Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on February 26, 2016:

Synopsis - Dawah with Insight - Part 15

The World of the Grave (Barzakh)

The World of the Grave (barzakh) is one of the last stations in our soul’s journey. The soul begins its journey from the world of spirits or the world of command to the world of creation; the world that is witnessed by humans, i.e. the present world. Both worlds belong to Allah (SWT), “His is the creation and His is the command. Blessed is Allah, the Lord of the worlds.” (al-A’raf, 7:74)

Our spirit and body come together in one form to inhabit planet earth. This phase of our existence is most important. We are informed that Allah (SWT) is the One “Who created death and life that He may test you (to see) who among you is best in conduct (and deeds). And He is the Almighty, the Forgiving.” (al-Mulk, 67:1-2)

The only way to pass this test is to recognize the Creator, know our purpose and surrender to Allah (SWT) unconditionally. This test gets harder the closer we get to Him and the examination ends at our death. Unlike the first experience humans undergo in the womb of their mothers where the spirit is joined with the body, at death the spirit is separated from the body.

This phenomenon of separation of body and spirit happens daily in our present life. The spirit of every person ascends to heaven every night as we sleep. For some their spirits return upon waking while others’ spirits are kept with God, and death arrives in his or her sleep. The Qur’an explains this fact. “It is Allah who takes the souls at time of death and those that do not die (He takes) during their sleep. He then keeps those whom He had decreed death and returns the others back for a specified term. Verily in this are Signs for a people who reflect.” (al-Zumar, 39:42)

We experience what is called ‘minor death’ every day. Every day we wake up, we are given yet another chance to do good and succeed. This phenomenon continues until our appointed time comes when we permanently depart from this world, making our journey to another world called al-Barzakh, otherwise known as the world of the grave. Death as we know it is not pure annihilation. It is a transition from one world to another, i.e. from the present world to the world of the hereafter. The intermediary cycle between the two worlds is al-barzakh.

Linguistically, the barzakh is simply a barrier or partition according to the Qur’an. “The two seas (of fresh and salt water) He released meet each other. There is a barrier (barzakh) between them they do not cross.” (al-Rahman, 55:19,20)

The Qur’an describes the concept of the barzakh in connection with those who deny the hereafter. “Until,
when death comes to one of them, he cries, ‘My Lord send me back that I may do good in that which I left behind.’” God replies, “‘Nay! He is only saying these words.’ And a barrier (barzakh) separates them until the day they are resurrected.” (al-Mu’minoon, 23:99,100)

The body of every person, whether buried, drowned or cremated returns to the very same source it came from, the earth. “From it (the earth) We created you, into it We shall return you, and from it We shall raise you once again.” (Ta Ha, 20:55) Our bodies will eventually decay, decompose and return to dust while our spirits await Judgment Day.

One may wonder what happens to the spirit at the time of death. The angel of death dispatches his troops to take out the souls of the dead, “When death overtakes any of you, Our messengers take his soul. They never fail in their duty.” (al-An’am, 6:61) The souls of the wicked will be harshly extracted while the souls of pious people will come out gently. God swears, “By the (angels) who forcefully pull out (the souls of the wicked); and by the (angels) who gently take out (the souls of the righteous).” (al-Nazi’at, 79:1,2)

We are informed that at time of death the unseen world becomes visible. “Certainly you were heedless of this, but now We have removed from you your veil, so your sight today is sharp.” (Qaf, 50:22) This phenomenon is similar to one who is as sleep and dreaming. The dream ends upon waking up. Similarly, when the eyes close for good, one’s dream-world ends and the state of wakefulness begins. At that time one is able to recognize the realities of the hereafter. According to Ali Bin Abi Talib (RAA), “People are asleep, when they die they will wake up.”

No one has claimed to have risen from the grave and shared their experience. The knowledge of the supernatural realm is confined only to Allah (SWT). Through revelation and inspiration, the Prophet (SAW) brings to us the news of that domain. We have a complete account from the Prophet (SAW) regarding the journey of the spirit and the reality of the grave. A noble companion by the name of Al-bar’â Bin Azib (RAA) narrates:

“We went out with Allah’s messenger (SAW) to the funeral of a man of the Ansar (a native resident of Madina). We came to the grave and the niche in the side of the grave (Al-Lahd) had not been dug out yet. So Allah’s messenger (SAW) sat and we sat around him as if we had birds upon our heads (an expression that meant, we were still and very alert) and he had a stick in his hand with which he would poke the ground. He then raised his head and said, “Seek refuge in Allah from the punishment of the Grave,” two or three times.

Then he said, ‘When the believing servant departs this world and is about to enter the next life (the hereafter), angels with bright faces, as if their faces were the sun, descend upon him. With them is a shroud from Paradise and perfume for embalment from the fragrance of Paradise. They sit away from him at a distance the eye can see. The angel of death (AS) then comes and sits by his head and says, ‘O good soul, come out to forgiveness from Allah and His good pleasure.’ So it comes out (smoothly) just as a drop flows out from the spout of a drinking vessel, and he (the angel of death) takes it and does not leave it in his hand even for a blink of an eye until they place it in that shroud and that perfume, and a smell emanates from him like the smell of the best musk found on the face of the earth.’”

