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# 1

## “I’ve Had a Lonely Life”

On Friday, May 17, 1963, hundreds of mourners attended a memorial service in Chicago to pay their respects to A. W. Tozer, the sixty-six-year-old pastor, teacher, and writer who had unexpectedly died at 12:45 a.m. the previous Sunday in a Toronto hospital. Although Aiden Tozer had lived and ministered from a Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Toronto for four years, Christians in metropolitan Chicago still claimed him as their own. Consequently, despite the fact that there had already been a service in Toronto two days earlier, the Tozer family acquiesced to the desires of many Windy City people to publicly grieve and pay respect to the preacher who had ministered to them for thirty-five years.

Memorial service eulogies, letters of condolence, statements from Christian organizations, and hushed words among the bereaved, all expressed a similar sentiment of gratitude to Almighty God for sending a modern prophet. A. W. Tozer had called them to heartfelt confession, urged them to genuine repentance, pushed them to radical obedience, helped them to know God

intimately, and led them up to the Heavenly Throne with praise.

Aiden W. Tozer directed people's attention toward God through almost every means of communication available in the early and middle twentieth century. He employed pulpits and platforms for forty-seven years, wrote hundreds of articles for periodicals over a span of four decades, conducted regular Saturday morning radio broadcasts over Chicago's WMBI for eight years, and published nine books during the last two decades of his life.

Dr. Tozer's messages pierced hearts and illuminated minds with a profundity uncommon among Bible teachers and preachers. Indeed, spiritually alert people recognized that he possessed unique charisma—a sacred anointing. Those close to him explained that despite his busy schedule, the modern-day prophet spent several hours each day in prayer—not simply interceding but ardently seeking God's face and desiring to be in His presence. In brief, Dr. Tozer manifested the spiritual principle of 2 Chronicles 16:9: "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him."



It is nearly a half century ago that Aiden Wilson Tozer, one of the twentieth century's most enigmatic, complex, and profoundly anointed preachers, died in his sleep of a coronary thrombosis. He was all alone in a Toronto hospital, except for the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ whom he knew and loved so passionately. This last scene of A. W. Tozer's life symbolized the way he lived during the forty-eight years following his conversion to faith in Jesus Christ.

From the time of his conversion in 1915 and his calling to preach in 1916, A. W. Tozer continually found himself surrounded by people. Nevertheless, this man who was raised in a large and extended family, married a godly woman who brought seven children into the world, and who lived most of his adult life preaching to large gatherings of people, confided to a friend in the 1950s: "I've had a lonely life."<sup>1</sup> Never one to use words carelessly, Tozer revealed this deep sadness during one of the few times he opened his most inmost being to anyone. But what an irony that Mr. Tozer lived a

lonely life. He had a devoted wife and lovely children, all of whom would have treasured more personal intimacy. And among those throngs of listeners to his sermons, and many of the faithful members of the four churches he pastored, many would have stood in long lines for hours just to have a few minutes of personal time and intimate two-way sharing with the man who helped them know God but refused to let them know him.

A. W. Tozer died alone in a dark hospital room because he had urged Ada, his faithful wife of forty-five years, to go home and get some sleep. Indeed, he never wanted people to see him when he was ill and in bed. By choice he pushed people away in times of sickness as he often did in times of health. His family and closest friends all testified that Tozer, who magnetically attracted spiritually alert people who longed to know God, kept almost everyone he knew at a personal distance. Indeed, the only person who really *knew* Tozer, and with whom he spent long, quiet hours was the Holy Spirit—the only One with him during his final hours on earth.

If A. W. Tozer’s loneliness was somewhat self-inflicted, there is another dimension of isolation that inevitably engulfs a man who faithfully preaches the whole counsel of Scripture. A. W. Tozer heralded biblical truth. He loved the Bible and unflinchingly preached what he believed people needed to hear, regardless of what they wanted. Furthermore, this self-educated preacher and teacher read deeply of the early church fathers, and he sought to interpret the Scriptures within the context of how they were interpreted and applied throughout church history. Consequently, Tozer was nonsectarian. He found riches in Christian tradition—riches sometimes overlooked by teachers and preachers who were confident that nothing written between the book of Acts and the Reformation, with the possible exception of St. Augustine, could be useful to true disciples of Jesus Christ.

