

Muslims and the Afterlife

This was one more blow to my faith in Islam. What kind of god would leave us with no hope?

I had recently graduated with my master's degree in Islamic history and culture from Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. The faculty asked me to be a traveling lecturer for the university. When they sent me to teach in Tripoli, Libya, I shared an apartment with a student who was assigned to be my assistant.

One hot summer evening we sat together on our second-floor balcony, looking out at the Mediterranean Sea. We were discussing the Quran, specifically the teaching about what happens when we die.

I explained: "When you die, the angel of death comes and removes your soul from your body. He starts at your toenails and works his way up the body until he finally draws the whole soul out of your mouth. The pain is very intense for those who are evil, but Allah makes it easy for the righteous [see Surah 79:1-2]. Then you go to the grave to wait for the Day of Judgment. The grave can be like a little Paradise, or it will be a place of torture. Allah decides."

"How can we know what the grave will be like for us?" the student asked.

"There is nothing in the Quran or the teachings of Muhammad to tell us," I replied. "We just don't know."

He was quiet for a few minutes, and then he took a big risk

and told me what he felt in his heart: "We are like sheep, going to be slaughtered. We have no power to help ourselves," he said softly.

I didn't say a word, but in my heart I agreed. This was just one more blow to my faith in the god of Islam. What kind of god would leave us with no hope, only fear about what would happen when we die?

For the next week I could hardly eat or sleep. I felt deep sorrow because I knew one thing for sure: I would die. And there was no way for me to know what would happen at that moment. It was one more link in the chain of events that would take me out of Islam and lead me to the true God.

I knew well what the Quran taught about who would go to Paradise. The Quran says: "And whomsoever Allah wills to guide, He opens his breast to Islam; and whomsoever He wills to send astray, He makes his breast closed and constricted, as if he is climbing up to the sky. Thus Allah puts the wrath on those who believe not" (Surah 6:125; also, see Surah 7:178-179 and Surah 32:13).

According to Islam, a man's fate is determined by his actions. On Judgment Day, a record of every good and every evil act of his life will be brought out. Then Allah will decide who was good enough for Paradise and who will populate hell. The fear of this day gnaws at the souls of even the most pious Muslims.

But I discovered that the God of the Bible is different. We read: "God our Savior ... wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3-4, NIV; see also Matt. 18:14).

The God of the Bible takes away the fear of death and judgment by making this wonderful promise: "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9, NASB).

God doesn't ask us to earn eternal life. Rather, He saves us, not because of the righteous things we do, but because of His mercy (see Titus 3:5).

He says that if you confess and believe, you "will" be saved. Not "may be." Not, "We'll see if you were good enough."

If you want to talk with a Muslim friend about your faith, here is a good question to ask: Do you know what will happen when you die and go to your grave?

They will answer, "No, no one can know." Then you have an opportunity to explain, "God wants you to have peace about what will happen when you die."

Remember to always speak in love. And don't try to put down a Muslim friend with what you know about Islam. Just show him that Jesus will meet his needs in a way that Islam cannot. You have a wonderful gift to give.