

As Christians, we know very little about death or what happens after we die. We live in a culture that fears and is uncomfortable with death. We all have different questions and/or interpretations of the afterlife. We are aware of some things that are told to us in Scripture. However, we don't know for sure. Some of us have been taught that in the end times, in stories like the *Left Behind Series*, that there will be the rapture and only a very few will be taken up to God. Others of us talk about heaven, but we don't know where heaven is or what heaven looks like. Today's Scripture comes from the Book of Revelation. Some of us avoid this book of the Bible because it doesn't make sense, yet some of us are fascinated with the study of the end of times, known as "eschatology." Many like apocalyptic literature. What we are about to read in today's text is often read in funerals as well as on All Saints Day, as it is a message of hope for those who believe in God's promise that nothing will ever separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38). Before we turn to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ Revelation 21:1-6.**

"The end of Revelation is fascinating and perplexing in that most people's expectations about the message of Revelation are not what they have always been taught" (Israel Kamudzandu, workingpreacher.org). For example, we read here that God comes down to earth to dwell with mortals/humans, rather than people going to heaven. No one is taken up in a great light. There is no prediction of the end times, no rapture, no punishment but God comes to be the home of humanity. John of Patmos, who is speaking, "struggles to find a language to express and describe a

new created world order. Spiritually, John calls us to see this world as one in which God will transform what we know today into something that is beyond human imagination. All we can do is to desire to be a part of the new heaven and the new earth. Here we are told that God is the origin and the end of all things- the Alpha and the Omega. Trusting in God, we wait for and simultaneously live in the hope of this new heaven and new earth, where all the pain of humanity such as crying, mourning, death, all isms, HIV/AIDS, cancer, and human brokenness will be no more (Rev. 21:4)” (Kamudzandu). As followers of Jesus we aren’t called to escape into this new world but rather to partner with God in ways that will allow God’s power to be experienced in this world as it is in heaven. In other words, John, who is speaking here, believes that “this New Jerusalem begins in the present moment and every human being must experience its joy and goodness in the present moment. Thus God’s dream is not an eternal world but one realized by human history. It is a world where zip codes do not divide people but that all God’s people have access to every area, including access to health care, education, transportation, housing, worship, and authentic life (Gen. 1-2)” (Kamudzandu). By faith and in hope, we must be a part of this new world order- for whether in life or in death, we belong to God.

Even as people of faith, we don’t always know how to speak to people in grief and loss, let alone speak about controversial issues. The struggle with faith and how we are to read the Bible are at the heart of much of the cultural conflict raging in our nation today. And today’s bumper sticker is no

different. Today's phrase or cliché doesn't come from the Bible at all. As a matter of fact, I don't believe it to be true. Here's a scenario. My grandmother was killed by a tractor trailer truck, along with my great aunt. They were coming back from visiting their brother and sister-in-law in an assisted living when the truck collided with their vehicle. They were killed on impact. I had just started seminary, and my parents were in Germany. I had to call the American Embassy in Germany and then Red Cross to locate my parents and deliver this tragic news. I was 24. It was awful. My grandmother, though she was 73, was still young in my eyes and had lots of life left to live. She was fun, made the best silver queen creamed corn, and very faithful. She was one of my cheerleaders in my call to ministry, and she was dead. I remember clear as day- it was 1998- and my brother and I were standing in the receiving line at the funeral home while well-intentioned friends and family came through the line to kindly offer us their condolences. This one couple approached us, and the wife first said to us, "Your grandmother was very special. I am sorry but obviously God needed another angel in heaven." Then her husband looked at us- not knowing us- and said, "Y'all make one good looking couple." Ewww! Just ewwww! Both my brother and I are now both pastors, and we try to have some compassion for well-meaning people trying to bring comfort but sometimes I wish we all would just offer a hug or an "I'm so sorry" while letting someone cry on your shoulder. I get it. I know we want to ease the pain for others, if only a little bit, and I know that there's a common misconception in our culture about angels such as they watch over us from heaven and they come back and visit us. But these ideas are foreign to the Bible. They

aren't found in Scripture. I just saw this morning on Facebook where a friend of mine experienced the death of her adult son last night and someone commented that God needed another soldier in God's army. So why do we say things like this when people are in a time of great loss or pain, especially when it involves the death of a baby or child?!

