

The concept of death in Islam

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

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Excerpt:

In his talk, the Maulana explains that death is a reality that every man faces – the fate of a king or a pauper is alike in this regard – all die. It must however be understood that death is not an end; it marks a new beginning of man's eternal life.

God created man as a perfectionist. He does not feel satisfied with anything less than perfect and therefore finding happiness seems forever impossible. Death reminds him that when God has made him a perfectionist, he must have made a perfect world as well. If man reflects on this seriously, he would not settle unless he finds the purpose of his life and what his Creator wants of him.

Remembrance of death therefore course corrects man's life and gives it right direction. If he does not remember death, man's efforts and focus will be on the pre-death period even though it is only a fleeting phase in his eternal lifespan.

The lesson:

Death of a fellow human being is a reminder for all others. It conveys the reality of human life and the importance of assessing the purpose of human life before it comes to an end. In his pre-death period therefore, man must discover the truth, acknowledge God and adopt a God-oriented way of life.

Introduction

Today, I received the news of Neil Armstrong's death. Aged eighty-two, Neil Armstrong was the first man to set foot on the moon. The historic feat, which took place on July 20, 1969 was watched live and listened to by an estimated six hundred million people. For the viewers, the sights were simply magnificent, beyond any visual experience they had ever been exposed to. A distance of over 2,40,000 miles separates earth and moon - neither was it conceivable that man would traverse such enormous distance in space and set foot on a planetary body, nor was it possible to imagine the possibility of viewing this live on television! In that year, I was in Delhi and happened to visit the office of a daily newspaper. The editor was exuding enthusiasm and remarked, "*thrilling news aa rahi hai (thrilling news is flowing in!)*."

This unusual event marked the beginning of the end of nature worship! Man worshipped sun and moon for a long time but when he set his foot on moon, he found out that moon was only a piece of rock that did not even emit its own light. This realization was sufficient to put an end to this form of nature and star worship.

When Armstrong set foot on the moon, he said, "*That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.*" Upon receiving the news of his death, I recalled these words and thought that in reality, the "giant step" had come for him now. He entered a different world one where God, angels, hell and paradise exist.

Death

Death is such a reality which each man must face – the fate of a king or a pauper is alike in this regard – both die. According to the Quran

Every human being is bound to taste death (3:185)

The term "*taste*" in this verse refers to experience. It is suggestive of the fact that every mortal has to necessarily experience death. Death is not an end, it marks a new beginning of an eternal life, and it is to acquaint man with this fact that God revealed the Quran.

Unfortunately, though each person knows that he would die, no one thinks about it seriously. Doing so would be a life-altering experience! The incident of the famous American missionary, Billy Graham is very illustrative in this regard. He once received an urgent message from an American billionaire who wanted to meet him without a moment's delay. On receiving this message, Billy Graham cancelled all his other appointments and immediately set out to meet this man.

When he arrived at the billionaire's palatial home, he was immediately taken to a private room, where the two men sat on chairs facing one another. Then, with great seriousness, the billionaire said to Billy Graham, "You see, I am an old man and life has lost all meaning for me. I am going to take a fateful leap into the unknown, young man can you give me a ray of hope?"

An American billionaire is not the only person to be faced with this kind of desperation. Every individual, man or woman, born into this world, is faced with this question at one time or the other. The answer or the solace can come only from a staunch belief in the world of the Hereafter. If we do not believe in a world after death, then this most perplexing question will remain unanswered.

According to the Creation Plan of God, man is an eternal creature. However, God has divided his life-span into two parts. A very tiny part of it has been placed in this world, while all of the remainder has been placed in the Hereafter. The present world is the world of action, while the world of the Hereafter is the place for reaping the harvest of actions. The present world is imperfect, but the world of the Hereafter is perfect in every respect. The Hereafter is a limitless world where all things have been provided in their ideal state. Every person is aware of this truth at the level of his nature, he does not acknowledge.

I came to know about an Indian born, London-based, ultra-secular Muslim writer who is now sixty-five years old and of ill health. His excessive drinking behavior has deteriorated his health to such an extent that the fear of death now looms large on him.

His relative told me that while discussing death the writer said to him, “*Agar koi aadmi mujhe milta jo ye jaanta aur jis ko ye khabar hoti ki maut ke us paar kya hai toh us se mein bheek mangta ki who mujhe bata de (If I knew of a man who would know what lies after death, I would beg him to tell me about it!)*”

This is no simple remark! The words of this write convey the intensity with which he wants to know what lies after death.

