

Blessed!

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[0 : 0 0] But we're going to look at a verse from Revelation this morning, Revelation chapter 14 and verse 13. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write this, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.

Blessed indeed, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them. And I want to look at that verse today from Revelation in the light of the sad news that we heard yesterday about Elizabeth, sad news that is also tinted for us as believers with joy.

Because how do we react when someone we love dies, someone that we're close to, someone that maybe is a big part of our family, either our physical family or our spiritual, our church family?

We grieve, and rightly so. And we want to be around people that we love. We gravitate towards the people we love, the family and friends that we love at a time of sadness.

That's why the pandemic is such a difficult time for people who are grieving, people who lose loved ones. And we recognise that and we seek God's help to take the family through this time, not least in the limited numbers that are able to attend the funeral of a loved one.

[1 : 3 7] And so it reminds us of the grief and the pain and the suffering many people are going through during and throughout this pandemic. But at a time when we grieve, we also want, and I think we all love, words of comfort from family and friends.

And as Christians, we look for words of comfort from our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's no different for us today, and that's exactly what we hope to do.

We've lost someone very dear to us, and we've lost her very suddenly, really. And many of you who are tuning in today will be shocked by the news of Elizabeth's passing.

She was core to St. Columba's in so many different ways and much more to her dear husband, Billy, and to her family. But a fantastic example to us, and I know that she would want me to focus today on the truth that changed her heart and life forever, as the only hope for every living soul that is in this universe. So today I want you to listen to words of comfort, not my words, but the words of God himself from Revelation, from that passage we read in Revelation 14. Now Revelation is a huge mystery of a book to most people and to many Christians, including myself. There's much that is difficult. I find difficult in the book of Revelation.

And it's full of imagery and of symbolism. And that imagery and symbolism reflects a type of writing particularly found in the Old Testament. So Jewish believers who knew their Old Testament would be really quite at home with the language of Revelation, with the symbolism and the imagery.

[3 : 3 6] Much of it is taken from some of the prophetic books in the Old Testament. But we remind ourselves in Revelation chapter 1 and verse 1, which tells us exactly why it's given or where it comes from.

This is the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave John to show his servants the things that must soon take place. It's the revelation of Jesus Christ. It's a specific kind of genre of literature and apocalyptic literature. But it's writings which speak about Jesus Christ. And give us a heavenly perspective on history in the light of its final outcome. In other words, it's looking forward, for the most part, it's looking forward to the fact that Jesus knows what's happening. And Jesus knows the end from the beginning. And it was written to real people.

It was written to churches in Asia, churches that were Christians that were struggling, that were persecuted, that were going through difficult times. And it was generally given to comfort them, to warn sometimes, but generally to comfort and to remind them to keep going.

And that God was sovereign and in control, and that his purposes and plans were being worked out. And if you read through Revelation, it kind of feels like when you read it, it's very allowed and very powerful. But every so often, there are whispers of beauty and comfort to encourage us.

And to remind us what really matters, which is faith in Jesus Christ. So just a few thoughts on this verse, verse 13 of chapter 14. So who's speaking in this verse?

[5 : 27] I heard a voice from heaven saying, so it's God. The message is from God of very God. The voice comes from heaven to John. And there's so much for us, even in that statement, that is so powerful and makes us think. Because it reminds us right away that this is not all that there is. This world and our lives today, and all that we experience physically and what we know and what we can examine and what we can explore, everything in this world is not all that there is.

That there is. There is a voice from heaven. Everything we believe, everything we teach, everything by grace that we try to live is in the light of this fact that there is more to life than what we just simply experience and what we see. And in a sense, this feels like a triune testimony. This mysterious God who reveals himself as God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It's as if the voice comes from God, the Father in heaven. I heard a voice from heaven saying, and he's talking about the blessing of those who die in the Lord and reminding us of the work and the person of Jesus Christ, the Lord Jesus Christ. And then it's confirmed that blessing is confirmed and powerfully by the voice of the Holy Spirit here. Blessed indeed says the Spirit. And there's this system, the way of God's whole triune character comes together to affirm this amazing truth.

And it's a truth that is almost the focus, the distillation of everything in the Bible, the story of the Old Testament that we're looking at usually in our morning worship, to the person of Jesus Christ, his person and work, his death and resurrection as ascension, the acts of the apostles as they brought this message to the people of the world and the church was born and to the teachings of the epistles right through to Revelation. It's as if this reality is the summary, is the focus of all of it, the voice from heaven that says, blessed are those who die in the Lord. And it's a truth that breaks into humanity's ideological locked door, which says there's nothing out there. We're alone in this house. This is just the world that we live in. It's a transcendent voice. It's a voice that reminds us there is something beyond what we know and experience and what we measure. There's a living God, a God in whose image we are made, a Creator God, a God who because of our own sin we are estranged from and need reconciled to, to whom we will give account every single person and before whom everything else finds its rightful place in his shadow, in the light of his character. So there's this amazing reality that heaven breaks into our experience, even our experience, maybe especially our experience at a sad time like this.

