

Sufyān ibn Sa‘īd ibn Masrūq Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Thawrī al-Muḍarī al-Kūfī (97-161), the Godfearing, wise, grief-stricken, *Mujtahid* Imām, “Commander of the Believers in Ḥadīth” – the highest level in ḥadīth Mastership –, “Shaykh al-Islām, the Imām of ḥadīth Masters, the leader of the practicing Ulema in his time, the author of the *Jāmi‘*” (al-Dhahabī). His father was a junior *Tābi‘ī Muḥaddith* and he thus began his scholarly career at home. Abū Ishāq al-Sabī‘ī recited when he saw Sufyān coming: ﴿**And We gave him wisdom when a child**﴾ (19:12). His *Shuyūkh* number 600. Ibn al-Jawzī claimed that his students number over 20,000 but al-Dhahabī said: “This is preposterous, they hardly reached 1,000. I know none of the ḥadīth Masters from whom more narrated than Mālik, 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 Sufyān.” (Ibn al-Mubārak)
- “I never saw better than Sufyān.” (Yūnus ibn ‘Ubayd – he had seen Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr, Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī, ‘Aṭā’, and Mujāhid.)
- “If ‘Alqama and al-Aswad were present they would stand in need of Sufyān.” (Abū Ḥanīfa)
- “I never saw one resemble the *Tābi‘īn* more than Sufyān al-Thawrī” (Ibn Abī Dhi‘b).
- “I never saw stronger in ḥadīth memorization than al-Thawrī, nor more ascetic than Shu‘ba, nor more intelligent than Mālik, nor of better counsel to the *Umma* than Ibn al-Mubārak.... Sufyān is the most knowledgeable of them.” “I could not look at Sufyān directly, he was too intimidating and full of majesty.” (Ibn Mahdī)
- “I never saw anyone more knowledgeable in the *ḥalāl* and the *ḥarām* than Sufyān al-Thawrī” (Ibn ‘Uyayna).
- “This is the most knowledgeable (*afqah*) of people on earth.” (Zā‘ida)
- “I never saw anyone like Sufyān al-Thawrī” (Ibn Wahb). Ibn Wahb narrates that he saw Sufyān prostrate after *Maghrib* and not raise his head until the call for *‘Ishā’*.
- “By Allāh! Sufyān was more knowledgeable than Abū Ḥanīfa” (Fuḍayl ibn ‘Iyāḍ). “He is above Mālik in all things.” (Yaḥyā ibn Sa‘īd al-Qaṭṭān) “If these two concur on something – al-Thawrī and Abū Ḥanīfa – then this is a strong position.” (Ibn al-Mubārak)
- “Al-Thawrī for us was the Imām of all the people.... Sufyān in his time was like Abū Bakr and ‘Umar in theirs.” (Bishr al-Ḥāfi)
- “If I were asked to choose someone to lead this *Umma* I would have chosen Sufyān al-Thawrī” (al-Awzā‘ī).
- “I never saw a man who follows the Sunna more rigorously or in whose body I would love to be more than Sufyān al-Thawrī.” (Al-Shāfi‘ī)
- “Do you know who is the Imām? The Imām in my view is Sufyān al-Thawrī. No-one comes before him in my heart!” (Aḥmad to Abū Bakr al-Marwadhī)
- “Sufyān is the *‘Ālim* of the *Umma* and its Worshipper” (Al-Muthannā ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ).
- “Truly, if I see a person accompany Sufyān, that person becomes great in my view.” (Abū Bakr ibn ‘Ayyāsh)

Sufyān 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 Allāh 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: “Abū ‘Abd Allāh! You hold dinars in your hand?!” He replied: “Be quiet! Were it not for them, the kings would use us to wipe themselves (*latamandala binā al-mulūk*).”