God is Merciful

I recently underwent an experience, which made me realize that our biggest solace after death is that we shall be face-to-face with a God who is Merciful and Compassionate. According to the Quran

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

All praise is due to God, the Lord of the Universe, the Beneficent, the Merciful. (1:1-3)

As I was slowly climbing the staircase to reach this room, a young person came running and quickly went up the stairs. It occurred to me that even though I was virtually crawling on the stairs and the other one ran it up, God is supplying oxygen to both of us indiscriminately; He does not distinguish between old and young. According to a Hadith

Allah ke nazdeek, qavi banda zyada mehboob hai zaef ke muqable mein, lekin har ke ke liye khair hai (Muslim)

[The strong believer is better and dearer to Allah than a weak believer, while there is good in both.]

According to the above Hadith, a strong person (*qaavi*) is expected to perform the religious tasks with fervor and is therefore dearer to God. An old man is the subject of God’s mercy as he is in a state where he should be helped and shown compassion towards.

It must be understood that life after death is not a world where man shall meet a fierce God. God is All-compassionate and Merciful. The only condition to invoke mercy is that in his pre-death period, man discovers the truth, acknowledges God and adopts a God-oriented way of life. It is the need of the hour to make man that he must develop his nature such that he becomes the recipient of Divine compassion and mercy.

According to a Hadith

Maut ko bahut zyada yaad karo kyun ki wo lazzaton ko dha dene wali hai (Tirmidhi)

[Remember death (the killer of all pleasures) often]

Remembrance of death course corrects the life of man and gives it right direction. If man does not remember death, his efforts and focus will be on the pre-death period even though it is only a fleeting phase in his eternal lifespan.

Recently, I came to know about a man who despite being born in a poor household, worked his way up and built himself businesses and houses. After his death, all that he had spent his life setting up was left behind! It is important to understand that he who does not remember God would end up making political power, money, and status as his goals. These may serve him during his pre-death lifespan but would be rendered valueless as soon as he breathes his last. This is the case of every man. Each person runs from morning to evening to pursue his material desires and earn a status in society. Death serves to remind man of the ephemeral nature of his worldly pursuits. The case is similar to that of a person who had established himself materially in his country of stay but when he travelled to a different land, he got robbed of all his belongings! Suddenly, he would find himself in an unknown land, penniless and all alone! I underwent such an experience during my travel to Russia. One day, it so happened that I could not contact my guide and was left stranded on the streets of Moscow! Neither did I know Russian nor did they know English and it was impossible to strike a conversation and seek help! This incident was a great realization for me and I keep refreshing it in my memory!

Why did God create man what is the end of his life?

The Quran gives to man, a very hopeful map of life. It says,

No soul knows what joy is kept hidden in store for them as a reward for their labours.

(32:17)

In the present world, one who accepts the Truth, proves that he gives prime importance to Truth. His test is on his ability to make the rightful use of the freedom granted to him by God. Such a person will have greatness conferred upon him in the Hereafter. As opposed to this, one who considers himself great, while ignoring the Truth, shall have a lesser position in the real life of the Hereafter.

Pharaoh was an unbeliever and a tyrant. But his wife Asiyah, was a woman of faith and a doer of pious deeds. She was not born in a polytheistic culture and therefore the message of monotheism addressed her, at once. So, when she kept herself on the right path, her husband caused her infliction and even threatened to kill her. Her prayer to God is recorded in the Quran thus

My Lord! Build me a house in nearness to You in Paradise (66:11)

This is a very significant *dua* with which Pharaoh's wife derived the courage to endure his atrocities and still adhere to the religion of God. Eventually, Pharaoh got her killed. The case of Asiyah was a case of opting for a better choice. Leaving behind the ephemeral palace of the Pharaoh, she opted for the eternal neighborhood of God. Similarly, the magicians whom Pharaoh had invited to compete with Moses were confronted by the cogent reasoning of Moses on one hand and the towering personality of Pharaoh, on the other. The magicians preferred convincing arguments to authoritarianism, although they knew very well how dearly they would pay for their choice in this world. The magicians' faith was not hereditary or formal, ritual kind: it amounted to a 'discovery' for them. And faith received as a discovery is so powerful that under its influence everything else appears worthless – be it a great personality or some other worldly consideration. When Pharaoh was defeated in the field of arguments and reasoning, he tried to suppress the truth by force.

He ordained brutal killing of these magicians at which they said,

So, decide whatever you will. Your jurisdiction only covers the life of this world. (20:72)

The magicians had understood that Pharaoh's control was temporary and God shall reward them with that which is better in the life hereafter.

