

Muhammad's Biography (part 12 of 12): Bidding Farewell

Description: The Pilgrimage of the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and his death.

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Category: [Articles](#) > [The Prophet Muhammad](#) > [His Biography](#)

The Farewell Pilgrimage

The end, however, was drawing closer, and in the tenth year of the Hijra he set off from Medina with some 90,000 Muslims from every part of Arabia to perform Hajj, the pilgrimage. This triumphal journey of the aging man, worn by years of persecution and then by unceasing struggle, is surrounded by a kind of twilight splendor, as though a great ring of light had finally closed, encompassing the mortal world in its calm radiance.

In the tenth year of the Hijrah he went to Mecca as a pilgrim for the last time, referred to as his "pilgrimage of farewell" when from the plain of Arafat he preached to an enormous throng of pilgrims. He reminded them of all the duties Islam enjoined upon them, and that they would one day have to meet their Lord, who would judge each one of them according to his work. At the end of the discourse, he asked: "Have I not conveyed the Message?" And from that great multitude of men who a few months or years before had all been conscienceless idolaters the shout went up: "O God! Yes!" The Prophet said: "O God! You be witness!" Islam had been established and would grow into a great tree sheltering far greater multitudes. His work was done and he was ready, to lay down his burden and depart.

Illness and Death of the Prophet

The Prophet returned to Medina. There was still work to be done; but one day he was seized by a painful illness. He came to the mosque wrapped in a blanket and there were those who saw the signs of death in his face.

"If there is anyone among you," he said, "whom I have caused to be flogged unjustly, here is my back. Strike in your turn. If I have damaged the reputation of any among you, may he do likewise to mine."

He had said once:

"What have I to do with this world? I and this world are as a rider and a tree beneath which he shelters. Then he goes on his way and leaves it behind him."

And now he said:

"There is a slave among the slaves of God who has been offered the choice between this world

and that which is with Him, and the slave has chosen that which is with God."

On 12 Rabi'ul-Awwal in the eleventh year of the Hijrah, which in the Christian calendar is 8 June 632, he entered the mosque for the last time. Abu Bakr was leading the prayer, and he motioned to him to continue. As he watched the people, his face became radiant. 'I never saw the Prophet's face more beautiful than it was at that hour,' said his companion Anas. Returning to Aisha's apartment he laid his head on her lap. He opened his eyes and she heard him murmur: 'With the highest companion in Paradise . . .!' These were his last words. When, later in the day, the rumor grew that he was dead. Umar threatened those who spread the rumor with dire punishment, declaring it a crime to think that the Messenger of God could die. He was storming at the people in that strain when Abu Bakr came into the mosque and overheard him. Abu Bakr went to the chamber of his daughter Aisha, where the Prophet lay. Having ascertained the fact, and kissed the dead-man's forehead, he went back into the mosque. The people were still listening to Umar, who was saying that the rumor was a wicked lie, that the Prophet, who was their life blood, could not be dead. Abu Bakr went up to Umar and tried to stop him by a whispered word. Then, finding he would pay no heed, Abu Bakr called to the people, who, recognizing his voice, left Umar and came crowding round him. He first gave praise to God, and then said those words which epitomize the creed of Islam: "O people! Lo! As for him who used to worship Muhammad, Muhammad is dead. But as for him who used to worship God, God is alive and dies not." He then recited the verse of the Quran:

"And Muhammad is but a messenger; messengers the like of whom have passed away before him. Will it be that, when he dies or is slain, you will turn back on your heels? He who turneth back doth no hurt to God, and God will reward the thankful."

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