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

Long before the *Ihyā’*, Sufyān 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.**” Abū Dāwūd said he heard Sufyān 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-Dhahabī comments:

By Allāh, 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.²

Al-Dhahabī also said:

Love of ḥadīth in itself and its practice for the sake of Allāh 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 Sufyān, al-Qaṭṭān, and the people of [spiritual] observance, for much of this is a curse on the *muḥaddith*.³

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‘ī said: “I heard from al-Thawrī 30,000 ḥadīths.” Sufyān 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, Allāh would cause someone to overpower him.” To a man who said to him: “Narrate to us just as you heard,” he replied: “No, by Allāh! 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 Mahdī said: “We would be with Sufyān 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 *ḥaddathanā ḥaddathanā*.” Qabīṣa said: “If you saw Sufyān you would think he is a monk but when he started narrating you could not recognize him.”

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

Sufyān al-Thawrī called the kissing of the hands of the Ulema a Sunna. Among his sayings: “Among the best of people is the Ṣūfī learned in *Fiqh*.”⁴ “I found the reform of my heart between Makka and Madīna, 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-ghazū*), Sufyān replied: “Because they do not observe the categorical obligations (*innahum yuḍayyi ‘ūna al-farā’id*).” To Shu‘ayb ibn Ḥarb he said: “What you wrote will not benefit you until:

¹Al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-Huffāz* (1:204).

²Al-Dhahabī as cited in al-Sakhāwī, *al-Jawāhir wal-Durar fi Tarjamat Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Hajar (al-‘Asqalānī)*, ed. Hāmid ‘Abd al-Majīd and Ṭaha al-Zaynī (Cairo: Wizārat al-Awqāf, 1986) p. 21-22.

³*Ṣiyār*. There is more in al-Dhahabī’s *Tadhkirat al-Huffāz*.

⁴Narrated by al-Harawī al-Anṣārī in his *Tabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, Ibn al-Jawzī in *Sifat al-Ṣafwa*, and Ibn al-Qayyim in *Madārīj al-Sālikīn* (2:330).

- you consider correct the wiping of the two *khuff*s [in *wuḍū'*];
- the softening of *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* in prayer becomes dearer to you than its recitation outloud;
- you believe in *qadar*;
- you pray behind every righteous and unrighteous imām;
- you hold that jihād continues until the Day of Resurrection;
- you endure patiently under the flag of the sultan whether just or unjust.”

Shu‘ayb said: “Every single *Ṣalāt*?” He replied: “No, only *Jumu‘a* and the two *‘Īds*, 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 Allāh, if He asks you about this, tell him, ‘My Lord! Sufyān ibn Sa‘īd told me this.’ Then leave me with my Lord.” Al-Dhahabī said: “This is firmly established as authentic from Sufyān.”⁵

He used to give precedence to ‘Alī over ‘Uthmān, which al-Dhahabī calls “slight Shī‘ism.” Yet he narrates that Sufyān said: “Love of both ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī are not found together except in the heart of the noblest men.” He also narrates that Sufyān said: “Whoever says that ‘Alī was more deserving of the Caliphate than Abū Bakr and ‘Umar has declared that Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Alī, the *Muhājirūn*, and the *Anṣār* were all wrong. I am not sure whether such a person’s acts of worship rise to the heaven.” “Whoever places anybody before Abū Bakr and ‘Umar has made light of twelve thousand Companions of the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ with whom the Messenger of Allāh was well-pleased when he died!” Asked about a man who died insulting Abū Bakr he said: “Such a man is a disbeliever in Allāh Most High.” “Do we pray over him?” “No, and fie to him!” “But he says *lā ilāha illā Allāh*?” 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 *Tafsīr* Sufyān 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 (*faqīh*) who does not consider difficulties a blessing and fortune a trial.” Sufyān once spent the night in the house of Ibn Mahdī 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.” ‘Aṭā’ al-Khaffāf said he never met Sufyān except he saw him weeping. When he asked him why, Sufyān 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 Qabīṣa said he found Sufyān so inclined to joking that he lagged behind him whenever he could – to avoid his jokes – and ‘Īsā ibn Muḥammad relates that Sufyān sometimes laughed to the point of lying down and stretching his legs. Al-Mu‘āfā used to rebuke him, saying: “What is this, Sufyān? This is not the manner of the Ulema!” And Sufyān would accept it from him.

