

Blessed Are the Dead Who Die in the Lord

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Before we pray and seek God's blessing on the ministry of the Word, I read but one text of Scripture, Revelation 14:13. John writes, "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth: yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; for their works follow with them."

Let us pray and ask God's help in the opening up of His Word this morning.

Our Father, it is encouraging to us to know that as we sit and as I stand in this place, those things of which we have just sung are true, that there is a vast company surrounding Your throne and the throne of the Lamb who have overcome and entered into their rest, and with one voice exclaim that they overcame by the blood of the Lamb, by the grace and power of Your Spirit. And we ask this day as we contemplate what they now know and what we shall know when we join them by the same grace, that our hearts will burn within us, that we may be nerved to face the last enemy with confidence that neither life nor death shall separate us from Your love that is in Christ Jesus. Speak to us, then, with grace and power we plead. In Jesus name, amen.

It was on September 20, 2004, exactly three years ago this past Thursday at 6:20 in the morning that Marilyn Martin, my wife of 48 years, breathed her last and died. As most of you know, she died at home in my presence and in the presence of her daughter Heidi Cook and of my sister Joyce Maltby. Four weeks later, on October 17, 2004, I stood behind this very pulpit and preached a sermon entitled "Death and Its Immediate Sequel for the One Who Dies in the Lord." In His wise, loving but inscrutable providence, God has once more thrust upon us as a congregation the unsettling facts concerning the uncertainty of life and the cold, brutal, irreversible finality of death. God has done this by taking a relatively young man from our midst on July 3, our brother Dan Haines, less than three months ago. And then again, in the shocking murder of Arif and Kathy Khan on August 29, now three and a half weeks ago.

In seeking to put these dark providences into some Biblical perspective for you, those who feel most keenly this unwanted but irreversible intrusion of death, and seeking to bring to you, God's people, some Biblical perspective to settle your minds and your hearts, I have not addressed in any extended way the question, "What precisely has happened to Dan and to Arif and to Kathy in the experience of their deaths?" And it is that question that I will attempt to answer from the Scriptures this morning using Revelation 14:13 as the basis of my message.

This text states, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." And it has struck me in coming back to this text of Scripture that there is an apparent contradiction in the language of this text. "Blessed are the dead who die...." The word "dead" and "die" are nestled under a canopy of blessedness. "Blessed are the dead who die...." We do not think of death in the category of anything that is a blessing. Death that wrenches our hearts, that opens up our tear ducts, death that brings us to that shocking realization of how tenuous life is. And yet the text says, "Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." And so this morning my message is simply this: an attempt to answer this question: "In what does this blessedness consist for those who die in the Lord?"

Now at the outset, I admit what is evident to any serious student of the Bible. Compared to what the Bible tells us about the consummation of redemption when Jesus returns in glory and power, raises the dead, and joins their perfected spirits to resurrection bodies. The Bible has a lot to say about the consummation of God's redemptive work in the hearts and in the lives and in the bodies of His people. Compared to all that the Bible tells us about the consummation, it tells us relatively little about what the theologians call the intermediate state, that condition between death and the coming of the Lord Jesus. However, the Bible gives us sufficient, clear, unmistakable information that we are able to answer the question, "In what does the blessedness consist for those who die in the Lord?" And I want to answer that question with four very simple affirmations rooted in the Word of God.

Number one: they are blessed with the welcoming of their spirits into the very presence of Jesus. When the text says, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord," they are blessed with the welcoming of their spirits into the very presence of Jesus.

We begin by asking the question, "Where is Jesus right now?" And the Bible answers it very clearly. In the body in which He lived, performed His miracles, died upon the cross, and rose from Joseph's tomb, that body in a new, resurrected condition that had corporeal substance (He could say, "Handle Me. See that a spirit has not flesh and bones, as you see Me have), yet a body capable of appearing in a room with closed doors, the doors being locked, capacity to pass through the walls, through the door, and yet appear with corporeal substance before the disciples, a body that apparently could remove from one place to another without the ordinary means of passing from one place to another by walking, by running, by riding upon a donkey. On the road to Emmaus, our Lord is with the two dejected disciples; He sits with them. And while He sits with them, their eyes are opened to behold who He really is, and then He's gone. So we don't understand and fully know the nature of that body that was given Him in His resurrection and any changes that may further have occurred when, in that body, He went to the place where He is right now. And where is that? When we turn to Acts 1, the Scriptures answer the question for us. In Acts 1, Luke has told us that our Lord has spent some 40 days with the disciples subsequent to His resurrection, showing Himself alive and speaking of things of the kingdom. And then as He's about to leave them, we read in Acts 1:9-11:

"And when He had said these things, as they were looking, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they were looking stedfastly into heaven as He went, behold two men stood by them in white apparel; who also said, You men of Galilee, why stand you looking into heaven? this Jesus, who was received up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you beheld Him going into heaven."

