

Funeral Rites in Islam

احكام الجنائز في الإسلام

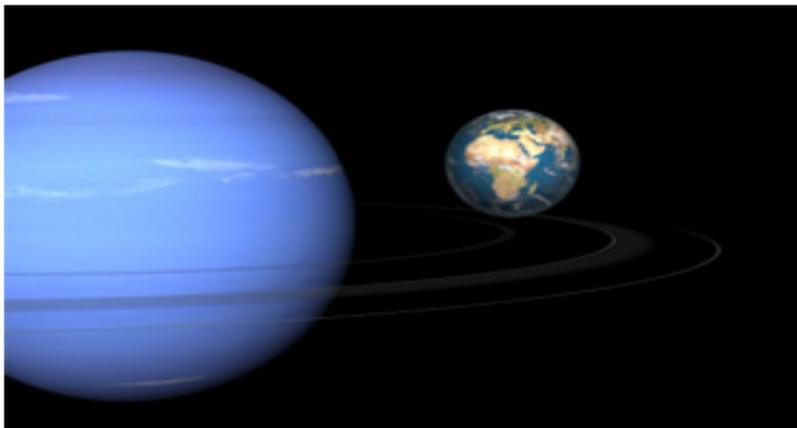
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In this still sparkling, bright 21st century many of us have forgotten about death. It is a scary stranger. One we do not dare think about for fear that it will creep up behind us and take us away from the only life we know. In the past however, death was an ever present friend. People were born and died at home, surrounded by family or friends; death was accepted as an inevitable part of life. Death has become a stranger confined to cold hospital mortuaries and quiet, manicured funeral homes. The rights of the dying and the dead are no longer of paramount concern.

Death will come for each and every one of us. Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, said, “*Remember often the destroyer of pleasures (i.e. death)*”.¹ The religion of Islam has not forgotten death, nor has it forsaken the rights of the dying. Islam provides us with a complete set of instructions for the one who is dying, those who are present at the time of death and those responsible for burying the deceased individual.

“Everyone shall taste death.” (Quran 3:185)

1 An-Nasaa’i, At-Tirmithi, Ibn Majah and Ahmad. Authenticated by Sheikh Al Albani.

How those facing death should behave

Death is inevitable however there are certain things that a believer can do to prepare for his departure to life everlasting.

The first is to remain patient in the face of an event over which we have no control, and those suffering illness or injury should refrain from accusing or cursing God for his or her misfortunes. There are many authentic sayings and traditions from Prophet Muhammad that explain how and why illness and injury expiate sins and evil deeds. On this web site you will find articles that go into great detail about the benefits of patience and accepting the will of God². Prophet Muhammad said:

“How wonderful is the affair of the believer, for his affairs are all good. If something good happens to him, he is thankful for it and that is good for him. If something bad happens to him, he bears it with patience and that is also good for him.”

When faced with any degree of pain and suffering it is generally not permitted to complain and whine about God’s decree. However, Islam tells us that it is permissible to cry directly to God and lay before Him all our fears, pain and suffering. Prophet Jacob cried out to God when he feared the loss of both his beloved sons, Joseph and Benjamin.

“I only complain of my grief and sorrow to God.” (Quran 12:86)

Knowing that it is God alone who has control over our lives means that a believer is able to hover between the states of fear and hope. Fearful, due to the nature and number of sins he has acquired but hopeful that God will forgive them all and provide shelter from everything that he dreads. A believer facing death must put his trust in God, knowing that God’s decree is without a doubt the best, most just decision.

² <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/2231/>

Before death overtakes him a believer must also make sure that his affairs are in order. He must write his will and try to settle any debts. Prophet Muhammad commented on both these issues. *It is the duty of a Muslim who has anything to bequeath, not to let two nights pass without writing a will about it.*³ *A believer's soul remains in suspense until all his debts are paid off.*⁴

How the one dealing with a dying person should behave

The sick person should be gently reminded that even sickness has a positive side. It is expiation from past negligence or error and it is a source of great reward for one who trusts God and bears the ordeal with patience. When visiting a sick or dying person a believer should pray and make supplications. According to the Prophet's beloved wife Aisha, with whom God is pleased, whenever he visited a sick person he would pray using the following words:

*Lord of mankind, remove the affliction from this patient for You alone are the healer, none can be healed unless healed by You: heal him so completely that the affliction is removed completely.*⁵

If a believer visits a non Muslim patient, he should seek help from God and invite the patient to accept Islam.

One of the most important things to remember about a sick or injured believer is that the angels gather around him. The words spoken at the bedside should be gentle, kind words, full of supplications because the angels gathered there respond by saying 'Ameen' (this means: O God respond) to all that is uttered. The patient should also be asked what he desires and the believer must

3 Saheeh Bukhari

4 At-Tirmidhi

5 Saheeh Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim

do his best to deliver it. Perhaps it is food or drink, to send a message or to see a particular family member or friend.

