

Go
Forward
in Love

ALSO BY TIMOTHY KELLER

The Reason for God

The Prodigal God

Counterfeit Gods

Generous Justice

King's Cross

The Meaning of Marriage

Every Good Endeavor

Walking with God through Pain and Suffering

Encounters with Jesus

Prayer

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The Songs of Jesus

Making Sense of God

Hidden Christmas

God's Wisdom for Navigating Life

The Prodigal Prophet

The Meaning of Marriage: A Couple's Devotional

On Birth

On Marriage

On Death

Hope in Times of Fear

Forgive



Go
Forward
in Love

— A YEAR OF —
DAILY READINGS FROM

TIMOTHY
KELLER

 ZONDERVAN
BOOKS

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

Go Forward in Love

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Kathy Keller





JANUARY 1

Creation and Shalom

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.

—GENESIS 1:31

In most ancient creation accounts, creation is the by-product of some kind of warfare or other act of violence. Virtually never is the creation deliberate and planned. Secular scientific accounts of the origin of things are, interestingly, almost identical to the older pagan ones. The physical shape of the world as well as the biological life is the product of violent forces.

Unique among the creation accounts, the Bible depicts a world that is brimming with dynamic, abundant forms of life that are perfectly interwoven, interdependent and mutually enhancing and enriching. The Creator's response to this is delight. He keeps repeating that it is all *good*. When he creates human beings, he instructs them to continue to cultivate and draw out the vast resources of creation like a gardener does in a garden. "Go keep this going," the Creator seems to be saying in Genesis 1:28, "Have a ball!"¹

The Hebrew word for this perfect, harmonious interdependence among all parts of creation is called *shalom*. We translate it as "peace," but the English word is basically negative, referring to the absence of trouble or hostility. The Hebrew word means much more than that. It means absolute wholeness—full, harmonious, joyful, flourishing life.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 2

The Fall and Loss of Shalom

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.

—ROMANS 5:12

The devastating loss of *shalom* through sin is described in Genesis 3. We are told that as soon as we determined to serve ourselves instead of God—as soon as we abandoned living for and enjoying God as our highest good—the entire created world became broken. Human beings are so integral to the fabric of things that when human beings turned from God the entire warp and woof of the world unraveled. Disease, genetic disorders, famine, natural disasters, aging and death itself are as much the result of sin as are oppression, war, crime and violence. We have lost God’s *shalom*—physically, spiritually, socially, psychologically, culturally. Things now fall apart. In Romans 8, Paul says that the entire world is now “in bondage to decay” and “subjected to frustration” and will not be put right until we are put right.

[. . .] Sin is not simply doing bad things; it is putting good things in the place of God. So the only solution is not simply to change our behavior, but to reorient and center the entire heart and life on God.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 3

Jesus Died for You

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

—ROMANS 5:8

Remember this—if you don't live for Jesus you will live for something else. If you live for your career and you don't do well it may punish you all of your life, and you will feel like a failure. If you live for your children and they don't turn out all right you could be absolutely in torment because you feel worthless as a person.

If Jesus is your center and Lord and you fail him, he will forgive you. Your career can't die for your sins. You might say, "If I were a Christian I'd be going around pursued by guilt all the time!" But we *all* are being pursued by guilt because we must have an identity and there must be *some* standard to live up to by which we get that identity. Whatever you base your life on—you have to live up to *that*. Jesus is the one Lord you can live for who died for you—who breathed his last breath for you.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 4

Avoiding Jesus through Religion

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

—ROMANS 3:20

Sin and evil are self-centeredness and pride that lead to oppression against others, but there are two forms of this. One form is being very bad and breaking all the rules, and the other form is being very good and keeping all the rules and becoming self-righteous. There are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord. The first is by saying, "I am going to live my life the way I want." The second is described by Flannery O'Connor, who wrote about one of her characters, Hazel Motes, that "he knew that the best way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin."² If you are avoiding sin and living morally so that God will have to bless and save you, then, ironically, you may be looking to Jesus as a teacher, model and helper but you are avoiding him as Savior. You are trusting in your own goodness rather than in Jesus for your standing with God. You are trying to save yourself by following Jesus.

That, ironically, is a rejection of the gospel of Jesus. It is a Christianized form of religion. It is possible to avoid Jesus as Savior as much by keeping all the biblical rules as by breaking them. [. . .] You need a complete transformation of the very motives of your heart.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 5

The Difference of Grace

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

—EPHESIANS 2:8-9

There is, then, a great gulf between the understanding that God accepts us because of our efforts and the understanding that God accepts us because of what Jesus has done. Religion operates on the principle “I obey—therefore I am accepted by God.” But the operating principle of the gospel is “I am accepted by God through what Christ has done—therefore I obey.” Two people living their lives on the basis of these two different principles may sit next to each other in the church pew. They both pray, give money generously and are loyal and faithful to their family and church, trying to live decent lives. However, they do so out of two radically different motivations, in two radically different spiritual identities, and the result is two radically different kinds of lives.