Here the language could not be more plain. Wherever this heaven, that's where Jesus is. They beheld Him going up from their presence into heaven. And this is the uniform testimony of the New Testament. In Hebrews 1:3, the language is a bit different, but it does not contradict but simply compliment: "Who being the effulgence of His glory, and the very image of His substance, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had made purification of sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high." And again in Hebrews 10:12, we have a similar affirmation: "But He, when He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God." So where is Jesus? Jesus is in a place designated as heaven somewhere in the vast universe of God, perhaps in a way that we cannot even begin to understand, with realities penetrating other realities. There in His glorified body, our Lord Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the concentrated presence of the majesty and glory of God. So wherever that heaven is, He is there in His now glorified body. And when anyone dies in the Lord, that human spirit which leaves that human body is immediately welcomed into the very presence of Jesus, so that the body remains down here while the spirit goes immediately into the presence of Jesus up there wherever up there may be. And there are several text of Scripture which, again, make this abundantly and unmistakably clear.

2 Corinthians 5:6-8: "Being therefore always of good courage, and knowing that, while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord (for we walk by faith, not by sight); we are of good courage, I say, and are willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be at home with the Lord." Twice we have "at home" and "absent". While we are at home in the body, that is, our spirits are inhabiting these corporeal subsistences called our bodies, we are away from or absent from the Lord. While we are not absent in terms of His dwelling in us by His Spirit; we are not absent in terms of holding loving, communing and fellowship with Him, but in terms of being in His immediate presence, the glorified, exalted God-man with His glorified body. When we are at home in the body, we are absent from the immediate presence of the Lord Jesus. However, when we vacate the body, when we are absent from this body, we are immediately at home with the Lord. Language could not be more plain. We are willing rather to vacate the body and to be at home with the Lord. Even though in the previous verses, Paul says his great longing is not for the disembodied state, the intermediate state, this abnormal state of severance of soul and body. He longs ultimately that his mortality would be swallowed up by immortality, that he will have his resurrection body. But he says, "Though that's my great longing, I'm perfectly content for the wonder and the privilege of the intermediate state, that when I vacate my body as my home, I come to be home with my Lord.

The second text that makes this unmistakably clear is Philipians 1. Paul is in prison writing to this church that brought him such delight, and he tells them that his great passion is that Christ will be magnified in his body whether by life or death (v. 20b). In verse 21, he says, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Well, in what sense is death gain? He's going to explain: "But if to live in the flesh,--if this shall bring fruit from my work, then what I shall choose I know not. But I am in a strait [I'm torn between two great desires], having the desire to depart and be with Christ." Depart is the language of dying. Dying is gain. And what is the gain? "If I depart from this bodily existence, the gain is with Christ, the Christ who arrested me on the Damascus road, the Christ who commissioned me, the Christ who empowered me, the Christ whose presence I have known in my fellowship and communion with Him, but I long to be with Him." And he says, "To depart and to be with Christ, which is very far

better." He piles superlative upon superlative and says it's very far better. And this is no selfish death wish, for he goes on to say,

"It's more needful to remain in this body with all of its scars from my beatings, with all of the aching joints from the deprivations I've suffered as a Gospel minister, as an apostle, as a church planter and missionary. I'm prepared to stay on in this state for your sake. And I have intimations from God that that will be His will. But if I had my choice, it would be to depart from this bodily existence and in my disembodied state to go immediately into the presence of Jesus."

Then you have a beautiful picture of this exactly happening with one of God's precious saints. In Acts 7, that Godly, spirit-filled, Bible-soaked man called Stephen, standing before enemies of His Christ and His Gospel, and he has preached faithfully, powerfully to the point where they gnash upon him with their teeth. And they pick up boulders to throw upon him and to snuff out his life. And we read in Acts 7:59: "And they stoned Stephen, calling upon the Lord, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (A beautiful euphemism for "He died.") For the believer to die, the bodily part of death is like being put to sleep awaiting the morning of the resurrection when he and all the saints shall awake resplendent with glorified bodies. But meanwhile, where is His spirit? He is very conscious that his very spirit is to be received by the Lord Jesus Himself. He then calls on the Lord saying, "Receive my spirit." And in what posture did he see the Lord of whom he petitions now, "Receive my spirit"? Verses 55-56: " But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." Standing for what reason? I thought we read in Hebrews, "He sat down at the right hand of God." He stands to receive the spirits of His own. Stephen sees this reality. Jesus standing to receive what? Not his body. His body will be buried. We read that in the next paragraph in chapter 8. His body will go into the ground, but his spirit will be in the immediate presence of the Lord Jesus.

