



Research Article

Preserving the Fast: Ethical Practices of the Early Muslim Salaf

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Abstract. Fasting (ṣawm) in the month of Ramaḍān represents one of the most significant acts of worship in Islam and serves as a comprehensive system of moral and spiritual discipline. While many contemporary Muslims restrict fasting to abstinence from food and drink, classical Islamic teachings demonstrate that fasting encompasses the regulation of behavior, speech, and inner character. Early Muslim generations, known as the Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ (righteous predecessors), developed a distinctive methodology to safeguard the integrity of their fasts by avoiding sins, controlling the senses, and increasing devotion. This study analyzes Qur'ānic guidance, prophetic traditions, and early Islamic reports preserved in classical sources to examine how the Salaf preserved the ethical and spiritual dimensions of fasting. Using qualitative textual analysis, the research identifies practical measures adopted by them, including guarding the tongue, avoiding backbiting and falsehood, reducing social distractions, remaining in mosques, minimizing harm to others, and intensifying acts of worship. The findings reveal that fasting was understood as a holistic ethical system integrating both restraint and active devotion. The paper argues that reviving these practices can restore the transformative spirit of Ramaḍān and strengthen moral consciousness in contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Fasting; Ramadan; Salaf; Islamic ethics; Taqwā.

INTRODUCTION

Fasting during the month of Ramaḍān constitutes one of the five foundational pillars of Islam and occupies a central position within Islamic devotional life. The Qur'ān clearly states: "O you who believe, fasting has been prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you so that you may attain taqwā."¹ This verse establishes the spiritual objective of fasting, namely the development of God-consciousness and moral self-restraint. Thus, fasting is not simply a physical exercise in hunger and thirst but a comprehensive training of the human soul.

Despite this clear objective, the practical understanding of fasting among many Muslims today often remains limited. Observance is frequently reduced to abstaining from food, drink, and marital relations during daylight hours, while ethical refinement, speech control, and character improvement are neglected. Such a reductionist understanding weakens the transformative power of Ramaḍān and prevents believers from achieving its intended spiritual benefits.

In contrast, the early generations of Muslims, collectively referred to as the Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ, possessed a more holistic comprehension of fasting. For them, ṣawm represented a complete program of spiritual purification. They viewed sins of the tongue, eyes, ears, and heart as direct threats to the validity and reward of their fasts. Consequently, they adopted conscious strategies to safeguard their fasting from moral corruption. Their lives demonstrate a practical embodiment of Islamic ethical teachings.

This paper seeks to explore the following questions: How did the Salaf understand the concept of preserving the fast? What concrete measures did they adopt to protect its spiritual value? What lessons can contemporary Muslims derive from their methodology? By analyzing classical reports and textual evidence, this study aims to present a systematic understanding of the Salaf's approach and highlight its relevance for modern Islamic life.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The Qur'ānic foundation of fasting as ethical discipline

The Qur'ān repeatedly associates fasting with moral reform rather than mere physical abstinence. The concept of taqwā implies guarding oneself against sin and cultivating constant awareness of Allah. Therefore, fasting functions as a training ground where believers learn patience, self-control, and sincerity.

Classical exegetes explain that hunger weakens bodily desires, softens the heart, and facilitates remembrance of God. This ethical dimension suggests that any behavior contradicting righteousness—such as lying, backbiting, or harming others—undermines the very purpose of fasting. Hence, preservation of fasting becomes a religious obligation

¹ Quran. Surah Al-Baqarah 2:183

Prophetic guidance on safeguarding the fast

Numerous prophetic traditions emphasize that fasting must be protected from immoral behavior. The Prophet Muhammad described fasting as a “shield.”² & ³ Scholars interpret this metaphor to indicate protection from sin and divine punishment. However, a shield remains effective only if it is not damaged. Thus, sinful actions metaphorically “tear” the shield.

Another tradition states that whoever does not abandon false speech and evil conduct, Allah has no need for his abstinence from food and drink.⁴ & ⁵ This narration clearly indicates that ethical reform takes precedence over physical deprivation. Such guidance shaped the mindset of the Companions and early scholars.⁶

Understanding of the Salaf regarding fasting

The Salaf internalized these teachings and developed a practical methodology to preserve their fasting. They considered every sin a potential threat to the reward of their worship. Therefore, they exercised extraordinary caution in speech, behavior, and social interaction.

Reports from early Islamic sources demonstrate that they treated fasting as a state of heightened spiritual awareness. Their daily routine during Ramaḍān differed significantly from ordinary days. They spoke less, worshiped more, and avoided unnecessary engagement with worldly matters.

