In Ramadan!” Although this is true, Muslims are encouraged to fast as much as possible (except for on days of celebration: *Eid*).

Time of fasting

Many people say that Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. But this is not true. The beginning of the fast is at *dawn*: this is **before** sunrise. Eating or drinking is not allowed once the time for *Fajr* has started. The fast ends at the time of the *Maghrib* prayer.

Why do we fast?

When we want to know about the things which we have to do, the first book which we look at is the Holy Qur’an. In the Holy Qur’an, Allah has told us some of the things that we have to do (things that are **wajib**) as well as things that we should do (things that are **mustahab**) and also things that we should not do (things that are **haram**). The Prophet also showed us these things.

In the Holy Qur’an, it says in Surah 2 (Baqarah) verse 183:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ
عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

[2:183] O you who believe! fasting is made wajib for you, as it was made wajib for those before you, so that you may have taqwa.

From this, we can see:

- fasting is *wajib* for Muslims now
- fasting was made *wajib* for others before
- fasting helps us to get *tawqa*

Taqwa

Taqwa is a very complicated word and it means many things. It is mentioned in the Qur'an to explain why we fast and so it is important for us to look at what it means.

One meaning is that it is remembering Allah all the time. Whatever we do, we should be remembering Allah and someone with *taqwa* is able to live their life as well as think about Allah all the time. This is important because if we remember Allah, we remember that He is always watching us and so he knows everything that we do. This means that we would always try to do what is right and not do what He does not want us to do.

So, to have *taqwa*, we have to do all the things that Allah has told us to do and to stay away from everything that Allah has told us to.

Fasting and taqwa

From this information about *taqwa*, we can see that when we fast, we have to be careful to follow Allah in everything that He told us to do and also stay away from everything that He told us not to do.

So when we fast, it is not only about not eating and drinking, but it is also about not doing anything that is *haram*. Of course we should always try not to do anything *haram*. By trying very hard to do this in Ramadan, we learn to do this throughout our lives.

Fasting in other religions**Judaism**

Jews are told to fast on certain days. The most important days for Jews to fast on are:

- Yom Kippur
 - o *Day of Atonement*: a special day when Jews ask for forgiveness
- Tisha B'av
 - o a day over 2000 years ago, when the Holy Temple of the Jews was destroyed

Christianity

In the Bible (the holy book for Christians), there are many times that fasting is mentioned:

- *Moses* (Prophet Musa) fasted on a mountain close to God for 40 days
- *Jesus* (Prophet Isa) fasted for 40 days in the desert

There are also many more times that fasting is mentioned in the Bible. Most know about Jesus in the desert and fast to remember this event. This happens in the time of *Lent* and ends with *Easter*.

What to do?

In Ramadan, it is strongly recommended to work hard to improve ourselves. Most Islamic centres will have a regular programme during the month, which will include a specific programme for children as well as for adults.

The Shia Ithna'ashari Community of Middlesex has programmes for Ramadan. To find out more, please visit: <http://www.sicm.org.uk>.



Reading Qur'an is highly recommended in Ramadan: some Muslims try to read the entire Qur'an in the holy month.