

Engage360 Episode 112 | Holy Week 2023; Dr. Craig Blomberg, Dr. Mark Young

Intro [00:00:04] 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.

Don Payne [00:00:16] Hi again, friends. This is engage360 from Denver Seminary. We're glad you have chosen to spend a bit of time with us. My name is Don Payne. I'm your host. And let's talk about Holy Week. For Christians around the world, this week, Holy Week, is the pinnacle of the church calendar. Every other aspect of the church calendar points to or revolves around or culminates in the events of Holy Week, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These monumental, history altering, history defining events point us to the gospel, which we could say is the humanity altering, humanity defining message. And it's more than simply a message in an informational sense. Since the Apostle Paul referred to the Gospel in Romans 1:16 as the power of God, that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Holy Week gives focus and character to our worship so that we can't reduce or dilute worship to our own internal feelings or to generic impulses that are unrelated to anything that actually changes us. There are lots of references to the gospel these days and sometimes curiously competing claims about how the gospel does or does not relate to our engagement with the brokenness of the world. So, this is a prime time for us to revisit the Gospel and those Holy Week events that are at the core of the Gospel. And this may be pertinent even for those, and maybe especially for those, who assume they already have the gospel down. Well, we're honored to be joined for this conversation by our president, Dr. Mark Young. Mark, welcome.

Mark Young [00:02:00] Hey, thanks, Don.

Don Payne [00:02:01] Good to have you back, and by our recently retired but long-time professor of New Testament, Dr. Craig Blomberg. Craig, welcome again.

Craig Blomberg [00:02:08] Thank you for having me.

Don Payne [00:02:09] It's been a while. We're going to talk about the meaning and the significance of the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Let me launch with this question. If we agree with Fleming Rutledge in her landmark volume on the crucifixion, that the crucifixion is the most important event in human history, why is that the case?

Mark Young [00:02:34] Well, I think we begin by simply saying that on the cross, Jesus did what no other person, no other power could possibly do, and that is defeat, sin, death and evil. It is the defining moment, the defining event that makes it possible for us to believe that redemption is ours, or redemption is possible in any and every way.

Craig Blomberg [00:03:05] If we add to the crucifixion, the bodily resurrection of Jesus on what today we call Easter, then I would certainly agree with Fleming Rutledge. If we had the crucifixion and Jesus stayed dead and buried, then we would have another tragic martyrdom, maybe the most tragic of all time. But it's the combination of those two, I think that we have to say, conquers death in a way that no other religion even quite claims to make, much less pulls off.

Don Payne [00:03:49] Would it be fair to say that in any other religious system where something like the crucifixion is not necessary to deal with sin, death and evil, that ultimately sin, death and evil are dealt with by diluting their significance, by minimizing their significance. Various ways of avoidance. I mean, does avoidance of the necessity of the crucifixion automatically lead one to do something different with the significance of death and evil and sin?

Craig Blomberg [00:04:24] I'm certainly not an expert on all of the world's religions, and I think the answer would vary from one to the next. But one thing it certainly does is put the responsibility for dealing with sin and death much more, if not entirely, on the human individual. And if Christian truth and Judaism before it

is correct that no one is righteous, no, not one then we do not have any ability ultimately to deal with that problem. So, we're all sunk.

Don Payne [00:05:05] So we either elevate ourselves or we minimize the problem. One of those two takes place.

Mark Young [00:05:12] Yeah, I think that's true. Everybody lives in a culture where people die. Right. Death is the great equalizer, the universal experience of all. So different cultures, different religious systems attempt to create either a way to cope with the reality of death, with no hope, or create a false hope that perhaps after death, there's some type of an annihilation where there's no longer any consciousness, or that after death people can still be in relationship with those who have died before or those who are still alive. So different worldviews, whether animistic or whether formalized and religious systems all have to deal with the reality of death. And I would add that it's very difficult to imagine a group of people, a culture, or a worldview, certainly a religion that would say that everything's great in the world. All of us deal with evil, with sin and its consequences in our lives in ways that are destructive. So religious systems, worldviews all create coping mechanisms. So, one, for example, would be, hey, everything's going to burn up. Stuff is bad, so just grab for all you can, enjoy it while you can. And don't worry about anything else. Purely hedonistic system, for example. So, I think throughout world history we can say people are constantly coping with the reality of sin, of death and of evil and its presence and its destructive presence.

