

Ben Best, co-host

Welcome to *Defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

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Matt Smethurst says the aim of his book, *Tim Keller on the Christian Life*, is to synthesize and distill Tim Keller's best teaching on Christian living. Here at *Defragmenting*, we believe he succeeded at that task, and we're not alone. *World* magazine selected it as its 2025 Book of the Year, stating, This well-written book will convict but also encourage Christians who read it, helping them as they pray, pursue friendships, go to work, consider how to help their poor neighbors, and endure suffering themselves. Pastor Smethurst joined Dr. Keith Plummer to talk about why he wanted to write the book and some of the recurring theme of Tim Keller's thinking, writing, and preaching about following Jesus. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I am joined today by Matt Smethurst, who's lead pastor of River City Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. He's the author of several books, including *Before You Open Your Bible*, *Before You Share Your Faith*, and *Deacons*. Matt is also the co-host, along with Ligon Duncan, of the podcast *Everyday Pastor*. He and his wife, Megan, are the parents of five children. I mentioned that last, not because it's by any means of least importance, but because it provides a nice segue into what we're going to be talking about today. Matt dedicates his latest book to his wife, Megan, whom he describes as Mighty Helper and Dearest Friend. That book is *Tim Keller on the Christian Life: The Transforming Power of the Gospel*, published by Crossway. Matt, welcome to the podcast, and thank you so much for taking time to talk with us.

Matt Smethurst

Thanks for having me, Keith, and thanks for highlighting the dedication to my wife. You're the first person to have done that in a podcast, and I could not have accomplished this project or any of the things I do apart from her help and support and just brilliance on all levels. So grateful to God for Megan.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, I was going to make mention of the fact that not only do you dedicate the book to her, but that she is the first person mentioned in the acknowledgements. And there you say, "There is no way I could have completed this, by far the most involved writing project I've ever undertaken, without your consistent encouragement and sacrifice." And I wanted to start there in terms of what it is about this book that made it so involved. And just to give people an idea of the research that you did for this, I wanted to mention something. In the long-standing battle between those who love footnotes and those who love endnotes, I am in the former category. You use endnotes, but you do so much with those endnotes that you almost made me forget that I don't really like endnotes because they were so filled with material that I found myself when I came across a reference, a superscript number that there's an endnote, a FOMO had set in because I was fearful of what I might be missing out if I didn't turn to the back. But I just want to give an example of the thing that you do here.

Dr. Keith Plummer

In one section, you're talking about an illustration that Tim used with respect to friendship, an illustration from a 1935 movie, *The Bride of Frankenstein*. And the endnote says this, "Keller shared this illustration with Redeemer in 1992, 1997, 2000, 2008, 2010, and 2015. The version I've used here is adapted with light edits for clarity from the 1992 sermon, "You Are My Friends." And I wrote in my margin by that endnote, "Did you listen to and/or read every sermon that Tim preached?" I mean, to know something like that, to be able to refer to when it is that he used that illustration, I was just amazed by. So tell us a little bit about what process of research went into this book.

Matt Smethurst

Yeah. Well, no, I did not listen to every... I've read every book. I think that Tim has published, 31, I believe, but I've not nearly listened to all of his sermons. For many years, Logos has basically sold the transcripts from Tim's sermons at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, 1989 through... I

believe they sell them through 2015. He retired in 2017. I had PDFs of sermon transcripts for his whole ministry at Redeemer that I could keyword search. That's how I, for example, could keyword search, "Bride of Frankenstein," and see how often he shared that. The reason it was such an intensive research project is because Tim was so prodigious over the course of nearly 50 years. He became a pastor in 1975, and he died in 2023, 48 years later, and was just from the very beginning incredibly prolific, especially beginning in 2008, with the publication of *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*, at which point he started basically publishing a book a year until his death.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. It's obvious from the book that you have a great appreciation for him. I was curious as to, prior to your setting out to write this, what was your involvement with, impact by Tim, in terms of your own Christian life and ministry?

