

The Story of ‘Abdur-Rahman ibn ‘Awf

Abdur-Rahman ibn Awf was born around 580 CE and lived for about 75 years. He was born into a family in the Banu Zuhura clan, part of the tribe of Quraish. The mother of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, Aminah, was also from this clan thus genealogists tell us that Abdur-Rahman was a fourth cousin to Prophet Muhammad. When Abdur-Rahman died he left an inheritance of what would today amount to over six million British pounds, and he is often remembered because of this great wealth. However, although he was a hugely successful businessman, he did not let his wealth control him. Abdur-Rahman was motivated by his love of God, His Messenger Prophet Muhammad, and the religion of Islam, and thus he used his wealth wisely assuring that it would benefit Islam and that God would be pleased with his efforts.

Abdur-Rahman was one of the close companions of Prophet Muhammad and his life story is certainly one worth studying and emulating. He was one of the first eight people to accept Islam.[1] He was one of the first five people to embrace Islam at the urging of Abu Bakr, only two days after Abu Bakr himself accepted Islam. Abdur-Rahman is one of the ten men given the glad tidings of Paradise from Prophet Muhammad himself.[2] And his remarkable character continued to inspire those around him even after Prophet Muhammad’s death. He was one of the first three people to pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr when he became the leader of the Muslim nation and one of six people chosen by Umar ibn al-Khattab to be in the shura council to choose the leader after his death.

Little is known of Abdur-Rahman's early life. He was born approximately ten years after Prophet Muhammad, and we know that his family was not poor. At the time of his conversion to Islam he was a trader, travelling regularly to Yemen. Perhaps even then he had established the skills he needed to acquire his great wealth. It was whilst travelling in Yemen that Abdur-Rahman met an old man who spoke to him about a prophecy predicting the rise of a man calling to the end of idolatry. Thus, when he returned to Mecca and heard Abu Bakr talking about Muhammad's claim to prophethood he converted immediately.

This was a time when very few people knew about the new religion, and the famous House of Arqam, where Prophet Muhammad taught a secret group of believers, had not yet been established. Thus Abdur-Rahman had his faith honed and polished from the very beginning, and it was at this time that Prophet Muhammad changed his name from Abdu Amru, a name representative of idolatry, to Abdur-Rahman meaning slave of the Most Gracious. Abdur-Rahman has been described as light skinned, tall, with lots of hair that he tied at the back of his head in a knot, as was the custom of the time.

Although an established trader Abdur-Rahman also suffered under the severe persecution the Meccan elite imposed upon the early believers. Thus, when Prophet Muhammad sent a group of people to seek refuge in Abyssinia Abdur-Rahman was among them. After hearing the news that life in Mecca had begun to improve Abdur-Rahman returned to Mecca to find the persecution and oppression was ongoing, thus he was among the believers that migrated to Madina. Most had to stealthily and quickly leave Mecca and Abdur-Rahman, like many others, left with only the clothes on his back and what he could carry easily.

Once in Madinah, Prophet Muhammad set about uniting the two groups of Muslims, those who emigrated and those who were residents of Madinah. He paired them up, a man from Mecca with a man from Madinah, and they became as close as blood brothers. They shared everything, and since those in Madinah had more of everything they became known as the Helpers. Abdur-Rahman was paired with Saad ibn Ar-Rabi. Saad was a very wealthy man and even offered Abdur-Rahman half his business empire that included successful orchards. Abdur-Rahman thanked him and supplicated for him profusely but did not accept. Instead he asked to be directed to the marketplace.[3] Within a very short space of time Abdur-Rahman had established himself as a successful business entrepreneur and is known to have said that if he picked up a rock it would not have surprised him to find gold or silver.

Abdur-Rahman was soon an extraordinarily wealthy man. However, he did not let the wealth corrupt him. Due to his closeness to Prophet Muhammad Abdur-Rahman's understanding of Islam was very profound. He was generous to a fault and knew that by giving away his wealth he was pleasing God and multiplying his riches. By following the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, he helped people secretly and openly. He knew his entrepreneurial skills were gifts from God and it made him happy to be able to share his wealth.

He is known to have given 2000 dinars to subsidize an expeditionary force, and at many other times, for the sake of God and for the benefit of Islam, he gave freely. He used his wealth at different times for different purposes; examples of his generosity include donating 400 ounces of gold, 500 camels and 500 horses. He also

freed groups of slaves and donated 400 dinars each to the survivors of the Battle of Badr. Abdur-Rahman did not neglect his other duties because of his businesses. He participated in all the battles and skirmishes and was one of the men severely wounded at Uhud, after which he forever walked with a limp.[4] The last battle that Prophet Muhammad took part in was at Tabuk and it was there that Abdur-Rahman was given an honor never before bestowed upon anyone else. It was the time for prayer and Prophet Muhammad was not there so the believers chose Abdur-Rahman to lead them. During the prayer Prophet Muhammad arrived and took a position behind Abdur-Rahman.

After Prophet Muhammad died Abdur-Rahman continued to amass wealth and took it upon himself to look after the Mothers of the Believers (the widows of Prophet Muhammad). He provided for their living expenses, financed their pilgrimages to Mecca and left an orchard worth 400,000 dinars to be distributed amongst them.[5] At the end of his life, even though he had been given the good news of Paradise, Abdur-Rahman wept worried that he had been given his reward in this life rather than in the next. He was a generous and selfless man dedicated to God, Prophet Muhammad and Islam, and was constantly aware that wealth, not properly utilized, could easily lead to corruption and an eternal downfall.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Seerah of Mohammad by Ibn Ishaq.

[2]At-Tirmidhi.

[3]Saheeh Bukhari.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

Source:

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