

## Mawt (Part II): the soul's journey after death.

### 1.0. Excellence and virtue of remembering death.

Allah and His Messenger (peace be upon him) have instructed us to prepare for death and prepare for the afterlife. It is the important things – the exams, interviews and weddings – that we plan and prepare for meticulously. Such is the importance of the afterlife that our every moment should ideally be spent in this pursuit.

\*The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Remember often the ender of pleasures' (*Ihya Ulum al-Din*, V: 118).

\*Sayyida Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) asked the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him): 'Will anyone be raised with the martyrs [on the Day of Judgement]?' 'Yes', he replied. 'He who remembers death twenty times in one day and night.' (*Ihya Ulum al-Din*, V: 118).

\*A man was once mentioned and highly praised in the presence of the Prophet (peace be upon him). 'How is your companion's remembrance of death?' 'We have scarcely heard him mentioning it', they replied. 'Then your companion is not as you suggest', replied the Messenger of Allah. (V: 119). In other words, a good Muslim is defined as one who remembers death abundantly.

\*The Prophet (peace be upon him) instructed us to look at our wills every two days and to rectify it if required (*Mirqat al-Mafatih*, VI: 228). In other words, we should always be ready for death.

\*Safiya (may Allah be pleased with her) told of an old woman who once complained to Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) of the hardness of her heart. 'Remember death frequently' she told her, 'and your heart will be softened.'

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Imam al-Ghazali identifies that when it comes to *mawt* and its remembrance, there are three types of people:

- i. The one engrossed in the world. Such a person does not remember death at all. If he does, then he does so in regret of the passing world. So, he spends his time cursing the whole concept of death, because of his fascination of this world.
- ii. The one who repents from his sins. He does remember death, and it in fact helps him to fear Allah and make his *tawba* complete. Sometimes, such a person hates death, but only in fear that he dies before his repentance is complete and accepted.

Imam al-Ghazali writes that this person is excused if he fears death. He does not come under the famous hadith 'Whosoever abhors meeting Allah, then Allah abhors meeting him (*Sahih al-Bukhari & Muslim*). This is because he fears only because of his ill preparation for it. It is like the example of a man who is made late for a meeting with his beloved by busying himself with preparations for the encounter; he is not reluctant of the meeting *per se*.

iii. The *Aarif* (gnostic) remembers death all the time because it is when he will finally meet his beloved. The lover never forgets the appointed time for meeting his beloved. Usually, such a person finds death to be slow in coming.

The third stage is clearly the highest stage, but even in the first stage is benefit because he still remembers death. When he remembers how death will eventually put an end to his pleasures and enjoyments of this world, it will somewhat spoil his enjoyment of it. And anything which lessens the enjoyment of this world is a good thing, writes Imam al-Ghazali (vol. V: p. 117).

## 2.0. *Sakar al-Mawt*; the agony of death.

If man knew about the agony, terror and calamity that will befall him at the time of death, it 'would suffice to render his life miserable and to cloud his happiness', Imam al-Ghazali writes. Only ignorance and distraction are the possible reasons why we do not pay greater heed to this imminent time.

### 2.1. What is the pain at death like?

In essence, this is hidden from us. The only one who truly knows what it feels like is the one who has tested death. Therefore, we can only know of it:

- i. By comparing it to the actual pains he has tasted.
- ii. By learning from the violent states of other people during their death agonies, thereby drawing an analogy from them.

Either way it is still a pale reflection of the pain and anguish of death.

Imam al-Ghazali does give an idea of how painful it might feel. He writes that no part or limb from a body really feels pain. It is because of the *ruh* that pain is felt elsewhere, in the head, arms and so on. If, for example, the hand experiences pain, then this sensation eventually makes its way to the spirit too, which too will feel that pain. However, this sensation passes through the blood, flesh and the other limbs, so only a certain part of it reaches the spirit itself.

Death is different. Death targets and affects the *ruh* directly. On the way it does not come into contact with anything else that might lessen the impact and anguish. Moreover, *all* of the *ruh* is affected not part of it (like what happens when someone is pricked for example; only part of the *ruh* is affected by the pain). Then this unbearable pain begins to manifest itself in each and every 'artery, nerve, part and joint, from the root of every hair and the bottom layer of his skin from head to foot.'

When a man is stabbed, then he cries out because there is some remaining strength in his heart and tongue to do so; but when a man is dying then his voice and screaming are muted due to the severity of the pain. The anguish leaves him with no strength to cry for relief. Imam al-Ghazali writes:

He longs to be able to seek relief in groaning, screaming and calling for aid, but he cannot. Should there remain in him any strength at all, a lowing and rattling sound is audible from his throat at the time when his spirit is pulled and dragged forth.

