

# A GIFT OF REMEMBRANCE

By Kathryn Kolton

"They remember God while standing, sitting, and on their sides, and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth" (3:191).

"Ramadan is the month during which the Quran was revealed, providing guidance for the people, and profound teachings, as well as the statute book. Those of you who witness this month shall fast" (2:185).

God created us and knows our every wish, desire, and need. Our most basic needs are food and water. In addition to the physical benefits of fueling our bodies, we derive a great deal of satisfaction from a full stomach and a well-quenched thirst, no matter what the climate. And food and drink are at the center of the human being's celebrations.

It is not new for God to use food or water to get our attention. *"Eat from the good things we provided for you"* (2:57). At the birth of Jesus, Mary was told, *"Eat and drink and be happy..."* (19:26). All provisions are signs from God of His absolute authority, and His unending mercy towards the human beings. Celebrate the wonder of God.

God knows how to get our attention. He knows that the distractions of our daily lives frequently keep us from remembering Him "while standing, sitting, or lying on our sides." We strive to do our best as we go through our days, but we know that all provisions are given by God alone, and that all creatures are provided for. What peace to know this, without doubt. And how easily we take it for granted

God has tested the human being with food and drink frequently, and He relates these tests that we might learn to be more appreciative, more aware of the true nature of our temporary world. For example, the majority of Saul's troops failed to pass the test at the stream, but for those that were steadfast, patient, and obedient, the reward was victory (2:249).

*"We must test you with some fear, hunger, and loss of money, lives and crops. Give good news to the steadfast who say when an affliction befalls them, 'We belong to God, and to Him we ultimately return'"* (2:155-156).

*"Recall that you said, 'O Moses, we can no longer tolerate one kind of food. Call upon your Lord to produce such earthly crops as beans, cucumbers, garlic, lentils, and onions.' He said, 'Do you wish to substitute that which is inferior for that which is good?'"* (2:61).

*"Remind them of the community by the sea, who desecrated the Sabbath. When they observed the Sabbath, the fish came to them abundantly. And when they violated the Sabbath, the fish did not come. We thus afflicted them as a consequence of their transgression"* (7:163).

And of Adam and Eve, we read, *"As for you Adam, dwell with your wife in Paradise, and eat there from as you please, but do not approach this one tree, lest you transgress. The devil whispered to them...'Your Lord did not forbid you from this tree, except to prevent you from becoming angels, and from attaining eternal existence" ( 7:19-20 ).*

Of all God's provisions of foods, only four are prohibited and if forced to eat these, we will not bear the consequences (2:173; 6:145; 16:115). God is so merciful as to provide for every possible circumstance of the human being's life. All things are lawful to eat. And He speaks frequently of water. He uses "pure drink" and "flowing streams" to describe the heaven we all strive for. He knows us and knows water is a source of life and internal peace for us. We are carried in water through nine months of pregnancy. It provides great comfort to us, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. God describes water and its source in many ways.

*"Recall that Moses sought water for his people and we said, "Strike the rock with your staff,' whereupon twelve springs gushed out there from" (2:60).*

*"Yet our hearts hardened and became like rocks, or even harder, for there are rocks from which rivers gush out. Other rocks crack and gently release water" (2:74).*

*"In the creation of the heavens and the earth, the alternation of night and day, the ships that roam the ocean for the benefit of mankind, the water that God sends down from the sky to revive dead land and to sustain all kinds of creatures therein.. these are signs for the people" (2:164).*

And when implored by Job, He said, *'Strike the ground with your foot. A spring will give you healing and a drink' (38:42).*

Such a precious commodity and so freely given by God in His infinite mercy.

What are the conditions of fasting? *"O you who believe, fasting is decreed for you, as it was decreed for those before you, that you may be saved. Specific days are designated for fasting. If one is ill or traveling, an equal number of other days may be substituted. Those who can fast, but with great difficulty, may substitute feeding one poor person for each day of breaking the fast. If one volunteers to feed more poor people, it is better. But fasting is the best for you, if you only knew. God wishes for you convenience, not harshly, that you may fulfill your obligations, and to glorify God for guiding you, and to express your appreciation. Eat and drink until the white thread of light becomes distinguishable from the dark thread of night at dawn. Then fast until the night..." (2:183-187).*

God decrees fasting at other times as well. As atonement for violating our oaths (5:89), for killing game during Hail (5:95), and for estranging our spouse (58:4). God knows that fasting can be very difficult, but God also knows how quickly He can get our attention when decreeing it for us. These very basic needs are constant reminders of God's absolute mercy.

Preparation for the month of Ramadan extends beyond the 30 days of fasting. We are aware of the calendar, the months passing. As the days approach, we begin to plan for them, and pray that we will have a better Ramadan this year, and thus, commemorate God more frequently. We are grateful for shorter days, and we pay more attention to weather forecasts, hoping for cooler days. During the days of fasting, we look forward to a "family celebration" with our brothers and sisters each Friday evening. We spend time planning for that meal with joy. Some may experience headaches, lightheadedness, stomach rumbling, etc. We count minutes and hours more closely. Our attention is more focused on our bodily needs. Or is it?

The effects of fasting are many. What is perceived as a loss by some, is a real gain for our soul, and its growth. We have the chance to focus on our "real self," our soul and its nourishment. Our body's needs turn into reminders of God and the growth of our soul. We grow more alert to our provisions and their source. And through God's mercy, He weaves reminders of Zakat for the poor. And we know hunger and thirst as the poor often do, to better understand why Zakat is so important. And each salat prayer brings us closer to the days end and provides us with more reminders. We come to understand the words "steadfast" and "patience" more specifically, as the days of fasting proceed and we refrain from suspicion, anger and bad thoughts. Sura 33:35 takes on new meaning, *"for the fasting men and women, for the commemorating men and the commemorating women...forgiveness and a great recompense."*

All of these activities and thoughts are opportunities to remember God alone, from whom all things come. As we reflect on God's creation, we might notice that even the animals, plants, and mountains, who did not accept the responsibility of "freedom of choice," are not exempt from fasting. There is no place on earth that does not experience drought at one time or another. The consequences of a severe lack of water include a reduction in all other provisions as well. And since these other creatures endure much longer than the human lifetime, they endure periodic fasting much longer than we. Yet, heaven is assured for each of these creatures. And by God's design, where life seems to disappear with the lack of water and the sustenance which comes from it, life springs back repeatedly once water is received.

Our lifetime is so brief compared to eternity. We are deprived of nothing during this brief period, including repeated, individualized messages of God alone. Twenty-four hour God-consciousness is our goal. It is that toward which we strive, with steadfastness and patience. We know that *"God never burdens any soul beyond its means..."(2:286)* and that fasting is not an ordeal, but rather a great opportunity to run, not walk, along God's path. How awesome is God. He takes His creation with all its limits and uses it to remind individually and constantly that He alone is our Lord and Master. Given our previous behavior, God is merciful beyond our wildest dreams, and provides us with a gift of remembrance that can only lead us closer to Him for all eternity.

***ALL PRAISE BE TO GOD***