

What Lessons Does Muhammad Al-Fatih – the Conqueror of Constantinople – Teach Us?

There are bright days in the history of nations that are a source of pride for those nations. So, what if those days mark the fulfillment of the glad tidings of Allah's Messenger (saw)? They are undoubtedly shining stars in the sky; rather, they are suns that illuminate the world and raise our Ummah high up to the sky. And from among these great days are the days of the anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople!

Our Beloved Messenger (saw), surrounded by his Companions who would transcribe for him, was asked, «أَيُّ الْمَدِينَتَيْنِ تَفْتَحُ أَوَّلًا قُسْطَنْطِينِيَّةً أَوْ رُومِيَّةً؟» ***“Which of the two cities will be opened first, Constantinople or Rome?”*** He answered, «مَدِينَةُ هِرَاقْلٍ تَفْتَحُ أَوَّلًا يَغْنِي قُسْطَنْطِينِيَّةً» ***“The city of Heraclius will be opened first,”*** meaning Constantinople. [Reported by Ahmed]

He (saw) also foretold, «لَتَفْتَحَنَّ الْقُسْطَنْطِينِيَّةُ فَلَنَعْمَ الْأَمِيرُ أَمِيرُهَا وَلَنَعْمَ الْجَيْشُ ذَلِكَ الْجَيْشُ» ***“You will open Constantinople. Its Amir is the best Amir, and the best army that army will be.”*** [Reported by Ahmed]

These words, authenticated and transmitted from generation to generation, echoed throughout the history of the Ummah, inspiring hope, ambition, and sincere effort in some of the greatest leaders, warriors, and scholars to have ever emerged in our Ummah. The honor of being described as the best Amir and the best army was desired by every sincere Muslim.

It wasn't until 857 years after the Hijrah (AH), on the 20th of Jumada al-Awwal, that the 21 year old Muhammad ibn Murad gained his title, Al-Fatih (the Conqueror) by fulfilling the prophecy of Allah's Messenger (saw) by liberating Constantinople. He renamed the city 'Islambol' (the City of Islam), protected its Christian residents, and went on a campaign of redeveloping the city to even greater heights than the Byzantines had achieved. He commissioned the improvement of the city's sanitation system, utilized clean sources of water for its citizens, opened kitchens for the hungry, and ordered the building of many of the Masajid and universities that we can still see today. He ensured that non-Muslims were protected under the contract of Dhimma, and even made Istanbul the capital city of his rule.

Conquering Constantinople was no easy task. Muhammad Al-Fatih had to account for the punishing winter in planning his siege of the city, he had to build “state-of-the-art” technology for that time, and he had to pull off feats of logistical brilliance in record time.

So, this Jumada al-Awwal, on the anniversary of this remarkable victory, there are two important lessons that the Ummah must learn today:

First, the distance between the blessed words of Allah's Messenger (saw) prophesizing the liberation of Constantinople and its occurrence spanned over 800 years. During the 800 years, imagine all the events that had taken place. The Muslims had experienced the loss of the Khulafaa Al-Rashidun, lived through the passing of the Umayyad Caliphate and the weakening of the Abbasid Caliphate, fought the Crusaders to whom they had lost and then regained Jerusalem, and had been brutalized by the Mongols. Yet even after eight centuries and successive failures of Caliphs at securing the city of Constantinople, the Ummah had not lost hope or conviction in the words of Allah's Messenger (saw) that they would indeed take the capital of the Byzantine Empire.

For Muslims, the words of the Prophet (saw) were not treated as some impossible dream or some distant point of academized theology. Rather, the promise of Allah's Messenger (saw) was firmly considered a tangible goal that Muslims would work towards. Al-Fatih's father, Murad, spent much of his own life trying to conquer Constantinople, and instilled this passion into his son. Sultan Murad provided the best religious education for his son, and Muhammad's teacher, Akshamsaddin, continued to encourage him to make an attempt at liberating the city.

