

'The Character of Zacharias'

by A.W. Tozer

The sermon emphasizes the importance of character over personality, using the example of Zacharias to illustrate the value of trust, expectation, and character in the face of adversity.

Scripture: Luke 1:5

Topics: "Faithfulness in Prayer", "Character vs. Personality"

Description

A.W. Tozer reflects on the character of Zacharias, emphasizing the importance of true character over superficial personality. He highlights Zacharias and Elizabeth's righteousness and faithfulness to God despite their long-standing prayers for a child going unanswered. Tozer contrasts the depth of character that emerges under pressure with the fleeting nature of personality, urging the congregation to seek a life of integrity and spiritual depth. He calls for older generations to be examples of faith and character for the younger ones, lamenting the lack of such role models in the church today. Ultimately, Tozer encourages believers to remain active in their faith and to cultivate a relationship with God that transcends mere appearances.

Transcript

August 12, 1956

In the first chapter of Luke, please. But I think I ought to say before I read my texts and give the talk that this is the low day for us here in that it is the closing day of the convention. Just within a forty-five-minute drive of here, and a good many of our people are here. Quite a number of our choir people are out there. I mean, are there, and we will probably notice it tonight. There's only one day in the year which our choir doesn't have a message for us. And we do allow that to get by on that Sunday. That's convention Sunday out at Des Plaines. Our people go and come and some will be out there, and some will not get home tonight. But we want you here and we plan a good service tonight and we look for you. But if you should want to help them out there and stay, we'll understand and it will be all right.

Now in Luke the first chapter beginning with verse five. There was in the days of Herod the king, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth. And they were both righteous before God walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. And they had no child because Elizabeth was barren. And they both were now well stricken in years. It came to pass that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course according to the custom of the priest's office. His lot was to

burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense. And there appeared under him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, fear not, Zacharias, for thy prayer is heard. And thy wife, Elizabeth, shall bear thee a son. And thou shalt call his name John.

I will not read further because there we see the picture of the old man and the angel. And I don't know whether I can as they say, now project this, or make you see it at all, or feel it. And if I cannot, it will be my fault, not yours. But to me there is about this scene something wonderfully wholesome, something strong and reassuring and healing to the soul. But we'll have to read it and hear it in the right mood though. We can't rush into this. We must walk reverently up there and with hushed voices gaze, and we must be submissive to the will of God and we must bring our hearts into tune with the New Testament and with the religion of the New Testament and with God Himself. We must be trustful and expectant. If we rush here from a ball game, of course we won't see anything here. But I hope that you came in the right mood. I hope that you have recollected yourself and are, and we'll be prepared to think with me about this.

Now, it says there was a certain priest by the name of Zacharias. And he was of the course of Abia. And he had married a wife many years before who was of the priestly line too. That is, she was of the tribes, she was a daughter of Aaron. And her name was Elizabeth. And they, both of them, were righteous before God. And they walked in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, blameless. And he, the old man, executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course according to the custom of the priest's office. And at the right time, he went and burnt incense, and then into the temple of the Lord while the multitude of the people stood outside praying at the time of the burning of the incense.

Now here, if we see nothing else, we see character, that beautiful word character. It was a sad day for the church of Jesus Christ when the word character went out, and the word personality came in. Because now in the average gospel church, character is just a little bit of a dirty word, because the liberals have talked so long about building character when they didn't have any foundation to build on; that we've decided, even if we have the foundation, we won't build anything on it. So that in place of talking about character now, we talk about personality. We borrowed that scintillating praise or word from elsewhere, and you know where, and so now it's personality. But God doesn't care very much about personality. He cares everything about character. Character is what we are under pressure. Character is the total of you added up at the bottom of the column. Total is the well-integrated qualities that make a Christian. And here we see if nothing else, we see character.

But we see more. We see strength here. Here's not surface tension. That's a word we use a lot now, that this thing will hold so much because it's been proved to hold so much. And there is a paint company that says, if you save the surface, you've saved all. And everything is surface now. Nobody cares very much what's underneath. It's all surface. Our architecture has gone surface from the 1933-34, what did they call it, World Fair held down here. Our architecture now looks like a fish fin piece of machinery and we don't care what's underneath it, just so it looks good on the surface.

This is the day of the surface. And the Scripture says that God doesn't look on the surface of a man. God looks underneath the surface at the character of the man. And here we have strength and we have depth of strength. Here we have it, but the gold became dim in religious circles when character went out and personality came in. Because personality is what people think you are because you can project yourself. That character is what you are when the squeeze is on. And you're only what you are when you're being

squeezed. You're not what you are when everything is all right and there's no pressure. You are when the pressures on.

