

TIM KELLER  
ON THE  
CHRISTIAN  
LIFE



THE TRANSFORMING  
POWER OF THE GOSPEL

MATT SMETHURST

“Matt Smethurst has researched an impressive amount of content for this book: sermons, books, papers, courses, articles, and unpublished conversations. He found resources even I wasn’t familiar with, and he has produced a work of scholarship that will long stand as the most thorough examination of the biblical themes that animated all of Tim’s ministry.”

**Kathy Keller**

“Few pastors have demonstrated a multilayered, multifaceted understanding of how the gospel of Jesus Christ transforms everything like Tim Keller did. Matt Smethurst has done a wonderful job organizing Tim’s teaching on the gospel in everyday life—in a way that is engaging, practical, and heart and life changing. May this gospel continue to transform us and everything our lives touch. Read and reread this book!”

**Paul David Tripp**, author, *Everyday Gospel*

“Imagine sitting with Tim Keller in his living room and asking him whatever is on your mind about the Christian life. Well, my friend Matt Smethurst has opened the door to that room in this book. Flip its pages and you’ll receive compelling wisdom from this beloved pastor, which will help you practice your faith within your family, job, or community. *Tim Keller on the Christian Life* is particularly timely, as many of us are struggling to make Christ-honoring imprints on our skeptical culture. But by the last chapter of this remarkable work, you’ll grasp what it means to truly embody the gospel in all your spheres of influence. Thank you, Matt, for giving us the very best of Tim Keller.”

**Joni Eareckson Tada**, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends International  
Disability Center

“The way the ministry of Tim Keller and Redeemer Church penetrated the secularized culture of Manhattan drew the attention of a surprised media. Remarkably, this was based not on an ever-changing pragmatism (‘whatever works’) but on an intelligent, clearly articulated, and winsomely expounded Christ-centered biblical theology. *Tim Keller on the Christian Life* explores the manifold ways this theology shaped Tim’s understanding of how the gospel restores and transforms. Those who heard Tim will be understandably eager to read these pages, and all readers will find a stimulating exploration of the impact of gospel grace. Congratulations and thanks are due to Matt Smethurst for this groundbreaking study.”

**Sinclair B. Ferguson**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological  
Seminary; author, *The Whole Christ*

“You don’t need to agree with everything Tim Keller said to recognize that God gave him uncommon wisdom that can benefit the church and your own discipleship. Matt Smethurst has done an impressive job distilling this wisdom, spread across many books and countless sermons, into ten engaging chapters. Think of it as a ‘Keller’s Greatest Hits’ volume. It’s a remarkable and grace-giving work, one that I’ll certainly encourage my family members and church members to read.”

**Jonathan Leeman**, Editorial Director, 9Marks

“What a blessing to read a book by a friend, about a friend’s wisdom on the Christian life. I got to watch Tim Keller practice what he proclaimed, especially while battling terminal cancer. No matter your familiarity with Tim’s body of work, Matt Smethurst’s distillation will prove an aid and blessing. He puts his finger on themes and emphases that will enrich your engagement with our brother’s enduring ministry. Matt has told me what a spiritually rewarding exercise it was to write this book. You will find it spiritually rewarding to read.”

**Ligon Duncan**, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary; cohost,  
*The Everyday Pastor* podcast

“I was eager to open this book to better appreciate Keller’s pastoral legacy and to see how Smethurst would tell the story. I found exactly what I’d hoped for: a wise pastor curating the wisdom of another wise pastor. The result is a treasure—a study about our Father’s love to us, which awakens our love for him and for others. The beautiful fruit of the heart-transforming gospel.”

**Tony Reinke**, Senior Teacher, Desiring God; author, *Ask Pastor John*

“Tim Keller had a knack for presenting Christ and what it means to follow him in ways that I, as someone who had spent my whole life absorbing Christian teaching, had never heard before. It often stopped me in my tracks. It challenged my deeply ingrained understandings and interpretations. But most importantly, it enabled me to see the beauty, necessity, and sufficiency of Christ in ways that moved and changed me. This book enables those familiar with Keller’s teaching to be reminded of its core truths—and those who know little of it to get to its essence in summary fashion.”

**Nancy Guthrie**, author; Bible teacher

“There will never be another Tim Keller—a man uniquely raised up by God to teach a generation of believers to treasure the gospel and to teach a generation of skeptics to consider the gospel. Matt Smethurst takes us into the genius of Tim’s ministry, drawing from its breadth to synthesize and distill the key insights for how Jesus Christ changes us from the inside out. This is a deeply edifying read.”

**Dane Ortland**, Senior Pastor, Naperville Presbyterian Church, Naperville, Illinois;  
author, *Gentle and Lowly*

“Matt Smethurst has done the church a great service by distilling, in ten insightful chapters, the core convictions that shaped Tim Keller’s life and ministry. The reader discovers what made Keller’s ministry so impactful: His convictions, along with his humility, were formed in the fires of pastoral work. *Tim Keller on the Christian Life* is a faith-enriching reminder, through the legacy and example of a beloved pastor, that Christianity is far more than a religious idea. It is the most satisfying and beautiful way of life.”

