

# A Case Study of the End of Life Experience of the Prophet Muhammad

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## **Abstract**

Death is a profound phenomenon, and so the death of the Prophet Muhammad impacted Muslims on many levels including theological, familial, social, ethical, and political. There are significant Islamic end-of-life care experiences that the Prophet encountered that were least addressed in the Seerah. Did the Prophet know that he was dying? Did his death create tension? How about the logistics of postmortem care: funeral and burial? What might inform what Muslims understand to be possible as well as necessary ritual practice at life's end?

The paper is a critical reflection that will focus on three distinctive themes: (1) The awareness of the Prophet of the imminence of his death; (2) The rituals and practices in dying; (3) The moment of death; and (4) Postmortem care. The aim is to understand what lessons and meanings can be understood from the death experience of Prophet Muhammad from the perspective of Islamic theology and the implications of that belief for modern Muslims at life's end. I will conclude with practical Islamic theology for spiritual care services in hospitals to all patients, especially terminal patients.

**Key Words:** Ethics of care, spiritual care, terminally ill, Maqāsid, chaplain

## Introduction

The goal of this paper is to describe the theory-laden practices and rituals of Prophet Muhammad<sup>1</sup> during the last three months of his life. I will examine the experience, rituals, and practices of Prophet Muhammad to understand how Muslims assign meaning to theological, familial, social, or ethical experiences related to life, death and burial especially that might inform what Sunni Muslims understand to be possible or necessary ritual practice at life's end.

The presentation of the end of life experience of the Prophet Muhammad as a case study requires a description of ritual and practice to make explicit the patterns of theological, cultural and social relationships, and puts them in context to analyze “What is happening now?”, “What should be happening?”, and “How should we respond?” This qualitative research aims to understand the meaning of Prophet Muhammad's “embracing of death” and describe practices and rituals in a timeline that surrounds the last three months of his life, last 10 days, the moment of death, and postmortem care: funeral and burial.

There are several scholars of biography (*seerah*) who meticulously provided details of the Prophet's life such as his appearance, clothing, how he worshiped, familial relations, or food. The reporting of events at the Prophet's end of life primarily focused on political debates about leadership and succession, then attention shifted to postmortem rituals. I will examine the personal and communal dimensions of the end of life of Prophet Muhammad from a traditional Sunni account. In doing so, I will analyze the events and rituals in the last three months of the Prophet's life, death, and burial.

## Significance

This is an original research of the end of life experience of Prophet Muhammad on details that haven't been addressed. It examines how the nearness of death was communicated with the Prophet, and what he did as a response to being aware of the imminence of his death. Did he disclose the impending death to his family and community? Did his death create tension among family members? How about the logistics of postmortem care: funeral and burial? In doing so, the research draws lessons and meanings from the end of life experience of the Prophet Muhammad. Furthermore, this critical reflection could impact how Muslims approach death, dying, and rituals, and could reveal new and important implications for practice. The

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<sup>1</sup> It is customary to include the phrase “Alayhi Aṣ-Salatu wa Salaam”, or “Peace Be Upon Him” and its abbreviation (pbuh) after the name of the Prophet. For brevity purposes, I will not list the phrase or its shortened form.

evolving understanding of the end of life experiences, rituals, practices, and possibilities might transform and influence Muslims' understanding of Islam and its theology of end of life experiences and might offer alternative practice norms and meaning for families, congregations, and societies.

## **Literature Review**

A critical analysis of the experiences of Prophet Muhammad will review literature that addressed the death narratives. The literature includes revealed Qur'anic verses addressing death in general and the Prophet's specifically. In addition, I will review books of Hadith and compare how death narratives are listed in the books of Hadith and the biography (*Seerah*) of the Prophet. The rituals and response of the Prophet to end of life experiences are scattered, so that none of the well-known biographies of Ibn Hisham, Ibn Kathir, Ibn Ishaq, or Al-Mubarakpuri provided a simple timeline of the Prophet's death. The literature review is focused on examining texts to enable historical and theological interpretation and intrapersonal reflection on the end of life events. In particular, I will examine sources that describe how the Prophet encountered such experiences, as well as his respective practices or responses. However, the literature review will be limited in its scope to investigating how the sources reported on three distinctive themes: (1) The awareness of the Prophet of the imminence of his death; (2) The rituals and practices in dying; and (3) Postmortem care.

## **Background and Description**

The Prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca in the year 570 C.E.<sup>2</sup> to a family that traced its lineage to Prophets Abraham and Ismael. He lived in Mecca for 40 years before receiving revelation, and remained in Mecca for 12 more years after he was blessed with prophethood in 610 C.E. This mission began with Qur'anic revelation which lasted for 23 years. The Meccans constantly persecuted the Prophet and his followers and imposed a Muslim ban for three years. He migrated to Medina and lived there for 11 years. He ultimately returned to Mecca and ended the rule of the polytheists in 630 C.E. This case study is concerned with the announcements and rituals during Hajj three months before the death of the Prophet, events during

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<sup>2</sup> The reporting of exact dates in Islamic history is complicated. There are three ways to report dates: the Gregorian and the Hijri calendars, and the Qur'anic year. The Gregorian and Hijri are most common yet conversion between the two calendars resulted in a discrepancy in reporting as there is 11-days difference between the solar Gregorian and the lunar Hijri calendars. The Qur'anic calendar begins with its first revelation in 610 C.E. that marked the start of the Prophethood that lasted for 23 years.

the last 10 days of the Prophet's life, and funeral and burial of the Prophet who died in Medina at the age of 63 on June 8, 632 C.E.