You are what you are when the nether millstone starts to grind one way and the upper millstone starts to grind another, and you're in between. Then what you are comes out; and all that is eternal of you and all of it that God will notice about you. And all little matters what you are when you're in the squeeze. When you're being ground there between the upper and the nether millstone, and that's character. Now, character isn't always under the grindstone and the character isn't always being squeezed. But, personality dissolves like the dew on the grass when it gets under the squeeze. But when the pressure is on, character stands up just the same as it was before.

And here's another word. It says they were both righteous before God. Here's another word that has gotten in bad; and the word righteous is now out. We don't like to use the word righteous because we've gotten our fingers burned. Because some people teach salvation by personal righteousness, we've gotten so we teach salvation without personal righteousness. And one's just as bad as the other. For the church to teach that I can be saved by my personal righteousness, is a falsehood. For the church to teach that I can be saved and not be personally righteous is also a falsehood. For, the purpose of God in salvation is to make men good forever, and he starts right down here now. And the idea that if the word righteous is applied to a man, that he's a self-righteous hypocrite, came from the devil and it never came from God or the Scriptures at all. It's a misunderstanding of grace, and it's a misapplication and misuse of the word.

But here was a righteous old man. God bless him, he hadn't been to the right Bible schools, and so he didn't know that he shouldn't be a righteous man. He didn't know that he should be obeying the commandments of God and keeping the order of his course and living prayerfully before his God, and living with one wife and walking decently in the world. He didn't know that because he hadn't been to the right schools and hadn't been taught that that's legalism, and that Jesus paid it all and that all you have to do is to believe, and that salvation hasn't anything to do whatsoever with righteousness. That's what we've been hearing over the last years and the result has been, it has dragged the moral level of the church down into the gutter until, in some circles now, you can't tell a Christian from a sinner except by the button he wears and the fact that he has a tract in his hip pocket.

Now, it says here that there was a certain priest named Zacharias. Thank God for him. I'm looking at this old man. It's like standing on a lofty mountain peak and gazing out miles and scores of miles away at the lofty chains of mountains there and at the blue sky above and the white clouds that come down like flux of whipped cream. It's like seeing the sky and the clouds and the hills and the vale that stretched far away there. And smelling the clean, fresh piney air that comes up from the vales below. And knowing that down below, there's smoke and dust and dirt and noise and tumult and seesaw rivalry and cutthroat competition, and cheating and deceiving and ambition and lying and at the same time standing above it all and gazing out over the mountains.

Now, in the world all around about us brother and sister, here is exactly what we've gotten. I've named it. There is all the smoke and dust and dirt and noise and moral tumults and seesaw rivalry and cutthroat competition and all the rest. It's out there in the world. And all the color and the glamour and the publicity and the pride and the self-love and the deceit and the pretense and the physical transiency of it all and the stage props and the painted, hollowed death, and the Danse Macabre and the march of dead zanies morally and spiritually dead, walking up and down. Brethren, that's what's out there. And the poor church hasn't had brains enough, God help us, to pull away from that. We haven't had brains enough to pull away

from that. We're busy now getting integrated into it. We're busy now, showing that you don't have to leave that. That that's an old-fashioned view of things, and that there isn't any Bible for it.

And so, youth has taken over. It's said in the Bible, to tarry in Jerusalem until your beard be grown. But proud and vain, beardless youths have now taken over and have become founders and experimenters and the getters of quick effects regardless of stability or character or righteousness or solidity or permanence. Well, I'm on the other side. But you know brethren, it isn't age that did it. I've all I always been on the other side. When my hair was as black as a raven's wing, or the feathers on the wing, I was, still believed and believe then what to believe now about this whole business. And it isn't senility. It is inside. And I'd had it from the time God filled me with the Holy Ghost thirty-some years ago.

O Zachariah, hold still a little. We want to look at you. We want to look at you and your quiet, smiling old wife Elizabeth. The rat race of Adam has all passed you by. And the brass band and the noise in the parade, it's all passed you by, and there's a faraway look in your own eyes, and a kind of a preoccupied set to your features. Because there isn't anything out there in the smoke and dirt and noise that you want. You don't want publicity, and you don't want a better job and you don't want a bigger house and you don't want more money and you don't want to be known in the gates and you don't want your picture in the paper and you don't want to get on Times cover. There isn't anything you want dear old man of God, only character and you've got it. Only strength and you've got it. Only eternity and you've found it.