**Sam Ferguson**, Rector, The Falls Church Anglican, Washington, DC

*Tim Keller on the Christian Life*



# Tim Keller on the Christian Life

*The Transforming Power of the Gospel*

Matt Smethurst

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*To Maghan,  
mighty helper and dearest friend.  
I love you.*





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## Introduction

HOPEWELL, VIRGINIA, IS EASY TO MISS. Roughly twenty-five miles south of Richmond, and about three hundred fifty miles from New York City, this rural town is where Tim Keller (1950–2023) cut his pastoral teeth from 1975 to 1984. For nearly a decade, Keller prepared three biblical expositions a week—Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night—for his flock at West Hopewell Presbyterian Church. By age thirty-three, he had delivered approximately fourteen hundred expository messages. Like many small-church pastors, his job description seemed endless: doing pastoral visits, caring for the sick, officiating weddings, conducting funerals, even cheering on the church softball team—not to mention leading and loving his family.

This season was so important that we cannot understand Keller's ministry in Manhattan without considering Hopewell. Far from a quick pit stop, his time there provided "the most formative ministry years of his life."<sup>1</sup> Hopewell is where, in Keller's words, "Kathy and I learned for the first time how to walk beside people who were facing grief, loss, death, and darkness."<sup>2</sup> This is why so many sermon illustrations at Redeemer Presbyterian Church came from experiences and counseling moments in his first church.

Keller observed that, generally speaking, in a small town "your pastoring sets up your preaching." That is, people won't respect you as a preacher unless they trust you as their pastor. But in a big city it's often

the opposite: “Your preaching sets up your pastoring.”<sup>3</sup> People won’t trust you as their pastor unless they respect you as a preacher. Keller experienced both dynamics, but his renowned preaching was infused with wisdom gleaned from years of diligent pastoring.

Hopewell was also where Keller honed the art of contextualization, which (rightly practiced) is about clarity and therefore love. In an interview two months before his death, Keller defined this fancy term as simply giving a message in “the most understandable and persuasive way without compromising or changing the message itself.” What was his main reason, the interviewer asked, for caring about contextualization? Simple: “I want people to fall in love with Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

### **A Sketch of His Life**

Born on September 23, 1950, to middle-class parents in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Timothy James Keller was the oldest of three children. His parents could hardly have been more different from one another: Bill seemed remote, while Louise could be downright stifling. The family dutifully attended a mainline Lutheran church, but Tim rarely heard the gospel and remained unconverted.<sup>5</sup>

At Bucknell University, though, the Lord invaded his life and captured his heart. After a season of spiritual wrestling, Tim repented of his sin and trusted in Christ in April 1970.<sup>6</sup> “During college the Bible came alive in a way that was hard to describe,” Keller later reflected. “The best way I can put it is that, before the change, I pored over the Bible, questioning and analyzing it. But after the change it was as if the Bible, or maybe Someone through the Bible, began poring over me, questioning and analyzing me.”<sup>7</sup> Through involvement with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Keller was introduced to solid Christian literature—including British authors such as J. I. Packer and John Stott, who helped crystallize the gospel and its implications for life.

After college, Keller moved to Massachusetts in the fall of 1972 to attend Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Another first-year

student—an acquaintance from western Pennsylvania—would become his closest friend. Collin Hansen writes,

Even before Kathy Kristy took the name Keller, she would become the most formative intellectual and spiritual influence on Tim Keller's life. When you're writing about Tim, you're really writing about Tim and Kathy, a marriage between intellectual equals who met in seminary over shared commitment to ministry and love for literature, along with serious devotion to theology.<sup>8</sup>

The three years on campus would prove pivotal in their theological formation. They entered with patchwork beliefs and emerged with thought-out convictions: historic Reformed theology, dynamic complementarianism, inward spiritual renewal, gospel-shaped missiology, and so on. Tim and Kathy were married on January 4, 1975, before their final semester. A thirty-six-year-old R. C. Sproul officiated the ceremony.

When Tim stepped into his first pastorate that summer, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) was only two years old. Those years in Hopewell, Virginia, were a baptism of fire for the newly minted pastor.<sup>9</sup> From preaching to counseling to hospital visitation to just about anything else that a solo small-town pastor is expected to do, Keller poured his life into the salt-of-the-earth saints the Lord had entrusted to his care. "It didn't take long for Keller to realize he needed to adjust his preaching—to become more concrete, clear, and practical. . . . He realized he needed to listen and learn before he spoke, so that he could persuade."<sup>10</sup> Hansen conveys it well:

Many have concluded that in Hopewell, Keller learned to "put the cookies on the bottom shelf." . . . Hopewell's blue-collar congregation forced Keller to develop his skill for distilling difficult and complicated concepts in ways that Christians and non-Christians alike can understand. If he would have jumped straight from seminary to a

highly educated congregation, he might never have become a widely popular writer or preacher.<sup>11</sup>

Keller would always look back on the Hopewell years as foundational to his life of ministry.