The above incident illustrates how death makes man fathom the reality of life and enables him to discover the eternal life that succeeds death. It prepares man to pursue a higher goal, which is to strive to unfold potential and become deserving of paradise. This is because paradise is not to inhabit a herd but to inhabit those who would deserve to be a part of God's neighbourhood. If man realizes the importance of eternal paradise – where those who live by the Creation Plan of God would be chosen to inhabit – he would remain in awe!

Every man undergoes the experience in this world of not getting what he wants. Not even kings or great men get what they want. This is because man is a perfectionist but God did not make this world as a perfect world. Everything in this world is less than ideal and imperfect. This means that a perfection-seeking animal has been cast into an imperfect world. According to the Quran

We have indeed created man in the best of mould, then We cast him down as the lowest of the low (95:4 - 5)

God created man as a perfectionist. He does not feel satisfied with anything less than perfect and finding happiness seems forever impossible. The issue is the disparity between nature of man and the nature of the present world whereby a perfectionist is forced to live in an imperfect world. Death reminds him that when God has made him a perfectionist, he must have made a perfect world as well. According to the Quran,

We created pairs of all things. (51:49)

The pair of a perfectionist is a perfect world. An imperfect world would not be his pair. If man reflects on this seriously, he would undergo a transformation and strive to find for himself, a line of action where he should devote his time and energy.

Let me explain this with an example. My younger brother, Mr. A.M. Khan was born as a premature child. He was very small in size and had to be kept in a tub of oil. My mother used to carefully attend to him even though visitors would discourage saying that he would not survive for long. My mother devoted herself completely. According to Hadith

Allah ko apne bandon ko us se zyada mohabbat hai jitna ek maa ko hoti hai

[God is more loving and kinder than a mother to her dear child] (Musnad Ahmad)

God is billion times more compassionate than a mother. This thought gives me great comfort! I cannot be selected for paradise on account of my actions but by virtue of God's blessings. In other words, just like a child, who by virtue of his birth is of no consequence but his mother's support helps him grow, similarly man is not deserving of paradise by virtue of his actions. It is his state of helplessness that makes him eligible for God's mercy and compassion. Man must therefore be forever hopeful of God's mercy. According to the Quran

Do not despair of God's mercy; none but those who deny the truth despair of God's mercy. (12:87)

Conclusion

Death is not merely a phenomenon where a human being who was walking, eating and interacting in a society, passed away. Death of a fellow human being is a reminder for all others. It conveys the reality of human life and the importance of assessing the purpose of human life before it comes to an end.

When those who do not remember death will come face-to-face with it, they will think of themselves as being a case of missed opportunities! They would regret the fact that they did not utilize the avenues which life had opened for them. I am reminded of the case of a man who used to regret the fact that despite his father's insistence, he did not study else he could have had a good job.

Similarly, he who did not prepare himself in this world would think upon entering into the world hereafter that he missed the golden chance to prepare himself else he could have been selected for paradise.

The Bible uses the following phrase for such individuals who would regret themselves in the life hereafter '*Abad tak rona aur daant peesna hoga*'. [*They shall weep and grind their teeth for eternity.*]

I pray that God gives us the ability to tread the path of righteousness and He selects us for inhabiting paradise!

Question- Answers

Q1: After Ramadan, how should we lead life so that the spirit which was inculcated during Ramadan remains and we live spiritually the rest of the year?

A: It is said that man is a thinking animal. All the activities are controlled by mind and the real thing is that at the level of thinking, man must keep recapitulating the learnings made by him during the month. Unfortunately, on Eid itself people forget all the learnings. So, it is important to consciously plan and draw from experiences and lead a God-oriented life throughout the year.

Q2: When death is unknown, why does man not use spirit of enquiry to know about it?

A: This is what lacks in most; the spirit awakens in some but most lead forgetful lives! In earlier times, people thought man died and finished. The later-day scientific discoveries brought to fore that death comes to the vehicle (body) and not to man's real personality (beyond the body). A thinker referred to personality as 'changelessness in change' because the cells of our body continue to die even as man lives on and despite the constant death of body cells, man's real personality remains unchanged. This means that death is not the end of a personality but of man's body.

Man cannot take unawareness as an alibi. He must study and undertake research. An Arab proverb says, '*Jo tehqeeq karta hai, zarur woh pata hai.*' [*He who searches, finds.*] But peoples remain distracted and are not able to think. Our mission is aimed at reminding people that they should not be so distracted by the present world they do not pay attention to the imminent tomorrow.

Q3: What is the biggest obstacle in trying to take a lesson from death and what should we do to remove this obstacle?