There were many people involved in the life of the Prophet and some played significant roles at the end of his life. The reflections will include the response and practices of the immediate family of the Prophet: wives, daughter, son-in-law, cousins and uncle, and his closest companions. On the other hand, the case study will not address end of life supernatural events. There are reports of angels participating in or instructing the participants on the post-mortem washing of the body of the Prophet or leading the funeral prayer. Furthermore, I will exclude the reported dialogue between Archangel Gabriel, Prophet Muhammad, and Angel `Azrael.

### **Life, Death, and Islamic Theology**

The life journey of the Prophet Muhammad, rituals, end of the life events, and ultimately his death, point to the fundamental Islamic doctrine of *Tawhid*, which affirms the unity and oneness of God, the eternal and everlasting, as well as the mortality and death of the Prophet.

The Qur'an defined man, including Prophet Muhammad, as a mortal human being who will eventually die<sup>3</sup> and stand before God on the Day of Resurrection.<sup>4</sup> This view underscores that humanity is both mortal and vulnerable. In addition, it reaffirms God as the Supreme whose ultimate sovereignty is manifested on the Day of Judgement when people shall come forth from death without anything hidden from God, who will hold absolute sway over all.<sup>5</sup> This belief in the oneness and uniqueness of God who is everlasting and omnipotent requires adherents to embody the theology of life and death through rituals and practice, just as the Prophet Muhammad preached and practiced.

The Prophet Muhammad had several wives but had children with only two: Khadija and Maria the Coptic. All of the Prophet's children preceded him in death except Fatima who died six months after her father. The bereaved Prophet was particularly impacted by the death of his infant son Ibrahim, and displayed his grief publicly. Imam Bukhari described the response of the Prophet in the Hadith collection Sahih al-

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<sup>3</sup> Quran 3:144.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 3:185.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 40:16

Bukhari. The Prophet carried his son in his arms, kissed him and his eyes welled up. Abdulrahman Ibn `Awf was puzzled to see the tears of the Prophet as the culture frowned upon men displaying their emotions. The Prophet shed more tears and described them as mercy, then said, “Oh, the eyes are tearful and the heart is saddened, yet we say only what pleases God. We are saddened by your departure, Oh Ibrahim.”<sup>6</sup> The embrace of the Prophet of his humanity and mortality is an embodiment of the covenants of Lordship and Servanthood where humans “belong” and “return” to God. This embrace of death is a direct response to Qur’an 6:162 which reminds Muslims to dedicate and declare that all of their prayer, devoutness, living, and dying solely belong to God. In the last revealed verse of the Qur’an, God described death as the return to God where people are “brought back” to God, a sign that people die involuntarily and unwillingly.<sup>7</sup>

### **Knowledge of the Imminence of Death**

The public announcement of the farewell to the Prophet was decreed while he was performing the Hajj. God announced that the message of Islam has been perfected and the mission of Prophet Muhammad was complete. God declared, “Today, those who are bent on denying the truth have lost all hope of your ever forsaking of your religion: do not, then, hold them in awe, but stand in awe of Me! Today, I have perfected your religious law for you, and have bestowed upon you the full measure of My blessings and willed that self-surrender unto Me shall be your religion.”<sup>8</sup> Muslims interpreted the verse as finality of the religion and an end to prophethood. Upon hearing the verse, Umar wept and said, “After perfection, there can only be diminution”.<sup>9</sup> The Prophet died in Medina three months after the end of the pilgrimage.

The unambiguous disclosure of the mortality of the Prophet in the Qur’an was echoed in Hadith narratives and affirmed that the Prophet had full knowledge and awareness that his death was near. The scholars of Hadith show that on several occasions, the Prophet had disclosed to the community that he might not survive to witness another year. The Prophet indirectly announced his own death as he bid farewell to Mu`az Ibn Jabal. He said, “Oh Mu`az, perhaps you will not meet me after this year, and perhaps you will

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<sup>6</sup> Imam Al-Bukhari, Sahih Al-Bukhari, vol. II, Beirut: Dar Al-Arqam, 1997, 556.

<sup>7</sup> Qur’an 2:281.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 5:3.

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Al-Ghazali, Fiqh Al-Seerah: Understanding the Life of Muhammad, Saudi Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 1999, 490.

pass by my Mosque and my grave.”<sup>10</sup> He died while Mu`az was in Yemen. In addition, the Prophet alluded to his death while delivering the Farewell Sermon.<sup>11</sup> On a different occasion, the death announcement was indirect as the Prophet encouraged Muslims to learn the rituals of Hajj and to emulate as he demonstrated for them.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the Prophet shared the knowledge of the imminence of his death with family members and his companions in more intimate ways. Abu Sa`id Al-Khudri reported the Prophet saying, “My recall is near, and I am responding while leaving with you the two most valuables: The Qur’an and my progeny. The Book of God is a cord that extends from the Heavens to earth. My progeny is my immediate and extended family. The Subtle and All-Aware God has informed me that they will not separate until they meet me again at the Fountain [in Heaven], so be mindful of how you treat them after me.”<sup>13</sup>

