

Sufyan ibn Sa'id ibn Masruq Abu 'Abd Allah al-Thawri al-Muḍari al-Kufi (97-161), the Godfearing, wise, grief-stricken, *Mujtahid* Imam, “Commander of the Believers in Ḥadith” – the highest level in ḥadith Mastership –, “Shaykh al-Islam, the Imam of ḥadith Masters, the leader of the practicing Ulema in his time, the author of the *Jami'*” (al-Dhahabi). His father was a junior *Tabi'i Muḥaddith* and he thus began his scholarly career at home. Abu Ishaq al-Sabi'i recited when he saw Sufyan coming ﴿**And We gave him wisdom when a child**﴾ (19:12). His *Shuyukh* number 600. Ibn al-Jawzi claimed that his students number over 20,000 but al-Dhahabi said: “This is preposterous, they hardly reached 1,000. I know none of the ḥadith Masters from whom more narrated than Malik, and those number 1,400 – including the liars and the unknown!”

Among the praises related about him:

- “I wrote from 1,100 Shaykhs, but from none better than Sufyan.” (Ibn al-Mubarak)
- “I never saw better than Sufyan.” (Yunus ibn 'Ubayd – he had seen Sa'id ibn Jubayr, Ibrahim al-Nakha'i, 'Aṭa', and Mujahid.)
- “If 'Alqama and al-Aswad were present they would stand in need of Sufyan.” (Abu Ḥanifa)
- “I never saw one resemble the *Tabi'in* more than Sufyan al-Thawri” (Ibn Abi Dhi'b).
- “I never saw stronger in ḥadith memorization than al-Thawri, nor more ascetic than Shu'ba, nor more intelligent than Malik, nor of better counsel to the *Umma* than Ibn al-Mubarak.... Sufyan is the most knowledgeable of them.” “I could not look at Sufyan directly, he was too intimidating and full of majesty.” (Ibn Mahdi)
- “I never saw anyone more knowledgeable in the *ḥalal* and the *ḥaram* than Sufyan al-Thawri” (Ibn 'Uyayna).
- “This is the most knowledgeable (*afqah*) of people on earth.” (Za'ida)
- “I never saw anyone like Sufyan al-Thawri” (Ibn Wahb). Ibn Wahb narrates that he saw Sufyan prostrate after *Maghrib* and not raise his head until the call for '*Isha'*'.
- “By Allah! Sufyan was more knowledgeable than Abu Ḥanifa” (Fuḍayl ibn 'Iyad). “He is above Malik in all things.” (Yaḥya ibn Sa'id al-Qaṭṭan) “If these two concur on something – al-Thawri and Abu Ḥanifa – then this is a strong position.” (Ibn al-Mubarak)
- “Al-Thawri for us was the Imam of all the people.... Sufyan in his time was like Abu Bakr and 'Umar in theirs.” (Bishr al-Ḥafi)
- “If I were asked to choose someone to lead this *Umma* I would have chosen Sufyan al-Thawri” (al-Awza'i).
- “I never saw a man who follows the Sunna more rigorously or in whose body I would love to be more than Sufyan al-Thawri.” (Al-Shafi'i)
- “Do you know who is the Imam? The Imam in my view is Sufyan al-Thawri. No-one comes before him in my heart!” (Aḥmad to Abu Bakr al-Marwadi)
- “Sufyan is the '*Alim*' of the *Umma* and its Worshipper” (Al-Muthanna ibn al-Ṣabbah).
- “Truly, if I see a person accompany Sufyan, that person becomes great in my view.” (Abu Bakr ibn 'Ayyash)

Sufyan spoke certain precious words on money matters. He was once asked a question while he was buying something. He replied: “Leave me, my heart is with my dirham right now.” He said: “I much prefer to leave behind ten thousand dirhams over which Allah takes account of me, rather than stand in need of people.” He also said: “In the past, money was disliked; but today it is the shield of the

believer.” To a man who told him: “Abu ‘Abd Allah! You hold dinars in your hand?!” He replied: “Be quiet! Were it not for them, the kings would use us to wipe themselves (*latamandala bina al-muluk*).”