Don Payne [00:06:48] In Galatians 6:14, Paul makes this rather blunt, almost astonishing statement. He says, may I never boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. Let's dial in on the crucifixion for just a moment. Why does Paul place the message of the cross at the center of his theology and ministering? We're going to come back to the resurrection here in a moment. But dial in on the crucifixion. What is it about that? Why did what Jesus have to die? That's a question often posed.

Craig Blomberg [00:07:26] Well, it's building on the Hebrew sacrificial system where animal deaths and other kinds of offerings substituted for human beings. But as the writer to the Hebrews would say, that could only ever be temporary because there wasn't parity, it wasn't human life dying for another human, and it had to be a sinless life, or else that human would just be dying for his or her own sins. So, when you combine the belief that Jesus was a sinless human who was also divine, thus making possible an eternal and infinite atonement, and you have the culmination of a system of thought with sacrifices at its heart, with a life for a life. Genesis 9:6, that finally is adequate, and as Hebrews says, more than once is once for all.

Don Payne [00:08:37] You remind me, Craig, of this famous statement by one of our early church fathers, Saint Athanasius, who said that no creature can redeem another creature, which adds a very particular element to Jesus being not only human, but the God man, a particular human.

Mark Young [00:09:01] You know, I think what we also see in First Corinthians 2, where Paul says, for I resolved when I was with you to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I think the reality of Paul's life is, that he confesses himself, if there were ever going to be a person who lived a righteous enough life, who was accomplished enough in the ways of the law, in the ways of following God as he knew God, then he ought to have been that person. Yet he was literally floored by the risen Christ and the recognition that it was only in what Christ had done, only in the death of Jesus and the resurrection, that the possibility of righteousness before God could be found, that. Forms the centerpiece of his life that he simply cannot avoid coming back to over and over and over again.

Don Payne [00:09:59] How does our view of the cross frame our view of God?

Craig Blomberg [00:10:04] Lots of ways, but the first thing that comes to mind is the extent to which he is willing to go to deal with our sin problem. You've got the unique puzzle of the Trinity, and we don't want to equate the three persons and not say there's any distinction, but neither do we want to separate them so much that we can't say with Paul in second Corinthians 5:17 that God was in Christ reconciling the world to

himself. The often-levelled charge of divine child abuse against God actually founders on a mistaken understanding of the Trinity because it wasn't God choosing an entirely separate human being and child of his. It was in a way we can't begin to fathom him taking our sins on himself in this other person of the Triune God.

Don Payne [00:11:12] Is it fair to say that God was never more present to us and our sin than in the crucifixion?

Mark Young [00:11:22] Yeah, I think you could say on the cross we see the love of God manifested in ways that we see nowhere else. And on the cross we see the holiness of God manifested. Name any attribute of God, and you see it magnified in its intensity and its beauty through Jesus on the cross. And that, I think, is part of the reason that we, as well as Paul, frame our theology around this unprecedented act. Always, of course, seeing the cross in the light of the resurrection, but never detaching the resurrection from the cross.

Don Payne [00:12:03] Right. We're going to touch right back on that in a moment. Lots of folks these days, at least maybe for a long time, have gotten stuck on this business of the wrath of God. And in one of our great hymns, there's that one line that the wrath of God is satisfied as if God has always been mad at us. But now, finally, God's not mad at us anymore. But let's speak to that. How does the cross help us, the cross and all that we've been saying about the love of God and the presence of God to us, for us in the cross, how does that square with this satisfaction of the wrath of God? What's going on there?

