Reckoning With Ravi

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Towards the end of Ravi Zacharias' life, things began to get a little strange. One of the most widely watched apologists of our generation, the grandfatherly intellectual, Ravi spent his days addressing packed university auditoriums, speaking for hours in his husky, Delhi-inflected voice. He wielded philosophical ideas amongst the brightest young minds, consistently making a case for the existence of God and the power of the gospel. And we all loved him for it. He carried himself like a gentleman. He was someone of whom we were proud; someone towards whom we could confidently point questioners.

The Misunderstanding

And then late in the life of this seemingly conservative scholar came the rumblings of a mini-scandal. He had carried out a private email correspondence with a married woman he was counselling and she had sent him naked photos. As the details came to light, he said it was all a misunderstanding. He had never solicited the photos and was horrified that she had ever done such a thing. His mistake, he admitted – his only mistake – was that he should never have emailed a woman who was not his wife.

The whole scenario was quite disconcerting, but the decades of good will Zacharias had accumulated were enough to keep most people in his corner throughout the accusations. It was

all a misunderstanding that most people figured would blow over.

Then things took an unexpected turn.

Postpartum Allegations

After his death on the 19th of May 2020, once the accolades and tributes had died down, more women began to come forward. They were masseuses. It was common knowledge that he had a serious back problem, requiring many hours of therapy to continue to travel and speak around the world. Three women came forward, alleging inappropriate sexual encounters stretching back years. The accusations seemed credible and needed to be officially investigated. So Ravi Zacharias International Ministries hired an independent investigator, Miller & Martin, to do a full report on the claims. That report has just been finalised and officially released, and the findings are worse than anyone ever imagined they could be.

Accountability Sham

A digital forensics expert analysed four phones and a laptop that belonged to the late apologist, and the contents found on the devices was startling. Photographs of women. Intimate text conversations. After more investigations were conducted, more therapists were found who described sexual encounters. One has alleged rape. It's clear that Zacharias had full-blown extramarital affairs with women in far-flung places like Southeast Asia, all while constantly travelling with a male partner to keep up the pretence of accountability. What no one realised or imagined was that even though he seemed to carefully avoid the appearance of improper conduct, he continued to have private massage sessions wherever he went, and that was where he indulged his fantasies.

The Seismic Fallout

The data is in. The investigation has been done. The epitaph has been re-written. Ravi Zacharias lived a double life for years, proclaiming the importance of truth while consistently cheating on his wife and family. Radio stations have pulled his sermons off their airwaves, known associates have disowned him, and his ministry will almost certainly cease to exist under his name, or possibly at all. People will simply never want to be associated with him again. The shock has been seismic; the feeling of disappointment hard to put into words. It's surely one of the biggest evangelical scandals of our generation. And it has tainted the work and legacy of a man who spoke truth so eloquently but deceived people so profoundly.

Ravi Zacharias is now on the other side of the curtain, in God's hands. Only God is qualified to judge him without a personal sense of disappointment and with complete integrity. For those of us who appreciated this man and took so much courage from his words, we must grapple with a

few important facts in the fallout of everything that has come to light.

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What We Can Learn

Gifts Don't Mean Godliness

Firstly, we must understand that a person can legitimately use their gifts and abilities even as they live a lifestyle of sin. Paul was aware of contemporaries who preached the same message he preached but had impure motives and corrupt character (Philippians 1:15-18). This is one of the reasons we should be so careful with the gifts Jesus has given: the fact that we are using them with power does not mean that we are godly people. Godliness is measured by the actions that flow from the thoughts inside our hearts, not from the way we bless others with our gifts. That's why the effectiveness of our gifts must never be the measurement of whether we are a success in God's eyes. Success is determined by our personal devotion to God.

