

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

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 Man With a Shotgun: *The former things have passed away.*

What does it mean to be prepared for death, from a spiritual perspective? What should we be doing to make sure that when the day comes, and especially if it comes without warning in an instant, that we are where we belong with respect to God? These are questions that have traditionally concerned Christians. But I don't want to focus on the issue of salvation in the sense of whether we are headed to Heaven. Salvation isn't just about Heaven. It also means that at the end of our life, no matter what our path has been, we have answered the call of God's grace by welcoming the Holy Spirit to live within us, and we have lived by those two Great Commandments of Jesus, to love God and to love our neighbor (and that turns out to be all people in this airplane and media interconnected world). Being ready for death also means that we have sought forgiveness and done our best to correct whatever mistakes we have made. That is a primary goal

of every follower of Christ. But what about the second stage of death, the part that will happen long after we die, the End Times? Are we ready for that?

First, though, let's talk just a bit about the state of the world. Those of us who grew up in the sixties and seventies thought during the eighties that the nation and the world were becoming loving and peaceful. There had been a vibrant civil rights era, the Soviet Union was clearly collapsing, and most people seemed to be able to afford what they needed in life, including housing. There were wars, and we were still under the threat of nuclear catastrophe, but the world and the U.S. seemed to be on a good trajectory. It was a time of optimism. Today, things are much more complex. There's a lack of willingness of people in the U.S. to embrace or even communicate with people who have beliefs different than theirs. It's a time of in-your-face anger. The world, although it isn't exploding, is clearly very unstable. Now, it's a time of anxiety.

But as people of faith, we know that a day will come when there is no violence, no conflict, no evil whatsoever. It allows us to be optimistic even in the most stressful circumstances. God helps us keep this in mind by sending us periodic reminders that this life will one day end, that we must keep our perspective broader. We should be giving and kind and forgiving. We should love all our neighbors unconditionally but keep our eyes on eternity.

A long time ago, when I was in L.A., I got such a reminder. I lived for a while in a ground floor apartment, an end unit. 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 inside the front door, a very small living room. Parking was in the alley behind the apartment building. One night, around 10 PM, I came home, opened the front door, and stepped into the living room – to find a man standing between the kitchen and the living room. He turned to face me. He had my stereo under one arm, and he leveled a cut-down, pump-action shotgun at me. In a bit, I'll tell you how this turned out.

I started out by saying that I didn't want to focus on Heaven. Still, let's look at this, but from an unusual perspective. If there is one thing that makes a lot of people in the United States and Western Europe feel uncomfortable about Christian theology, it's that we believe that we go somewhere when we die. People can accept the idea of living the way Jesus taught. They are fine with "being spiritual". Perhaps most people are willing to admit that there just might be some sort of God or creator. But when it comes to the Heaven part, a lot of people today believe that when we die, it's poof! That's the science influence on society: now, more than ever, if we can't see it or touch it, and if physicists don't have the math to back it up, then the news media and social media tell us that it

isn't real. One thing that everyone does agree on, however, is that we can die at any time. But keep in mind that in Christian theology, there are two related events. The first is the personal death of each of us. The second is the End Times, when life for all of humanity as we know it ends. There is disagreement about whether we go to Heaven immediately when we die or if that happens at the End of Time. We talked about this in a sermon a while back, so I won't revisit the topic. But what about the End of Time? One thing that almost everyone agrees on, and that is because physicists tell us it will certainly happen, is that the universe as we know it will cease to exist someday. Here are some very popular words of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 24:

*Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.
⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

Many people who read this think that it is about the moment we die, but if we look at its greater context, we see that it is not. Matthew 24 is a very intriguing chapter, in that it is often compared to the Book of Revelation. It is "apocalyptic" in nature. In Chapter 24, Matthew writes about Jesus coming again, in power and glory. Jesus predicts the coming destruction of the Temple – which would then occur in a war that started in 64 A.D. The second and final Temple

was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. In Chapter 24, Jesus also warns us about false teachers and a time of tribulation, and he also provides other signs of the End Times coming. He predicts the return of the Son of Man. We are warned that the End Times could happen at any time. A very common first century Christian belief was that the End Times were about to happen. They thought that their generation would be alive on Earth when Jesus returned. In fact, in this Chapter, 24, Jesus seems to say this in verse 34. It's near the end of Jesus' earthly life. He starts out by referring to the signs of the coming End Times that he has just told us about:

³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The truth is that this line, *"³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place"* confuses even modern scholars. The most common interpretation is that Jesus is NOT talking about the current generation seeing the End Times but rather them seeing the first major sign that the End Times will eventually unfold, and that is the destruction of the Temple, which did occur in about thirty years. We see that Jesus, near the end of his mission on Earth, is concerned with his Apostles, and all future readers of the Gospel, being

prepared for the end of human life in its current form. Jesus wants us to be vigilant. He wants us to know there will be a day when there will be a great battle between God and evil, when evil is destroyed, and when there will be a new Heaven and a new Earth. We don't know what this will look like. The language in the Bible, such as we read in Revelation, is allegorical, not literal. But we should live knowing that this day will come. We will one day live in a perfect world.