When death becomes inevitable

A dying person sees what we do not see. He may drift in and out of consciousness. He may become very weak, hearing, but unable to reply. This is known as the ‘death struggle’ and it is full of agonies we cannot imagine. When Aisha spoke about Prophet Muhammad’s death she said, *“At the time of his death, he (Prophet Muhammad) dipped his hand in a water container and wiped it across his face saying, ‘There is no true deity but God! Indeed death is full of agonies’.”*

There are a number of things that can be done to ease a dying person’s mind and help him to cope with the agonies. If it will not cause any discomfort he should lie facing the *qibla*, either on his right side or back. He can be prompted, very gently without any insistence to say the words, ‘there is no true deity but God.’ If possible these should be his last words before dying. A dying person should never be left alone and wetting his lips or putting a few drops of water in his mouth may ease his suffering somewhat.

In part I we learned that the religion of Islam upholds the rights of the dead and the dying. Death should not be a stranger to us and Muslims are encouraged to remember death even in the midst of life. Death is an ever present, a part of everybody’s life and the simple procedures set by Islam ensure that the dying and dead are treated with the upmost respect and gentleness.

Immediately after death

Immediately after death, those in attendance should gently close the eyes of the deceased and say the simple supplication for those afflicted by a calamity. To God we belong and unto Him is our return.⁶ If the deceased did not clear his debts before dying

6 Saheeh Muslim.

now is the time to pay his debts from his own wealth or from the wealth of family, relatives or friends. This is an important matter. Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, encouraged the believers to pay the debts of the deceased. As mentioned in part 1, *a believer's soul remains in suspense until all his debts are paid off.*

The entire body of the deceased should be covered, except for the one who dies in a state of *Ihraam* - that is, whilst performing pilgrimage (Hajj or Umrah), in which case the head and face should not be covered. It is permissible to kiss the deceased. We know that when Prophet Muhammad died, his best friend leaned over and kissed him on the forehead between the eyes saying, 'O my Prophet, O my best friend'.

When hearing the news of a person's death a believer should try to remain steadfast and patient. Grief at the loss of a loved one, friend or relative is normal and weeping for the dead is allowed. However wailing, shrieking, beating the chest, and pulling the hair or clothes are not permissible.

Finally, immediately after death, those in attendance should hasten to prepare the body for washing, shrouding and burial. Islam has set out strict and comprehensive instructions for these procedures and nowadays they are usually done by qualified Muslims in the mortuary section of an Islamic centre, mosque or government mortuary. Preparing the deceased for burial is the responsibility of the Muslim community. The deceased body is handled with respect, and great care and gentleness. The washing and preparation for burial are usually performed by those of the same gender as the deceased.

The funeral prayer

A prayer service should be held for every dead Muslim, young or old, even infants who have lived who died before their birth. Women are permitted to attend the funeral prayer just as they are

permitted to perform other non obligatory prayers. In order to keep the time between death and burial to a minimum this should be held in the same city or area in which the person died. It is not necessary for the body to be sent to another country.

The funeral prayer should be performed in congregation, it is a rewarding act and believers should not hesitate to participate in any funeral prayer even those of people not known to them. Prophet Muhammad encouraged this saying that whoever attended the funeral prayer until it was finished would earn rewards as hefty as a great mountain⁷. The number of attendees at the funeral prayer also brings great reward to the deceased. Prophet Muhammad said that if a Muslim dies and forty pious Muslims pray for him in the funeral prayer God will accept their prayers.⁸

After the funeral prayer the deceased should be taken to the Muslim cemetery or the Muslim section of the local cemetery. Carrying a coffin and accompanying it to the burial ground is a recommended and rewardable act.

The Burial

Islam has a unique style of building graves and cemeteries that is characterized by simplicity, and humility. All Muslims, rich, poor, king or commoner are all buried following the same procedure. Burying the deceased in the coffin is not allowed unless there is a requirement that must be followed in a particular area or country.

The burial should be done as soon as possible after death; however there are specific times when it is prohibited to bury the dead. They are, from sunrise until the sun has risen, when the sun is at its highest and, from when the sun begins to pale until it is fully set. After the burial it is permissible for the believers to stay

7 Saheeh Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim

8 Ibid.

in the graveyard making supplication as this is the time when the deceased is being questioned by the angels.

In part 3 we will discuss what happens after the burial, particularly the mourning period and condolences. We will also look briefly at the funeral rites and practices of other religions and compare them to the simplistic yet beautiful Islamic methods and procedures.

One of the practices prevalent before Islam was excessive wailing and lamenting for the dead. This was denounced by Islam and is strictly forbidden. Prophet Muhammad, may God praise him, made this abundantly clear when he told his companions and thus the believers until the end of time, '*the deceased suffers when someone bewails loudly*'.⁹ No amount of wailing or grieving can change the situation or bring the dead back to life, therefore Islam insists that death be handled with dignity and acceptance of God's decree.