While pastoring in Virginia, Keller had received a doctor of ministry degree—studying the work of deacons—through Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Eventually, after nine years in Hopewell, Westminster hired him to teach practical theology part-time. (Keller also became the first director of mercy ministries for the PCA’s Mission to North America.) So the Kellers moved back north, and the pastor became a professor.

While enjoying a fruitful teaching ministry at Westminster in the late 1980s—Keller was one of the school’s most popular professors—the PCA asked him to consider planting a church in the heart of New York City. He declined and offered to try to recruit someone else.<sup>12</sup> But in God’s providence, he couldn’t find a pastor willing to move there. Meanwhile, he was becoming more and more attracted to the challenge himself:

Keller’s friends back in Philadelphia had been praying for Tim for months as he first searched for a different pastor for this calling and then slowly realized he would need to go. Finally, he came to the group and said, “I have to do this myself.” Kathy considers that decision “one of the most truly ‘manly’ things” her husband ever did. The move scared him. But he felt God’s call. He had no way of knowing the result would be a dynamic, growing megachurch. He just knew it was the next step of faith, even if the church were to end in failure.<sup>13</sup>

So in the summer of 1989, the Kellers moved to New York, three young sons in tow, with the goal of establishing a new outpost of Christ’s kingdom.<sup>14</sup> From a rural town in Virginia to the quiet suburbs



of Philadelphia to the city that never sleeps, God had brought the Kellers to the place he had prepared them for.

Redeemer Presbyterian Church was soon born and, almost immediately, experienced revival-like growth. “Everyone who remembers those first three years says they’ve never seen anything like it,” Keller recounts. “We had conversions, a sense of God’s presence, changed lives—all the stuff everyone hopes for. . . . It was unusually thick and rich—beyond anything we expected.”<sup>15</sup> Or as Kathy has sometimes quipped, “Want to know the secret to planting a successful megachurch? Find out where God is going to send a revival . . . and move there the month before.”<sup>16</sup> Redeemer experienced other significant surges in growth over the years, including after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>17</sup>

Keller was instrumental in developing several ministries that grew out of Redeemer: Hope for New York (an effort to resource local nonprofit groups focused on mercy ministry), the Center for Faith and Work (a resource for believers seeking to bring the gospel to bear on their vocations), Redeemer Counseling (a professional counseling and training center), and Redeemer City to City (a global church-planting network). After retiring as senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in 2017, Keller focused much of his time on serving church planters around the world.

Additionally, over lunch at a Manhattan sidewalk cafe in 2002, Keller and Bible scholar Don Carson dreamed up what would eventually become the Gospel Coalition (TGC). From an invite-only pastors’ colloquium in 2005 to the organization’s first national conference in 2007, TGC was founded to help restore the center of historic, confessional evangelicalism in the broadly Reformed heritage. Some of Keller’s most edifying material is found in keynote talks and workshops he delivered at TGC conferences over the course of fifteen years.

### **Distillation, Not Evaluation**

This book is not a biography. With rare exceptions, the focus is not on detailing Keller’s life or assessing his legacy. The aim is more modest:

to *synthesize and distill* Tim Keller's best teaching on the Christian life. For clarity, let's briefly consider these phrases.

*Synthesize and distill.* This book seeks to *show* more than *tell*, to let Keller's own voice feature most prominently and ring with coherent clarity. That word *coherent* represents the book's challenge, and its potential value—not because Keller was unclear but because his body of work was so expansive and sprawling. How do you summarize nearly fifty years of pastoral teaching on Christian living? One topic at a time. In short, by taking key ingredients from the various cupboards of Keller's wide-ranging work, this book endeavors to serve a nourishing, multicourse meal.

*Tim Keller's best teaching.* Keller left behind a staggering amount of material. Many Christians will simply not have time to listen to thousands of his sermons and read thirty-plus books. But they might be willing to start with one—which seeks to bring out the “best of” his teaching and, ideally, whets the appetite for partaking of more from the well-stocked pantry of Keller's work.

*On the Christian life.* This book focuses on practical Christian discipleship—rather than, say, Keller's thoughts on more controversial theological or political matters. Those are worthy topics for another writing project. In general, the target here is Keller's contribution to timeless, bread-and-butter aspects of everyday Christian living.

If you're like me, you probably didn't agree with Keller about everything. That's okay. For example, I disagreed with him on baptism and church polity,<sup>18</sup> on aspects of practical ecclesiology and ministry philosophy, and on some emphases in the realm of public theology. Keller was an evangelist at heart, and I believe his genuine desire to reach the lost convinced him to remain, at times, “above the fray” on certain social issues, more than perhaps was warranted.

Though my purpose is to distill Keller's best teaching on the Christian life, rather than evaluate his legacy, I will take the liberty to point out that he was a three-dimensional voice in a two-dimensional world. To

borrow philosophical categories, Keller combined the *normative* (keen biblical insight) with the *situational* (studied awareness of the cultural moment) with the *existential* (searching heart application).<sup>19</sup> Think Bible teacher meets cultural analyst meets biblical counselor. Most great pastors tend to do two of these well, but Keller excelled at all three. The first and third are where he is probably least appreciated. Some may hear Keller quoting philosophers and *New York Times* columnists and assume his preaching was super scholarly or fancy. But it really wasn't. His illustrations were vivid, and his applications penetrating—precisely because they were down-to-earth.

