

Abu Dharr al-Ghifari

In the Waddan valley which connects Makkah with the outside world, lived the tribe of Ghifar. The Ghifar existed on the meagre offerings of the trade caravans of the Quraysh which plied between Syria and Makkah. It is likely that they also lived by raiding these caravans when they were not given enough to satisfy their needs.

Jundub ibn Junadah, nicknamed Abu Dharr, was a member of this tribe.

He was known for his courage, his calmness and his far sightedness and also for the repugnance he felt against the idols which his people worshipped. He rejected the silly religious beliefs and the religious corruption in which the Arabs were engaged.

While he was in the Waddan desert, news reached Abu Dharr that a new Prophet had appeared in Makkah. He really hoped that his appearance would help to change the hearts and minds of people and lead them away from the darkness of superstition. Without wasting much time, he called his brother, Anis, and said to him,

"Go to Makkah and get whatever news you can of this man who claims that he is a Prophet and that revelation comes to him from the heavens. Listen to some of his sayings and come back and recite them to me."

Anis went to Makkah and met the Prophet, peace and blessings of God be on him. He listened to what he had to say and returned to the Waddan desert. Abu Dharr met him and anxiously asked for news of the Prophet.

"I have seen a man," reported Anis, "who calls people to noble qualities and there is no mere poetry in what he says."

"What do people say about him?" asked Abu Dharr.

"They say he is a magician, a soothsayer and a poet."

"My curiosity is not satisfied. I am not finished with this matter. Will you look after my family while I go out and examine this prophet's mission myself?"

"Yes. But beware of the Makkans."

On his arrival at Makkah, Abu Dharr immediately felt very apprehensive and he decided to exercise great caution. The Quraysh were noticeably angry over the denunciation of their gods. Abu Dharr heard of the terrible violence they were meting out to the followers of the Prophet but this was what he expected. He therefore refrained from asking anyone about Muhammad not knowing whether that person might be a follower or an enemy.

At nightfall, he lay down in the Sacred Mosque. 'Ali ibn abi Talib passed by him and, realising that he was a stranger, asked him to come to his house. Abu Dharr spent the night with him and in the morning took his water pouch and his bag containing provisions and returned to the Mosque. He had asked no questions and no questions were asked of him.

Abu Dharr spent the following day without getting to know the Prophet. At evening he went to the Mosque to sleep and Ali again passed by him and said,

"Isn't it time that a man knows his house?"

Abu Dharr accompanied him and stayed at his house a second night. Again no one asked the other about anything.

On the third night, however, Ali asked him, "Aren't you going to tell me why you came to Makkah?"

"Only if you will give me an undertaking that you will guide me to what I seek."

Ali agreed and Abu Dharr said:

"I came to Makkah from a distant place seeking a meeting with the new Prophet and to listen to some of what he has to say."

Ali's face lit up with happiness as he said, "By God, he is really the Messenger of God," and he went on telling Abu Dharr more about the Prophet and his teaching. Finally, he said:

"When we get up in the morning, follow me wherever I go. If I see anything which I am afraid of for your sake, I would stop as if to pass water. If I continue, follow me until you enter where I enter."

Abu Dharr did not sleep a wink the rest of that night because of his intense longing to see the Prophet and listen to the words of revelation. In the morning, he followed closely in Ali's footsteps until they were in the presence of the Prophet.

"As-salamu 'alayka ya Rasoolullah, (Peace be on you, O Messenger of God)," greeted Abu Dharr.

"Wa 'alayka salamullahi wa rahmatuhu wa barakatuhu (And on you be the peace of God, His mercy and His blessings)," replied the Prophet.

Abu Dharr was thus the first person to greet the Prophet with the greeting of Islam. After that, the greeting spread and came into general use.

The Prophet, peace be on him, welcomed Abu Dharr and invited him to Islam. He recited some of the Qur'an for him. Before long, Abu Dharr pronounced the Shahadah, thus entering the new religion (without even leaving his place). He was among the first persons to accept Islam.