Matt Smethurst

I don't know if this will be interesting to any listeners, but you asked the question. I think that I first discovered Tim Keller in the summer of 2004, when I was a camp counselor at a camp called Summer's Best Two Weeks in Pennsylvania. An 11-year-old camper, a guy in my cabin, had brought me a CD with one sermon on it, and he handed it to me and he said, "My mom gets this guy's CDs in the mail every month, and she says he's the best preacher she's ever heard, and you should listen to this on your day off." So during my day off that term, I listened to the sermon from his Proverbs series on pride, which actually became much of his little book, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness*. And then after I graduated from college, I went was a missionary in East Asia for two years. We had a fellowship time among the missionaries on Sundays where we would listen to Keller sermons for two years. But then it was in being hired by the Gospel Coalition in 2011 and having the chance over the course of the next 12 years at various TGC events, both public and private, to get to interact with Tim more personally.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, you say in the introduction to the book that it's not a biography, that what you are seeking to do is to, as you put it, "to synthesize the master synthesizer." Tell us a bit about what you mean by that. Why do you call him the master synthesizer? And what is it that you're hoping to accomplish in terms of the book?

Matt Smethurst

Tim had illustration that just as if you cut a tree, you see various rings within the tree, that in a sense, if you cut a person in half, you see the rings in a person, which he likened to one's influences, those voices that you have absorbed and who have become part of you. Tim would say that if you listen to one voice, you're a clone. If you listen to two voices, you're confused. But if you listen hundreds of voices, you start to become wise. I think he was a model of someone who listened and read widely and well. He was able to do that because he was so firmly rooted in his own reformed tradition. It's not like his theology was up for grabs, but he had a way of learning from disparate voices and had a special gift for popularizing what was being written about and disseminated in wider scholarship. That's what I mean, that he was a master synthesizer, bringing out the best insights of various voices. Colin Hansen, in his excellent book on Tim's Influences, brings that out. What I'm trying to do in *Tim Keller on the Christian Life* is to synthesize the master synthesizer in the sense of synthesizing and distilling his best teaching on Christian living.

Matt Smethurst

So you're right. It's not a traditional biography. I did an interview, a bunch of sources for it. It's not a critical evaluation of his legacy. It's not focused on his political or public theology. It really is laser-aimed at what was Tim's best teaching, almost like, think of a greatest hits album when it came to the Christian life. Because Keith, I actually think that that's where he can be least appreciated and where his teaching, in some ways, is going to be most timeless. Just think bread and butter wisdom for everyday Christian living that all of us need.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I'm glad you mentioned Colin's book, because I found that the two, they actually complement one

another very well. Colin's dealing with his spiritual and intellectual influences, and you're looking at what are some of the prominent recurring themes and some of the foci of his teaching and his writing and his preaching on the nature of the Christian life. At one point, you say, "Think Bible teacher meets cultural analyst meets biblical counselor." And he did function on all of those levels.

**Matt Smethurst**

Absolutely. And I think that many think of him either exclusively or predominantly in that middle category of, Oh, he was the cultural analyst. He quoted *New York Times* columnists and various philosophers. And that's true. He was incredibly gifted when it came to what we call contextualization. And yet, I think where he's underappreciated and where his brilliance in so many ways shone were in those first and third Bible teacher and biblical counselor. He was so steeped, for example, in the Puritans, in the writings of John Newton, and in the writings of David Pawlison and other biblical counselors through ministries like CCEF, that when it came to his sermon applications and his ability to make you feel like he was climbing into your heart and mind and poking you in the idols. Well, that's because he had learned the art of being a soul doctor, applying the unchanging word of God to the changing circumstances and struggles of our lives.

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

Yes. He was one of the people who was very instrumental in getting me very interested in John Newton. And you mentioned the Puritans, again, to go back to the value of the endnotes. You had in there some of the things, not only sources from Keller, but something that I learned of through one of your notes was a work by David Clarkson. I was not familiar with that, but his work, *Soul Idolatry Excludes Men Out of Heaven*. And so I went and looked that up and read that and was really, really helped by it. So I would encourage anyone who picks it up, do not forego the endnotes because they are a gold mine of material.

**Matt Smethurst**

I'll just say on that, I'm actually team footnote, not endnote, along with Keith, generally, because I think that oftentimes, endnotes, it's like eating your dinner but having your drink in another room. It's annoying. The reason that I did endnotes for this book is twofold. One, because they are pretty substantive. It's not just, Here's where this was said, but it's essentially almost like if the book is meant to be the greatest hits album of Keller's teaching, the endnotes are the hidden tracks. There's good stuff there as well, which would have been quite cumbersome to have on every page. But the other reason is because that's what Tim himself did. So it was a nod to the way Tim wrote books. And actually Trevin Wax has a column called, folks can Google it, "Tim Keller: King of Endnotes," where he shares his 10 favorite endnotes from Keller books over the years.