Oh yes, there's one thing you do want too, one thing, one thing. You've told God about it over the years often, and often you've told God about it. And it didn't come. And over the years, and it's been a long time since you've asked for it now, because you thought there isn't any use anymore. He wanted a son. He wanted a boy that he could name after him that could stand and offering incense when he was gone. He wanted a boy, but he didn't get any boy. And so, he kind of quit and gave up and became reconciled. And he thought that he wasn't worthy of such an honor. But he wasn't bitter about it. He was just sad. And the sadness sort of mixed with the sweetness to make his old countenance kind and it furnished the low notes in the song of adoration that he sent up every day. The bright notes were formed out of the things God did for him. But the low notes were the ones that God hadn't, and that one was, he hadn't given him a son.

But now, suddenly there appeared unto him an angel. Suddenly standing by the right hand of the altar, there was an angel. Not while he was idling his hours away. Not while he was listening to the ballgame. But not while he was just sitting. You know, they do that. We came through the south a couple of weeks ago, and we smiled and talked about it down there in some parts they just sit, even young fellows are in training for it. We saw them only maybe 13-14 years old sitting with the old gray hairs.

But the old man had something better to do than just sit. Not while he was gossiping and waiting for the end, but while he was busy in the work of God doing what he was told to do. Not always knowing exactly how it was going to come out. And there was a little grave of prayer that hadn't been answered, but he wasn't going to bother God about it. He had a little prayer that was there and he had a little headstone up, sacred to the memory of a boy that I never got; that I wished I might have had for carrying on the name. But he didn't. And the old man just waited there and did his work. And while he was waiting there by the right hand of the altar, stood an angel.

I wonder about the old empties that we have in the church of God, brethren. I wonder about these old empties. They've grown up now and they've married and had their children. The children have grown up and they've got some grandchildren. And they walk slow now and are careful not to twist. They move at

right angles you know. When you get old, you move at right angles. When you're young, you just twist and turn like a rubber band. But when you get old, you face around, very military fashion and go straight ahead. Not because you're military, because you're stiff.

And so many old Christians are like that. I know so many of them. I meet them everywhere up and down the land. They're the old empties. They haven't seen an angel and they haven't anything particular to do. They're just sitting. And I wonder if they couldn't do like the old man did while He was praying, while he was living the life, while he was worshipping, an angel appeared unto him. If he'd been somewhere else, the angel wouldn't have appeared. But he was at the right place at the right time. And God said, your prayer is heard Zacharias. And Zacharias thought real fast, what prayer? What, I hadn't been praying anything lately. I haven't wanted anything. What is it? Oh, that, that I buried that. I thought God hadn't heard me for that. His old face brightened. Yeah, you're going to have a son, Zacharias, and Elizabeth thy wife will conceive and bear a son. And then he described him. He said, he's going to name him John, that's first. And you shall have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice at his birth, for he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. He shall go before Him in the Spirit and power of Elias to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, and to make ready of people prepared for the Lord. God waited a long time. But when he answered, He poured it on, shaken down and running over.

That was the Annunciation, the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, that mightiest New Testament figure beside Christ, and Paul. Christ is never compared with anybody else. But next to Paul the mighty New Testament figure. And your prayer is heard, he said. So, the old man could lay the reef off that grave and tear it to pieces and throw it to the wind, kicked down the head board or whatever you call it and plant a peony there now, or a bit of garden vegetable. No use for it anymore. God had heard his prayer.

Now, he hadn't been a colorful figure. And he never wrote a tract about that. And he never was interviewed, I suppose by anybody. But God had heard his prayer. And he said that prayer you made. Oh, yes, I quit that about 15 years ago, when I gave up hope that I would ever have a son. But God hadn't forgotten it. And he had that prayer in His bottle up there. He was about to pour it down. Your prayer is heard, Zacharias. You haven't had much personality, but you've had tremendous character. You've been good under pressure. You've kept sweet when I said no to a son. And you didn't let it embitter you when the age passed when you thought you could, you and your wife, could have had a son. And you've lived your life and your prayer has been you. You've been your prayer, Zacharias. Your prayer and you would have been one. You haven't gone one way and your prayer another, but you and your prayer have been on. You've gone the same way your prayer went. And so now I am ready to do a miracle here. Nobody ever heard of it, but it's going to be a miracle. That old lady over there with the gray hair with a modest smile, she's going to have a boy. And he's going to be named great and he'll turn the hearts of Israel to God.