### **The Farewell Sermon**

The Prophet Muhammad delivered a sermon during Hajj known as the Farewell sermon, which offered a summary of the foundation of worship, familial responsibilities, and communal relations. The Prophet began the sermon with delivering the news that he might not live to be among the community for another season of Hajj. The Prophet stressed the sanctity of life and the preservation of various rights as members of one community; this was a departure from the reckless way of life of the Meccans. He reaffirmed that the Qur’an and the Hadith are sources for understanding the basis of faith, outlining laws and guidelines, as well as setting boundaries for what is allowed or prohibited. The Prophet engaged the public in the sermon asking them to affirm whether he fully delivered the message. This departure from the traditional style of non-engaging sermons where preachers deliver and the audience listens, was probably triggered by the revelation of Quran 5:3 which declared the completion of the mission of the Prophet and the perfection of the message.

The Prophet made several announcements following his return to Medina from Hajj in regards to the imminence of his death, especially during the last week of his life. He announced during a sermon on Wednesday, five days before he died, that a “servant” was given a choice between having the treasures of the world or meeting his Lord and that he chose to meet his Lord. Abu-Bakr wept upon hearing the Prophet as he

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<sup>10</sup> Safi Al-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *Al-Raheeq Al-Makhtum*, Qatar: Ministry of Islamic Affairs Publication, 2007, 458.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Ibn Ishaq, *Al-Seerah Al-Nabawiya*, Beirut: Dar Al-Kotob Al-`Imiyyah, 2004, 670.

<sup>12</sup> Ismael Ibn Kathir, *Al-Seerah Al-Nabawiya*, Vol. 4, Beirut: Dar Al-Ma`rifa Publishing, 1976, 367.

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Ibn Sa`ad, *Kitab Al-Ṭabaqat Al-Kubra*, Vol 2, Cairo: Al-Khanuqji Library, 2001, 174.

realized the servant was no one but the Prophet himself.<sup>14</sup> The Prophet gathered his closest companions on Thursday and attempted to write a farewell advice to keep them from going astray.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the Prophet provided the most intimate and direct announcement to his daughter Fatima when she visited her dying father. He asked Fatima to sit close to him, whispered something in her ear, and she cried. He leaned closer and whispered again, and then she laughed.<sup>16</sup> Fatima did not immediately disclose the content of what her father divulged; she only shared after the Prophet had passed away. Fatima initially cried when the Prophet disclosed that he would not recover from the illness and would soon die. He said, “Archangel Gabriel used to review the Quran with me once a year and he reviewed it twice this year. I see my end is near, so keep God-conscious and patient; I am your best example [in patience]”. Fatima had then laughed when the Prophet whispered again sharing comforting news with the bereaved daughter. He said, “You will be the first from among my family to join me and wouldn’t it satisfy you that you have become the Lady of all the believers of this Ummah.”<sup>17</sup> Fatima died six months after her father.

## **Rituals and Practices in Dying**

The Prophet Muhammad responded to the end of life experience and the imminence of death by embracing vulnerability, indulging in worship and rituals, and teaching his companions the rituals.

The knowledge of the nearness of death prompted the Prophet to invite Muslims to join him in performing the Farewell Pilgrimage (*Hijjat al-Wida`*) during which he instructed Muslims to follow his steps in performing the rituals. The Prophet explained the rights and obligations in the ritual of state of consecration (*Ihram*) and showed the geographical location of the appointed place (*Miqat*) where one enters into Ihram from. In addition, he described the different kinds of Hajj: Qiran, Ifrad, and Tamat`u, and how to perform each and the prohibitions to observe. The Prophet changed the Meccan Hajj tradition. Instead, he performed the rituals following the footsteps of Prophet Abraham. Traditionally, the Meccans confined the Hajj boundaries to Mecca only. The Prophet extended Hajj outside of Mecca and made the rituals at Arafat the climax of Hajj.

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<sup>14</sup> Al-Ghazali, 490.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Sa`ad, 213.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Mubarakpuri, 468.

<sup>17</sup> Ibn Kathir, 448.

The announcement of the impending death of the Prophet was embedded in the revelation of Qur'an 110 during Hajj. The chapter of "victory" was the last whole chapter to be revealed, served as the "Farewell Chapter", and instructed the Prophet to practice the rituals of glorifying God and seeking forgiveness.<sup>18</sup> The Prophet's uncle Al-'Abbas wept when the chapter was revealed as he understood it meant a declaration of the imminent death of his nephew.<sup>19</sup> The Prophet practiced seeking forgiveness, a tradition he often performed during the daily prayers, kneeling or prostrating. In addition, the Prophet practiced the praising of God as an end of life ritual. Aisha and Al-'Abbas narrated the Prophet frequently recited phrases of praise and glorification "*Subhana Allah*," thankfulness "*Al-Hamdulillah*," and repentance "*Atubo Ilayhi*."<sup>20</sup>

The tradition and ritual of seeking forgiveness were extended to offering intercessory prayers to petition the forgiveness of God for others. Ibn Hisham reported that the Prophet prayed for the dead and offered intercessory prayers of forgiveness while visiting Al-Baqi' Cemetery in Medina two weeks before his death.<sup>21</sup> While at the cemetery, the Prophet was given two choices: to be cured of illness and to receive worldly material wealth or to die and meet with God. The Prophet visited Mount Uhud in Medina in May, 632 CE where he visited the cemetery and offered intercessory prayers for the martyrs of the Battle of Uhud. Later that day, he addressed the community at his mosque and shared his concerns of their divisions after his death. He held a public session where he restored justice and mended broken relationships. Prophet Muhammad delivered a sermon in Medina during the last week of his life where he encouraged Muslims to come forward to air their grievances against him, and he repaid his debts.<sup>22</sup>