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

Tim was certainly known for his focus on the Christocentricity of scripture, and that's you begin with the first chapter, which you call "One Hero: Jesus Christ in All of Scripture." Tell us a bit about how that was so central and foundational for Tim with respect to his thinking about the Christian life as well as in his preaching.

**Matt Smethurst**

Well, Tim grew up in a mainline Protestant home where he didn't often hear the gospel. And when through influence of during college, discovering authors like John Stott and J. I. Packer, and eventually C.S. Lewis, through his wife, he was awakened to the centrality of Jesus in all of life. And then through the influence, particularly of Ed Clowney and Alec Matier, I think he was awakened to the centrality of Jesus in all of Scripture, especially the Old Testament. And that, from the very beginning, was a key note in Tim's ministry. But I think especially in his years at Redeemer in New York, you knew that Jesus was going to be the hero of every sermon. Because while the Bible is written for us, it is not ultimately about us. It's about what Jesus has done for us. And we can see his brilliant shine from Genesis to Revelation, whether Scripture is anticipating him, proclaiming him, explaining him, applying him. The whole Bible is about Jesus, and that's really good news.

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

Yeah. And people who are familiar with his ministry are probably familiar with his message on Jesus

as the new and better. In which he goes through Scripture and shows how Christ is the culmination of all of Scripture. And yet this approach to Scripture is sometimes critiqued because, and whether rightly or wrongly so. It's sometimes critiqued because some people see it as being skittish about making moral application. You say that Tim wasn't guilty of that. Why?

Matt Smethurst

Well, I can understand why people might think he was because it's like, Well, this feels predictable, almost too easy that he's going to get to Jesus from every Old Testament passage. Is he just finding Jesus under every rock? Is he making prefigurings and types where there are actually none? But I don't think he was guilty of that. Tim didn't bring all of his pots and pans to the dinner table. Don Carson would often say that Tim was actually a model expositor. He was an expositional preacher, but he just didn't show you all of his homework. He didn't show you all of the exegetical contextual work that had gone into. He just served up the meal. And what he says in his book on preaching, which, by the way, is good for every Christian to read. It's not just for pastors. He says that there are two dangers. There's the danger of preaching the text without preaching Christ, but there's also the danger of preaching Christ without preaching the text. We can't leapfrog over the authorial intent and the original context in order to get to Christ. I think for those with ears to hear, especially for those who don't only listen to his sermons, but listen to his teaching on preaching, you hear him give a more under the hood look at what that looks like, practically.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. Sometimes people say that this approach to preaching and biblical interpretation in its desire to avoid moralizing avoids application. You say that he didn't shy away from direct moral application. "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." So he was not reticent about making moral claims and exhortations, but you're saying that he was really concerned that these be in the context of a Christ-focused, gospel-centered life.

Matt Smethurst

Exactly. I don't think I can put it better than you just did, Keith. For him, it was a matter of order and priority. He would say that the way we're sanctified is first and foremost by reflecting on the fact that we're justified. So we're sanctified by remembering and rehearsing our gospel grace and justification. But that's not all there is to say. The Bible actually has more motivations that go into what the Puritans called this dynamic of holy sweat. It's God's work, but it's grace-fueled. It's spirit-enabled. But we also have to exert effort. "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Philippians 2. I think Keller sounded both notes in his preaching. But yes, the priority, the foundation, the fuel for all of it was the reality not of what we must do, but of what Christ has already done.

Dr. Keith Plummer

The focal point of his preaching, or one of the things that he was known for, was this idea of getting at the sin beneath the sin and talking about the place of idolatry in life. I know that he credited to a large extent, some of his colleagues at CCEF, particularly David Powlison, in helping him understand this. He was very much influenced by an Augustinian view of disordered love. Your second chapter is called "Excavating Sin: A Tale of Disordered Loves." And in that, you talk about his dealing with idolatry as a very often overlooked idea. But one of the things that you say there is that you think at one point that maybe his approach to idolatry was too simplistic. What is it that changed your mind about that? Why do you think that this is one of his great contributions? And what should we take away from some of the things that he had to say about the role of idolatry in life?