What's he saying? What's he saying? Well, he's saying, write this. John, he says, write it down. Not just for yourself, John, not just even for the seven churches to whom you're directly writing, but write this as part of the revelation of God, as part of Holy Scripture, as the last book of Holy Scripture revealed truth, dictated to John, recorded for posterity, for our learning and understanding and insight into the character and nature of God in his work. He wants to share it.

[9 : 32] John, write it down. Write it down so it's recorded. It's simple, it's short, it's concise, it's clear. And isn't that true? Isn't the most, the more important things are in life, the greater our ability to communicate these things simply and concisely and clearly because it's a matter of life and death. It's important and it is significant. Write this down, he says, and he says, blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Wow. What a statement, a strange statement in many ways.

If I was to go and read that out in the street on the Royal Mile, well, I'd probably be reading it to myself just now because there's so few people around. But normally, if you read that to an audience out in the street, they would wonder what you meant by that. Because blessed is really just another word for happy, truly happy. And it's in the Bible particularly, it's connected with a relationship with God. But it means it really is speaking about the kind of happiness that every person that I would speak to on the Royal Mile, or every person in this church, or every person around us are looking for, want, but so few experience. We talk about being in your happy place and we all have our happy place. But even our best happy place is very best, it's only a shadow of what this word means and what lies behind this word from God. It is very much connected with the peace of being reconciled with God through Jesus. It's the peace of God's friendship, of almost of saying, oh, I get it now. I know who I am. I know why I live. I know,

I understand why sin and why wrongdoing is so perverse and has separated me from my God. And I know that I can't put that right. But Jesus put that right. And there's just this deep seated healing and power that comes from that. When, as in any broken relationship, when that relationship is put right, there's that sense of, oh, that's great. It's great to be friends again. It's great we've made up. And it's the blessing that flows from that most fundamental and most basic human relationships, our one, our relationship with the living God. It's blessing. And I'll just say two things then about that. The first is that we would never normally associate being blessed with death, would we? No, it's crazy. It's crazy. It's the most radical and it's the most counter-cultural message you will ever hear. And it simply isn't, as I said in the prayer earlier, it's not fanciful.

It's not wishful thinking. It's not vague hope upon hope to have this sense of blessing even in sadness. Because we all know every believer knows, every Christian knows, every person knows that death is brutal, that death is an enemy and we rightly recoil from it. And we grieve when it comes close. We absolutely do and rightly so. Because we know in our grief that death means separation, separation from a loved one, separation and the end of someone's unique life and all the experiences and the intertwining love and laughter and joy and the experience that went with that.

And we recoil from death because we know it's often associated with pain and suffering. What is blessed about that? What on earth can bring happiness through that? Well, naturally, nothing. There's nothing happy about death, naturally. Nothing. If you face death alone, and by that I don't mean with family and friends, I've just been going through the experience of death alone, there's nothing blessed, there's nothing good about that. If Christ is not with you.

[14 : 21] Because that's the statement that is made here. It's not just in general that death is blessed, we all know that isn't the case. It is blessed are those who die in the Lord.

And that's very significant. Death, biblically, God reveals in His word that death is a consequence of our sin. It's not a natural thing. It's a spiritual consequence of rebelling against the author of life, the giver of life. It's been separated from the Lord. And it's first a spiritual problem. There's a spiritual separation, a spiritual death that we're ironically born with, but we go on to experience. And then physical death comes and physical death confirms that spiritual separation and that continued separation under God's eternal justice.

And I don't think we appreciate that and the seriousness of that and the reality of that. We've been brought up to think that death is natural and this world is naturalistic and it's just part of what happens. But there's much in this universe and there's much in our lives that shout out to us, if only we will listen, that death is an enemy.

And many things that shout out to us and point us to the person and work of Jesus. So we would never normally associate being blessed that deep seated of all happiness is associated with death. But we recognize the importance of associating being blessed here with being in the Lord. And the Holy Spirit in that lovely confirmatory message of emphasis says, blessed indeed, absolutely blessed in the Lord. And that's why we read 1 Thessalonians 4 verse 13 and 14. Yes, we grieve today at the loss of Elizabeth and yes, the family hurt greatly today in their loss, but it's not without hope.

And that makes a great difference because blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Why is that the case? And it takes us to the very crux of our faith. The first is because the Lord has experienced the death of every believer before they die.

[17 : 01] On the cross, he experienced Elizabeth's death first. He removed its sting. He took the punishment for her sin and for all who believe in him, for all our sins, he took the justice and the judgment of God. You know, sometimes we talk about sin lightly and we talk about faith lightly. And yet what we see in the cross of Jesus is that God Himself, in the person of His Son, as we've been looking at in the flesh and blood Jesus series, He needed to take on flesh God Himself, the author of life in order to pay the price to satisfy His love for us and want to redeem us and His justice and His holiness against sin and all the death that it brings into humanity and into the universe's existence. But He took the grave, He took the punishment of sin. He experienced the death of every believer before them removing its sting. And in relationship to Him, as we confess our sins and entrust ourselves to Him, then we are in the Lord. So if a person dies in the Lord as a Christian, you live on with the resurrected Savior in glory. You never go through death alone. Isn't that the most remarkable truth?