Ṭābi Mujahid ibn Jabr said, “Two qualities ruin fasting: backbiting and lying.”⁷

Sufyan al-Thawri said “Fasting is not only from food and drink; rather it is from lying, backbiting, and falsehood.”⁸

Ṭābi Al-Hasan al-Basri said “Fasting was prescribed to discipline the soul, not merely to cause hunger and thirst.”⁹

Guarding the senses

Jabir ibn Abdullah (ra) narrates that the Messenger of Allah (sm) said,

“When you fast, let your hearing, your sight, and your tongue fast from falsehood and sins. Avoid harming your servants. Let there be dignity and tranquility upon you on the day of your fast...”¹⁰

Abu Hurairah (ra) reported that the Messenger of Allah (sm) said,

² Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 1904

³ Sahih Muslim, Hadith 1151

⁴ Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 1903

⁵ Sahih Muslim, Hadith 1151

⁶ Ibn Abi Shaybah, *al-Musannaf*, vol. 2 (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1989), 422

⁷ ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-San‘ani, *al-Musannaf*, vol. 4 (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1983), 305

⁸ Abu Nu‘aym al-Isfahani, *Hilyat al-Awliya wa Tabaqat al-Asfiya*, vol. 6 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1988), 356

⁹ Abu Nu‘aym al-Isfahani, *Hilyat al-Awliya*, 2:148

¹⁰ Ibn Abi Shaybah, *Al-Musannaf* (2/272)

“Verily, fasting is not only from eating and drinking. Rather, fasting is from vanity and obscenity. If someone abuses you or acts foolish against you, then say: Indeed, I am fasting.”¹¹

One of the most prominent practices of the Salaf was controlling the senses. They believed that the ears should avoid listening to forbidden speech, the eyes should avoid unlawful sights, and the tongue should avoid harmful words. Jābir ibn ‘Abdullāh advised believers to let their hearing, sight, and tongue fast alongside their stomachs.

Imam al-Ghazali defines three levels of fasting:

1. General Fast (*Sawm al-Umum*): Restraining the stomach and private parts from desires. (The basic requirement).
2. Special Fast (*Sawm al-Khusus*): Keeping the ears, eyes, tongue, hands, and feet free from sin. (The level of the righteous).
3. Elite Fast (*Sawm Khusus al-Khusus*): The fast of the heart from worldly thoughts and anything other than Allah. (The level of Prophets and Saints).

The 6 Requirements for "Special Fasting"

Ghazali explains that to achieve the second level, one must fulfill six duties:

1. Gaze: Lowering the eyes from everything blameworthy or distracting.
2. Speech: Guarding the tongue from lying, backbiting, and idle chatter; remaining silent or engaged in *dhikr*.
3. Hearing: Closing the ears to everything forbidden (since what is forbidden to say is forbidden to hear).
4. Limbs: Restraining the hands and feet from sinful actions.
5. Stomach: Avoiding overeating during *Iftar* (even of Halal food) to maintain the spiritual effect of hunger.
6. Heart: Remaining between fear and hope after *Iftar*, wondering if the fast was accepted.¹²

This holistic understanding recognizes that sins committed through the senses weaken spiritual purity. Therefore, fasting becomes a comprehensive discipline involving the entire body. Such control nurtures mindfulness and strengthens moral responsibility.

Avoidance of backbiting and slander

Allah Said, "And do not spy or backbite each other. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his brother when dead? You would detest it. And fear Allah; indeed, Allah is Accepting of repentance and Merciful."¹³

Backbiting (*ghībah*) was considered particularly destructive. Early scholars interpreted it as “eating the flesh of one’s brother,” based on Qur’ānic imagery. Because fasting aims to purify the soul, engaging in backbiting contradicts its objectives.

¹¹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, 3479

¹² Imam al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ Ulum al-Din*, Vol. 1, Book 6, pp. 234-235.

¹³ Quran, Surah Al-Hujurat (49:12)

Many reports indicate that the Salaf believed backbiting could nullify the reward of fasting. As a result, they refrained from discussing others unnecessarily. Conversations were kept purposeful and beneficial. This practice fostered social harmony and personal integrity.

