

Introduction to Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: “Introduction” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. ix-xxiv

*Main Point:* Keller’s introduction intends to give you a sense of why he is writing the book both academically (or intellectually) and personally. The main question at issue is religion: is it going away or is it getting stronger? Is it good or is it evil? We have a “divided culture” that is dividing on political and religious grounds. Can we talk about what matters here? How can we learn and grow when we are so determined that we know everything already? The point in this chapter is less of a content point and more of a discussion to get us to think about religion.

*Questions to Answer:*

- Do you have reactions or connections to the changing character of religion in the modern world (p. ix-xi) or to Keller’s own experience with Christianity (xi-xii)?
- What are the three barriers that Keller mentions that prevented him from feeling authentic in his Christianity? (p. xii-xiii) What do they mean? Do you have experience with any of these?
- What is the “second look at doubt” that Keller proposes? (xvii-xviii) What are the two processes that he commends? (xix)
- How did the vignettes of three people strike you? Any reactions or connections you felt to those? (xix-xxiv)

- What do you think of Keller at the end of the intro? Would you be willing to chat with him about religion? Why or why not?

Chapter 1 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter One “There Can’t Be Just *One* True Religion” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 3-21.

*Main Point:* Keller believes that Christianity is the one true faith, but he knows that many people don’t think that’s possible. This chapter deals with the objection to Christianity summed up in the title: “There can’t be just one true religion.” Keller discusses the reasons why people think there are many true religions, and attempts to show why that rationale is problematic or even wrong. Be careful as you read that you distinguish between what Keller thinks—that Jesus Christ is the one Savior of the world and Christianity is the one true religion—and what other people think—that there are many paths to truth and many different ways of belief that can all be right. Keller would agree that all religions have *some* elements of truth, but they are fundamentally different on what matters most: God, Jesus, and salvation.

*Questions to Answer:*

- What do you think about panel discussion Keller mentions with him, a rabbi, and an imam in which he states: “The bottom line was—we couldn’t all be equally right about the nature of God”? (4)
- Keller admits that religion tends to make adherents feel more superior than others? What does this mean? Why is this a danger? (4-5)
- As Keller discusses ways that religion is condemned, he focuses on four statements with which he disagrees: 1) All major religions are equally valid and basically teach the same things. (7-8), 2) Each religion sees part of spiritual truth but none can see the whole truth. (8-9), 3) Religious belief is too culturally and historically conditioned to be ‘truth.’ (9-11), and 4) It is arrogant to insist your religion is right and to convert others to it (11-14). Which of these do you see people holding today? How would you respond in light of Keller’s explanations?

- What is the definition of religion that Keller uses on page 15? What does this definition mean? What would religious topics be if Keller is right on this definition of religion? What do you think about this definition?
- Are all moral positions dependent upon some kind of religious or philosophical worldview? Keller says yes. What do you think? (See the discussion between Ms. A and Ms B on pages 16-17.)
- What are the two reasons that Keller gives for why Christianity “provides a firm basis for respecting people of other faiths”? What do these mean? How do they distinguish Christianity from other religions?

Chapter 2 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter Two “How Could a Good God Allow Suffering” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 22-34

*Main Point:* This chapter deals with a common objection to Christianity: “How can suffering and evil exist if there is a good God?” Keller tries to show how this objection fails to see the real problem with evil: how do we decide what is evil? He also shows how the problem doesn’t go away if one doesn’t believe in God. In fact, Christianity provides great hope in the midst of this problem, which is the only real solution, not a logical one but an existential/relational one in which God gives himself to us in the midst of suffering and promises even more. Answers are not so much the point in the midst of the problem of evil as presence: showing that God is with us and loves us for Christ’s sake come what may.

*Questions to Answer:*

- How does Keller argue that evil and suffering are not evidence against God? What’s the problematic assumption that most have? What do you think of Keller’s understanding? (23-25)
- How can evil and suffering possibly be evidence *for* God’s existence? How does Keller make that point? (26-27)
- Why does Jesus suffer so much more than the martyrs (Christians who died for professing their faith), according to Keller? (28-30)
- How does Jesus’ death and suffering provide hope for sufferers? (30-31)

- What is the hope of the resurrection that Keller mentions? Is that the same or different from the normal view of spiritual souls up in the sky? (p. 31-33) How does this provide hope in the face of evil?

Chapter 3 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter Three “Christianity Is a Straitjacket” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 35-51

*Main Point:* So much of contemporary society wants us not only to be free but to free to decide what our freedom is for. Is freedom to be radically myself in any way that I choose really freedom? Is there a freedom that ignores reality or does freedom have to have some kind of connection to reality? As Keller discusses the objection that a person cannot be both authentically themselves and a Christian, he discusses how the Bible understands freedom, what it means to be a human being, and what it means to live in community. Freedom without purpose is not freedom but meaninglessness. Freedom disconnected from truth/reality is not freedom but deception. Freedom disconnected from community is not freedom but isolation. True freedom finds our purpose and meaning in life in connection to God.