Your soul goes to be with Jesus until that day when your body is raised on that last great day to inherit the new heavens and the new earth that Jesus will usher in. That's the great hope of every believer. That is what utterly transforms our heart, our perspective and our life. And that's why we want to share it with others because it's not a religious thing, it's not a cultural thing, it's not a race thing, it's a humanity reality. It's a universal reality. Not only is there personal redemption, there's going to be universal redemption. That is the hope that shone from Elizabeth's faith. It's the hope that inspired her life and her motivation. She lived in the Lord.

She loved Jesus because he died for her sins, for her sins and she served him so faithfully and so beautifully and with such dignity and such humility. Therefore, we can say of her that she is blessed because she lived in the Lord. She also died in the Lord. He never left her for one second through that process and she is with him now happy above and beyond what we can even contemplate or think about in her life. That is why for the family, for Billy and the family and for ourselves and for others who knew her and loved her, as Christians we don't grieve as those who don't have any hope because as I think it's so beautifully stated in Thessalonians, those who have died in the Lord have fallen asleep in Jesus. This thing is gone and it's as gentle and positive as falling asleep. There's nothing better than falling asleep. The older you get, the more you love falling asleep. You fall asleep in front of the telly and you fall asleep. When you go to bed there's nothing worse than the disruption of not being able to fall asleep. It's such a lovely picture and she has fallen asleep in Jesus. The sting has gone. She's with him. She is with him and we worship him today. Very briefly, it also says, blessed indeed says the Spirit that they may rest from their labours for their deeds follow them. So in death the believer also rests and again rest, falling asleep image continues is a beautiful thing. There's renewal, there's recuperation, there's refreshment and the Christian life, we know that. The Christian life is a battle. It's a struggle. There's much toil, there's much joy as well, we know that and there's life to the full but it is still a time of battle. There's spiritual opposition. We struggle with our own battles, our own failure, our own sin and we know that today for Elizabeth her battles are over. Her struggles, her fear of dying, her struggles with illness, weakness, pain, maybe the internal struggles of the life of faith for her, of prayer, concern and love and fear for others. It's all gone because she's at rest and that's the hope that we have as Christians for ourselves and it says their deeds will follow them. I love this last section because it reminds us that our ordinary, undramatic, seemingly unimportant lives, certainly at least in the world's eyes, God knows and in the Lord everything we do as we do it, motivated by the love of Christ and for God's glory has significance.

Not one cup of cold water that you've given or whatever that might symbolise in your life is wasted. Not one kind word, not one text. Nothing that you've written or spoken of said in love and grace in the name of Jesus is forgotten, is worthless, is a waste of time.

God remembers it and God honours it. That is great in a harsh and disinterested world who will forget us long before our time is remembered by one or two.

[23 : 25] God, I think, in glory will have to remind us as Christians of many things that we've forgotten, things we didn't even realise were particularly valuable, deeds that we've done in love for him and in his name. The fruit that we've borne will be remembered and honoured and our deeds will follow us. That's great, isn't it? That gives our lives great motivation.

It also challenges about how we're living. What are our priorities? Will the labours, the deeds of your life and of mine, will they follow us to heaven? I just asked to make your ambition to live in the Lord and to bear His fruit and to be well-rooted, as we've talked about here over these last two years, well-rooted in the living water so that we'll bear fruit, even in drought, whatever that fruit is, make it your ambition. Think about how you're going to spend your time as I must think about how I spend my time remembering that our last day comes much sooner than we ever expect. May it live in the Lord so that we will also die in the Lord and be blessed forevermore. The gospel is really far too important to relegate, to ignore or to pretend it isn't real. And as Christians we mustn't live as if Christ is just an appendage and an added part of our lives, a shadow. But nor must you live as someone who knows about the gospel but is never given your life to Jesus Christ. That is an unspeakable, an everlasting tragedy. Remember that for yourself and we remember as Christians for the people we pray for, the mission of this church, which is to reach the lost, to disciple people for Jesus Christ and to bear His fruit. I pray that today, even on this sad day that Jesus will use His word and Elizabeth's testimony to be the means of bringing you to Christ, or at least yes bringing you to Christ and up on top of that bringing us all closer to Jesus Christ today. Amen. Let's pray. Father God we ask for your help and for your grace.

We ask for your word to be powerful in our hearts. We thank you for it. What great comfort it brings us today as we listen to your words, not empty, sentimental, meaningless words that bring hope where there isn't any. But it's the hope of the risen Savior, the hope of the historical Christ who died and who rose again, God in the flesh, God who came to redeem us.

May that be our hope today. Amen.