

The Rightly Guided Caliphs: Umar ibn Al-Khattab (part 1 of 2)

Description: A short biography of Prophet Muhammad's companion, friend and the second Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam.

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Objective:

- To learn about the life of Umar ibn Al-Khattab and understand his importance in the history of Islam.

Arabic Terms:

- *Khalifah* (plural: *Khulafa'*) " Caliph. Sometimes spelled Khalif. He is the chief Muslim religious and civil ruler, regarded as the successor of Prophet Muhammad. A Caliph is not a monarch.
- *Ummah* - Refers to the whole Muslim community, irrespective of color, race, language or nationality.
- *Kabah* - The cube-shaped structure located in the city of Mecca. It serves as a focal point towards which all Muslims face when praying.
- *Rashidun* " Those who are rightly guided. More specifically, a collective term to refer to the first four Caliphs.
- *Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.

The second of the Rightly Guided Caliphs (*Al-Khulafa' Ar- Rashidun*) was Umar ibn Al-Khattab. He was also the first man to take the title of Commander of the Faithful. Umar assumed leadership of the *Ummah* after the death of Abu Bakr. The year was 634 CE and Umar ruled for approximately 10 years.



Umar was born into a middle class family approximately 11 years after the birth of Prophet Muhammad. He had what we would call a harsh upbringing, his father would beat

him when he thought it necessary and at times worked his son to the point of exhaustion. Despite this Umar was literate, an uncommon skill in pre-Islamic Arabia, and grew into a tall, well-built, muscular man known for his fierce demeanour and wrestling skills.

As Umar grew into manhood he supplemented the meagre income he earned from shepherding for his father and aunts, by engaging in wrestling competitions. His skill increased and so too did his business acumen. By the time Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, began openly calling people to Islam Umar was a successful trader and businessman.

Umar's path to the truth began with an intense hatred of Islam. Umar was one of the men in Mecca that considered Islam to be an obstacle to economic growth and stability, thus he used his immense strength and influence to ridicule the new religion and he openly took part in the abuse and torture of some of the weaker converts to Islam. Umar's hatred for Islam was so strong that he volunteered to kill Prophet Muhammad and thus put an end to the changes taking place in Mecca.

The complete story of Umar's conversion to Islam can be found on many websites.^[1] However for the sake of brevity we can say that Allah prevented him from killing Prophet Muhammad and instead seized his heart through the beautiful sound of Quran being recited. When Umar pronounced his intention to murder Prophet Muhammad a young believer tried to divert him by revealing that Umar's own dear sister and her husband had converted to Islam. It had the desired effect and Umar changed course. Umar was so incensed by the turn of affairs that he lashed out at his sister and caused her great harm, even drawing blood, a melee ensued however after some minutes Umar realised how he had nearly hurt his sister and calmed down. He asked to hear the parts of the Quran his sister had been reciting before he had stormed into their house.

Umar's eyes filled with tears of remorse and joy and he rushed to Prophet Muhammad declaring his love for Islam and Allah's Messenger. Within days Umar led a procession of believers to the *Kabah* where they prayed openly. Islam was strengthened by Umar; his fierce hatred became love and he declared that his life and his death now belonged to Allah and His Messenger, Muhammad. The first two *Rashidun*, Abu Bakr and Umar ibn Al-Khattab became close friends and they were the two companions closest to Prophet Muhammad. Ali ibn Abi Talib is reported to have said that Prophet Muhammad went out in the morning with Abu Bakr and Umar and he would return at night with Abu Bakr and Umar.

Umar ibn Al-Khattab was a pious and generous man. He would often spend the nights in worship, and he was a staunch believer in Allah's promise of Paradise. Umar readily spent his wealth for the sake of Allah and to benefit the believers. Umar once distributed 22,000 dirhams to the needy and had a habit of giving away bags of sugar. When Umar was asked why he distributed the sugar he said, 'Because I love it and God said, 'By no means shall you attain piety, unless you spend (in God's Cause) of that which you love; and whatever of good you spend, God knows it well.' (Quran 3:92)''

Umar was the best in righteousness after Prophets and Abu Bakr. Prophet Muhammad said, "Follow the example of the two who come after me, Abu Bakr and Umar."^[2] The *Sunnah* is filled with examples of the virtues of Umar ibn Al-Khattab including this profound and significant statement from Prophet Muhammad. "Among the nations who came before you some were inspired; if anyone from among my *Ummah* were to be inspired it would be Umar."^[3]

Umar loved Prophet Muhammad so much that he was determined to stay close to him during all the battles the Muslim armies took part in. It is understood that Umar was present at the first battle, the battle of Badr and all the other battles at which the Messenger of Allah was present. Umar was a great man and a great leader; in fact his faith, knowledge, intellect, attitude and influence were all exceptional and all based on his strong relationship with Allah and His Messenger.

When Prophet Muhammad died the entire *Ummah* went into a deep state of shock. None more than Umar, he found himself feeling lost and out of control, even refusing to believe Prophet Muhammad had now passed away. Abu Bakr had to take matters into his own hands and call the people away from Umar. In his famous address he (Abu Bakr) said, "Whoever amongst you worshipped Muhammad, know that Muhammad is dead, but whoever worshipped Allah, know that Allah is alive and will never die." He then recited **Quran 3:144** saying, **"Muhammad is no more than a Messenger and indeed (many) Messengers have passed away before him. If he dies or is killed, will you then turn back on your heels (as disbelievers)? And he who turns back on his heels, not the least harm will he do to Allah; and Allah will give reward to those who are grateful."** The people were overcome, as if they had never heard this verse before, which of course they had. They all in their grief started reciting it. Umar said that on hearing Abu Bakr recite he began to feel dizzy and fell to the ground. He then understood that Prophet Muhammad was dead.

When Abu Bakr became the first of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, Umar hastened to swear allegiance to him and to encourage others to do so he took his oath of allegiance publicly. Little did Umar ibn Al-Khattab know that in just over two years he would be standing in front of the *Ummah* as the second Caliph.

Continued in Part 2

Endnotes:

^[1] <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/2100/viewall/>

^[2] *At Tirmidhi*

^[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

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