

LIFE AFTER DEATH

WAMY Series on Islam No. 6

The question of whether there is a life after death is not an issue of scientific concern, for science only deals with the classification and analysis of sense data. While man has been conducting scientific inquiries and research, in the modern sense of the term, for only the last few centuries, he has been familiar with the concept of life after death since time immemorial.

All of the prophets sent by God for the benefit of humanity called upon their people to worship God and to believe in life after death. They laid so much emphasis on this last belief that even a slight doubt about its reality was considered a sign of denying both God and all other beliefs. The very fact that they have dealt with this metaphysical question of life after death so confidently and so uniformly, despite the fact that they appeared over thousands of years and in different places, proves that the source of their knowledge about this reality was one and the same: divine revelation. We also know that these prophets of God were opposed strongly by their people on this very issue, as many considered it impossible. Despite such opposition, however, the prophets were able to convince many people of its truth.

This raises the following question: what made those followers forsake the established beliefs, traditions and customs of their forefathers notwithstanding the risk of being totally alienated from their own community?

The simple answer is: they analyzed the issue with their minds and hearts and came gradually to the realization that the prophets were speaking the truth. Did they realize the truth through perceptual consciousness? No, for a perceptual experience of life after death is impossible. What they used was their rational, aesthetic, and moral consciousness, which God has given to every individual in addition to a perceptual consciousness. These additional faculties guides an individual through those realities that cannot be verified by sensory data. That is why all prophets of God appeal to the aesthetic, moral, and rational consciousness of man when discussing metaphysical matters. For example, when the idolaters of Makkah denied even the possibility of life after death, the Qur'an exposed the weakness of

their stand by advancing very logical and rational arguments in support of it:

And he has coined for us similitude, and has forgotten the fact of his creation, saying: Who will revive these bones when they have rotted away? Say: He will revive them who produced them at the first, for He is the knower of every creation, Who has appointed for you fire from the green tree, and behold, you kindle from it. Is not He who created the heavens and the earth, able to create the like of them? Yes, and He is indeed the Supreme Creator, the All-knowing. (36: 78-81)

In another verse, the Qur'an says very clearly that non believers do not have a sound basis for their denial of life after death. It is based on pure conjecture:

They say, 'There is nothing but our present life; we die, and we live, and nothing but Time destroys us. Of that they have no knowledge; they merely conjecture. And when our revelations are recited to them, their only argument is that they say, 'Bring us our fathers, if you speak truly.' (45:24-25)

Surely God will raise all those who have died, but only when He chooses to do so. A day will come when the whole universe will be destroyed and then the dead will be resurrected to stand before God. This day will be the beginning of the life that will never end, and on that day every person will be rewarded by God according to his or her good or evil deeds. This day is called the Day of Judgment.

The Qur'an states that there will be a life after death because the moral consciousness of mankind demands it. If there is no life after death, any belief God Himself becomes irrelevant. Furthermore, such a situation would mean that God is unjust and indifferent, for how could He create mankind and then lose interest in His creation? As God is just, those people who have committed crimes must be punished. All of those tyrants who have killed scores of innocent persons, unleashed great corruption and evil within their societies, enslaved their people to serve their whims, and other terrible deeds must be brought to justice.

As man's life is so short and the world is not eternal, true justice can only be meted out in the afterlife, which will have none of these limitations. The Qur'an states that the Day of Judgment must come

and that God will decide the fate of each soul according to his or her record of deeds:

Those who disbelieve say: The Hour will never come unto us.' Say: Nay by my Lord but it is coming unto you surely' (He is) the Knower of the Unseen. Not an atom's weight, or less than that or greater, escapes Him in the heavens or in the earth, but it is in a clear record, that He may reward those who believe and do good works. For them is pardon and a rich provision. But those who strive against Our revelations, challenging Us, theirs will be a painful doom of wrath. (34:3-5)

