

IMAM AL-GHAZĀLĪ
On Fasting



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IN THE NAME OF ALLAH—THE MOST
COMPASSIONATE, MOST MERCIFUL

A brief biography of Imam al-Ghazālī

Imam al-Ghazālī, without a doubt, ranks among the most distinguished scholars in the history of the Islamic Ummah. A millennium after his life, his influential works, profound legacy, and innovative philosophies continue to stir inspiration among Muslims of all ages across the globe.

Ḥujjat al-Islām (the Proof of Islam), al-Imam Zayn al-Dīn (Ornament of the Religion) Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī al-Tūsī, al-Nisāpūrī, al-Shāfi‘ī al-Sufī was born in the town of Tus, the second major town of Khurasan (after Nishapur) in the year 450.

According to Ibn ‘Asākir (d. 571), he embarked on his dedicated study of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and then moved to Nishapur, where he continued his studies under Imām al-Ḥaramayn (The Leader of the Two Sanctuaries) Abū 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.

At the age of 28, he left Nishapur to join Niẓām al-Mulk. He engaged in numerous intellectual debates, often emerging victorious, resulting in him being offered the prestigious professorial post at the Niẓāmiyyah in Baghdad. There, he earned a reputation for his exceptional intellect.

In 488, he relinquished his respected position in pursuit of solitude and asceticism. Undertaking the hajj pilgrimage, he also journeyed to Damascus, Egypt, and Jerusalem before returning to his birthplace, Tus, in 492. There, he composed most of his renowned literary works and taught in the Sufi Khanqahs.

He passed away on the 14th of Jumādah al-Ākhirah, in the year 505/1111.

The *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*

The *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (“The Revival of the Religious Sciences”) is the magnum opus of Imam al-Ghazālī’s literary contributions. This monumental work holds a prestigious place in Islamic literature; much revered and esteemed, it is often regarded as the apex Islamic work, secondary only to the Qur’an and Sunnah. 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 Imam al-Ṣafadī might not be seen as hyperbole considering it encompasses all areas pertinent to the life of a Muslim. The work can be divided into four broad areas: (i) rites of worship (ii) norms of routine living (iii) the destructive aspects of life and (iv) the salvaging elements of life. Each of these broad areas is further dissected into ten sub-themes, rendering the *Iḥyā'* an intricate compilation of forty comprehensive chapters.

Perhaps the main difference between this work and other great works is the depth Imam al-Ghazālī explores in each section. He examines both the explicit and implicit implications. Not only does he explore how to perform *sajdah* (prostration) but what it entails spiritually. Similarly, he does not restrict death to being a biological phenomenon but expands on it as a profound philosophical concept of life. The *Iḥyā'*’s unique richness and depth solidify its status as an unparalleled masterpiece in Islamic literature.

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

THE CONTENT OF THE ‘BOOK OF FASTING’

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

- i. an introduction
- ii. the obligatory acts of fasting, the discernible Sunnahs, and the factors that nullify the fast
- iii. the secrets of fasting and the hidden conditions
- iv. the voluntary 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 the Prophet ﷺ said, “Fasting is half of patience (*ṣabr*)”², and it has also been mentioned by ‘Abd-Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd that, “Patience comprises half of faith.”³ Fasting distinctly contrasts other forms of worship, as Allah individually pledges to reward those who fast.

Imam al-Ghazālī relates multiple prophetic traditions which remind us the value of fasting for the sake of Allah. For example:

والذي نفسي بيده لخلوف فم الصائم أطيب عند الله من ريح المسك

“By the One in Whose Hand is my soul! The odour from the mouth of a fasting person is more pleasant to Allah than the scent of musk.”⁴

للصائم فرحتان فرحة عند افطاره وفرحة عند لقاء ربه

“For the one fasting there are two joys: when he breaks the fast and when he meets his Lord.”

لكل شيء باب وباب العبادة الصوم

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

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

3 Bayhaqī, *Shu‘ab al-īmān* (9083).

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

“The sleep of a fasting person is a form of worship.”

انظروا يا ملائكتي الي عبدي ترك شهوته ولذته وطعامه وشرابه من اجلي

Allah proudly says to the angels ‘Observe my servant, my dear angels! He has forfeited his desires, pleasures, food and drink solely for My sake.’

Why is the rank of fasting revered?

- 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. The act of fasting is veiled; it is the most sincere form of worship as it encompasses the least external display. Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī mentions a *mursal* tradition,

ليس في الصيام رياء

“There is no ostentation in fasting.”⁶

Hajj, *ṣalāh* and *zakah* are seen by others [i.e. they are outer actions]; fasting remains hidden. There is no worldly motive. Because of that, Allah says ‘I alone will reward it’.

