

## Engage360 | Episode 20: A New Year's Reflection

**Introduction:** Welcome to Engage360 Denver Seminary's podcast. Join us as we explore the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture at work in our culture today.

**Dr. Don Payne:** Welcome to Engage360. I'm your host, Don Payne. As is becoming our custom on this podcast, we're going to take a break from our normal interview format and offer a brief reflection related to the holiday in view this week. I'll come to that in just a bit. But, in keeping with that, Happy New Year from Denver Seminary. I believe this is episode 20 of Engage360 and as we wrap up this first year—though it's been a partial year for us with the podcast—we want to thank you for whatever time you have spent with us. We hope and pray that what you have heard has been beneficial and interesting, especially as you think about what the redemptive power of the gospel and the life-changing truth of Scripture mean in your own life. Please email us when you have a chance and let us know what you think at [podcast@denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@denverseminary.edu). And, though I know every podcast encourages this, it really does make a difference when you give us a rating or a written review. So, if you like what you hear, please take a few minutes to do that. You might also like to know, if you don't, that full text manuscripts of each episode are available on our website. Simply go to [denverseminary.edu](http://denverseminary.edu), click on the link to the podcast, and under the picture of each episode's guests you'll see a page icon that will lead you to the text for each one.

These first few months of Engage360 have been devoted to a "Get to Know Denver Seminary" theme. You've heard from some of our administration, faculty, board members, students, and graduates. And I have to say that I have found each of our guests really interesting. I'm still waiting for the first "dud". If you check out the Engage360 page on the seminary website, you'll see every episode there. If you have not heard all of them, I encourage you to go back and listen to a few. I promise you that it will beat listening to some of the same tunes you've heard before while you're driving. As we jump into the new year we're going to branch out a bit. You'll still hear from administration, faculty, staff, students, board members, and graduates, but we also plan to engage an even broader spectrum of people involved in really interesting and challenging ministries. What we have planned for this year will give you some great ideas and a much larger vision for what the redemptive power of the gospel can look like. I hope you'll plan to listen as regularly as you can.

So, did you know that there are 31 million, 360 thousand (31,360,000) seconds in every year? Perhaps the most universally recognized ten seconds in all that are the final ten seconds of every calendar year. In the U.S. we can watch the ball drop in Times Square as those final ten seconds expire. It seems that the less time that remains in any timed endeavor, the more conscious we are of the smaller increments of time. Once a basketball game gets to the final minute of play the clock starts measuring in tenths of seconds. The less time that remains

the more charged that time is in our perception, whether for good or ill. In his insightful book, *The Tyranny of Time*, Robert Banks observes that the mechanical time-keeping device we call a clock was invented in the late 13th century, but from then until the Industrial Revolution it occupied a primarily ornamental role in society. It was a curiosity – a showpiece. Not until the labor of large numbers of workers needed to synchronize for the sake of mass production that clocks assumed a regulative role in society. They began to “tell” us what time it was, rather than simply report or reflect the time. When the bell rang or the whistle blew, it told people it was time to begin work, time to break for lunch, time to resume work, and time to stop. It’s amazing—sometimes comical—how much power we invest in time-keeping devices. My late father-in-law used to be working in back yard and my mother-in-law would call out to him through the kitchen window and ask, “Jim, are you hungry?” to which he would respond, “What time is it?” He couldn’t answer whether he was hungry without knowing the time. So, at this time of the year, it’s good time to think about time in relation to God, who we are, and what we’re doing in God’s world.

For people around the world, the start of a new year tends to be some type of celebration. A new year and the celebration surrounding it has different meanings in different cultures, but in the more secularized cultures like ours it seems to be celebration sort of for its own sake. Our culture loves to celebrate celebrating! Among Christians and perhaps other people of faith, it also tends to be a time of reflection on the events of the prior year and their significance in light of God. That’s a good thing, in part because it brings into focus God’s relationship to time. Sometimes Christians talk about time as if it to minimize it in light of God’s timelessness. Doing that is a way of connecting with God’s transcendence when life for us inside time can be rugged. Certainly from a theological vantage point, we have to admit (at least in my understanding of things) that God is not bound to time or limited by time as we are. After all, God is Creator of all.

But we ought to ask ourselves whether perhaps God takes time more seriously than we do. We’re just coming off a season when as Christians we celebrated the entrance of God into time through the Incarnation. God may not be innately bound to time but God certainly has willed to bind himself to time for our sake. The 20th Scottish theologian T.F. Torrance challenged what he called the “container view” of space and time that he thought has plagued the Church’s thinking for centuries. This “container view,” which he attributes to Aristotle, found its way into much Western theological thinking and is responsible, so argues Torrance, for much discomfort with the Incarnation – with God being really, truly, fully present among us and acting decisively in our lives as one of us in time through both the Incarnation and the Resurrection. If you want to follow up on how Torrance treats these notions, I would refer you to his book *Space, Time, and Incarnation*. It’s a challenging read, so eat a hearty breakfast before you jump in! Ever since Albert Einstein argued that space and time are not absolute but relative to each other, many Christians have had a curious relationship to time—particularly to how God relates to us in and through time.

We conveniently play the timelessness card when life inside time gets too difficult or puzzling.

Yet we just rehearsed during Advent our “life between the times” of Christ’s comings. The very hope and promise of the gospel is hope and promise that situates us in time and anchors God’s promises in time. So, these annual holiday punctuation points serve not merely as occasions to celebrate celebration, but to recognize God’s presence and recalibrate our lives around God’s presence to us and God’s work through us in time, even with all the ambiguities that time involves.