The Day of Resurrection will be the manifestation of God's justice and mercy. He will shower His mercy on those who suffered during their lives for His sake, believing that eternal bliss was awaiting them. Those who abused the bounties of God and did not care about the life to come will be in the most miserable state. Drawing a comparison between them, the Qur'an says:

Is he, then, to whom we have promised a goodly promise the fulfillment of which he will meet, like the one whom We have provided with the good things of this life, and then on the Day of Resurrection he will be of those who will be brought arraigned before God? (28:61)

The Qur'an also states that this worldly life is a preparation for the eternal life after death. But those who deny it become slaves of their passions and desires and make fun of virtuous and God-conscious persons. Such persons realize their folly only at the time of their death, a time when their wish to be given a further return to this life and make amends will be in vain. Their miserable state at the time of death, the horror of the Day of Judgment, and the eternal bliss guaranteed to sincere believers are presented very clearly and powerfully in the Qur'an:

Until, when death comes unto one of them, he says, 'My Lord send me back, that I may do right in that which I have left : behind. ~ But nay! It is but a word that he speaks; and behind : t hem is a barrier until the day when they are raised. And when the Trumpet is blown there will be no kinship among them that day nor will they ask of one another Then those whose scales are heavy, they are successful. And those whose scales are light are those who lose their souls, in hell abiding,

the fire burns their faces and they are alum therein. (23: 99-104)

The belief in life after death guarantees success in the Hereafter and also makes this world a place of peace and happiness by transforming people into individuals who are more responsible and dutiful in their activities.

Consider the example of the people who lived in the Arabian peninsula before the appearance of the Prophet Muhammad. They were great lovers of gambling, wine, tribal feuds, plundering, and murdering. As they had no concept of an afterlife, why not enjoy themselves as they saw fit? But as soon as they accepted the belief in the One God and an afterlife, they became a very disciplined nation. They gave up their vices, helped each other when requested to do so, and settled all their disputes on the basis of justice and equality.

The denial of life after death also has consequences in this world. When an entire nation denies belief in the afterlife, all kinds of evils and corruption are unleashed and the society is set on the path to ultimate destruction. The Qur'an mentions the terrible end of such pre-Islamic peoples as the Aad, the Thamud, and the Pharaoh of ancient Egypt:

(The tribes of) Thamud and 'Aad disbelieved in the judgment to come. As for Thamud, they were destroyed by the lightning and as for 'Aad, they were destroyed by a fierce roaring wind, which He imposed on them for seven long nights and eight long days so that you might see the people laid prostrate in it as if they were the stumps of fallen down palm trees. Now do you see a remnant of them? Pharaoh likewise and those before him, and the subverted dunes. They committed errors and they rebelled against the Messenger of their Lord, and He seized them with a surpassing grip. Lo, when the waters rose, We bore you in the running ship that We might make it a reminder for you and for heeding ears to hold. So when the [trumpet is blown with a single blast and the earth and the mountains are lifted up and crushed with a single blow, then on that day the [error shall come to pass, and the heavens shall be split for upon that day it shall be very frail. Then as for him who is given his book in his right hand, he shall say: Here, take and read my book! Certainly I thought that I should encounter my reckoning' So he shall be in a pleasing life in a lofty garden, its

clusters nigh together 'Eat and drink with wholesome appetite for that you did long ago, in the days gone by.' But as for him who is given his book in his left hand, he shall say: -Would that I had not been given my book and not known my reckoning! Would that it had been the end. My wealth has not availed me, my authority is gone from me. (69: 439)

There are very convincing reasons to believe in life after death.

First: All the prophets of God have called their people to believe in it.

Second: Whenever a society is built on the basis of this belief, it has been the most ideal and peaceful society, free of social and moral evils.

Third: History bears witness that whenever this belief has been rejected collectively by a group of people in spite of the repeated warning of the prophet, the group as a whole has been punished by God even in this world.

Fourth: The moral, aesthetic, and rational faculties of man endorse the possibility of life after death.

Fifth: God's attributes of justice and mercy have no meaning if there is no life after death.