

Engage360 Episode 120 | Disability and a Different Perspective on Miracles; Dr. J.D Kim

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] Friends, the episode of Engage 360 you're about to listen to deals with some difficult material along the way. We just want you to be aware of that. The topic of suicide comes up, and if that's going to be a sensitive topic, we just want you to be aware in advance. And if there are resources that you need, you or somebody you know, we hope you'll reach out to us or reach out to caregivers that you may know to help come alongside folks who are struggling with any of the issues that may come up in this episode. Hi there, friends. This is engage360 from Denver Seminary. I'm Don Payne, your host. Very glad you joined us for this episode. Thanks for taking some time to be with us. Maybe we're all susceptible to the risk of themes like grace and redemption becoming overfamiliar, benign, pedestrian because we affirm them and talk about them, or we can so glibly. And it's all too easy to think about themes like God's faithfulness in power and presence, in rather romanticized or predictable ways, only then to have our hopes dashed and our expectations of God confused. But now and then we're confronted by stories that wake us up to the jarring, radical nature of how God can redeem a life and be present to us. And it's even more bracing when God does that without simply fixing everything as we generally insist on God doing. That brings us to the theme of suffering. J.D. Kim's story does all that, and we have the privilege of hearing from him in this episode. I'm going to start with the impressive stuff. JD holds an MDiv from Denver Seminary, holds a Ph.D. in Systematic theology from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. He's an ordained elder in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and he serves here at Denver Seminary as an adjunct professor of theology and as assistant director of the Korean Track in our Doctor of Ministry program. JD, Welcome to Engage 360.

JD Kim [00:02:25] Well, thank you for having me.

Don Payne [00:02:27] Very good to have you here. JD is a bright young scholar and JD is also quadriplegic. He sits across from me right now in his wheelchair. His father accompanies him everywhere he goes to assist him. And his father's here right now as well. You're going to hear from JD today. His full story you can read in his recently released book, From Walking to Wheeling, How God Reconstructed One Man's Dreams. It's honest. It's raw. And it will touch you to your core. JD Thanks for the work you invested in this fine book.

JD Kim [00:03:07] Thank you for your kind note.

Don Payne [00:03:10] JD, why don't you give our listeners kind of a quick overview of your story and then we'll get into some of the specifics with other questions.

JD Kim [00:03:20] Well, I was born in South Korea and came to America when I was 13 years old. Yes, my parents had great plans for me, which were to give me the best opportunity to study in the United States and to become maybe doctor, lawyer, engineer. Those Asian parents dream for their children. Yes, I tried to do my best at first. However, I also encountered many difficulties, especially trying to get adjusted and to be adopted to American culture. And it was really about my identity crisis. Was I a Korean? Was I an American? Sure, I could be Korean and American. But what did that mean? I just couldn't figure that out. And I was lost. Consequently, I lost interest in education, and I was beginning to live according to the worldly pattern. I began skipping schools, not being interested in any education, and I decided to work as a sushi chef in a Japanese restaurant in order to make a lot of money and to open up my own business and travel around the world to enjoy the life right, visiting different states and different parts of the world. Having fun with your friends. Well, I moved to Aspen, Colorado, and became a sushi chef and began working with a Japanese sushi chef in this very luxurious restaurant called Nobu Matsuhisa. I tried really hard, and I was really getting the approval of my head chef and my fellow chefs, and I was really getting ready to move up to the next step. When I was 22 years old, while working at the restaurant, my friends and I went snowboarding to Aspen Snowboard Ski Resort. It was sunny. It was a best day to hang out with

