

Did Osama bin Laden Go to Hell?

Some people cheered when the world's most hated terrorist was killed. But I don't think God was happy about his death.

Like many other Americans who stayed up late to hear the news about Osama bin Laden on Sunday night, I had one eye on my television and the other on my laptop. I was waiting for President Obama to make his statement about the demise of the world's most infamous terrorist, but the White House was moving as slow as Vermont syrup in December. When Obama finally stood in front of his teleprompter, many of us had already finished the story—by tweeting, texting and posting entries on Facebook.

These days we don't just sit and watch TV. We are involved in the story, and sometimes we know the news before Wolf Blitzer does. Empowered by our lightning-fast digital media, we are the commentators now. Yet as I read some of the verbal shots fired into the Twitterverse by this new army of armchair journalists ("May Osama rot in hell!" for example, or "I'm glad he's fish food now"), I had to ask myself: Is it right for Christians to rejoice over the death of a criminal—even one who masterminded a plot so evil as the 9/11 attacks?

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There are certainly some Old Testament passages that seem to give us permission to gloat when a terrorist is served justice. Consider Proverbs 11:10: "When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices; and when the wicked perish, there is joyful shouting (NASB)."

But the heart of the matter is found in Ezekiel 18:23, in which God asks a rhetorical question: "Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" He answers in verse 32: "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies ...Therefore, repent and live."

This verse gives us deep insight into the heart of a God who is both merciful and holy, both loving and just, both kind and severe. It tells us that although God's kingdom has a moral order—and He does indeed hand out severe consequences for sinners—He does not enjoy seeing any human being sentenced to eternal death.

It is ironic that while a majority of Americans believe Osama bin Laden deserves to spend eternity in hell (and many are willing to say they're happy about it), a large segment of Christians aren't sure if they even believe hell is a real place, or if God actually sends anyone there to stay.

Michigan pastor Rob Bell, author of the controversial new book *Love Wins*, has been labeled a heretic by some conservative evangelical leaders because he suggests—in vague and sometimes confusing terms—that a loving God offers ultimate reconciliation to everyone. Bell’s theology feels awfully similar to universalism—the idea that everyone gets into heaven regardless of how they lived or how they responded to the claims of Christ.

I’ve kept my mouth shut about Bell’s book because I’m still reading it. But Osama bin Laden’s death has caused me to examine my own beliefs and attitudes about eternal punishment. What really happens to people when they die—especially those who have never heard the gospel? As pundits debate on whether we should have buried bin Laden at sea, or if we should release the photos of his corpse, I offer three points to ponder:

1.
People who don’t know the forgiveness of Christ will be judged by God’s law. I don’t know if Osama bin Laden ever heard the gospel or if he consciously rejected Christ. (There are Christians scattered all over the Middle East—and it is probable that someone presented the gospel to bin Laden and the rest of his al-Qaida henchmen.) Paul wrote that Gentiles who sin “apart from the law” (ignorant of God’s truth) will be judged by what they know instinctively—because all human beings have a

sense of morality written in their hearts (see Rom. 2:12-16). Although bin Laden was most assuredly deceived, he knew it was wrong to murder innocent people.

2.

We don't get off the hook after death. Universalists believe everyone gets a "come to Jesus moment" after they die. But this idea contradicts Hebrews 9:27, which says it is "appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." Death is horribly final. The choices we make in this life do matter. This is why Jesus preached more about hell than anyone in the New Testament. And it is why Peter, in the very first sermon preached after Pentecost, declared: "Repent" (Acts 2:38). To suggest that adherents of other religions get a special pass to heaven, or that sinners get a second chance in purgatory, is to make a mockery of Paul, Peter, Jude, John and all other New Testament writers who plead for genuine repentance and warn of final judgment.

3. The only

way to avoid hell is to believe in the Son of God. The gospel is "good news" because God offers all of us—no matter what sins we have committed—amnesty from judgment through faith in Jesus. Hell is real, but we don't have to go there. The concept of hell is actually imbedded in the most famous passage in the Bible, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave

His only begotten
Son, that whoever believes in Him *shall
not perish*, but have eternal life” (emphasis added). The focus
here is on
the amazing love and mercy of God—which is free and unmerited.
But you cannot
ignore the reality that those who reject the Son will perish.

Bin Laden’s death was a victory for the free world
and a signal that justice prevails. But it was also a sobering
reminder that
those who don’t know Christ will spend eternity without Him.

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