Imam al-Nawawi's Life

The Life of al-Nawawi

Before commenting on the *Forty Hadith* of al-Nawawi, it would be proper to introduce Imam al-Nawawi to the reader. It is important for Muslims to take the time to learn about the lives of the pious predecessors. The great scholars and pious individuals of the past can be great examples for the living. Their behavior and actions can have a great effect upon the hearts. Their examples demonstrate that in every age, there were pious Muslims who followed the way of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his noble Companions, without compromise and without giving into the desires of this world. They demonstrate to the Muslims of today that the guidance of the Quran and hadith was sufficient for them to lead their lives in manners pleasing to Allah, although they did not sit with and learn directly from the Prophet (peace be upon him) or even his close Companions.

Today, Muslims face many of the same problems, temptations and difficulties that these pious predecessors faced. The pious predecessors read and intensely studied the Quran and hadith to attain guidance for their lives. They applied the Quran and sunnah in their lives under various circumstances. What they derived from the Divine Guidance should be considered a light for all of those who come after them who face circumstances similar to theirs.

There are many aspects of al-Nawawi's life, in particular, that may set an example for those living today. In his introduction to his Master's Thesis on al-Nawawi, Ahmad al-Haddaad echoed these views when he stated,

> The third reason [for writing about al-Nawawi] was to bring to the forefront the life of this extraordinary man who lived in a later time. It is hoped that this biography will bring to us and the coming generation great benefits with respect to seriousness and striving for knowledge, with respect to asceticism and fearing Allah, and with respect to bravery in publicly speaking the truth. The lives of the pious have the greatest effect on those who hear about them. Allah has certainly spoken the truth when He said, "And all that We relate to you (O Muhammad) of the news of the messengers

[is] in order that We may thereby make your heart strong and firm" (*Hood* 120).[1]

The goal here is to be brief. Therefore, only some aspects of his life will be highlighted.[2]

Background to al-Nawawi's Life: Islam in the Seventh Century of the Hijrah

The Seventh Century of Islam was a very turbulent time, especially for the area of Sham ("Greater Syria"). It was during this Century that the Mongols invaded from the East and the Crusaders controlled part of the Muslim lands from the West. In the year 656 AH, the Mongols invaded and conquered Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasids. In 658, however, under the reign of al-Mudhafar Qutuz ibn Abdullah and military leadership of al-Dhaahir Baibars, the Muslims handed the Mongols a stunning defeat at Ain Jaloot. Also, in 679, when the Mongols again tried to conquer Aleppo, they were defeated. From that time onwards, Muslim forces continued to battle and make headway against the Mongols. Similarly, the Crusaders were defeated and removed from Sham in the year 691.

By the grace and mercy of Allah, these turbulent times did not mean the end of Islamic studies for the inhabitants of that area. In fact, when Noor al-Deen Zanki (d. 569) entered Sham he found that the light of learning had been extinguished. Therefore, he made a concerted effort to encourage the people of that area to renew their studies of Islam. In the process, he opened many schools for the study of Islam. In fact, he opened the first Dar al-Hadith in Damascus, Aleppo and elsewhere. This same spirit of spreading knowledge and establishing educational institutions was carried on by those who ruled after Noor al-Deen Zanki, especially Saif al-Deen Qalaawoon (d. 689). Therefore, one does not find a shortage of scholars and learning even during that turbulent century of Islamic history.

Al-Nawawi's Birth and Upbringing

Muhi al-Deen[1] Abu Zakariya[2] Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Hizaami al-Nawawi was born in 631 A.H. (1233 C.E.) in the village of Nawa, south of Damascus,

---

[1] Ahmad al-Haddaad, *al-Imaam al-Nawawi wa Athaaruhu fi al-Hadeeth wa Uloomih* (Beirut: Daar al-Bashaair al-Islaamiyah, 1992), p. 7.

[2] Those readers interested in more details about the life of Imam al-Nawawi may consult Alaa al-Deen ibn al-Attaar, *Tuhfat al-Taalibeen fi Tarjumah al-Imaam Muhiy al-Deen* (Riyadh: Daar al-Sami'ee, 1414 A.H.), *passim*; Jalaal al-Deen al-Suyooti, *al-Minhaaj al-Sawi fi Tarjamah al-Imaam al-Nawawi* (Beirut: Daar ibn Hazm, 1994), *passim*; Abdul Ghani al-Diqr, *Al-Imaam al-Nawawi: Shaikh al-Islaam wa al-Muslimeen wa Umdat al-Fuqahaa wa al-Muhaditheen* (Damascus: Daar al-Qalam, 1980), *passim*. Al-Suyooti relied greatly on al-Attaar, quoting lengthy passages from his work.

Syria. Coming from Nawa, he is given the descriptive name al-Nawawi, which is also sometimes written al-Nawaawi.