In a very real sense, dear people of God, when anyone dies in the Lord, they are blessed in that death because Jesus gets His greatest desire fulfilled in them. Turn to John 17. In His high priestly prayer, the language, the verbs of petition, the standard words are used throughout this prayer. But when we come to verse 24, it's not the standard language of petition, but it's the expression of want, of will:

"Father, I desire [I want] that they also whom You have given Me be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory, which You have given Me: for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. [Father, it is my strong wish and desire that those You have given Me, those for whom I am about to die and lay down My life, those to whom I will send My Spirit, regenerating them, giving them eyes to see My glory and to embrace Me as their only hope of life and salvation, those in whom I will come to dwell by the Spirit, that by a process of sanctifying grace, I will make them more and more like Myself. But Father, though I will that all this shall be done in them and for them, My great desire is that they be with Me where I am.]"

And the moment someone dies in the Lord, this desire of the Lord Jesus is fulfilled. And that departing spirit is with Him where He is.

Surely then, when John hears the voice saying, "Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord," the first dimension of that blessedness that is theirs is that they are blessed with the welcoming of their spirits into the very presence of Jesus. Yes, all of them have seen their need of Him as the only way to be right with God, to have the forgiveness of sins, to be accepted in the court of heaven. They've entrusted themselves to Him in the abandonment of saving faith. They've come to love Him supremely above father, mother, brother, sister, and their own lives also. They have enjoyed communion with Him in prayer and praise, in the fellowship of the church, in the secret place of the closet, and at the family table. But if they truly know Him, their greatest longing is to be with Him, to see Him face to face, to behold His glory at the right hand of the Father. The great longing of their hearts is to be in His immediate presence. "Blessed are those who die in the Lord." Why? They are blessed with that entrance of their spirits into His presence.

For those of us who have lost those dearest to us, concerning whom we have confidence they died in the Lord, no little part of stabilizing our hearts, of chastening and disciplining our grief is to think of the blessedness that is theirs. With the deepest yearnings of their renewed inner being now fulfilled, they look upon the face of their Redeemer with joy. Few things are more calculated to give us as God's people confidence in the face of our own death than to really believe that by whatever means God chooses to bring to me that abnormal and temporary severance of soul and body ("as the body apart from the spirit is dead")--that's what death is, this radical, unnatural severance of soul and body--to know that by whatever means, whether it's a sudden tragic accident, whether it's by a lingering, debilitating illness, whatever the means by which my death will glorify God, to face death with the confidence that the moment I breathe my last and the line goes flat, and the nurse puts her finger on my carotid artery and says, "He's gone," to know that I'll look upon His face and the great desire of my heart will be fulfilled. How can we have a crippling fear of death when we have that confidence? "Blessed are the dead [fully satisfied]...." That Greek word packs into it all of the Hebrew concepts of the shalom of God, the well-being that God gives us, the peace, the joy of being in covenant relationship with God. "Blessed are the dead who die...." Blessed because, first of all, they have experienced what I have called the welcoming of their spirits into the very presence of Jesus.

But secondly, they are blessed with the perfecting of their spirits into the moral likeness of Jesus. Not only the welcoming of their spirits into the very presence of Jesus, but the perfecting of their spirits into the moral likeness of Jesus. According to the Scriptures, when God sets His heart upon the salvation of a sinner, He has a gracious determination that He will fulfill in every such sinner. And what is that gracious determination? Romans 8 tells us. Here's God's determination in the salvation He has purposed, He has planned, for which He has marked out fallen sons and daughters of Adam in His free, sovereign, loving, electing grace. Verse 29:

"For whom He foreknew [that is, those upon whom He set His sovereign love], He also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He [Jesus] might be the firstborn [the chief] among many brethren: and whom He foreordained [that is, foreordained to this end: to be conformed to the image of His Son], them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified."