### Reverberating Voice

It's impossible to know whether people will still be reading and listening to Tim Keller in a hundred years. But since his death, numerous people have suggested that his impact will stand the test of time. Whether or not that will happen, it's striking that so many seem to assume it. Keller's voice has found unique resonance around the world. And because he left such an immense body of work, focused mainly on enduring topics of Christian living—the kind we'll be exploring in this book—his voice is primed to reverberate for generations to come.

When the news hit on May 19, 2023, that Keller had gone to be with his Savior, the outpouring of gratitude for his life—from myriad sectors of the church—was remarkable to witness. What accounts for Keller's titanic appeal across typical divides? Why can't Christians (of various stripes) seem to get enough of his teaching? The answer lies not in his sophistication but in his simplicity, in his ability to clarify the complex—a skill he nurtured as a young pastor in rural Virginia. And to do this, he had to listen widely, and well. Hansen is correct:

Keller's originality comes in his synthesis, how he pulls the sources together for unexpected insights. . . . This God-given ability to integrate disparate sources and then share insights with others has been

observed by just about anyone who has known Keller, going back to his college days. He's the guide to the gurus. You get their best conclusions, with Keller's unique twist.<sup>20</sup>

My aim in this volume is to synthesize the master synthesizer. Drawing from nearly fifty years of sermons, conference messages, interviews, articles, books, and more, I attempt to draw out the best of Keller's teaching where it shines brightest—biblical wisdom for everyday life.

The appetite from Christians is there. The ingredients from Keller are there. Again, my hope is to simply open the various cupboards and deliver a nourishing meal.

# One Hero

## *Jesus Christ in All Scripture*

WHEN THINKING ABOUT the ongoing relevance of Tim Keller's teaching, it's easy to think of his cultural analysis, his attention to idolatry, his teaching on justice and mercy, or any number of emphases, many of which we'll explore in this book. But no theme can be understood, much less situated in Keller's thought, apart from the topic of this first chapter.

Running through Keller's enormous body of work is a single thread that connects the diverse dots into a coherent whole.<sup>1</sup> Above all, he was enamored with one great reality—the person and work of Jesus Christ—and he spent his life showcasing this treasure.

And learning to read the Bible with eyes for the Lord Jesus—seeing him as not just the main character but the main *point*—could change your life.

### Setting the Stage

If you grew up in church, you're likely familiar with well-known Bible stories.<sup>2</sup> You've marveled at Noah's floating zoo, you've faced down giants in your life like David did, and maybe you've even dared to be a

Daniel. And that's just the Old Testament. In the Gospels you learned about Jesus's miracles, and you also likely learned that these stories aren't just intended to amaze; they're meant to make you a better person. See how generous that little boy was with his lunch? Go and do likewise.

Many of our nonbelieving neighbors assume that the Bible is a well-meaning series of morality tales, an anthology of philosophical musings, or an archaic rulebook that should remain confined to hotel-room drawers. Indeed, increasing numbers of people today believe that Scripture is downright dangerous, a tool to oppress the weak and prevent the gullible from being true to themselves.

Contrary to popular belief, though, the Bible is not simply a collection of principles, platitudes, or abstract life lessons. It is a single, unfolding drama, a story of epic proportions that's more thrilling than your favorite fairy tale—because it's true. That's God's word.

If we ever hope to properly handle the stories *in* the Bible, we must first grasp the story *of* the Bible. And that story—one that traverses its way from Genesis to Revelation—though recorded for you, is not ultimately about you.<sup>3</sup> The central focus is higher, and the central figure is better. Given the Bible's breathtaking diversity, the plotline's essential coherence is astonishing:

- sixty-six books of various genres
- over forty authors from various backgrounds and occupations
- over fifteen centuries
- ten civilizations
- three continents
- three languages
- one unified story of redemption

Remarkably, the Bible has one ultimate plan, one ultimate plot, one ultimate champion, one ultimate hero. And from the beginning we can see his silhouette.

## Learning from Jesus

Consider what Jesus himself claims regarding his unique place in the pages of Scripture.

In Luke 24, shortly after his resurrection, Jesus appears incognito to two of his followers on a road. Bewildered and breathless, they relay the buzz surrounding the inexplicably empty tomb. It's the *inexplicable* part that prompts Jesus, still unrecognized, to speak: "'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:25–27).<sup>4</sup> After revealing himself to the eleven disciples, he reiterates the same point: "'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44–45).

It wasn't only *after* his resurrection that Jesus spoke this way, however. For example, before his death he had explained to the Pharisees—the Jewish religious establishment, the "Bible experts" of the day—his central place in their great story: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. . . . For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me" (John 5:39–40, 46).

To put it mildly, such claims were not typically well received.

