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**Matthew 24:42–44 ESV.**

*Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*

*<sup>43</sup> But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup> Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

**Mark 9:42 ESV.**

*<sup>42</sup> Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.*

**John 5:24 ESV.**

*<sup>24</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.*

**Revelation 21:4 ESV.**

*He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*

**A thief in the night.**

When I was in graduate school in L.A., I lived for a while in half of a duplex. It was in Venice, California, near the beach, in an area that was extremely prone to burglaries. From back to front, my unit had one bedroom, a tiny kitchen, and a

very small living room. Instead of a street out front, there was a sidewalk and another row of houses facing it. Parking was in the alley behind the duplex. The sidewalk in front of the house was overgrown with bushes from the yards facing it on either side. One night, around 10 PM, I opened the front door, stepped into the living room – and a man who was standing between the kitchen and the living room turned to face me. He had my stereo under one arm, and he leveled a cut-down, pump-action shotgun at me. I'll get back to this.

I want to talk today about something that Christians today tend to not talk about it: the afterlife. If there is one thing that makes people feel uncomfortable about Christian beliefs, it's that we believe that we go somewhere when we die. People are just fine with living the way Jesus taught. They are fine with "being spiritual". Most people are even comfortable with us believing that there is some sort of God or creator. But when it comes to the Heaven part, well people today tend to believe that when we die, it's poof! That's the science influence on society: we just have no academic proof that there is an afterlife. One thing that everyone does agree on, however, is that we can die at any time. Our first quote is a very popular quote from the Gospel of Matthew: *"if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into."*<sup>44</sup> *Therefore you also must*

*be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*” This quote is from Matthew 24; it is a very intriguing chapter, in that it is often compared to the Book of Revelation, in that it is “apocalyptic”. In Chapter 24, Matthew writes about Jesus coming again, in power and glory. Jesus predicts the coming destruction of the Temple – which did occur in a war that started in 64 A.D. Jesus also warns about false teachers, a time of tribulation, other signs of the End Times coming, and return of the Son of Man. In particular, we are warned that the end could happen at any time. We are also reminded that our individual time, which for each of us, presumably will be before the End Times, could come at any moment. As believers, we do want to be prepared at all times. We want to be right with God when we die.

That’s not what I was thinking about when I saw that shotgun leveled at me. I simply thought about not wanting to die. I also thought about not wanting to be wounded and suffering. We are reminded, from time to time, that we are very mortal. A near collision in a car, a relative passing away, a frightening medical test that comes back negative. It doesn’t have to be immediately life-threatening. God gives us many gentle reminders that the thief in the night will come when we are not looking out. Are we ready at all times? What’s on our

minds when that close call happens? Are we relieved that we are in a good place spiritually? Or do we only think about staying alive?

Our second passage is from the Gospel of Mark. Chapter 9 opens with the transfiguration of Christ, where the Apostles witness him glowing an intense white. Jesus later predicts that he will be killed. Jesus says: *Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.* People assume that Jesus is talking about children here. But there are no children in the scene. The Greek word that is translated as little is μικρῶν (mikrōn). It can mean little, but it also means unimportant or young. It refers to believers who are not yet totally confident in their faith. This statement by Jesus says that it would be better for someone to kill a person who is new and insecure in their faith – but in good shape morally - than to let them live and tempt them into an evil life that destroys them. This is something else that people find hard to accept about Christians – that we value our life with God, our eternal lives, more than we value just any old human life on Earth. We could die at any time – and as Christians, we do indeed want to be living the way Christ taught us when our time comes.

When I saw that man, a young man like myself at the time, point his shotgun at me, I did not immediately think about my soul or how I might be with

God if I were to die right then and there. But that's what should have been my biggest concern at that moment.

The point, of course, is that there is more than one kind of life. There is a brief Earthly life and an eternal life. Yet, it's not quite as simple as that. It's not in our nature to only think about life after death and not about our lives here on Earth today. There's a reason for this. God *does* want us to think about this life. God made us so that it's hard for us to live our daily lives only thinking about eternity. He doesn't want us to live with only Heaven in mind. That's because there is a life in the human world and life in the Kingdom of God – and they don't run consecutively. They overlap. Our life in the Kingdom of God is eternal, and yet, it is also right here and now. Living in a godly way doesn't only impact where we might spend eternity. If life after death isn't something we can easily contemplate or truly believe in, as people with faith, we can still appreciate the power and the glory of living with God and for God right here and now. When the thief comes in the night and our life on Earth ends, we want to be in the right place, not just so that we can earn an eternal reward. We want to have been living in the Kingdom of God, in a vibrant, brilliant fashion for all those many years leading up to life after death. It's what God wants for us.

