**THE SUNNA**



4.59. O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger, and those from among you who are invested with authority; and if you are to dispute among yourselves about anything, refer it to God and the Messenger, if indeed you believe in God and the Last Day. This is the best (for you), and fairest in the end.(1)



24.54. Say: "Obey God and obey the Messenger. " But (,O people), if you turn away from the Messenger, (then be aware that) what rests with him is only what he has been charged with, and what rests with you is only what you have been charged with. However, if you obey, you will be guided (to the truth). What rests with the Messenger is but to convey the Message fully and clearly.(2)



62.2. He it is Who has sent among the unlettered ones a Messenger of their own, reciting to them His Revelations, and purifying them (of false beliefs and doctrines, and sins, and all kinds of uncleanness), and instructing them in the Book and the Wisdom, whereas before that they were indeed lost in obvious error.(3)

**HADITH**

92. Jabir, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “The metaphor of me and you is that of a man who lights a fire and the grasshoppers and moths begin to fall into it and he chases them away from it. I pull you by your belts back from Hell while you are doing your best to slip from my hand.” (Sahih Muslim, Fadail, 19).(4)

93. Ibn Abbas, may Allah be pleased with him, said, “The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, stood up among us to admonish us and said, ‘O people! You will be gathered to Allah the Almighty barefoot, naked and uncircumcised. “We will bring the creation back into existence as easily as We originated it in the first instance.” (al-Anbiya 21:104) The first of creatures to be clothed on the Day of Rising will be Ibrahim. Men of my community will come and will be taken to the left. I will say, “O Lord, my Companions!” and it will be said, “You do not know what innovations they introduced after you.” I will say the same as the righteous servant (Isa) said, “I was a witness over them so long as I remained among them; and when You took me back, You were Yourself the Watcher over them. Indeed, You are Witness over everything. If You punish them, they are Your servants; and if You forgive them, You are the All-Glorious with irresistible might, the All-Wise.” (al-Maedah 5:117–118) I will be told, “They never stopped turning back on their heels from the time you left them.” (Sahih al-Bukhari, Anbiya, 8, Riqaq, 45; Sahih Muslim, Jannah, 58).(5)

**THE SUNNA: INTRODUCTION**

The science of Hadith deals with Prophet Muhammad’s life, especially his words and actions, and the actions he approved of in others. In this section, we will restrict ourselves to his own words and actions. These words and their meanings are his alone, for they were not included in the Qur’an, the Recited Revelation and whose meaning and wording belong to God exclusively. His actions include those whose rule and authority we are obliged to follow as laws, and his personal affairs, which are a source of spiritual reward and blessing if followed.

The science of fiqh (Islamic law) does not concern itself with the Prophet’s personal affairs. The fuqaha’ (jurists) consider that if those affairs touch upon the voluntary and purposed acts, they should be dealt with under the relevant law. However, if they are matters of the Prophet’s personal likes and dislikes, which are not a basis for legislation, they are of no concern to the fuqaha’. According to the muhaddithun (scholars of Hadith, or Traditionists), everything related to the Messenger is included in the meaning of Hadith (Tradition) and concerns the Traditionists.

The Sunna is the record of the Messenger’s every act, word, and confirmation, as well as the second source of Islamic legislation and life (the Qur’an is the first one). All scholars of religious sciences, and sometimes those of the natural scientists, use it to establish the principles of their disciplines and to solve difficulties. The Qur’an and authentic prophetic Traditions enjoin Muslims to follow the Sunna.

The Qur’an and the Sunna are inseparable. The Sunna clarifies the ambiguities in the Qur’an by expanding upon what is mentioned only briefly in it, specifies what is unconditional, enables generalizations from what is specifically stated, and particularizations from what is generally stated.

For example, how to pray, fast, give alms, and make pilgrimage was established and expounded in the Sunna. So were such principles or legislation that no one can inherit from the Prophet, killers cannot inherit from their victims, the meat of domestic donkeys and wild animals cannot be eaten, and men cannot marry a wife’s female cousins if she is still living. Indeed, the Sunna is relevant to all aspects of Islam, and Muslims must design their lives according to it. For this reason, it has been studied and transmitted to each new generation with almost the same care as the Qur’an.

The Messenger ordered his Companions to obey his Sunna absolutely. He spoke distinctly, so they could understand and memorize his words, and encouraged them to convey his every word to future generations. Sometimes he even urged them to write his words down, for: “Whatever I say is true.” The Companions were fully attentive to what his words and deeds and showed a great desire to mold their lives to his, even in the smallest details. They regarded his every word and deed as a Divine trust to which they must adhere and follow as closely as possible. Viewing his words as Divine gifts, they internalized and preserved them and transmitted them to future generations.

