

Wash with Snow

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EXPOSITORY NOTES

*Explanation of the phrase **wash with snow** mentioned in a prayer recited in funerals, found in the ḥadīth of Muslim.*

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Praise be to Allāh. Blessings of Allāh and greetings of peace be upon His beloved Messenger. The following ḥadīth of Muslim,¹ mentions a prayer that is recommended to be recited in funerals.

وَحَدَّثَنِي هَارُونُ بْنُ سَعِيدٍ الْأَيْلِيُّ، أَخْبَرَنَا ابْنُ وَهْبٍ، أَخْبَرَنِي مُعَاوِيَةُ بْنُ صَالِحٍ، عَنْ حَبِيبِ بْنِ عُبَيْدٍ، عَنْ جُبَيْرِ بْنِ نُفَيْرٍ، سَمِعَهُ يَقُولُ: سَمِعْتُ عَوْفَ بْنَ مَالِكٍ

يَقُولُ: صَلَّى رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ عَلَى جَنَازَةٍ، فَحَفِظْتُ مِنْ دُعَائِهِ وَهُوَ يَقُولُ:
اللَّهُمَّ، اغْفِرْ لَهُ وَارْحَمْهُ وَعَافِهِ وَاعْفُ عَنْهُ، وَأَكْرِمْ نُزُلَهُ، وَوَسِّعْ مَدْخَلَهُ، وَاغْسِلْهُ بِالمَاءِ
وَالثَّلْجِ وَالْبَرَدِ، وَنَقِّهِ مِنَ الْخَطَايَا كَمَا نَقَّيْتَ الثَّوْبَ الْأَبْيَضَ مِنَ الدَّنَسِ، وَأَبْدِلْهُ دَارًا خَيْرًا
مِنْ دَارِهِ، وَأَهْلًا خَيْرًا مِنْ أَهْلِهِ وَزَوْجًا خَيْرًا مِنْ زَوْجِهِ، وَأَدْخِلْهُ الْجَنَّةَ وَأَعِزَّهُ مِنْ عَذَابِ
الْقَبْرِ - أَوْ مِنْ عَذَابِ النَّارِ - قَالَ: حَتَّى تَمْنَيْتُ أَنْ أَكُونَ أَنَا ذَلِكَ الْمَيِّتَ

The companion Áwf ibn Mālik reported: The Prophet ﷺ prayed in a funeral and I memorised [the words he said in] his prayer and he ﷺ said:

O Allāh! Forgive him and have mercy upon him, protect him from harm, and grant him pardon. Ennoble his resting place and widen his grave. Wash him with water, snow and ice. Cleanse him from sins just as you have made a white cloth clean from dirt. Transfer him to a dwelling better than his [erstwhile] home, and [replace] folks better than his folks [in this world]; and a spouse better than a spouse in this world. Make him enter Paradise and grant him refuge from the punishment in the grave - [or he said:] from the punishment in Hell fire.

[the narrator Áwf says:] until I fervently wished that I were in place of the deceased.

¹ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, #1665; also in Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ, #1656 and Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn, #933.

The speech of the Prophet ﷺ is elegant and eloquent; rich expressions and figures of speech are employed in his prayers and sermons. The idioms in the above ḥadīth are explained in various commentaries as follows.²

According to Al-Haytamī, even though the litany [*duāā*] is said softly in the funeral prayer, if it was said loudly, the Prophet ﷺ did so to educate those present [H, A].

{he said:} after the third *takbīr*³ in the funeral prayer [Q].

{O Allāh! Forgive him} by erasing his sins [Q]. Any specific sin was not mentioned – so that the forgiveness was asked for every kind of sin and error [A].

{and have mercy upon him} by accepting his good deeds [Q]. This is a reiteration of the previous supplication seeking forgiveness [H]. Seeking Allāh's infinite Grace [A].

āāfihi: {protect him from harm} the imperative form of *muāāfāh*, meaning 'deliver him from hardship'. According to Ṭibī: protect him from punishment and affliction.[Q] Protect him from the harms, the dangers and tribulations in the grave – and give him comfort from the loneliness, the darkness and punishment in the grave [A].

wāfu ānhu: {and grant him pardon} from the sins that he might have committed; or protect him from the consequences of the sins. In *Al-Nihāyah*:⁴

āfw: to erase sins; i.e. to forgive them.

āāfiyah: protection, granting safety from disease, illness and myriad afflictions

muāāfāh: protection from the harm one would suffer at the hands of men; and that others may suffer from oneself.

