

Reality of death

In His plan for creation, when Allaah SWT decided to create human beings with the freedom to choose, decide and act, He also decided to test them first by putting them temporarily on the earth before giving them an eternal and permanent life. Depending on the results of the test, people were to be treated differently in the eternal life of the Hereafter. Those who would handle their freedom properly during the test (in this world) by choosing to live in obedience to Allaah as Muslims would be rewarded with eternal bliss and freedom in the Hereafter. Those who would fail to do so during the test would be deprived of their freedom and imprisoned in Hell for eternity.

Though both the test and accountability were relevant only to human beings, all other life forms were also subjected to the same biological rules and laws of nature as the human beings were, because their existence was subservient to and for the purposes of human existence. For that matter, all other creations were also made temporary for the same reason; i.e., their sole purpose was to enable creation and sustenance of human life until the predetermined and pre-planned Last Day.

As per this plan, simultaneous to the creation of life, a process and means of terminating the temporary test was implemented that would result in the death of every living creation. Hence, the process of bringing upon death was an inherent part of the creation of life. And the rule from the first day of the creation of life was:

“Everyone shall taste death. Then, your compensation will be fully settled on the Day of Resurrection. Then, whoever is removed away from the Fire and admitted to Gardens, he indeed is successful. In fact, the life of this world is nothing more than illusory enjoyments.” ﷻ
Aali ‘Imraan 3:185

“Everyone shall Taste death. And, (during your life), We are testing you through evil and through good trials.” Al-Ambiyaa 21:35

In fact, the concept of death preceded the creation of life because the plan was to keep this life temporary. This fact is mentioned in the Qur-aan in the following verse:

“He is Who created death and life to test you as to who are better in performance”. Al-Mulk 67:2

Considering this reality, it is extremely important that people remember their own end and prepare for what comes after their death. It is only by keeping one’s own end in mind that a person will be able to plan and properly prepare for his success in the eternal life after the expiry of the test brought upon by death. When their own death is not kept in mind, people get too absorbed in their worldly life at the cost of neglecting the test and its results in the eternal life. Often, they live as if this life is an end in itself. Consequently, they are rudely awakened at the time of death. They feel sorry and want to do something about it, but it is too late by that point. They wish, at that moment, to have just a little more time to undo what they have so far done and start life over to live the way they should have lived – preparing for the Hereafter. Alas! There is no second chance.

At that time, a person will wish:

“My Lord! If only You would give me a respite for a little while, then I would give charity and be among the righteous. The fact is that when someone’s end comes, Allaah does not give any respite and He is fully aware of what you do.” Al-Munafiqoon 63:10-11

That is why the wise people focus on the Hereafter while living their life:

As reported by Abdullaah bin ‘Umar, a person asked the Messenger of Allaah, “Who is the smartest person and who is the most clever?” He replied, “Those who remember death the most often and prepare for it the most are the smartest. They enjoy respect in this world and honour in the Hereafter.” (Tabaraani, Mu’jam-alsagheer)

Similarly, as reported by Shaddaad bin Ows, the Messenger of Allaah said, “Smart is he who controls his urges and prepares for what comes after death. Foolish is he who follows his urges and then hopes for the best from Allaah.” (Tirmidzi and Ibn Maajah)

Nature and Mechanisms of Death

Death may occur as a result of the natural mechanisms that Allaah has inherently implemented within the process of life or it may be caused by misuse of the freedom and authority delegated to human beings or it may be a combination of both.

Examples of natural mechanisms include death through biological reasons such as the aging process as well as through the diseases that are beyond human influence and control. This death is predestined for us through the biological laws of nature and through our genes.

The examples of death caused by human misbehaviour are murders, accidents due to human carelessness, and suicides. This is the misuse of freedom and authority that Allaah has delegated to human beings for the purposes of the test. Whenever human actions cause death, it is a sin for which the person responsible will be held accountable and punished. If a person is victimized by the misbehaviour of another person, the victim will be fully compensated.