As truthfulness is the cornerstone of the Islamic character, the Companions did not lie. Just as they did not distort or alter the Qur’an, they did their best to preserve the Traditions and entrust them to future generations by either memorizing them or writing them down. Among the Hadith compilations made during the time of the Companions, three are very famous: Al-Sahifa al-Sadiqa by ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘As, Al-Sahifa al-Sahiha by Hammam ibn Munabbih, and Al-Majmu’ by Zayd ibn ‘Ali ibn Husayn.

The Companions were extremely conscientious in relating the Traditions. For example, ‘A’isha and ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar would relate them word for word, not changing even one letter. Ibn Mas’ud and Abu al-Darda’ would tremble, as if feverish, when asked to report a Tradition.

Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (ruled 717-20 ce) ordered that the orally preserved and circulated individual Tradition compilations be written down. Such illustrious figures as Sa’id ibn al-Musayyib, Sha’bi, ‘Alqama, Sufyan al-Thawri, and Zuhri pioneered this sacred task. They were followed by the greatest specialists, who were entirely focused on the Traditions’ accurate transmittal, as well as studying their meaning and wording and their narrators’ careful critiques.

Thanks to these Traditionists, we have the second source of Islam in its original purity. Only through studying the Prophet’s life and then conforming our own to it can we gain God’s good pleasure and travel the way leading to Paradise. The greatest saints receive their light from this “sun” of guidance, Prophet Muhammad, and send it to those in darkness so that they may find their way.

**THE SUNNA AND ITS ROLE**

Sunna literally means “a conduct and a good or evil path to be followed.” This is the meaning used in the following hadith: “Those who establish a good path in Islam receive the reward of those who follow it, without any decrease in their reward. Those who establish an evil path in Islam are burdened with the sins of those who follow it, without any decrease in their burden.” [1]

This term also has different terminological connotations according to each group of Traditionists, methodologists, and jurists. Traditionists view it as including everything connected to the religious commandments reported from the Messenger and categorized, according to the Hanafi legal school (followers of Abu Hanifa), as obligations, necessities, practices particular to or encouraged by the Prophet himself as recommended and desirable.

Methodologists consider it to be every word, deed, and approval of the Messenger as related by his Companions. Jurists, who approach it as the opposite of innovation in religion (bid’a), consider it a synonym for hadith. They use it for the Prophet’s words, deeds, and approvals, all of which provide a basis for legislation and categorizing people’s actions.

Derived from the word haddatha (to inform), hadith literally means a tiding or information. Over time, it has assumed the meaning of every word, deed, and approval ascribed to the Messenger. Ibn Hajar says: “According to the Shari’a, the Hadith is everything related to the Messenger.”

Another literal meaning is something that takes place within time. This is why some scholars of fine discernment write that Hadith is that which is not Divine, eternal, or without beginning in time. This fine line separates the Hadith from the Qur’an, as the latter is Divine, and eternal, and without beginning in time. The Messenger distinguished his words from the Qur’an: “It is two things only, nothing else: the Word and guidance. The best word is the Word of God, and the best guidance is the guidance of Muhammad.” [2]

**[1] Muslim, “Zakat,” 69; Ibn Ma’ja, “Muqaddima,” 203.
[2] Ibn Ma’ja, “Muqaddima,” 7.**

**CATEGORIES OF THE SUNNA**

The Sunna is divided into three categories: verbal, practical, and based on approval.

The Verbal Sunna. This category consists of the Messenger’s words, which provide a basis for many religious commandments. To cite a few examples:

• “No bequest to the heir.” [1] In other words, people cannot bequeath any of their wealth to their heirs, since they will naturally inherit the bulk of the estate. A bequest can be made to the poor or some social service institutions.

• “Don’t harm (others), and don’t return harm for harm.” [2] That is, do not engage in any negative and damaging behavior toward others, and do not retaliate against them by returning bad for bad.

• “A tenth will be given (out of crops grown in fields) watered by rain or rivers; but a twentieth (out of those grown in fields) watered by people (irrigation or watering).” [3] The Qur’an enjoins charity, but goes into no detail about how to do so correctly. All such regulations were established by the Sunna.

• “A sea is that of which the water is clean and the dead animals are lawful to eat.” He gave this response when someone asked him if wudu’ could be done with sea-water. This has provided a basis for many other rulings.