Tozer’s enthusiasm for the writings of the many so-called Christian mystics distressed still other faithful people. To the minds of many of Tozer’s generation a mystic could not be Christian. They feared “mysticism” was a way to smuggle Eastern paganism into the church. But Tozer begged to differ. He frequently asked, “How can anyone have a ‘personal relationship’ with Jesus Christ today unless

it is mystical?” Tozer insisted that Jesus does not walk our streets as He walked the roads of Galilee. “Eternal life is to *know* the Father and Jesus Christ whom He has sent” (see John 17:3), and only a mystical relationship can enable one to have this grace of intimacy and knowledge.<sup>2</sup> In brief, A. W. Tozer’s teaching on the “deeper life”—that is a relationship with God that is only opened up and sustained through the person of the Holy Spirit—caused some people who otherwise admired him to be a bit wary of his teaching on the Holy Spirit.

Like the ancient Hebrew prophets, Tozer alienated religious leaders. He spoke publicly of his disdain for materialism, consumerism, and worldliness, wherever he detected it infiltrating the church. This led to no end of criticism.

Since Tozer’s death this problem of worldliness in American culture and in the church has grown much more pronounced. Consequently, his writings are still anathema to people who share the Western mania of consumer Christianity. In fact, by twentieth- and early twenty-first-century standards of success, A. W. Tozer is scarcely worthy of notice. In a nation that celebrates rapid, sustained, and quantifiable growth as primary measuring sticks of value, Tozer’s name will not be found on the rosters of role models or in the pantheon of heroes, even within the hallowed halls of many American seminaries or within the training programs of institutional churches.

A. W. Tozer’s relative obscurity is the result of several factors. First of all, he spoke prophetically to the church, and historically we see that the religious leaders of any era seldom admire those sent to them with words of truth. Like prophets of old, the thin, mustached, and bespectacled herald of truth who originally came from the hilly wilderness of western Pennsylvania, spoke with razor-like sharpness. He admonished Christian leaders for their drift toward worldliness manifested in growing practices of adopting leadership models from the business world for the church and for allowing various forms of entertainment to take the place of biblical preaching, teaching, and theocentric worship. Many church leaders did not like his critique of their practices during his lifetime, and their worldly offspring today find his criticisms even less palatable, especially since so many have enthusiastically and unquestionably

adopted the precise methods he found so deplorable. Second, the cult of success is so firmly entrenched in the contemporary institutional church that many leaders see Tozer as simply irrelevant. With our turn-of-the-century obsession to attract crowds and make them comfortable for fear they will leave, Tozer’s prophetic calls for radical obedience to Christ, personal holiness, purposive and passionate prayer life, spartan lifestyles, and God-centered worship, caused him to sound—in the minds of many people—insensitive, unloving, and in some cases downright abrasive. Finally, due to the market-driven contemporary church’s love affair with growth, fostered by “seeker friendly” services, “inoffensivism” in the pulpit, church growth courses in the seminaries, and continuing education conferences for pastors on how to build bigger churches, few are inclined to examine the life and ministry of a man who served as a pastor for forty-four years but never attracted and sustained a congregation of more than four or five hundred people.<sup>3</sup>

A. W. Tozer was neither hurt nor surprised by his relative obscurity in comparison to some of his highly acclaimed contemporaries who commanded large annual salaries and substantial honorariums for outside speaking engagements. On the contrary, Tozer poked fun at himself and laughingly remarked that he preached himself off of nearly every camp meeting and Bible conference platform in North America once he called for costly discipleship and genuine spiritual revival. Like Old Testament prophets, he registered his disdain for money, and even urged his church governing board to pass over his name when it came time to review the budget and increase staff salaries.<sup>4</sup>

In truth, this frequently acerbic pastor cared little for the opinions of people when it came to what he should preach or write. A self-proclaimed “minor prophet,” Tozer’s ambition was to be Jeremiah, Amos, and John the Baptist to his generation. He knew his ministry required him to call the church out of its apathy and admiration for the world, and into the presence, knowledge, and worship of a Holy God.<sup>5</sup>

If the prophets of Hebrew history were unpopular, Tozer unflinchingly accepted a similar reception. If his preaching failed to attract large crowds, and if his books sold far fewer copies than many

of his Christian contemporaries, he never registered concern. On the contrary, he knew his calling was to be faithful rather than successful by world standards. Antithetical to today's "market-driven" churches, Tozer's churches were places where the faithful gathered to worship God in community, learn from Scripture how God would have them live, and be sent out as heralds of the gospel of Jesus Christ to a fallen and hurting world.

