

Transcript: Beliefs, Life after death

Islam believes that all human beings who follow God's guidance, by treading the path, the *Shari'a*, that has been laid out for them, are capable of living an ethical life. This life is not all there is. It is only a testing ground and preparation for the life hereafter. Every human being who becomes truly the servant of God in all things can rely upon the mercy of God on the Day of Judgement [Q. 2:286].¹

This life is a test that prepares us for death, which is inevitable [Q. 28:88, 3:185].² Death is the point of transition to the Afterlife or *Akhira* which begins as soon as someone is placed in their grave. From that point on, there is nothing more that the dead person can do to affect their fate. The records of a person's life, kept by the Recording Angels, are closed.

As soon as the mourners have filled in the grave and left, the angels Munkar and Nakir appear. They ask the dead person who is their Lord, what religion they followed and who was their Prophet. This is followed by a foretaste of the joys of heaven or the torments of hell. If heaven, the grave expands, becomes light and airy and is filled with the sweet scents of heaven. If hell, the grave contracts, becomes dark and cold and is filled with the stench of hell.

Life in the grave, or *barzakh*, is understood in Islam as a timeless state in another dimension, in which one awaits the resurrection [Q. 23:100].³ Some Muslims believe that they can perform pious acts in the name of the person who has died and thus assist them during their time in *barzakh*. The state of *barzakh* is difficult fully to understand. After death one enters into another realm that lies beyond our powers to describe.

¹ Q. 2:286 God does not place a burden on a soul greater than it can bear. To its benefit is whatever [good] he does and to its harm is whatever [evil] he does. "Our Lord! Do not take us to task if we forget or make a mistake. Our Lord! Do not lay a burden on us like that which you laid on those before us. Our Lord! Do not make us carry that for which we have no strength to bear. Blot out our sins, forgive us and have mercy on us. You are our Master. Make us victorious against those who reject faith."

² Q. 28:88 And do not invoke another god with God; there is no god except Him. Everything is to perish except his face. Judgement belongs to him, and to him you will be brought back.

Q. 3:185 Every soul shall taste death, and you will indeed be paid your full rewards on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever is delivered from the Fire and admitted to the Garden has certainly succeeded. The life of this world is nothing but deceptive enjoyment.

³ Q. 23:100 And ahead of them is a barrier until the day they will be resurrected.

The Day of Judgement

Before the end of the world, there will be a period of time known as the End of Time. Nobody knows how long this will last, but at the start the Rightly-Guided One, *al-Mahdi*, will appear to begin a rule of justice on the earth. For the Shi'a, *al-Mahdi* is associated with the return of the Twelfth Imam, who is currently in occultation. Over time, many have falsely claimed to be the *Mahdi* as a way of rallying Muslims to their cause.

'Isa or Jesus will return to the earth at this time to resume his earthly life and to lead the great battle of good against evil. The forces of evil will be led by the Great Impostor - *al-Dajjal*. Jesus will lead all true believers in this battle and will be victorious over *al-Dajjal* and the evil he represents. Jesus will then rule the world for a period of time in complete obedience to the will of God, that is, in the state of *islam*. During this time he will be able to do all those things that were not possible during the first part of his earthly life. At the end of this time, Jesus will die and will be buried alongside Muhammad in Madina, where his grave-space awaits him. This will be the signal for the end of the world.

At the end of the world, all humans and other creatures that are then alive will die. Tradition has it that this will be followed by a bleak period of unknown duration. Then will come the sign for the General Resurrection. The Angel Israfil will sound the trumpet to signal the resurrection. All will rise from their graves and be clothed in 'new bodies' [Q. 56:60-61].⁴ Every single person will stand alone before God as Judge and be held to account for their actions [Q. 23:99-101, 35:18].⁵

No-one will be held responsible for the sins of another, blame can't be offloaded and merit can't be transferred to anyone else [Q. 82:19].⁶ There will be no place to hide anything. Everything will be known by God and must be acknowledged. The records kept by the Recording Angels will be produced and each person will be weighed in

⁴ Q. 56:60-61 We have decreed death to be your common lot, and we are not to be outmanoeuvred from changing your forms and recreating you in [forms] that you do not know.

⁵ Q. 23:99-101 When death comes to one of them, he says, "My Lord! Take me back, that I may act righteously in what I have left behind." "By no means! These are mere words that he says." And ahead of them is a barrier until the day they will be resurrected, and when it is blown in the Trumpet, there will be no ties between them on that day, nor will they ask each other.

Q. 35:18 No bearer shall bear another's burden, and should one heavily burdened call [another] to carry it, nothing of it will be carried, even if he were a near relative. You can only warn those who fear their Lord in secret and perform the prayer. Whoever purifies himself, purifies only for his own sake, and it is to God that you go.

⁶ Q. 82:19 It is a day when no soul will be of any avail to another soul and all command that day will belong to God.

the balance of God's justice [Q. 84:7-12].⁷ The tradition is that every good deed will count ten times more than every bad deed. This is a clear indication that God's wrath is overcome and justice is tempered by mercy [Hadith].⁸

The Prophets too will be present at the Judgement and will appear before God to testify as witnesses. For instance, Jesus will testify against those who have proclaimed his divinity.

On the Day of Judgement, God, as an act of mercy, will invite the Prophets to plead on behalf of their followers. Muhammad will be invited to intercede for Muslims; indeed most Muslims believe that he can intercede for them with God now, before the Day of Judgement. Some believe that many holy people may have a share in intercession, with God's permission.