The Prophet was keen on giving general good advice and specific reminders to his family and companions. The Prophet shared general advice on keeping close to God, having compassion, and mending relations with others. He specifically advised Muslims to be compassionate towards the Muslim helpers (Ansar) of Medina.<sup>23</sup> Also, the Prophet constantly reminded his family members and companions not to neglect their prayers and to be kind to their spouses.<sup>24</sup> He reiterated three days before he died, the significance of trusting God fully as the one who responds to supplications and prayers. He said, "One shall

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<sup>18</sup> Muhammad Al-Soyani, *Al-Sererah Al-Nabawiya*, Vol. 4, Riyadh: Al-'Abeykan Library, 2004, 282.

<sup>19</sup> Abu Abdullah Muhammad Al-Qurtubi, *Al-Jami' Li Ahkam Al-Quran*, Vol. 22, Beirut: Al-Risala Publishing and Distribution, 2006, 541.

<sup>20</sup> As-Soyani, 282.

<sup>21</sup> Abu Muhammad 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Hisham, *Al-Seerah Al-Nabawiya*, Beirut: Dar Al-Kitab Al-Arabi, 1990, 289.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Ghazali, 495.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn Hisham, 300.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 290.

not die without expecting the best from God.”<sup>25</sup> The advice was based on a Divine Saying “Hadith Qudsi”.<sup>26</sup> Abu Hurairah reported the Prophet said, "God the Exalted says: 'I am as my slave expects me to be, and I am with him when he remembers Me. If he remembers Me inwardly, I will remember him inwardly. If he remembers Me in an assembly, I will remember him in a better assembly (i.e., in the assembly of angels).’”<sup>27</sup>

The Prophet suffered bouts of headaches, fever, and intolerable abdominal pain during the last week of his life, and while on his deathbed. He resumed his functions as the Imam and led Muslims in the congregational prayers for eleven days during the period of his illness. The Prophet suffered extreme abdominal pain that he lost his consciousness after he led the Evening prayer (*Maghrib*) on Thursday evening, four days prior to his death. As a result, he appointed Abu Bakr to lead the congregational prayers. Abu-Bakr led about 17 prayers starting with the Night prayer (*Isha*) on Thursday until the death of the Prophet on Monday. The Prophet prayed sitting next to Abu Bakr when he felt well enough to join the congregational prayer. However, he prayed at home when he suffered bouts of pain and fever and the symptoms of illness were uncontrollable.

The illness and physical pain didn't distract the Prophet from reflecting on death while living the last moments of his life. He described pain metaphorically and resembled the analogy of the believer in pain, to a tree in autumn, where God absolves a sin with every leaf that falls off the tree.<sup>28</sup> The Prophet turned to God for healing, frequently recited the Qur'an, and asked God to come to his aid as he travelled through the twilight of death. When he suffered high fever, he dipped his hand in water, wiped his face, and said: “I bear witness there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah.”<sup>29</sup> He remained steadfast in gratitude to God even when his companions reminded him that all of his sins have already been forgiven. The Prophet responded, “Shouldn't I be a thankful servant?”<sup>30</sup>

## The Death of the Prophet

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<sup>25</sup> Imam Abu-Dawood Al-Sisjistani, Sunan Abu Dawud, Vol 5, Damascus: Dar Ar-Risala Al-`Aalamiyyeh, 2009, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Hadith Qudsi is an inspiration attributed to God which the Prophet received through revelation or divine inspiration then used his own words to articulate the message. Hadith Qudsi addressed topics such as fear, hope, divine love, or dialogue between God and people, and rarely addresses rules for prayers, fasting, or other worship.

<sup>27</sup> Mustafa Bin Al-`Adwa, Al-Sahih Al-Musnad min Al-Ahadith Al-Qudsiya, Tanta: Dar Al-Sahaba Publishing, 1989, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Kathir, 470.

<sup>29</sup> The two testimonies are “I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God”.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Sa`ad, 185.

The Prophet emerged from the home of Aisha in the early hours of Monday, June 8, 632 C.E. while Muslims were performing the Morning prayer (*Fajr*) in congregation. Reports varied about whether the Prophet joined in the Morning prayer (*Fajr*) in congregation on the day he died, or prayed alone at the home of Aisha after his brief appearance.<sup>31</sup> He looked refreshed, so the Muslims rejoiced his recovery from illness. The Prophet went home and disclosed the information to his daughter Fatima causing her to initially cry, then laugh. Aisha reported that his eyes became fixed towards the ceiling in the last hour of his life, and his head turned heavy as he rested his head on her chest.<sup>32</sup> The Prophet lost his consciousness and Aisha prayed for his healing. The Prophet woke up and recited Qur'an 4:69, "With the Prophets whom God has bestowed His favors upon, the steadfast affirming the truth, the martyrs and the righteous. And excellent are those as companions."<sup>33</sup> The Prophet said his last words, "With the Highest Exalted Companionship. We return to God, and to Him we turn back for help, and the last abode with God, the Supreme companion."<sup>34</sup> The Prophet tilted his head and took his last breath.