Matt Smethurst

Well, his little book on this topic is *Counterfeit Gods*, which I reread for project and was struck afresh by how relevant it is, though it was originally published in 2010. But it's not that I, once upon a time, suspected that Tim's teaching on idolatry was necessarily too simplistic. It was almost like I thought it was too sophisticated. Maybe he was trying to be a little too cute and clever in the way he talked about sin rather than having the courage to just confront Manhattanites head-on. But the more I explored the way he actually thought and talked about idolatry, the more I realized my view was

simplistic, not his, that he was actually, first and foremost, channeling the way the Bible itself speaks. Even in the Old Testament, in Ezekiel, you see language like, "My people have taken their idol into their hearts." And of course, in the New Testament, there are places like the very verse of 1 John, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols," which Tim defined as a "good thing that's been made into an ultimate thing." And the way you can know in your life that you've made a good thing into an ultimate thing is what happens when it's threatened or lost. If you're sad, if you're disappointed, that's natural. But if you're utterly devastated such that you can't imagine, in a sense, continuing on without that thing, then that's evidence that you've turned a gift into the giver and that you have an idol that must be slain. And that the way we slay our idol is not just by mowing over them as if with a lawn mower, but getting on our hands and knees and plucking them up like weeds and replacing them with something better.

#### Matt Smethurst

So one of the authors from history that Keller drew from was Thomas Chalmers, the 17th century Puritan, who wrote a sermon called "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." So the secret to conquering an idol in your life is not just to remove it, it's to replace it with a superior beauty, a superior love. I think that actually in showing that sin is fundamentally a worship problem, which is what he was doing, he was showing that sin against a Holy God is actually more of a personal affront than merely breaking a commandment or missing an archery target. That's why the Bible describes sin in the language of not just idolatry, but adultery. We are cheating on our maker, and therefore, it wasn't a way to soft-pedal sin. It was actually a way to, I think, show people that we're all tempted to live for something other than the one who alone can satisfy.

#### Dr. Keith Plummer

His section in *Making Sense of God*, in which he is talking about what is at the root of our dissatisfaction. And he unpacks Augustine and the idea of disordered love, I think, is masterful and quite helpful. You write concerning his teaching about idolatry: "Whether personal, religious, or cultural in form, idol are shapeshifting and over-present threats to being joyfully satisfied in Jesus Christ. When something in your heart becomes a deity, it's only a matter of time before it becomes a demon." One of the areas that you highlight that you say is often neglected in thinking about Tim's teaching has to do with that friendship. Tell us a little bit about what were some of the factors that he saw as being necessary for... What's the relationship between sanctification and Christian friendship? Why is friendship in league with, or why is it supposed to be in league with our pursuit of Christian maturity?

#### Matt Smethurst

Well, through the influence of C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Four Loves*, I think Tim came to see how much the Bible itself had to say about this theme. And in particular, when he came to New York, he's looking out every Sunday on a congregation of mostly ambitious, ladder-climbing, transient Manhattanites who don't have a lot of time for friendship. This was a countercultural word that he was consistently, or a note, he was consistently sounding in his preaching. The reason why it's so indispensable is because we were made for one another. Adam had God, and God himself said before the fall, It is not good that the man is alone. We especially see in the fact that God has given us his church that we are not meant to live the Christian life alone. Tim was constantly pushing back against the hyper individualism of New York City and saying, you can't be, here's the phrase he liked to use, a self-accredited Christian. You can't accredit yourself. You have to come under the authority of shepherds. You have to actually... It's not enough to just attend a church. You need to belong to a church, a community of people who will hold you accountable and care for your soul.

#### Matt Smethurst

One of the illustrations from Lewis that he liked to share is how he and J.R.R. Tolkien, so C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, whom they called Ronald, and another friend, Charles, spent all kinds of time together as friends. Charles died eventually, and C.S. Lewis thought to himself, Well, now that Charles has died, as tragic as that is, at least I'll have more of Ronald because Charles is out of the picture. But what Lewis came to see is that he actually got less of Ronald because Charles was gone. And that's because Charles was able to bring things out of Ronald that Lewis himself couldn't. And here's the point Keller makes. If it takes a multidimensional community to know a person, how much more to

know the living God? How much more do we all need one another in order to see and experience the manifold wisdom and facets and brilliance of a Triune God?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that is a very powerful illustration. He says, your relationship with the Lord will suffer if you try to know him apart from others who also know him. And that certainly does speak to our tendency to have the me and Jesus individualistic approach.

