

What Does God Do With A Dead Terrorist?

This was originally written in response to 9-11. But seems even more relevant now upon hearing of the death of Osama bin Laden, May 1, 2011.

"What will God do with Osama bin Laden? There is no hate in heaven. There is only love. And in heaven, love is also just, is also always the right relationship that God desires for all of creation. There are no terrorists in heaven. Only God's beloved children."

Since I believe that God is present in every moment of existence, and is the God of all creation, the question must be asked:

What is God going to do with the terrorists who died on September 11?

I also believe that God is both wholly just and wholly merciful, and that nothing can thwart God's purposes. So the question cannot be avoided:

What does God do with a dead terrorist?

I do not know the mind of God of course, but offer the following act of imagination as a personal response.

I imagine that God will greet each terrorist, and, in a gentle, loving way, walk with him through every moment of his life. But with one critical difference.

Instead of seeing his life through his own perspective, the terrorist will now see his life from God's perspective, through God's eyes; through the eyes of love.

Each terrorist will now see each person on the plane, each person in the buildings, each police officer, fire fighter and rescue worker as God sees them; infinitely precious and dear to God's own heart.

The terrorist's own heart will now be filled with the same love for these people as is in God's own heart.

He will see them going about the morning business. He will experience, one by one, what each one felt and experienced that morning, moment by moment. Not as an outside observer; but as one living through the experience itself. He will live through 3,000 deaths.

And then God will also have him live through the experience of the survivors. The husbands, the wives, the daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, mothers and fathers, friends – everyone. Even the feelings of those of us who only watched on TV.

In other words, the terrorist will live through hell. Seeing what he has done. Feeling it. Living it.

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Stripped of all justifications, hatred, ideology, and indoctrination, he will be totally responsible and totally vulnerable for all he has done. He will see it, live it, know it, regret it, and be able to do nothing about it.

Surely, the terrorist would want to fling himself into the eternal torment of hell itself than continue in relation with God; rather than continue to see things through the eyes of God, through the eyes of love. Better to live in isolation, darkness and brokenness. He will beg for the pain to stop.

But there is more.

For while the terrorist has been living through the pain and horror he has caused, those who were killed have been experiencing an amazing healing, forgiveness and restoration. In a way that God alone can do, God has healed their memories and hearts of all pain, all suffering, all terror, all wrong-doing. He has wiped away every tear from their eye. He has brought them to himself. And they too now see the world as God sees it, through the eyes of love.

They see through the eyes of love the lives of the terrorists: their birth, childhood, adulthood; their humanity and hopes. How did some mother's baby grow to become a terrorist?

They see as God sees the connections between their lives and the lives of those who killed them.

Through the eyes of love.

And so, just when the terrorist has lived through the hell of experiencing all the pain and horror he has caused; just when he thinks his soul can endure no more and live; just when he thinks he would rather curse God and die eternally; just at this point, God brings him to meet, one by one, the souls of all those who died. But not souls as they were on the morning of September 11. He meets them now as souls healed, forgiven and transformed by the power of God's love.

What does the terrorist see in the faces of those souls? What does he expect them to say to him? To do to him?

This is when the last shred of his old self is torn away. For his old self knows about hate. His old self knows about revenge. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. These are things his old self understands.

Face to face with the souls of those whom he has killed, the terrorist would understand revenge – would even welcome it, for that at least is familiar. That would confirm his old beliefs. Leave a shred of self-justification intact.

But God, and the souls of the blessed, have no mercy for self-justification, lies and evil. There is no place in heaven for hate.

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And so, one by one, as the terrorist meets each soul and looks into each face, he hears, “Father, forgive him, for he knew not what he was doing.”

One by one, the terrorist is left utterly defenceless. One by one, the possibility of continuing the old story: I hurt you, you hurt me back, is put to an end. One by one, the terrorist is left with no excuses, no place to run to.

But he is not left with no one to run to.

For those of us still grieving, it may be hard to hear this, but even a terrorist is not left by God with no one to turn to.

And so while my imagination fails at this point – for I can’t imagine how God pulls this off – my faith tells me that God’s love is such that after living through the hell I have described, something new will happen. I don’t know what, I don’t know how. Perhaps it will be as corny as overhearing someone sing, “Just As I Am.” I don’t know, but I believe that somehow something moves in us, when all hope is gone, something causes us to turn.

Jesus told a parable about someone like this – the Prodigal Son. I trust Jesus. And I trust that when I die, and when God meets me and walks with me through my life, and helps me to see my life through God’s eyes, through the eyes of love; and when my defences are stripped away and I am left without excuses, I trust something will move in me, will cause me to turn to the only one to whom I can turn for healing, and forgiveness and welcome when none of these are deserved nor can be expected.

And I trust that I will be greeted just as the terrorist was on that day so long ago – by a loving Father, who says to his disgruntled older son, “Why are you upset. For this my child was lost and now is found. Was dead, and now is alive.” And God will invite me in to a marvellous feast in my honour. And there – and I don’t know God does this – will be the souls of all those who died that day – including the terrorists – rejoicing and praising God. For there is no hate in heaven. Only love. God’s love.

And there are no terrorists in heaven. Only God’s children, each one of whom is precious in God’s sight.

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