

An Islamic View of Death and Dying

Wahaj D. Ahmad, MD
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Abstract

The definition of death, its certainty and its significance are given based on Qur'anic verses. Dealing with a dying person and the rituals performed in case of death are discussed based on the Qur'an and Hadith. The concept of resurrection is central to Islamic belief.

Key words: death, Rūh (Soul), Islamic belief

"Every soul shall taste death . . ." is a well-known and well-understood "ayah" of the Qur'an. Everyday human experience makes it quite evident that death is an inseparable part of life. Everything that lives must die.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross published her book *On Death and Dying* in 1969.² She attempted to bring to light the psychological attitudes toward death and described four stages in the acceptance of death by individuals who know they are dying. She failed to incorporate religious views of dying. Yet, every culture, ancient or recent, Eastern or Western, black or white, Muslim or non-Muslim, has its own beliefs, taboos, and religious dictates regarding dying and the perceptions of death. Take for example the indestructibility or immortality of the soul, a concept that is common to many religions. Hindu teachings³ indicate that the soul passes at death to another body, even if the body is nonhuman.

Islamic teachings of eschatology are, however, different. Allāh [SWT] says in the Qur'an al-Majid:

"O ye who believe let there be witnesses between you when death draweth near unto one of you, at the time of bequest . . ." ⁴ Also:

"It is prescribed when death approaches any one of you,

if he leaves wealth, that he make a bequest to parents and next of kin according to reasonable usage . . ." ⁵ These and other "āyāt" (verses) give details of how a dying Muslim should divide and distribute his property. Rasūl-Allāh [PBUH] advised Muslims to visit the sick, especially when death is near, and advised them to recite the "Shāhādah" (the Islamic article of faith [witness]) or "Surāt Yāsīn" and that the dying person should recite the Shāhādah. 'Abū S'aid al-Khudri [RAA] narrated that the prophet [PBUH] said:

"Instruct the dying person to say, 'Lā ilāha illāllāh' (There is no god but God [Allah])." ⁶

For Muslims, it is clear that Allāh, not man, is in charge of death, as revealed in the following verses:

" . . . at length when death approaches one of you, our angels take his soul . . ." ⁷ and

"It is He who doth take your souls by night and hath knowledge what ye have done by day. Then He doth raise you up again that a term appointed be fulfilled . . ." ⁸ Then again,

"It is Allāh that taketh the souls (of men) at death and those that die not, He takes during their sleep. Those on whom He has passed the decree of death He keeps back (from returning to life) but the rest He sends (back to their bodies) for a term appointed." ⁹ These 'āyāt tell us that the permanent disconnection of soul from body is death. Much of death remains a mystery to men, as Allāh reminds us that

" . . . of knowledge it is only a little that is given to you." ¹⁰

There are about 165 'āyāt concerning death in the Qur'an al-karim, but we need concern ourselves with only a few for the sake of understanding the concept of death as

From the Department of Neurology
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Reprint requests:

Wahaj D. Ahmad, MD
576 Townhouse Lane
Fayetteville, NC 28311

Muslims.

"Nor can a soul die except by Allah's leave. The term being fixed as by writing."¹¹

This means that there is a definite time of death even though as physicians we attempt to predict that exact time. Also, we are told that death is certain to catch up with you wherever you are and you cannot escape it.

"Say, death from which ye flee will truly overtake you . . ."¹²

"Wherever you are, death will find you even if you are in towers built up strong and high."¹³

Rasūl-Allāh [PBUH] has left us the instructions about how the living should deal with their grief. Ibn-'Umar [RAA] narrated the following passage from his father, who learned it from the Prophet [PBUH]:

"The deceased is tortured in his grave for the wailing done over him."¹⁴

'Anas ibn Malīk [RAA] narrated:

"...we entered 'Abū Sīf's house and at that time Ibrahīm was on his last breath and the eyes of Allāh's apostle started shedding tears. Abd-ur-Raḥmān ibn 'ūf said, 'O Allāh's apostle, even you are weeping.' He said 'O ibn 'ūf this is mercy.' Then he wept more and said, 'the eyes are shedding tears and the heart is grieved...'"¹⁵

Thus, Muslims understand that loud wailing is not allowed, while quiet weeping with grief is appropriate. Mourning is not allowed for more than three days, as the prophet stopped people in Medinah from mourning after the third day of Shahādah (martyrdom) of his beloved uncle and friend, Ḥamzah [RAA].