Matt Smethurst

Yeah. YouTube, I'll just say, I don't know exactly who all your listeners are. I'm sure there's a diversity, but YouTube is great. Spotify is great. These things cannot pastor your soul. You can supplement your spiritual life with things like this podcast. But you have to organize your life around a healthy local church and submitting your life to those who love the gospel and love God's Word and can shepherd you and care for you until you make it home.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Well, let's pause here. We'll take time out for a few messages, and then we'll come back and talk about some of the other of the greatest hits of Tim Keller.

Ben Best, co-host

Cairn University invites pastors and lay leaders to our annual Church Leaders Conference. Join us on Thursday, March fifth, for a day of encouragement, fellowship, and sessions designed to equip you for effective leadership. This year's topic is recognizing, resisting, and recovering from gospel drift, which will be addressed by keynote speaker, Jared C. Wilson. Conference registration includes a copy of his book, *Lest We Drift*. Don't wait. Find more information and register today at [cairn.edu/clc](http://cairn.edu/clc). That's c-a-i-r-n .edu/clc.

Dr. Keith Plummer

I am back speaking with Pastor Matt Smethurst, who is the author of *Tim Keller on the Christian Life: The Transforming Power of the Gospel*. I wanted to look at some of the other areas that you highlight. We can't, of course, touch upon all of them, but one of the chapters that you devote time to is that of prayer. You call it *Answering Heaven: How Prayer Unlocks Intimacy with God*. And this is an area which, as you note, Tim acknowledged that this had been an area of struggle for him personally. You say at one point that he admitted in 2014, "I don't believe I've been particularly good at teaching my church to pray. Even at the age of 69, he confessed, You're right, I've always sought to have a time of devotion and prayer each morning. And like most other believers, I have found it a struggle to be consistent." What is the relationship that Tim saw and taught between, say, theology and prayer? How does knowing truth or how should knowing truth about God lead us to prayer? And what is the relationship? What did he see prayerlessness as evidence of?

Matt Smethurst

I'm so glad you asked this question because there is a lot of emphasis these days around habits and spiritual practices and a rule of life, all of which, rightly defined, I can affirm. But one danger that I detect is that it can be an exercise, an expressive individualism, if we're not careful, that, Oh, here's a new hack for life, for a holistic living. I'm working out to grow physically, and I'm dieting, and I'm doing all these things. Oh, and I need the spiritual component. I want to be clear, not all the authors in the spiritual formation world are saying it like that. But the way it's being appropriated, I often fear, is that prayer, or what they might call a discipline of silence and solitude, it's pretty me-oriented. It's pretty individualistic. And here's the answer to your question, Keith. Here's where I think Keller's voice comes in, and you see this especially in his 2014 book, *Prayer*. He makes the wonderful point that unless we're responding to revelation, unless we're responding to who God has revealed himself to be in the pages of his word, then we're just talking to ourselves. We may be kneeling, we may be silent and in a place of solitude, but we might just be talking to an idol unless we are letting Scripture dictate the way we pray.

Matt Smethurst

So the way Tim talked about it was a two-way conversation that God initiates in his Word and that we

respond to in prayer. We hear God's voice in the Bible, and here, he hears our voices in prayer. And that's why Tim said that prayer was answering God. This is not from Tim, but it's something that I sometimes said to my church. I've said, We tell our kids that it's rude not to respond when someone talks to them. That's what prayerlessness is. The God of the universe has forfeited his personal privacy to reveal himself to us, to talk to us. And when we don't talk back to him, when we don't respond, not only is that a sin against his glory, we're impoverishing ourselves because prayer is how we experience communion with him. It's how we enjoy him. It's how we delight in him and how we ultimately take what the beliefs we have in our head and press them down into our hearts in a way that they become warm and affecting and life-transforming.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You quote him as saying, "To fail to pray is not to merely break some religious rule. It is a failure to trust God as God. It is a sin against his glory." And you also talk about how it is that it reveals a pride of life or a refusal to depend upon someone outside of ourselves.