He also said: “The ‘*Alim* is the cure in the Religion and money its disease. If the ‘*Alim* drags the disease to himself, when can he heal others?”<sup>1</sup>

Long before the *Ilhya'*, Sufyan warned against the mere thirst for knowledge at the expense of the training of the ego. He possessed a photographic memory – “I never forgot anything I had memorized” – but, more importantly, “I never memorized a single ḥadīth except I practiced it, at least once.” He said: “Adorn knowledge and the ḥadīth with yourselves, not vice-versa.” He also said: **“The ugliest of people is he who pursues the world through the work of the hereafter.”** Abu Dawud said he heard Sufyan say: “I do not fear anything that might enter me into the Fire more than the ḥadīth.” He also said: “Would that I had recited the Qur’an and stopped there.” He also said: **“Whoever increases in knowledge increases in pain; if I knew nothing it would be easier for my predicament.”** He also said: “If ḥadīth were a good it would have vanished just as goodness has vanished... Pursuing the study of ḥadīth is not part of the preparation for death, but a disease that preoccupies people!” Al-Dhahabi comments:

By Allah, he has spoken the truth!... Today, in our time, the quest for knowledge and ḥadīth no longer means for the ḥadīth Scholar the obligation of living up to it, which is the goal of ḥadīth. He is right in what he said because pursuing the study of ḥadīth is other than the ḥadīth itself.<sup>2</sup>

Al-Dhahabi also said:

Love of ḥadīth in itself and its practice for the sake of Allah is required and part of one’s provision for the Return; but love of its narration, its shortest chains, excessive focus on knowing and understanding it – that is what is blamed and feared on the part of Sufyan, al-Qaṭṭān, and the people of [spiritual] observance, for much of this is a curse on the *mulḥaddith*.<sup>3</sup>

Yet when he was asked: “Until when will you study ḥadīth?” he replied: “And what greater goodness is there for me but ḥadīth, so that I might turn to it?” Al-Ashja’i said: “I heard from al-Thawri 30,000 ḥadīths.” Sufyan also said: “There is no need better than [the study of] ḥadīth if the intention is correct.” He also said: “If a man were to try and lie in [narrating] ḥadīth, even inside his own house, Allah would cause someone to overpower him.” To a man who said to him: “Narrate to us just as you heard,” he replied: “No, by Allah! This is impossible. These are only the meanings.” “If I tell you that I am narrating to you just as I heard, do not believe me.” “Were we to narrate to you exactly in the way we heard, we would not narrate to you a single ḥadīth.” Ibn Mahdi said: “We would be with Sufyan as if he had been summoned for his last reckoning. We did not dare speak a word to him. Then we would mention a ḥadīth and all this fear would be dispelled and nothing remain except *ḥaddathana ḥaddathana*.” Qabiṣa said: “If you saw Sufyan you would think he is a monk but when he started narrating you could not recognize him.”

On the chain of transmission: “The *isnad* is the weapon of the believer. Whoever has no weapon, with what is he fighting?”

Sufyan al-Thawri called the kissing of the hands of the Ulema a Sunna. Among his sayings: “Among the best of people is the Ṣufi learned in *Fiqh*.”<sup>4</sup> “I found the reform of my heart between Makka and Madina, among a community of strangers who wore wool and ample coats.” “Simple living (*zuhd*) does not consist in eating chaff and wearing coarse cloth, but in keeping hopes short and search out the coming of death.” “I never saw rarer *zuhd* than the renunciation of leadership. **You might see a man renounce food, money, and dress, but when it comes to leadership, he maneuvers and battles.**” “A man must force his child to learn because he is responsible for him.” To a boy in the first row of prayer he said: “Have you reached puberty?” If not, he would make him stand in a back row. Asked why he abandoned soldiery (*al-ghazu*), Sufyan replied: “Because they do not observe the categorical obligations (*innahum yuḍayyi’una al-fara’id*).” To Shu‘ayb ibn Ḥarb he said: “What you wrote will not benefit you until:

<sup>1</sup>Al-Dhahabi, *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz* (1:204).

<sup>2</sup>Al-Dhahabi as cited in al-Sakhawi, *al-Jawahir waḍ-ḍurar fī Tarjamat Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Hajar (al-‘Asqalani)*, ed. Hamid ‘Abd al-Majid and Taha al-Zayni (Cairo: Wizarat al-Awqaf, 1986) p. 21-22.

<sup>3</sup>*Siyar*. There is more in al-Dhahabi’s *Tadhkirat al-Huffaz*.

<sup>4</sup>Narrated by al-Harawi al-Anṣari in his *Tabaqat al-Ṣufiyya*, Ibn al-Jawzi in *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwa*, and Ibn al-Qayyim in *Madarij al-Salikin* (2:330).