your friends and snowboard. I was having a great time with my friends and as I was snowboarding, I went over this mogul, and I was on the air. And in soon as I landed, I fell and heard this sound going, beep. Immediately I knew something was wrong. I kept telling myself, it's going to be okay. It's going to be okay. And as usual, I try to move in, make the next move. However, something was different. My legs and my arms weren't moving. I tried again, but nothing worked. I called out to my friend for help, and he thought, of course, I was making a bad joke. Thankfully, he understood the gravity of the situation and got down and asked for the help of the ski patrol. Soon the ski patrol came up and transferred me down to the Aspen Hospital. After a few examinations, they transferred me to a hospital located in Grand Junction, Colorado. There, as soon as I landed from the helicopter, all the medical teams, they were getting ready to rush me into the emergency room. Like one of those scenes you see in medical programs. And after the spinal cord fusion injury, I was transferred to a rehab hospital in Denver, Colorado. It was a hospital which specializes in rehab for people with spinal cord injury and with traumatic brain injury. Without understanding anything about spinal cord injury, I began my rehab. At first, I thought I would walk out of the hospital within three months. About two months passed by. Nothing worked. I thought, if I'm going to walk out of here, shouldn't I at least move a finger or a toe. So, I talked to the doctor, and the doctor, explained J.D., when the nerves in your arms or your legs are damaged, they usually regenerate by themselves. However, when the nerves in your brain or spinal cord are damaged, they do not regenerate by themselves. Only stem cells can regenerate the broken nerves. So, I told him, yes, doctor, I'm ready for the treatment. Give me some stem cells. And he responded. Because of the technology, you're not going to be able to walk for the rest of your life. And that was like a death sentence to me. And really many things were going on psychologically. I just couldn't believe that the accident actually happened. I thought this type of thing only happens in a movie or TV drama. But it was my reality. I thought I was dreaming, and I really wanted to wake up from the terrible nightmare. There were times when I felt so depressed, I did not want to do anything. There were times when I was so worried about my future. I thought everything was over. When I saw myself on a mirror, it was like seeing a familiar stranger. It was not supposed to be me. It shouldn't be me. It couldn't be me. I didn't like him. I did not want him. And I rejected myself. One day, as I was thinking about all these things, I kept hearing, your life is over. You failed. Just give up. You are being taken care of by nurses and others because you are at the hospital. What's going to happen when you are discharged? Your parents will have to take care of you. They took care of you all these years. And yet, do you want to still add to those burdens to them? And your life is over. So do them a favor. They'll be sad. Your friends and family members will go through some difficulties for some time, but they'll get used to it. So, I decided to end my life. But because I couldn't even pull the trigger of a gun, I couldn't do that. But I saw a stair sign at the hospital, and I thought, you know, me being in this electric wheelchair, about 400 pounds, if I just fall myself down on the stairs, that will do the job. And as I was about to make the decision, I remembered all the stories that I learned from my Sunday school, stories of Jesus healing the dead, doing all this miracle stuff. And I prayed to him. Lord. I went to church since I was little. I learned all those stories. But I don't know if I really believe them. I went to church on Sunday, participated in the church programs. But I don't know if I truly accept you as my Lord and Savior. However, if there is still something you can do about my life, if it is not too late, please hold my hand. And he took my hand and he never let it go. And that's where my journey with Jesus began. So about 18 years passed by. There are so many things that happened. I experienced many painful experiences, hardships. But at the same time, there are times of joy and peace in Jesus Christ. There are times when I really wanted to give up and did not want to keep journey with Jesus anymore. However, he was always holding me and kept consistently telling me that he has great dreams for me. So right now, even though I cannot walk again, I'm still wheeling on this wheelchair, I am with Jesus, and I love him very much.

Don Payne [00:11:26] JD Talk to us a little bit about your understanding of miracles, because I know you prayed hard for a long time wanting God to do a miracle of healing. Didn't experience that. How has that changed your understanding of what it means for God to work a miracle?

JD Kim [00:11:44] Yes. Thank you for that question. I believe in the miracle because I have experienced many types of miraculous experiences, I would say. Well, first, it all began after my relationship with Jesus began since the snowboarding accident. So, after the accident, as you can imagine, I really wanted to walk again. I wanted healing from God. So, I prayed to him. And I spent 2 to 3 hours in prayer. In the morning, I