A: Man is able to understand the observable immediately but that which requires him to think and infer is what he often fails to understand. The world before death, its loss and gain, the pain and happiness – all can be observed by him and it is man's weakness to live in that which he can see. Therefore the Quran says

**Those who believe in the revelation sent down to you and in what was sent before you
and firmly believe in life to come (2: 4)**

In other words, those who are able to think even about that which they cannot observe would be able to understand the reality of death and will then plan their life accordingly.

Q4: Why people are more worried about how they will die – bed ridden or healthy – instead of worrying about what will happen to them after death?

A: This is because everyone considers this life as everything and so their focus is on being able to cure ailments and take care of events as they unfold. Unfortunately, man remains caught up in what he sees and forgets the unseen. The aim of our mission is to inculcate intellectual awakening in man.

Q5: Today I am young and think that death is away. How should I save myself from this thinking?

A: This is why God has not assigned a time to death. Children, elderly – all die. My children, my younger brother and sister, all died at different ages. This makes me think that if they died, what will prevent me from dying? On the other hand, if God would have fixed the time of death, thinking would have been difficult but when we see people of all ages die, it serves as a reminder for the thoughtful that when others have died, so shall they. The only thing that lacks in such people is intellectual awakening.

Q6: During Ramadan, Arabs sleep through the day and are awake during night whereas in India it is the other way round. Why this difference between the habits of Muslims?

A: This is a cultural aspect and has nothing to do with Islam. Both are not right. Arabs keep eating through the night and consequently sleep through the day. A lot of people sleep so that they do not experience the fast and time passes. What they forget is that fast is not observed so that time elapses and count is maintained, it is to experience and feel the hunger and thirst that arises out of it.

Q7: Should we force ourselves to reflect on death if the thought does not come spontaneously and will this not make us disinterested in our daily activities?

A: When we know that death is a reality, we will be compelled to think about it. Just as the onset of winters makes us provision for warm clothes, similarly, we cannot turn ourselves away when we see others dying around us. If we are sincere, we will think about God.

And thinking of God, on the contrary, makes man more active and he is imbued with a sense of urgency – that there is very little time and whatever needs to be done, should be done now as tomorrow may not be there. I remember death a lot and it brings in me a sense of urgency which is a very valuable attribute.

Q8: How God will judge a person who was born in a non-Muslim family and the message could not reach him in totality?

A: I find pertinent the answer that an *alim* gave in this regard. He said ‘*Accountability is proportionate to the knowledge obtained.*’ While we cannot judge how much knowledge a person derived but principally, we can associate accountability to the level of knowledge garnered by an individual.

Q9: Death is not in our DNA. How should we then remember death?

A: Even if it is not in our DNA, it is a fact that we see all around us. It is not written in our DNA either that we do a Masters or build a house, we do it still. This is because we see around us that those who do so lead a comfortable life. In other words, we have to think about our death when we see lives of other men coming to an end and use this thought to realize our purpose in life.

Q10: How is contemplating about death linked to positive thinking?

A: Positive thinking is another name for realistic thinking. Of all experiences that man undergoes, it is death which makes man a realist. Positive thinking is as-it-is thinking and death inculcates this in man to a great extent.

Q11: That young person who spent his life in worship of God will find a special place on the Day of Judgment?

A: Our life span comprises childhood – youth – old age. Youth age is the biggest asset of man because he can neither accomplish a feat in childhood nor in old age. Youth is therefore the best part of man's lifespan. When one does the work of God in that age, one would be immensely rewarded in the world hereafter. Therefore, one must utilize one's youth most in doing the work of God.

Q12: Why are people not able to attribute to God what they get from him?

A: Let me give you an example. When a child is born, parents become immersed in the love of their child and as a result, on growing up the child gives the credit for his upbringing to his parents. No one reflects on the Creator who gave them the form and life they have. Unfortunately, all follow this herd mindset and no one is able to think in a detached manner. It must be understood that religion is for those who have a creative mind and not for those who have traditional thinking. Only he who has creative thinking is able to think in a detached manner and use his wisdom to judge what is right and what is wrong. Without creative thinking, people cannot understand the value of religion.

Q13: When we attend Sunday classes, we undergo several thrilling emotions but afterwards we drift back to our previous selves. How should we prevent this drift or retraction?

A: Parents keep showering their love upon their new born. Doing so again and again does not let the feeling fade. What is heard here on Sunday, should be listened to again and discussed. Just like you repeat the acts of love for the child, the topics discussed should be listened to again and talked about so that the lessons stay.

Q14: Muslim leaders complain about lack of progress in the Muslim community. Please give your views on this.

A: I do not say this. I only say that Muslims are a case of intellectual backwardness. They are backward as far as their thinking is concerned.