Let us leave Abu Dharr to continue his own story...

After that I stayed with the Prophet in Makkah and he taught me Islam and taught me to read the Qur'an. Then he said to me, "Don't tell anyone in Makkah about your acceptance of Islam. I fear that they will kill you."

"By Him in whose hands is my soul, I shall not leave Makkah until I go to the Sacred Mosque and proclaim the call of Truth in the midst of the Quraysh," vowed Abu Dharr.

The Prophet remained silent. I went to the Mosque. The Quraysh were sitting and talking. I went in their midst and called out at the top of my voice,

"O people of Quraysh, I testify that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah."

My words had an immediate effect on them. They jumped up and said, "Get this one who has left his religion." They pounced on me and began to beat me mercilessly. They clearly meant to kill me. But 'Abbas ibn 'Abdulmuttalib, the uncle of the Prophet, recognised me. He bent over and protected me from them. He told them,

"Woe to you! Would you kill a man from the Ghifar tribe and your caravans must pass through their territory?"

They then released me. I went back to the Prophet, upon whom be peace, and when he saw my condition, he said, "Didn't I tell you not to announce your acceptance of Islam?"

"O Messenger of God," I said, "It was a need I felt in my soul and I fulfilled it."

"Go to your people," he commanded, "and tell them what you have seen and heard. Invite them to God. Maybe God will bring them good through you and reward you through them. And when you hear that I have come out in the open, then come to me."

I left and went back to my people. My brother came up to me and asked, "What have you done?" I told him that I had become a Muslim and that I believed in the truth of Muhammad's teachings.

"I am not averse to your religion. In fact, I am also now a Muslim and a believer," he said.

We both went to our mother then and invited her to Islam.

"I do not have any dislike for your religion. I accept Islam also," she said.

From that day this family of believers went out tirelessly inviting the Ghifar to God and did not flinch from their purpose. Eventually a large number became Muslims and the congregational Prayer was instituted among them.

Abu Dharr remained in his desert abode until after the Prophet had gone to Madinah and the battles of Badr, Uhud and Khandaq had been fought. At Madinah at last, he asked the Prophet to be in his personal service. The Prophet agreed and was pleased with his companionship and service. He sometimes showed preference to Abu Dharr above others and whenever he met him he would pat him and smile and show his happiness.

After the death of the Prophet, Abu Dharr could not bear to stay in Madinah because of grief and the knowledge that there was to be no more of his guiding company. So, he left for the Syrian desert and stayed there during the caliphate of Abu Bakr and 'Umar.

During the caliphate of 'Uthman, he stayed in Damascus and saw the Muslims' concern for the world and their consuming desire for luxury. He was saddened and repelled by this. So, 'Uthman asked him to come to Madinah. At Madinah he was also critical of the people's pursuit of worldly goods and pleasures and they were critical in turn of his reviling them. 'Uthman, therefore, ordered that he should go to Rubdhah, a small village near Madinah. There he stayed far away from people, renouncing their preoccupation with worldly goods and holding on to the legacy of the Prophet and his companions in seeking the everlasting abode of the Hereafter in preference to this transitory world.

Once a man visited him and began looking at the contents of his house but found it quite bare. He asked Abu Dharr, "Where are your possessions?"

"We have a house yonder (meaning the Hereafter)," said Abu Dharr, "to which we send the best of our possessions."

The man understood what he meant and said, "But you must have some possessions so long as you are in this abode."

"The owner of this abode will not leave us in it," replied Abu Dharr.

Abu Dharr persisted in his simple and frugal life to the end. Once the Amir of Syria sent three hundred dinars to Abu Dharr to meet his needs. He returned the money saying,

"Does not the amir of Syria find a servant more deserving of it than I?"

In the year 32 AH, the self-denying Abu Dharr passed away. The Prophet, peace be upon him, had said of him:

"The earth does not carry nor the heavens cover a man truer and more faithful than Abu Dharr."

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