

With Death Do We Part

You've probably never heard of a faithful preacher named Nathaniel Evans.

His friends called him Nate. Every day along a stretch of Hwy 43 just outside of Corcoran he walked carrying a sign.

Repent, the End of the World is Near! was written on the sign he carried.

One day, as he was walking along the highway, he came to a huge lever just on the shoulder, just by the side of the road.

There was a large, legible sign next to it that said, 'Pull this lever to end the world.'

Authorities never have determined who put the lever there. Nate probably realized it was put there as a prank, to ridicule him and his Gospel preaching. Nevertheless he decided he could use it as a sort of pulpit, so on that day he stopped there, putting his sign next to it.

He caused such a distraction that traffic became congested as rubber-neckers tried to read both signs and looked at the lever.

Suddenly a hay-hauler came around the curve and the driver realized he couldn't stop in time.

The driver had a choice: run over Nate, or run into the lever.

As the driver explained to the Highway Patrolman later, he felt he had no choice. Pointing to the red smear on the road that used to be Nathaniel Evans, he said,

"Better Nate than Lever."

You've probably never seen a lever like that but you have seen someone with a sign that reads ***The End is Near!***

Is the end near?

Well, that depends on what you mean by "the end." Most people think of the end in terms of some sort of final catastrophe that will wipe-out all or most of humanity.

When I was a kid, nuclear war was the thing we thought would end the world. Those of us who were at school when the bomb detonated, who could "duck-and-cover" under our pressed-wood desks, might live through the initial blast. But afterward Godzilla would find us and eat us.

A zombie apocalypse is the current favorite end-of-the-world scenario.

Zombies are relentless, flesh-eating, "undead," once-human monsters. Literary and cinematic versions of zombies seem to be popping up nearly everywhere in recent years: in the big-budget movie, *World War Z*, in the hugely popular TV series, *The Walking Dead*, and even in a hipster car insurance commercial.

By the way:

What did the zombie say to his date? "I just love a woman with BRAINS!"

What does a zombie say during an MMA match? "Do you want a piece of me?"

While we Christians always get accused of saying, ***The End is Near!***, the Bible doesn't really predict that kind of end for the world. The apostle Peter does say, "the end of all things is at hand" (First Peter 4:7), but the word "end" means something like *the consummation of all things*.

There won't be one, final apocalyptic event that destroys all of humanity as we know it.

Although it's often used to describe a great devastation or cataclysm, the literal meaning of "apocalypse" is an *unveiling*, or a *revealing*.

A better translation is the word "revelation." The last book of the Bible is the Revelation - the **Apocalypse** - of Jesus Christ. It unveils Him, revealing Him in His Second Coming to the earth, and, afterwards, in eternity.

True, the earth will be devastated by the coming seven year Great Tribulation described in the Revelation. Fully four-fifths of the world's population will be killed by natural or supernatural disasters. But at His Second Coming, The Lord will establish a kingdom on the earth and renew the earth for one thousand years.

True, after the one thousand years The Lord will destroy the earth by fire. But then there will be a new earth, and a new Heaven, and those who have trusted Jesus Christ for their salvation will live together with Him on into eternity.

There will be a consummation. History is heading to something being completed. It might therefore be more accurate to say, ***The Beginning is Near!***

Yes, it will be the end of the world as we know it; but it's replacements are far better.

There **are** a few things that need to end; and the sooner they end, the better. They were never meant to be a part of God's creation, and it's taken Him some doing, over time, to eradicate them.

I'll let the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, tell us what will end.

Isa 25:7 And He will destroy on this mountain The surface of the covering cast over all people, And the veil that is spread over all nations.

Isa 25:8 He will swallow up death forever, And the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces; The rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken.

The end is near for three things: death, tears, and "the rebuke of [God's] people."

We'll take them one at a time, but before we talk about their end, it might be helpful for me to explain what is going on in the verses from Isaiah.

In chapters twenty-five through twenty-seven of his book, Isaiah was predicting the future beyond our own day and age, looking far forward to the time after the seven year Great Tribulation, when a remnant of God's people, Israel, would be preserved safely to finally enjoy the kingdom on earth.