### **Reaction to the Death of the Prophet**

The death of the Prophet shocked his immediate family members and the community at large. The bereaved young wife Aisha whom the Prophet died in her hands, shared her reaction to his death, "I should have kept his head on my chest until his funeral preparation. However, due to young age and ignorance, I put the Prophet's head on a pillow and joined other women in crying."<sup>35</sup> Fatima, the bereaved daughter, cried and said, "O Father, whom his Lord responded to his supplication! O Father, whose abode is Paradise. O Father, whom I announce his death to Gabriel."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the bereaved Muslim community reacted to the death of the Prophet with shock, disbelief, extreme sadness, anger, and even denial.

### **Postmortem Care: Funeral Preparations and Burial**

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn Ishaq, 710.

<sup>32</sup> Al-Mubarakpuri, 469.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn Kathir, 476.

<sup>34</sup> As-Soyani, 299.

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Ishaq, 713.

<sup>36</sup> Imam Abi Abdullah Al-Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith #4462, Damascus: Dar Ibn Kathir, 2002, 1092.

The care for the deceased is anchored in the legal rights where people enjoy non-alienable rights and benefits, alive or dead. These rights are divided into six distinctive areas: two before death and four after death has occurred. The living person has the right to receive the visitors to the sick (*ziyara*) and empowerment (*tathbit*). The aim is to coach (*talqin*) the individual to seek forgiveness and affirm the Two Testimonies (*kalimah*) while dying (*ihtidar*). The deceased enjoys four rights: (1) washing (*ghusl*) and shrouding (*takfin*); (2) participating in the funeral procession (*tashyee`*); (3) an intercessory funeral prayer (*janaza*); and (4) burial of the deceased (*dafn*). These rights are legally classified as communal collective duties (*fard kifaya*).<sup>37</sup> The community (*ummah*) will be relieved from the burden once the duties are performed, and however will be blameworthy if they are neglected. For example, *ghusl* is an obligation because the Prophet used the imperative form of the verb to wash (*ighsiluha*) while addressing a group of women gathered to wash his deceased daughter.<sup>38</sup> The tradition that Muslims inherited from the Prophet included a theology, practices, and a set of duties that they rush to perform. This is a demonstration of a community that is rooted in a tradition of love where the Prophet preached that, “None will attain faith until one loves for his brother [and sister] what one would love for himself [and herself]”.<sup>39</sup>

Traditionally, *ghusl* is a familial task that a group of same-sex members complete. The male members of the family of the Prophet performed the washing of the body of the Prophet. There is disagreement in regards to when actually the *ghusl* took place. Traditional Sunni sources maintain the *ghusl* took place after Abu-Bakr was appointed a successor of the Prophet on Tuesday.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, those who were present during the *ghusl* included the Prophet’s uncle al-`Abbas, cousins Kuthem and al-Fa`dl, son-in-law Ali, and Usama ibn Zayd.<sup>41</sup> The group was helped by the Prophet’s servant Shaqran, and Aws Ibn Khawli an Ansar from Medina, whose request to join the group was granted.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, Aisha shared her regret that she overlooked that it was permissible for her to wash the body of her deceased husband. She said, “Had I known then what I know now, none would have washed the Prophet except his wives.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Imam Muhammad Ibn Rushd Al-Qurtubi, *Bidayat Al-Mujtahid Wa Nihayat Al-Muqtasid*, Vol 1, Cairo: Al-Halaby Publishing, 1975, 226

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Bukhari, vol II, 69.

<sup>40</sup> Ibn Kathir 719.

<sup>41</sup> Ibn Hisham, 313.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Kathir 719.

<sup>43</sup> Imam Abu-Dawood Al-Sijistani, *Sunan Abu Dawood*. Vol 5. Damascus: Dar Al-Risala Al-`Alamiya, 2009, 60.

There was a discussion on whether it is legally permissible to undress the Prophet or to perform *ghusl* while he was fully clothed. Ali took the initiative to wash, perfume, and shroud the Prophet, without undressing him.<sup>44</sup> There were varying reports about the burial shroud, its color, number of pieces, and the origin of the cloth. Most sources reported the shroud of the Prophet consisted of three layers of white Yemeni cotton cloth.<sup>45</sup>

Muslims came in droves to bid farewell to the Prophet. However, they didn't perform the traditional funeral prayers in congregation as Muslims are accustomed to. The Prophet was lying in state on the edge of his grave in Aisha's room. Groups of Muslims filled the room to capacity, lined up in neat rows, then each offered their supplications without an Imam leading the prayer.<sup>46</sup> The immediate family members and male members of the Prophet's tribe of Bani Hashem entered first to bid their farewell. They were followed by the Meccans (*Muhajirin*), Helpers of Medina (*Ansar*), the women, and lastly the children. There are different opinions on when the supplications began; however, the farewell ended on Tuesday evening.