We can say that there is a combination of both natural and human factors where human misbehaviour such as overeating, unhealthy eating, smoking, overindulgence, etc. combined with biological disposition accelerates the onslaught of death. In this situation, a person himself is partly responsible for his death. People are also partly responsible when life is short-circuited due to the problems caused by gene-mutations because of in-breeding based on racial, ethnic and fraternal prejudices. The same is true when people become an easy target to disease because of keeping the body defenses weak through bad habits. In these situations, people will be held accountable for their personal actions such as excessive consumption, waste of resources, prejudices and bad habits.

In a pure Islamic society, death through human misbehaviour shall absolutely be minimized because:

- People do not kill each other, nor do they commit suicide;
- People eat healthily and moderately;
- People are free of biases and prejudices -- they marry based on piety alone which keeps the gene pool healthy and strong;
- Items injurious to health are forbidden, hence, not consumed; and,
- A healthy Islamic lifestyle is practised.

The mechanisms of death are designed to keep the occurrence of death unexpected and random (from a human perspective only, because nothing is random or unexpected from Allaah's perspective). Since death comes to different people at different ages, and because the underlying causes and all the factors responsible for it are not usually known to people, it can be termed random from a human's perspective. Due to the randomness of the cause of death, some people die in their mother's wombs, some in childhood, some in youth etc, all the way to some who die at a very old age.

This randomness in expiry of one's period on earth makes the test more genuine. The validity of the test requires that people do not know the time of their death, because had they known their time of death, they would be able to plan their period of disobedience and repentance. That would not have been a true test for the whole life. As no one knows about their time of death, people who want to obey Allaah are always on their toes in obedience, so that whenever death comes to them, they die in the state of Islam (in full obedience to Allaah SWT). Even those people who slip, make mistakes (i.e. sin), and then realize their mistake and want to repent, know that they will be forgiven if they repent before the time of their death – which is right now because death can come at any moment. In this way, the uncertainty of the time of death is also a great mercy of Allaah SWT as it encourages people to remain prepared all their life for the Hereafter, thus improving their chances to be saved there.

Whatever the cause of death, what dies is the physical body of the person. The human soul is extracted and taken by the angels of Allaah SWT. The soul continues its existence in the metaphysical world where time is irrelevant. We must remember that time is a temporal concept which relates only to this world as we know it. Because we have only experienced time, we do not know what timelessness or eternity means. We will discover it only after our death.

Say: "The angel of death, put in charge of you, will recover you fully (take your souls), then you shall be brought to your Lord." As-Sajdah 32:11

And if you could but see when the wrongdoers are in agonies of death, while angels are stretching their hands (saying): "Deliver up your souls". Al-An'aam 6:93

Perspectives on Life and Death

To ensure survival of species, Allaah has endowed every living creation, including human beings, a strong desire to survive and live. At the same time, death has been instituted to move people on to the next phase of life.

Considering both of these aspects, the balanced view about life and death for a Muslims is that:

As a general rule, every Muslim must endeavour to preserve and protect life considering it as a trust from Allaah SWT that must be looked after according to His commands and as an opportunity to perform more acts of obedience to Allaah SWT. Thus, all humanly possible reasonable means must be utilized to preserve and prolong one's life.

At the same time, however, a Muslim must be personally ready to face death calmly all the time. When the time comes, the person should be mentally ready to meet his/her Lord happily. Similarly, when a loved one dies, despite reasonable attempts to save, the matter should be accepted with grace, calmness and maturity. Knowing that death is part and parcel of life that everyone has to experience sooner or later, any other behaviour is illogical, imprudent and unworthy of a Muslim. Besides, any deviant behaviour will not bring the dead person back or do him/her or those left behind any good. Muslims treat life as a trust from Allaah given temporarily and to be taken back as and when He wills. No one complains about returning the trust back to the rightful owner when demanded. This is the proper Islamic attitude.

Those who do not have this proper Islamic attitude end up suffering from many unbalanced attitudes or views about life and death.

The greatest misunderstanding about life and death is that most people are not truly convinced about or believe in the Hereafter. Naturally, to them, the life of this world is everything. To them, death is the end of everything. Hence, it becomes very painful and hard for them to accept death. On the other hand, a true Muslim knows that death is just a transition to a new life. Whether it is sooner or later, it really does not matter. When the time is up, it is up.

