

## **Abdullah ibn Masud**

When he was still a youth, not yet past the age of puberty, he used to roam the mountain trails of Makkah far away from people, tending the flocks of a Quraysh chieftain, Uqbah ibn Muayt. People called him "Ibn Umm Abd"--the son of the mother of a slave. His real name was Abdullah and his father's name was Masud.

The youth had heard the news of the Prophet who had appeared among his people but he did not attach any importance to it both because of his age and because he was usually far away from Makkan society. It was his custom to leave with the flock of Uqbah early in the morning and not return until nightfall.

One day while tending the flocks, Abdullah saw two men, middle-aged and of dignified bearing, coming towards him from a distance. They were obviously very tired. They were also so thirsty that their lips and throat were quite dry. They came up to him, greeted him and said, "Young man, milk one of these sheep for us that we may quench our thirst and recover our strength."

"I cannot," replied the young man. "The sheep are not mine. I am only responsible for looking after them."

The two men did not argue with him. In fact, although they were so thirsty, they were extremely pleased at the honest reply. The pleasure showed on their faces . . .

The two men in fact were the blessed Prophet himself and his companion, Abu Bakr Siddiq. They had gone out on that day to the mountains of Makkah to escape the violent persecution of the Quraysh.

The young man in turn was impressed with the Prophet and his companion and soon became quite attached to them.

It was not long before Abdullah ibn Masud became a Muslim and offered to be in the service of the Prophet. The Prophet agreed and from that day the fortunate Abdullah ibn Masud gave up tending sheep in exchange for looking after the needs of the blessed Prophet.

Abdullah ibn Masud remained closely attached to the Prophet. He would attend to his needs both inside and outside the house. He would accompany him on journeys and expeditions. He would wake him when he slept. He would shield him when he washed. He would carry his staff and his siwak (toothbrush) and attend to his other personal needs .

Abdullah ibn Masud received a unique training in the household of the Prophet. He was under the guidance of the Prophet, he adopted his manner and followed his every trait until it was said of him, "He was the closest to the Prophet in character."

Abdullah was taught in the 'school' of the Prophet. He was the best reciter of the Quran among the companions and he understood it better than them all. He was therefore the most knowledgeable on the Shariah. Nothing can illustrate this better than the story of the man who came to Umar ibn al-Khattab as he was standing on the plain of Arafat and said:

"I have come, O Amir al-Mumineen, from Kufah where I left a man filling copies of the Quran from memory." Umar became very angry and paced up and down beside his camel, fuming. "Who is he?" he asked. "Abdullah ibn Masud," replied the man. Umar's anger subsided and he regained his composure. "Woe to you," he said to the man. "By God, I don't know of any person left who is more qualified in this matter than he is. Let me tell you about this." Umar continued: "One night the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, was having a conversation with Abu Bakr about the situation of Muslims. I was with them.

When the Prophet left, we left with him also and as we passed through the mosque, there was a man standing in Prayer whom we did not recognize. The Prophet stood and listened to him, then turned to us and said, 'Whoever wants to read the Quran as fresh as when it was revealed, then let him read according to the recitation of Ibn Umm Abd.'

After the Prayer, as Abdullah sat making supplications, the Prophet, peace be on him, said, "Ask and it will be given to you. Ask and it will be given to you." Umar continued: "I said to myself, I shall go to Abdullah ibn Masud straight away and tell him the good news of the Prophet's ensuring acceptance of his supplications. I went and did so but found that Abu Bakr had gone before me and conveyed the good news to him. By God, I have never yet beaten Abu Bakr in the doing of any good."

Abdullah ibn Masud attained such a knowledge of the Quran that he would say, "By Him besides Whom there is no god, no verse of the book of God has been revealed without my knowing where it was revealed and the circumstances of its revelation. By God, if I know there was anyone who knew more of the Book of Allah, I will do whatever is in my power to be with him."

Abdullah was not exaggerating in what he said about himself. Once Umar ibn al-Khattab met a caravan on one of his journeys as caliph. It was pitch dark and the caravan could not be seen properly. Umar ordered someone to hail the caravan. It happened that Abdullah ibn Masud was in it.

"From where do you come?" asked Umar.

"From a deep valley," came the reply. (The expression used faji amiq deep valley--is a Quranic one).

"And where are you going?" asked Umar.

"To the ancient house," came the reply. (The expression used al-bayt al-atiq ancient house, is a Quranic one.)

"There is a learned person (alim) among them," said Umar and he commanded someone to ask the person:

"Which part of the Quran is the greatest?"

"God. There is no god except Him, the Living, the Self-subsisting. Neither slumber overtakes Him nor sleep," replied the person answering, quoting the Ayat al-Kursi (the verse of the Throne).

"Which part of the Quran is the most clear on justice?"

"God commands what is just and fair the feeding of relatives..." came the answer.

"What is the most comprehensive statement of the Quran?"

"Whoever does an atom's weight of good shall see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil shall see it."

"Which part of the Quran gives rise to the greatest hope?"

"Say, O my servants who have wasted their resources, do not despair of the mercy of God. Indeed, God forgives all sins. He is the Forgiving, the Compassionate."

Thereupon Umar asked:

"Is Abdullah ibn Masud among you?"

"Yes, by God," the men in the caravan replied.

Abdullah ibn Masud was not only a reciter of the Quran, a learned man or a fervent worshipper. He was in addition a strong and courageous fighter, one who became deadly serious when the occasion demanded it.

The companions of the Prophet were together one day in Makkah. They were still few in number. weak and oppressed. They said, "The Quraysh have not yet heard the Quran being recited openly and loudly. Who is the man who could recite it for them?"

"I shall recite it from them," volunteered Abdullah ibn Masud . "We are afraid for you," they said. "We only want someone who has a clan who would protect him from their evil . "

"Let me," Abdullah ibn Masud insisted, "Allah shall protect me and keep me away from their evil." He then went out to the mosque until he reached Maqam Ibrahim (a few meters from the Kabah). It was dawn and the Quraysh were sitting around the Kabah. Abdullah stopped at the Maqam and began to recite:

"Bismillah irRahma nirRahim. Ar-Rahman. Allama-l Quran. Khalaqal insan. Allamahul bayan... (In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. The Merciful God. He has taught the Quran. He has created man and taught him the clear truth...)"

He went on reciting. The Quraysh looked at him intently and some of them asked: "What is Ibn Umm Abd saying?" "Damn him! He is reciting some of what Muhammad brought!" they realized.

They went up to him and began beating his face as he continued reciting. When he went back to his companions the blood was flowing from his face.

"This is what we feared for you," they said. "By God," replied Abdullah, "the enemies of God are not more comfortable than I at this moment. If you wish. I shall go out tomorrow and do the same." "You have done enough," they said. "You have made them hear what they dislike."

Abdullah ibn Masud lived to the time of Khalifah Uthman, may God be pleased with him. When he was sick and on his death-bed, Uthman came to visit him and said:

"What is your ailment?"

"My sins."

"And what do you desire?"

"The mercy of my Lord."

"Shall I not give you your stipend which you have refused to take for years now?"

"I have no need of it."

"Let it be for your daughters after you."

"Do you fear poverty for my children? I have commanded them to read Surah al-Waqiah every night for I have heard the Prophet saying, "Whoever reads Al-Waqiah every night shall not be afflicted by poverty ever."

That night, Abdullah passed away to the company of his Lord, his tongue moist with the remembrance of God and with the recitation of the verses of His Book.

[View Page](#)

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