Craig Blomberg [00:12:42] I think, first of all, you have to make sure that you don't define any attribute of God in terms of merely human equivalence, even good attributes. We can't hardly conceive of wrath without an element of something that's overdone, that is unfair, that is excessive. But the wrath of God is perfectly holy and just and deserved. And in the cross is taken out in a sense, on himself and not on us. So that then becomes an amazing act of love towards us, that we don't have to experience that.

Mark Young [00:13:36] Yeah, I really appreciate you saying we can't define God's attributes through human expressions of those same descriptors. And it's also, I think, important for us to recognize that we think of wrath in terms of holiness, right? We kind of say the wrath of God is played out because of His Holiness and, yes, that's true. We never want to separate as well, though, that concept of justice. And I think sometimes in our understanding of what happens on the cross, we lose sight of the fact that not only is the justice of God fully accomplished, there remains yet justice that will be executed by the risen Christ. I so frequently remind myself or I'm convicted by the fact that when I read Revelation 21 and 22, really this marvelous description of the great redemptive work of God consummated. And there's this very clear and powerful section that indicates that the justice of God will make it so that there are those who will not experience this redemption in its fullest. I think sometimes because of our celebration of new life and because of redemption and because of all that God gives us, we want to forget that the risen Christ as He returns, returns as well as a judge as well as Redeemer. The grace of God is cheapened if the justice of God is not made evident throughout all of human history. And I think wrath is a part of that conversation as well.

Craig Blomberg [00:15:13] And we can try to deny that until we are the ones who have had some grave injustice perpetrated against us or against those who are very close to us. And then it's remarkable how quickly we do acknowledge that we want justice. In fact, we want judgment for the oppressors.

Don Payne [00:15:38] And if we go back to Fleming Rutledge's work that I referenced at the beginning, she makes quite a point of showing how our concept or the concept of justice can really be framed in terms of making things right. And that phrasing, I think, is very accessible to us. We want things to be made right. And if we think of a justice in terms of the making right of all things, then that kind of bridges this artificial gap between justice and love or between wrath and love. Craig, to your point earlier that it's easy to project our own experience, say, of God's attributes onto God in unfair ways. It's also very difficult for us to think of concepts of love and wrath and justice, except in compartments that are polarized against each

other. And yet they're really not. When we think about the holiness, the justice, the wrath, the love of God, those are what I would call mutually defining concepts. What parent does not have the capacity for indignation when a child the parent loves is threatened or when anything threatens something we love, we can get irate about that and should.

Craig Blomberg [00:17:03] And what parent who has any sense of responsibility at all doesn't live out Hebrews 12, where the parent disciplines those they love precisely because of that love. They want to help them grow, to mature, to avoid terrible evil and to protect them.

Don Payne [00:17:28] As John describes God as love in 1 John 4, would God be love if God did not ultimately make things right? And in the cross, I guess we see the cross as the pulling together of all of that, the love of God, the holiness of God, the justice of God, the wrath of God in the most, even if humanly speaking, gruesome way, the most elegant and beautiful way in what it accomplishes.

Mark Young [00:17:59] I think one of our challenges in thinking through this topic of God making things right is that our history as a movement places the cross almost entirely in a personal transaction between an individual and God. Right. So, we silo what Jesus has done on the cross and limit it to the personal forgiveness of sins. And in that, I think we can lose sight of the more cosmic dimensions of what happens on the cross when the penalty for sin is paid. And because of that, death ultimately will not have the final word. And because of that, evil will not have the final word. So, this kind of cosmic, more kingdom awareness of what happens because of Christ's death on the cross was often, well, I'll say said another way. That was never a part of my understanding. For years I would go to revival services, and we had two revivals a year in the Baptist church where I grew up. And the way I like to describe it is the same people repented for the same sins after singing the same hymns twice a year for all my entire life. And they were always individual sins. It was just about me and God and forgiveness. And certainly, I don't want us to ever move away from the forgiveness of sins as our reality. But I look back on my own understanding of the cross as being somewhat impoverished because of that heavily individualized view where the making of things right didn't include the making of ultimately the world right again as God created it to be.