And what is glorification? Glorification is God's accomplishment of His sovereign purpose to conform the subjects of His saving grace to the image of Christ (spirit and body) so that Christ will be the great paradigm of what they will be. He will be the elder Brother, the chief in the family, the firstborn. And His brethren will bear His likeness in their spirits being perfected in holiness and in their bodies being conformed to the body of His glory, as Paul describes it in Philippians 3:21. However, while glorification is total conformity to Jesus (sinless spirits inhabiting deathless bodies), only those alive when Jesus comes get both parts at once. Most of us get it in two installments. The glorification of our spirits occurs when we die, the glorification of our bodies when He returns. And I'm amazed at how much sloppy thinking there is among Christians. They say, "O, my loved one is in heaven and they're doing cartwheels." No, you don't do cartwheels as a disembodied spirit. "My loved one is gone to heaven and they were crippled, and now they're running hundred yard dashes in 11 seconds." No, you don't run hundred yard dashes in a disembodied spirit. No, we've got to think Biblically, dear people. God's committed that when He's done with us, Christ will be the firstborn; we'll all bear the family likeness in spirit and in body. However, for most of us, we will pass through the door of death. And as we do, what happens that enables the spirit to say to John, "Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord"? I answer by saying they are the blessed with the perfecting of their spirits into the moral likeness of Jesus. They'll get the glorification of the inner man the moment they die. They'll get the glorification of the outer man when Jesus returns and gives them resurrection bodies.

Now where does the Bible teach that? Well, turn with me to Hebrews 12. In this section of the book of Hebrews, seeking to persuade these Hebrew Christians not to cast off their faith but to cling to Christ and all that they have in Him in spite of the opposition they receive and the persecution they're enduring. And here in Hebrews 12, beginning in verse 18, the writer to the Hebrews contrasts what you would have come to had you been there at Mount Sinai when God gave the terms of the old covenant under Moses. And he has all this descriptive language of what was true when the old covenant was inaugurated at Mount Sinai. He begins by saying, "For ye are not come unto a mount..." And then he says all the things to which we have not come in the new covenant; then he contrasts them with the things to which we have come. Verses 22-24:

"But you are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable hosts of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect."

He says when you come to Jesus, mediator of the new covenant, to lay hold of the blessings held out in Him, here is one of the things to which you come. You come into this communion with the spirits of just men made perfect. You come into this communion with those who have right now a spirit existence. Their bodies lie in graves all over the place. The worms have eaten them and the fish have consumed them, but their spirits have entered into the presence of their God. And having entered into His presence, they are spirits having been and remaining in a state of perfection. The writer to the Hebrews uses a perfect passive construction of the verb (to complete, to bring to fullness, to bring to its terminus), and he says, "You've come to the spirits of just men" (those who were justified by faith in life, so that it would be right for God to welcome them into His presence with no controversy against them, made righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus, mediator of the new

covenant whose work is applied to all of those under the old covenant who come to true faith in Himself). And he says, "In coming into communion with them, you come into communion with spirits having been made perfect."

And one of the wonderful things about the death of Christians when we're thinking Biblically, what makes us blessed when we die in the Lord is this: we are blessed with the perfecting of our spirits into the moral likeness of Jesus. While here on earth, when we came to Christ quickened by the Holy Spirit to repentance and faith, in our union with Christ and by the indwelling Spirit, the dominion of sin was broken in us. Romans 6:14: "Sin shall not exercise lordship over you, for you are not under the law but under grace." If we've come out from under the condemning power of the law as a covenant, sin's dominion over us has been broken in the cross of Jesus Christ; the willful practice of sin has ceased. We read of that in 1 John 3 this morning: "He that is born of God does not make a practice of sin." Why? "His seed remains in him [the principle of divine]." And he cannot be at home in sin as his native environment because he has been born of God. The mortification of sin as an ongoing discipline has been their reality: "If you by the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, you shall live." The image of Christ has begun to be formed within us. 2 Corinthians 3:18: "But we all [in the blessing of the new covenant], with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are [being] transformed into the same image from [one stage of glory to another], even as from the Lord the Spirit." A pattern of Christ-like behavior has begun to emerge in us. 1 John 2:6: "He that says he abides in Him ought so to walk even as He walked." 1 Peter 2:21: "Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow His steps." All of this is true of every single true child of God. The dominion of sin has been broken. The willful practice of sin has ceased.

The mortification of sin is an ongoing reality. The image of Christ is being formed in him or her. The pattern of Christ-like behavior is emerging. Yet sin remains. Romans 7:21-23: "I find then the law, that, to me who would do good, evil is present. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members." The same Paul writes, "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary the one to the other; that you may not do the things that you would" (Galatians 5:17). It's a reality that the child of God longs with a passionate longing for the time when sin will no longer be any element in his experience of grace.