That's not what I was thinking about when I saw that shotgun leveled at me. I didn't ask myself if I was ready to die, to be with God immediately, and then one day enter the new, eternal world. No. I simply thought about not wanting to get hurt. But maybe this is why that man was in my apartment. God finds a way to remind us from time to time that we are very mortal, that this life is brief, that we should be living in a way that honors the gift we that will one day receive. A near deadly car crash, a relative passing away, a frightening medical test that finally comes back negative. It doesn't have to be immediately life-threatening. God gives us reminders that the thief in the night will come. What's on our minds when that reminder is thrust upon us by God? Are we relieved that we are in a good place spiritually? Or do we live in the moment, never thinking about this?

Let's consider another passage from Matthew. In Chapter 17, Jesus predicts that he will be killed. Then at the beginning of Chapter 18, we read:

18 *At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”* ² *And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them* ³ *and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.* ⁴ *Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*

⁵ *“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.*

It appears that Jesus is talking about children here. After all, he starts out by calling a child to him. And yes, the point is made that we need to protect the faith of children, to help them learn about God. But as is often the case, the words of Jesus here are layered. There is a bigger point being made. The Apostles want to know how to be the greatest person in the eyes of God. Jesus uses a child as a metaphor, saying that we must have the humility and innocence of a child if we want to prepare ourselves for the Kingdom of God. In the last verse, Jesus is using the metaphor of a child to refer to anyone whose faith is vulnerable:

whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

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 to die than to harm the faith of a person who could be damaged by our

actions. In fact, the statement is stronger than this: the implication is that we should be proactive in helping others come to God and make their faith mature. That is the way to prepare for the eventual End Times. This is something that people are amazed to learn about Christians – that we value our eternal lives in the Kingdom of God more than we value a life on Earth, even if it brings money and power and glory. We are looking forward to that new, magnificent world, and that means that we do indeed need to be living the way Christ taught us.

When I saw that man point his shotgun at me, I did not immediately think about my soul, or Heaven, or the End Times. I didn't think about where I was spiritually. But that's what should have been my biggest concern at that moment.

God *does* want us to think about this life here. That's the reason for God's reminders – to use this life as a preparation for one that will last infinitely long.

Let's consider something from the Gospel of John, Chapter 5:

²⁴ 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 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. Jesus is telling us that we can pass from death to life – spiritually – while we are here on Earth. While Jesus is saying that we can eventually live with God forever by hearing his Word and believing, and that we will survive death and the End Times, and live forever in some form, we must remember that independent of this, we must be vibrantly alive today on this planet - in a spiritual sense. We want to live in the Kingdom of God now regardless of anything else. It is now when we have the opportunity to do what Jesus did, that is to serve others. We have the chance to live with forgiveness and generosity and love. 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 one 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 exiled on the island of Patmos off the coast of what is now Turkey. He was banished there by Emperor Domitian because of his evangelistic efforts. When ships moved between Rome and Ephesus, the city to which the evangelist Paul addressed the letter to the 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 in Jerusalem. But John saw this destruction as the validation of Jesus' apparent prophesy that people who were alive during Jesus' life would see the End Times; surely, the devastation of his spiritual capital was signaling the beginning of the ultimate end. Thus, the Romans, by destroying Jerusalem, were initiating the second coming of Christ. This is the theme of Revelation. Many people feel that John of Patmos wasn't only trying to predict or describe the end of time, though. They feel that he used prophetic Jewish literature, a style of writing very familiar to Jews of the time, to also denounce the oppression of the Romans. Likely, John was writing on two levels, the eventual destruction of all evil and the end of the Roman Empire itself, which did of course, happen, due to its corruption. By mimicking ancient prophetic literature, he was also concealing his attack Rome and thus avoiding reprisals by the Roman authorities. 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. So, consider this, from Chapter 21:

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.

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. All that was old will be gone and God will gently wipe all our tears and pain away.

No, I was not thinking about living during the eternal time when all suffering will have ended as I was facing a man with wide, bloodshot eyes. He was shaking, sweating, pointing his shotgun at me. 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. This was Los Angeles. They came to my home - three days later.

Jesus prophesized that a day will come when *“the former things have passed away”*. On this Earth, we live like Christ as best as we can. We live for the knowledge that the day we die, we will be with God. We also live for that day when all evil, all pain, all fear, all anxiety will be gone. This knowledge is a gift from God that we are meant to enjoy now. It is a source of security and optimism. It clears our minds so that we can live like genuine, caring Christians today. We live each day with the joy of knowing that a day will come when eternity in the New Jerusalem unfolds before us.