

Beginner's guide to Hadeeth and Sunnah

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

It might seem to the new Muslim that the Qur'aan is a sufficient guide for the believer, requiring only personal study and interpretation to implement its teaching and put it into practice. However, doing so may lead one into the same kind of errors that non prophetic interpreters of the Bible propagated to their congregations. To truly appreciate the message of the Qur'aan, one has to study the life, actions and words of the Prophet who brought it to us and exemplified it. Thus Muslims kept records of the doings and sayings of Prophet Muhammad, may Allaah praise him, which are called 'Hadeeth' and instituted critical examination of the means by which they have come down to us. If the Hadeeth is found to be strong, it is considered a Sunnah.

The meaning of Sunnah

Sunnah, in general, refers to the teachings and the way of life of Prophet Muhammad. More specifically, it means what has been authentically related to us from Prophet Muhammad, other than the Qur'aan: his statements, actions, and tacit approvals or permission (of his companions' statements or actions).

The meaning of Hadeeth

Hadeeth is any report of Prophet Muhammad's statements, actions, tacit approvals, manners, or physical characteristics. A hadeeth consists of two parts:

- (a) The chain of narrators.
- (b) The text

To be considered a true report of the Prophet's speech or actions, both the text and chain of narrators must meet strict conditions. We will learn more about them in subsequent articles.

Hadeeth & Sunnah

Sunnah is contained in the reports that have come to us from the Prophet, that is, the hadeeth literature. We find the Sunnah of the Prophet in the books of hadeeth. The statements, actions, tacit approvals, physical description, and manners of Prophet Muhammad are all contained in books of hadeeth. Nothing of importance from his life is missing. A Muslim can know how he prayed, fasted, and lived at home and with his

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companions. Such a complete and accurate record is not available for any other historical figure.

Importance of the Sunnah

The Qur'aan tells us how important the Sunnah is:

(1) Obeying the Prophet is obeying Allaah.

["He who obeys the Messenger has obeyed Allaah; but those who turn away – We have not sent you over them as a guardian."]¹

(2) Divine command to obey the Prophet and warning against disobeying him.

["And obey Allaah and the Messenger that you may obtain mercy."]²

["And whoever obeys Allaah and His Messenger will be admitted by Him to gardens (in Paradise) under which rivers flow, abiding eternally therein; and that is the great attainment."]³

["And whoever disobeys Allaah and His Messenger – then indeed, for him is the fire of Hell; they will abide therein forever."]⁴

["O you who have believed, obey Allaah and obey the Messenger and do not invalidate your deeds."]⁵

(3) Accepting decisions of the Prophet is part of faith.

["But no, by your Lord, they will not (truly) believe until they make you, (O Muhammad), judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves, and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in (full, willing) submission."]⁶

(4) Following the Messenger earns divine love and forgiveness.

["Say, (O Muhammad!) 'If you love Allaah, then follow me, Allaah will love you and forgive you your sins. And Allaah is Forgiving and Merciful.'"]⁷

(5) The Qur'aan calls Sunnah Hikmah or 'wisdom.' Sunnah was also revealed by Allaah like the Qur'aan.

Allaah revealed the Qur'aan and the Sunnah:

¹ Qur'aan [4:80]

² Qur'aan [3:132]

³ Qur'aan [4:13]

⁴ Qur'aan [72:23]

⁵ Qur'aan [47:33]

⁶ Qur'aan [4:65]

⁷ Qur'aan [3:31]

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["And Allaah has revealed to you the Book (Qur'aan) and Hikmah (Sunnah)."]⁸

Allaah counts it His favour that He revealed the Qur'aan and Sunnah:

["And remember the favour of Allaah upon you and what has been revealed to you of the Book (Qur'aan) and Hikmah (Sunnah)."]⁹

The Prophet Muhammad taught the Qur'aan and Sunnah:

["...and teaches them the Book (Qur'aan) and Hikmah (Sunnah)..."]¹⁰

Divine Preservation of Sunnah

Allaah says in the Qur'aan:

["Indeed, it is We who sent down the reminder, and indeed We will be its guardian."]¹¹

In this verse 'reminder' refers to everything Allaah revealed, both the Qur'aan and Sunnah. Allaah promises to protect the Qur'aan and the Sunnah, and it makes sense. The Qur'aan is Allaah's final revelation and Prophet Muhammad is Allaah's final prophet. Allaah commands Muslims to follow the Sunnah in the Qur'aan as we have seen above. If the Sunnah were not preserved, Allaah would not be ordering us to do something impossible, i.e. to follow the Sunnah that either has not been preserved or does not exist! Since such an expectation contradicts divine justice, Allaah must have preserved the Sunnah. As we will see, Allaah, through human beings, used various means by which He preserved the Sunnah.

The most important books of Hadeeth

A beginner must be aware of the most important books of hadeeth that contain the Prophet's Sunnah.

(1) Saheeh al-Bukhaaree

This book was written by Imaam al-Bukhaaree (810 - 870 CE). It is considered to be the most authentic and reliable book after the Qur'aan. Saheeh Al-Bukhari has 2, 602 unrepeated hadeeth in it. It has been translated into English by Dr. Muhsin Khan and was first published in 1976.

(2) Saheeh Muslim

Saheeh Muslim was written by Imaam Muslim (817 – 875 CE). It has 3,033 hadeeth and is considered the most accurate book after Saheeh al-Bukhaaree. It was translated into English by Abdul Hameed Siddiqui and published in 1976.

⁸ Qur'aan [4:113]

⁹ Qur'aan [2:231]

¹⁰ Qur'aan [3:164]

¹¹ Qur'aan [15:9]

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(3) **Riyaadh us-Saleheen (Gardens of the Righteous)**

This is a book by Imaam Nawawee (1233 - 1277 CE). It is a collection of Qur'aanic verses and hadeeth arranged according to topic. It has close to 1900 authentic hadeeth. Of all the three books, 'Gardens of the Righteous' is the most appropriate for a beginner.

There are other important books which contain many authentic hadeeth. The most common are Aboo Daawood, At-Tirmidhee, An-Nasaa'ee, and Ibn Maajah, and together with Al-Bukhaaree and Muslim are called, Al-Kutub Al-Sittah, or "The Six Books".

A last note on reading hadeeth is that there is no one book which contains all hadeeth, rather hadeeth are mentioned in various books. It is of grave importance that one not make any judgments while reading hadeeth, as there is more than likely another hadeeth in another book clarifying it. Reading explanations of hadeeth, however, will give the reader a much better understanding of the concepts mentioned in the hadeeth, as the scholars who write these explanations bring together various other hadeeth which shed light on the one at hand. Interpreting specific hadeeth, like the Qur'aan, should be restricted to those knowledgeable in religion. There are other collections, such as Riyaadh us-Saleheen mentioned above, which were, unlike other books of hadeeth, written for a general audience, and they are much easier to understand for all Muslims. Another good starting book is one called Al-Arba'oon Al-Nawawiyya, or 'Forty Hadeeths Compiled by Al-Nawawee', which mentions some of the most important and basic hadeeth in Islaam.