The moment we breath our last and our spirits leave our bodies, in order to make it feel comfortable in the immediate presence of God and of the Lamb, the Holy Spirit puts forth a burst of redemptive energy and power upon every last element in the texture of the human spirit that purges away every vestige of sin and implants every perfection of Christ-like grace. In a instant it's done. Think of it. What power was operative to breaks sin's dominion? Some of us can remember. We had filthy minds and dirty tongues that liked to tell dirty jokes--and no heart for God. What did God do by the power of the Spirit to dethrone sin and make it a clean tongue and holy eyes? What amazing power! That's why God called it a spiritual resurrection: "You hath He made alive who were dead in your trespasses." Think of the power that's been operative in us to keep us from the potential that is still within us. Think of the power that's working in us day by day, that we don't bring shame to the name of Christ, fall into grievous and shameful sin. Every irritation breaking out in foul words and striking and hitting. We're an amazement if we're real Christians. But I tell you, all that God's

done right now, that's 5 watts compared to what He will pour in the moment we die. That's 10,000 megawatts of sanctifying grace that's going to take this spirit that lies behind all of the remaining struggle. Yes, it brings into service the members of our body, and I'm fully conscious of that emphasis in Scripture. But sin does not reside in the corpuscle of my fingers or in my head or in the stuff of my eyeballs. It resides in my spirit. And God's going to do something marvelous the moment we breathe our last. That spirit will experience its perfecting into the moral likeness of Christ. So instead of being uncomfortable in the presence of the holy One of Israel, we'll feel perfectly at home in His presence.

What happened to Isaiah when he had a vision of the holy God? It shattered him. He fell on his face and said, "I'm undone! I'm unzipped from head to toe! I'm shattered! I'm disoriented! My eyes have seen the King!" God's going to do something in us, and we're not going to fall down shattered. We may fall down, however disembodied spirits fall down--I don't know--but we're going to be at home. And we're going to run into the arms of our Savior and say, "Lord Jesus, at last I'm home, and I'm like You." "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." Child of God, do you believe God's going to do that for you? If you do, why can you look on death with such dark, foreboding, shrinking fears? If you really believe that, then you'll understand why McCheyne wrote the words that he did:

"When I stand before the throne
Dressed in beauty not my own,
When I see You as You are;
Love You with unsinning heart,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know
Not till then how much I owe

Some of us feel we could give a pinky to go through one day without sinning, and maybe an index finger to go through a week. I've got news for you, you're going to go through an eternity and never sin. And it all is going to begin when God ushers you through the door of death, and you experience the blessedness of the perfecting of your spirit into the moral likeness of Jesus. Surely, this is the great attraction of heaven for the child of God. Next to being with Jesus is the longing to be fully like Jesus. And when you think of heaven, if those two are not the dominant attractions, you've probably have a heaven like unto the Muslim. It's escape from this and that, and it's a joy in this, that, and the other and has nothing to do with that work which God does in making Christ precious and making sin our greatest mortal enemy.

Child of God, this is for your comfort. I say to grieving widows and widowers, grieving sons and daughters, think what's happened to Dan, what's happened to Arif and to Kathy. They've enjoyed, whatever consciousness of time there may be (several months in Dan's case and three and a half weeks in Arif and Kathy's case), uninterrupted communion with their Savior in His presence without sin. And it should go far to help you and me to have a balanced Biblical attitude to our own eventual death.

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord," blessed not only with the welcoming of their spirits into the very presence of Jesus, blessed with the perfecting of their spirits into the moral likeness of Jesus, but thirdly, they are blessed with the gathering of their spirits into the company of all those redeemed by Jesus. Each one of us is born as an individual. Even if you're one of triplets, somebody came out first, second, and

third. You're born all alone. And if we're in Christ, we come into Christ individually. We don't come in on mama or daddy's belt or apron strings. And if we've experienced new birth (God has born us individually by His Spirit), we will die as individuals and will stand before God on the day of judgment as individuals. Yet, hear me now, God's great design in salvation is not crassly individualistic. Rather, in redemption, God is committed in that redemptive grace to create a new humanity, a city of God, a bride for His Son, a holy nation of people for His own possession. When Paul describes the consummation at the second coming, he writes of this togetherness that's in the mind and purpose of God and will be in our experience. In the familiar words of 1 Thessalonians 4:14-15,

"For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also that are fallen asleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we that are alive, that are left unto the coming of the Lord, shall in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep."

There was some teaching abroad that there was going to be a bifurcation of class distinction at the coming of Christ, that the living saints were going to have preference over the dead saints. Paul said, "No, no! No splitting up of the people of God." Listen to what he says:

"For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first; then we that are alive, that are left, shall together with them be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we [in our togetherness] ever be with the Lord."