prayed for healing. In the afternoon, I did intercessory prayer for others. And at night I prayed for my healing again. And I began to ask for God for my needs and for various needs. God began to answer my prayers. But before I go further, you need to understand that when I had the snowboarding accident, you know, I had nothing. I had no savings, no insurance, no government support. And of course, I had no job. And because I was not an American citizen, I couldn't receive any government support. And my father was a pastor of a small church, and my mother ran a small tailor shop business. So, we really didn't have much. So, I was really desperate when I prayed to God. You know, I cried out to him, screamed my lungs out, just begged him for mercy and for healing. So, after weeks and months passed by, I still couldn't walk again. But things began to happen. Things that I never experienced before. So, every time I applied for the government support, I was denied because I was not an American citizen. However, every time I applied for a scholarship or some sort of a grant money for financial assistance to nonprofit organizations, all of them responded to me with yes. One organization donated an electric wheelchair, which was about \$15,000. One organization donated monthly medical supplies, which I'm still receiving from the hospital. There were other times they would come to my house and repair my house or redesign my bathroom, my desk, and other things. And also, God gave me an opportunity to go back to school. And because the tuition was so expensive and because of my status, I had to pay the out-of-state rate tuition, which was 3 to 4 times more expensive than resident scholarship. And there was an organization that donated \$20,000, another 1500. I mean, there are so many other scholarships that I applied to, and they approved me of. And there was a time when I accidentally applied to this scholarship for movie making school, but they still gave me a scholarship. And as these things were happening, I'm like, you know, okay, things are really going well. So about 3 to 4 years passed by. It was about 2009. I had a fever for weeks and it just didn't go away. And my father found two big lumps behind my shoulder, one on my left, and one on my right. And I really didn't want to go to the hospital because I knew it was very expensive. But I had to go to the emergency room, and they found a hole in my esophagus. So, every time I drank and ate, those things went into the hole and caused big lumps behind my back. So, I had the surgery right away. And so not knowing the nature of the bacteria, I was on nine types of antibiotics. I had to stay in bed and lay flat for 24 hours a day for three months. No water, no food. I had a feeding tube inserted to my stomach. And of course, because of the bacteria for weeks and months, I had that fever experience, shivering all day, and there were times I was so hot that I had to use two ice packs. And I was really frustrated because, you know, I thought I was doing everything that I can to please God. I read the Bible. I pray to God. I try to walk away from the worldly lifestyle. And I'm thinking, is this what I get from him? You know, I just couldn't believe that I was going through this type of major hardship again.

Don Payne [00:16:48] Was it kind of a god you owe me?

JD Kim [00:16:51] Exactly. You cannot do this to me if you are God, if you really know what I have been doing in order to, you know, receive healing from you. I mean, you cannot do this to me. And the only thing that I could do was to just to call out to him and to pray to him. And then one night, as I was praying to God, God spoke to me through the verse in Isaiah 41:10. Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Sure, I memorized that verse before. I thought it was always comforting and very encouraging verse. However, at that moment when God gave me or spoke to me through the verse, something was different. I was still shivering because of the infection. But I believed that God was with me in that room. My throat was still not healed completely. But I believed that God will heal me and would heal me completely. That I'll be out of the hospital soon. And at the same time, all the doubt that I had, or the things that I questioned of him and these things, even though I couldn't explain why, but all my doubts and all my anxiety and my worries, they were somewhat reduced, and they were offered as an offering to God. And God filled me with faith and hope in Him instead. So, nothing really happened. There was no miracle at that moment. There was no miraculous healing. But I was truly freed from my worries, freed from the desire that I had to receive because God owed me. So, the miracle is that sometimes this miracle is not always about receiving what I want from God, and it's not always about receiving something miraculous, something that people cannot do that only God can do. But if the letter is the true definition of miracle, at that moment, I was experiencing a miracle because only healing had to justify what I was going through. However, it was my

faith in him and the peace that demonstrated my faith in him and the liberation from the need to receive healing or need to receive what I want from God.

Don Payne [00:19:28] That's what really got my attention from that section in your story is that moment when your questions changed, your demands changed, and you experienced that freedom. Freedom to let God be God on God's own terms, perhaps.

JD Kim [00:19:46] Yes.

Don Payne [00:19:47] Freedom to receive the gift of the Lord's presence. Whatever the Lord did or did not do physically. That was an arresting part of your story that I really, really appreciated. And I think many will be able to resonate with that. JD, when you think about the ministry God has given you, and I might mention this to our listeners. JD has, among the many things he's doing right now, has started a ministry organization called JDKimMinistries.org. And that's a ministry that focuses on teaching theology, on encouragement, and on supporting those with disabilities and disability ministries. As you've been in ministry, particularly to others with disabilities. That's a key part of what God has given you to do. But it's only one part. But I'm curious what you've learned through that ministry. What does it mean to walk alongside fellow sufferers when you can give them no guarantee of what God is going to do in their lives?

JD Kim [00:20:56] So when I first thought about doing a disability ministry, at first, I thought it was always about me doing something for them, teaching Christian theology, encouraging them, and helping them. I mean, it is a very important part of the ministry and I think they are very important responsibilities and helpful ways to help them as well. But at the same time, as I'm engaged in these specific, you know, missions or ministries, I also think about the way I need to serve them and love them as a believer of Jesus Christ. But at the same time as a follower of Jesus or his disciple. So, what I mean is this. I think there are actually two ways we need to serve people, whether you're in a ministry setting or you're in a seminary setting. Of course, the first way is to use the gift that God has already given us and then use it and apply them into our ministry context. This is number one. But at the same time, the second part is that we, without those gifts, but we as children of God, as believers, and I believe that's our true identity in Jesus Christ. So how will we actually be more like Jesus in the way of serving them and loving them? Of course, that could be the core, major way of serving them first, and then the gift comes later. But many times, we could get kind of lost just trying to use our gift to only, you know, teaching or encouraging them or financial support. Because without the heart of Jesus within us, without the heart of Jesus enabling us to do those ministries of using our gift, we cannot really serve them as a person, serve them as God's beloved children, serve them as God's creature made in his image, you know, going through very difficult trials and suffering. So, my biggest learning was that, yes, I got to do my best using my gift to provide them what they need, but always do it with the heart of Jesus, and to remember that I am a follower of Jesus, and my fundamental utmost duty is to love them and to serve them as Jesus would do. Because without doing that, all my ministry effort also can be meaningless. Or it could be a very narcissistic way of trying to fulfill my duty just for my own ambition or for my own desire. So that is the part that I learned through my ministry.