When the temporary nature of worldly life as a test and the quality of eternal life being the real goal is overlooked, people often tend to put all their emphasis on the 'quality' and length of this worldly life. From that point of view, a longer life is considered a blessing, a favour from Allaah

and something that Allaah owes to everyone; while a death before the normal life expectancy is considered as unfair, cruel and a deprivation. Those who understand the reality of both this world and the Hereafter understand that neither of the views is true. Neither is a longer life a favour from Allaah or something Allaah owes to everyone, nor is an early death unfair or a deprivation. They know that it is not the length of the test that matters for success in the eternal life, but how the test period was spent. They also know that, in the greater scheme of things, even a hundred years life in this world is very insignificant compared to the eternity of the Hereafter. Hence, considering the real purpose of our being, the length of one's life is totally insignificant and irrelevant to the real success of a person. A long life is not an advantage if it is going to cause one to accumulate more burden of sins than rewards for obedience of Allaah. Similarly, an early death is not a deprivation nor is it unfair, because it does not compromise the ultimate goal of our life. It just limits the time and scope of the test bringing a person to the consequences of his/her deeds faster. The person who did well in the short period of time will still be amply rewarded in the eternal life just as a centenarian who did equally well.

If the early death was caused by the normal operation of biological laws of nature, it is not unfair because the duration of the test is not fixed. The examiner has indicated that the test can terminate anytime. Had a fixed duration been promised, early termination could have been termed unfair. But when it is clearly communicated to be indefinite, expecting it to last a certain amount of time is an unfair and unreasonable expectation. Everyone who dies a natural death dies on his or her time. No natural death is untimely.

By the same token, any human interference to end life earlier than the natural death is a crime in the eyes of Allaah SWT. Allaah SWT has declared life to be the most sacred of all sanctities in this world. Thus, terminating any life unduly is a violation of the sanctity of life.

If someone commits suicide, he is guilty of: exiting the examination before the exam is over, and thus earning an automatic failure; despairing in Allaah's mercy and giving up in the face of difficulties; and betraying the trust entrusted for caretaking.

If the life of a person was cut short because of wrong doings of another human being, the victim will be so well compensated for this interruption that he would be happy to be rewarded in the Hereafter instead of having to live a longer life in test mode in this world. This is an extremely important point to note -- if anyone is unfairly deprived in this world, he will be amply rewarded in the Hereafter. Justice will definitely be done and the payoff in the Hereafter is going to be much better.

Those who have dedicated their lives in submission to Allaah SWT and in the service of His Deen and are killed by adversaries during such efforts, such persons are martyrs (Shaheed). They witness the success in their test of submission to Allaah SWT by giving their lives. Thus they enjoy eternal life right away at their martyrdom. They are wise people who have truly understood the reality of the life of this world as compared to the life of Hereafter. Just imagine their rewards! That will explain why martyrs would like to comeback to this life again and again and being martyred in the way of Allaah repeatedly.

It must be noted, however, that those suicide bombers who kill innocent people and cause mayhem in countries like Pakistan are dying in vain, committing crimes against the teachings of Allaah SWT. They are enemies of Islam and Muslims and they are playing in the hands of the enemies of Islam and Muslims.

Coming back to our topic of natural death, then, from the Islamic point of view, death is simply the termination of the test, bringing the person into the next phase of life – the eternal life. Although death has its pains and although it hurts to see one's loved ones move on, it is just a means of moving the person to the next phase. In this respect, it is no different from the birth of a person. Through the process of birth, the temporary stay of the child in the womb is terminated to start another phase -- life on the earth, just as death takes a person to the life in the Hereafter. Like death, birth also has its own pains and difficulties. Thus, Allaah wants us to view death not as an end of life but as the process of entering into a new but final phase of life.

It is painful, but...