The primary difference is that of motivation. In religion, we try to obey the divine standards out of fear. We believe that if we don’t obey we are going to lose God’s blessing in this world and the next. In the gospel, the motivation is one of gratitude for the blessing we have already received because of Christ. While the moralist is forced into obedience, motivated by fear of rejection, a Christian rushes into obedience, motivated by a desire to please and resemble the one who gave his life for us.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 6

The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

—GALATIANS 2:20

When my own personal grasp of the gospel was very weak, my self-view swung wildly between two poles. When I was performing up to my standards—in academic work, professional achievement or relationships—I felt confident but not humble. I was likely to be proud and unsympathetic to failing people. When I was not living up to standards, I felt humble but not confident, a failure. I discovered, however, that the gospel contained the resources to build a unique identity. In Christ I could know I was accepted by grace not only despite my flaws, but because I was willing to admit them.

The Christian gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less. I don't need to notice myself—how I'm doing, how I'm being regarded—so often.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 7

The Forgiveness of God

The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

—HEBREWS 9:22

Why did Jesus have to die? Couldn't God just forgive us?" This is what many ask, but [. . .] no one "just" forgives, if the evil is serious. Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer do it, so you can reach out in love to seek your enemy's renewal and change. Forgiveness means absorbing the debt of the sin yourself. Everyone who forgives great evil goes through a death into resurrection, and experiences nails, blood, sweat and tears.

Should it surprise us, then, that when God determined to forgive us rather than punish us for all the ways we have wronged him and one another, that he went to the cross in the person of Jesus Christ and died there? As Bonhoeffer says, everyone who forgives someone bears the other's sins. On the cross we see God doing visibly and cosmically what every human being must do to forgive someone, though on an infinitely greater scale. I would argue, of course, that human forgiveness works this way because we unavoidably reflect the image of our Creator. That is why we should not be surprised that if *we* sense that the only way to triumph over evil is to go through the suffering of forgiveness, that this would be far more true of God, whose just passion to defeat evil and loving desire to forgive others are both infinitely greater than ours.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 8

The Divine Dance

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you."

—JOHN 17:1

Christianity, alone among the world faiths, teaches that God is triune. The doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one being who exists eternally in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity means that God is, in essence, relational.

The Gospel writer John describes the Son as living from all eternity in the "bosom of the Father" (John 1:18 NKJV), an ancient metaphor for love and intimacy. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus, the Son, describes the Spirit as living to "glorify" him (John 16:14). In turn, the Son glorifies the Father (17:4) and the Father, the Son (17:5). This has been going on for all eternity (17:5b).

[...] What does it mean, then, that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit glorify one another? If we think of it graphically, we could say that self-centeredness is to be stationary, static. In self-centeredness we demand that others orbit around us. We will do things and give affection to others, as long as it helps us meet our personal goals and fulfills us.

The inner life of the triune God, however, is utterly different. The life of the Trinity is characterized not by self-centeredness but by mutually self-giving love.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 9

Joining Creation's Dance

"What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

—1 CORINTHIANS 2:9–10

God did not create us to get the cosmic, infinite joy of mutual love and glorification, but to share it. We were made to join in the dance. If we will center our lives on him, serving him not out of self-interest, but just for the sake of who he is, for the sake of his beauty and glory, we will enter the dance and share in the joy and love he lives in. We were designed, then, not just for belief in God in some general way, nor for a vague kind of inspiration or spirituality. We were made to center our lives upon him, to make the purpose and passion of our lives knowing, serving, delighting and resembling him. This growth in happiness will go on eternally, increasing unimaginably (1 Cor. 2:7–10).

This leads to a uniquely positive view of the material world. The world is not, as other creation accounts would have it, an illusion, the result of a battle among the gods, nor the accidental outcome of natural forces. It was made in joy and therefore is good in and of itself. The universe is understood as a dance of beings united by energies binding yet distinct, like planets orbiting stars, like tides and seasons, "like atoms in a molecule, like the tones in a chord, like the living organisms on this earth, like the mother with the baby stirring in her body."³ The love of the inner life of the Trinity is written all through it. Creation is a dance!

The Reason for God



JANUARY 10

Deeds of Justice and Service

Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.