Koheleth, the writer of Ecclesiastes, was poignantly conscious of those ambiguities in reflecting on how God has frustrated us by placing us in time while allowing us to have a sense of the past and the future, and not allowing us to see what our work adds up to—all of that steering our attention back to the simplicity of trusting God for those matters.

The Apostle Paul reflected his keen sense of the significance of time in Romans 13:11-14. “And do this [that is, fulfill the law through love], understanding the present time. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” In this challenge, Paul gives us more than might be evident at first glance. He helps us think about and relate rightly to time by referring to time in two ways. He uses words like “now” and “day”—words that connote chronological time—linear time that accumulates and can be measured. Yet the word he uses for “time” in v. 11 is not *chronos*—the word for linear, accumulating, measureable time—but *kairos*, which refers to time in a more qualitative sense. Kairos speaks of time as an occasion or a unique type of moment when something important is to occur. We generally answer the question, “What time is it?” by looking at a clock. But Paul would have been just as inclined to answer that question by saying “It’s time to trust God.” “It’s time to love our neighbors.” See the difference? We should not always think about time in clock or calendar terms.

Now, here we are, all the same, using a calendar to prompt our reflections. But that is only a prompt for the far bigger questions of how we relate to God within time when we can’t quantify the worth of a life, or when we can’t quantify how much impact our loving and serving has had, or the value of a cup of cold water offered in Jesus’ name when the person will need another cup shortly after that, or we can’t explain why God seems to take so long to work or to answer our prayers or to do the very things that he says he wants. The most important things in life take place within time but can never be measured in units like those we use to measure chronological time. We cannot think of God’s activity in time the way we like to measure so much else in life.

Let me offer a suggestion for how we—as those who have banked our lives on the claim that Jesus is indeed the way, the truth, and the life—how we are to celebrate and to reflect at this time of year. As we enjoy some of God’s good gifts and celebrate, sometimes alongside our neighbors whose lives reflect other allegiances, we can breathe a bit easier because not everything that matters can be assessed by the limited metrics that the world uses to determine value—including how much got done in measureable time. We can afford to stop or step back from what typically preoccupies and pressures us and we can reflect on God’s presence and activity between the lines—in the subtle ways that we tend to miss.

Like about 8% of the male population and .4% of the female population, I am color-blind. Some people who are not color-blind have thought that meant that I see in black and white, like an old-fashioned TV set. No, it simply means that I have trouble distinguishing certain colors (normally red, green, and brown) unless they are really bold, and that some shades of colors I simply don’t see at all. A few years ago some of my students found about this and went together—quite generously—and surprised me with a rather expensive pair of sunglasses that actually compensate for colorblindness. It’s a very real and very cool technology. The first time I put them on I went for a drive and for the first time in my life I was surprised to realize that the street signs on corners (at least where I live) are green. I had never seen that. I also was stunned the first time I saw a green traffic light. I always knew it was called a green light but I had never seen it as anything but a white light. It was staggering to realize that a green light is actually green! In some roughly analogous fashion, God’s presence and activity in our lives often doesn’t scream at us. They can actually be staring us in the face and we not recognize them—or benefit from them—at all. The dominantly chronological or linear ways we think about time carry over to other domains of life and cripple our vision. To the extent that our vision is impaired in this way, so is our capacity for joy and celebration and gratitude, and our motivation to risk and sacrifice in service. Try to see life through God’s eyes—within time but not bound to a one-dimensional view of time.

I have to confess that the older I get the more I think about chronological time, because, as I mentioned at the outset, the less time that remains the more finely calibrated our attention to it becomes. Hardly a day passes when I don’t somehow think about the fact that far more of my life is behind me than ahead of me. That’s not macabre or depressing to me. Sometimes it’s sobering as I consider various regrets and I know there is no do-over. Quite often, though, it motivates me to make the most of whatever time remains. In one sense—a chronological, quantitative sense—I want to get as much done as possible within that time. But in the more qualitative or Kairos sense, it motivates me and inspires me to invest my life in the right kinds of ways: with good proportion, quality relationships and conversations, deep attention to people, attentive to opportunities, courage to speak up for things that really matter and give a plausible witness for the gospel within my circle of acquaintances, to not let the experiences and resources and lessons of my life be lost or wasted. The list could continue. It really brings me back to some of Paul’s key words in

Romans 13. To fulfill the law through love, “understanding the present time . . . to wake up from slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. [to] put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” To enter deeply into the life and truth and way of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That strikes me as a fairly healthy and worthwhile balance of celebration and commitment to mark the end of a year and the beginning of another. The resolutions we make will only be life-giving and durable if they’re upheld by attention to God’s presence and activity beyond what we can measure. Thanks be to God for the gift of time, however long or brief it is for any one of us chronologically. Thanks be to God for entering our time and sanctifying it or making it holy by his very presence—for being Lord over time and Lord within time. Thanks be to God that the worth and value and influence of our lives can’t be measured by how much time we have. Thanks be to God for the grace-filled promise that he is the One who does the work and guarantees the final outcome.

On behalf of all of us here at Denver Seminary, Happy New Year. May you know the Lord’s presence and redemption in all you do this coming year, the gains and the losses, your work and your rest. Check in with us again next week.