It has been said that if the New Testament is Jesus Christ *revealed*, the Old Testament is Jesus Christ *concealed*.<sup>5</sup> That is exactly right. To paraphrase the late theologian B. B. Warfield, the Old Testament is like a room full of treasures, but the room is dimly lit.<sup>6</sup> It's filled with prophets that predict him, patterns that preview him, and promises



that anticipate him. A sweeping, aerial view of the Bible's topography, focused on Christ, would therefore look something like this:

- **Old Testament:** anticipation
- **Gospels:** manifestation
- **Acts:** proclamation
- **Epistles:** explanation
- **Revelation:** consummation<sup>7</sup>

From beginning to end, the Bible is an epic story about Jesus.

Consider, Keller advises, what it would be like to read a chapter in a great novel without being privy to the surrounding context. Much would be incomprehensible. "If you don't see how the chapter fits into the whole story, you don't understand the chapter."<sup>8</sup> This is akin to reading any portion of God's word without seeing how it connects to God's Son.

### Discovering Christ in the Old Testament

In Keller's foreword to Alec Motyer's book *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Loving the Old Testament*, he recounts traveling in the summer of 1972 to R. C. Sproul's Ligonier Valley Study Center. Fresh out of college, Keller was a fairly new Christian for whom the Old Testament was rather "confusing and off-putting."<sup>9</sup> Motyer was visiting from England and fielding questions when someone asked about the relationship between Old Testament Israelites and Christians today. He imparted an illustration that always stayed with Keller. Asking the group to imagine how the Israelites under Moses would have given their "testimony," Motyer suggested it would sound something like this:

We were in a foreign land, in bondage, under the sentence of death. But our mediator—the one who stands between us and God—came to us with the promise of deliverance. We trusted in the promises of

God, took shelter under the blood of the lamb, and he led us out. Now we are on the way to the Promised Land. We are not there yet, of course, but we have the law to guide us, and through blood sacrifice we also have his presence in our midst. So he will stay with us until we get to our true country, our everlasting home.

Motyer's conclusion—that a Christian today could “say the same thing, almost word for word”—left Keller “thunderstruck.” The thought experiment brought Keller to an astounding recalculation: not only had the Israelites been saved by grace, not works, but “God's salvation had been by costly atonement . . . all along.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Learning from Paul**

We could turn to many places in Scripture for clues about how to read the whole, but consider the apostle Paul's simple statement to the church in Corinth: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). As we begin to unfold Keller's comprehensive teaching, consider his commentary on this pivotal verse:

At the time Paul was writing, the only Scripture to preach from was what we now call the Old Testament. Yet even when preaching from these texts Paul “knew nothing” but Jesus—who did not appear by name in any of those texts. How could this be? Paul understood that all Scripture ultimately pointed to Jesus and his salvation; that every prophet, priest, and king was shedding light on the ultimate Prophet, Priest, and King. To present the Bible “in its fullness” was to preach Christ as the main theme and substance of the Bible's message.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, you may wonder, won't a relentless focus on Jesus in our Bible study become tiresome? Keller counters, “I can speak from forty years

of experience . . . to tell you that the story of this one individual never needs to become repetitious—it contains the whole history of the universe and of humankind alike and is the only resolution of the plotlines of every one of our lives.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps we could say that the reason seeing Christ is never monotonous is because he is less like an intriguing *Where’s Waldo?* answer and more like water for our deepest thirst. He is not a mere ticket to heaven; he is the one for whom we were made, and only a profound sense of his love will reconfigure our hearts.

Vital union with the living Christ, the hero of the biblical story, is the wellspring from which virtually every other Keller teaching flows.<sup>13</sup>

### Why Begin Here?

Before we proceed, it’s worth clarifying again why we’re starting here. Why is *this* the topic of chapter 1? The answer, most basically, is that Keller sees the Bible as the foundation for the Christian life.

Without the sure anchor of revelation, we will always be adrift in speculation. And those are dangerous waters. Until we gladly submit our lives to the supreme authority of God’s word, we will remain captives to the clamoring voices of man.<sup>14</sup> Cultural sensibilities, personal preferences, and a hundred other factors will hold sway in our hearts. Keller is blunt: “Contemporary people tend to examine the Bible, looking for things they can’t accept, but Christians should reverse that, allowing the Bible to examine *us*, looking for things God can’t accept.”<sup>15</sup> Or even more simply: “Unless you have an authoritative view of the Bible, you’ve got a God you created and you’re going to be lonely.”<sup>16</sup>

Even though this book is for ordinary laypeople, not just professional ministers, the wisdom Keller commends to preachers about getting to the heart of the Scriptures can help *all of us* better read our Bibles “with the Jesus grain,” and not against it. Christ-centered interpretation is vital for life transformation, for following Jesus closely.

Everything we will cover in this book, therefore, is built on a Christ-centered reading of God's word.

### Careful, Now

Simply naming Jesus, however, doesn't necessarily honor him. We can be so quick to "find" Christ in the Old Testament that we fail to do justice to the original text. Pulling him out of a hat—*voilà!*—undercuts the integrity of the Bible and robs us of the benefit of reading it as God intended.