—ISAIAH 1:17

The story of the gospel makes sense of moral obligation and our belief in the reality of justice, so Christians do restorative and redistributive justice wherever they can. The story of the gospel makes sense of our indelible religiousness, so Christians do evangelism, pointing the way to forgiveness and reconciliation with God through Jesus. The gospel makes sense of our profoundly relational character, so Christians work sacrificially to strengthen human communities around them as well as the Christian community, the church. The gospel story also makes sense of our delight in the presence of beauty, so Christians become stewards of the material world, from those who cultivate the natural creation through science and gardening to those who give themselves to artistic endeavors, all knowing why these things are necessary for human flourishing. The skies and trees “sing” of the glory of God, and by caring for them and celebrating them we free their voices to praise him and delight us. In short, the Christian life means not only building up the Christian community through encouraging people to faith in Christ, but building up the human community through deeds of justice and service.

Christians, then, are the true “revolutionaries” who work for justice and truth, and we labor in expectation of a perfect world in which:

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

—REVELATION 21:4

The Reason for God



JANUARY 11

Grace Makes Us Servants

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.”

—MARK 10:43–44

Jesus conducts a major critique of religion. His famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7) does not criticize irreligious people, but rather religious ones. In his famous discourse the people he criticizes pray, give to the poor, and seek to live according to the Bible, but they do so in order to get acclaim and power for themselves. They believe they will get leverage over others and even over God because of their spiritual performance (“They think they will be heard because of their many words”—Matt. 6:7). This makes them judgmental and condemning, quick to give criticism, and unwilling to take it. They are fanatics.

[. . .] The God of Jesus and the prophets, however, saves completely by grace. He cannot be manipulated by religious and moral performance—he can only be reached through repentance, through the *giving up* of power. If we are saved by sheer grace we can only become grateful, willing servants of God and of everyone around us.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 12

God of Love and Justice

The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does. . . . The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

—PSALM 145:17, 20

In Christianity God is both a God of love and of justice. Many people struggle with this. They believe that a loving God can't be a judging God. Like most other Christian ministers in our society, I have been asked literally thousands of times, "How can a God of love be also a God filled with wrath and anger? If he is loving and perfect, he should forgive and accept everyone. He shouldn't get angry."

I always start my response by pointing out that all loving people are sometimes filled with wrath, not just despite of but because of their love. If you love a person and you see someone ruining them—even they themselves—you get angry. As Becky Pippert puts it in her book *Hope Has Its Reasons*:

Think how we feel when we see someone we love ravaged by unwise actions or relationships. Do we respond with benign tolerance as we might toward strangers? Far from it . . . Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is, and the final form of hate is indifference . . . God's wrath is not a cranky explosion, but his settled opposition to the cancer . . . which is eating out the insides of the human race he loves with his whole being.⁴

The Bible says that God's wrath flows from his love and delight in his creation. He is angry at evil and injustice because it is destroying its peace and integrity.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 13

Miracles Lead to Worship

You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples.

—PSALM 77:14

Miracles are hard to believe in, and they should be. In Matthew 28 we are told that the apostles met the risen Jesus on a mountainside in Galilee. “When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted” (verse 17). That is a remarkable admission. Here is the author of an early Christian document telling us that some of the founders of Christianity couldn’t believe the miracle of the resurrection, even when they were looking straight at him with their eyes and touching him with their hands. There is no other reason for this to be in the account unless it really happened.

The passage shows us several things. It is a warning not to think that only we modern, scientific people have to struggle with the idea of the miraculous, while ancient, more primitive people did not. The apostles responded like any group of modern people—some believed their eyes and some didn’t. It is also an encouragement to patience. All the apostles ended up as great leaders in the church, but some had a lot more trouble believing than others.

The most instructive thing about this text is, however, what it says about the purpose of biblical miracles. They lead not simply to cognitive belief, but to *worship*, to awe and wonder.

The Reason for God



JANUARY 14

Two Sons

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable.

—LUKE 15:1-3

Jesus' story might best be named the Parable of the Two Lost Sons. It is a drama in two acts, with Act 1 entitled "The Lost Younger Brother" and Act 2 "The Lost Elder Brother."

Act 1 begins with a short but shocking request. The younger son comes to the father and says, "Give me my share of the estate." The original listeners would have been amazed by such a request. [. .] Here the younger son asks for his inheritance *now*, which was a sign of deep disrespect. To ask this while the father still lived was the same as to wish him dead. [. .]

This younger brother, then, is asking his father to tear his life apart. And the father does so, for the love of his son. Most of Jesus' listeners would have never seen a Middle Eastern patriarch respond like this. The father patiently endures a tremendous loss of honor as well as the pain of rejected love. Ordinarily when our love is rejected we get angry, retaliate, and do what we can to diminish our affection for the rejecting person, so we won't hurt so much. But this father maintains his affection for his son and bears the agony.

The Prodigal God