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He Was Ready for Heaven

May 22, 2023



Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

He kept the main thing the main thing. He wasn't a jerk. He wasn't a prima donna. He was enjoyable to be around. He was full of the fruit of the Spirit. That's a good life; that's a Christian life.

Transcript

(music) Greetings and salutations. This is Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung.

I want to read today the tribute that I wrote over the weekend for Tim Keller. I'm sure everyone listening to this realizes that Tim passed on into glory last Friday after several years of his life. Several years battle with pancreatic cancer and of the many things.

To give thanks for loved how Tim said repeatedly that his battle was not with cancer, but with his own sin. So through Christ he has won that battle. We rejoice with him even though we grieve.

It's been a heavy week, not only Harry Reader, who is very well known in the PCA and somewhat outside the world. And somewhat outside of that, perhaps some listening here wouldn't have been as familiar with Harry and read a tribute to him earlier. He was the founding pastor here at Christ Covenant where I serve and had a fabulously fruitful, faithful ministry and then pastored for the last quarter century at Briarwood and Birmingham.

In addition to these two saints, Tim and Harry, another senior statesman in the PCA, Stephen Smallman, passed away. He would be well known in the PCA. He was in his 80s.

In fact, his book, all of our young people do in their communicants class as they make profession of faith. He's known for that and a number of other things as well. And then just last night as I'm recording this on Monday, yesterday on Sunday, the word came out that Donald McLeod from Scotland passed away.

And a number of leaders, pastors, thinkers, writers in the Presbyterian and Reformed world passed away in just half a week. And we trust that the Lord's timing is perfect and his providence knows and foresees and oversees all things and we rejoice in that. I want to read this piece I wrote, it came out on Saturday in world opinions, a tribute to Tim Keller, simply entitled "He was ready for heaven." I'm not on the habit of commenting on the death of every famous Christian.

The world doesn't need a statement or reflection from everyone on everything all the time. But it's not all the time that two well-known friends, they're friends of mine and they were also friends of each other in ministry die within the span of 24 hours. Those outside the Presbyterian church in America may not realize that Briarwood in Birmingham and Redeemer in Manhattan may be the two most famous churches in our denomination.

At least if you were to ask people in the PCA, they would certainly be among the five that somebody would mention as the most well-known influential churches. How sad yet providentially fitting then that their pastors would enter into glory on nearly the same day. Harry Reader's death came as a shock.

Tim Keller's death shouldn't have been shocking. His battle with pancreatic cancer was well known. But somehow even though Tim had outlived the normal prognosis by a long shot, when his days drew to an end, it still felt sudden.

Beautifully, Tim was ready to die. None of us were ready for him to go. I initially got to know Tim through his books and his sermons.

Even though we had a few times along the way in the gospel coalition circles had an opportunity to meet, I didn't get to see Tim up close at regular intervals. Until six or seven years ago when I came on the TGC board, we navigated some choppy waters in those days and then later we were put together on the PCA's Sexuality Study Committee. Over many emails, phone calls and meetings, I got to know that Tim Keller, behind the famous books and famous sermons, turns out, it was the same Tim Keller.

Amazingly, I never got a whiff of pretension with Tim, never a hint of moral impropriety, and never a sense of superiority or entitlement. I know many other young-ish men who probably thought the same thing I did. Why is Tim being so kind and encouraging to me? That question has nothing to do with me and everything to do with Tim.

On the one hand, I think he made a conscious effort in the last five years to invest in the next generation. He deliberately looked for ways to support others, steer them, and if necessary, affectionately spar with them. This was a strategic move on his part, perhaps sensing more and more his own mortality.

But conversation also came naturally for Tim. Though not an extrovert by most

definitions, he was at ease with people, or at least he was by the time I got to know him. He was insatiable curious about ideas, books, and trends.

He loved to talk about theology, culture, and history. He also loved to tell stories. Importantly, he smiled often, and liked to laugh.

I've written before, at greater length, in first things, just a few weeks ago, about Tim's life and ministry, including some ways we were similar and some ways we were different. As I said at the conclusion of that piece, the best thing about Tim wasn't his intellect, his insights, or his communication skills, as impressive as those gifts were. Second to the gospel that he joyfully preached, the most lasting lesson from Tim Keller's life is Tim Keller's life.

His books will last a long time, likely so will the church he pastored, and the ministries he helped to start. But in these days, immediately following his death, I suspect what you'll hear most, and we've already heard, is about Tim's life of heartfelt faith and sincere devotion. How he loved the Lord, how he treated people.

He loved Jesus, he loved the Bible, he loved his wife, Kathy, and their children. He kept the main thing, the main thing. He wasn't a jerk, he wasn't a prima donna, he was enjoyable to be around, he was full of the fruit of the spirit, he was ready for heaven.

That's a good life, that's a Christian life. Soon after his diagnosis of pancreatic cancer in 2020, I was on the phone with Tim, probably talking about some brushfire at TGC. He said he needed to tell me something about his health and let me know why he would be out of commission for some time.

His demeanor was sobering and realistic, but also hopeful and grateful. I remember hearing from Tim several months later, this is my paraphrase. You know, I've always talked about preaching the gospel to yourself and finding freedom in the gospel, and I've really believed it, Tim said.

But with this diagnosis, I finally have complete freedom. Then he said with a chuckle, "I can say no to everything now. Once you have cancer, you can do whatever you want." The comment was lighthearted, but it also made a serious point.

Tim knew what Christ had done for him and who he was in Christ. He also knew that he was free to focus in the months or years ahead, whatever the Lord might give him, on those things and only those things that were most important. Tim was fully alive, even when dying of cancer.

He was full of faith until the end, all the way up to the moment when his faith became sight. Tim and I didn't talk all the time, there are many others who knew him longer and more deeply, but we did communicate regularly. And it says something revealing, if unsurprising, that as I peruse our emails over the past few months, Tim was writing

about everything from Christian nationalism and two kingdoms, the outside of the world.

Tim and two kingdoms theology, to Abraham Kuiper and Martin Lloyd-Jones, to the Bible's teaching on spiritual adultery and idolatry. In our last communication, a few weeks ago in April, Tim told me that he would be feeling better in a month, and should be ready for a podcast interview after that. Well, there won't be a podcast interview, but Tim was right.

He's feeling much better now. The very last line, which seemed perfunctory at the time, but now feels rather poignant. "Talk later, and thanks," he said.

I'd like that. Because of Jesus, we will talk later. In Tim? Thanks.

[Music]