*Questions to Answer:*

- If being free ultimately is to make our own concept of existence, what do you think it means to be free? How would you understand it? Can Christianity fit into that, as you know it? (36-37)
- What does Keller mean that no community can be completely inclusive? How so? Agree? (37-38)
- What examples does Keller give that Christianity is culturally adaptive, present and active in many countries and continents across the world? Does that match with your experience of Christianity? (41-46)

- “In many areas of life, freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions.” (47) What does Keller mean by this? How can restrictions be freeing?
- Is love freeing or constraining? Or is it somehow both? Can you think of any examples? (48-51)



Chapter 4 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter Four, “The Church Is Responsible for So Much Injustice,” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 52-69.

*Main Point:* Many people say that religion causes violence and is the cause of so many of the world’s wars. In addition, religious people aren’t so good. Think of the scandals in the Roman Catholic Church or some of the hypocritical, self-righteous jerks you have known who call themselves Christians, perhaps even people in your own church (even your pastors??). Christianity seems to be as much bad as good. Keller challenges us to look at the real cause of violence and evil around religion, and he directs our eyes to see some of the good things that Christianity has fostered in the world: justice, compassion, and equal rights among others. These good things, he says, are at the root of Christianity, not the evil.

*Questions to Answer:*

- How can Christian behavior affect how people think about the truth of Christianity? How does toxic behavior turn off people to even consider whether something is true? (52-53)
- Christianity does teach that God’s grace transforms human hearts to make them new people, and gives them his Spirit to lead a holy life. Why, then, aren’t Christians “better people” than others? Summarize one way that Keller explains this. (54-55)
- How can religion’s transcendentalizing process contribute to violence? (56)

- What's the real issue that causes violence, according to Keller, though? (57)
- What would someone be like if they were truly fanatical about salvation by God's grace and following Jesus, according to Keller? (58-59)
- According to Keller, what do religious people try to do with their works in their relationship with God? (60-61) How does one actually get closer to God? (61)
- What is a story that shows how some Christians have been vocal and active for justice in Jesus' names? Give some details (64-69)

Chapter 5 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter Five “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 70-86

*Main Point:* We usually think of judgment as a bad thing, but in reality we yearn for judgment when something bad is going on. Judgment upon evil is a good thing. It is good when murderers are put in prison, when thieves must make restitution, and when abusers are prevented from abusing again. Love without judgment is actually impossible. Does one really love when one sees evil and does nothing about, refusing to judge? The issue with contemporary people is that we don't think evil is real, by and large, and thus judgment is not necessary. Keller challenges us to see the reasons behind why we disagree with divine judgment in order to see God as a God of both justice and love together.

*Questions to Answer:*

- According to Keller and Lewis, what is a major difference between an ancient and more modern view of reality and how people fit into it? (72-74) How does this fit into our rejection of God's judgment? (74 mostly)
- How can God's love and God's wrath go together? What does it mean that “God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition the cancer... which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being? (75-76)
- How can a lack of belief in God create violent tendencies in human hearts, according to Miroslav Volf? What do you think? (p. 77-78)

- How does Keller describe hell with Lewis in a very different way that most of us are probably used to? For instance, what does it mean that hell is growing in us? (81-82)
- What does Keller seem to mean by “God is a God of love”? What do you think it means? Where do we get this idea? (84-86)

Chapter 6 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter Six “Science Has Disproved Christianity” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 87-99.

*Main Point:* The scientific, materialistic worldview is probably the primary competitor to Christianity in the United States. Even Christians often find themselves wondering if the Bible can be true in light of what we learn about science. If Christianity is true, however, God made all things, and even science operates under his commands. In other words, science is describing the way that God has created the world to work. Keller also wants us to see how we can understand miracles and God’s continued presence and work in the world as long as we don’t rule out the possibility of the supernatural from the beginning.

*Questions to Answer:*

- Why do miracles seem to be impossible in our scientific age? (88)
- What are the underlying beliefs behind the assertion that miracles are impossible? Explain them in some detail (88-90)
- What are the four different models for our science and religion interact? (91) What are some problems with the conflict model? (91-95)
- With regard to evolution and the Bible, what does Keller think about the relationship of Gen. 1 and 2, and how there might be room to believe in both evolution and the

Bible? (96-97) Based on what you know about the Bible and the Christian faith, do you agree? Why or why not?

- Keller points out that the apostles not only were excited to see Jesus raised from the dead but some also “doubted.” Why would this bring some people comfort as they struggle with understanding miracles and scientific realities together?

Chapter 7 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter Seven “You Can’t Take the Bible Literally” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 100-18.