He was also looking beyond that kingdom to eternity.

The "covering cast over all people" he mentions refers to death. Death is pictured as a "covering," like the shroud placed over a dead body.

The sorrow caused by death is pictured as a "veil" that affects all the "nations" of the world.

Death will be destroyed, Isaiah says, "swallowed up forever." He then he expands the destruction of death to include two other sufferings, "tears" and "the rebuke of His people."

He doesn't mean that mankind will make a dent in disease and expand life spans. He's not talking about discovering the cure for cancer.

Jesus "will swallow up death forever." **There will be no more death.**

I thought that there was nothing more certain than death and taxes?

It's not so hard to understand the death of death if you remember that death was not part of God's original creation.

He put Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden. He visited them daily. It was all so perfect.

There was one rule; one boundary; one restriction. Don't eat a particular fruit from a particular tree. If they did, The Lord said they would surely die. It would bring death into the universe, and upon the human race.

People tend to get angry with God about this restriction. Why did He give them this one rule? I'll tell you in a moment. But think of this. If you're Adam and Eve, you've got every possible fruit from every imaginable tree - all totally organic and healthy - to choose from.

Do you really need to try the one restricted fruit? How lame are you!

Why the one restriction? As near as I can tell, if you want a person or persons to love you, of their own will and by their own choice, you must give them the genuine freedom to choose. Anything else is not love.

With their freedom, Adam and Eve chose badly. They chose death, and it brought death into the universe and upon us as a race.

God immediately went to work in the garden to counteract their choice - a choice, by the way, which we call sin. He promised He would Himself come into the world He created and take our place in death so that we might live forever without sin as He originally intended.

From that promise forward, the Bible is the unfolding drama that describes exactly how God came to save us. He came as a man in the person of Jesus Christ, died on the Cross for our sins, then rose from the dead - conquering death and everything that follows from sin.

Death has been destroyed by Jesus Christ; but it has not yet been completely "swallowed up." People still die, and they will, until after the Great Tribulation, and after the thousand-year kingdom, until eternity.

We can, however, celebrate the death of death.

- For one thing, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, to be absent from your body in death is to be immediately present with The Lord in Heaven.
- For another thing, if a loved one dies, and if they were a believer, then you have the certain hope you will be reunited with them, in Heaven, forever.
- Furthermore, we are promised that we will be raised from the dead, never to die again, in a perfect, timeless body fit for eternity.

I have to add to that the promise that some of us may never die. The Lord promised to return, before the Great Tribulation, to remove His church from the earth. He will resurrect the bodies of the believers who have died through the centuries. When He returns, some believers will be alive, on the earth.

Believers living at the moment of His return for the church will be immediately transformed into their eternal state without ever having died.

These truths prompted the apostle Paul to exclaim, "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING? O [GRAVE], WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY?" (First Corinthians 15:55).

"The end is near!" for death. In the mean time, we triumph over death knowing our destiny.

Unless you are not a believer... Then your destiny is very different, very terrifying. Death will hold you, conscious and aware, in Hades until the final resurrection of nonbelievers. Having rejected the only means of salvation, you cannot enter Heaven. The only other address is Hell.

Does that make you afraid? If you're not yet a believer in Jesus, it should make you very afraid.

"The end is near!" for "tears." I was with a woman the other day, in the ER, whose husband had been rushed in by ambulance with an apparent, but totally unexpected, heart attack. She wept and wept and wept. It came in waves.

She was a believer; but that, in itself, cannot stop tears - not this side of eternity.

Crying is strange, is it not? You think you're doing OK, handling the situation, then all of a sudden, you get choked-up, and you can't get the words out, and your eyes fill with tears.

There's so very much to cry about in the world in which we live. I wonder we don't cry more when we think about the awful suffering that people are enduring.

I don't want to evoke crying, but I want you to think about your tears for a moment. That sorrow, that pit in you from which tears are formed, is about at its end. If you're a believer, you'll be with Jesus, and He will wipe away every tear.

You'll also find something waiting for you in Heaven - maybe on the mantle in your mansion. There will be a bottle and in it your tears.

Psa 56:8 ...Put my tears into Your bottle; Are they not in Your book?