Probably one of the most powerful, prestigious kings of all time was Solomon. His reign was so outrageously prosperous that it was said that gold and silver were as common in Jerusalem as ordinary stones (2 Chronicles 1:15). Solomon was given wisdom, authority, influence, ability, understanding and immense wealth, and he was given it by God. And yet, over time, he made catastrophic personal decisions. He married foreign wives, served their gods and even erected places of worship for them. On a hill east of Jerusalem, we're told in 1 Kings 11:7, he used the resources God had given him to build a high place for Molech, the demonic god of the Ammonites, so that parents could sacrifice their children in the flames. It's almost beyond belief. And you could probably make a fairly good case that Solomon may even be in hell right now for the things he did, even as God's anointed and equipped man.

The abilities God gave Solomon were not as important as Solomon's own devotion to the giver of the abilities, and so his own life must be judged as a failure, regardless of the public success. To be given gifts, and to use them, does not mean that we ourselves are doing well. It means God is working through us, but not necessarily in us.

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Be Sober-Minded

And secondly, this is a moment to reckon with ourselves. To be sure, when a leader fails morally, we must face their reality head-on; we must not simply gloss it over because we all happen to be sinful. Jesus said that for those to whom much has been given, much will be demanded (Luke 12:48). The half-brother of Jesus said that there should be few people in the church who consider themselves teachers because those who teach will be judged more strictly (James 3:1). And so we must look at the failures of the man Ravi Zacharias with open eyes and consider what they mean for his message, his family, his legacy and the gospel itself. But after having done that, we should let this whole nightmarish episode teach us something about ourselves. The call of Jesus to every disciple is a high call. It's a sobering call. Jesus said things like, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34, ESV)

The Heart Is Deceitful

We live in bodies of flesh, full of covetous desires and lusts. When Hollywood director Woody Allen embarked on a scandalous romance with his own adopted daughter, who he helped to raise as a child before ultimately marrying, he explained it by famously shrugging, "The heart wants what it wants. There's no logic to these things." He was exactly right. The heart wants what it wants, and that should make us very fearful of the things that go on inside our own hearts. We live with these deceptive desires, these misleading emotions, these sinful longings. Being a Spirit-filled Christian does not mean that we cannot be overcome by the sin we embrace; anybody can repeatedly harden their heart against God, create a new reality for themselves and head down a terrifying road that will end at the judgement seat of Christ.

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Keep A Short Account

Ravi Zacharias' time is up. He breathed his last without confessing, and quite possibly without repenting, although we have no way of knowing what he privately said to God before his death. He has damaged the gospel by his actions, and emboldened many to reject the God he proclaimed, even though his words about God were, and still are, true. Many people feel a profound sense of disappointment. And rightly so, but we'd do well to remember that having witnessed this very public exposing of sin in someone else, we must do whatever possible to live our own lives with a clear conscience, repenting of sin as soon as possible and seeking to be true "in the inward parts," as David put it in Psalm 51:6 (ESV).

> The last word belongs to Jesus.

With Man This Is Impossible

You may wonder how Ravi Zacharias, a man with so much eloquence, understanding and wisdom, could be so catastrophically misled, and how any of us are supposed to live out the rest of our lives denying the desires that spring up so powerfully in us. The disciples wondered that same thing when another outwardly impressive man, the rich young ruler described in Mark 10, walked away from Jesus after realising that he had a desire he didn't want to give up. "Who then can be saved?" panicked the disciples, surely thinking of their own lives. But we must – today, tomorrow and for the rest of our lives – remember Jesus' response: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:27, NIV)

But God

The last word doesn't belong to Ravi Zacharias; he was just a man. The last word belongs to Jesus. And Jesus said that it is possible to live a holy life. It is possible to live abandoned to God. It is possible to serve God out in the open and deep in the secret place. It is possible to give ourselves fully to God, whether anyone is watching or not.

After delving into the dismay brought about by a failed man, we must again lift our eyes to the call of God, to the truth of God, to the promises of God and to Jesus; fully God and fully man, tempted in every way and yet without sin, who alone is able to give us the power we need to honour Him in this life.