

THE **F1RST**S

A Lecture Series

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INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

Bilal Ibn Rabah

The Voice of Certainty

The story of Bilal ibn Rabah (ra) is poetic and is well-known among Muslims. Bilal is known for his struggle as he embraced Islam. He was one of other black companions but he more importantly, also overcame many challenges in his lifetime. The message of Islam resonated with the downtrodden and the slaves of the time. He brings together two different surahs, Surah Al-Feel (when he became a slave) and Surah Al-Nasr (upon returning to Mecca victoriously and making the athan atop the Kaaba).

A Slave, a Son of Slaves

His mother was an Abyssinian princess who was taken into slavery by Abraha's army and she was married to Ibn Rabah, a black Arab slave. He was born 10 years after the year of the Elephant (580), a decade younger than Prophet Mohammad ﷺ.

Bilal (ra) was an extremely pleasant, very handsome man with a strong appearance. He was very dark, had hazel eyes, a lot of hair, and he had a light beard. He maintained a youthful appearance all his life.

He never had children. "O son of a black woman" was used to put him down even though she was a princess and his father was a black Arab.

Immediate Submission

The message of Islam was attractive to him because both of his parents were enslaved. He witnessed his mother being beaten. He understood that the way to rise is to have special abilities. His intelligence and strength raised his status among other slaves.

He embraced Islam upon hearing about it immediately. He heard about it as Ummaya, his master was complaining about Prophet Mohammad ﷺ. The message resonated with him right away because of its focus on justice and message of tawheed. If you acknowledge the oneness of God, it puts all of humanity on a singular plane. He kept repeating it over and over again, "Ahad, Ahad - [One, One]".

Enduring Unbearable Torture

Ummaya placed hot coals on him, deprived him of water in the heat and beat him until he was unconscious. He told him to just say the idols names to stop the torture but Bilal (ra) refused time and time again, responding only by saying “one, one”.

He took Bilal (ra) to the gangs of Taif and told them to attack him in whatever ways they wanted. Bilal still did not give up. He was dragged through the streets of Mecca and streaks of his blood stained the pathways.

The torture went on for a very long time. Bilal (ra) never showed his pain, he completely sacrificed himself for Allah. The final torture was a big boulder on his chest while he was chained in the hot sun. Ummaya realized that he wasn’t able to break Bilal’s will and he wanted to get something for him while he was still alive. Abu Bakr (ra) repeatedly asked Ummaya to sell him Bilal and he eventually freed him. Bilal was worth so much to Abu Bakr (ra) while he was not given any value by Ummaya.

A Very Special Companion

He was a special companion of the Prophet Mohammad ﷺ and he has a lot of honor. He became known as “our master who was freed by our master.” Umar (ra) would later ask him why he only said “one, one” while he was being tortured and he told him that’s all he knew about Allah and if he knew more he would have said it.

Bilal witnessed every battle and journey and was always by the side of Prophet Mohammad ﷺ. He was the gatekeeper to Prophet Mohammad ﷺ and was beloved to him as his confidant. He was very trusted as the first treasurer for the Muslims.

The First to Make the Call to Prayer

Abdullah ibn Zayd (ra) had a dream about the call to prayer. Umar ibn Khattab (ra) had the very same dream. Prophet Mohammad ﷺ appointed Bilal to say the call to prayer. Prophet Mohammad ﷺ felt that Bilal (ra) deserved to do it; not to make a statement about racial equality, but because Bilal was already proclaiming the oneness of Allah while he was being tortured.

Before every call to prayer, he asked permission of Prophet Mohammad ﷺ first who then replied, “comfort us with the call to prayer, Bilal.” One time after he called the athan, Prophet Mohammad ﷺ said “whoever says these words with certainty will enter Paradise.”

Justice Served

Badr was a defining moment for Bilal (ra). Ummaya tried not to fight in battles and tried not to go to the Battle of Badr. After arriving, he tried to get out of it by making a deal with Abd el Rahman ibn Awf. Upon seeing him, Bilal wanted to kill him, to get revenge for all the torture he got by his hand. Bilal finally got justice and killed Ummaya.

The conquest of Mecca was the day of Bilal (ra). He entered the kaaba with Prophet Mohammad ﷺ and destroyed all the idols. Prophet Mohammad ﷺ asked him to climb on top of the Kaaba to make the call to prayer. He was the first and only man to ever do that.

Dealing With Great Loss

Bilal's life revolved around the Prophet Mohammad ﷺ, so naturally, his death was extremely hard on him. As he was passing away, Bilal (ra) witnessed his pain and said, "Oh what grief I'm in, if only I had died before this." Bilal stayed firm on the message after the passing of Prophet Mohammad ﷺ, but doing every call to prayer was extremely difficult without asking Prophet Mohammad ﷺ first and not seeing him come to prayer towards the end of the call as he always did. He couldn't complete the call to prayer and wept often. He said that he will never call for prayer again after the loss of Prophet Mohammad ﷺ. He told Abu Bakr (ra), "if you freed me for Allah, let me go anywhere I want." He found it difficult to remain in Medina because there were reminders of the Messenger everywhere he went and everything he did. He went to Sham to battle the Romans. He saw Umar (ra) during the conquest of Jerusalem and after many requests he made the call to prayer at Masjid Al-Aqsa. He was the first muadhin (one who calls prayer) at all three masajid, Mecca, Medina and Al-Aqsa.

Bilal (ra) died during the plague of 639. As he was on his deathbed, his wife said, "what a day of grief," but he told her to instead say what a great day because he would finally meet his beloved Prophet Mohammad ﷺ who he missed greatly.

Lessons Learned

- We should all have the same *yaqeen* (certainty) when saying the words of the athan (call to prayer) as Bilal (ra) did.
- *Ahad, Ahad* - One, One was the only thing that Bilal knew about Allah and it was enough for him because it displayed his total conviction about the Oneness of God. It's not about the different names and deep knowledge of Allah and Islam but about true conviction and dedication.

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