Ṭibī has pointed out that the latter two meanings are not applicable for the deceased; rather the literal meaning of *āāfiyah* is not appropriate even for the living because, the Prophet ﷺ and his followers prayed for safety [i.e. *āāfiyah*] but nevertheless suffered illnesses and hardships. In fact,

² I have consulted the following commentaries in the above explanation and indicated by the abbreviation as follows:

- ▶ [R] *Sharḥ Maṣābiḥ al-Sunnah*, 2/352, #1176; Imām Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdu'l Laṭīf al-Kirmānī al-Rūmī al-Ḥanafī, "Ibn Malak" [d. 854 AH].
- ▶ [Q] *Mirqāt al-Mafātīḥ Sharḥ Mishkāṭu'l Maṣābiḥ*, 4/124, #1655; Mullā ʿAlī ibn Sulṭān al-Qārī [d. 1014 AH].
- ▶ [T] *Al-Kāshif ʿan Ḥaqā'iq al-Sunan*, 4/1394, #1655; Sharafuddīn Ḥusayn ibn ʿAbdullāh al-Ṭibī [d. 743 AH].
- ▶ [H] *Fatḥ al-Ilāh Sharḥ Mishkāh*, 6/78; #1655; Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī al-Makkī [d.974 AH].
- ▶ [A] *Dalīl al-Fāliḥin bi-sharḥi Riyād al-Ṣāliḥin*, 3/414; Imām Muḥammad Ibn ʿAllān al-Ṣiddīqī al-Makkī [d. 1057 AH].

³ *Takbīr* = saying Allāhu Akbar. Four *takbīrs* are said in the funeral prayer; a special litany for the deceased is recited after the third *takbīr*.

⁴ *Al-Nihāyah fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth wa'l Athar*, 3/265. Ibn al-Athīr, Imām Majduddīn Abi's Sāādāt Mubārak ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shaybānī al-Jazariy [544-606 AH], the eldest of three brothers known as **Ibn al-Athīr**. All of them were famous scholars. The eldest mentioned above was a ḥadīth master, the second was ʿIzzuddīn Abu'l Ḥasan ʿAlī Ibn al-Athīr [555-630 AH], a prominent historian, and the third: Ḍiyā'uddīn Abu'l Fatḥ Naṣrullāh Ibn al-Athīr [558-637 AH] who was a minister of king Afdal ibn Ṣalāhuddīn and a prominent linguist.

those who suffer the extreme hardship are the Prophets, and after them are those who are closest to them. In fact, to not have suffered an illness was a flaw [as if Allāh táālā had forsaken them]. Therefore, it is necessary to consider that the ‘protection from disease’ means the worst and abhorrent kinds of diseases such as vitiligo, madness, leprosy [by extrapolation: cancers, deadly diseases and epidemics]. Or *āāfiyah* is a prayer to protect oneself from discontentment and to be patient and thankful to Allāh and be content and pleased with His Divine Will [Q, T, A].

{Ennoble his resting place} i.e., grant him a handsome place in Paradise. *Nuzul*, originally meant ‘to present food to the guest’ and then adapted to mean an accommodation, an inn, a caravansary where one alights to rest, to sleep. [R, Q, H] This prayer is beseeching Allāh to honour the deceased and to give him a beautiful reward and envelop him in forgiveness [A].

{and widen his grave} *mud’khalahu* and *mad’khalahu*, both⁵ are correct, and here it refers to the grave [R]. Both words mean ‘the place of entering’ or ‘the place where one is entered’ and the former is preferred following the recitation of the Qur’anic verse [Q]:

وَنُدْخِلْكُمْ مَدْخَلًا كَرِيمًا

And We shall make them enter a noble abode.⁶

It is appropriate that the word should mean ‘made to enter’ as it is not possible to enter oneself, and it is Allāh who will make us enter by His Infinite Grace.

{Wash him with water, snow-water and ice} i.e. cleanse him from his sins by myriad forms of forgiveness, just as all these things are used to clean dirt [R, Q]. Water, snow and ice are mentioned repeatedly to emphasise cleansing – such that not a speck from his sins remain [H].

{Cleanse him from sins just as you have made a white cloth clean from dirt} a simile, where the tangible [dirt, spotless white cloth] is mentioned to explain the abstract [i.e. sins, purified]. Or the first phrase [washing with water and snow] refers to small sins [*ṣaghā’ir*] and the other phrase refers to enormities [*kabā’ir*]; or the first refers to the rights of Allāh and the other refers to the rights of creatures [Q]. Since the person has now died and cannot commit sin anymore, ‘cleanse him from sin’ means – cleanse him from the consequences of sins that he has committed in his worldly life [A].

{Transfer⁷ him} i.e. as a recompense [Q].

⁵ The first is with *ḍammah* and the second with *fat’hah*.

⁶ Sūrah Al-Nisā’a, 4:31.

⁷ *Abdil* = replace, substitute, change. For readability, I have used the synonyms as appropriate in the sentence.

{to a dwelling better than his [erstwhile] home, and [replace his] folks⁸ better than his folks in this world }': i.e., his servants [Q]. Transfer him to palaces in Paradise, or expand his grave.⁹ A better home than a home that is temporary and will eventually be ruined in this world [A].¹⁰

{and a spouse better than his [or her] spouse in this world} from the wide-eyed houris. This also includes his wives in this world and will not contradict the fact that women who enter paradise will be far superior than the houris, because they enter paradise as a reward for their prayer and fasting – moreover, *the Hereafter is better and everlasting*¹¹ [Q].

Suppose a dead man

- a) does not have a wife or
- b) a wife who will [eventually] be with him in Paradise

then how can this be a replacement or substitution?

