

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Al-Ghazālī on Ṣawm

A brief biography of Imām al-Ghazālī

Undoubtedly, Imam al-Ghazālī was one of the greatest scholars ever to have lived in the Islamic *Ummah*. A thousand years later, his works, legacy and thinking continues to inspire Muslims young and old, in all corners of the world.

Hujjat al-Islām (the Proof of Islam), al-Imam *Zayn al-Dīn* (Ornament of the Religion) Abu Ḥāmid Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī al-Tūsī, al-Nisāpūrī, al-Shāfi‘ī al-Ṣūfī was born in the town of Tus, the second major town of Khurasan (after Nisāpūr) in 450.

According to Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571), he began studying *fiqh* in his youth and then moved to Nisāpūr, where he continued his studies under Imām al-Ḥaramayn (The Leader of the Two Sanctuaries) Abu al-Ma‘ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 478). Whilst occupying himself with the formal studies in the morning, he coupled this with learning the inner sciences in more informal settings in the afternoon. In other words, he walked both paths, the outer and the inner sciences of Islam.

He left Nisāpūr and then joined Nizām al-Mulk at the tender age of 28. Many approached him to debate with him and he triumphed over them. As a result, they gave him the post of professor of the Nizāmiyya in Baghdad, where he became famous as a brilliant mind.

Then, in the year 488, gave up this revered post to seek refuge in solitude and renunciation. He performed the Ḥajj, and then journeyed to Damascus, Egypt, Jerusalem before returning to his native Tus in 492. It is here he compiled most of his literary works and taught in the *Sufi* Khanqahs.

He passed away on the 14th of *Jumāda al-Ākhira* in 505/1111.

Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn

The *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* ("The Revival of the Religious Sciences") is the magnum opus of Imām al-Ghazālī's literary legacy. For many, it is considered the best Islamic work after the Qur'an and Sunna and the ultimate Sufi treatise. Imam al-Ṣafadī said: "It is amongst the noblest and greatest of books, to the extent that it was said, concerning it, that if all books of Islam were lost expect the *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, it would suffice for what was lost."¹

The opinion of Imām al-Ṣafadī is perhaps not an exaggeration, since the *Iḥyā'* is instrumental in covering all areas of Muslim life. The work can be divided into four broad areas, (i) acts of worship (ii) norms of daily life (iii) the destructive matters of life (iv) the saving matters of life. Each of these four sections are divided into ten sub-sections and thus the *Iḥyā'* consists of forty chapters in all.

Perhaps the main difference between this work and other great works is the depth Imām al-Ghazālī explores in each section. He investigates the outer and the inner. Not only does he explore how to perform *sajda* (prostration) but what it entails spiritually. He does not treat death as a biological occurrence but a whole philosophy of life. This is perhaps the reason why the *Iḥyā'* is like no other Islamic literature in the world.



¹ Ibn al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi'iyya al-kubrā* (6:253).

CONTENTS OF THE ‘BOOK OF FASTING’

Imām al-Ghazālī’s section on *ṣawm* consists of—

- i. an introduction
- ii. the obligations of fast, the apparent *Sunnahs* and the things that break the fast
- iii. the secrets of fasting and the hidden conditions
- iv. the optional fasts

This paper will primarily focus on the secrets of fasting and the hidden conditions for its acceptance.

THE—‘INTRODUCTION’

Fasting is a quarter of faith. This is because Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, “Fasting is half of patience (*ṣabr*)”², and it has also been mentioned by ‘Abd Allah ibn Mas‘ūd that, “Patience is half of faith.”³ Then fasting is totally different to other forms of worship as Allah personally promised to reward the one fasting.

Imam al-Ghazālī mentions several prophetic traditions which remind us the value of fasting for the sake of Allāh. For example:

و الذي نفسي بيده خلوف فم الصائم أطيب عند الله من ريح المسك

I swear with the Being Whose in His Hands lies my life! The odour from the faster’s mouth is more pleasant to Allāh than musk perfume.⁴

للصائم فرحتان فرحة عند افطاره و فرحة عند لقاء ربه

2 Al-Hindī, *Kanz al-‘ummāl* (8:444); al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (1:231).

3 Al-Bayhaqī, *Shu‘ab al-īmān* (§9083).

4 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (§1904); Mālik, *al-Muwattā’* (§310).

For the one fasting there are two happinesses; when he breaks the fast and when he meets his Lord.

لكل شيء باب و باب العبادة الصوم

For everything there is a gate and the gate of worship is fasting.

نوم الصائم عبادة

The sleep of the one fasting is worship.

انظروا يا ملائكتي الى عبدي ترك شهوته و لذته و طعامه و شرابه من اجلي

Allah proudly says to the angels ‘Look at my servant, my dear angels! He has left his cravings, desires, food and water for My sake.’

Why the exalted rank for fasting?

- a) It is a hidden worship. No one sees it except Allah. That is why Allah says ‘*I alone will reward it*’⁵. Fasting is practiced secretly and no one is aware of it other than Allah and the one who fasts. It is the most sincere worship because it involves the least amount of showing off. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī mentions a *mursal* tradition,

ليس في الصيام رياء

“There is no ostentation in fasting.”⁶

Ḥajj, *ṣalāh* and *zakāt* are seen by others [i.e. they are outer actions]; *ṣawm* is not. There is no worldly motive. Because of that, Allah says ‘*I alone will reward it*’.