The Practical Sunna. The Qur’an usually lays down only general rules and principles. For example, it enjoins prayer and pilgrimage but does not describe in detail how to perform them. The Messenger, taught by God through inspiration or through Gabriel, provided this information through his actions. His life was one long, unique example to be followed by all Muslims. For example, he led the daily prayers before his Companions five times a day and ordered them to pray as he prayed. [4]

The Sunna based on approval. The Messenger corrected his Companions’ mistakes usually by ascending the pulpit and asking: “Why has somebody done this?” [5] When he saw something agreeable in them, he gave his approval either explicitly or by keeping silent. For example:

• Two Companions traveling in the desert could not find enough water for wudu’ before praying, and so used sand (tayammum). When they found water later on before the prayer’s time had passed, one of them performed wudu’ and repeated the prayer, and the other did not. When they asked The Messenger about it later, he told the one who had not repeated the prayer: “You acted in accordance with the Sunna.” Then, he turned to the other one and said: “For you, there is double reward.” [6]

• The Messenger ordered a march upon the Banu Qurayza immediately after the Battle of the Trench. He said: “Hurry up! We’ll perform the afternoon prayer there.” Some Companions, concluding that they should hasten and pray over there started out without delay. Others understood that they were to hasten to the Banu Qurayza’s territory only, and that they could pray before departing. The Messenger approved of both interpretations. [7]

**[1] Ibn Ma’ja, “Wasaya,” 6; Tirmidhi, “Wasaya,” 5.
[2] Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, 1:313.
[3] Tirmidhi, “Zakat,” 14; Bukhari, “Zakat,” 55.
[4] Bukhari, “Adhan,” 18; Ibn Hanbal, 5:53.
[5] Bukhari, “Salat,” 70; Muslim, “Nikah,” 5.
[6] Darimi, “Tahara,” 65; Abu Dawud, “Tahara,” 126.
[7] Darimi, “Maghazi,” 30, “Khawf,” 5.**

**THE SUNNA IN THE QUR’AN**

The Sunna is the main source of our religious life. It is promoted and encouraged by the Qur’an: He Who raised among the unlettered ones a Messenger from them, reciting to them His revelations, purifies them and instructs them in the Book and the Wisdom (62:2). According to most Qur’anic interpreters and Traditionists, the Wisdom signifies the Sunna. The Qur’an, being a miraculous exposition, contains nothing superfluous and does not exceed the proper terms. As Wisdom comes after Book, it must be something different. The Book is the Qur’an, and the Wisdom is the Sunna showing how the Qur’an is to be applied to our daily lives.

The Qur’an enjoins absolute obedience to the Messengers, for they have been sent to guide people to truth in every sphere of their lives. Our loyalty is to God, Who has sent His Messenger and told us to obey him, and not to that man personally: We have not sent a Messenger save to be obeyed by God’s leave (4:64), and: O you who believe! Obey God and His Messenger, and do not turn away from him (8:20).

Obedience to God means unconditional obedience to what has been revealed in the Qur’an. Obedience to the Messenger means following his way of life as closely as possible by obeying what is enjoined and prohibited in the Qur’an and by the Messenger. The Sunna is a comprehensively detailed account of his life. He told his community: “Take care! I have been given the Book and its like together with it.” [1]

As stated in 8:20, Muslims must not turn away from the Messenger. Therefore, disobeying, belittling, or criticizing the Sunna amounts to heresy or even apostasy. Many other verses emphasize the necessity of following the Sunna, such as: O you who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those in authority from among you (4:59). The verse stresses obedience to God and to the Messenger. The repetition of obey in the imperative mood indicates that the Messenger is authorized to command or forbid, and that Muslims must do what he says. Besides, where obedience to those Musims in authority is ordered, the Prophet has a far greater right to be obeyed.

Another verse states: Obey God and His Messenger and do not dispute with one another, lest you should be dissolved (dispersed) and your strength fade away; and be steadfast (8:46). Muslim strength and unity lie in submission to God and His Messenger. The Messenger established the Sunna by living the Qur’an, which means that it is the only way his community can follow. Based on this, we can say that the Sunna is both more comprehensive than the Qur’an and indispensable for leading an upright life in Islamic terms.

Muslims can obey God and show their love for Him only by obeying the Messenger or by following his Sunna: Say (O Muhammad): “If you love God, follow me so that God loves you” (3:31), Surely there is for you in the Messenger an excellent example for him who aspires to God and the Hereafter, and mentions God oft (33:21), and many other verses. Those who claim to love God or that God loves them, despite their non-adherence to the Sunna, are seriously deluded and astray.