*Main Point:* Like Keller, I too first took classes on the Bible from scholars who assumed the Jesus of the Bible was not the real, historical Jesus. They taught that the real Jesus was a normal Jewish man who was crucified for his anti-authority teachings and his body was eaten by dogs in a mass burial site. That view of Jesus did not fit with what I learned in church growing up, but it seemed like the smartest and best researched people were teaching this historical Jesus thing. It was troubling at first. Soon, I did my own research, and found out that the scholars I was reading were basing most of their account on presumptions about what happened to most Jewish men in first century Galilee and Judea. They based whole theories about Jesus on little more than what would have been normal at that time. My point is that many people try to discredit the Bible—you can find them on television or social media if you look, but their criticisms often have little reality behind them. Keller helps us to see that the Bible is trustworthy, written by eyewitnesses who cared about truth and not power. And then, recognizing the Bible as a reality authority, maybe we can learn to hear God speak through the Bible, telling us who God is, what he has done, and helping us to see ourselves as his creatures and beloved children in Jesus.

*Questions to Answer:*

- How many years after Jesus’ death were the books of the Bible written? So what? (104)
- Who was still alive when the gospels were written? How does this help to show the reliability of the books? (104-105)
- The Gospel of Thomas is non-Biblical text that some will point to as a competitor of the Biblical Gospels. When was it written? What would that mean for its reliability?

- Many believe that the gospels were really about power, not truth, and they were written to bring power to some church leaders. How is the content of the Bible “counterproductive” toward that end? In particular, how does the Bible depict the apostles, the most prominent church leaders? (108-9)
- How does the form or style of the Bible suggest it is true and not fictional? (110-11)
- In the case of the Bible’s supposed affirmation of slavery, how does Keller help us to see the text in its proper context (113-15)?
- What advice does Keller give for how to approach challenging teachings of the Bible that aren’t primary teachings? (116-17)



## Intermission of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: “Intermission” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 119-28.

*Main Point:* As Keller moves from critiquing cultural assumptions and challenges to the Christian Faith to giving “sufficient grounds” for why people should be Christians, Keller offers this intermission to clear away a few issues. What Christianity are we talking about? What counts as sufficient? These two questions are central to this intermission. This short chapter will also begin to help us understand who God is from a Christian perspective.

*Questions to Answer:*

- What are the central teachings of Christianity as Keller defines it? (121)
- What is “strong rationalism”? Why is it so problematic, especially in questions of God and faith? (122-23)
- How is Keller’s approach of “critical rationality” different from relativism? (125)
- Why does Keller describe God as playwright, and what does this metaphor mean for how we understand and approach God? (126-28) How might this metaphor speak to the role God (and you!) plays in your life? Whose play (life!) is it really? What do you think of that?

Chapters 8 and 9 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read chapters 8 and 9 of Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 131-64.

Main Point: Keller describes various “clues” of God that point toward the reality of an almighty Creator. None of these clues is a “smoking gun” that “proves” the existence of God. A better metaphor might be putting together a puzzle of reality. Does reality as a whole make more sense if the picture includes an almighty Creator or does it make more sense devoid of any divine being? Keller makes a compelling argument that our picture of reality fails to recognize so much that is important, like love, justice, and morality, unless that picture includes God.

- Which clue did you find most compelling? Why?
- Which clue did you find least compelling? Why?
- How might you use these clues in a conversation with an unchurched person?
- What arguments do you foresee coming against these clues? How might you respond?
- What similarities do you notice between the evolutionary perspective that Keller talks about and religious viewpoints that are not based on reality but simply a blind faith? How can blind faith be a danger for Christians too?

Chapter 10 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter 10, “The Problem of Sin” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 165-79.

*Main Point:* There is something fundamentally wrong with the nature of reality and the world. Things simply fall apart. Whether it’s my relationships, my body, our social communities, all of it falls apart and it takes tremendous amount of energy and work to keep things together. This is part, though a rather trivial part, of what Christians call “sin,” this brokenness that pervades all things and even me and all individuals. For the Bible, though, sin is not merely about why things are broken. Sin is “a wrecked relationship with God, one another, and the whole created order” (166). We not only doubt the true God and reject his goodness, but we then chase after other gods—money, sexual pleasure, status, beauty, intelligence, ethical superiority, religious prominence. Our hearts are idol-making factories, as John Calvin quipped, creating other gods for our own benefit. This sin is at the heart of every person and has broken us, and we need this problem to be fixed.

*Questions to Answer:*

- How can pride be “the enemy of hope”? How does the story of the man with dreadlocks telling the crisply-dressed young man about “achieving low self-esteem” show how pride can be the enemy of hope? Explain (167-68).
- “The primary way to define sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into *ultimate* things” (168). What does Keller mean by this? What kind of things do people turn into ultimate things? Do you agree with him on people doing this? (168-170) Check out footnote 8 on this chapter, page 290-91 also as you answer this.