Anas ibn Malik reported, Two women were fasting during the time of the Messenger of Allah (sm) and they were suffering severely from hunger and thirst, to the point that they were close to collapse. It was mentioned to the Prophet (sm), so he sent for them and brought a bowl. He said to them: "Vomit into it." One of them vomited blood and fresh meat, and the other did the same until the bowl was filled. The Prophet (sm) said, **"These two fasted from what Allah made lawful for them (food and drink) but broke their fast with what Allah made unlawful. They sat together and began backbiting people, and this is the flesh of those whom they backbit."**¹⁴

Abstaining from lies and idle talk

Falsehood and meaningless speech were also strongly discouraged. The Companions emphasized that fasting includes abstinence from lies, vain entertainment, and excessive joking. Speech discipline served multiple purposes: protecting the heart, preventing conflict, and preserving time for worship.

By minimizing idle talk, the Salaf created space for remembrance of Allah. Their words became intentional and meaningful, reflecting spiritual consciousness.

Ibrahim al-Nakha'i (d. 96 AH) said "The Salaf used to say: 'Telling lies breaks the fast' [meaning it destroys the reward and spiritual value, even if the fast is legally valid]."¹⁵

Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751 AH) summarized the consensus of the Salaf,

"The fasting person is the one whose limbs fast from sins; his tongue fasts from lies, obscenity, and false speech; his stomach fasts from food and drink; and his private parts fast from sexual relations. If he speaks, he says nothing that harms his fast; and if he acts, he does nothing that spoils his fast."¹⁶

Avoiding harm and conflict

Fasting trains believers in patience. The Prophet instructed that if someone insults a fasting person, he should respond calmly by stating that he is fasting. This behavior transforms potential conflict into an opportunity for self-restraint.

Historical reports reveal that the Salaf extended this principle even to their servants and family members. They avoided imposing burdens and treated others with kindness. Such behavior reflects the ethical essence of Islamic spirituality.

¹⁴ Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 2001), vol. 38, Hadith 23653. Al-Tabarani, *al-Mu'jam al-Kabir* (Cairo: Maktabat Ibn Taymiyyah, 1994), 8:225.

¹⁵ Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani, *al-Musannaf*, vol. 4 (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1983), 306

¹⁶ Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Zad al-Ma'ad fi Hady Khayr al-'Ibad*, 2:29-30

Narrated by Abdullah ibn Abbas, "The Prophet (sm) was the most generous of people, and he was even more generous in Ramadan when Jibril met him..."¹⁷

Increasing devotion and acts of worship

Avoidance of sin alone was insufficient; the Salaf complemented restraint with increased devotion. They intensified recitation of the Qur'ān, remembrance of Allah, voluntary prayers, charity, and night worship. Ramaḍān became a season of spiritual productivity.

Since Ramadan is the month the Quran was revealed (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:185), the Salaf would prioritize it above all else. Many would stop teaching other sciences (like Hadith or Fiqh) to focus solely on the Quran.

Imam Malik: When Ramadan began, he would flee from reciting Hadith and sitting with scholars to focus on the Mushaf.¹⁸

Imam Al-Shafi'i: It is famously reported that he would complete 60 recitations (*khatm*) of the Quran during the month—one during the day and one at night.¹⁹

The Prophet Muhammad (Sm) promised immense spiritual reward for night prayer in Ramadan, stating that whoever stands in prayer during its nights with sincere faith and hope for divine reward will have his past sins forgiven.²⁰

By engaging in positive acts, they filled their time with beneficial activities and minimized exposure to temptation. This balanced approach ensured both protection and growth.

Staying in the mosque

Some Companions preferred to remain in mosques during fasting hours. This environment protected them from worldly distractions and facilitated worship. The mosque served as a space of reflection, learning, and communal spirituality.

Such seclusion highlights their determination to safeguard their fasting from unnecessary engagements. It also demonstrates their prioritization of spiritual goals over worldly matters.

Abu Hurairah (ra) and his companions used to sit in the mosque while fasting. When asked why, they replied: "We are purifying our fast."²¹

ʿĀ'ishah (RA) reported:

"The Prophet (sm) used to perform i'tikāf during the last ten days of Ramadan until Allah took his soul. Then his wives performed i'tikāf after him."²²

Minimizing social distractions

Certain early Muslims limited outings and gatherings to avoid gossip and idle talk. By controlling their environment, they reduced the likelihood of sinful behavior.

¹⁷ Sahih al-Bukhari, 3554.

¹⁸ Al-Qadi 'Iyad, *Tartib al-Madarik wa Taqrib al-Masalik* (Rabat: Ministry of Awqaf, 1983), 1:294.

¹⁹ Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani, *Hilyat al-Awliya wa Tabaqat al-Asfiya*, vol. 9 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1988), 136.

²⁰ Imam Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 37; Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 759.

²¹ Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Kitab al-Zuhd* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 1999), 115.

²² Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Hadith 2026; Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 1172.

This proactive strategy illustrates their deep understanding of human psychology and temptation.

Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali (d. 795 AH) said "The essence of I'tikaf is to cut off all ties with people so that the soul may connect with the Creator. The more one knows Allah, the more they love solitude in His house."²³

When Ramadan entered, Sufyan al-Thawri would leave discussions and scholarly gatherings and say, "This is not a time for talking; rather it is a time for the Qur'an and feeding the poor."²⁴

Revitalizing the Night (I'mār al-Layl)

For the Salaf, the night was the true "harvest time" of Ramadan. They believed that the spiritual strength required to guard the senses during the day was gathered through long standing (*Qiyam*) during the night.

1. Endurance in Standing

The early generations were known for the extraordinary length of their night prayers. It is reported that during the era of Umar ibn al-Khattab (ra), the Imam would recite hundreds of verses, and the congregants would lean on staffs because of the length of the standing. They would not finish until the first signs of dawn appeared, hurried to eat their *Suhoor* (pre-dawn meal) just in time.

2. Weeping and Emotional Connection

Their night worship was characterized by deep emotional vulnerability. Qatadah used to say that the Quran should be "the spring of the heart" in Ramadan.

"They used to spend the night in prostration and standing (25:64), their eyes overflowing with tears, fearing that their fast might not be accepted."

3. The Link Between Night Worship and Character

The Salaf argued that one who truly stands before Allah at night in humility find it impossible to be arrogant, rude, or dishonest with people during the day. It was the source of the *Sakinah* (tranquility) and *Waqar* (dignity) that Jabir ibn Abdullah mentioned as essential for the fasting person.

Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali (d. 795 AH) said, "Know that the believer in Ramadan gathers two types of Jihad against his own soul: Jihad by day for fasting, and Jihad by night for standing in prayer. Whoever combines these two jihads and fulfills their rights, and is patient in doing so, will be given his reward without account."²⁵

Ethical Framework of the Salaf Methodology

A careful examination of the practices of the Salaf reveals the emergence of a coherent ethical framework built upon two complementary principles: abstention and devotion. Abstention entails refraining from sinful speech, harmful conduct, and unnecessary distractions that may compromise the integrity of one's fast. Devotion, by contrast, involves the conscious intensification of worship through prayer,

²³ Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, *Lataif al-Ma'arif fi ma li Mawasim al-'Am min al-Waza'if* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 2007), 338–340.

²⁴ Al-Dhahabi, *Siyar A'lam al-Nubala'* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risalah, 1985), 7:292.

²⁵ Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, *Lataif al-Ma'arif fi ma li Mawasim al-'Am min al-Waza'if* (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir, 2007), 171–172

remembrance, recitation of the Qur'an, and acts of charity. Together, these two dimensions create a balanced spiritual discipline that unites moral restraint with active obedience.

Through this integrated approach, fasting transcends its outward, physical form and becomes a transformative process aimed at refining character and cultivating God-consciousness rather than merely fulfilling a ritual obligation.

Contemporary Implications

The relevance of this methodology is particularly evident in contemporary Muslim societies, where daily life is increasingly shaped by constant distractions such as social media, entertainment, and excessive communication. These factors often weaken concentration, diminish reflection, and erode the ethical spirit of fasting. Preserving the moral and spiritual essence of Ramadan therefore requires deliberate effort.

In this regard, the example of the Salaf provides practical and timeless guidance. By minimizing idle talk, limiting exposure to harmful or frivolous content, and allocating greater time to worship and remembrance, believers can revive the inner purpose of fasting. Such intentional discipline not only enhances spiritual awareness but also promotes moral self-control and ethical behavior in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that fasting in Islam constitutes a comprehensive ethical and spiritual discipline rather than a mere act of physical abstinence. The Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ understood fasting as a holistic practice that required safeguarding the senses, restraining the tongue, avoiding backbiting and falsehood, reducing conflict, and increasing acts of devotion. Their lived example illustrates a structured and conscious methodology designed to preserve the sincerity and integrity of worship.

Accordingly, fasting becomes a means of inner transformation, shaping both character and conduct, and guiding the believer toward sustained moral and spiritual excellence.

The analysis reveals that fasting achieves its true objective only when combined with moral reform and conscious self-control. Contemporary Muslims can benefit greatly from reviving these principles. By following the model of the Salaf, fasting can once again become a powerful means of cultivating taqwā and transforming character.

Thus, preserving the fast is not simply recommended but essential for realizing the deeper purposes of Ramaḍān.

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