Despite knowing the reality of death, it is still difficult and painful for the people left behind to see their loved ones' go. In addition, it may also cause some social or economic difficulties for the family of the deceased. A believer realizes that these difficulties and pains are a part of life and the test we have to go through in this world. Thus, regardless of how tough the circumstances, the believer knows that:

1. A hardship is as much a test as is a comfort. Hardship does not indicate disapproval or punishment and a comfort does not mean it is an approval or a reward from Allaah SWT. Both conditions are tests and both tests are difficult.
2. It is not the kind of test you get in this life that determines your destiny in the permanent life of the Hereafter, but how you react to the circumstances. If one is tested through difficulties and remains steadfast, patient and submissive to Allaah SWT, he succeeds. But if one complains, gives up or resorts to inappropriate behaviour, he fails. On the other hand, if one is tested through wealth and worldly comforts and he thanks Allaah, shares his prosperity generously with others and keeps free of arrogance or pride, he succeeds. Otherwise, he fails.

A believer is a winner in all circumstances because of his right attitude and behaviour in all circumstances.

3. Whatever the testing circumstances happen to be, they are just temporary. Time is moving fast. Everything is transient and with rapidly moving time, it passes quickly. The real concern of the believer is life in the Hereafter, which is permanent and not going to end. Hence, a believer's focus is on the eternal life, not the difficulties of this transitory phase.

Following are some Ahaadeeth about patience during the hardships people face in their lives such as illnesses and diseases, death of loved ones, natural calamities and disasters, and problems or setbacks emanating from the situations and circumstances beyond one's control.

“A person who faces a physical or financial setback, keeps quiet about it and does not complain to people, has a right on Allaah to be forgiven.” Attributed by Ibn ‘Abbaas to the Prophet as reported in At-Tabaraani's Al-Owsat

“A Muslim does not suffer any mental or physical anguish, or any distress, grief, pain or sorrow - even from the prick of a thorn - except that Allaah expiates his mistakes and sins.” Bukhaari and Muslim

The Messenger of Allaah said, “How wonderful it is for a believer that he always ends up with goodness: If he suffers and remains steadfast, it is rewarding; if good things happen and he thanks Allaah, that is also rewarding. (Suhaib in the Muslim)

The Messenger of Allaah said, “Allaah told ‘Eesa peace be upon him: I will bring up an Ummah after you who will thank Allaah when they encounter what they like; and they will restrain themselves expecting reward from Allaah and will remain patient when they suffer something they dislike.” Reported from Aboo-Ad-Dardaa by Baihiqi in Shu'abul-Eemaan

In a letter of condolence dictated for Mu'aadz Ibn Jabal on the death of his son, the Prophet said:

“May Allaah increase your reward and bestow you patience, and enable us and you to be

thankful to Him. Our lives, our wealth and our families are blissful gifts that are trusts temporarily entrusted. Allaah gave you the opportunity to enjoy (your son gifted to you in trust) with happiness and pleasure, and then he took it from you in return for a big reward. May He bestow upon you blessings, mercy and guidance, if you restrain yourself in expectation for His reward. So, be patient and do not let wailing destroy your reward, to be sorry afterwards. Remember wailing neither brings back the dead, nor removes the grief. What had to happen has happened.” At-Tabaraani

This kind of patience is the lowest level of Sabr expected of the believers and is one of the qualities emanating from the Taqwa in the heart and Tawakkul on Allaah SWT. The test of the patience is at the initial shock. The patient person controls his/her reactions at the very outset.

The Messenger of Allaah told a women crying over the grave of her husband, “Maintain Taqwa and be patient.” Later on he explained to her, “The real Sabr (patience) is that which is demonstrated at the initial shock.” Reported from Anas in Bukhari and Muslim

The Messenger of Allaah said, “Allaah Tabaaraka wa Ta’alaa says: O son of Adam! If you remained patient restraining yourself and expecting my reward at the initial shock, I will not be happy without rewarding you with Jannah.” From Abee Umaamah in Ibn Maajah

Knowing that all circumstances that we encounter in our lives are part of our test for which we have been put on the earth and that our success lies in how well we react to and handle such situations helps a believer endure these hardships without panicking, complaining or being frustrated and cope with any circumstances successfully and easily. And with the right frame of mind, a proper attitude and the appropriate Islamic response to any and all circumstances, a believer always emerges a winner.