Al-Nawawi did not come from a well-known family. There is very little mention, if any, of his grandfather, father and other relatives. This implies that they were a modest family. They also were not known for producing great scholars. However, his father did have a reputation for being very pious and God-fearing. His father had a garden in which he would grow food for his family. He would avoid, and taught his family to avoid, eating anything which may be forbidden in any way whatsoever. This was a true application of the following hadith from *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ طَيِّبٌ لاَ يَقْبَلُ إِلاَّ طَيِّبًا وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ أَمَرَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ بِمَا أَمَرَ بِهِ الْمُرْسَلِينَ فَقَالَ (يَا أَيُّهَا الرُّسُلُ كُلُوا مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَاعْمَلُوا صَالِحًا إِنِّي بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ عَلِيمٌ) وَقَالَ (يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُلُوا مِنْ طَيِّبَاتِ مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ) قَالَ وَذَكَرَ الرَّجُلَ يُطِيلُ السَّفَرَ أَشْعَثَ أَغْبَرَ يَمُدُّ يَدَهُ إِلَى السَّمَاءِ يَا رَبِّ يَا رَبِّ وَمَطْعَمُهُ حَرَامٌ وَمَشْرَبُهُ حَرَامٌ وَمَلْبَسُهُ حَرَامٌ وَغُذِّيَ بِالْحَرَامِ فَأَنَّى يُسْتَجَابُ لِذَلِكَ

"O People! Verily Allah is good and He does not accept but what is good. Allah has ordered the believers with the same command that He ordered the messengers. He said, 'O Messengers, eat of the good and pure things and work righteous deeds. Verily, I am knowledgeable of what you do.' And He said, 'O believers! Eat of the good and wholesome things that We have provided for you.' And he mentioned a man who was on a long journey, with disheveled hair and dust-ridden, stretching out his hands to the sky, saying, 'O Lord, O Lord,' while his food is of the forbidden, his drink is of the forbidden, his

---

[1] All of the biographical works give him the nickname "Muhiy al-deen" although he himself did not like to be called by it. He said that he did not forgive the person who gave him that nickname. He may have disliked that nickname because it means, "The One who Gives Life to the Religion," while, in fact, the religion of Islam is not in need of anyone to give it life. Al-Haddaad argues that the name does become him but that out of modesty, he did not like to be called by it. (See al-Haddaad, p. 19.) According to al-Madaabaghi, if a name or title of praise is disliked by someone, out of modesty, although the title fits him, then it is allowed to call that person by that name. This is not considered a type of backbiting or insult. See Hasan al-Madaabaghi's comments on the margin of Ahmad ibn Hajr al-Haitami, *Fath al-Mubeen li-Sharh al-Arbaeen* (Beirut: Daar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, 1978), p. 4.

[2] He was given the name Abu Zakaria ("The Father of Zakaria") although he never had a child by that name. It is not uncommon for men to be given agnomens while they are still under age and that agnomen remains with them throughout their lives. In *al-Majmoo*, al-Nawawi argues that it is recommended for people to have agnomens, even if they do not have children. See Yahya al-Nawawi, *al-Majmoo Sharh al-Muhadhab* (Beirut: Daar al-Fikr, n.d.) vol. 8, p. 438.

Commentary on Al-Nawawi's Introduction

Imam al-Nawawi's Introduction to His *Forty Hadith*[1]

الحمد لله رب العالمين، قيوم السماوات والأرضين، مدبر الخلائق أجمعين، باعث الرسل صلوات الله وسلامه عليهم أجمعين إلى المكلفين، لهدايتهم وبيان شرائع الدين، بالدلائل القطعية وواضحات البراهين، أحمده على جميع نعمه وأسأله المزيد من فضله وكرمه، وأشهد أن لا إله إلا الله وحده لا شريك له الواحد القهار، الكريم الغفار، وأشهد أن سيدنا محمداً عبده ورسوله، وحبيبه وخليله، وأفضل المخلوقين، المكرّم بالقرآن العزيز المعجزة المستمرّة على تعاقب السنين، وبالسنن المستنيرة للمسترشدين، سيدنا محمد المخصوص بجوامع الكلم وسماحة الدين، صلوات الله وسلامه عليه وعلى سائر النبيين والمرسلين وآل كلّ وسائر الصالحين، أما بعد:

فقد روينا عن علي بن أبي طالب وعبد الله بن مسعود ومعاذ بن جبل وأبي الدرداء وابن عمر وابن عباس وأنس بن مالك وأبي هريرة وأبي سعيد الخدري رضي الله عنهم

[1] First, the text of al-Nawawi's Introduction shall be presented. This will be followed by a commentary on that introduction. The translated text of al-Nawawi's work will be indented to distinguish it from the commentary.

