

The Rightly Guided Caliphs: Ali ibn Abi Talib (part 2 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 challenges.

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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.
- *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.
- *Ummah* - Refers to the whole Muslim community, irrespective of color, race, language or nationality.

Ali ibn Abi Talib was the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph of Islam. The cousin and son-in-law of Prophet. After the assassination of Uthman ibn Affan many Muslims were eager for Ali to take on the leadership but Ali was concerned that the seeds of rebelliousness were being sewn among the believers. He hesitated until some of those who had been closest to Prophet Muhammad encouraged him and gave him their support. The events surrounding Uthman's murder catapulted the fledgling *Ummah* into a period that became known as the "time of tribulation". Sadly Ali began and ended his caliphate in treacherous times.



Ali accepted the caliphate very reluctantly and moved the capital of the fledgling Muslim *Ummah* from Medina to Kufa in present day Iraq. He felt that the civil strife surrounding the assassination of Uthman was due in part to the ineptitude of the governors thus he recalled all the governors appointed by Uthman and appointed new ones, whom Ali felt would administrate their provinces better. Muawiyah, Uthman's nephew and governor of the Greater Syria Area, refused to step down until Uthman's murderers were brought to justice.

One of Prophet Muhammad's widows Aisha, also believed that Uthman's murderers should be brought to trial. However because of the chaos during the last days of Uthman's rule it was difficult to complete this task as it may have brought about more strife.

Despite his best efforts to bring an end to the strife that had beset the *Ummah*, Ali was unable to unify all the bickering and warring factions and in 657 CE Muawiyah's refusal to step down from the governorship of Syria resulted in military action. Muawiyah's and Ali's forces met at the Battle of Siffin. This was actually a series of skirmishes and negotiations that took place between May and July 657 CE and ended finally in the arbitration of Adhurh.

At first Ali and his forces appeared to be winning but then both sides resolved to stop the bloodshed and appoint a judge to decide which party was upon the truth. A small number of men, who became known as the Kharwarij^[1], refused this arbitration, and then waged war against Ali, may Allah be pleased with him. Ali would spend the next two years in a campaign against the Kharwarij until he was assassinated by one of them. After his assassination, his son Al-Hasan, may Allah be pleased with him, became the rightful Caliph over the *Ummah*. In this regard, the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, said: "Indeed this son of mine (i.e. Al-Hasan) is a graceful individual; it is through him that Allah shall unite two large parties of the *Ummah*." True to this narration, when Al-Hasan witnessed the strife and bickering he called Muawiyah to arbitration and willingly stepped down for him, thus uniting the Muslim *Ummah*. This event took place in the year 41 Hijri, which is known as the 'year of congregation'.

Throughout his trials and tribulations Ali remained noble, courageous, and generous. Even in those perilous times, he forgave his enemies and strove continuously for a united *Ummah*.

The Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, stated: "Caliphate after me shall last for 30 years." Indeed, the period of Abu Bakr's caliphate, along with that of Umar, Uthman, Ali and Al-Hasan, adds up to be exactly 30 years.

Endnotes:

^[1] Literally in Arabic *those who went out*. They were the first doctrinal innovators in Islam. Originally a group of up to 20,000 men who deserted Ali and rejected his caliphate when he agreed to arbitration with Muawiyah.

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