Though Keller is known for "getting to Christ," he warns against treating scriptures as mere springboards. In his book on preaching, which is helpful for any Bible reader, he identifies two common pitfalls. The first is studying a passage—even one about Jesus—without seeing the gospel. The second is getting to Jesus too quickly or carelessly.<sup>17</sup> Before seeing the Savior, Keller notes, we must ensure we've understood the text. We dare not "leapfrog over historical realities" in the Old Testament as though they bore "little significance to the original hearers."<sup>18</sup> So we mustn't make the focus all about Christ while ignoring the text, or make it all about the text while ignoring Christ.

Every now and then, Keller is critiqued for somewhat predictably getting to Christ but failing to apply the force of God's moral demands. In my experience, though, Keller was exemplary at showing how the gospel *transforms* us—how it's not only the last word but also, in a sense, the first word and the foundation of everything else. We shouldn't merely "tell people all the ways they must be moral and good without relating such exhortation to the gospel," he warns. But nor should we merely "tell them over and over that they can be saved only by free grace without showing how salvation changes our lives."<sup>19</sup>

Consider, for example, how Keller explains his typical sermon structure (again, this is relevant not just to those who deliver sermons but to all who listen to them):

- **Intro:** What the problem is; our contemporary cultural context: *Here's what we face.*
- **Early points:** What the Bible says; the original readers' cultural context: *Here's what we must do.*
- **Middle points:** What prevents us; current listeners' inward heart context: *Why we can't do it.*
- **Late points:** How Jesus fulfills the biblical theme and solves the heart issue: *How Jesus did it.*
- **Application:** *How through faith in Jesus you should live now.*<sup>20</sup>

This is not the only way to teach a passage (at least I hope not because I don't exactly follow this template). But notice that when Keller does finally “get to Jesus,” the message is not over. With the final movement—moral application—his teaching reaches a summit, and the vista is clear. As a case study, he offers the example of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22:

1. **What we must do:** Put God first in every area of life, as Abraham did. (This is unfortunately where many sermons end!)
2. **But we can't:** We can't! We won't! So we deserve to be condemned.
3. **But there was one who did:** On the cross, Jesus put God first. His was the ultimate and perfect act of submission to God. Jesus is the only one to whom God ever said, “Obey me, and as a result I will judge you and condemn you.” Jesus obeyed anyway—just for truth's sake, for God's sake. The only perfect act of submission.
4. **Only now can we change:** Only when we see that Jesus obeyed as Abraham did—*for us!*—can we begin to live like Abraham. Let your heart be shaped by this.<sup>21</sup>

Again, the point is not that every faithful sermon will simulate this structure. But a preacher's approach is incomplete if he virtually *never* sounds a “by the mercies of God, live like Abraham” note. Some

gospel-centered voices are so allergic to sounding moralistic that they end up, despite good intentions, not sounding much like the Bible. Moral application (good) becomes moralistic application (bad) only when divorced from gospel grace.

Keller didn't shy away from direct moral application; this book, in fact, is a tour of Scripture-derived imperatives: resist idolatry (chap. 2), avoid moralism (chap. 3), be a good friend (chap. 4), work for God's glory (chap. 5), live justly (chap. 6), pray fervently (chap. 7), and suffer courageously (chap. 8). From beginning to end, Keller summons us to life transformation by the power of the Spirit. But we'll lose our footing if we don't start from a robust foundation of grace.<sup>22</sup>

### Jesus, the True and Better

The Old Testament presents endless opportunities to discover the manifold wonders of Jesus Christ. We can see his glory in the Bible's every theme,<sup>23</sup> every genre and section,<sup>24</sup> every deliverance storyline,<sup>25</sup> every major image,<sup>26</sup> and, of course, every major figure.<sup>27</sup> As for the latter, it's hard to improve on Keller's classic formulation. (Read slowly—this is not just a rhetorical flourish; it captures the greatest news in the world.)

Jesus is the true and better *Adam*, who *passed* the test in the garden and whose obedience is imputed to us. . . .

Jesus is the true and better *Abel*, who, though innocently slain, has blood that cries out for our acquittal, not our condemnation. . . .

Jesus is the true and better *Abraham*, who answered the call of God to leave the comfortable and familiar and go out into the void, "not knowing whither he went," to create a new people of God.

Jesus is the true and better *Isaac*, who was not just offered up by his father on the mount but was truly sacrificed for us all. God said to

Abraham, “Now I know you love me, because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love, from me.” [So] we can say to God, “Now *we* know that you love us, because you did not withhold your son, your only son whom you love, from us.”

Jesus is the true and better *Jacob*, who wrestled with God and took the blow of justice we deserved so that we, like Jacob, receive only the wounds of grace to wake us up and discipline us.

Jesus is the true and better *Joseph*, who, at the right hand of the king, forgives those who betrayed and sold him and uses his new power to save them.

Jesus is the true and better *Moses*, who stands in the gap between the people and the Lord and who mediates a new covenant. . . .

Jesus is the true and better *rock of Moses*, who, struck with the rod of God’s justice, now gives us water in the desert.