Craig Blomberg [00:19:48] I like the model of concentric circles. So, you have at the center the smallest circle, the individual becoming right with God. Then the next one out is the church, the corporate community of individually justified people. And then you have the world, the creation being put back in order, nature made right. And then finally the entire cosmos. And if you start in the middle, you may never move outward, but if you start in the outer circle, it contains all of the inner circles as subsets. So, if you start with Revelation 21 and 22 and the redemption of the cosmos, you'll get everything else, including the individual.

Don Payne [00:20:42] Hey, let's loop back to something you brought up you both brought up earlier. In first Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul makes this really intriguing statement that is not always attended to as much as it should be when he says that if Christ had been crucified but not raised, we are still in our sins. Expand on that connection for us. What is it about both Jesus' death and resurrection that are so crucial for redemption?

Craig Blomberg [00:21:18] Well, I think he answers it later in the same chapter when he speaks about Jesus' resurrection as the first fruits of our resurrection. We are eternal beings, and we are meant to be in eternal relationship with God. And so, without Jesus paving the way, as it were, being the first one to do it, or to shift the metaphor to Hebrews, the pioneer, the author of our faith, then we have no hope for life after death and might as well be those Hedonists Mark was talking about earlier.

Mark Young [00:22:02] Yeah, I think Rutledge talks about this a lot, this connection between crucifixion and resurrection. As Craig pointed out earlier, without the resurrection than Jesus, just as another criminal, dies on a cross like thousands before him and after him even. Yet, on the other hand, without the crucifixion, the resurrection is, to use Rutledge's phrase, just an act of divine dazzlement. So, you bring the two together and you have this definitive act of God, what Leslie Newbiggin calls the Christ event, wherein the

trajectory of human history itself is changed. It seems to me that the resurrection, I like to describe as high stakes reality. Right. So, if it's not true, everything changes. So, if the resurrection doesn't happen, Paul says, our faith is in vain. We have no hope rules. We're fools.

Craig Blomberg [00:22:59] Of all people, most miserable.

Mark Young [00:23:01] Exactly. So, without the two seen as one great event in God's redemptive history, and I would argue, I would say with Rutledge in all of human history, we really have an incomplete understanding of how God engages humanity in the framework of human history.

Don Payne [00:23:23] Why is that so hard to grasp? Perennially throughout human history. Why is that so difficult for us?

Craig Blomberg [00:23:33] Well, one reason is because our thoughts are earthed in this life and in the mundane human tasks, evils, joys of this life. We don't think enough about the life to come. I was struck a number of years ago, just before we moved to this campus, so it would have been in the early 2000s, when my former mentor, Don Carson, was a chapel speaker. And at one point, I couldn't tell you the context, he said, if you don't make decisions now in light of reality 50 billion years from now, you have not even begun to think as a Christian. That got my attention.

Mark Young [00:24:30] I'd like to ask him what is 50 billion year out thoughts are. I have a hard time worrying about tomorrow. You know, I think for me, Don, as I grew up, we just kind of lived through the week. And then on Sunday, we had a special service. Although I have been in evangelical churches in the U.S. where Resurrection Sunday services, the message wasn't even centered on the resurrection. So, I think our faith was shaped so strongly by our revivalist heritage that we lost sight of living into the rhythms of the birth, the death, the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus that is prominent in the liturgical calendar for many traditions. And as a result of that, I can remember years where I would say something like, Easter kind of sneaked up on me. I wasn't thinking about it. I wasn't working my way toward the glorious celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

