311409 - The soundness of al-Ghazaali’s view on the levels of fasting: the fast of the common folk, the elite, and the elite of the elite

the question

How sound are the words, There are three levels of fasting? These words are attributed to Imam al-Ghazaali: We should understand that there are three degrees of fasting: ordinary, elite, and very elite. (1) Ordinary fasting means refraining from food, drink and sexual relations. (2) Elite fasting means that a person guards his hearing, sight, tongue, hands, feet and all other physical faculties against sin. (3) Super-elite fasting means that the heart fasts from worry and worldly concerns that are not worthwhile, and completely ignores everything except Allah.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Abu Haamid al-Ghazaali (may Allah have mercy on him) said: It should be noted that fasting is of three degrees: the fast of the common folk, the elite, and the elite of the elite.

The fast of the common folk is to refrain from food and drink and sexual desires, as explained above.

The fast of the elite is restraining the hearing, sight, tongue, hand, foot and other physical faculties from committing sin.

The fast of the elite of the elite is when one frees oneself from unworthy concerns and worldly thoughts, and refrains from thinking of everything except Allah, may He be glorified and exalted.

End quote from Ihyaa’ ‘Uloom ad-Deen (1/234).

These ideas are sound, because the believers vary with regard to fasting. For some of them, the

fast means simply refraining from food, drink and sexual desire, but they may give their tongues free rein in backbiting, malicious gossip and lying, and they may give their eyes free rein in looking at what is prohibited, and give their ears free rein in listening to singing, music and the like, and give themselves free rein in doing harm and spreading corruption. This kind of fasting is lacking and weak.

Al-Bukhaari (6057) narrated that Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Whoever does not give up false speech and acting upon it, and ignorance, Allah has no need of him giving up his food and drink.”

There is some concern for the fasting of one who is like this, as Ahmad (8856) narrated that Abu Hurayrah said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “There may be a fasting person who gets nothing more from his fast than hunger and thirst, and there may be a person who prays qiyaam and all he gets from his qiyaam is a sleepless night.”

Shu‘ayb al-Arna’oot said in Tahqeeq al-Musnad: Its isnaads is jayyid.

Ibn Abi Shaybah narrated in his Musannaf (8882) that ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) said: Fasting is not only abstaining from food and drink; rather it is also abstaining from lying, falsehood and idle pursuits.

He narrated a similar report (8884) from ‘Ali (may Allah be pleased with him).

And he narrated (8883) that Maymoon ibn Mahraan said: The easiest king of fasting is abstaining from food and drink.

So the first level of fasting is the imperfect fast, in which a person does not retrain himself from speaking haraam words or doing haraam deeds. Ibn Rajab (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Some of the salaf (early generations) said: The easiest type of fasting is abstaining from food and drink.

Jaabir said: If you fast, then let your hearing, sight and tongue refrain from lying and haraam

deeds; do not annoy your neighbour, and be dignified and tranquil on the day of your fast; do not let the day when you fast and the day when you do not fast be the same.

In Musnad al-Imam Ahmad it says that two women fasted at the time of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), and they almost died of thirst. Mention of that was made to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and he turned away, then they were mentioned to him again, so he called them and told them to vomit, and they vomited a bowlful of pus, blood, and flesh. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “These two fasted and refrained from that which Allah permitted to them, but they broke their fast with that which Allah forbade to them. One of them sat with the other, and they started eating people’s flesh [i.e., backbiting].” End quote from Lataa’if al-Ma‘aarif (p. 155).

The isnaad of this hadith is da‘eef.

The one who guards his physical faculties against committing haraam actions has fasted in the real sense. This is the second level, which al-Ghazaali called the fast of the elite.

With regard to the third level, which is when the heart fasts and refrains from unworthy worries and worldly concerns, and focuses entirely on Allah alone, undoubtedly this is a sublime level which no one reaches except those who are guided and helped by Allah, for the heart is the king of the physical faculties, the site of taqwa (piety, mindfulness of Allah), and the place at which Allah, may He be glorified, looks. Worship is perfected when the heart is entirely focused on Allah and is not distracted from Him. Whoever fasts in a true sense, involving both his heart and his physical faculties, has indeed attained perfection.

Conclusion:

These levels are real, and people very in their fasting. The believers should strive to fast truly in all senses. This does not mean that the common folk have one kind of fasting, and the elite have another kind; rather everyone is enjoined to attain the highest and the most perfect level of fasting, but Allah, may He be exalted, has ordained that His slaves will vary in that regard, just as they vary with regard to establishing prayer and achieving true focus and humility (khushoo‘)

therein.

We ask Allah to bless us and you by enabling us to fast in a true sense, and to make us among those who are accepted.

And Allah knows best.