

BILAL, THE FIRST MUEZZIN

A MUSLIM STORY

Key Ideas: Islam, the call to prayer, courage

Bilal stood on top of the Ka'aba in Mecca. It had been a difficult and dangerous thing to do, but he had a far more important task to complete. He filled his lungs with as much air as he could, then used his deep and powerful voice to call faithful Muslims to prayer.

Allah is the greatest.
I bear witness that there is no god but Allah.
I bear witness that Muhammad is Allah's messenger.
Come to prayer.
Come to salvation.
There is no God but Allah.

Even Bilal could not believe how his life had changed to bring him to this point.

Bilal was born in Arabia, but he was a slave. His parents had been black Africans who had also lived as slaves, so their son had to be a slave too. When he was old enough, he was taken to the market place and sold to a new master.

Umaya owned Bilal. He was a merchant, who made a good living from selling idols in Mecca. He had a number of slaves, and treated them badly, for slaves were cheap, and Umaya had plenty of money. When the merchant heard Muhammad teaching about one god, Allah, he was angry. He might lose money. But when he heard Muhammad say that all people were equal, like the teeth in a comb, he was furious. No slave was equal to him.

The merchant decided to test Muhammad's teachings. He ordered Bilal to strike one of the Prophet's companions, firmly believing that a slave would not disobey his master. But Bilal had listened to Muhammad too, and he thought the Prophet was right. He dropped the whip Umaya had given him, and refused to do as he was told.

Immediately the merchant had Bilal thrown in prison, and his execution was ordered. During the long, dark night, Bilal thought more and more about Muhammad's words, and became more and more convinced that they were right.

In the bright light of day, Bilal was staked to the ground and beaten. Then heavy rocks were piled on him, to crush his body. All that could be heard by those who went near was Bilal's deep, strong voice saying "One God, One God."

It happened that Abu Bakr, a great friend of the Prophet was passing and heard Bilal. Moved by his voice, and his cry of "One God, One God," Abu Bakr haggled with Umaya until he was able to buy Bilal and set him free.

As a free man, Bilal became a close and dear friend to both Abu Bakr and Muhammad. He helped to build the first mosque in Medina. When the time came

that the Muslim's were searching for a way to call the faithful to prayer, Bilal came into his own. The believers decided they did not want a flag, or a bell, or a rattle, or a drum, or a trumpet, but a beautiful human voice.

Abu Bakr became excited. "Then there is only one voice we could use for our first call to prayer," he said, and explained how he had found Bilal and set him free. And so it was that Bilal became the first muezzin, the first to call people to prayer in Medina. And when the Muslims returned to Mecca, he was the first to call from the top of the Ka'aba. Today the call to prayer is still as it was in Bilal's time, just a beautiful human voice calling people to worship.