We do believe that the departed one is in the presence of God. Some of us may also picture them as angels. Again, good intentions and bad theology. God doesn't NEED any more angels. God doesn't need anything. If we say that God needed another angel, aren't we implying that God in God's infinite wisdom failed to create enough angels in the first place? So if we tell a child when a parent dies, "God just needed another angel," they actually hear, "you didn't need your parent enough." Not good at all. Angels are referenced many times in Scripture, and every reference to angels is incidental to some other topic. When they are mentioned, it is always in order to inform us further about God, what God does, and how God does it. Angels are spiritual beings created by God to serve God, though created higher than human beings. God commissions the angels, clothes them in glory, gives them a message, and enables them to be God's representatives before humanity. Though the exact time of their creation is never stated in Scripture, we know angels were more than likely created before the creation of the world. In the Book of Job, chapter 38 (vv. 4-7), God is speaking to Job asking Job where was he when God created the world and when the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted

for joy. This seems to indicate that either they were included in or preceded the beginning of creation.

Speaking of Job, he suffers a series of devastating losses. His friends come to his side but after a while they try to explain away his suffering. They assume God must be punishing Job. And God finally speaks to Job's friends in chapter 42 and is angry with them because they speak of things that are not true about God and Job. A compassionate Creator would not snatch a child away from its parents just so that he could enlarge his own family. No matter how much we want to make things better for our loved ones, we cannot deny people the privilege and right to grieve. I saw a meme that reads, "Easy for you to say, 'God needed another angel,' since God didn't ask you for yours."

We were created in the image of God and we were created to love one another. Yet trying to explain God at a time like this is troublesome and problematic. Most people aren't ready to or don't want to hear it. A few may take comfort in these words but most do not. Theologian, John Calvin, encourages us to stick with what is known about angels in scripture rather than getting caught up in popular speculation. Though that is much more difficult than it sounds. For some reason we human beings have a fascination with angels. Wikipedia lists around 35 films (with actors ranging from Henry Travers to Nicholas Cage) that concern angels- movies and TV shows such as, "It's A Wonderful Life," "Angels in the Outfield," "Teen Angel," "Highway to Heaven," and "Touched by an Angel." Google returns

almost 87 million references annually to angels. In some ways, we might suppose that angels matter because they demonstrate a concrete caring of our Creator. However, at the end of the day, angels are beings. Just as we are beings. They are not God. Furthermore, people do not become angels when they die (regardless of what the TV or movies say). No, once you're dead one doesn't magically sprout wings and a halo and become an angel. You just don't!

I was meeting with someone recently whose mother had died and after some listening, this person asked me if they were crazy for being angry with God and having lots of questions and crying a lot. I said to this person, no...that they were grieving and this is normal. Grief honors love. Grief is real and necessary in our healing. It lets us know how much we love and are loved. We can't take away people's dignity to grieve. Yet, how can one begin to grieve if God needed their love one? Can't you see how this phrase further distorts the image of God? Death is inevitable, and it touches us all. When a loved one dies, we grieve. When anything comes to an end in our lives, we grieve. And as followers of Jesus Christ, we have hope of resurrection life. And our resurrection life does not make us angels.

Overall, I recommend retiring this bumper sticker. This phrase offers no redeeming value. I don't say this to shame anyone. I know we all have good intentions. I say this as a pastor who cares deeply for her flock. There's enough hurt out there without our words. Because every one of the words in the sentence is flawed. It shifts the blame to God, dismisses the grieving

process, and raises a ton of unhelpful questions about how exactly the afterlife works. So, what is a better option, you ask? Say nothing and do something. Or just say nothing. Saying nothing may be best of all. In fact, saying nothing is surprisingly helpful. And if you just can't help yourself and your discomfort gets the best of you, you can always give a hug or say, "I am so sorry." When we face the unbearable pain of loss, we don't need to try and explain why. Like Jesus did with Lazarus' sisters, we weep with those who weep. Jesus doesn't explain why. He weeps with them and then he explains who he is. "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25-26). I know Job's friends didn't get it all right when it came to comforting Job, but they started out doing well. They just sat with Job in silence for seven days and seven nights (Job 2:13). Consider staying silent, as your presence will matter most of all. And in your silence, you will allow the other person the space to arrive at their own answers instead. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, death will not have the final word. As we hold onto and make space for those grieving, so we hold on to the promises of Jesus. May we all live in hope and in faith of God's vision of a new heaven and a new earth, where we will not endure suffering or mourning or even crying there...where death will lose its sting! Thanks be to God! Amen.