Oh, brethren, where are the Zacharias in our day? Where are the Zacharias? We are all out to be like Stuart Hamblin instead of like Zacharias. We're all out to be personality boys instead of like Zacharias. And we scold our young people, some of the older people do. But where are the gray-haired saints? Where are those who have left the parade long, long ago and let it go by, and look at it with a tired benign smile? There are those that are preoccupied with the things of God and live for the hour of their release? Where are they? Everybody over fifty ought to be one of them. Everybody here today over 50, you ought

to be in that category. You ought to be one that a young man could look at and say, there's character. There's no personality. He's a little bald, and he sticks out places, but there is character, there is character. There is gold instead of brass. There's pure, pure silver instead of tin.

There's a man brethren. That's what's the matter with the church and that's why that ill-advised young people came up and took over and led us over a cliff. It was because there weren't enough old Zacharias to set the pace. And they had nobody to imitate and they had no heroes to follow. All their heroes were dead. They had to read about George Mueller and David Livingstone, and that was pretty dry reading for a young fellow with red blood. So, they got up and jazzed up our Christianity because we had an old Zacharias. Listen old man, you blame the young fellow and you blame that young girl who's got a lot of zing and a wicked look in her eye. She has no Zachariah to look at, that's the trouble. She's got nobody to imitate, no character out there.

Oh, the old empties, help them. They get old and cold and dull and retire, and retire from the work of the Lord too, and move into a comfortable home. All right, old fellow, you think that big picture window is going to keep cancer out? Do you think that beautiful lawn is going to keep a heart attack away? You think that charming door with a brass knocker will be shut so the undertaker won't come and lug you out? You think that all this fresh country air is going to do you any good in the day when God looks into the hearts of men and judges as according to the deeds done in the body? No, you old empty. You were just an old empty and you've come back hollow because you've always been hollow, but you were too busy and we didn't find it out until you got along in years.

Brethren, don't think for a second that we can get away with it. The old man shouldn't be seeing angels and dreaming dreams. And the young man should be having visions and there should be alertness and growth. And I should be able any moment to stop and call on any man here to lead in prayer and expect a prayer that would be a blessing to everybody. I should be able to do that. A pastor should be able to stop here and say, now we'll stand and have brother so and so lead us and point to any man. I should be able to toss a marble out there or a rubber ball, and anybody it hits and say, you pray. That's the way we should be. But instead of that, every church has a tight little nucleus of a half dozen that have seen the angel, that have heard the voice of God, that have developed character, that have been filled with the Spirit, that have lived the life whose faraway look and preoccupation with heavenly things, mark them out as being different. Every church has its half dozen, or dozen at most and the rest are hangers on. Getting old, it won't be long until they're old empties and won't have a thing. Tap them and they're as hollow as a drum

Brethren, we blame our young people. Are young people aren't to blame at all. I don't think I would ever have served God or ever have gone on if I hadn't had examples to follow when I was a young fellow. I wouldn't have had brains enough to do it. I wouldn't have known how to go about it. But I happen to get into a church when I had only been converted a few months. I happened to get into a church where they stood like pillars, stood like pillars, Brother Colgrove or Brother Hall, and could name them one after the other and there they stood, the pillars. And when they prayed, heaven came down our souls to greet and glory crowned the mercy seat. And I had examples. I had a pastor who was an example. And I had a district superintendent who was an example. And I walked among people who are examples. And God sent a teacher from another missionary society for a year or so to me as an example. And I got my eyes on Zacharias. And I got them off of the personality boys.

I have lived down a whole parade of good-looking rascals that have come up and like a comet have stirred the heavens and gone down into darkness. They've gone up like a rocket and come down like a stick, and

still I've have gone along. I may pop out any one of these days. I don't know and I don't care. It doesn't make any difference. But I do want to leave my testimony behind that it's better to have character than to have personality. Better to have a life that prays than to pray and go another direction from your prayers. Better to be known well in heaven than to be known well on Earth. Better to be popular with the angels and a multitude of holy beings than to be popular down here below. To be popular down here you've got to sell out to a certain degree.

Emerson said, young man, you want to be president? Do you know how much manhood a man has to sell out to be president? If you did, you wouldn't want the job. Emerson said that, I didn't. And I am not striking at Stevenson or Eisenhower. It's not political. I'm just saying that to get popular enough to get elected to anything you have to be pretty slick and a smoothy. And if there's one thing that people of God oughten to be, it's smooth. God's people out to be as salty as sowbelly brine. And they ought to be as sharp as honed steel, but as kind as the heart of God. And they never ought to say anything they didn't mean.