Being a man who was steeped in the Holy Scriptures—a man whose soul was in a word, bibline, he probably never expected more than a remnant of Christians to take his writing and preaching seriously. What might have surprised him was the fact that the books he published in his lifetime continue to sell, and two of these, *The Pursuit of God* and *Knowledge of the Holy*, sell more now than when he was alive. Furthermore, many of his recorded sermons have been edited since his earthly passing, and many of these have been produced in book form. Like C. S. Lewis, Tozer had more books published subsequent to his death than when he lived.

If A. W. Tozer's voice needed to be heard in his lifetime, his messages are even more important today. The problems he confronted in the late twentieth century are still with us. Although he died nearly fifty years ago, we ignore his biblical messages at our peril.

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Although there are already two important biographies on A. W. Tozer: David J. Fant Jr., *A. W. Tozer: A Twentieth-Century Prophet* (1964) and James L. Snyder, *In Pursuit of God: The Life of A. W. Tozer* (1991), I have chosen to write another book for several reasons. First, some new resources are available since Fant and Snyder wrote their books. Oral history interviews have been conducted with hitherto overlooked or inaccessible people. Likewise some important correspondence has been discovered in recent years. Second, despite significant contributions of the earlier biographies in setting forth the details of Tozer's life, more remains to be revealed about the inner man. There are dimensions of A. W. Tozer that have eluded students of his life and ministry. As a result, this book attempts to reveal the inner life of this gifted and complex man who

at once loved God passionately and deeply, sought to know Him with all his heart and mind and soul, yet found it quite difficult to relate with similar enthusiasm to his own immediate and extended family, or to the congregations God called him to oversee.

Third, inasmuch as Tozer has been dead for nearly half a century, we now have a vantage point of longer perspective. From this angle of vision we can evaluate his influence with more confidence. Fourth, early twenty-first-century Christians live in a culture that asks some different questions and wrestles with at least a few issues peculiar to our time and therefore not explored by earlier biographies. Tozer died before the high tide of the charismatic movement and the so-called Third Wave of the Spirit among Christians in the late 1980s,<sup>6</sup> but he has much to say to us in the midst of these profound changes. Indeed, his personal history can calm, comfort, and encourage us today.

Aiden W. Tozer probably never heard or employed a phrase popular today—spiritual formation. Nevertheless, he became magnificently obsessive about the shaping of the soul into Christlikeness. He shared this younger generation’s suspicion of chronological snobbery, and he understood and lived a life of faith that drank deeply from the wells of wisdom preserved in the writings of the early church. Like numerous young adults of the early twenty-first century, Tozer wanted to be connected with the rich roots of historic Christianity, and like many of our younger contemporaries he instinctively knew that the Madison Avenue market-driven movement, with its disdain for the past and its concomitant worship of all things “new and improved,” is deathly for Christians. He realized that anything “new” in Christianity would be moldy in a few years. He believed that preachers and teachers of “the faith which was *once* for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3, emphasis added) must be dedicated to thoughtful contextualization, yes, but originality, no. Tozer would have joined theologian Thomas C. Oden in saying as a teacher of “the faith” that “I am dedicated to unoriginality. I am pledged to irrelevance if relevance means indebtedness to corrupt modernity.”<sup>7</sup>

In the following chapters A. W. Tozer's life is unfolded chronologically, with emphasis placed on presenting and explaining the people, events, and sundry factors that awakened his soul and helped him mature spiritually. Tozer's continual response to the Holy Spirit's call is set forth along with evidence of how the Lord gifted him and then fashioned and refined his ministry.

It is instructive for people who desire to grow in Christ to learn lessons from the lives of saints who have finished well. With this aim in mind, I have been careful to reveal Mr. Tozer's imperfections as well as strengths because most individuals find hope by learning that God uses flawed people. Furthermore, I have attempted to show that Tozer, like all men and women whom God uses for His glory, learned from his mistakes rather than never making them. And it has been quite helpful to discover that the pathway of discipleship is not one of a smooth upward trajectory. On the contrary, Tozer, like all disciples, encountered fog and roadblocks along the way. The route of the Christian is never clearly laid out beforehand. Like Matthew the tax collector, the disciple is simply called out. He is not immediately told where he is going, but he knows the One who has called and promises to walk with him. Consequently the journey, although never easy, is joyous and fruitful. So it was with a boy who first heard the voice of God in western Pennsylvania.