- b. Fasting represents the most effective countermeasure against Satan. The most successful means by which Satan manipulates us through our *shahawāt* (cravings, lusts, and desires). Food and drink are the key impulses. This is why the Messenger a said: ‘Verily, Satan circulates through the veins of man, so weaken his movement by inducing hunger.’ And, he said to Lady ‘Ā’isha - may Allah be well-pleased with her: ‘Keep knocking on the gates of Paradise.’ She asked ‘With what?’ He replied, ‘With hunger.’⁷

5 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* (164).

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

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

If you are personally and actively waging war against the enemy of Allah, is it not fitting that you should receive a personal reward from Him?

THE SECTION 'THE SECRETS OF FASTING AND ITS
HIDDEN CONDITIONS'

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

1. **The fasting of the common man**

This is the fast of those who refrain from food, drink and sexual relations during daylight hours. It is the fast that ticks the *fiqh* and shariah rulings on fasting.

2. **The fasting of the distinguished**

This form of fasting is observed by those who, in addition to ordinary fasting, restrain their hearing, vision, speech, hands, feet - from committing sinful acts during the fast.

3. **The fasting 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. Such fasting is characteristic of the prophets, the truthful ones and the friends of Allah.

The section then proceeds to concentrate and elaborate on the second type — the fast of the extraordinary. This is because ordinary fasting should not ideally be our sole aim. The third type is an exalted spiritual state, somewhat beyond the reach of most individuals (and only attainable following the attainment of the second stage). The second type is, therefore, not just attainable but also a more desirable form of fasting.

The fasting of the Distinguished

Imam al-Ghazālī explains that the fast of the pious is completed through six factors:

1. The first involves lowering the gaze from anything forbidden or disliked in Islam, or from anything that deters a person from remembrance of Allah while fasting.
2. The second is to guard the tongue from sin, especially lying, backbiting, gossip, rudeness, and harshness. The fast of the tongue requires refraining from such vices and adopting silence, engaging the tongue in remembrance of Allah, and recitation of the Qur'an instead. In the event of an argument, a Muslim should walk away, remembering the spiritual state they are in. The Prophet ﷺ said,

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

“Fasting is indeed a shield. So, when one of you is fasting, let him neither indulge in obscene language nor behave foolishly. If someone insults or fights with him, let him say, ‘I am fasting, I am fasting.’”

This part requires significant attention. It is strange that we give up the hard part (food and drink) and insist of performing the futile. Abstaining from backbiting will not kill anyone, while avoiding food and drink might. Allah asserts that abstaining from food and water is meaningless if a person continues to lie and cheat others during Ramadan.

3. The third is safeguarding the ears from hearing forbidden or disliked things. In the same way, backbiting is forbidden and sinful; so is listening to it.
4. Fourthly, the rest of the body should be shielded from sin, including protecting the hands and feet and avoiding unlawful or doubtful food at the time of iftar.

Imam al-Ghazālī says someone who fasts and then breaks his fast by means of unlawful food is like one who constructs a palace but demolishes a town in the process.

5. Fasting defeats the enemy of Allāh by lowering desires, the primary means through which Satan entraps individuals. It is hardly a defeat when we consume the same amount, maybe more, during Ramadan.

Imam al-Ghazālī points out that we frequently consume a more diverse food during Ramadan than outside of it. He also advises sleeping less during the day in Ramadan, so we can physically feel the hunger and thirst, which will clean our hearts. The purer the heart, the clearer the secrets of *Laylat al-Qadr* will be, a night when the celestial world becomes perceptible to us.

6. When breaking the fast, a Muslim's heart should oscillate between two thoughts: Has my fast been accepted or was it merely hunger and thirst? In reality, this should be our mindset for all acts of worship we perform for the sake of Allah.

CONCLUSION

When a Muslim persistently eats and drinks, it does not elevate him higher than an animal. However, when a Muslim exercises restraint and controls his intake, he embodies the attributes of the angels, who are independent of food and drink.

Imam al-Ghazālī writes:

قال بعض العلماء كم من صائم مفطر وكم من مفطر صائم والمفطر الصائم هو الذي
يحفظ جوارحه عن الاثام وياكل ويشرب والصائم المفطر هو الذي يجوع ويعطش ويطلق
جوارحه

Some of the ulema related: There are many who fast but, in reality, they are eating and there are many who do not fast, yet, in essence, they are fasting. The non-fasting individual who is truly fasting is one who guards his senses from sin while eating and drinking. Meanwhile, the one who outwardly fasts but essentially does not is the one who endures hunger and thirst but yields his senses to unrestraint.