In those pictures of the consummate glory of redemption (the new heavens, the new earth), it is a city that comes down from God. It is a vast multitude whom no man can number out of every kindred, tribe, tongue, people, and nation. It is 144,000 of the spiritual Israel. God is committed to make a new humanity. And when the Spirit says to John, "Write, Blessed are those who die in the Lord from henceforth," a third aspect of that blessedness is the gathering of their spirits into the company of all those redeemed by Jesus. And again, I go back to the Hebrews 12 passage. What do we come to in the new covenant? We come here and now into relationship and communion with the spirits of just men made perfect. Verses 22-23: "But ye are come...to the spirits of just men made perfect." This is captured in one of the verses of one of our lovely hymns:

Yet she on earth hath union with God, the three in one
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won

Even now we have a dimension of mystic sweet communion with Abraham and Isaac and Joseph and Sarah and Mary and Martha and Ruth and Naomi and all of those redeemed by Christ. How much more, then, can we expect, that when our spirits leave our bodies, that communion will become intensified because we now become a part of the company of the spirits of just men made perfect, so that when those still on earth come to faith in Christ, they come into mystic sweet communion with us, and I'm a part of the us. I don't know how disembodied spirits recognize one another and communicate, but aren't angels disembodied spirits? The Bible says they are spirits sent forth to do service to the heirs of salvation. The angels obviously communicate with God, and He communicates with them. They recognize their rank and station. There are angels and archangels, and there are different categories and structures of

power. So in some way, disembodied spirits are going to be able to communicate. I don't know how, but they're going to.

After I've seen my Savior and seen Paul and seen Dick and thanked him for all he did, that I now have the wife God has given me. And I've seen Marilyn and thanked her for all her life and ministry meant to me over those 48 years, I want to meet Moses and Joseph and Daniel and Peter and Paul and all those lesser saints the writer to the Hebrews says the world was not worthy of. "Time will fail me," He says, "if I tell of," and then he mentions Gideon and Samson and Jephthah and those who were sawn asunder. Brothers who lost their lives in my generation, sealed their testimony with blood. It's going to be wonderful. We'll be introduced into to something far grander than we have ever known in our most loving, intimate moments of communion down here when at the end of the Lord's Day when we've worshipped God together and we've felt the impress of the Word upon our hearts together, and we've been drawn out in prayer and praise together, and we've lingered long to enter into each others joys and sorrows and we've said, "Ah, this Lord's Day was a taste of heaven." Ah, but what a pathetic taste. We're still a bunch of sinners with selfishness. And we hear things wrongly, and we interpret things wrongly. What will it be to be gathered home with the spirits of just men made perfect? I will be one of them, and you will be one of them.

I say again, this should be a comfort to those of us who've lost loved ones who've gone before us. Think of what they now enjoy. You wonder if they even have time to think of us poor folks down here. Their eyes, their hearts, their souls--however disembodied spirits communicate, I don't know. I've got some secret, holy fantasies that I'll never preach; I'll never say publicly. In the early hours of this morning I said, "Lord, should now be the time when I pull back the vale?" I said, "No, I'm not going to do it." Because I've never preached my fantasies. But I have some, and it's between me, the Lord, and my wife. If she ever squeals on me, she's in trouble. But seriously, isn't this calculated to take away some of the brininess of our tears as we think of those whom God has taken from us. What they now experience as they have been gathered into the company of those redeemed by Christ.

Fourthly and finally: when the Spirit says to John, "Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth," they're blessed with the experiencing in their spirits of the promised rest of Jesus. Go back now to the Revelation 14 passage with me. We're going to concentrate a little bit more on some of the wording to which I've not made reference. "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth: yes, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors." When the Spirit tells John to write the words He gives John, they're rather shocking at first. You'd think he would have said, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth: yes, says the Spirit, in order that they may see their Savior, in order that they may be perfectly holy, in order...[these other three things that to me are prominent emphases]." But the Holy Spirit emphasizes with a hena clause of purpose what it is that is a focal point of their blessedness. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord [in order] that they may rest from their labor." Now it's interesting that the verb "to rest" is the very verb used in Matthew 11:28: "Come unto Me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." They've come laboring with an accusing conscience, laboring with the guilt of sin. And coming to Christ, they have found the promised rest to their souls. They rest from trying to save themselves; they trust in another for their salvation. But in this life they continue to labor, life in general under the ancient curse upon the ground, life as a Christian in a

fallen world, life with a decaying outward man. No wonder Paul said in Romans 8:23, "And not only so, but ourselves also, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." In 2 Corinthians 5:4, He says the same thing: "For indeed we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened...." But God says the moment we die in the Lord, we enter into the rest of Jesus. What is that rest? One man of God wrote--and I found this so helpful,

"Rest also may be rest above all. Here we have responsibilities, pain, and temptation; here harassment by the demonic, persecution from the world, disappointment in our friends; here relentless, remorseless pressure, requiring us to live at the limit of our resources and at the very edge of our endurance, but there, rest. The battle's over; the victory's won. The toil is behind us and the danger is past. No more the burden of unfinished work or the frustration of inbuilt limitations, no sin to mortify, no self to crucify, no pain to face, no enemy to fear. 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord in order that they may rest from their labors,' blessed with entering into the promised rest of Jesus."

