66438 - It is not permissible for pregnant and breastfeeding women to break the fast unless they fear for themselves or their children

the question

I read a hadeeth in which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Allaah has waived the fast for pregnant and breastfeeding women.” Does that mean that fasting is not obligatory for them whether it entails hardship or not?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

This hadeeth was narrated by Abu Dawood, 2408; al-Tirmidhi, 715; al-Nasaa’i, 2315; and Ibn Maajah, 1667. It says that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Allaah has relieved the traveller of half of the prayer and of the duty to fast, and He has relieved pregnant and nursing mothers (of the duty to fast).” It was classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood.

This hadeeth is general in meaning and applies to every pregnant woman, but the scholars limited it to cases of hardship, based on the reason for which this ruling – namely pregnant women not fasting – was prescribed.

This is similar to the reference to the sick in the verse (interpretation of the meaning):

“and whoever is ill or on a journey, the same number [of days which one did not observe Sawm (fasts) must be made up] from other days”

[al-Baqarah 2:185]

This applies to everyone who is sick, no matter how mild his illness. Some of the salaf, such as ‘Ata’, applied it in general terms, and this was the view favoured by al-Bukhaari. But the scholars, including the four Imams, rejected that general application and restricted it to cases of sickness

where fasting causes hardship, based on the reason for which the ruling of not fasting was prescribed.

There are texts narrated from the scholars which state this restriction; indeed it was narrated that there was unanimous agreement among the scholars on this point, as we shall see below.

1 – Narrations from the salaf

Abu Dawood (2318) narrated that Ibn ‘Abbaas said, concerning the verse “And as for those who can fast with difficulty, (e.g. an old man), they have (a choice either to fast or) to feed a Miskeen (poor person) (for every day)” [al-Baqarah 2:184]: This is a concession granted to old men and old women who are able to fast, allowing them to break the fast and to feed one poor person each day instead of fasting. (And this concession is also granted to) pregnant and breastfeeding women, if they fear (harm). Al-Nawawi said: Its isnaad is hasan.

So here Ibn ‘Abbaas restricted the concession granted to pregnant and breastfeeding women to cases where they feared harm, whether the harm was to themselves or to their children.

Al-Shaafa’i narrated in al-Umm: Maalik told us, narrating from Naafi’, that Ibn ‘Umar was asked about a pregnant woman, if she fears for her child. He said: She should not fast, and she should feed one poor person for each day, giving a mudd of wheat.

Imam al-Bukhaari said:

Chapter on the words, “Exempt days”… al-Hasan and Ibraaheem said concerning breastfeeding or pregnant women: If they fear for themselves or their children, they should break the fast then make it up. End quote.

This restriction of the ruling was narrated from Ibn ‘Abbaas, Ibn ‘Umar, al-Hasan and al-Nakha’i among the salaf.

2 – The madhhabs of the four imams.

They were also agreed upon this restriction of the ruling.

(i)The Hanafi madhhab

Al-Jassaas said in Ahkaam al-Qur'aan, 1/244, after quoting the words of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him): "Allaah has relieved the traveller of half of the prayer and of the duty to fast, and He has relieved pregnant and nursing mothers (of the duty to fast).":

It is known that this concession – granted to pregnant and breastfeeding women – is limited to cases where they fear for themselves or for their children.

He also said (1/252):

Either pregnant and breastfeeding women will themselves be harmed by fasting or their children will be harmed. In either case, not fasting is better for them and fasting is not allowed in their case. If fasting will not harm them or their children, then they have to fast and it is not permissible for them to break the fast.

It says in al-Bahr al-Raa'iq (2/308):

If pregnant and breastfeeding women fear for themselves or their children, they may are allowed to break the fast in order to ward off any hardship.

i.e., they may break the fast so as to ward off harm… but this is restricted to cases of fear, i.e., when they think that is most likely to happen… because if they do not fear harm there is no concession granted to them.

(ii)The Maaliki madhhab

It says in Sharh Mukhtasar Khaleel (2/262):

If a pregnant woman fears that her child may die, or be severely harmed, then she must break her fast. If she fears that sickness may happen, it is permissible for her to break her fast according to the correct view. And it was said that she must break her fast if she fears sickness. The same applies to the breastfeeding woman, if she fears that her child may die or be severely harmed, she must break her fast, and if she fears sickness, it is permissible for her to break her fast. This is

subject to the condition that her child will not accept the breast of any other woman, otherwise she is obliged to fast,

(iii)The Shaafa'i madhhab

Imam al-Shaafa'i said in al-Umm:

If a pregnant woman fears for her child, she should break her fast. The same applies if a breastfeeding woman fears that her milk supply will be adversely affected. But if that is bearable then she should not break her fast. The fast may reduce the breast milk but it may be a bearable reduction, but if it is extreme, then she should break her fast.

Al-Nawawi said in al-Majmoo' (6/274):

Our companions said: If pregnant and breastfeeding women fear that fasting may harm them, they should break the fast and make it up later on, and they do not have to offer any fidyah, as in the case of one who is sick. There is no difference of opinion on any of that. If they fear for themselves and their children, the same applies and there is no difference of opinion. This was stated by al-Daarimi, al-Sarkhasi and others. If they fear for their children but not for themselves, they should break the fast and make it up later on, and there is no difference of opinion on that…

(iv)The Hanbali madhhab

Ibn Muflih said in al-Furoo' (3/35):

It is makrooh for pregnant and breastfeeding women to fast if there is the fear that they or their children may be harmed.

Ibn 'Aqeel said that if a pregnant or breastfeeding woman fears for the pregnancy or the nursing infant, it is not permissible to fast, and she must offer the fidyah. If there is no such fear then it is not permissible for her not to fast.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah said in Majmoo' al-Fataawa (25/218):

If a pregnant woman fears for her foetus, she may break the fast…

(v)The Zaahiri madhhab

Ibn Hazm said in al-Muhalla (4/411):

The fast is addressed to pregnant and breastfeeding woman and old men. The Ramadaan fast is obligatory for all of them, but if a breastfeeding woman fears that she may have too little milk for her child and there is no one else to feed the child, or if he will not take the breast of any other woman, or if a pregnant woman fears for her foetus, or if an old man is unable to fast because of his age, then they may break the fast… end quote.

It says in al-Mawsoo'ah al-Fiqhiyyah (28/55):

The fuqaha' are agreed that pregnant and breastfeeding women may break the fast in Ramadaan, so long as they fear sickness or an increase in sickness for themselves or their children, or they fear harm or death. In the case of a pregnant woman, the foetus is regarded as part of her body, so the fear for him is like the fear of damage to any of her limbs or physical faculties.

Al-Shawkaani said in Nayl al-Awtaar (4/273), commenting on the hadeeth which says that pregnant and breastfeeding women are allowed not to fast:

This hadeeth indicates that it is permissible for pregnant and breastfeeding women not to fast. This was the view of the fuqaha', if a breastfeeding woman fears for her nursing infant or if a pregnant woman fears for the unborn child. They said: They may definitely break the fast. End quote.

It says in Fataawa al-Lajnah al-Daa'imah (10/226):

With regard to the pregnant woman, she must fast whilst pregnant, unless she fears that fasting may harm her or her unborn child, in which case she is granted a concession allowing her not to fast, and she should make up the fasts after she delivers and her nifaas has ended. End quote.

See also question no. 50005.

These texts from the scholars indicate that it is not permissible for pregnant and breastfeeding women to break the fast so long as fasting is not difficult for them.

And Allaah knows best.