Once the actions of each person are weighed in the balance, they will be sent to Heaven or Hell. There is no third option.

Maulana Raza explains the extent of intercession on the Day of Judgement:

At this time, the function of intercession is not in action. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) can definitely make a prayer for us from his grave. But the actual action of intercession will take place on the Day of Judgement. Prophet Muhammad himself, then all the other Prophets and Messengers of God, including Jesus, Moses and others (peace be upon them all), they will be [engaged] in [the] action of intercession. At the same time, the *auliyallah* [lit. Friends of God, the most pious of people], the sufis, the martyrs, the *hufaz* of Holy Book, Qur'an, (those who have memorised the Qur'an by heart), even the minor children, they will be interceding and their intercession will be accepted by God. And it is in fact at the end of the day, in my opinion, one of the beautiful demonstrations of forgiveness by God.

⁷ Q. 84:7-12 Then as for him who is given his record in his right hand, he shall soon receive an easy reckoning, and he will return to his people joyfully. But as for him who is given his record from behind his back, he will plead for annihilation, and he will enter the Blaze.

⁸ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh) that, "When God decreed the creation, he pledged himself by writing in his book, which is with him: my mercy shall overwhelm my wrath."

It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh) that, "Almighty God has said: O son of Adam, so long as you call upon me and ask of me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face me, giving me no partner, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as it."

Shaykh Bahmanpour draws a parallel between the way in which revelation is received by people of the highest spirituality and the way in which ordinary human beings need intercession from such exalted ones on the Day of Judgement:

God guides; and it is not something which is specific to certain people. However this guidance cannot be received directly by all. It's received only by a few elect Prophets and then it is conveyed to others. The reason is we have short-comings, we have deficiencies. We cannot receive that guidance directly. Now, we are guided through the Prophet, and through all the Prophets, and we are somehow drawn to very high spiritual levels through that guidance. If we go to our next phase of creation, which is the Day of Judgement, still because of those short-comings we are in need of some great souls who could take us to the vicinity of God and that is the process of intercession. Exactly in the same way that guidance is received by some great souls in this world and conveyed to others, and others are taken [by] or follow him. In the next world, it will appear in the form of intercession, that that great soul would carry on, would carry all other souls with him to the vicinity of God because they have short-comings. God wants everyone to go there but the deficiencies, the short-comings of the souls would not allow it and therefore they need that great soul to come and take them. However it is not the voluntary decision of the Prophet, it's a systematic type of process. It's not the case that the Prophet could do it for whoever he wishes or he wants. Only those who have followed that guidance with good intention could be included in that intercession on the Day [of Judgement].

Life Hereafter

The Qur'an tells us that Heaven and Hell are beyond our earthly capacity to understand [Q. 32:17].⁹ Heaven is most often referred to as The Garden, or *al-Jannah*, in which we will be in the presence of God. The Qur'an uses images of Heaven that are not only spiritual: joy and peace, gardens with running streams, food without labour, wonderful companions, and "whatever souls desire" [Q. 88:2-16, 36:57].¹⁰ Some scholars have interpreted these images as figurative rather than literal, basing this on a Hadith that speaks of heaven as a state that no human eye has ever seen or human ear heard, and which has not been imagined by the human heart. Heaven is as

⁹ Q. 32:17 No person knows what has been kept hidden for them of comfort as a reward for what they used to do.

¹⁰ Q. 88:2-16 Some faces on that day will be humbled, wrought-up and weary: they will enter a scorching fire, and be made to drink from a boiling spring. They will have no food except cactus, neither nourishing, nor availing against hunger. Some faces on that day will be joyous, pleased with their endeavour; in a lofty Garden, wherein they will not hear any vain talk. In it there is a flowing spring and in it there are raised couches, and goblets set, and cushions laid out in an array, and carpets spread out.

Q. 36:57 There they have fruits and they have whatever they call for.

difficult for us to imagine as it must be for a caterpillar to imagine the life of a butterfly.

Hell has many descriptions and names in the Qur'an. The most commonly used are terms of fire, e.g., *al-Nar*. The common theme is of unimaginable torment and loss.

The question was asked by some, 'Is Hell eternal?' Some scholars have argued on the basis of some verses in the Qur'an that there may be some who are sent there 'only for a time' to be purged from their sins, after which the mercy of God will admit them into Heaven [Q. **11:106-108**].¹¹ However the Qur'an states explicitly that those who die unrepentant of *shirk*, or maintaining that God shares divinity with any being or thing, will never be forgiven [Q. **4:48**].¹²

Maulana Raza speaks of the justice of God requiring a life hereafter:

Without the concept of the Hereafter, God would not be the just and merciful God that he is. At the same time, I feel that the Hereafter is a moment of delight for the believers because they will be meeting God and it is an occasion of tremendous reward for those who have lived their lives on this planet according to the will of God. There is an element of punishment and fire of Hell also; and it really saddens me that many of us will be going to Hell. It is really very sad but it is one of the demonstrations; a divine demonstration of a just God's action.

¹¹ Q. **11:106-108** As for the wretched, they shall be in the Fire: for those in it there will be groaning and wailing. They shall remain in it for as long as the heavens and the earth endure - except what your Lord may want - indeed your Lord does whatever he wills. As for those who prosper, they will be in the Garden. They will remain in it for as long as the heavens and the earth endure - except what your Lord may want - an endless bounty.

¹² Q. **4:48** Indeed God does not forgive that any partner should be given to him, but he forgives anything besides that to whomever he wishes. And whoever gives partners to God has indeed forged the most terribly sinful [lie].