- b. Because fasting is the best attack on the enemy of Allah, *Shayṭān*. For

⁵ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (§164).

⁶ Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī, *Fath al-bārī* (4:107, under §1894).

the most successful means by which *Shayṭān* deceives us is through *shahawāt* (cravings, lust and desires). Food and water are the key impulses. This is why the Messenger (peace be upon him) said: ‘Certainly *Shayṭān* runs through the veins of man, so weaken his running places via hunger.’ And, he said to Lady ‘Ā’isha (may Allah be pleased with her), ‘Keep knocking on the gates of Paradise.’ She asked ‘With what?’ He replied, ‘With hunger.’⁷

So if you are directly and personally waging a war against the enemy of Allah, do you not now deserved to be rewarded personally by Him?

THE SECTION—‘THE SECRETS OF FASTING & ITS HIDDEN CONDITIONS’

Imām al-Ghazālī writes that there are three stages of fasting.

1. The fast of the ordinary

This is the fast of those who refrain from food, water and sexual relations during the daylight hours. It is the fast that ticks the *fiqh* and *sharī’ah* rulings of a fast.

2. The fast of the extraordinary

This is the fast of those who also stop their hearing, sights, tongues, hand, feet and the entire body from sin during the fast.

3. The fast of the elite

This is the fasting of those who fast with their heart, ensuring that they refrain from everything other than Allah. They empty their hearts from any thought and act related to the *dunya* and concentrate on Allah alone. It is the fast of the prophets, the *ṣiddiqīn* and the saints.

The section then proceeds to concentrate and elaborate on the second type — the fast of the extraordinary. This is because the first should not really be our aim. The third type is somewhat beyond us (and even if it is, then it can only be attained after the second stage). The second type is not

⁷ Al-‘Irāqī, *Kitāb al-mughnī ‘an ḥaml al-‘asfār* (1:232).

only attainable but desirable.

The fasting of the extraordinary

Imām al-Ghazālī explains that the fast of the pious is complete with six things:

- To lower the gaze from anything that is forbidden or disliked in Islam, or to anything that will deter a person from the Dhikr of Allāh during a fast.
- To protect the tongue from sins, not least lying, backbiting, tell-tales, harshness, rudeness and so on. The fast of the tongue is to refrain from these vices and to instead adopt silence and to engage the tongue in the Dhikr of Allāh and the recitation of the Qurʾān. In the event of friction and debate, a Muslim should walk away and remember the spiritual state he is in. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

انما الصوم جنة فاذا كان احدكم صائما فلا يرفث ولا يجهل و ان امرؤ قاتله أو شاتمه فليقل
اني صائم اني صائم

Fasting is merely a shield. So when one of you is fasting, he should not commit sinful acts or acts of ignorance. And if someone tries to fight with him or quarrel, he should reply ‘I am fasting, I am fasting.’

This is the part that needs most attention from us. It is strange that we give up the hard part (food and water) and insist on performing the futile. Staying away from backbiting is not going to kill anyone. Staying away from food and water is. Allah says there is no point giving up food and water if a person still lies and cheats others during Ramadān.

- To protect the ears from hearing forbidden and disliked things. In the same way backbiting is forbidden and sinful, so is listening to it.
- To protect the rest of the body from sin such as:

protecting the hands and feet from sin.

refraining from *ḥarām* (unlawful) or doubtful food at the time of *iftār*.

Imam al-Ghazālī says someone who fasts and then does *iftār* on *ḥarām* food is like the one who builds a palace but demolishes a town in the process.

- To not eat excessively at the time of *iftār*, for man fills no container worse than his own stomach. As mentioned before, fasting defeats the enemy of Allāh (because it lowers the desires, the main way *Shayṭān* entraps us). It is hardly a defeat when we eat the same amount in Ramaḍān, perhaps more. Imām al-Ghazālī writes that we often eat more variety of food that we do not outside Ramaḍān. He also suggests that we should sleep less in the day in Ramaḍān so that we can physically feel the hunger and thirst, which will in turn clean our hearts. The cleaner our hearts are in Ramaḍān, the clearer the secrets of *layla al-qadr* will be for us, which is in essence a night when the celestial world becomes apparent to us.
- At the time of *iftār*, the Muslim's heart should be caught between two thoughts, has my fast been accepted or has it been mere hunger and thirst? In reality, this should be our mindset for all worships we perform for Allah's sake.

CONCLUSION

When a Muslim eats and drinks continuously, then this makes him no better than an animal. When a Muslim refrains and controls his intake, he takes on the attributes of the angels, who are free from food and water.

Imam al-Ghazālī writes:

قال بعض العلماء كم من صائم مفطر و كم من مفطر صائم و المفطر الصائم هو الذي يحفظ
جوارحه عن الاثام و ياكل و يشرب و الصائم المفطر هو الذي يجوع و يعطش و يطلق
جوارحه

Some ‘*ulamā*’ have said: There are many who fast, yet in reality are consuming and there are many who do not fast, yet are in reality fasting. The non-fasting faster is the one who eats and drinks, but protects the rest of his body from harming others and from sin. The fasting non-faster is the one who stays hungry and thirsty, yet has given his body parts complete freedom.

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