## **The Burial of the Prophet**

Muslims disagreed on the burial site of the Prophet and the method of digging the grave as they prepared to bury the Prophet. Meccan Muslims had grave-digging and burial customs that are different from their Medina coreligionists. The Meccans adopted the tomb (*darīh*) method which consisted of digging a trench (*shiq*) in the center of the grave. The deceased is entombed in the trench and covered with bricks, then the grave is filled with dirt. On the other hand, the Ansar preferred the niche (*lahd*) method where they would dig a slit (*shiq*) in the side of the grave. The deceased is buried in the slit resting on the right side facing Mecca. The body is stabilized with mud bricks and the grave is filled with dirt. There were two gravediggers in Medina, Abu Ṭalḥa and Abu U'bayda Ibn al-Jarah, The Prophet's uncle Al-'Abbas dispatched two emissaries to fetch either man. Abu Ṭalḥa was available and he dug the grave of the Prophet who was buried in a *lahd* according to the customs of Medina.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 517.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Ishaq, 720.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Mubarakpuri, 471.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn Hisham, 314.

The companions considered three different location for burying the Prophet. There were calls to bury the Prophet next to his companions at Al-Baqi` Cemetery in Medina. Other suggested burial at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, or in Palestine next to the Prophet Abraham. The sources made no mention whether the immediate family of the Prophet preferred one place over another. Sunni sources credited Abu-Bakr with the selection of the burial-place based on his testimony, "No prophet has ever died but was buried where he died."<sup>48</sup> As a result, Muslims divided the home of Aisha into two sections: a living quarter for her and a burial ground for the Prophet. Aisha conveyed lack of awareness of the burial time of the Prophet. She said, "We did not know the time of the burial of the Messenger of God and we heard the sound of the shovels in the middle of the night."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Wilfred Madelung, The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate. Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1977, 357-358.

<sup>49</sup> Al-Mubarakpuri, 472.

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## Appendix I: Major Events in the Timeline of the Death of the Prophet

- Tuesday, 29th Safar, 11 AH – May 26, 632 CE: The Prophet attended a funeral and complained of a headache and fever afterwards.
- Wednesday, 8th Rabi` I 8, 11, AH – June 3, 632 CE: The Prophet lost consciousness and when he regained consciousness he delivered a sermon advising the community to take care of the indigenous community of Medina who supported the Prophet in the early years of Islam, asked not to make his grave a shrine for idol worshiping, and asked if anyone has lent the Prophet money to come forward and collect his debt. Also, he disclosed he was given two choices; Abu-Bakr understood the Prophet is sharing his departure is near and began weeping.
- Thursday, 9th Rabi` I, 11, AH – June 4: The Prophet gathered his closest companions and attempted to write an advice that will keep them from going astray. The companions argued so the Prophet dismissed them without writing anything.
- Thursday, 9th Rabi` I, 11, AH – June 4: The Prophet led the evening (Maghrib) prayer but was unable to lead the night (Isha) prayers. He tried to get up three time and he collapsed. When he regained consciousness, he appointed Abu-Bakr to lead the congregational prayer. Abu-Bakr led the prayer 17 times prior to the death of the Prophet starting with the night prayers on Thursday until Monday morning.
- Friday, 10th Rabi` I, 11, AH – June 5: The Prophet is unable to join the Friday prayers. Abu-Bakr delivers the sermon and leads the prayers. He stayed home the entire day.
- Saturday 11th Rabi` I, 11, AH – June 6: The Prophet joined the Asr congregational prayers while being supported by his uncle Al-`Abas and two companions, then was rushed home.
- Sunday, 12th Rabi` I – June 7, 632: The Prophet's daughter Fatima visited the Prophet who whispered in her ear and she cried. He whispered again and she laughed. The Prophet addressed the community after the prayers, paid off his debt, and freed his servant.
- Monday, Rabi` I 13, 11 A.H. – June 8, 632: The Prophet came out of his room at the time of the early morning (Fajr) prayer and saw Muslims praying in congregation. Muslims were delighted to see the Prophet recover from illness.
- Monday, Rabi` I 13, 11 A.H. – June 8, 632: The Prophet called his wives and advised them to maintain their prayers.
- Monday, Rabi` I 13, 11 A.H. – June 8, 632: The Prophet became actively dying. His wife Aisha placed his head on her chest. He had a cup of water next to him where he would dip his hand in water, wipe

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his face, and say: “I bear witness there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah. Oh God, come to my aid as I go through the twilight of death.”

- Monday, Rabi` I 13, 11 A.H. – June 8, 632: The Prophet was heard reaffirming the choice of meeting with God and recited Quran 4:69, “With the ones upon whom Allah has bestowed favor of the prophets, the steadfast affirmers of truth, the martyrs and the righteous. And excellent are those as companions.” He died close to noon while resting his head on the chest of his wife Aisha.
- Tuesday, Rabi` I 14, 11 A.H. – June 9, 632: Muslims were busy with the funeral and burial plans and disagreed on where to bury the Prophet. Three locations were suggested: Mecca, Palestine, and Medina.
- Tuesday, Rabi` I 14, 11 A.H. – June 9, 632: The Prophet was prepared for burial by his cousin Ali and other close family members.
- Tuesday, Rabi` I 14, 11 A.H. – June 9, 632: The Helper Abu Talha Zayd b. Sahl dug the grave of the Prophet according to the Medinan practice of making a niche (lahd).
- Tuesday, Rabi` I 14, 11 A.H. – June 9, 632: The Prophet was buried late in the night in the room where he died at the home of his wife Aisha.