Mourning

A woman may mourn the death of a loved one for three days. This period is considered long enough for a person to immerse himself in grief and sadness. Islam emphasizes that death is not the termination of a person rather it is the beginning of a journey, from a transient stop to life everlasting. The only exception to this duration is at the death of a woman's husband.

It is prohibited for a woman who believes in God and the Last Day to mourn for a deceased person for more than three nights, except for her husband.¹⁰

9 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim

10 Saheeh Al-Bukhari

A wife must observe a mourning period, known in Islam as *iddah*, of four months and ten days for her deceased husband. This period is considered an extension of her marriage and she is not allowed to receive any new proposals of marriage during this time. This period is prescribed for widows in order that they mourn the death of their husbands, fulfill any required obligations and to see if the widow is pregnant. If pregnancy is confirmed then the mourning period is extended until delivery.

Condolences

Offering condolences to the relatives and friends of the deceased is an important act of kindness. It is not limited to three days, and can be extended for as long as there is a need. Offering condolences means sharing in the grief and helping to lighten the feelings of sadness and misfortune, however it also means gently reminding the bereaved to be patient and accept the will of God. The words should be chosen carefully and offered with sympathy. Among the actions recommended at the time of offering condolences are to leave relatively quickly, unless the family requires and asks for assistance, and to prepare food for the grieving family.

So far we have learned a great deal about Islam's attitude towards dying, death and funerals. The overall theme encompasses complete submission to the will of God, being patient in the face of adversity and simplicity involving a distinct lack of worldly rituals and procedures. The basic procedures of washing, shrouding, prayers and burial are exactly the same for every believer, be he rich, poor, black, white, a king or a commoner, young or old. We now take a brief look at the funeral rites of other religions to further emphasize the uncomplicated rites inherent in Islam.

Cremation, a practice forbidden in Islam is practiced in many parts of the world and in many religions. In Hinduism, cremation is the primary mode of body disposal. Taken from the belief that

the soul could not enter a new body until its former one had totally disappeared, cremation is considered the fastest way to expeditiously dispose of the body. Antyesti funeral rites are important sacraments in Hindu society. While extensive texts of such rites are available there is wide inconsistency in theory and practice, and procedures differ depending upon the location, caste, social group, and the status of the deceased person.

In Sikhism the preferred method of disposal is cremation, and the ashes are taken to be submerged in the nearest river. In Japan it is estimated that 99.81%¹¹ of all deceased persons are cremated, the majority of them after a Buddhist ceremony. However before the 20th century most bodies in Japan were buried and cremation was limited to the wealthy.

In a Buddhist funeral a wake is performed before the burial, this involves a special prayers and giving of condolence money by the guests who are in turn given departure gifts based on the value of their condolence contribution. After cremation the guests return to pick the bones of the deceased out of the ashes with chopsticks, transferring them to urn feet first. In some cases, the ashes of the deceased will be divided between more than one urn for transporting to different locations and depending upon the local custom, the urn may stay at home of the deceased for a specific number of days before being transported, to the grave site.

Some African funeral ceremonies are purely animist, and without any set ritual. Often the females of the deceased wail loudly and sometimes work themselves into a frenzy heightened by the use of alcohol. The funeral service may last as long as a week.

Chinese funerals and burial customs are determined by the age of the deceased, the cause of death, the marital status and the deceased's status and position in society. Improper arrangements

11(<http://www.srgw.demon.co.uk/CremSoc5/Stats/Interntl/2007/StatsIF.html>)

are believed to bring ill fortune and disaster on the family of the deceased. A Chinese Buddhist funeral ceremony traditionally last 49 days but if finances are an issue, this period may be shortened to 3 days. It is customary for the daughters of the deceased to pay for the funeral expenses.

The Zoroastrian religion strictly prohibits burying dead bodies in the ground, cremation and disposal in waterways of any kind. In accordance with religious injunctions, Towers of Silence (circular raised structures for the exposure of the dead) are built with a view that they may last for centuries without the possibility of decaying bodies polluting the earth or contaminating any living beings. The deceased is carried to the Tower of Silence on an iron bier by official corpse-bearers and is followed in procession by the mourners, dressed in white flowing robes, walking behind in pairs and joined hand in hand by holding a white handkerchief.

Once at the tower the body must be exposed and left without clothes so that birds of prey are able to completely devour the body. As a post script, now days in large cities such as Mumbai, there are serious concerns about the sanitary conditions at Towers of Silence due to the fact that birds of prey¹² no longer exist in numbers great enough to dispose of the number of bodies left to decay.

Death is a very painful and emotional time both for the dying and the loved ones left behind. The simplicity of Islam's rites and rituals fill the believers with hope. Hope of life everlasting surrounded by their loved ones and hope in God's forgiveness, mercy and justice.

12(<http://www.skyburial.org/asianvulturesdisappearing.pdf>)