A man wrote me a seven or eight page, closely typewritten letter. It was a rhapsody, a rhapsody, just a rhapsody. He was a commercial artist out in Jamestown, New York. And in one paragraph he admitted that he had met me at Keswick out in the East, that I had just looked at him. Oh, he said, that it was a hard one to take. He said, I went away saying, who does he think? Does he just think I don't amount to much, is that it? I just don't amount to much? Do you think I don't rate? Am I not an important person? Is that the reason he hadn't made over me? No, I was just acting natural. There wasn't any particular reason why I should effervesce, so I didn't effervesce. But I meet people and effervesce sometimes, really. But it just happened that no bell rang, so I didn't effervesce. I didn't turn my back on him. I just didn't effervesce and that worried him, but he got victory over that. If I effervesced and slapped his back, his teeth would have fallen out and chances are he had thought he was somebody and that rhapsody wouldn't have been written. But I just acted natural.

Oh, brethren, by the grace of God, that's what you're for. But remember this one thing. When you act natural, you ought to be spiritual, so what's natural is spiritual. The old man Zachariah just acted natural. But the way he acted was spiritual. He made a mistake. I'll preach about that in another coming Sunday. He made a mistake. He had a little doubt there in his mind, and he got rebuked for that doubt. It wasn't, you know, he wasn't an angel yet, but he just talks to angels. So, he made the mistake, but we'll talked about that later.

So, what about it now? Now this is addressed to everybody that's a little receding. You say, I'm not getting bald. My hair is just receding a little. Sure, that's all. That's all. That's all, and those gray ones that you pick out and pick out and pick out. I used to pick the gray ones out and now I'm picking the black ones out. They're out of place now.

Well, Zachariah, just hold still. We just want to kind of let something rub off on us a little this morning. We just want to be like him. We're living in a different dispensation but his God is our God, and His Christ is our Christ, and his Bible is our Bible. His David is our David and his Moses is our Moses, and his Isaiah is our Isaiah. His knees can be our knees and his voice our voice. He was a good old man. He'd walked with his God. And he made a prayer that had boiled so long up in the yonder in a bottle that God couldn't hold it in any longer. So we just poured it down, and the result was John the Baptist.

Have you seen an angel lately, brother, or are you just one more of the old empties of the church. You've just decided to quit. No zeal, no fire, no sacrifice, relaxing you say. You're going to relax yourself right into

a hole and everybody's going to walk away saying, he was a dear old man. You're going to relax yourself right into a hole. And you're so afraid your poor old heart won't stand up under it. Come to church and die of a heart attack by the grace of God.

Better to die of a heart attack in the house of God than to lie somewhere out of the prayer meeting and live to be 100. Go to the house of God. Get out and visit. Do something. Wake up. Shake yourself. Pray and ask God what He wants you to do. And if you don't live to be 100, you're insured. Your wife will get along. Don't think, don't think she won't get along. Mama needs me. Mama doesn't need you at all. Mama needs a holy man at the head of the household. Are you one? Mama needs a self-sacrificing man at the house of God. Mama needs to be a prayer meeting widow. Do you know what they are. They're the women that stay home. They won't go to prayer meeting and their husband goes every week for a meeting, widows. Better make your wife a prayer meeting widow than to go ahead and get old, and be an old empty, dear God.

I don't want to quit. I've got more zeal now that I had when I was 17. And I don't want to quit, and I don't want to die mean, and I don't want to live my life out so when I go people won't know who they're talking about when they praise me.

I want to live for God. Zachariah, thank God for you. You're a good old man. Your old bones have been resting in the dust for a long, long time. But one of these days, there will be a trumpet. There will be a trumpet and it won't be Harry James. There'll be a trumpet and he'll get up and shake himself, and all the character he ever had will rise with him. All the character will rise with him. Personality will be left behind. His character will rise with him to the right hand of God. Amen.

Brother, that's the kind of religion we believe in here, the kind of Christianity we believe in. And if you don't believe in it, you're in the wrong place. For we'll never compromise by the grace of God. Well, I have quit now a long time ago and I'm just running on so I better stop. God bless you this morning. It's hot and it's vacation time. But this ought to be the time that you put your two knees down on the floor and pray through until your heart is warm. Pray through until your heart's warm. And when it gets cold, worry about it. And pray through again until it's warm and keep your heart warm. For these are the days of cold Christianity brethren and we need warm hearts and sacrificial lives. May God give us both.

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