

Death (al-Mawt)

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ

***"Every soul will taste death."*¹**

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Almost every day we see or hear of a death, often that of someone we know; yet how often do we consider our own time and what will follow? While a funeral procession passes before us, we admit that, true, death has come to others; but we are still here and feel that we will continue to be for a long time. Once when a funeral procession passed near the Prophet (ﷺ), he remarked, "Relieved or relieved of him." Some inquired, "What is the meaning of 'relieved' and 'relieved of him'?" He answered, "The believing servant is relieved of the fatigue and afflictions of this world, [entering] into the mercy of Allah; and people, countries, plants and animals are relieved of the transgressing servant."²

Consider a person who expects to travel and how he thinks of nothing but his journey – what to take along and how best to prepare himself. The believer prepares in the same way for his final and most important journey. This temporary station (i.e., life) in which he waits is not his primary concern. ‘Abdullāh bin ‘Umar reported that once the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) took hold of his shoulders and said, "Be in this world as a stranger or a traveler."³

The One who has given life will surely take it back at the time determined by Him. There is no destination but the return to Allah, and there is no hope but in the acceptance of Allah. It is death which exposes the truth about this life – everything material will be left behind. For those who love the comforts of worldly life, it is good to remember the harshness and solitude of the grave and that one will be removed irrevocably from all that to which he had been so closely attached. The Prophet (ﷺ) advised, "Remember often the destroyer of pleasures – death."⁴

Death is an awesome reality facing every living being. It is, in itself, a severe trial. Even Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ), the most beloved of Allah's creatures, was not spared its pain. For the believer, affliction at death (as at any time) is a means of expiating sins or gaining a higher position in Paradise. Those attending a dying person should make every effort to have him remember Allah and give him hope and reassurance, not allowing him to submit to the Shayṭān out of pain or fear. The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Help your dying ones to say, 'Lā ilāha ill-Allah.'"⁵ And he also stated, "When death draws near to the believer, he receives glad tidings of Allah's pleasure with him and His generosity, so nothing is more loved by him than what is

¹Sūrah 3:185, 21:35 and 29:57.

²Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

³Al-Bukhārī.

⁴At-Tirmidhī, an-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah – ṣaḥeeḥ.

⁵Muslim, Abū Dāwūd and at-Tirmidhī. Scholars have added that this should be a gentle encouragement without insistence if it is feared that the person might become upset. It could be said by someone else within hearing distance to serve as an indirect reminder to the dying.

before him. As for the companion of the Fire, whose deeds were sealed with evil, he is given the news of it [i.e., Hellfire] during this terror [of death]."⁶

In the Qur'ān, Allah *ta'ālā* gives a clear description of what happens at that time:

وَلَوْ تَرَىٰ إِذْ يَتَوَفَّى الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَضْرِبُونَ وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَدْبَارَهُمْ وَذُوقُوا عَذَابَ الْحَرِيقِ.
ذَٰلِكَ بِمَا قَدَّمْت أَيْدِيكُمْ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ لَيْسَ بِظَلَمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ

"And if you could but see when the angels take the souls of those who denied...⁷ They are striking their faces and their backs and [saying], 'Taste the punishment of the Burning Fire. That is for what your hands have put forth [of evil] and because Allah is not ever unjust to [His] servants.'"⁸

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَمُوا تَتَنَزَّلُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا وَأَبْشِرُوا
بِالْجَنَّةِ الَّتِي كُنتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ

"Indeed, those who have said, 'Our Lord is Allah' and then remained on a right course – the angels will descend upon them, [saying], 'Do not fear and do not grieve but receive good tidings of Paradise, which you were promised.'"⁹

Death is an awakening after a dream – lucidity after confusion. It is a second birth into a greater life. If the life of this world was created for work and trial, then the life of the next world was created for judgement and lasting compensation.

At death the soul leaves the body. All things are now absolutely clear to that soul – the realities concerning all of which one was unaware during his lifetime or chose to ignore.¹⁰ The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) reported, "When one of you dies, he is shown his place [in the Hereafter] morning and evening. If he is from the people of Paradise, then among the people of Paradise. And if he is from the people of Hell, then among the people of Hell. And it will be said to him, 'This is your place until Allah resurrects you on the Day of Judgement.'"¹¹ Thus each soul remains until the Day of Judgement (according to its preview of the Hereafter), feeling sadness and regret or happiness and reassurance.

