

Islamic Funeral Rites

Death is a very painful and emotional time, yet one that may be filled with hope and mercy. Muslims believe that death is a departure from the life of this world, but not the end of a person's existence. Rather, eternal life is to come, and we pray for God's mercy to be with the departed, in hopes that they may find peace and happiness in the life to come.

Care for the Dying

When a Muslim is near death, those around him or her are called upon to give comfort, and reminders of God's mercy and forgiveness. They may recite verses from the Qur'an, give physical comfort, and encourage the dying one to recite words of remembrance and prayer. It is recommended, if at all possible, for a Muslim's last words to be the declaration of faith: "I bear witness that there is no god but Allah." Upon death, those with the deceased are encouraged to remain calm, pray for the departed, and begin preparations for burial. The eyes of the deceased should be closed, and the body covered temporarily with a clean sheet. It is forbidden for those in mourning to excessively wail, scream, or thrash about. Grief is normal when one has lost a loved one, and it is natural and permitted to cry. When the Prophet Muhammad's own son died, he said: *"The eyes shed tears and the heart is grieved, but we will not say anything except which pleases our Lord."* Muslims strive to bury the deceased as soon as possible after death, avoiding the need for embalming or otherwise disturbing the body of the deceased. An autopsy may be performed, if necessary, but should be done with the utmost respect for the dead.

Washing and Shrouding

In preparation for burial, the family or other members of the community will wash and shroud the body. (If the deceased was killed as a martyr, this step is not performed; martyrs are buried in the clothes they died in.) The deceased will be washed respectfully, with clean and scented water, in a manner similar to how Muslims make ablutions for prayer. The body will then be wrapped in sheets of clean, white cloth (called the *kafan*).

Funeral Prayers

The deceased is then transported to the site of the funeral prayers (*salat-I-janazah*). These prayers are commonly held outdoors, in a courtyard or public square, not inside the mosque. The community gathers, and the *imam* (prayer leader) stands in front of the deceased, facing away from the worshippers. The funeral prayer is similar in structure to the five daily prayers, with a few variations. (For example, there is no bowing or prostration, and the entire prayer is said silently but for a few words.)

Burial

The deceased is then taken to the cemetery for burial (*al-dafin*). While all members of the community attend the funeral prayers, only the men of the community accompany the body to the gravesite. It is preferred for a Muslim to be buried where he or she died, and not be transported to another location or country (which may cause delays or require embalming the body). If available, a cemetery (or section of one) set aside for Muslims is preferred. The deceased is laid in the grave (without a coffin if permitted by local law) on his or her right side, facing Mecca. At the gravesite, it is discouraged for people to erect tombstones, elaborate markers, or put flowers or other mementos.

Mourning

Loved ones and relatives are to observe a 3-day mourning period. Mourning is observed in Islam by increased devotion, receiving visitors and condolences, and avoiding decorative clothing and jewelry. Widows observe an extended mourning period (*iddah*), 4 months and 10 days long, in accordance with the Qur'an 2:234. During this time, she is not to remarry, move from her home, or wear decorative clothing or jewelry. The Prophet Muhammad once said that there are three things, however, which may continue to benefit a person after death: charity given during life which continues to help others, knowledge from which people continue to benefit, and a righteous child who prays for him or her.

<http://islam.about.com/cs/elderly/a/funerals.htm>