Matt Smethurst

Yeah. Just very practically, the things we pray about are the things we trust God to handle, and the things we don't pray about are the things we trust we can handle on our own. And so it's vital to look at our prayer lives and to look at how much anyone can pray in an emergency when it needs something. But how many of your prayers are simply prayers of adoration as you gaze at the beauty of God and praise him for who he is and what he has done. Keller, the way he would put it is, we ought to pray not just to get things. Ultimately, we ought to pray to get God, to enter into the very happiness of the Triune God.

Dr. Keith Plummer

What we pray about reveals what it is that we value.

Matt Smethurst

Amen.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah. I think along those lines of, again, to mention David Powlison, one of his articles, "Pray Beyond the Sick List." I don't know if you're familiar with that. I'm he was talking about praying for the sick and praying for their hearts in the midst of the sickness and not simply the alleviation of the malady. Certainly, pray for that. But what is it that God might be wanting to do that we know on the basis of revelation, that we should be praying for as well with those who are ailing?

Dr. Keith Plummer

Tim was obviously known for a lot of the work that he did with respect to the relationship between faith and work, seeking to help people, particularly in the New York area, in a variety of vocations, to live as faithful followers of Christ in the midst of their vocation. You've got a chapter on that, as well as a chapter on some of his thinking about justice and the relationship between justification and the doing of justice.

Dr. Keith Plummer

You close the book with something having to do with an area in which he both wrote and taught a lot about and experienced, particularly toward the end of his life, that of suffering. And you call this chapter "The Painful Gift: How Suffering Drives Us into God's Heart." And before we talk about some of the details there in the introduction of the book, you say this, with respect to his first pastorate in Hopewell, Virginia. Hopewell is where, in Keller's words, and then you quote him, "Kathy and I have learned for the first time how to walk beside people who were facing grief, loss, death, and darkness." And then you say this is why so many sermon illustrations at Redeemer came from experiences and counseling moments in his first church. Before we talk specifically about suffering, the more I have thought about that, I have thought, Tim probably would not have been the pastor that we all have come to know him to be as the New York pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church had it not been for him being the pastor of Hopewell. Does that make sense?

Matt Smethurst  
Oh, absolutely.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It just made me think, the more I have thought about that, is we we should not despise, apparently small things. Because the ministry that he did, the things that he learned from the people of Hopewell, that was all contributing to that which we are more familiar with in terms of the platform that he came to have.

Matt Smethurst

Yeah. The Bible itself says, "Do not despise the day of small things, of small beginnings." Hopewell is only 35 minutes outside of Richmond, Virginia, where I pastor. I've been able to visit on a couple of occasions and to see West Hopewell Presbyterian Church, where he pastored for almost 10 years in the '70s and '80s. It is an incredibly blue collar, simple town. In fact, in Tim's first church there, where he pastored for that decade, there were only two college graduates in the entire church. They were elementary school teachers. One of his elders was illiterate. When he did a Scripture reading on a Sunday, he would have to take weeks to memorize it in order to stand up and do it. Yes, you cannot understand New York Keller apart from Hopewell Keller. It's a great reminder. One thing Tim would sometimes say is that in a small town, your pastoring sets up your preaching, meaning people won't care what you have to say from the pulpit if they don't feel like they know you and are cared for by you in private, whereas in a big city, it's often the reverse. Your preaching sets up your pastoring.

Matt Smethurst

If they don't respect you as a communicator, they're not probably going to implicitly come to you or trust you and come to you as a pastor. But I think it's in God's wisdom, he enabled him to cut his pastoral teeth and develop a lot of those instincts that be with him for the rest of his ministry.

Dr. Keith Plummer

It says so much about the importance of just faithful service where you are. In the beginning, you say that by the time that he was 33, he had delivered approximately 1,400 expository messages. I know that his preaching and teaching schedule at Hopewell was quite involved. He was preaching twice on Sundays and Wednesday nights. And I know that at least that. But it was just a matter of faithfully serving where it is that God had called him to be, serving those people, not looking toward where might this take me, but what is it that God has called me to right here?

Matt Smethurst

Absolutely. And at the end of the chapter on faith and work, when faith goes to work, I share the way that Keller drew from J.R.R. Tolkien's little known essay, "Leaf by Niggle." For anyone listening who is feeling discouraged in their vocation, feeling perhaps like they're spinning their wheels and that maybe they're not accomplishing much for the kingdom. That would be a good section to read as Keller helps reorient you to the larger perspective of what God is accomplishing even when we can't see it.