- you consider correct the wiping of the two *khuffs* [in *wudu'*];
- the softening of *Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahman al-Rahim* in prayer becomes dearer to you than its recitation aloud;
- you believe in *qadar*;
- you pray behind every righteous and unrighteous imam;
- you hold that jihad continues until the Day of Resurrection;
- you endure patiently under the flag of the sultan whether just or unjust.”

Shu'ayb said: “Every single *Ṣalat*?” He replied: “No, only *Jumu'a* and the two '*Ids*, otherwise, you are free to choose and not to pray except behind one you trust and know that he is from *Ahl al-Sunna*. When you stand before Allah, if He asks you about this, tell him, ‘My Lord! Sufyan ibn Sa'id told me this.’ Then leave me with my Lord.” AHDhababi said: “This is firmly established as authentic from Sufyan.”<sup>5</sup>

He used to give precedence to 'Ali over 'Uthman, which al-Dhahabi calls “slight Shi'ism.” Yet he narrates that Sufyan said: “Love of both 'Uthman and 'Ali are not found together except in the heart of the noblest men.” He also narrates that Sufyan said: “Whoever says that 'Ali was more deserving of the Caliphate than Abu Bakr and 'Umar has declared that Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Ali, the *Muhajirun*, and the *Ansar* were all wrong. I am not sure whether such a person's acts of worship rise to the heaven.” “Whoever places anybody before Abu Bakr and 'Umar has made light of twelve thousand Companions of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ with whom the Messenger of Allah was well-pleased when he died!” Asked about a man who died insulting Abu Bakr he said: “Such a man is a disbeliever in Allah Most High.” “Do we pray over him?” “No, and fie to him!” “But he says *la ilaha illa Allah*?” He replied: “Do not touch him with your hands. Raise him up on a slab of wood until you bring him down into his grave.”

In his *Tafsir* Sufyan said: ﴿We lead them on﴾ (7:182, 68:44) means We lavish blessings on them but prevent them from giving thanks.” He also said: “He is not a wise person (*faqih*) who does not consider difficulties a blessing and fortune a trial.” Sufyan once spent the night in the house of Ibn Mahdi and started weeping. To his questioners he replied: “I care less for my sins than for this dust, but I fear deprivation of faith before dying.” 'Aṭa' al-Khaffaf said he never met Sufyan except he saw him weeping. When he asked him why, Sufyan replied, “Because I am afraid of being written among the wretched in the Mother of the Book.” He also said: “Whoever is content with the world, fear of the next life is removed from his heart.” Yet Qabiṣa said he found Sufyan so inclined to joking that he lagged behind him whenever he could – to avoid his jokes – and 'Isa ibn Muḥammad relates that Sufyan sometimes laughed to the point of lying down and stretching his legs. Al-Mu'afa used to rebuke him, saying: “What is this, Sufyan? This is not the manner of the Ulema!” And Sufyan would accept it from him.

Sufyan was the farthest of people from kings and princes. He would not eat at their tables nor return their salaams but he would avoid them and ignore them until they showed humbleness and repentance. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab said: “I never saw princes and rich men sit more meekly than in the gathering of Sufyan al-Thawri.” In our own time this was also observed from the Moroccan ḥadith Master Muḥammad ibn Ja'far al-Kattani. Sufyan also said: “Those kings left the hereafter to you, so leave the world to them!”

Yalya ibn 'Abd al-Malik ibn Abi Ghaniyya said: “I never saw anyone with a sterner face (*aṣṣaqa wajhan*) for the sake of Allah.” Sufyan said: “If a man's neighbors all praise him, then he is an evil man because he might have seen them do something wrong and he says nothing and meets them with a smile; or he is a flatterer.”

Among his sayings: “Safety lies in not being known.” “I never met anyone except they warned me against fame.” “I fear Allah has abandoned this *Umma* by having people need me. I wish I could live among people who do not know me.” “The less people you know, the less slander you commit.” “Having many brothers is part of folly in one's Religion.”