- Keller contends that making created things into gods causes a kind of slavery to those things, a kind of addiction (p. 171-72). Why and how does Keller argue that this is the case? What do you think?
- How does sin affect society and relationships? (174-75)
- How does sin affect the universe as a whole? (176-77)
- Why is living for Jesus easy (even if he demands everything) in Keller's view? (p. 177-79) What do you think about this?

Chapter 11 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter 11, “Religion and the Gospel” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 180-92.

*Main Point:* Earlier in the book, Keller already hinted at the distinction between Religion and the Gospel, suggesting that the Christian faith is not simply a matter of religious works but rather of what God does for us in Jesus Christ. Keller dives into the distinction between Religion and the Gospel in this chapter so that we can see how our religious tendencies are actually sinful and dangerous. We tend to think of religion as among the greatest and best of human proclivities, but Keller points it out as among the most dangerous to our souls. Keller helps us to recognize the difference between human religious works and the grace of God. Jesus gave up his life for human sinners not because we deserved it or are somehow worthy of it, but because God so loved us even in our guilt, shame, and sin. That’s grace that makes all the difference.

*Questions to Answer:*

- What does Keller mean by the term “religion” in this chapter? What does he mean by the term gospel? (181)
- What does selfishness look like usually? How does Mr. Hyde show that kind of normal selfishness? (p. 181-82)
- What does it mean that Jekyll becomes Hyde, “not in spite of his goodness, but because of his goodness”? What kind of self-centeredness is this? (p. 183) How, then, can religion be sin? (183 for quotation, but also 182-84)

- How does grace make a difference so that Christians understand their own works differently through the gospel and thus also understand other people differently? (p. 186-88)
- How is grace a threat to us in a certain way? How does the illustration of the woman show this point? (p. 189-90, a maybe a little 192)

Chapter 12 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter 12, “The (True) Story of the Cross” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 193–208.

*Main Point:* Why does Jesus die? Jesus’ death makes no sense if we believe that human beings are basically good or morally neutral. The death of Jesus only makes sense when we recognize that the world as a whole, and each human being, is deeply broken and corrupt. When we recognize that life has gone so badly that relationships are busted and people are destroyed, then we might begin to recognize why Jesus dies. Keller helps us to see how Jesus’ death was necessary because of our own costly debts that required a costly forgiveness. Moreover, Keller helps us to see how Jesus’ life functioned as an exchange, giving up his own treasures and life so that we—broken, condemned sinners—could have forgiveness and eternal life, the treasures of heaven.

*Questions to Answer:*

- How are wrongs costly? Give an example. What do we naturally want to do when someone wrongs us? What’s the result? (p. 194-95)
- How can forgiveness be costly? What does it feel like sometimes to forgive? What does it take? (p. 196-97)
- Why is Jesus’ death not the same as a kind of divine child abuse where God is requiring the death of someone else in order to be merciful? (p. 199-200)

- How is real love an exchange? Can you give an example? (p. 201-2)
- What is the Great Reversal? How does it show us the good news of the cross? (p. 203-5)



Chapter 13 of Keller, *The Reason for God*

Read: Chapter 13, “The Reality of the Resurrection” in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 209–21.

*Main Point:* Jaroslav Pelikan once quipped, “If Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, then nothing else matters. But if Jesus did rise from the dead, then nothing else matters.” Pelikan’s point is the same as Keller’s. The resurrection of Jesus is the center of the Christian faith, and according to the Bible it is the center of reality itself. In the resurrection of Jesus something brand new has come into history, and this is a promise that changes everything. Keller’s chapter will help us to see the evidence that Jesus indeed rose from the dead *bodily*, not just spiritually or immaterially. And in rising from the dead, Jesus is the first fruits, the sure sign and promise of a coming renewed age, not an immaterial totally other world, but a cleansed and purified creation where lambs and lions will lay down together and people of all ethnicities and status will eat together with God in the wedding feast that will never end.

*Questions to Answer:*

- What are the alternative accounts and premises for those who reject the resurrection of Jesus but try to account for the birth of Christianity and the church? (p. 211)
- What evidence does Keller bring forth that the events of the Gospels are best understood as factual, true recording? (p. 211-214)
- According to Keller (and NT Wright behind him), an individual, bodily resurrection was inconceivable to both Jewish people and Greek people. Why is that? Explain how Greeks and Jews both understood resurrection and the body. (p. 215-16)

- Keller talks about the “explosion of a new worldview” that occurs after the resurrection of Jesus. What are some of those beliefs that constitute this new worldview? (p. 217-18)
- In the words of NT Wright in the long excerpt at the end of the chapter, what hope is there for the world because of the resurrection of Jesus (not just for my individual soul or spirit)? How does this hope make a difference for you?