Dr. Keith Plummer

That's a good word. In your chapter on suffering, you say, "When the subject matter is darkest, Keller's teaching shines brightest." What leads you to say that? What was it about his approach to suffering and the gospel's relationship to suffering that just really shines?

Matt Smethurst

Well, he preached a lot about suffering. It's easy to find sermons on this theme, and he preached as one who himself, you could tell, was well-acquainted with grief, just like our Savior. And some of that is from his own personal suffering. Some of that was from, as you mentioned, ministering over the course of many years to those who had suffered. He had a tender pastoral way of coming at it like a spiritual surgeon. He would talk about suffering as being like a furnace, which is a biblical image. Of course, you think of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. You also think about the famous verse in Isaiah 43, "When you pass through the fire, I will be with you, and the flames will not overcome you. They will not set you ablaze." And he said, It's almost like Isaiah is saying, The heat will

You will be in the heat, but the heat will not be in you. The heat will not be able to destroy, to incinerate what is most valuable and precious in your life. And that's your greatest treasure, Jesus Christ.

**Matt Smethurst**

But the thing about a furnace, Keith, is that it will do one of two things. It'll either burn you to a crisp, or it'll burn away the draughts and enable you to emerge more noble, more radiant, more courageous, more joyful, than you were before. And so in Tim's book on suffering, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, as well as in the second to last book, he wrote, *Hope in Times of Fear*, which he wrote under the looming prognosis of having terminal stage four pancreatic cancer. That's what I mean when I say his teaching on suffering shown the brightest when the topic was darkest.

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

Yeah. That book *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* is one of the beauties of it is just the facets that he deals with, dealing with, yes, the apologetic issue, which in terms of showing how it is that Christianity provides resources for suffering that nothing else does, but also what he does in terms of helping the person who's trying to help the sufferer, as well as addressing in another section, the one going through the suffering. So many times, approaches to suffering will take one of those. But he was doing this full-orbed approach. And as you were saying about what suffering can do, you write, "Over more than 40 years of pastoral ministry, Keller watched hardship drive people in one of two directions, further from God or closer to God, the only thing he never saw was pain leaving somebody the same."

**Matt Smethurst**

Absolutely. And that's why he spoke and wrote so much on the topic. And of course, when he was diagnosed with cancer, we all got to, from afar, watch him live into and live up to his teaching as he himself suffered so well to the very end.

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

Yes. I wanted to bring that up because you quote him as saying that he could sincerely say without any sentimentality or exaggeration, that "I've never been happier in my life, that I've never had more days filled with comfort, but it is equally true that I've never had so many days of grief." When he was asked about these closing days of his life in light of the cancer that had to overcome him. That seems so counterintuitive that this was a time that was marked with the heights of joy and comfort as well as grief.

**Matt Smethurst**

Well, here's, I think, where we saw Keller as a modern day Puritan in many ways. The Puritans would say that it is worse to sin than to suffer. That's very countercultural. It is worse to sin than to suffer. But if you listen to some of the interviews that Tim did near the end of his life, he was saying things like, Hey, the main thing I'm fighting is not cancer. The main thing I'm fighting is my sin.

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

Yes. I remember hearing him say that.

**Matt Smethurst**

I need God, through the Holy Spirit, to uproot the idols in my heart and expose my selfishness and remove my sin so that I am fit to be with him forever. And what you alluded to is what he said in the sense of he and Kathy learned that for so many years, they were essentially trying to make a heaven out of this Earth. For Tim, that was through ministry productivity. For Kathy, it was maybe through family vacations or whatever. But the point is, they were looking to this Earth for something that only heaven can give, and that having that terminal diagnosis in an odd way, actually liberated them. It freed them to recognize that only heaven is going to be heaven, and therefore this Earth can just be Earth. We can just enjoy it and delight in it for what it is, but we don't have to impose and project expectations that it was never meant to bear. It can never finally satisfy our souls. Only Jesus can.

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

That is liberating. You alluded to this, but I wanted to quote you on this because I thought that this is a

true tribute and true words. You say, "Keller's most eloquent testimony to God's all sufficient grace and suffering wasn't a sermon or an essay, a seminar or a book. It was his death. He faced it with bravery and hope, and it was the most powerful message he ever delivered." That is true.