The Lord collects your tears in a bottle or bottles, and records their volume in a ledger. They are precious to Him.

One author said,

Today tears are being shed in dark rooms where children are being held as sex slaves; in Africa as people remain homeless and without food and water; in the United States as many remain jobless; in hospitals and on the streets where the mentally ill are forgotten; in homes around the world where people are spiritually lost and have no hope.

We live in a fallen world. Tragedies happen and humans are not always kind to one another. And so tears are shed. It is hard to fathom God collecting every single one, but He does. He notices and He records each tear and each lament.

That's all great, but maybe you feel more like this:

Psa 42:3 My tears have been my food day and night, While they continually say to me, "Where is your God?"

Where is God when it hurts? It would be a good time to recall that Jesus was a man of sorrows Who was well acquainted with grief. Jesus cried twice that we can pinpoint.

1. He wept outside the tomb of His friend, Lazarus.
2. He wept over the city of Jerusalem.

Consider Hebrews 5:7, where it says,

Heb 5:7 who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, **with vehement cries and tears** to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear,

The Lord was no stranger to tears. In his successful struggle against the power of sin, His prayers were of such intensity and passion that they were frequently accompanied by tears.

So the real answer as to how many times Jesus wept is not once, not twice, but, in private, frequently, although only two instances of public weeping are recorded.

Somehow knowing The Lord shed tears encourages me. It's as if His tears are somehow mingled with my own to bring me comfort in my time of need.

Tears are nearly at their end. And they won't simply end, as beautiful a thing as that is. Isaiah said God will "wipe away" your tears.

I'm sure that is a metaphor to describe the end of our suffering. But it could be that, in some spiritual sense I cannot yet fathom, Jesus will deal with every one of the tears I shed in a way that seems He is wiping each of them away with His nail-scarred hand.

Isaiah next said, "The rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth." In the context of the original verses, he was talking about the nation of Israel - God's chosen people, the Jews.

The word for "rebuke" can be translated *reproach*, or *shame*.

Certainly you'd agree that the history of the Jews has been one of reproach and shame with regards to their treatment by the other peoples and nations of the world.

That shameful treatment hasn't stopped. *USAToday* reported this week that Jews in the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk, where pro-Russian militants have taken over government buildings, were told they have to "register" with the Ukrainians who are trying to make the city become part of Russia.

Masked men were waiting for Jewish people after the Passover eve prayer, to hand them flyers ordering them to register.

While we are talking about Israel, I should mention that the preservation of the Jews as a people, and their return in 1948 to the Promised Land, is the modern-day fulfillment of many specific ancient Bible prophecies.

If anyone were to say that, in order to believe God, they'd need to see a miracle, then they only need to look on a map and know that Israel has returned as God promised.

We're not Israel; what does "shame" have to do with us?

Can you in all honesty say that there is nothing you are ashamed of?

If you answer "Yes," then I'd suggest you take a moment to re-read the Ten Commandments.

Let me refresh our memories with just two of them: "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery."

Wait a minute, before you say you're in the clear because you haven't murdered anyone, nor are you committing adultery. Jesus interprets those commandments for us in His famous Sermon on the Mount.

Mat 5:21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.'

Mat 5:22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

Mat 5:27 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.'

Mat 5:28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Sometimes people would like to eliminate portions of the Old Testament because they seem too harsh. This is an instance in which you might like to overlook what Jesus said.

If you could. But you can't.

Every single one of us has broken these commandments because we've sinned in our hearts. Anger and lust are things I find in my heart and should be ashamed of.

"The end is near!" for shame. When I go to be with The Lord at death, or am caught-up in the rapture, I will no longer have this body of flesh to contend with. I will be sinless for eternity in my new, glorified, resurrection body.

Are you ashamed of something? While we wait for the end of shame, there is confession, repentance and forgiveness.

Are tears welling up? Maybe not right this moment, but there is a suffering you are enduring that makes you cry or want to cry. Jesus wept and can comfort you.

What about death? Are you ready for it?

You're not - unless you've acknowledged your sin and trusted Jesus Christ to save you.

Do it today; now. **Better late than never.**