من طرق كثيرات بروايات متنوعة أن رسول الله (صلى الله عليه وسلم) قال "من حفظ على أمتي أربعين حديثاً من أمر دينها بعثه الله يوم القيامة في زمرة الفقهاء والعلماء."

وفي رواية أبي الدرداء "وكنت له يوم القيامة شافعاً وشهيداً". وفي رواية ابن مسعود "قيل له: ادخل من أيّ أبواب الجنة شئْت". وفي رواية ابن عمر "كُتِبَ في زمرة العلماء وحُشر في زمرة الشهداء". واتفق الحفاظ على أنه حديث ضعيف وإن كثرت طرقه.

وقد صنف العلماء رضي الله عنهم في هذا الباب ما لا يحصى من المصنفات. فأول من علمته صنف فيه عبد الله بن المبارك، ثم ابن أسلم الطوسي العالم الرّباني، ثم الحسن بن سفيان النسائي، وأبو بكر الآجري وأبو بكر محمد بن إبراهيم الأصفهاني، والدارقطني والحاكم وأبو نعيم وأبو عبد الرحمن السلمي وأبو سعيد الماليني وأبو عثمان الصابوني وعبد الله بن محمد الأنصاري وأبو بكر البيهقي وخلائق لا يحصون من المتقدمين والمتأخرين.

وقد استخرت الله تعالى في جمع أربعين حديثاً اقتداء بهؤلاء الأئمة الأعلام وحفّاظ الإسلام، وقد اتفق العلماء على جواز العمل بالحديث الضعيف في فضائل الأعمال، ومع هذا فليس اعتمادي على هذا الحديث، بل على قوله

(صلى الله عليه وسلم) في الأحاديث الصحيحة: "ليبلِّغْ الشاهدُ منكم الغائب." وقوله (صلى الله عليه وسلم) "نضر الله امرءاً سمع مقالتي فوعاها فأداها كما سمعها." ثم من العلماء من جمع الأربعين في أصول الدين، وبعضهم في الفروع، وبعضهم في الجهاد، وبعضهم في الزهد، بعضهم في الآداب، وبعضهم في الخطب، وكلها مقاصد صالحة رضي الله عن قاصديها، وقد رأيت جمع أربعين أهمّ من هذا كله. وهي أربعون حديثاً مشتملة ذلك، وكل حديث منها قاعدة عظيمة من قواعد الدين، قد وصف العلماء بأن مدار الإسلام عليه، أو هو نصف الإسلام أو ثلثة أو نحو ذلك، ثم ألتزم في هذه الأربعين أن تكون صحيحة، معظمها في صحيحي البخاري ومسلم، وأذكرها محذوفة الأسانيد ليسهل حفظها ويعم الانتفاع بها إن شاء الله تعالى، ثم أتبعها بباب في ضبط خفيّ ألفاظها.

وينبغي لكل راغب في الآخرة أن يعرف هذه الأحاديث لما اشتملت عليه من المهمات واحتوت عليه من التنبيه على جميع الطاعات، وذلك ظاهر لمن تدبره، وعلى الله اعتمادي، وإليه تفويضي واستنادي، وله الحمد والنعمة، وبه التوفيق والعصمة.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, the [One who] Sustains the Heavens and the Earths, Director of all that is created, who sent the messengers

(peace and the blessings of Allah be upon all of them) to rational beings, to guide them and explain the religious laws to them with clear proofs and undeniable arguments. I praise Him for all of His bounties. I ask Him to increase His grace and generosity. I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah, alone, who has no partner, the One Alone, the [One who] Subdues, the Generous, the Forgiving. I bear witness that our leader Muhammad is His servant and messenger, His beloved and dear one, the best of all creation. He was honored with the Glorious Quran that is the enduring miracle throughout all the years. He was also sent with his guiding sunnah that shows the way for those who seek guidance. Our leader Muhammad has been particularized with the characteristic of eloquent and pithy speech, and simplicity and ease in the religion. May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, the other prophets and messengers, all of their families and the rest of the righteous.

To proceed:

We have narrated, through many chains and various narrations, from Ali ibn Abu Taalib, Abdullah ibn Masood, Muaadh ibn Jabal, Abu al-Darda, ibn Umar, ibn Abbaas, Anas ibn Maalik, Abu Huraira and Abu Saeed al-Khudri— may Allah be pleased with all of them— that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, "Whoever preserves for my Nation forty hadith related to its religion, Allah will then resurrect him in the company of the savants and scholars." Another narration states, "Allah will raise him as an erudite and learned scholar." In the narration from Abu al-Darda, it is stated, "On the Day of Resurrection, I will be an intercessor and witness for him." In the narration from ibn Masood, it is stated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "It will be said to him, 'Enter Paradise through any door you wish.'" In the narration of ibn Umar, one finds the words, "He will be recorded among the company of the scholars and will be resurrected in the company of the martyrs." The scholars of hadith agree that, although this hadith has numerous chains, it is weak.