Here again, I say for the consolation of those who are called upon to grieve, think of the blessedness of those who have died in the Lord and have entered fully into that rest: no struggle with the unyielding nature of a cursed earth, no struggle against the powers of darkness, no struggle with remaining sin, no weariness in the performance of duty, no frustration with not enough hours to do the things it appears one must do. All of that is over--perfect rest! And whatever activities there are, they are the activities of sheer, unbounded, limitless, Holy Spirit-imparted, heavenly energy, so that there's never any weariness in worship, never any weariness or distractedness in praise. They've entered into their rest.

Now what do I say to you by way of final summary and application? Well, the Bible clearly teaches, my friends, that death is the result of the intrusion of sin into the world. It is the unnatural, temporary separation of soul and body. It is called in our Bibles the last enemy and leaves a trail of emotional trauma, tears, and broken hearts. Yet the Spirit says, "Write, Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." And I've tried to answer the question, "In what does that blessedness consist?" And I've sought from the Scriptures to give you four assertions: They are blessed with the welcoming of their spirits into the very presence of Jesus. They are blessed with the perfecting of their spirits into the moral likeness of Jesus. They are blessed with the gathering of their spirits into the company of all the redeemed by Jesus. And they are blessed with experiencing within their spirit's the promised the rest of Jesus. While not denying that death is still an enemy, the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), a cruel, ugly, heartless enemy. And if you had to look at it up close by bits and pieces, taking a love one to a grave with a horrible, lingering, debilitating illness, you grow to hate that enemy. Years ago I heard Dr. Tozer on a tape, speaking of the fact that if you can't hate, you can't love and make it mean anything. And he was speaking of the things he loved. And then he spoke of the things he hated (this will tell you when he lived), and he said, "I hate the devil, and I hate Khrushchev, and I hate cancer." I didn't understand it at the time. I now do. Death's instrument, a debilitating disease that wrenches away a love one. I'm not denying any of that reality, but here in our text: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." And what should be the result of internalizing these things that have grown out of our question? In the Biblical answer to wherein consists that blessedness, we ought to be able, in facing our own death

and the death of others who die in the Lord, to enter into this holy triumphalism of the Apostle. Romans 8:37-38:

"Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Dear child of God, for you to be tentative as you face death is a disgrace to the power of the Gospel and takes away the edge of the convincingness of your witness. The world lives in denial of death. It has no answer in the face of death. And in honest moments, people will admit they fear it. And they want to do everything to reverse the undeniable evidences that the outward man is decaying--the billions of dollars spent on elected cosmetic surgery to live forever in a body that's going to rot and be eaten by the worms in a grave. When you, as a child of God, can speak of death, not in a cavalier way, but with the confidence of the Apostle who said, "Death shall not separate me from the love of God. It will usher me into four wonderful dimensions of the love of God that I can't have down here." And then you tell them what they are: "I'm going to be with Jesus. I'm going to be like Jesus. I'm going to be with Jesus' people. And I'm going to enter into rest." Child of God, that's your privilege. And then to go even further. 1 Corinthians 3--this is an amazing statement--and verse 21: "Wherefore let no one glory in men. For all things are yours." In Christ, everything is yours for your spiritual profit. Then Paul specifies different ministers, Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, because they were splitting up and lining up behind one or the other. Paul says, "Don't do that. They're all yours. Appreciate them all for what God would do in you through every one of them." "Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours." Death is now mine? Yes, in Christ, death is my possession to chase me home to Jesus, to bring me into total conformity to Jesus, to put me at home with my people of Jesus, and to enter the promised rest of Jesus. Death is mine to do that for me.

There was an anthem sang way back 50 plus years ago in college, and the phrase in it was this: "Thou hast made death glorious and triumphant, for through its portals we enter into the presence of the living God." That's why the words of Jesus that puzzled me for years, I think I understand them a little better now. In John 8:51, Jesus made this stupendous claim: "[Truly, truly], I say unto you, If a man keep my word, he shall never see death. [If you're one of My true disciples, and you've been bonded to Me in faith and love and obedience, you will never see death.]" What did He mean? Did He mean that His true followers will never experience that radical, temporary severance of soul and body. No, what He meant was that you will never see death in its naked essence as the wages of sin: to separate your soul from your body in order to drive that soul into the hell of the intermediate state, the provisional suffering of the hell that is the moment you die out of Christ, and then the hell of soul and body in Gehenna after the judgment. You will never see death. Death as the wages of sin has been swallowed up by my Savior. And if I'm united to my Savior in faith, in love that issues in obedience, I have His promise, "If you keep My word, you shall never taste of death." And then a similar statement in John 11:25-26: "Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believes on Me, though he die, yet shall he live; and whosoever lives and believes on Me shall never die." Of course, that's pointing ultimately to the eternity of eternal life, but it has wrapped up in it this wonderful reality, that death in its naked essence as the wages of sin cannot touch