Muslims must cling to the Sunna if they want to remain on the Straight Path and avoid deviation. For example: One day a woman said to ‘Abd Allah ibn Mas’ud: “I have heard that you call down God’s curse upon women who tattoo their bodies, pluck their facial hair, force their teeth apart in order to look more beautiful, and who change the creation of God.” Ibn Mas’ud answered: “All of this is found in the Qur’an.” The woman objected: “I swear by God that I have read the entire Qur’an, but I couldn’t find anything related to this matter.” Ibn Mas’ud told her: “Our Prophet called God’s curse upon women who wear wigs, who join somebody’s hair to theirs, and who have tattoos on their bodies. Haven’t you read: Whatever the Messenger brings you, adopt it; whatever he forbids you, refrain from it (59:7)?” [2]

The Qur’an also declares: Nay, by your Master, they will never become believers until they choose you as judge to settle the matters in dispute between them (4:65).

**[1] Abu Dawud, “Sunna,” 5.
[2] Muslim, “Libas,” 120.**

**THE SUNNA IN THE TRADITIONS**

The way of the Prophet is the way of God. As the Sunna is the way of the Prophet, those who reject it are, in essence, rejecting (and disobeying) God. As the Prophet stated: “Whoever obeys me, obeys God; whoever disobeys me, disobeys God.” [1] Such disobedience is “rewarded” with Hell: “My nation will enter Paradise, except those who rebel.” When asked who these rebels were, the Prophet answered: “Whoever obeys me will enter Paradise; whoever disobeys me rebels.” [2]

The Sunna links all past, present, and future Muslims. It also enables Muslims to maintain their unity, as it forms a unique culture and system. Concerning this, the Messenger declared: “Those who survive me will witness many disputes and disagreements. Therefore, follow my way and the way of my rightly-guided and rightly-guiding successors. Hold firm to that way—cling to it with your teeth.” [3]

Following the Sunna, on both the individual and the collective level, becomes vital when Islam is attacked and Muslims lose their supremacy. The Messenger stated that “at a time when the Muslim community breaks with Islam and consequently disintegrates, the one who holds firm to his Sunna gains the reward of a martyr.” [4] Given this, those who criticize it should be asked, as the Qur’an asks unbelievers: Where are you headed?

**[1] Bukhari, “Ahkam,” 1; Ibn Ma’ja, “Muqaddima,” 1.
[2] Bukhari, “I’tisam,” 2; Ibn Hanbal, 2:361.[3] Abu Dawud, “Sunna,” 5; Tirmidhi, “‘Ilm,” 16; Ibn Ma’ja, “Muqaddima,” 6.
[4] Abu Nu’aym, Hilya, 8:200; Daylami, Musnad al-Firdaws, 4:198.**

**THE COMPANIONS AND THE SUNNA**

The Companions obeyed the Messenger in everything. They were so imbued with love for him that they strove to imitate him in every possible way. In fact, the Qur’an itself led them to do this, for it states that obeying the Messenger is directly related to belief: But no, by your Master! They will not believe till they make you the judge in disputes between them, then they shall find in themselves no impediment touching your verdict, but shall surrender in full submission (4:65). The following are only a few examples of their degree of submission.

• Shortly before his death, the Messenger raised an army, appointed Usama to command it, and told him to “advance only as far as the place where your father was martyred, and strengthen our rule there.” The Messenger took to his bed before the army departed. When Usama visited him, the Messenger prayed for him. The army was just about to set out when the Messenger died. Abu Bakr, his political successor and the first caliph, dispatched the army without a second thought, despite uprisings in various parts of Arabia. He accompanied the soldiers to the outskirts of Madina and said: “By God, even if wolves attack us from all directions, I will not lower a flag hoisted by the Messenger.” [1]

• The Messenger’s death shocked and grieved Madina’s Muslims. The subsequent election to choose the caliph caused some dissension among the Companions. Abu Bakr shouldered a very heavy task, for the army was waiting to be sent, reports of uprisings were coming in, and small groups were not satisfied with his election. Just at this juncture Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter, asked him for her share in the land of Fadak. Abu Bakr did not want to offend her, but also was determined to remain faithful to the Sunna. He used to say: “I can’t forsake anything that the Messenger did.” He had heard something from the Messenger, which Fatima had not: “We, the community of the Prophets, do not bequeath anything. Whatever we leave is charity.” [2]

• After the conquest of Makka, people from all over Arabia embraced Islam. Of course, many were not as devoted to Islam as the Companions. Some apostatized and, following Musaylima the Liar, revolted against Madina. Others showed signs of revolt by refusing to pay the prescribed alms-tax. Abu Bakr fought such people until peace and security reigned in Arabia once again.