The Answer to the first objection is that it includes both actual and hypothetical cases; i.e., grant him a wife better than his wife in this world, were he to marry.

The second answer is that it includes people and their attributes; thus, the woman who is/was his wife in this world and who will accompany him in Paradise – then make her better and superior than she were in this world; and so also in the case, if the deceased is a woman – and thus her husband will be ‘replaced with a better man’ – meaning AS a better man [H].

If the departed is a woman, then it is a prayer that she be with a man better than her husband in the present world – either actually [in case if the husband was not a Muslim] or by the outcome [i.e the husband is transformed into a better man and entered into Paradise].

{Make him enter Paradise} that is, the first step towards Paradise [Q], because no one will enter Paradise until Judgement day.

{and grant him refuge} It is permissible to pray for a sinner – even the worst kind of sinner, for it can be hoped that he will be forgiven.

{from the punishment in the grave – [or he said:] from the punishment in Hell fire} the doubt was on the part of the narrator who was not sure whether the litany mentioned punishment in the grave or Hell [Q]. It may also mean: ‘protect him from the tribulations that lay ahead’ or ‘protect him from being perplexed when the angels Munkar and Nakīr question him’ [R].

⁸ *Ahl* translates to household or family or folks or relatives.

⁹ These are matters of the unseen. Humans in this world will not be able to see this if they dig a grave – but in the realm of souls, the deceased person will have an expanded and comfortable place to rest.

¹⁰ This is self-evident. The palaces of kings and powerful emperors are no more than dilapidated ruins after their owners departed.

¹¹ Sūrah Al-Nisā’a, 4:77.

In another narration, a variant word is used: {give him refuge from the tribulation in the grave} – obviously, all trials and tribulations end if a person dies upon faith; hence this may be a prayer to protect him during the questioning by the two angels [H].

{He said:} that is, Āwḥ, the narrator of this ḥadīth [H].

{until I fervently wished that I were in place of that dead man}

I wished to be in the place of the deceased, so I would benefit from the prayers of the Prophet ﷺ as this *duʿāʾ* is comprehensive and nothing is omitted that one can wish for [H].

This proves that it is sunnah to pray for the deceased [R].

This ḥadīth has also been narrated by Nasāʾi and Tirmidhī.¹² Imām Bukhārī has said that this is the most authentic narration concerning litanies of the funeral [H, Q].



The phrase “cleanse with water and snow” is mentioned in an unrelated ḥadīth in Bukhārī,¹³ concerning which Imām Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī says:¹⁴

The simile “like dirt is washed away from a white cloth” is used because it is easy to discern dirt being cleansed from a white cloth compared to coloured clothes, as said by Ibn Daqīq al-ʿYīd.¹⁵

Khaṭṭābī¹⁶ has said: snow and ice are mentioned after water to reiterate the supplication for forgiveness, i.e. repeatedly asking for forgiveness; imploring forgiveness. Or it is because snow-water is not touched by hands, so it signifies a cleanser, purer than water; and metaphorically, a better cleanser should cleanse a denser dirt. [‘cleansing’ is also metaphorical here].

Ibn Daqīq has said that it denotes erasing immensely; because a cloth which is washed by three different cleansers will be the cleanest.

Ṭībī has also suggested that water, snow and ice are mentioned to indicate varying degrees of mercy and if one would consider fire to be extinguished, then water and snow and ice would douse it completely.

Some have said that it is a metaphorical way of saying: ‘cool his resting place’ or make his resting place comfortable and grant him deliverance from Fire.

¹² *Tirmidhī*, #1976; *Nasāʾi* #62 & #895 [*Muṣṭabā*].

The same ḥadīth is also reported with slight variance by the companion Āwḥ ibn Mālīk in *Musnad Imām Aḥmad*, #23432; *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, #810; *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, #3140; *Sunan al-Kubrā*, #6578, of Imām al-Bayhaqī.

¹³ *Bukhārī*, #744; *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, 2/641.

¹⁴ Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī [773-852 AH], ḥadīth grandmaster and Shāfiʿī jurist; author of *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, the most prominent commentary of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī.

¹⁵ Imām Abūʾl Fatḥ Taqīyuddīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn Daqīq al-ʿYīd [625-702 AH].

¹⁶ Imām Abū Sulaymān Ḥamd ibn Muḥammad al-Khaṭṭābī al-Bustī [d. 388 AH], among the earliest commentators of *Bukhārī*.

It is as if the Master equated sins with the fire of Hell – because sins are the reason one goes to Hell – and thus described that which douses such a fire [i.e. of sins] by water and snow. [End of citation from *Fat'h*].

It is obvious that ‘wash with snow’ is figurative and should not be taken literally. A similar phrase can be found in the Old Testament:

If I wash myself with **snow water**, and make my hands never so clean.¹⁷

Allāh táālā knows best.

والحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة والسلام على سيد الأنبياء والمرسلين وعلى آله الطيبين وصحبه المطهرين



¹⁷ The Book of Job 9:30, King James Version.