Looking at a third Gospel, our quote from John says: <sup>24</sup> *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.* Again, this is Jesus speaking. In this Chapter, 5, Jesus is challenging the Jewish authorities of his day. He gets in trouble for healing someone on the Sabbath. He makes a bold statement that no one can know or see the Father except by going through the son – him, Jesus. He’s challenging the religious leaders and laying claim to his authority as the Messiah. Here again, we have to be careful about focusing too narrowly on physical death and physical life. Jesus is telling us that we can pass from death to life – spiritually – while we are here on Earth. Even if we eventually will live with God forever, it is well worth the effort to be alive today on this planet, in the spiritual sense. We want to live in the Kingdom of God now. That is the best way to live on this Earth. We don’t live just for the eternal future. It is now that we have the opportunity to do what Jesus did, to serve those who need help. We have the chance to live with forgiveness and generosity and love for those who have little. That is how we live in the Kingdom of God right now. It’s worth it, simply on its own – not just because it’s a path to a good eternity.

Consider our last passage, from Revelation. Revelation is very different from the rest of the New Testament. It’s filled with violent visions. It was written

around 90 A.D. by a man named John who was living on the island of Patmos off the coast of what is now Turkey. When ships moved between Rome and Ephesus, the city to whom the evangelist Paul addressed the book of Ephesians, these ships moved past the island of Patmos. So, Patmos was a well-known landmark in that part of the world. John of Patmos, as we call him, was a Jewish Christian, and Rome had crushed his Jewish homeland, which included Jerusalem, about 20 years earlier. He and other Christians were well aware of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. But John saw this horrific war as the validation of Jesus' prophecy that people who were alive during Jesus' life would see the End Times; surely, the devastation of the spiritual home of God's people was signaling the beginning of the ultimate end. Thus, the Romans, by destroying Jerusalem, were bringing about the second coming of Christ. This is the theme of Revelation. Many people feel that John of Patmos wasn't trying to literally predict or describe the end of time, though. They feel that he used prophetic Jewish literature, writings very familiar to Jews of the time – literature in what we now call the Old Testament - to denounce the oppression of the Romans. By wrapping his words in those of ancient prophetic literature he may have been avoiding reprisals by Roman authorities; John was concealing his attack on the Romans by using metaphoric language drawn from the Old Testament. John of Patmos was also

leveraging the emotional response that Jewish followers of Jesus would have when they heard the echoes of ancient Hebrew prophetic writings in *his* writings. And his fellow Jews would have known exactly who John was writing about – the Romans. We'll look at the Book of Revelation at some point in the future. But for now, let's just look at our passage: *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*

What does it say? John of Patmos is telling us what will happen in the End Times - that there will be a new Jerusalem. And at that time and in that place, God will personally care for the faithful. All of the pain of human life will disappear. We will never have to worry about death. All that was old will be gone and God will gently wipe all our tears away.

No, that's not what I thought when I was facing a man with wide, bloodshot eyes. He was shaking, pointing his shotgun at me. He was sweating. His skin was paste white. I was only thinking about not suffering and not dying. I was not thinking that it would be okay if I never again would feel pain. I was not thinking that an eternal life with God is better than a sinful life on Earth. I wasn't even thinking that I wanted to live so that I could live in the Kingdom of Heaven now, that I wanted my chance to live a Christ-like life on Earth before I went to be with



God. I wasn't thinking that I wanted a chance to serve humanity just like Jesus served humanity while he was here. No. Sorry.

Luckily for me, the thief in the night was more freaked out than me. He dropped my stereo, tucked his shotgun under his arm, jumped up on the kitchen counter, and exited through the same window through which he had entered. It was over in a flash. I called the cops. They came to my home, three days later.

I am grateful that I didn't die then. Not just because I, like everyone else, have it in my nature to cling to life. I'm grateful because I now know why Jesus made us the way we are, why God created us to want this life to last a good long while. That's because we have a purpose here. It isn't to make a lot of money or be famous or even become a living saint. God wants us to live like Jesus: simply, with gentleness, and with a desire to be the hands and mouth of Jesus Christ, to pass on his teachings, his way of life, to the next generation. Please pray with me.

*God, thank you for this life here on Earth. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you by serving humanity. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to accept your guidance and to accept Jesus Christ, something that we can only do while we are here. But we also thank you for the astonishing gift of knowing that when life does end, whether it is today or many years from now, we have absolutely nothing to worry about. Amen.*