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

Well, as someone who had the privilege of knowing him, interacting with him for all of the research that you did for this, and even prior to this, your own profiting from his ministry in a variety of ways. I wanted to ask you, I won't put it in a superlative because I hate when people say the most, the best or anything. But when you think about how it is that you have been challenged and or encouraged with respect to your own Christian life by Tim's life and ministry, what is one of the ways that you would say this is a highlight? And then I want to ask you the same question, though, with respect to pastoring. What is something that you have taken away that you seek to emulate in your own ministry?

**Dr. Keith Plummer**

Those two things, just general Christian living and then pastoring.

**Matt Smethurst**

Yeah, for me, personally, I think it's the way he applied his insights on gospel grace. So I'll give you one example that has stuck with me for 20 years. I first heard him say this in a sermon, one of the first sermons I had ever heard from him. He said that it's almost like every morning we wake up and our hearts are looking for new ways to justify themselves. We go into a courtroom. And even though confessionally, doctrinally, we might affirm that we're justified, we're forgiven, we're adopted, we are still tempted to go into the courtroom and try to make a case for ourselves, why we matter, why we're okay. And he basically said, Every day, a Christian is going into an empty courtroom. There's no one there. Because the judge of all the Earth has already slammed down the gavel, and he has already said, In Christ, through faith in Christ, you are acquitted. You are innocent. You are righteous. And that criminal trial was turned into an adoption ceremony. The judge became our father. He said, I'm not just acquitting you in my courtroom, I'm bringing you, as it were, to my living room and my dinner table where you're going to eat with me for the rest of your days. And it's insights like that that help me on a daily basis because I am so prone to wander. I'm so prone to forget that I live under the smile of God because of Jesus Christ. That his mercies really are new every morning, and Tim helped me see that.

**Matt Smethurst**

As it relates to pastoring, I definitely would say that Tim's ministry has revolutionized the way that I preach and counsel when it comes to seeing Christ in all of Scripture and seeking to preach not just to people's heads, but preach to people's hearts. To show that Tim would sometimes quote Jonathan Edwards, who just made a really simple observation. "It's one thing to know about honey and all of its properties. It's another to have tasted it." Tim wanted us to taste and see that the Lord is good, not just know it in our heads. As I preach, I am aiming to do that with the help of Holy Spirit. I'm aiming to hold Jesus Christ up in all of his sufficiency and glory and beauty and essentially say to my people, week after week after week, Here is the fountain apart from which you will shrivel and die.

**Matt Smethurst**

And Tim had such a way of... Tim wasn't the most animated or passionate preacher, but there was a pleading tone in his voice where you he was summoning people, Come to the waters, come to the waters, come to Jesus Christ.

**Matt Smethurst**

I'm reminded, one last thing I'll say on this is there was an old Puritan who on his deathbed said, "I have made a heap of all my good works, and I've made a heap of all my bad works, and I've fled from both of them to Jesus." And what I love about that is it reminds me so much of Tim's ministry, because we are prone to think, Oh, I just need to flee from my heap of bad works to my heap of good works. But Tim was constantly telling us, No, you can be lost in your irreligion and immorality, and you can be lost in your religion and so-called morality. The only hope for you every day of your life is to collapse into the open arms of Jesus Christ.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yeah, that emphasis came out most profoundly, probably in his preaching on the prodigal sons.

Matt Smethurst

Yes. And if someone's never read a Tim Keller book, I would encourage them to start there with his book, *The Prodigal God*.

Dr. Keith Plummer

Yes. Well, I am grateful both to you and Megan that you were able to put this together because it is a very good... I think you met your aim of synthesizing the synthesizer. It's a very good introduction for some, if you're not familiar with the ministry of Tim Keller, but it's a good refresher for those of us who are, and I think you've done a really good job of condensing, as you have said, some of his greatest hits, some of the prime peaks of his the season in ministry.

Dr. Keith Plummer

The book is *Tim Keller on the Christian Life: The Transforming Power of the Gospel*, published by Crossway, authored by Matt Smethurst. Matt, it was a pleasure having you. Thank you again for taking the time. And grateful for your life and ministry.

Matt Smethurst

Likewise, Keith, you've asked terrific questions. It's been a joy to chat with you.

Ben Best, co-host

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