As the spirit leaves, the body begins to change colour. One by one, the limbs begin to die. First his feet grow cold, then his shins and thighs, and then each and every limb feel the misery and agony. This continues until the *ruh* reaches the throat. At this point he gazes out for the last time at the world and its people, and the gate of repentance (*tawba*) is closed. This is what the Messenger (peace be upon him) was referring to when he said: 'A man's repentance is accepted until he gives the death rattle (*ghargara*).'

Such is the pain of death that even the Prophet (peace be upon him) himself used to supplicate: 'O Allah! Lessen for Muhammad the agonies of death.'

## **2.2. Glimpses to show the difficulty at the time of death.**

\*A group of people from Bani Isra'il once passed by a graveyard when one person asked another: 'Could you not pray to Allah that He resurrects one of these corpses here so we can ask it some questions?' They all prayed and Allah answered their prayers. A man appeared from the tomb with the sign of prostration between his eyes. He said: 'O people! What would you have of me? Fifty years ago I tasted death, yet its bitterness is not yet stilled in my heart!'

\*It is reported that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) was once talking about death and its pain. He said: 'It is equal to three hundred blows with a sword.'

\*When he was asked about the pain of death, the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: 'The easiest death resembles the branch of a thorn tree caught in some wool. Shall the branch be extracted from the wool without some remaining in it?'

\*In fact, Sayyiduna Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) used to spur people to fight in the path of Allah on this very basis. He would say: 'If you do not fight, then you shall die a natural death. By Allah! A thousand sword-strokes are easier to bear than death in one's bed!'

\*It is related that when Musa's (peace be upon him) *ruh* passed onto Allah, his Lord asked him: 'O Musa! How did you find death?' He replied: 'I found myself like a sparrow being roasted alive, unable either to die and find rest, or to escape and fly away.' In another report, he remarked: 'I found myself to be like a sheep being flayed alive at the hands of a butcher.'

\*Once Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) asked Ka'b to talk about death. Ka'b affirmed and said: 'Death is a thorny twig made to enter the stomach of a man, so that each thorn becomes attached to an artery. Then a powerful man pulls at it, and it takes what it takes, and leaves what it leaves.'

After describing these reports, Imam al-Ghazali writes:

Such were the agonies of death as they were endured by the saints of Allah and His dear ones. What, then, shall be our state, we who are engrossed in sins?

Imam al-Ghazali lived 900 years ago.

### 2.3. The angel of death.

Imam al-Ghazali writes that so scary is the angel of death that were someone to see him in a dream, it would ruin the rest of his life. So how must it be when he sees him in the state of wakefulness? Wahib ibn Munabba reports:

A certain king once desired to journey to a land. He called for a garment to wear, but he did not like it, so he demanded another until he finally found one he liked. In the same manner, he demanded a transporting animal to take him there. Several were presented to him but he did not like them, until he finally agreed to one of his liking. Then the Devil came to him and blew into his nostril, and he puffed himself up with pride. He then set off on his journey, refusing to even glance at anyone out of his pride. But then he was approached by a man of threadbare appearance, who came up to him and greeted him. When the king failed to reply he took hold of the bridle of his horse. 'Release my bridle! For you have committed a grave act!' The man said: 'I have a request to make of you.' The king said: 'Have patience until I dismount.' 'No', replied the man and asked to be heard instantly. So the king leaned down his ears to the man, who secretly said to him: 'I am the Angel of Death.' At this point, the king's face changed colour and his tongue stammered: 'Leave me, so that I may return to my family and bid them farewell and conclude my affairs.' The angel told him: 'Never will you see your family and wealth again!' He then took away his *ruh* and the king fell dead, as though he was a wooden log.

Then the angel continued on his way. He came across a believer, whom he greeted and who greeted him in return. He asked the believer: 'I have a request which I would mention in your ear.' The man agreed and so he informed him he was the angel of death. 'Welcome' he replied. 'Welcome to the one who has long been absent from me! By God, there is no one on earth whom I wanted to meet more than you!' At this point, the angel said: 'Conclude the business for which you had set out.' He replied: 'I have no business which is more important and beloved to me than meeting Allah.' The angel said: 'Then choose the state in which you would prefer me to take your spirit.' 'Are you able to do that', he asked. 'Yes', he replied.

The man said: Leave me awhile, so that I may perform the ablution and pray, and then take my spirit while I am prostrating.' And this is how he died.

Ata ibn Yasar reports that: 'On the middle night of Sha'ban, the angel of death receives a scroll and is told: "This year you are to take the people whose names are recorded on this scroll." A man may sow crops, marry women and raise up buildings, while his name is upon that scroll and he knows it not.'

