

Examining Judaism (7)

A news reporter was speaking about the differences between Jewish funerals and those of Muslims. Suicide bombers are considered heroes, their funerals are political events and the deceased is a martyr. Jewish funerals are sad occasions due to the high value they place on life. Death is the worst possible thing that can happen. Such were the words of the man on television.

In the Law of Moses, the body of a dead person was considered unclean. "He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean." (Numbers 19:1 1 12) This limited the contact people would have with a dead body. Our custom of displaying the deceased and after a number of days, having a funeral, was not the practice of the Jews. In the New Testament we read of Lazarus dying in John 11. They laid his body in a tomb and the family went to mourn. Jesus' body was prepared for burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus in John 19:38 42. He was anointed with myrrh and aloes, bound in strips of linen with spices and placed in a tomb.

We know the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, (Matthew 22:23). The Pharisees, who believed in the resurrection, knew very little about its nature. The Old Testament itself does not disclose much about life beyond the grave. Therefore, the Jews have little to go on, since they rejected Jesus and His teachings concerning the resurrection and heaven. "Unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism has no elaborate explanation of just what it is that the dead do. The whole area of life after death is left shrouded." (Being Jewish: The Spiritual and Cultural Practice of Judaism Today, page 87)

To the modern Jew, heaven is not the goal of life, but this world is the true purpose of creation. They quote Psalms 115:1 17, "The dead cannot praise the Lord." Ironically, Judaism has no explanation of what happens to the dead.

Jews have developed a number of traditions concerning funerals and bereavement. Upon death, the eyes of the departed are to be closed by a son or daughter. The deceased is not to be left alone until the burial. Family members will take turns watching over the body. This is not to be confused with a "wake" or funeral. Public viewing of the body is not permitted. Also not permitted are autopsies (allowed only if it could save another human life), medical research on the body, and cremation. The funeral is to be within one day. The only exception is when death occurs on Friday. Funerals are not permitted on Saturday, the Sabbath. The synagogue or graveside is where most funerals are conducted. At that time a special prayer called a Kaddish is recited. This prayer is not for the dead, but to praise God. "Official mourners" are limited to the father, mother, son, daughter, sister, brother, and spouse. These official mourners are supposed to take a week to "process their loss". During that time, they are not to work, shave, put on makeup, or do a number of other things. Many families cannot afford to lose a whole week of work so they may mourn only two or three days.

Different societies have developed their own customs concerning death. In India, cremation is normal. It really does not matter how the body is treated after death, the soul belongs to God. (Ecclesiastes 12:7) Jesus, in Luke 16, tells us that Lazarus and the rich man were both aware of their condition. In John 6:28 29, we are told all who are in the graves will be resurrected. 2 Corinthians 5:10 teaches that everyone will appear before the judgment seat of God and give an account for the deeds done in this life. 1 Thessalonians 4:14 17 speaks of those in the graves being raised first to meet the Lord in the air. Our best understanding of

death and the resurrection comes from these and other passages in the New Testament.

Sadly, the Jews during Jesus' time rejected Him as their Messiah due to placing too much emphasis on the physical and not enough on the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God. Today, many reject the teachings of Christ for exactly the same reason. (This concludes our study of Jewish customs.) -- Dennis Tucker