## **Discussion**

The death of the Prophet Muhammad is a significant event that provides clarity to how death is understood within an Islamic theology of end of life, how death impacts familial and communal relations, and how the experiences surrounding death and dying influence rituals and practice within the boundaries of Islamic ethical-legal dimensions. In particular, the knowledge of the imminence of death triggered rituals and events in the last three months of the Prophet's life, the last 10 days of his life, postmortem care: funeral and burial. Furthermore, the practices of the Prophet and the community during each stage provided meaning to

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## **Appendix II: A Partial List of Spiritual Care Services for Patients and Families**

1. Prayer Support: It include providing supporting material to teach how to do the ablution (wudu) and how to pray (salat). It also includes how to shorten and combine the prayers, how to do dry ablution (tayamum. In addition, it provides support to orient self towards the Qibla, get a prayer mat (Sijada) or prayer beads.
2. Prayer: Offering prayer (dua) for the patient and their family addressing the patient's issues and offered to God to facilitate the healing process. It particularly important to offer a prayer before any medical procedure. Prayers can be done for newborn babies.
3. Dying Muslims: Help comfort a dying Muslim by reciting Kalima Shahadah, and comfort family members.
4. Postmortem Care: Offer support to wash and shroud deceased patients. Help coordinate release of remains for burial, attend funeral prayers and burials.
5. Spiritual Counseling: counseling in conjunction with the Islamic theology of human relationship to God, enabling the patient to deal constructively with illness and related problem.
6. Resources: Provide resources while in the hospital such as a Quran, books of Hadith and other material that is necessary.
7. Spiritual assessment: A professional service to discover and address concerns, strengths, hopes, or emotions and the facilitation of reflections while being in the hospital.

“embracing death”, end of life rituals, rights, obligations, necessity and permissibility, and the implications of that belief for modern Muslims at life’s end.

The case study of the death of the Prophet Muhammad emphasized that Islam is theory-laden where actions, change, innovation, and pragmatism occur within the limits of the revealed sources of the Quran, the Sunnah, and the scholarly heritage. Nonetheless, the revealed sources are the authority in deciding on setting the rituals the while scholarly and individual interpretations influence the scope of the understanding, meaning, and the extent of rituals and practice. Hence, experiences of the past and the present deeply impact people’s approaches to end of life and offer alternative practice and ritual depending on experiences and circumstances by the exploration and expansion of the scope of leniency in the “allowed” (mubāḥ) category of Islamic law and ethics.

The case study presented a comprehensive view of life and death and affirmed the role of the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet in guiding the understanding of the Islamic theology of end of life. Life is a continuum of ritual and practice while death is a state of stillness, physically and spiritually; life and death serve as a bridge that connects the human-divine experiences of creation with the afterlife. The relationship, rituals, and practice aim to fulfill the covenants of Lordship and Servanthood and sustain divine attributes such as omnipotence and supreme. In this theological view, human death is divinely ordained and takes at a predestined and deferred time while the embrace of death is self-surrender to the will of God. This view of life and death mutually influence the meaning and experiences, rituals, or practices on intrapersonal and interpersonal levels by gauging the compliance and congruency of ritual and practice with the revealed law. Meanwhile, these laws are flexible and support enacting limited and temporary measures of leniency or suspend the legal norms whenever necessary in urgent situations that require immediate attention to existing challenges that pause a threat to the preservations of the essentials of the law. The human agency within this framework becomes predominant where people engage the law in non-critical situations, expand their understanding of practice that is legally permissible (mubah), and provide alternative ritual practice at end of life experiences.

The end of life experience of Prophet Muhammad provided an unprecedented support for the disclosure of the imminence of death. The evidence in the revealed sources and the actions of the Prophet reflected knowledge of his impending death and allowed him to establish rituals and practice that would otherwise not be undertaken if the imminence of death remained unknown. As a result, the legal and ethical

foundation for disclosures was proven stronger than local customs that frowned on disclosure despite the consideration of these customs in Islamic law. Hence, a systematic approach to disclosures of the imminence of death is necessary where duty and rights shape ethics of care, autonomy, consent, and justice, and impact modern Muslims' practice in end of life situations.

## **Conclusion**

The end of life experience of the Prophet Muhammad is a textbook case of Islamic pastoral care. The end of life experiences includes events, inspirations, rituals, relationships, practices that are not limited in scope to Prophet Muhammad but extended to include the community at large. This expanded view of community is evident in the message of the Prophet Muhammad in the Last Sermon where he ended with a request for public affirmation and testimony that he has conveyed the message. The engagement of the community who positively affirmed his efforts was met with a call on God to directly witness this communal affirmation. The view of God reflects the human understanding and awareness of settings of such experiences where God is seen as directly involved, a role that is comforting and empowering.

The life and death of the Prophet Muhammad featured familial and communal relations and practices rooted in general ethical principles of duty where people and communities act based on understanding, belief, or perception of what is morally and legally obligatory. People must love others. Altruism is a prerequisite for attaining faith and compassion has deontological and consequential dimensions; values that impact obligations to the self, others, and God. For example, the pastoral leadership requires leaders to shepherd the community at times of crisis. The moral vision of care for the community was clear in the Prophet Muhammad's gathering of his companions on Thursday, four days before he died, and initiating the writing of directives to protect the community from "losing the way" after his death. In addition, the duty of the father to comfort his own daughter compelled the Prophet Muhammad to dialogue with God where assurances were granted that raised the status of Fatima and comforted her while her father was actively dying.