The Prophet (SAW) continued, “So they ascend with it (the soul) and they do not pass by any group of angels except that they say, ‘Who is this good and pure soul?’ They reply, ‘So and so, son of so and so,’ using the best of his names which he used to be called by in this world. When they reach the lowest heaven, they ask for permission to enter and so the gates open for them. The angels of each heaven escort him to the next heaven until they reach the seventh heaven. Allah the Mighty and Magnificent would say, ‘Write the record of my servant in Illiyeen1 and return him (the soul) to the earth (to his body) for I created them from it and to it I return them and from it I shall raise them once again.’”

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1 A place in the seventh heaven beneath the Divine Throne where the souls of the believers and their registers of deeds are kept.
The Prophet (SAW) continued, “So his spirit is returned to his body and then two angels come to him and make him sit up. They will then say, ‘Who is your Lord?’ He replies, ‘My Lord is Allah.’ They ask, ‘What is your Deen (religion)?’ He replies, ‘My Deen is Islam.’ They ask, ‘Who is this man who was sent to you?’ He replies, ‘He is Allah’s Messenger.’ They ask, ‘How did you know that?’ He replies, ‘I read the Book of Allah, and I believed in it and confirmed it.’ Then, a voice from heaven is heard declaring, ‘Indeed my servant has spoken the truth, so furnish a place for him from Paradise, clothe him from (the garments) of Paradise and open a door to Paradise for him.’ And so its gentle breeze and fragrance will be felt by him and his grave is expanded for him as far as he can see. A handsome, well-dressed man smelling good comes to him and says, ‘Receive good news that please you. This is your day which you were promised.’ He (the righteous soul) will then say, ‘My Lord! Establish the hour so that I may rejoin with my family and wealth.’”

The Prophet (SAW) continued, “And indeed when a disbelieving servant departs this world and is about to enter the next life (the hereafter,) angels with dark faces descend upon him, with them is a coarse sack-cloth, and they sit at a distance from him as far as the eye can see. Then the angel of death comes and sits by his head and says, ‘O foul soul, come out to Allah’s displeasure and anger.’ So the soul clings to his body, and he (the angel of death) pulls it out just as a pronged roasting fork is pulled out from wet wool. And so he takes it and does not leave it in his hand even for a blink of an eye until they place it in that coarse sack-cloth. And an offensive stench emanates from him like that of the foulest smelling rotten corpse on the face of the earth.

A true believer will have an easy time transitioning from the present world to the next. While in the grave, Allah (SWT) will give the true believers the ability to answer the fundamental and most important questions. It is inevitable that they will succeed, “Allah will strengthen those who believe with the firm Word in the life of this world and in the life to come (the hereafter) and Allah sends astray the unjust ones. Allah does whatever He wills.” (Ibrahim, 14:27)

Allah (SWT) affirms that during death (and while alive), the angels will certainly support the believers who are on the straight path, “Surely those who say, ‘Our Lord is Allah’ and then remain steadfast, the angels descend upon them (saying), ‘Have no fear or grief, but rejoice in the good news of Paradise which you have been promised. We are your allies in this world and in the world to come, where you will have everything you desire and ask for as a welcoming gift from the Most Forgiving, Most Merciful One.’” (Fussilat, 41:30-32)

On the contrary, the experience of a disbelieving soul is quite different at the time of death. “If you could only
see the wicked in the agonies of death as the angels stretch out their hands (saying), ‘Release your souls. Today you will be repaid with humiliating torment for saying things about Allah that is not true and for arrogantly rejecting His revelations.’” (al-An’am, 6:93)

And thus the angels convey the news to the departing souls. Good news of paradise to the believers and disappointing news of wrath and punishment to the disbelievers. And unlike living above ground in beautiful homes and palaces, the deceased dwells in a tiny pit dug underground. For a believer, the grave is a garden of the gardens of Paradise and for a disbeliever; the grave is a pit of the pits of the Hell Fire.

A believing soul will enjoy the comfort of their grave anxious to be raised and admitted to their final abode that is beyond description. In a sacred tradition where the Prophet (SAW) speaks in his own words on behalf of Allah (SWT), he said, “Allah said, ‘I have prepared for My righteous servants what no eye has seen and no ear has heard, and no heart has conceived.’” The narrator, Abu Hurairah (RAA), then said, “Recite if you will, ‘And no soul can comprehend what blissful delights has been kept hidden for them as a reward of what they used to do.’” (al-Sajdah, 32:17)

The disbelieving soul, on the other hand, will be tormented in their grave. Regarding hypocrites who are worse than disbelievers, Allah (SWT) asserts, “We shall punish them twice and then they will be returned to a severe punishment.” (al-Tawbah, 9:101) The hypocrites will suffer misfortune in this world, be tormented in the grave and severely punished in Hell.

In the world of barzakh, the fire will be displayed before the disbelievers. “And a terrible torment engulfed Pharaoh’s people; they will be exposed to the fire in the morning and in the evening and on the day the hour shall come to pass (Judgment Day) (it will be said), ‘Admit Pharaoh’s people to the worst punishment.’” (Ghafir, 40:45,46)

The grave or the barzakh is the first station in our journey toward eternal life. The Prophet (SAW) said, “Indeed, the grave is the first station of the stations of the hereafter (akhirah). Hence, whoever is successful, then what comes after will be easy for him and whoever fails, ahead is only hardship.”

The state of the dead in the world of barzakh is very similar to our experience of having pleasant dreams or nightmares while asleep. The punishment in the grave is so real the Prophet himself sought refuge in Allah from the torment of the grave at the end of every prayer.

May Allah (SWT) save us from the torment of the grave and the Hell Fire, ameen.

End.