"The grave is the first station among the stations of the Hereafter."¹² In a long and detailed ḥadīth the Prophet (ﷺ) described how two angels come to the believer in beautiful form, taking his sweet-smelling soul gently up to the seventh heaven where Allah registers him and the angels question him about his Lord, his religion and his prophet. After he has answered correctly, "My Lord is Allah; my religion is Islam; and my prophet is Muḥammad (ﷺ)," his soul is returned to its body in the grave, which is expanded for him for as far as he can see. Then his good deeds come to keep him company in the form of a beautiful man

⁶Al-Bukhārī.

⁷This sentence is left incomplete for additional effect. Its conclusion is left to the imagination of the reader or listener and estimated as "...you would see a dreadful sight."

⁸Sūrah al-Anfāl, 8:50-51.

⁹Sūrah Fuṣṣilat, 41:30.

¹⁰See Sūrah Qāf, 50:20.

¹¹Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

¹²At-Tirmidhī – ḥasan.

telling him to look forward to all that will please him. As for the nonbeliever, two angels come to him in ugly form, tearing his foul-smelling soul violently from its body; and when they ascend to the lowest of the heavens, the door does not open, and Allah registers him in the book of Hell. His soul is then thrown back to its body in the grave, and the angels come to question him about his Lord, his religion and his prophet. But he can only answer, "Uh... uh... I don't know." (And in another narration: "I only said as the people said.") So the door of Hell is opened before him, and his grave contracts, compressing him until his ribs are crushed against each other. Then his bad deeds come to him in the form of a repulsive man telling him to look forward to all that he despises – humiliation and eternal punishment – and he is struck a blow which causes his scream to be heard by everything except men and jinn.¹³ The Prophet (ﷺ) advised us to seek from Allah protection from the punishment of the grave and the punishment of the Fire.¹⁴

All this, and the Day of Judgement has not yet arrived! In truth, one's reward or punishment begins from the instant of death, when he leaves the familiar confines of time and space.

إِنَّهُمْ يَرَوْنَهُ بَعِيدًا. وَنَرَاهُ قَرِيبًا

***"Indeed, they see it [as] distant, but We see it [as] near."*¹⁵**

The reality of death is that it is simply a stage in man's development, as birth was – a transition from one world to another. Knowledge of this fact given to the Muslim is another example of Allah's endless mercy upon him, for with this knowledge he can prepare himself for success.

The Qur'ān is explicit in its statement that no one but Allah knows when the appointed Hour will be:

قُلْ إِنَّمَا عِلْمُهَا عِنْدَ رَبِّي لَا يُجَلِّيهَا لِوَقَّتِهَا إِلَّا هُوَ

***"Say, 'Its knowledge is only with my Lord. None will reveal its time except Him.'"*¹⁶**

Certain signs or warnings have been mentioned in both the Qur'ān and the prophetic statements – events that will take place before that Last Hour; but these signs are for the living to observe. The souls of the dead are no longer subject to time as we know it. The Prophet (ﷺ) once said, *"The Hour will not come until 'Allah, Allah' is no longer uttered upon the earth,"* (i.e., when Allah has been completely forgotten by the earth's inhabitants.)¹⁷

Just as the death of every individual is the first stage in his new life, the death of the universe and its recreation in a different form signals the beginning of the true existence promised by Allah:¹⁸

¹³Aḥmad – ṣaḥeeḥ.

¹⁴Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

¹⁵Sūrah al-Ma'ārij, 70:6-7.

¹⁶Sūrah al-A'rāf, 7:187.

¹⁷Muslim. At that point there will no longer be any reason for continuation of the present creation. It must make way for the new order.

¹⁸"And indeed, the home of the Hereafter – that is the [eternal] life, if only they knew." (29:64)

كَمَا بَدَأْنَا أَوَّلَ خَلْقٍ نُعِيدُهُ ۖ وَعَدَّا عَلَيْهَا إِنَّا كُنَّا فَاعِلِينَ

***"As We began the first creation, We will repeat it. [That is] a promise binding upon Us. Indeed, We will do it."*¹⁹**

يَوْمَ تُبَدَّلُ الْأَرْضُ غَيْرَ الْأَرْضِ وَالسَّمَوَاتُ

***"On the Day the earth will be replaced by another earth, and the heavens [as well]..."*²⁰**

When the appointed Hour has arrived, the whole universe will undergo such drastic changes as no man can imagine. In early Makkan sūrah, Allah *ta'ālā* gives terrifying descriptions of some of these events in order to awaken man and shake him into the realization that Allah, his Creator, will manifest His absolute power and control that Day over all things, that He will restore life to the dead, and that all beings will be then totally helpless and answerable to Him...

