

# Death and its relevance to Muslims

What do Muslims believe happens when a person dies?

- Death is a natural part of life and is willed by God
- Body and soul separate
- Death enables a to cross over from the world to eternal life
- Initial judgement by two angels (Munkar and Nakir)
- Begin to enjoy eternal reward or punishment.
- Final judgement of God at the end of time

Death is a question of ultimate concern for every human being, and Islam has a very vivid portrayal of the stages of death and the afterlife. Death is likened to sleep in Islam; interestingly, sleep in Arabic is called "the little brother of death." The Prophet spoke often of death, and the Quran is filled with warnings of the dangers of ignoring one's mortality and of not preparing for death before it is too late. In one poignant passage, the Quran reads,

And spend something (in charity) out of the substance which We have bestowed on you before death should come to any of you and he should say, "O my Lord! Why didst Thou not give me respite for a little while? I should then have given (largely) in charity, and I should have been one of the doers of good." But to no soul will Allah grant respite when the time appointed (for it) has come; and Allah is well-acquainted with (all) that ye do. (Quran, pp. 1473–1474)

Hence, the world is seen as an opportunity to cultivate for the hereafter, and time is seen as capital that human beings either invest wisely or squander, only to find themselves bankrupt in the next life. Muhammad said, "One of you says, 'My wealth! My wealth!' Indeed, have any of you anything other than your food that you eat and consume, your clothes that you wear out, and your wealth that you give in charity which thus increases in return in the next world?"

The idea of mentioning death and reflecting on death is very important in a Muslim's daily life, and attending any Muslim's funeral, whether known or not, is highly encouraged; for such attendance, one is rewarded greatly by God. Muhammad advised, "Make much mention of the destroyer of delights," which is death. He also said, "Introduce into your gatherings some mention of death to keep things in perspective." This is not seen as a morbid exercise, and Muslims surprisingly accept death, resigned to what is called "one's appointed time" ( *ajal* ). Like the telomere in biology that dictates how

many times a cell may regenerate before dying, an individual's appointed term, according to Islam, is inescapable and fated. When a Muslim survives a near-death experience, such as a serious car accident, an operation, or an illness, he or she will often remark, "My appointed time did not come yet."

### After Death

Once a Muslim dies, the people left behind must prepare the body by washing, perfuming, and shrouding it. The funeral prayer is then performed, and the deceased is buried in a graveyard without a coffin, simply laid in the earth and covered. A person, usually a relative, informs the deceased of what is happening, as Muslims believe that the deceased can hear and understand what is being said. Muslims believe the dead person is not always aware of the transition, and so the one giving instructions informs the deceased that he or she has died, is being laid in the grave, and that two angels known as Munkar and Nakir will soon come into the grave to ask three questions. To the first question, "Who is your Lord?," the deceased is instructed to reply, "Allah." In answer to the second question, "Who is your Prophet?," the deceased should say, "Muhammad," and the correct response to the third question, "What is your religion?," is "Islam." If the individual passes this first phase of the afterlife, the experience of the grave is pleasant, and he or she is given glimpses of the pleasures of paradise. If however, the deceased does not pass this phase, then the grave is the first stage of chastisement.

After this, the soul sleeps and does not awake until a blast from an angel at God's command. According to Islamic tradition, this blast signals the end of the world and kills any remaining souls on the earth. It is followed by a second blast that causes all of the souls to be resurrected. At this point, humanity is raised up and assembled on a plain. The Quran states, "On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves on one another; the trumpet will be blown, and We shall collect them all together" (Quran, p. 735). From there, humanity will beg each of the prophets to intercede for them and hasten the Day of Judgment because the waiting is so terrible, but the prophets will refuse. Finally, all of humanity goes to the Prophet Muhammad. He will agree to intercede for them and ask that the Judgment commence. This intercession is granted to him alone. Then, each soul is judged based upon its beliefs and actions, which are weighed in the scales of divine justice. At this point, the two guardian angels assigned to all people throughout their adult lives will testify for or against them. According to the Quran, the limbs of each person will testify, and the earth herself is resurrected and bears witness against those who caused her harm. Next, a person will be given a book either in the right or left hand. For those given a book in the right hand, they pass the Judgment and are given the grace of God. For those given a book in their left hand, they fail the Judgment and are condemned to hell. However, at this point, prophets and other righteous people are allowed to intercede for their relatives, followers, or friends among the condemned, and their intercession is accepted.

Once the Day of Judgment is over, humanity proceeds to a bridge known as the sirat, which crosses over hell. The saved cross it safely to the other side and are greeted by their respective prophets. The Muslims who make it safely across are greeted by Muhammad, who will take them to a great pool and give them a drink that will quench their thirst forever. The condemned fall into hell. The Quran states that some will only spend a brief time there, while others, the unrepentant and idolatrous ingrates, are condemned forever. Muslims see death as a transition to the other side. Islam is seen as the vehicle

that will take one safely there. It is only in paradise that the believer finds ultimate peace and happiness.

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