The practice of the community is measured by the degree of its significance to preserving the essentials of Islamic law: faith, life, intellect, resources, and morals. The obligation to fulfill the tendency-needs varies based on the people's needs which can be existential, complimentary, or embellishments. The

interconnectedness of Islamic law and ethics is significant and help prioritize the needs based on contexts which guide practice. In this regard, the priority of Islamic is to avoid harm or non-maleficence while western ethics place its priority on agency and beneficence. The relationship between Islamic law and ethics and their influence of practice hasn't been addressed, additional investigation is needed.

The postmortem care experience of the Prophet Muhammad was rich, significant, and provided a comprehensive model for individual, familial, and communal approaches to practices and rituals at end of life experiences. Nonetheless, there was confusion about roles of individuals and communication gaps that resulted in tension at certain times. Was it the responsibility of the immediate family or the newly appointed successor of the Prophet to decide on details of who to wash the Prophet, where to bury him, or what method of internment to use? Hence, experience created an opportunity to interpret what is necessary and permissible in postmortem care. Modern Muslims face similar issues and ask if it is permissible to delay burials to accommodate family members residing in different states or countries. The end of life experiences provided ample content for discussion on diversity in responding to news about death and tension, and their impact on the practices and rituals of the dying person, the family, and community.

Healthcare providers encounter several challenges when dealing with patients at the different stages of end of life. Spiritual care providers struggle with the lack of time to talk to the dying patients, siblings, descendants, spouses, or family members, and struggle with how to discuss the imminence of death. As a healthcare chaplain, I had several conversations with critically ill patients and with families as actively dying patients are often non-responsive. I found most patients eager to reflect on their illness and what it means to live while dying.

Communication at end-of-life is often more complex, multiplied, and multilayered when a non-Muslim chaplain takes care of a Muslim patient. The majority of healthcare chaplains in the United States are non-Muslim and some lack of knowledge about Islam and end of life care. Therefore, the end of life experience of the Prophet Muhammad provides a good model for communication with patients, friends, and family members, including the religious obligation to share information on the nearness of death.

I traveled extensively to Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia to teach the concept of Islamic spiritual care to healthcare professionals: physicians, nurses, and chaplains. Providers shared how family members vehemently opposed informing patients of their diagnosis, especially

poor prognosis, or when they are actively dying. In this regard, the knowledge of the Prophet to the nearness of death and his embrace of the end of life experience offer an example that is compatible with professional ethics as well as Sharia congruent. The failure to inform patients of their diagnosis hinders the ability of patients to take control of practices and rituals shall they know the end of life is near. The relationship between healthcare providers and patients is built on trust. Prophet Muhammad offered a model that communicated truthfully and disclosed the imminence of death to his daughter. The style of communication was private, compassionate and intimate, despite having several family members present in the room. He demonstrated pastoral leadership at the bedside and comforted Fatima while processing his own death.

The Prophet's model of end of life experience was an opportunity to affirm faith and belief in the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*) and practice accordingly. The Prophet was stricken with pain and illness just as any human being would. He reflected on his life and death, and his emotions, and his responsibilities. The Prophet turned to God for support and healing. The declaration of faith (*shahada*) affirms faith in God and the prophethood; however, the prophetic model of end of life experience affirmed the omnipotence and mercy of God as the Prophet kept asking God for support, forgiveness, and healing. In other words, death is the triumph of God where believers confront attachment to the material world with eagerness to meet the Creator. Hence, the last words the Prophet uttered were "to be with God."

The non-traditional funeral prayer of Prophet Muhammad underscored the significance of contexts and experiences in determining the understanding of the community of what is legally allowed (*mubāḥ*) to practice in a specific context. The funeral prayer is often led by a male Imam who gathers the community and leads the funeral prayer in congregation. However, there have been situations where more than one funeral prayer was conducted on the same deceased especially in situations when family members and friends commute long distances and might miss the organized prayer. People who arrive after the funeral prayer has concluded can offer an extra funeral prayer. Also, if the funeral prayer is deemed a communal supplication for the deceased, would that mean that a woman can lead a same-gender prayer independent of men just as they would lead in the daily same-gender setting?

The Muslim family in the United States is diverse religiously and ethnically and requires having services that are religiously and culturally sensitive. The context of an Imam offering a funeral supplication in Arabic to an English-speaking bereaved family is counterproductive. In addition, the choice of interpretations and translation for funeral supplication is important. I have witnessed several family members in distress after

Muslims leaders prayed for the deceased to be granted a better family than the current one they left behind without offering an explanation or context to the supplication. Imams need ongoing culturally insensitive training to become competent to serve bereaved families, especially those with anticipated delayed grief. Interfaith Muslim marriages are on the rise in the United States. In such situations, the Muslim leadership might be dealing with spouses and extended family members who are less knowledgeable of Islamic customs and laws. Tension might occur when the surviving non-Muslim spouse and family members request a role in postmortem care of deceased Muslim. Finally, funeral is a supplication that can be silent or aloud, conducted with the congregation or individually, where people connect with God personally and independently. This personal approach to worship is congruent with the understanding that the divine-human connection takes place without an intermediary. Therefore, the Islamic dynamics of funeral prayers and worship undercuts the clerical model and represents the need for new directions in theory and practice for specific contexts and circumstances such as living as minorities or in a secular community.

## **Notes**