There are many rituals undertaken at the time of death in different cultures, such as shooting arrows in the air (by American Indians) or shooting rifles or guns (military honor in most western countries). Muslims have no such noisy rituals.

Muslim customs are minimal and simple: wash, bathe, and shroud the dead body and then bury it in the grave after farewell prayers have been offered by the group of family and friends. Emphasis is on quickly burying the deceased. In the grave, the face of the dead body is turned toward the Ka'abah (in Makkah, Saudi Arabia). The most common prayer is "O Allāh, forgive our dead ones and living ones, present ones and absent ones, men and women, older and younger, all. O Allāh whoever of us you let live, let him live in Islam and to whoever of us you give death, let him die on "Imān" (faith)."¹⁶

When you see a funeral procession, stand up if you are sitting (for respect). Join in if you can and give a helping shoulder in carrying the casket. Recite the Shahādah. 'Amr ibn Rābi' [RAA], who was narrating the prophet [PBUH] said, "Whenever you see a funeral procession stand up until the procession goes ahead of you."¹⁷

The concept of life after death and teachings such as "remember death frequently that destroys your enjoyments" are strong in Islam.¹⁸ In America, "... 69% of the adult population affirmed a belief in an afterlife. However, this belief is not held deeply enough to provide much psycho-

logical reassurance. What prevails is the implicit belief for most of us, that death means the end."¹⁹ In contrast, a Muslim, while in this world, must prepare for the other world.

Allāh says in the Qur'ān,

"... at length ye will die. Again on the day of judgment will ye be raised up."²⁰

Thus, we see that death is actually but the end of one phase for a soul and a new phase begins after that. In fact, in most of the Muslim world, the death of one person is referred to as "Intiqāl," which means transfer. Thus, Allāh teaches that death is the end of one phase and beginning of the next phase for a soul. We as Muslims are urged to prepare ourselves for the day of judgment; that is the reason all these things about death and the day of judgment have been communicated to us by our Creator.

What is actually happening to a soul? Souls (Rūhs) or spirits of all human beings have been created and reside in a world of souls from where a soul comes to join the body (according to Allāh's will and decree). The soul (Rūh) remains in an intermediate state, or "Ālm-al-barzakh," until it is time for all souls to be reunited with their bodies at the time of resurrection.

This is the knowledge of the unseen and comes from the teachings of the Qur'ān and Hādith (Prophet Muhammad's [PBUH] sayings).

Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and have no connection with the Department of Veteran Affairs of the U.S. government.

References

1. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 21; Verse 35.
2. Kubler-Ross, E: *On Death and Dying*. New York: McMillan Publishing Co., 1969.
3. Encyclopedia Americana. *Reincarnation*. Danbury, Connecticut: Grolier, Inc, 1984;23:348-9.
4. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 5; Verse 106.
5. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 2; Verse 180.
6. Mishkāt-ul-Maṣābīh. English translation by James Robeson. Lahore, Pakistan: Sh.M. Ashraf, Kashmiri Bazar. 1:334.
7. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 6; Verse 61.
8. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 6; Verse 60.
9. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 39; Verse 42.
10. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 17; Verse 85.
11. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 3; Verse 145.
12. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 62; Verse 8.
13. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 4; Verse 78.
14. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, English translation by Dr. MM Khan, Volume II, Chapter 33, Hadith #379, Page 213: Kāzī Publications.
15. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, English translation by Dr. MM Khan, Volume II, Chapter 42, Hadith #390, Page 219: Kāzī Publications.
16. Riyāḍ-ul-Ṣāliḥīn. English translation by S.M. Madni

Abbasi, al-Imam al-Nawawī: Dar-ul-‘Arabiah, Beirut, Lebanon. 483.

17. Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, English translation by Dr. M.M. Khan, Volume II, Chapter 45, Hadith #394, Page 222: Kāzī Publications.

18. 'Iḥyā' 'ulūm-ul-Dīn by al-Imam al-Ghazālī, Urdu translation by M. Ahsan Chapter on Death and After Death: Lahore, Pakistan: al-Maktabah al-Raḥmāniyyah, Urdu

Bazar. 728.

19. Encyclopedia Americana. Danbury, Connecticut: Grolier, Inc., 1984;8:565.

20. The Glorious Qur'ān. Chapter 23; Verse 15-16.

English translations of the Qur'ān used here are either by Marmaduke Pictahal or Yusuf Ali.