Qabiṣa said that no-one sat with Sufyan except they remembered death. Yusuf ibn Asbaṭ narrates that he once handed Sufyan the ablution-pot in the evening and left him holding it pensively. At dawn, he had not moved and said: “I am still thinking about the next life.” He would reach states of anxiety about the Day of Judgment in which he urinated blood. He said: “I may see something against which I ought to speak out but I do not, then I urinate blood.” He also said: “I felt the fear of God to a point I

<sup>5</sup>*Tadhkira* (1:207).

wondered how I could still be alive, then I would say to myself: I have a fixed term of life, but I wish it were made lighter for me. My fear is such that I fear losing my mind.” “I ask Allah to take away some of my fear of Him.” Ibn Mahdi said: “Night after night I would catch sight of Sufyan sitting up and calling out: ‘The Fire! The Fire! I cannot sleep nor feel pleasure anymore because I think of the Fire.’”<sup>6</sup> Abu Nu‘aym said that Sufyan would be useless for days whenever this state overtook him.

Sufyan’s garb was coarse and ragged and he ate dried meat and eggs. He said to Mu‘ammal: “I do not tell you not to eat good things. Dress well and eat good things.” Ahmad ibn Yunus said: “I once ate fruit at Sufyan’s house, he said: ‘This was brought to us as a present.’” ‘Abd al-Razzaq said: “Sufyan once ate dates with butter, then he rose and prayed until noon.”

Ahmad ibn Yunus said: “I heard Sufyan al-Thawri countless times say, ‘*Allahumma sallim sallim, Allahumma sallimna, warzuqna al-‘afiyata fil-dunya wal-akhira.*’” ‘Abd al-Razzaq said he heard Sufyan say to Wuhayb: “By the Lord of this [human] frame, I do love death!”

When Ibn Mahdi took care of Sufyan in his last illness, he asked him about the permissibility of leaving the congregational prayer to that end. Sufyan said: “Serving a Muslim in need for one hour is better than congregational prayer.” Ibn Mahdi said: “From whom did you hear this?” Sufyan replied: “‘Aṣim ibn ‘Ubayd Allah narrated to me from ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Amir ibn Rabi‘a, from his father [the Companion ‘Amir ibn Rabi‘a al-‘Anzi]: ‘I would prefer serving one man among the Muslims who is in need for a single day, to sixty years of congregational prayers in which I never missed the opening *Takbira!*’” Sufyan became afflicted with chronic diarrhea. The night of his death, Ibn Mahdi relates, he made his ablution sixty times. When he felt the end was near he left his bed and put his cheek on the ground, saying, “Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman! How hard it is to die!” He then said: “Recite Ya Sin over me, for I was told it makes it easier for the sick man.” Ibn Mahdi said: “I recited and did not finish before he expired.”

Muṣ‘ab ibn al-Miqdam said he dreamt of the Prophet ﷺ holding Sufyan by the hand and thanking him. Ibrahim ibn A‘yan also dreamt of him and asked him: “What happened to you?” Sufyan replied: “I am with the **《Noble and righteous》** (80:16).” Ibn al-Qayyim in *al-Ruḥ* reports that Ibn ‘Uyayna said: “I saw Sufyan al-Thawri in sleep [after his death] and said, ‘Give me your final command!’ He said, ‘Make little of the knowledge of men.’” Qubayṣa ibn ‘Uqda said, “I saw Sufyan al-Thawri in sleep after his death and I said, ‘What has Allah done with you?’ He said, ‘I looked at my Lord face to face, and He said to me:

*My pleasure is with you, Ibn Sa‘id!  
You stood (in worship) when night fell,  
Sad with tears and firm of heart.  
Behold! Choose which castle you wish,  
And visit me; for I am not far from you!”*

Sufyan ibn ‘Uyayna also said: “I saw Sufyan al-Thawri after his death, flying in the Garden from palm tree to tree and from tree to palm tree, saying, **《For the like of this let the workers work》** (37:61) but the narration in the *Sīyar* has **《Praise be to Allah, Who has fulfilled His promise unto us》** (39:74) He was asked, ‘By means of what were you brought into the Garden? He said, ‘Godwariness, godwariness (*wara‘*)!’”

Of his moving words: “Weeping is ten parts, one for Allah, and nine for other than Allah. If the part that is for Allah comes once a year, that is plenty.” Ibn Mahdi said: “I could hardly hear Sufyan’s recitation because of his weeping.”

Ibn al-Mubarak visited al-Firyabi and said: “Bring out the ḥadīth of al-Thawri for me.” Then he started weeping until his beard became wet and he said: “Allah have mercy on him! I do not think I shall ever see the like of him again.”

Main source: al-Dhahabi, *Sīyar* (Fikr ed. 7 :174-211 #1083).

<sup>6</sup>Also in the *Hilya* (7:60) and *Tarikh Baghdad* (9:157).