#### **2.4. The two recording angels.**

Another further calamity associated with death is the vision of the two recording angels. Wuhayb reports: 'We have it heard that no man dies without being shown his works by the two recording angels. If he had been obedient, then they say, 'May God reward you well! For you made us sit at many a gathering of truth, and caused us to be present at many a righteous act.' But if he had been an evil-doer then they say to him: 'May God not reward you well! For you made us sit in at many a gatherings of evil and you caused us to be present at many an act of righteousness, and obliged us to hear many a foul discourse.' At this point, the gaze of the dying man is fixed upon them, never to behold this world ever again.'

#### **2.5. Seeing their place in heaven or hell.**

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Not one of you shall leave this world before knowing his destination, and before seeing the place he is to occupy in heaven or in hell.' In another report, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'When one of you dies his [future] seat is displayed before him morning and evening; should he be of the people of heaven, then this is shown. Should he be of the people of hell, then this is shown (*Ihya Ulum al-Din*, 5: 178).

#### **2.6. Seeing hitherto unseen things.**

In a saying attributed to Ali (may Allah be pleased with him), 'people are asleep, and when they die they awake.' Just before the time of death, a person sees many things that he could not otherwise see. For example, he will see his good and evil works that he did during his lifetime.

### **3.0. To the grave and beyond.**

#### **3.1. Knowing about the family.**

Amr ibn Dinar said: 'No man dies without being aware of the condition of his family after his death. They wash and shroud him while he watches them.' In fact, the Prophet (peace be upon him) explained that the deceased recognizes his washer, those who carry him and those who lower him into his grave (5: 180).

Moreover, when the deceased are buried, they are shown the works and actions of the family members who are still alive. In a hadith reported by Abu Hurayra (may Allah be pleased with him), the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Do not shame your dead with your evil works, for they are shown to your companions in the graves' (5: 180).

If this is the case with family members, then why is it not possible for the Prophet (peace be upon him) to know about the affairs of his Ummah? It is in the hadith of Ibn Mas'ud (may Allah be pleased with him) recorded by [Imam] al-Bazzar, with a *hasan* (fair) chain that the Prophet said: 'My living is good for you and my dying is good for you. Your actions are presented to me. Thus whatever I see from good [actions], I praise Allah for it. And whatever I see from sin, I seek forgiveness from Allah for you.'<sup>1</sup>

### 3.2. The welcome from the grave pit.

Imam al-Ghazali writes that when the deceased is first placed in the grave, then his is given a welcome address. The pit will say: 'I am the house of gloom, and of loneliness and solitude! If you were obedient to Allah during your lifetime then today I shall be a source of mercy for you, but if you were rebellious then I am an act of vengeance against you. The obedient who enter me shall come in joy, while the rebellious who enter me shall emerge in ruin.' (5: 181).

### 3.3. The questions from *Munkar* and *Nakir*.

When the burial has taken place and the deceased's family leaves the graveyard, the deceased hears their footsteps as they leave. Then two angels will appear after the burial, called *Munkar* and *Nakir*. The soul will be made to return to the person and he will be brought back to life. They will ask him about his Lord, his religion and about the man who was sent amongst them (namely the Prophet (peace be upon him)).

The believer will say: 'My Lord is Allāh, my Religion is Islām and our beloved, our master Muhammad (peace be upon him) was sent amongst us and indeed I believed in him. Then it will be said to him: 'Look at your abode in paradise and now sleep peacefully pleased!' Then he will sleep in his grave until the Day of Gathering and a window will be opened from paradise. He will live in happiness and delight. The space of the grave will also be extended for the believer.

As for the non-Muslim, he will be asked the same as the Muslim but he will say: 'I don't know' to every question. So he will be punished in his grave until the gathering and Allāh will send snakes and insects in his grave which will sting and bite him. Thereafter a window from the fire of hell will be opened and he will be punished like this until the Day of Gathering. The grave will become tight and restricted for him.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Irshād al-sārī sharh Sahih al-Bukhārī*, II: 440.

<sup>2</sup> p. 371. *al-Sharh al-Qawīm fī Hall Alfāz al-Sirāt al-Mustaqīm*. Abd Allāh al-Harāfī.

### 3.4. The torment and bliss of the grave.

\*The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'The believer in his grave is in a green garden. For his sake, his tomb is widened by seventy cubits, and he shines with light until he becomes as the full moon...[for the disbeliever's punishment] 99 beasts (tinnin) are let loose against him. Each beast is formed of 99 serpents each of which has seven heads, which maul and savage him, and blow into his body until the Day of Judgement.'

\*The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, '99 beasts (tinnin) are assigned to the infidel in his grave. They will eat away at him and sting him until the Day of Judgement. If just one tinnin was to blow on this earth, nothing green would ever grow (*Mirqat al-mafatih*, 1: 328).'