Is it not then incumbent upon this generation of Muslims to have hope and trust in another promise of Allah's Messenger (saw), who after foretelling the loss of the Khilafah Al-Rashidah (rightly guided Caliphate), followed by a period of family rule, followed by a harsh and then coercive rule, promised us (as reported by Imam Ahmed): «ثُمَّ تَكُونُ خِلَافَةٌ عَلَى مِنْهَاجِ النَّبِيِّ» ***“...then there will be the Khilafah upon the way of the Prophethood (‘ala minhaaj al-nubuwwah)’?”***

Second, the relationship of Muslims with prophecy is not one of passivity. Rather, the glad tidings of Allah's Messenger (saw) are supposed to motivate us towards actions. In preparing for this mission, Al-Fatih knew he would have to construct a fortress to keep his soldiers sheltered so he could continue his siege of Constantinople over the winter. He secured the best cannon engineer at the time to construct cannons to be used against the formidable defenses of the city. And, in an amazing feat of logistics, he was able to move 70 ships over the Galata Hill, gliding them overland over greased wooden tracks, to enter the Golden Horn, which was otherwise defended from the sea by a heavy chain. The sudden appearance of the ships demoralized the Byzantine army.

It is clear that Muhammad Al-Fatih did not let the promise of eventual victory from Allah (swt) over Constantinople lull him into complacency. Rather, he was eager to be the leader of the army to achieve this great honor, and now is remembered throughout history! Why should we then, close to 100 years after the fall of the Khilafah, allow ourselves to be tranquilized with mere glimmers of a future glory or breathless retellings of the Ahadith about the End of Times and the arrival of the Mahdi? Rather than waiting for the fulfillment of these promises, we should be eager to be of those who are part of the immense victory that Allah (swt) has promised: The return of full and complete Islamic rule upon the way of the Prophethood.

We are at a unique time in the history of this Ummah. Never before has the Muslim Ummah remained for so long without a Khaleefah (or a "Caliphate") state. And, while its absence exposes us to never-ending tragedies, within this test lies our greatest opportunity.

As Muslims alive today, we have the unparalleled opportunity to engage in a struggle that was previously only carried out by Prophets and their immediate followers; today we have the opportunity to re-establish the full implementation of the Message of Allah (swt) and restore the Deen of Allah (swt) to its rightful place. The reward for this work surpasses the reward of liberating any one city; this is the work of liberating of all the Muslim lands, and the restoration of dignity and protection to the Ummah as a whole!

In preparing for this task, it is incumbent upon us to study the life of the Prophet (saw) in order to observe how he was able to transform a small group of powerless and persecuted believers in Makkah into the leaders of the greatest civilization brought forth to Mankind. He worked with a small group of companions, instilling in them conviction in Allah (swt) and created formidable Islamic personalities within them. Leading this group, he then took his message to the public, engaging with both the common folk of Makkah as well as the tribal elders of Arabia, until he found a receptive ear in the Aws and Khazraj of Yathrib – the Ansaar. As believers, it is incumbent on us to follow this model for change. Not only is this an immense opportunity for reward from Allah (swt), it is also an obligation, as Allah's Messenger (saw) tells us: «وَمَنْ مَاتَ وَلَيْسَ فِي غُنْفِهِ بَيْعَةٌ مَاتَ مِيتَةً جَاهِلِيَّةً» ***"Whoever dies without a Bay'ah (to the Khaleefah) upon his neck has died a death of Jahiliyya."*** [Reported by Muslim]

The "death of Jahiliyya" here indicates that being without a legitimate Khaleefah is prohibited. This makes the existence of the Khilafah obligatory, as agreed upon by all classical scholars, including Imam Al-Nawawi, Al-Qurtubi, Al-Juwayni, Al-Taftazani, Al-Dahlawi.

We cannot let hopelessness or complacency cloud our judgment and delay us from our duty. Rather, we must be racing towards the mercy of Allah (swt), as He says: «سَابِقُوا إِلَى مَغْفِرَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَجَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا كَعَرْضِ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ أُعِدَّتْ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرُسُلِهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَاءُ ۚ وَاللَّهُ ذُو الْفَضْلِ الْعَظِيمِ» ***"Race toward forgiveness from your Lord and a Garden whose width is like the width of the heavens and earth, prepared for those who believed in Allah and His Messengers. That is the bounty of Allah that He gives to whom He wills, and Allah is the possessor of great bounty."*** [57:21]

O Allah! Grant us the honor of being among the ones to fulfil the prophecy of Allah's Messenger (saw) of establishing the Khilafah upon the way of the Prophethood. Ameen!

22 Jumada al-Awwal 1441 AH

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Hizb ut Tahrir

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