Don Payne [00:25:37] Mark, you mentioned just a few moments ago, I think you used the word transaction when you were talking about the sort of individualistic relationship. If the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which we summarize in gospel language, is anything more than merely a heaven or hell transaction, and not no less than that, but more than that, reminds me of another statement Paul made in Philippians 1:27, such a short statement that I think it's easy to blow past this. He exhorted the Philippians believers to live in a manner that is worthy of the gospel, which could suggest that the gospel, this message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and all that is entailed in that, is almost like an ethical rubric for the rest of life, something to be lived out more than merely acknowledged or even more than merely accepted in a one-time sense. Elaborate on that if you would. What does it mean for the Gospel to be that comprehensive, that broad, that all-inclusive, that Paul could put it forward to believers as something that is to provide them ethical rails to run on through their lives, to live in a manner that's worthy of the gospel?

Craig Blomberg [00:27:07] Well, the first thing I think of is Jesus in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, when he climatically turns his face in Luke, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And then you have the language of if anyone does not take up their cross and follow me so that Jesus' cruciform life as well as death is a model for our lifestyle. We are not to be looking by worldly standards, to be triumphant, to be powerful, to be wealthy, to be privileged. To the extent that we have that without anything that we did to accrue it, it shouldn't be what we glory and what we revel in. And humility is one of maybe the key Jewish and Christian virtue that was not seen as a virtue, but as a weakness in the Greco-Roman world. And humility is sort of what has to be central if you're going to follow Jesus on the road to the cross.

Mark Young [00:28:39] Yeah, thank you for that, Craig. I agree with you. I think Jesus really pulls no punches with his own disciples. He tells them that they are to take up their cross. He calls them to lose their life in order to follow him. If you could just indulge me a moment, I'll read something that I've written. If

Jesus' death on the Cross is the centerpiece of God's redemptive engagement in human history, it must take the same place in the lives of those who claim to know and worship him. Sacrifice, humility, love, and non-retaliation when reviled and humiliated. These are the characteristics of the one who refused to use his unrivaled power to defend himself and crush those who persecuted him. His cruciform death calls us to a cruciform life. It calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us to turn the other cheek when assaulted by an evil person to bless, not curse those who persecute us, to step away from revenge and not to retaliate when insulted and degraded. The cruciform life demands full trust in the wisdom, goodness, and power of God. That I think is a unique way to envision one's life that really can't be found in other ways of thinking or in other worldviews or value sets. It sets us apart if we're willing to live into this central city of the crucifixion and of course, the certainty of life in the resurrection.

Don Payne [00:30:12] Well, that wraps it up. That sums it up well. Thanks, Mark. Thank you to both of you, Mark, Craig, for spending time with us and sharing from your reflections and wisdom on this centerpiece of our faith in our lives together. Friends, whatever your tradition and however your churches celebrate the history altering, history defining events of Holy Week, the Death and Resurrection of Christ, our prayer for you is that the Lord would make these events more poignant and salient and vivid in your lives than ever before, because they're meant, as our conversation has demonstrated, to do far more than give us a ticket, but to change our lives, to make all things right. And we're glad to be a part of that and hope that the Lord really enriches you with a deeper knowledge of that. I do want to remind you that for all of our episodes, all of our conversations, full written transcripts are available. If you go to our website, which is DenverSeminary.edu, and just do the search for Engage 360 or the podcast, you'll find all of our episodes available there along with full written transcripts if you ever want to download those. I would also encourage you to roam around on our website. We have some new certificate programs and some newly redesigned master's programs available and more to come. We'd love for you to be acquainted with those, and if you're interested, contact us, or recommend those to somebody you know who might be able to benefit from them. We'd love to have you email us, contact us if you'd like. Our email address is podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. We'd be privileged to hear from, know how we can serve you better. And if you get a chance, please give us a rating or review on whatever podcast platform you access us. Want to give a final shout out and thanks to Matt Evans, who records these for us, and to Christa Ebert, who edits them. They do such fine work, we're just deeply grateful for them and all that they do. Friends, until we get together with you again, may the Lord fill you with His grace and peace through and because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Take care.