Jesus is the true and better *Job*—the *truly* innocent sufferer—who then intercedes for and saves his stupid friends. . . .

Jesus is the true and better *David*, whose victory becomes his people’s victory, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it themselves.

Jesus is the true and better *Esther*, who didn’t just risk losing an earthly palace but lost the ultimate heavenly one, who didn’t just risk his life but gave his life—to save his people.

Jesus is the true and better *Jonah*, who was cast out into the storm so we could be brought in.<sup>28</sup>



## David, Jonah, Esther . . . and Bruce Willis

Again, we can be so quick to “get to the gospel” in our Bible reading that we run roughshod over the text at hand. That’s a legitimate danger. Thankfully, though, the instinct for detecting Christ responsibly can be honed. In fact, the experience is a bit like watching the Bruce Willis film *The Sixth Sense*—for the second time. Keller explains,

That movie has a startling ending that forces you to go back and reinterpret everything you saw before. The second time through, you can’t *not* think of the ending as you watch the beginning and middle of the movie. The ending sheds unignorable light on everything that went before. In the same way, once you know how all the lines of all the stories and all the climaxes of all the themes converge on Christ, you simply can’t *not* see that every text is ultimately about Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

Keller shows us God’s provision on page after page in the Hebrew Scriptures—Adam and Eve’s clothing; the promises made to Abraham and the patriarchs; the intricate sacrificial system; persons (e.g., Moses), events (e.g., the exodus), and institutions (e.g., the Day of Atonement) that prefigure Christ; and explicit promises of a coming Messiah. When we say the Bible is about Jesus, therefore, we’re observing that the whole thing hums with the music of saving grace. And the all-sufficient work of Christ is the key that unlocks good news from every passage. Keller goes so far as to say that whenever you come to a biblical text, “you are *not finished* unless you [consider] how it shows us that we cannot save ourselves and that only Jesus can.”<sup>30</sup>

Keller’s approach to the well-known narrative of David and Goliath, for example, goes beyond where many might land as they seek to muster courage and faith to face the “giants” of life. Taking the passage into the Christ-centered realm brings Keller to a more meaningful and complex conclusion: the point is that the Israelites “could not face the

giant [by] themselves. . . . [T]hey needed a champion who would fight in their place—a substitute who would face the deadly peril in their stead.” Shifting the narrative to spotlight the gospel, Keller thereby quells the temptation we may have to make every Bible story about *us*. Again and again, he recalibrates our thinking to see both our need and heaven’s provision. In the case of David and Goliath, Keller asserts that “God used the deliverer’s weakness as the very means to bring about the destruction of the laughing, overconfident Goliath. David triumphs through his weakness, and his victory is imputed to his people. And so does Jesus. It is through his suffering, weakness, and death that sin is defeated.” Thus, Keller utilizes a story that could easily end up as little more than a morality tale to showcase what it means that “we have died with Christ (Rom. 6:1–4) and are raised up and seated with him (Eph. 2:5–6). Jesus is the ultimate champion . . . who did not merely risk his life for us, but who gave it. And now his victory is our victory, and all he has accomplished is imputed to us.”<sup>31</sup>

What about the “sign of Jonah” (Matt. 12:38–42) and how the runaway prophet points us to Christ? The Pharisees were demanding spectacular magic tricks, as it were, to prove Jesus’s authority as a teacher and sage. But they had it backward, Keller notes: “Jesus isn’t one more teacher, come to tell you how to save yourself and find God. He is God himself, come to save and find you.” The Savior is infinitely greater than a sage:

So the miraculous sign of Jonah isn’t so much a display of power as an astonishing display of weakness. Jesus laid aside his divine glory and prerogatives and humbled himself even to the point of death on the cross. Just as Jonah was cast into the water to save the sailors from the wrath of God, so Jesus would be cast into death to bear all the punishment our sins deserve—to save us. And just as Jonah came “back from the dead,” so Jesus was raised for our justification. That’s the sign of Jonah.<sup>32</sup>

Or consider how Keller teaches the story of Esther. She saved her people through identification and mediation:

Her people were condemned, but she identified with them and came under that condemnation. She risked her life and said, “If I perish, I perish.” Because she identified, she could mediate before the throne of power as no one else could, and because she received favor there, that favor was transferred to her people. . . . Does that remind you of anyone?<sup>33</sup>

Keller reminds us that Esther’s bold advocacy for her people was based on a comparatively “vague revelation that God is a god of grace.” But our revelation is decidedly not vague: “[Queen Esther] didn’t know God was actually going to come to earth himself and do what she was doing on an infinitely greater scale, at an infinitely greater cost, with infinitely greater benefits to humanity. We now know so much more about his grace, our value to him, and our future.”<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, Keller uses this Old Testament account—among many others—to hurl us headlong at the feet of our Savior and King. Jesus Christ “lived in the ultimate palace with ultimate beauty and glory, and he voluntarily left them behind.” He did not exploit his divine status but emptied himself, identifying with us and bearing our condemnation (Phil. 2:5–11). Marveling at the staggering extent of Christ’s sacrifice, Keller characterizes it as both definitive (“He didn’t say ‘*If* I perish, I perish,’ but ‘*When* I perish, I’ll perish’”) and ultimate (“He didn’t do it at the risk of his life but at the *cost* of his life”). Truly, Christ’s atonement for us was the “ultimate mediation,” and we enjoy the spoils of his victory.<sup>35</sup>

## From BC to AD

The “one hero” thread in Scripture is not confined to the pages of the Old Testament. For example, Keller reflects on the beatitudes in Matthew 5:1–12 by pointing a laser beam at the work of Jesus Christ:

Why can we be as rich as kings? Because he became spiritually and utterly poor.