• ‘Umar was known as “the one who submits himself to truth.” Unaware of the Prophet’s decree, he put forward his own judgment about how much money should be paid to compensate someone for a cut finger. A Companion opposed him: “O Commander of the Faithful! I heard the Messenger say: ‘The blood money for both hands together is the same as that paid for a life. This amount is shared out equally among the fingers, as ten camels for each.'” ‘Umar instantly withdrew his ruling and said to himself: “O son of Khattab! Do you dare to judge, through your own reasoning, on a matter the Messenger decreed?”

• Abu Musa al-Ash’ari went to visit ‘Umar in his office. He knocked on the door three times and then left, as he received no answer. After Abu Musa left, ‘Umar opened the door and asked who had knocked. Learning that Abu Musa had knocked, ‘Umar sent for him and asked why he had left. Abu Musa answered: “The Messenger said: ‘When you visit someone, knock on the door. If you are not allowed to enter after you knock for the third time, go away,'” ‘Umar asked him if he could verify this hadith, which was unknown to him. Abu Musa brought Abu Sa’id al-Khudri, who testified to its truth, and ‘Umar conceded. [3]

• When ‘Umar was stabbed while prostrating in the mosque, he was asked if he wanted to designate his successor. ‘Umar answered: “If I designate, one who is better than me (Abu Bakr) did so. If I do not designate, one who is better than me (the Messenger) did not do so.” ‘Umar was certain to follow the latter action. However, to prevent any possible disagreement, he left the matter to a consultative committee that he formed for this very purpose.

• When ‘Umar saw Zayd ibn Khalid al-Juhani perform a supererogatory prayer after the afternoon prayer, he reproached him for doing what the Messenger had not done. Zayd told him: “Even if you break my head into pieces, I shall never give up this two rak’ah prayer, for I saw the Messenger perform it.” Umm Salama, one of the Prophet’s wives, reported that one day her husband could not perform the two rak’ah supererogatory prayer after the noon prayer because he was busy with a visiting delegation. So, he prayed that prayer after the afternoon prayer. Zayd must have seen the Messenger perform it at that time.

• ‘Ali once drank water while standing. Maysara ibn Ya’qub criticized him: “Why are you drinking while standing?” ‘Ali answered: “If I do so, it’s because I saw the Messenger do so. If I drink while sitting, it’s because I saw the Messenger do so.” [4]

• Instead of washing the feet during wudu’, Muslims can wipe the upper surface of light, thin-soled boots worn indoors (or inside overshoes) with wet hands. Showing the Sunna’s supremacy over personal reasoning, ‘Ali said: “If I had not seen the Messenger wipe the upper surface of his light, thin-soled boots, I would deem it more proper to wipe their soles.” [5]

• If a Muslim kills another by mistake, the killer’s heirs must pay blood-money. ‘Umar thought that a wife could not inherit any blood-money due to her husband. However, Dahhak ibn Abi Sufyan informed him that when Ashyam ibn Dibabi had been killed, the Messenger had given some of the blood-money to his wife. ‘Umar declared: “From now on, wives will inherit from the blood-money of their husbands.” [6]

• Abu ‘Ubayda ibn Jarrah commanded the Muslim armies fighting in Syria. When ‘Umar went to visit him in Amwas, pestilence had broken out already. Before ‘Umar entered the city, ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-‘Awf told him: “I heard the Messenger say: ‘If you hear that pestilence has broken out in a place, don’t enter it. If you are in such a place already, don’t leave it.'” ‘Umar, so obedient to the Sunna, returned home without seeing his faithful friend for the last time.(6)

**[1] Suyuti, Tarikh al-Khulafa’, 74.
[2] Bukhari, “Khums,” 1; Muslim, “Jihad,” 52.
[3] Muslim, “Adab,” 7/33; Ibn Hanbal, 3:19.
[4] Ibn Hanbal, 1:134.
[5] Abu Dawud, “Tahara,” 63.
[6] Abu Dawud, “Fara’id,” 18; Ibn Ma’ja, “Diyat,” 12; Tirmidhi, “Fara’id,” 18.**

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