

The islamic idea of death



In The Name Of Allah The Beneficent The Merciful

In this essay I would like to talk about death. I will define death according to the general understanding as well as the Islamic definition. I will use Quranic Verses along with some Hadith to prove the certainty of death. Then I will describe and present the Islamic idea of death. I will describe the process of death, what occurs after death and what happens to the soul. I will conclude by describing how the remembrance of death is important and how it should affects the thoughts and ideas of a Muslim and causes him to act ethically in this life.

Death is defined as the termination of the biological functions of the body[1]. In Islam it refers to the separation of the soul from the body by the Angel of Death. Death is the only certainty in life. It can occur at any moment no matter whether you are 9 or 90. There is no guarantee when we wake up in the morning that we will see the evening or when we go to sleep that we will see the morning. We have a fixed time on the earth and once it is up it cannot be extended.

Wherever you may be, death will overtake you, even though you were in lofty towers.[2]

The above verse shows that we will have to face death at some point. It is a certainty and it will occur. There is no hiding place not even in high towers. There is no cure for death. What happens after death is unknown because no one has returned to tell us about it. This is why man busies himself in the worldly affairs. He believes it will make him immortal but it is only a distraction for him. The Quran says:

Rivalry in worldly increase distracts you. Until you come to the graves.[3]

I would like to state the example of Fir Awn[4] for those who believe their wealth will bring them immortality. Here is a man who had power and wealth so much so that he claimed Divinity. Where is he now? His body is in a museum in Cairo. He claimed to be God but look at him now. Fir Awn drowning, in his last moments, tries to accept Islam but it is far too late and his repentance is rejected. This is a harsh warning to those who think they can accept Islam or repent while on their death beds. The Quran mentioned that his body would be preserved.

But this day We save you in your body that you may be a Sign for those after you. Most of Mankind are heedless of Our Signs.[5]

A Hadith[6] warns us about a man who did not do a single good deed but at the time of death he was so fearful he thought he could escape ALLAH (SWT) by telling his children to burn his body and scatter his ashes across different lands and oceans. ALLAH (SWT) was still able to resurrect him[7]. It does not matter how you die or what condition your body is in. If you did not have a burial your soul will be placed in the ground where you took your last breath.

Every soul will taste of death. Then to Us you will be returned.[8]

Even the Prophets, the best of mankind, had to taste death. The Prophet Ibrahim[9] (AS)[10] was reluctant stating “ a friend does not take the life of his friend.” ALLAH[11] (SWT)[12] told Izrail[13] to say “ a friend does not refuse the invitation to meet his friend.” Upon hearing this, the Prophet

Ibrahim (AS) submitted to ALLAH (SWT) one final time[14]. What a way of looking at death as going to meet your Friend!

The Prophet Musa[15] (AS) also did not wish to die and ended up punching Izrail so hard; one of his eyeballs fell out. Izrail reported this to ALLAH (SWT) who restored his eye and told him to tell the Prophet Musa (AS) to place his hand on the back of an ox and that however many hairs he held, he would live for the equivalent number of years and then die. Upon hearing this the Prophet Musa (AS) agreed to die immediately[16].

Muslims believe the Prophet Isa[17] (AS) will return to earth a 2nd time and he will do many miraculous things such as killing the Dajjal.[18] However the main purpose of his return is to fulfil the promise of ALLAH (SWT) in the above verse. The Prophet Isa (AS) has yet to taste death and the idea of crucifixion is heavily rejected in the Quran. Whatever came from the earth must return to the earth meaning we came from dust and we shall return to dust.

They slew him not nor crucified him[19]

When the Angel of Death comes to collect a soul he does not leave without taking what he came for. The believer's soul is removed gently where as the disbeliever's soul is ripped out. When the soul of a disbeliever is removed, it is black and has a foul stench where as the believer soul is shining and has a beautiful fragrance. The soul of the believer is handed to the Angels of Mercy who inform him of glad tidings and blessings of his Lord (SWT). The soul of the disbeliever is handed to the Angels of Punishment who curse him and

inform of his Lord (SWT)'s wrath. The souls are then taken to their respective locations to have their book of deeds registered.

Nay, but the record of the vile is in Sijjin[20]

Nay, but the record of the righteous is in Illiyin[21]

Both souls will at first go up but the disbeliever's soul will be thrown down after being rejected entry into Heaven and then is taken to Sijjin which is either in the vicinity of or close proximity to Hell and is a dreadful place. The believer's soul is admitted into Paradise where it is greeted by the angels and inhabitants who wish peace. It is taken up to the 7th Heaven going through each Heaven with all inhabitants and Angels accompanying it until it reaches Illiyin. Once registration is complete, the believing soul is greeted by ALLAH (SWT)! What a great honour! It is then unclear what happens to the soul while waiting to return to the body.