إِذَا السَّمَاءُ انفَطَرَتْ . وَإِذَا الْكَوَاكِبُ انتَثَرَتْ . وَإِذَا الْبِحَارُ فُجِّرَتْ . وَإِذَا الْقُبُورُ بُعْثِرَتْ . عَلِمَتْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ وَأَخَّرَتْ

***"When the sky breaks apart and when the stars fall, scattering, and when the seas are erupted and when the [contents of] graves are scattered [i.e., exposed], a soul will [then] know what it has put forth and kept back."*²¹**

The Hour will be heralded by a trumpet blast which will strike everyone in the heavens and upon the earth dead from terror, except whom Allah wills. Then upon the second blast, life will be restored to all of the dead.²² Each will feel as one who has slept but a short while, having been awakened when the soul returned to the body.

وَيَوْمَ تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ يُقْسِمُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ مَا لَبِثُوا غَيْرَ سَاعَةٍ

***"And the Day the Hour appears the criminals will swear they had remained but an hour."*²³**

Thus will every soul be returned to life in the same psychological condition it was at the time of death – in belief or denial, in good or evil. In support of this statement are the Prophet's words: "Every servant will be brought back to life in accordance with the state in which he died."²⁴

The second creation of man will occur in a way similar to the growth of plants upon the earth. Allah points to this fact in the Qur'ān. In authentic ḥadīths the Prophet (ﷺ) explained, "...then water will descend from the heavens, and they [i.e., people] will grow as vegetation grows. There is no part of man which will not have decayed except for one bone, which is the

¹⁹Sūrah al-Anbiyā', 21:104.

²⁰Sūrah Ibrāheem, 14:48.

²¹Sūrah al-Infiṭār, 82:1-5.

²²See Sūrah az-Zumar, 39:68.

²³Sūrah ar-Rūm, 30:55.

²⁴Muslim.

base of the tail, from which creation will be developed on the Day of Judgement." And he (ﷺ) said, "Every part of a son of Ādam is consumed by the earth except for the base of the tail. He was created from it, and he will be reassembled from it."

All creatures will then be gathered together for the Judgement – men, jinn, even the animals – each one alone, stripped of friends and family ties.

فَلَا أُنْسَابَ بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ

"No relationship will there be among them that Day."²⁵

The following information about the Gathering comes from *Ṣaḥeeḥ Muslim*: People will be gathered on a land that is white, untrodden, pure and unowned by anyone. They will be gathered as they were at birth – barefoot, naked and uncircumcised – but they will be too preoccupied to notice each other. This Day every person will be concerned only with the judgement that awaits him, no longer thinking of those he loved in his earthly life – even being willing to sacrifice them to save himself, if only that was possible.²⁶ On that Day Allah *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* will fold up the heavens, taking them in His right hand; and He will fold up the earth, taking it in His left hand, saying, "*I am the Sovereign. Where are the tyrants? Where are the arrogant?*"

Then there will be the taking of account and the judgement. The justice that man instinctively longs for but never realizes in this earthly life will be established. And the justice of Allah is complete, taking into account all deeds, intentions and conditions. Not one particle of good or evil will be ignored in His register.

لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا

"It leaves nothing small or great except that it has enumerated it."²⁷

فَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ. وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُ.

"So whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it."²⁸

Everyone will be perfectly convinced of the justice of his judgement, and the balance will prove to him without a doubt what he deserves. Indeed, nothing will benefit him this Day except the good which he had put forth in his former life and the mercy and forgiveness of Allah, which he hopes for now. For even the intercession of the Prophet will be only by Allah's permission.

Every servant will be given his record, published openly before all creation, and he will be told:

أَقْرَأَ كِتَابِكَ كَفَىٰ بِنَفْسِكَ الْيَوْمَ عَلَيْكَ حَسِيبًا

"Read your record. Sufficient is yourself against you this Day as accountant."²⁹

²⁵Sūrah al-Mu'minūn, 23:101.

²⁶See Sūrah al-Ma'ārij, 70:11-14.

²⁷Sūrah al-Kahf, 18:49.

²⁸Sūrah az-Zalzalah, 99:7-8.

²⁹Sūrah al-Isrā', 17:14.

The successful person on that Day will feel proud and happy before his Lord and before all of creation, but the one who is exposed and scandalized will have no escape from humiliation. He will try to defend himself through lying as he did in his earthly life.