me, for I am in my Savior. If you are in Christ as one who will die in the Lord, surely, murky views of what will happen when you die are inexcusable. And a crippling fear of death is dishonorable to God. And if your loved ones die in the Lord, grief unmixed with joy is dishonoring to the Lord if we're thinking as Christian men and women.

Now I'm not saying that we should all rise to the level of Billy Bray. Have you ever heard of Billy Bray? He was a Cornish miner in Cornwall, England. He had been a profligate, wicked man, and God saved him. And just as God gave to George Mueller an unusual gift of faith, he gave to Billy Bray an unusual gift of joy. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace...." Some people seem to have a peculiar dimension of love, some of joy, some of peace. And he was known when walking down the street. And he would start praising God for no apparent reason. People would say, "Billy, why are you praising God." He would say, "I can't help it. When I'm walking, one foot says, 'glory,' and the next one says, 'hallelujah.' I can't help but say it." Well, his wife struggled with assurance and struggled with doubts. And Billy sought to minister to her to enable her to come to full assurance. And when he stood by her bed and she breathed her last and he knew she was gone, the story is that he raised his hand and bellowed out in praise, "She's done with the doubters and gone up with the shouters." Now, I'm not saying that I should have stood by Marilyn's bed and raised my hand like Billy Bray. But shame on me if I could not look upon that lifeless form and say, "She's with Jesus, she's like Jesus, she's in the company of Jesus' people, and she's entered into the rest of Jesus. Dear people, those four realities should enable us to look death straight in the eye and know what it can and cannot do to us.

My final word is back to Revelation 14:13. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." Taking the teaching of Scripture from other places, we could well write, "Cursed are the dead who die out of the Lord." And if you want to know what the curse is, just stay within this very 14th chapter of the book of Revelation. And go back to verse 10:

"He also shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is prepared unmixed in the cup of his anger; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest day and night, they that worship the beast and his image, and whoso receives the mark of his name [those who sell their souls to the world and do its spiritual harlotry]."

A horrible, horrible description. Cursed are those who die out of the Lord. And I pray that if you're not in the Lord, that this day you will determine the sun will not set without you embracing the Son of righteousness and casting yourself upon Him. I think especially of you dear children. And I do so because I cannot remember a time as a child when I was not terrified at the thought of death. I'd go to bed every night saying, "O God, don't let me die." Afraid to go to sleep for fear I might die in my sleep. I thank God I had that fear of hell. I thank God I no longer do. But there may be some of you children that are where I was. And I want to tenderly plead with you this day that you might join the ranks of those who are in the Lord. I found this little story: A young girl somewhere in England who died at nine years of age, one day in her illness said to her aunt with whom lived,

"When I'm dead, I should like the pastor to preach a sermon to children to persuade them to trust in Jesus, to love Christ, to obey their parents, not to tell lies, but to think about dying and going to heaven. I've been thinking what text I should like the pastor

to preach from at my funeral--2 Kings 4:26. Auntie, you're the Shunammite, the pastor who I regard as the prophet, and I am the shunammite's child. When I'm dead, I dare say you will be grieved, though you need not. The prophet (the pastor) will come to you, and when he says, 'How is it with the child [like Elijah came to the Shunamite]?', you may say, 'It is well.' For I am sure, Auntie, it will be well with me, for I shall be in heaven singing the praises of God. You ought to think it well too."

The pastor, accordingly, fulfilled the wish of this nine-year-old child.

Dear children, if one of you should die in the next, the next month, the next year, could your mom and dad say, "Pastor, you know what my kid said to me? Tell the pastor to preach on this text. And when he asks, 'Is it well?', you tell him, 'It is well with my soul.' Ah, dear children, is it well with you? Are you trusting in the Lord Jesus to take away your sins? Are you loving Jesus? Are you telling lies or speaking truthfully to Mom and Dad? Do you love the worldling that has no use for Jesus? Or do you like to be with the kids that like to talk about the sermons and about Sunday school? And when they're laughing and playing and having innocent fun, their language is clean, and their attitudes are loving. Are you showing that you are a true child of God? I yearn for you, that you may be able to say, "It is well with the child."

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