\*The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'The graves are either gardens from the gardens of paradise or pits from the pits of hell.'<sup>3</sup>

\*Jabir (may Allah be pleased with him) reports that when the Muslim is assigned to his grave, then the sun will be resembled to him at the time of its setting. The deceased will sit up in his grave and rub his eyes, saying, 'Leave me to perform Salah' (*Mirqat al-mafatih*, 1: 332). Mulla Ali Qari writes in the commentary of this hadith that the Muslim had become so accustomed to Salah in the past life that he will want to perform it in the next life too. Like they say, 'the way you live, that is the way you die. And the way you die is the way you will be raised.' This also explains why on the night of Isra wa'l Mi'raj, Musa (peace be upon him) was seen performing Salah in his grave. Imām Muslim narrates from Anas ibn Malik (may Allāh be pleased with him) that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said: 'I passed by Mūsā on the night I was taken on the night journey...and he was standing in his grave performing *salāh*' (*al-Isrā wa'l-Mi'rāj*, Dr. Abd al-Halim Mahmud. (pp. 49-50)).

### 3.5. How to save oneself from the torment of the grave.

Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya writes that the most beneficial way to save oneself from the torment of the grave is that every night before going to sleep, a person should take his own account of what good and bad he has done that day. Then, he should sincerely repent (*tawba*) to Allah and then sleep in that state, with the intention not to return to the sins when he wakes. If he dies during his sleep, then he has died in the possible state, in the state of repentance. If he doesn't, then he will wake feeling fresh and active, happy that Allah has given him more time to perform good actions and repent from the bad.

Other methods to save oneself include reciting Surah al-Mulk each night before going to sleep.

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<sup>3</sup> *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*. Chapter: the Description of Qiyama. Hadīth no. 2384.

From hadith literature, we are informed that the martyr will be saved from the punishment of the grave, as will the one who (i) dies because of stomach illness (ii) dies on a Friday or Friday night.

#### 4.0. Where is the *ruh* during this period?

\*Malik ibn Anas said, 'I have heard it said that the spirits of the believers are let loose to go where they please.'

\*Abd Allah ibn Amr ibn al-As (may Allah be pleased with him) was asked where the spirits of the believers reside after death. He said, 'They are in the form of white birds in the shade of the Throne. And the spirits of the disbelievers are in the seventh earth.'

#### 5.0. What should be done in the presence of a dying man.

\*He should be encouraged to read the second kalima, and put in a place of peace and tranquility. Those around him should recite it in abundance. He shouldn't be forced to read it, lest this prompts a disturbance.

\*He should be reminded to have a favourable of Allah's mercy.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Watch for three signs in the dying man. If his forehead sweats, his eyes shed tears and his lips become dry, then the mercy of Allah has descended upon him. But if he should choke like a man being strangled, and if his colour should turn to red, and if he should foam at the mouth, then this is the punishment of Allah descending upon him.'

\*If possible, his face should be turned towards the Qibla.

#### 6.0. How to remember death often.

Perhaps this is the defining difference between the Muslims of today and yesteryear. Our pious ancestors never let the remembrance of death part for their hearts for a moment. Al-Rabi ibn Khuthaym dug a grave in his house, and used to sleep in it every night in order to remember death. He remarked: 'Were the remembrance of death to leave my heart for a single hour, it would become corrupted.'

i. Imam al-Ghazali writes that the best way to remember death often is to make frequent remembrance of the peers, friends and relatives that have passed away before or in front of him. By reminding oneself of how the earth has obliterated the beauty of their forms, how they have left behind widows and orphans, how the mosques have become void of their visits and how their very traces have been wiped out, certainly a person will remember his own imminent death.



ii. He should visit the graveyard as often as possible. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'I used to prohibit you all from visiting the graveyards. Now visit them. For indeed it reminds one of the hereafter.'

iii. He should visit the ill people.

iv. He should attend funeral prayers as much as possible. By watching the funeral of others, the observer will soon realize his funeral too is imminent. Whenever Abu Hurayra (may Allah be pleased with him) saw a funeral procession pass by, he would say, 'Continue, for we are following you.'

In the past, funeral were marked by sorrow and anguish precisely for this reason. Al-A'mash commented that when we use to attend a funeral, we did not who to offer condolences too because everyone would be distraught and in tears.

## 7.0. Conclusion.

There are only two things that prevent us from contemplating death more: ignorance and distraction. The more we think about death and what will happen, the more prepared we will be for it. As we do, our hearts become more soft and tender. Moreover, there is an important less for us too that we can apply to our lives too: that the only way to tackle are fears and worries is to tackle and confront them head on.

## 8.0. Further reading.

*Al-Ghazali on the Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife: Book XL of the Revival of the Religious Sciences (Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din): The Revival of the ...* (The Islamic Texts Society's Ghazali Series).

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