فَيَحْلِفُونَ لَهُ، كَمَا تَحْلِفُونَ لَكُمْ

***"And they will swear to Him as they swear to you."*³⁰**

And they will say:

وَاللَّهِ رَبِّنَا مَا كُنَّا مُشْرِكِينَ

***"By Allah, our Lord, we were not those who associated."*³¹**

But Allah will silence their tongues, and as it is reported in the Qur'ān, their hands and feet – even their skins – will testify to the truth, leaving them with no further argument. Left with only sorrow, regret and self-hatred, they will be addressed:

لَمَقْتُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ مِنْ مَقَّتِكُمْ أَنْفُسَكُمْ

***"The hatred of Allah for you was [even] greater than your hatred of yourselves."*³²**

Surely He has prepared for them a just and fitting punishment for their crimes.

Concerning the believer who had sinned at times, the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) related that he will be confronted privately by his Lord, who will say, "Do you know that you have committed such and such a sin," mentioning each sin one by one until the servant has admitted all of them and sees that he can only be doomed to destruction. But then Allah will say, "I had concealed it for you in the world, and I forgive you for it today," and he will be given his record containing only the good that he did. As for the rejecters and hypocrites, the witnesses will say:

هَؤُلَاءِ الَّذِينَ كَذَبُوا عَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ ۚ أَلَّا لَعْنَةُ اللَّهِ عَلَى الظَّالِمِينَ

***"These are the ones who lied against their Lord. Unquestionably, the curse of Allah is upon the wrongdoers."*³³**

Such will be their reckoning. Everyone, believers and nonbelievers alike, will be exposed to Hell, approaching it and observing it at close range.

وَإِنْ مِنْكُمْ إِلَّا وَارِدُهَا

***"And there is none of you except he will come to it."*³⁴**

Ḥadīths from *Ṣaḥeeḥ Muslim* and *Ṣaḥeeḥ al-Bukhārī* explain that a narrow bridge will be erected over Hell, and everyone will be made to pass over it. The best of the people will cross

³⁰Sūrah al-Mujādilah, 58:18.

³¹Sūrah al-An'ām, 6:23.

³²Sūrah Ghāfir, 40:10.

³³Al-Bukhārī and Muslim. The Qur'ānic reference is Sūrah Hūd, 11:18.

³⁴Sūrah Maryam, 19:71.

it at the speed of lightening, others at the speed of the wind, others at the speed of galloping horses, and others will cross it more slowly, some crawling on their hands and knees. The wrongdoers and unjust will not succeed in crossing it but will be seized by claws like giant thorns along the path, pulling them off of it into the Fire. Some of the believers will escape untouched, others narrowly escaping after having been scratched. Then those successful in crossing will proceed on to Paradise.

يَوْمَ نَقُولُ لِجَهَنَّمَ هَلِ امْتَلَأَتْ وَتَقُولُ هَلْ مِنْ مَّزِيدٍ . وَأُزْلِفَتِ الْجَنَّةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ . هَذَا مَا تُوعَدُونَ لِكُلِّ أَوَّابٍ حَفِيفٍ . مَنْ خَشِيَ الرَّحْمَنَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَجَاءَ بِقَلْبٍ مُنِيبٍ

"On the Day We will say to Hell, 'Have you been filled?' and it will say, 'Are there some more,' and Paradise will be brought near to the righteous, not far, [it will be said], 'This is what you were promised – for every returner [to Allah] and keeper [of His covenant] who feared the Most Merciful in the unseen and came with a heart returning [in repentance].'"³⁵

There are detailed accounts of Hellfire and of Paradise in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, informing us that the consequences of our actions and intentions will be both physical and emotional. These descriptions serve to bring the concept closer to man's understanding, yet it is perceived that the realities of the next life are greater than the human mind can now comprehend. The eternal yet unbearable tortures of the Hellfire await those who have arrogantly denied their Lord. Their efforts to escape will be futile, and their pleas for relief will be ignored. The punishment they will have earned for themselves by their rebellion and tyranny upon the earth will be the ultimate justice. The righteous believers who have worked hard, seeking the acceptance of Allah, will be rewarded accordingly by forgiveness for their minor sins and entrance into Paradise, where they will have all that their souls desire, and more – the presence of the Lord Himself, who will be eternally pleased with them.

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) once recited from the Qur'ān: ***"For those who have done good is the best [reward] – and extra..."***³⁶ and then said, "When the people of Paradise have entered Paradise and the people of Hell have entered Hell, a crier will call out, 'O people of Paradise, you have a promise from Allah, and He wishes to fulfill it for you.' So they will say, 'What could it be? Has He not made our scales heavy [with good deeds], whitened our faces [i.e., shown us in the best light], and caused us to enter Paradise and avoid Hellfire?' Then the screen will be removed, and they will look at Allah. He will not have given them anything that they love more than looking at Him, and that is the 'extra.'"³⁷

Allah Himself confirms:

وَجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَّاصِرَةٌ. إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَةٌ

"[Some] faces, that Day, will be radiant, looking at their Lord."³⁸

It is mentioned in the prophetic narratives that there are those among the believers who will enter the Fire for a time due to the gravity of their sins. It is possible that one might not

³⁵Sūrah Qāf, 50:30-33.

