

Engage360 Episode 129 | Christmas Reflections 2023; Dr. Don Payne

[00:00:00] **Don Payne:** Hello again, friends. This is Engage360 from Denver Seminary. My name is Don Payne, one of your hosts. No interview in this episode, but our annual Christmas Reflection. So, guess what the great news about Christmas is. Now, that may not sound like a terribly profound or fresh question, and you could probably think of several good answers to it, but I want to suggest one that might not get as much attention as it deserves, even among Christians, that the great news about Christmas is forgiveness.

Now, some may say, well wait, forgiveness is certainly important and its core to the gospel, but that's not what I would naturally associate with Christmas. Don't we have Easter to focus on that? Well, yes, we do have Easter to draw our attention to how Christ's death and resurrection provide forgiveness and reconciliation with God, yes.

But guess what? None of that would be possible without the incarnation. Certainly, the incarnation is all about anticipation and fulfillment, the eternal son of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, fulfilled prophecy about the Messiah. He culminated God's covenantal promise to create and redeem a people for himself. And the incarnation signaled the arrival of the promised deliverer. And Advent points us with anticipation to his return and restoration of all things just as much as it celebrates his initial coming to inaugurate God's long-awaited kingdom. But that kingdom, all that anticipation and all of that fulfillment, rests on God's Decisive act of reconciling people to himself. And that reconciliation depends on forgiveness, a forgiveness that only God could provide in person.

It's a forgiveness that both exposes and confronts our need, our sin in all of its full and stark dimensions, with no softening, no excusing, no minimizing. And that's why God provided forgiveness in person. For that reason, the forgiveness that we all need is as scary and foreboding as it is amazing and life giving.

Because forgiveness makes a brutally honest and unfiltered statement about our condition and our need before God. And the other essential component of forgiveness is that God provides it. So, it began when the Son of God, God himself, entered the scene in that Bethlehem manger. Actually, even before that, when the young Virgin Mary experienced a child in her womb, not through normal human intercourse, but by the mysterious agency of the Holy Spirit.

The early 20th century Scottish theologian H. R. Macintosh spoke to this eloquently in his 1927 book, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*. Bear with me for a minute while I quote him, keeping in mind the literary style of a hundred years ago. He speaks of, quote, a patently and vital connection between atonement and the divinity of Christ. The atonement has neither substance nor efficacy apart from the assurance that in Jesus, very God is personally present.

The history of theology proves to the hilt that the great ideas of atonement and incarnation lose the lifeblood of meaning when they drift apart from each other. The sacrifice of Christ is the sacrifice of God, in which He makes our burdens His own and puts away sin by the surrender of Himself. And it's this life-giving apprehension which men declare, rather than define when they say incarnation. End quote.

Macintosh roots the unique and the life altering forgiveness that we can receive from God in the fact that God himself personally took up residence in our humanity so that as only God can do, our sins are dealt with, defeated, and banished. In 2 Corinthians 5:19, Paul declares that God was in Christ,

reconciling the world to himself. And Jesus himself condensed that in his statement, Mark 10:45, that the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

One of our most familiar and beloved Christmas carols captures how scripture links the incarnation and forgiveness. In 1933, folklorist John Jacob Niles penned the words to the song, I Wonder as I Wander. Here are the lyrics to that song.

I wonder, as I wander out under the sky, how Jesus the Savior did come for to die. For poor, ordinary people like you and like I, I wonder, as I wander out under the sky. When Mary birthed Jesus, t'was in a cow's stall, with wise men and farmers and shepherds and all. But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall. And the promise of ages it did then recall. If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing, a star in the sky, or a bird on a wing, or all of God's angels in heaven for to sing, He surely could have it, because He was the King. I wonder, as I wander out under the sky, how Jesus the Savior did come for to die. For poor, ordinary people like you and like I, I wonder, as I wander out under the sky.

I love that song. Pondering the death of Christ for our sin may not be the most conventional or a cheery approach during this Christmas season, but it actually thickens our joy. It allows our cheer, our celebration, our festivity to go far deeper than any sentimentalism, and it fills them with genuine wonder at what God has done to forgive us and how he did it by coming that close to us personally and dying for us in Jesus to bring us home.

That gospel of divine personal entrance into human history, the incarnation and divine forgiveness, that message anchors us here at Denver Seminary. It's the gospel that reverberates with a commitment to the authority of scripture and it confronts the enticing popular narratives that people want to hear but that never address our true condition, the narratives that never provide us with a solution that can actually change that condition, actually redeem us.

At the center of everything we do here at Denver Seminary, we want to stay anchored in that place, even when some may want us to move into other places and other commitments. The gospel refuses to be capitalized on by any ideology, whether political, cultural, or otherwise. In a number of ways, only that gospel that comes to us because of all that Christmas means, that gospel centeredness can keep us deeply anchored, able to engage and draw from a variety of perspectives on a variety of issues without swallowing their entire ideological framework. And only as we're centered in that way, tightly tethered to the gospel, can we carve out paths of faithfulness in a world that is torturously complex.

So, this Christmas and every Christmas, let's not take anything away from the exuberance of the season. But let's reach through all that exuberance and grab hold of the incarnation and forgiveness and pull them together. That can make any Christmas the very merriest Christmas. So, from all of us here at Denver Seminary, thank you for your prayers, your support, and whatever involvement you have with the mission that God has given us to engage the needs of the world with the redemptive power of the gospel and the life changing truth of scripture. And Merry Christmas.