Don Payne [00:23:50] Well, I bet that one thing many people have picked up from you simply from your modeling, if nothing else, is how suffering and disability of various sorts does not cancel out our gifts, and our capacities and our responsibilities to serve. Because you're modeling that so well now in your life circumstance, how you're not sitting around waiting for others to serve you, even though many do, but you are setting a model for what it means to use your gifts in your circumstance, and I want to commend you for that. As you think about churches that have ministries to disabilities, what do you think churches need to know about people with disabilities and how to minister well to them?

JD Kim [00:24:40] Yes. Thank you for that question. So, in the worldwide, the 15% of people have been impacted by disability. In the United States, the number is 20%. And out of those 20% of the population impacted by disabilities, 80% of them do not attend church and they are not associated with any church communities. One of the reasons that it is really hard for them is still the accessibility, of course, is of physical accessibility. Some people with disabilities are not able to, you know, have the access to go to

church on Sunday. And at the same time, the accessibility from people to people, I think that is the most important part that is missing. So, it means that when people with disabilities go to church, so for me, it takes 2 hours to get ready in the morning. And of course, not all people with disabilities might have a hard time getting ready to go to church, but when they actually go to church, if they have to spend a lot of time to get ready for it physically. But at the same time, emotionally, because when they go to church, they don't want to feel ashamed, unwelcomed, or disappointed. So, there is a risk factor that they have. But then when they go to church, if they are not welcomed or embraced by other people, you know, then it will be a very disappointing experience. And there is a chance that they never go to church again. And now many of the church or Christians that I meet, I mean, they are nice people. But then when it comes to the issue of people with disabilities, they are not more active in approaching them, not because they are a bad person, but it is because they do not want to do anything to kind of disrespect their boundary. They don't want to say something that might offend them. So, in a way they are kind of giving people with disabilities some space so that there is not any unintended or negative circumstance happening. I think about it as a practicing social distance within a church without the coronavirus. So, from my case, I attend the Cherry Hills community Church. It's a big church, but I've been attending the church since 2016, but very truthfully and honestly, there are only about ten people who approach me first and introduce themselves to me in order to have a fellowship. Of course, I'm not saying that they all must come to me first and say hello, and if they don't, they are bad Christians or anything. But my point is, if you don't make the first move, there's a chance that you may not be able to, you know, help those people with disabilities to settle in your church.

Don Payne [00:27:40] So even if people are well-intended, wanting to give others space, sometimes maybe out of fear of doing something wrong or saying something wrong, better to take the risk, is it? And just move in and approach them and see how you can connect?

JD Kim [00:27:59] Yes, I believe so, because, I mean, the risk always exists, and I think the gospel itself is a risk. Right. If you want to make disciples, if you want to evangelize, you have to approach someone first with the intention of sharing the gospel. And, of course, the expectation that someone might not accept it well at the first time. But we do it for the mission of God, and we do it with asking help from the Holy Spirit that we may be able to convey the love to the person. And just like that, I think, without taking a risk, you would never be able to approach people with disability first and then to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment at church. And you know, from my experience, most of the time, unless some people with disability have a very negative view, you know, against church, if you say hello, if you just go to them, how can I help you? Or welcome to our church. I think they will receive that really well and they will really appreciate you approaching them first.

Don Payne [00:29:09] Yeah, sometimes we get in our own way and make things worse because of our own feelings of awkwardness, right?

JD Kim [00:29:14] Yes.

Don Payne [00:29:16] JD, I really appreciated the work you did in writing this book, from Walking to Wheeling. And I'm sure this was both a lot of labor and a labor of love. I want to encourage listeners to get a copy of this. From Walking to Wheeling by JD Kim. But JD, maybe you can leave us with one or two things that you really hope people will take away from this book. What's the one or two primary reasons you wrote this?