In Islam, it is recommended to perform the funeral as soon as possible, on the same day if possible because the soul is returned to the body before the funeral. This does not mean a return to life but simply that the soul resides in the body and is able to see and hear happenings but unable to communicate or perform any action. At the site of the graveyard, the soul will be able to sense the Angels but they will not approach whilst the relatives are there. The soul will cry out but to no avail. No one is able to help any more. Once the burial is completed, slowly everyone disperses, as the last relative leaves the soul will hear the footsteps departing. Now the Angels will descend and the questioning will begin. The 3 questions will be:

1. Who is your Lord?[22]
2. What is your religion?[23]
3. Who is your Prophet?[24]

The answers may seem obvious now but at that moment it will be extremely difficult especially when faced with the sight of two tremendous Angels. Only a true believer will be able to answer correctly and his grave will be made a place of rest and comfort. A disbeliever will not be able to answer and thus the Punishment of the Grave will begin[25]. This is one's individual judgement but does not necessarily determine whether one will enter Heaven or Hell as the Punishment of the Grave may be a process of purification especially for Muslims who were sinners so that they may receive the Forgiveness and Mercy on the Last Day.

Having answered correctly, the believer will be shown a vision of Hell which he is safe from and then a door to Heaven will be opened so that he may enjoy the sights and smells. His grave will be lit and expanded for him and his good deeds will be personified into a handsome young man to keep him company until The Day Of Judgement.

On the other hand, a disbeliever will be shown a vision of Heaven which he will never enter and a door to Hell will be opened so that he may have a preview of the torment to come. His grave will be constricted until his ribs are crushed and his evil deeds are personified as a vile ugly old man and the Angels of Punishment will strike him with hammers and other Punishments will occur until The Day Of Judgement[26].

The life of this world is but comfort of illusion.[27]

This life is just temporary. It has been designed as a test for us to see who remembers ALLAH (SWT) and who is distracted by the dunya[28]. After life in the grave, everyone will be resurrected and receive their final Judgement based on their actions.

Blessed is He in Whose hand is the Sovereignty, and, He is Able to do all things. Who has created life and death that He may try you which of you is best in conduct; and He is the Mighty, the Forgiving.[29]

The remembrance of death should play a vital part of a Muslim's daily life and he should take a portion of his time every day to contemplate on this. He should contemplate the certainty of death and the fact that it could happen anywhere anytime. He should reflect on the events during and after death. He should ponder over the fact that his possessions and property will remain here. By remembering the certainty of death, he will realise how petty and temporal the temptations of this world are. By remembering the fact it could happen instantly it will cause him to repent immediately as he aware of the example of Fir Awn. It will also lessen the inclination to sin as he will not want to die in a state of sin. By reflecting on the process of death, he will be determined to achieve the fate of the righteous soul not that of the evil soul. He will realize how temporary the material things are and spend less time trying to acquire them and focus on the good deeds which will accompany him. I would like to end with a verse of the Quran which we should ponder over.

We belong to ALLAH and to Him is our return.[30]

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death> 14/12/09

[1] Wikipedia

[2] 4: 78

[3] 102: 1, 2

[4] Fir Awn was the Pharaoh of Ancient Egypt who opposed the Prophet Musa (AS)

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[5] 10: 92

[6] Saying or action or approval of the Prophet (SAW)

[7] Sahih Muslim

[8] 29: 57

[9] Abraham

[10] Alayhis Salaam = Peace be upon him

[11] GOD

[12] Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala = Glorious and Exalted is He

[13] The Angel Of Death

[14] Stories Of The Holy Prophets P: 46

[15] Moses

[16] Sahih Bukhari

[17] Jesus

[18] Anti Christ

[19] 4: 157

[20] 83: 7

[21] 83: 18

[22] The only correct answer is ALLAH (SWT)

[23] The only correct answer is Islam

[24] Every nation was sent a Prophet and each nation must give the name of its own Prophet. Previous nation's answers would include Prophet Musa (AS) or Prophet Isa (AS) but since the advent of the last & final Prophet in Arabia, the only acceptable answer from the 7th Century onwards is Prophet Mohammed (SAW)

[25] Abu Dawud

[26] Understanding Islam P: 60

[27]3: 185

[28] World

[29] 67: 1, 2

[30] 2: 156