Sufyān 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-Wahhāb said: “I never saw princes and rich men sit more meekly than in the gathering of Sufyān al-Thawrī.” In our own time this was also observed from the Moroccan ḥadīth Master Muḥammad ibn Ja‘far al-Kattānī. Sufyān also said: “Those kings left the hereafter to you, so leave the world to them!”

Yaḥyā ibn ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Abī Ghaniyya said: “I never saw anyone with a sterner face (*aṣfaqa wajhan*) for the sake of Allāh.” Sufyān 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 Allāh 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.”

Qabīṣa said that no-one sat with Sufyān except they remembered death. Yūsuf ibn Asbat narrates that he once handed Sufyān 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

⁵*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 Allāh to take away some of my fear of Him.” Ibn Maḥdī said: “Night after night I would catch sight of Sufyān sitting up and calling out: ‘The Fire! The Fire! I cannot sleep nor feel pleasure anymore because I think of the Fire.’”⁶ Abū Nu‘aym said that Sufyān would be useless for days whenever this state overtook him.

Sufyān’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.” Aḥmad ibn Yūnus said: “I once ate fruit at Sufyān’s house, he said: ‘This was brought to us as a present.’” ‘Abd al-Razzāq said: “Sufyān once ate dates with butter, then he rose and prayed until noon.”

Aḥmad ibn Yūnus said: “I heard Sufyān al-Thawrī countless times say, ‘*Allāhumma sallim sallim, Allāhumma sallimnā, warzuqnā al-‘āfiyata fil-dunyā wal-ākhirā.*’” ‘Abd al-Razzāq said he heard Sufyān say to Wuḥayb: “By the Lord of this [human] frame, I do love death!”

When Ibn Maḥdī took care of Sufyān in his last illness, he asked him about the permissibility of leaving the congregational prayer to that end. Sufyān said: “Serving a Muslim in need for one hour is better than congregational prayer.” Ibn Maḥdī said: “From whom did you hear this?” Sufyān replied: “‘Aṣim ibn ‘Ubayd Allāh narrated to me from ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Āmir ibn Rabī‘a, from his father [the Companion ‘Āmir ibn Rabī‘a al-‘Anzī]: ‘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 *Takbīra!*’” Sufyān became afflicted with chronic diarrhea. The night of his death, Ibn Maḥdī 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, “Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān! How hard it is to die!” He then said: “Recite Yā Sīn over me, for I was told it makes it easier for the sick man.” Ibn Maḥdī said: “I recited and did not finish before he expired.”

Muṣ‘ab ibn al-Miqdām said he dreamt of the Prophet ﷺ holding Sufyān by the hand and thanking him. Ibrāhīm ibn A‘yan also dreamt of him and asked him: “What happened to you?” Sufyān replied: “I am with the **《Noble and righteous》** (80:16).” Ibn al-Qayyim in *al-Rūḥ* reports that Ibn ‘Uyayna said: “I saw Sufyān al-Thawrī 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 Sufyān al-Thawrī in sleep after his death and I said, ‘What has Allāh 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‘īd!
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!”*

Sufyān ibn ‘Uyayna also said: “I saw Sufyān al-Thawrī 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 *Siyar* has **《Praise be to Allāh, 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 Allāh, and nine for other than Allāh. If the part that is for Allāh comes once a year, that is plenty.” Ibn Maḥdī said: “I could hardly hear Sufyān’s recitation because of his weeping.”

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

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

⁶Also in the *Hilya* (7:60) and *Tārīkh Baghdād* (9:157).