

Can the dead benefit from the good deeds of those who are alive?

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 1 October 2021

وَأَنْفِقُوا مِنْ مَّا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ أَحَدَكُمُ الْمَوْتُ فَيَقُولَ رَبِّ لَوْلَا أَخَّرْتَنِي إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ قَرِيبٍ
فَأَصَّدَّقَ وَأَكُنْ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ ﴿١٠﴾ وَلَنْ يُؤَخِّرَ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهَا وَاللَّهُ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١١﴾

“And spend (on good works) out of what We have given you before death comes to one of you, and he says: My Lord, why did You not grant me respite for a little while (longer), so that I should have given in charity and been among the doers of good deeds? But Allah does not respite a soul, when its term comes. And Allah is Aware of what you do.” — ch. 63, v. 10–11.

حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ رَبِّ ارْجِعُونِ ﴿٢٣﴾ لَعَلِّي أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا فِيمَا تَرَكْتُ كَلَّا إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ
قَالَهَا وَمِنْ وَّرَائِهِمْ بَرْزَخٌ إِلَىٰ يَوْمِ يُبْعَثُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾

“Until when death catches up with one of them, he says: My Lord, **send me back**, that I may do good in that which I have left (undone). By no means! It is only a word that he speaks. And before them is a barrier, until the day they are raised.” — ch. 23, v. 99–100

The first passage is addressed to the believers, as shown by the verse which occurs before this passage. The second passage refers to all people, believers and unbelievers. And as regards the words “send me back” in this second passage, Maulana Muhammad Ali points out in his Urdu commentary of the Quran that in the Arabic used here is in the plural form (*irji ‘ūnī*) implying repetition of this request: “send me back, send me back, send me back”. Just “send me” would be: *irji ‘nī*. So the person is desperately repeating his request to be sent back into the world.

We learn from these passages of the Quran that people who don’t use the opportunity given to them in this life to do good deeds, at the time of death they will immediately realize that they missed this opportunity and they will plead with God

desperately to give them a little longer in this life, to return them to this life, in order that they may do the good deeds which they failed to do. But God says that it is His law that after death He does not return anyone to this life, even if their desire is to return to make up for the good deeds which they missed doing. The second passage tells us that the dead enter into a new phase, known as *barzakh*, and there is a barrier between that phase and this world's life which is not lifted even up to the Day of Judgment. As we know from other places in the Quran, with each human being there is a book or record being prepared of the deeds done by him in this life. This book is, in fact, a part of his soul. That book is closed at his death and then presented before the person in the next life to read for himself. Nothing further can be added to that book or removed from it.

It is a common belief among Muslims that after someone has died his relatives can still do things in his name to add to his reward in the life after death. If that had been true, then it would have been stated here in these passages, and God would have replied that although you can't go back and do the good deeds yourself which you missed, but your relatives can still do them in your name and you will have the reward. In another place the Quran puts forward this law: "and that a human can have nothing but what he strives for, and that his striving will soon be seen, then he will be rewarded for it with the fullest reward" (53:39–41). The Quran also tells us that God said to Moses when he chose him as His messenger: "Surely the Hour (of Judgment) is coming — I am about to make it manifest — so that every soul may be rewarded **according to its striving**" (20:15). So how can any good deeds done by the living, and those left behind, benefit someone who is dead? It can't happen as people imagine, but **there is** a sense in which it can happen, which I will come to later.

We all know that we pray for the forgiveness of the deceased. But those prayers are not for any good deeds to be added to the account of the deceased. Although the book of deeds is closed at death, there is still a scope for how harshly or leniently the deeds will be judged. It is somewhat like an examination paper. After the paper has been completed and handed in for marking, the examiner has scope for being harsh or

just to get reward from God, but to benefit people. Maulana Muhammad Ali comments on this hadith as follows in his Urdu commentary of Sahih Bukhari:

“This shows that if charity is given on behalf of a deceased, its reward reaches the dead person. An objection is raised that when the deed has not been done by the person himself, how can he be rewarded? Accordingly, it is mentioned in the hadith that the questioner told the Holy Prophet that **if his mother could talk she would have given the charity**. That was her intention but she did not get the opportunity. And in fact every true believer always intends to spend in the way of Allah. However, in the matter of reward for the dead for deeds done on their behalf, we cannot generalize and must restrict ourselves to whatever the Holy Prophet has stated.”

I quoted earlier the words of the Quran: “a human can have nothing but what he strives for” (53:39). Maulana Muhammad Ali, in his Urdu commentary of the Quran, under this verse has mentioned a number of hadith reports about deceased people getting a reward for what someone does on their behalf. He comments as follows:

“These hadith reports show that the deceased can benefit to some extent from the deeds of others, but it must be remembered that, as these reports clearly tell us, this is in case of such a close connection between the two that the doer of the deeds becomes the representative of the deceased. In such matters we are not entitled to broaden the scope of the teaching of the Shariah so as to invent an entirely new principle.”

We can draw the conclusion that if the deceased used to do a good deed of some kind, and had set an example to others of doing so, then if they follow that example after his death and continue his work, and take his work further, it means that the original deeds of the deceased flourish more, acquire a greater value and continue to benefit the world. That must give the deceased satisfaction in the next life.

You could say that this concept of continuing a deceased’s good work, and associating it with his name, is also recognized by the world in general, including non-religious people. When someone dies who has excelled in some field, for example in a branch of science or the arts or other human accomplishment like sport, his work is

honoured in various ways, for example, by naming an institute or establishment after him, or awards and trophies are named after him, etc. so that later generations may be inspired by their achievements and follow in their footsteps. Their prestige and fame grows as more and more work is done in their names. The idea in Islam is very similar to this. You are inspired by someone's good work and you continue it as a tribute to them, and in this case their ranks and grades with God rise to higher levels.

But the primary and main reward for the deceased is based on their own deeds which they themselves did in this life. That primary reward has to be earned first before the secondary reward based on other people's deeds can be added to it.

Another way in which a living person's good deeds, for example his charity, can do benefit to a deceased person, is that the living person's good and charitable deeds make his prayers for the deceased more accepted by God. So if he gives in charity in order to make his prayers of forgiveness for the deceased more effective, then this benefits the deceased. But this should not be taken to mean that the giving of charity by the living person is being counted as being the act of the deceased and he is rewarded for it.

We pray that may Allah enable us to follow the true teachings of His Holy Book and His Holy Prophet— *Ameen*.

بَارِكْ اللَّهُ لَنَا وَكُنْ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعْنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-