The scholars (may Allah be pleased with them) have compiled innumerable works of this nature. The first one that I know of who compiled such a work was Abdullah ibn al-Mubaarak. After him came ibn Aslam al-

Toosi, a pious scholar. Then came al-Hasan ibn Sufyaan al-Nasaai, Abu Bakr al-Aajuri, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Ibraaheem al-Asfahaani, al-Daaraqutni, al-Haakim, Abu Nuaim, Abu Abd al-Rahmaan al-Sulami, Abu Said al-Maleeni, Abu Uthmaan al-Saabooni, Abdullah ibn Muhammad al-Ansaari, Abu Bakr al-Baihaqi and countless others both from earlier and later times.

I have turned to Allah for guidance and prayed to Him while compiling these forty hadith, following the example of those Imams and guardians of Islam. The scholars have agreed that it is permissible to act in accord with weak hadith that state the virtuousness of deeds. Nonetheless, given that fact, I have not relied upon that hadith only in compiling this work. Instead, I am following the statement of the Prophet (peace be upon him) found in an authentic hadith, "Let him who was present among you inform those who are absent." The Prophet (peace be upon him) also said, "May Allah make radiant the man who has heard what I said, preserved it in his memory and conveyed it in the way that he heard it."

Scholars have compiled forty hadith on faith and belief (*usool*), on practical matters (*furoo*), on jihad, on austerity, on etiquette, and even on sermons. All of these [collections] were concerning righteous aims. May Allah be pleased with those who sought them. However, I have found it best to collect together forty hadith which are more important than all of those. These forty hadith incorporate all of those separate topics. In fact, each hadith is by itself a great general precept from the foundations of the religion. Some scholars state that all of Islam revolves around these hadith. Some have said, about particular hadith, that they are one-half of Islam, one-third of Islam and so forth.

I have committed myself to including only authentic hadith in these forty hadith. The majority of them are from *Sahih al-Bukhari* or *Sahih Muslim*. I have mentioned them without their chain of authorities in order for it to be easier to memorize them and thus more will be able to benefit from them, Allah willing. After the hadith, I included a section on the meanings of the obscure expressions found in the hadith.[1]

---

[1] This is not included in the translation but may be referred to in the commentary.

Everyone who desires and looks forward to the Hereafter must be familiar with these hadith because they cover the most important aspects of the religion and offer direction to all forms of obedience to Allah. This is clear to anyone who ponders these hadith. I rely only upon Allah and I entrust my affair only to Him. To Him is all the Praise and grace, from Him is guidance and protection from error.

Commentary on Al-Nawawi's Introduction

Al-Nawawi stated, "All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds..."

It is noteworthy, that in none of al-Nawawi's major works did he begin with what is known as *khutbah al-haajah*.[1] These are the words with which the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to begin many of his speeches. In his commentary to *Sahih Muslim*, al-Nawawi makes mention of *khutbah al-haajah* by saying, "It is confirmed in *Sunan Abu Dawood* with a *sahih* chain from ibn Masood (may Allah be pleased with him) who said, 'The Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) taught us *khutbah al-haajah*: All praise is due to Allah, we praise Him, seek His aid and...'"[2] In that hadith, it is clear that the Prophet (peace be upon him) intentionally taught his followers that beginning. For this reason, many of the learned begin their lectures, Friday speeches and books similarly. However, no one claims that it is obligatory. If someone begins his speech in that matter, he has done well and what is best. If he does not, no harm has been done.

Al-Nawawi always began his works with praises of Allah. As is clear from his commentary on *Sahih Muslim*, he followed this practice due to the following hadith of the Prophet (peace be upon him), as reported by Abu Huraira:

كُلُّ أَمْرٍ ذِي بَالٍ لا يُبْدَأُ فِيهِ بِالْحَمْدِ أَقْطَعُ

"Every matter of importance that does not begin with praise [of Allah] is lacking in blessing." This hadith is recorded with different wordings by Abu Dawood and ibn Maajah. (The above is ibn Maajah's text.) Al-Nawawi records a number of its different wordings and concludes that the narration from Abu Huraira is *hasan*.[3] However, this seems to be one of those cases where al-

---

[1] For the complete text of *khutbah al-haajah*, see the beginning of the introduction of this work. For more details, see the author's *The Friday Prayer: Part 1- The Fiqh* (Aurora, CO: Islamic Assembly of North America, 1994), pp. 95-97.

[2] Al-Nawawi, *Sharh Sahih*, vol. 6, p. 160.

[3] Al-Nawawi, *Sharh Sahih*, vol. 1, p. 43.