³⁶Sūrah Yūnus, 10:26.

³⁷Muslim.

³⁸Sūrah al-Qiyāmah, 75:22-23.

be forgiven if he did not repent before his death. It is true, as well, that every soul will be compensated in full at the time of judgement, and that even animals will obtain their rights. So if one has been unjust to others, then he has, in reality, been unjust to himself since he will have to pay the price. The Prophet (ﷺ) referred to such a person as "bankrupt" because he will come forward on the Day of Judgement with some good deeds, such as prayer, fasting and *zākah*, but if he had wronged others during his lifetime, those people will all take their compensation from his good deeds until, when there are no good deeds left, they will unload their bad deeds upon him, one by one, until justice is restored. Thus he will be thrown into the Fire.³⁹

The Prophet (ﷺ) added, "As for the true people of the Fire, they will not die therein nor will they live. But others of you afflicted by the Fire by reason of sins will be caused by Allah to die therein a death⁴⁰ until, after their having become charcoal, permission will be given for intercession. They will then be gathered, brought forth and scattered in the rivers of Paradise. Then it will be said, 'O people of Paradise, pour upon them,' and they will grow like seeds that have been carried by a flood."⁴¹

Those who loved the Messenger of Allah, following his teachings and obeying him, can hope for his intercession in the life to come, for he said, "For every prophet there is a supplication which is answered. Every other prophet asked for something immediate, but I have saved this prayer for my community until the Day of Judgement. And it will be obtained, Allah willing, by whoever dies from my community not associating anything with Allah."⁴²

But lest a servant fall into false security, it must be emphasized that no one enters Paradise sooner or later without true belief and the proof of that belief, which is obedience to Allah and His final Messenger (ﷺ).⁴³ For it is stated in authentic ḥadīths that some Muslims will seek to join the Prophet at his pool but will be prevented, and Allah will tell him, "Verily, you do not know what they did after you."⁴⁴ Indeed, Allah *ta'ālā* warns about complacency in religion like that of the Jews and Christians who claim that He has favored them over others. Concerning entry into Paradise, the Qur'ān states:

لَيْسَ بِأَمَانِيكُمْ وَلَا أَمَانِي أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مَنْ يَعْمَلْ سُوءًا يُجْزَ بِهِ وَلَا تَجِدْ لَهُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَلِيًّا وَلَا نَصِيرًا

"It is not [obtained] by your wishful thinking nor by that of the People of the Scripture. Whoever does a wrong will be recompensed for it, and he will not find besides Allah a protector or a helper."⁴⁵

³⁹Muslim.

⁴⁰The word "*imātah*" (death) is used here in the sense of a temporary death or a sleep. It has been related in Ṣaḥeeḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥeeḥ Muslim that on the Day of Judgement a plump ram will be brought forth, which will be recognized as death by the inhabitants of Paradise and the Hellfire alike. The ram will be slaughtered before them, and they will be told, "O people of Paradise, [there is now] eternity and no death. O people of Hell, [there is now] eternity and no death." Thus their respective conditions of bliss or misery will be rendered complete.

⁴¹Muslim.

⁴²Muslim. The Prophet (ﷺ) emphasized here that *tawḥeed* is a condition for his intercession.

⁴³See Sūrah Aali 'Imrān, 3:31-32.

⁴⁴Muslim.

⁴⁵Sūrah an-Nisaa', 4:123.

In the Qur'ān, Allah gives a picture of both sides of the Hereafter in order that the believer may attain a healthy balance between fear and hope; for certainly, an excess of either, in the form of despair or excessive optimism, is a deterrent to effort. Every Muslim must be aware that his fate is in his own hands by the will of Allah and that what awaits him in the life to come depends completely upon himself in this time of examination.

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ وَإِنَّمَا تُوَفَّقُونَ أُجُورَكُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَمَةِ فَمَنْ زُحْزِحَ عَنِ النَّارِ وَأُدْخِلَ
الْجَنَّةَ فَقَدْ فَازَ وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْغُرُورِ

"Every soul will taste death, and you will only be given your [full] compensation on the Day of Resurrection. So he who is drawn away from the Fire and admitted to Paradise has attained [success]. And what is the life of this world except the enjoyment of delusion."⁴⁶

⁴⁶Sūrah Aali 'Imrān, 3:185.