

The Rightly Guided Caliphs: Ali ibn Abi Talib (part 1 of 2)

Description: A short biography of Prophet Muhammad's companion, cousin and son-in-law, and the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam. We will also have a brief look at some of Ali's achievements and challenges.

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Category: Lessons > [Prophet Muhammad](#) > [His Companions](#)

Objective:

- To learn about the life of Ali ibn Abi Talib 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.
- *Rashidun* " Those who are rightly guided. More specifically, a collective term to refer to the first four Caliphs.
- *Hijrah* - the act of migration from one place to another. In Islam, the *Hijrah* refers to the Muslims migrating from Mecca to Medina and also marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Ali ibn Abi Talib is the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam, the fourth of the *Rashidun*. He ruled the Muslim *Ummah*, after Abu Bakr, Umar ibn Al-Khattab and Uthman, from 656 to 661 CE. Ali spent his childhood emulating the noble character of his beloved cousin Muhammad, and his youth learning the details of Islam. Ali grew into a noble warrior with a humble heart and he is remembered for his courage, honesty, generosity, kindness and devotion to Islam.



Ali was the son Abu Talib, Prophet Muhammad's uncle and guardian. When Ali was

small a great famine ravaged Mecca and its surrounds and Abu Talib was unable to feed and clothe his family. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, and his wife Khadijah offered to take in Ali and care for him. As a direct consequence of this Ali and Muhammad became very close and Ali tried his best to emulate his cousin's behaviour and noble character. Ali was around 10 years old when Prophet Muhammad received the first revelations. He was also present in the home when Muhammad revealed to his family that he had been called upon to be the Messenger of Allah. Thus Ali accepted the truth of Islam at a very early age and his dedication and support of his uncle was unquestionable.

The history of Islam is strewn with examples of Ali's commitment to the cause of Islam and to Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him. When Prophet Muhammad called a meeting of his tribesman to explain the new faith and his position in it he asked pointedly who would support him. When all those present grew quiet, Ali, even though he was a young boy, stood up and pledged his support. When the Meccan leaders were planning to assassinate Prophet Muhammad, the Muslims decided to leave and make *hijrah* to Yathrib (soon to be renamed Medina). Muhammad, Abu Bakr and Ali were the only ones who were left behind. While Prophet Muhammad and Abu Bakr walked into the desert night Ali slept in the Prophet's bed waiting to confront the assassins. Ali survived the night, and in the coming days, he returned the valuables that had been left in trust with Prophet Muhammad, to their rightful owners. Soon after completing his mission Ali joined the Muslims in Yathrib.

Like Uthman, Ali was also the son-in-law of the Prophet. He married Fatimah, Prophet Muhammad's youngest daughter. Ali and Fatimah lived very humble austere lives but sometimes life was just too difficult. Many times they were hungry and overworked but even then their generosity continued. There were times when they gave away the last of their food in order to help someone even poorer than themselves. At one time when the young couple approached Prophet Muhammad asking for a servant he rebuked for asking for luxuries when poor people filled the mosque. The same evening Prophet Muhammad visited Ali and Fatimah in their home and taught them words of the remembrance of Allah. He assured them that remembering Allah would be more beneficial than a servant to ease their workload. Ali never forgot the words of advice given to him that night, and said that not a night passed that he did not recite those words before sleeping.

Ali and Fatimah's marriage lasted ten years until Fatimah's death. During that time they had four children and their sons Hasan and Husayn were particularly close to Prophet Muhammad. Although polygamy was permitted, Ali did not marry another woman while Fatimah was alive, and their marriage is looked upon as something special. They were both well loved by Prophet Muhammad and by each other. After Fatimah's death, Ali married other wives and fathered many children.

Ali has been described as one of the most virtuous of Prophet Muhammad's companions and he was known to be one of the staunchest supporters of Islam. Ali became a strong warrior and distinguished himself in the crucial first battle against the Meccans, known as the Battle of Badr. Prophet Muhammad bestowed upon Ali the

nickname 'Lion of Allah'. It is reported in the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad that during the battle of Khaybar, the Prophet bestowed a great honour on his young cousin. The night before the battle Prophet Muhammad informed his companions that the flag would be given to 'a man who loves Allah and His Messenger and is also loved by Allah and His Messenger, he does not flee the battlefield, and Allah will bring about victory through him'. The companions spent the night wondering who the flag would be handed too. Every companion hoped for this honour, but this particular time the honour belonged to Ali.

After Prophet Muhammad died and Abu Bakr was elected *khalifah*, Ali retired from public life and dedicated himself to studying and teaching the Quran. He was consulted on matters of state by both Abu Bakr and Umar ibn Al-Khattab and gave one of his daughters, Umm Kulthum, to Umar in marriage. When Uthman ibn Affan was murdered in the service of the Muslim *Ummah*, Ali was chosen as the fourth of those men known as the Rightly Guided Caliphs of Islam.

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