JD Kim [00:29:46] So the number one thing that a reader needs to understand is that, you know, God loves us. All people, we go through suffering one way or the other. In a way, suffering is the common experience of human beings, whether you're a teenager, you know, just broke up with your girlfriend or boyfriend. I mean, that still hurts. And, you know, if you have a physical disability or cancer or kidney disease, whatever they may be, it's suffering. And you might have a relationship problem, financial problem, or issues with your business or your coworkers or whatever. So, we all suffer in one way or the other. The point is how are we going to respond to this suffering? And there are many times when people come to church and turn to God asking him to solve their problems and their issues. And there are times when God does

miraculously answer their prayers. However, there are times when they just have to, you know, live with their suffering for whatever reasons. And sometimes that could be a reason why people walk away from God. That could be a reason why people, especially Christians, you know, stop believing in him or stop being enthusiastic about teachings of the Scripture and attending the church. But however, I want all of you, if you are suffering, I want you to know that God still loves you. He loves you. And his love was demonstrated on the cross, and his power that regenerates all brokenness was demonstrated through the resurrection power, through the empty tomb. So, it's really not about you receiving the healing or not, what you want from him or not, because in Jesus Christ, you know, we can still laugh again, hope again, and dream again, and do great things together for the Kingdom of God and have a wonderful journey despite your suffering. So, he welcomes all brokenness and all suffering. So, I truly encourage you to, you know, put your faith in him once again if you are lost. And another reason that I wrote this book is to, you know, encourage all those people who are going through a suffering. One of my professors told me and taught me that if we can share, we can bear. If we can share our lives, if we can share our suffering, you know, we can bear it together in Jesus Christ. And that is the one of the reasons why I wrote the book. And I try to be very authentic of my story. I shared many of the things that I did well, but all those things that could be described as humiliating experiences or my vulnerability. But I did so that I could connect with you. And you might say, well, I don't have a disability. I never have experienced such suffering before. But however, just as I mentioned suffering is suffering, whatever the source, whatever the cause may be. So, I hope to be connected with you through my suffering so that my story is not just my own personal story. It is your story, it is the story of your neighbor, it's the story of your fellow human being who is trying to survive and thrive living in this world. Lastly, I wrote this book to share my gratitude for my parents who love me very much. Since the snowboarding accident or, you know, since I was born, you know, they were wonderful parents. They took care of me. They were patient with me. And even after the accident, they did their best to support me. My father was a senior pastor of a Korean Baptist Church, but he had to kind of give up the role in order to take care of me, in order to become a full-time caregiver. So, it was a very huge transition for him because he truly believed that he received a calling to become a pastor of the church. But then all the effort, all the studies, and all the trials and effort that he put it into to become a pastor, he had to put that aside and to become a full-time caregiver for his son. And I really appreciate his sacrifice and love for me. And, of course, my mother as she runs the small business, there was not a day when she just took a day off besides those holidays because she was not able to afford any, you know, employees. She had to work harder than anybody, go to the store very early in the morning and come home late to support the family financially. And because of my situation, my mother always wanted to go back to Korea when I get settled, but her dream of moving to Korea shattered because of me. But thankfully, you know, she loves me with her unconditional love. And their love teaches me the love of Jesus Christ and how to become a Christian even without, you know, accomplishing many things. But in their daily life, how to be a Christian by doing your best loving and serving, you know, your children, doing your best in any circumstances, all circumstances you are faced with. So, I just love them very much and very grateful for their love.

Don Payne [00:35:32] That's a great tribute. And you and your family are really inviting examples of what the love of Christ looks like, the sacrificial love of Christ. I want to commend you, you all. And thank you again for this work. As you pointed out, JD, whether people are suffering in any particular way, suffering is part of the fallen human experience. And regardless of the form that that suffering takes, your very open, very honest, and raw portrayal of your journey from walking to wheeling has really illuminated some aspects, some crucial aspects of the spiritual journey that every one of us are on. So, there's something in there for everybody to relate to, even if physical circumstances are very different. So, you've given us a great gift. I want to thank you for that. Dr. JD Kim. Get the book. It's called *From Walking to Wheeling*. The subtitle is *How God Reconstructed One Man's Dreams*. Friends. We're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us. If you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to podcasts and please send any questions or comments to us at our email address, which is podcast@DenverSeminary.edu. Our website DenverSeminary.edu has plenty of other resources you can explore, such as events, degree programs, and also more episodes of Engage360, including full episode transcripts. We're really grateful for your interest, for your support, and for your prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless you. Take care, friends.