Why can we be comforted? Because he wept inconsolably and died in the dark.

Why can we inherit the earth? Because he became meek, like a lamb before his shearers. He was stripped of everything—they even cast lots for his garment.

Why can we be filled and satisfied? Because on the cross he cried, “I thirst.”

Why can we obtain mercy? Because he got none—not from Pilate, not from the crowd, not even from God.

Why can we someday see God? Because he was pure. We can see God because, on the cross, Jesus could not.<sup>36</sup>

“When you see Jesus Christ being poor in spirit *for you*,” says Keller, “that helps you become poor in spirit before God and say, ‘I need your grace.’ And once you get it and you are filled, then you are merciful, you become a peacemaker. . . . The beatitudes, like nearly everything else in Scripture, point us to Jesus far more than we think.”<sup>37</sup>

### Self-Substitutionary Love

In our cultural moment, it is vital to grasp that Jesus didn’t merely die to boost our self-esteem or to set a moral example.<sup>38</sup> Such a perspective, however well-meaning, domesticates what he did. He stooped to take our place on the cross because we scramble to take his place on the throne. Indeed, so much of Keller’s teaching about Jesus Christ, our mighty Champion and King, focused on his sacrificial *substitution*. When Redeemer was less than a year old, he invoked beautiful words from John Stott:

The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting

himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone.<sup>39</sup>

Consider again the example of Jonah, hurled into a raging storm of judgment so that undeserving men might live. Does that sound familiar?

This is why Jesus couldn't have perished, say, with his disciples on a storm-tossed boat (Mark 4:35–41). He couldn't have died in that storm because he had come to face down a greater one. And that's what he did—willingly pinned to a Roman cross, plunged into the waters of God's wrath so that fugitives like us could be saved. Jonah was a prophet thrown overboard for his own sin; Jesus, the final prophet, was thrown overboard for ours. We all deserve the floodwaters of divine justice. But God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, to perish in our place, that whoever believes in him might have eternal life. Here's how Keller puts it:

A God who [in Christ] suffers pain, injustice, and death for us is a God worthy of our worship. In a world of pain and oppression, how could we give our highest allegiance to someone who was immune to all that? This is a God who knows what storms are like because he came into the world and dove straight into the greatest pain and suffering. Because of his self-substitution, we can have life.<sup>40</sup>

Or consider Jesus the good shepherd's promise: "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). "Have you ever known," asks Keller, "the glorious release of realizing your shepherd knows you to the bottom and yet loves you to the skies?" He wasn't merely willing to take our

place; he delighted to (Heb. 12:2). “He glories in his substitution for us,” declares Keller, as if Jesus is saying, “I die in the dark so they can live in the light. I take their cross so they can have my crown. I take their punishment so they can have my reward. I die instead of them.”<sup>41</sup>

When Redeemer was less than two years old, Keller pressed home that robust theology, once internalized, makes all the practical difference in the world:

You, my dear friends, have to realize there is no way you will ever have a loving, Christian lifestyle unless you’re continually coming back to this doctrine. To the degree that you have grasped the doctrine of the substitutionary, vicarious death of Jesus Christ on the cross, you will walk in love. If you don’t walk in love, you haven’t grasped the doctrine.<sup>42</sup>

From beginning to end, Keller’s teaching is suffused with the good news of Christ’s self-giving love as he absorbs—for our sins—God’s righteous judgment in our place.<sup>43</sup>

### Ultimately about You—or Him?

In the final analysis, says Keller, there are two ways to read the Bible: as if it’s all about you, or all about him. They are “radically different” approaches:

Yes, you [should] obey the things the Bible says. But if you read it as all about you and something you have to do to live up to God, that will just crush you into compliance. But if you read it as salvation by grace through Jesus Christ, it’ll melt your heart into *wanting* to obey those things.

Every other culture, every other religion, every other philosophy gives you an identity based on your performance. It’s an *achieved* identity, so it’s fragile. But only Christianity gives you a *received*

identity, so it's stronger than heaven and earth. It's "I love you. You know you're my beloved child, in whom I'm well pleased, because of what Jesus Christ has done." Only when you read the Bible like that does [it] become a life-changing story instead of just a millstone around your neck.<sup>44</sup>

We miss out on the breathtaking beauty of the Bible when we reduce it to *only* a textbook or *only* a devotional book or *only* a morality book. Above all, the word of God is a Jesus book.

Don't lose sight of his glory, majesty, and beauty as you turn the pages. Christ is all.<sup>45</sup>

