On the Death of a God-Hater

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Renowned evangelist for atheism Christopher Hitchens died last week at the end of his battle against cancer. Author of *God Is Not Great*, he knew the end was coming and also knew that many people would speculate about his destiny. As far as we know, he remained persistent in his unbelief and hostility about God, religion, and any concept of the afterlife.

I am one of the many Christians who prayed for him as death approached, knowing full well it would take a miracle for Mr. Hitchens to do a "180" and throw himself on the mercy of a God he has insisted is not there. But then again, no less of a miracle than anyone who was born dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), since dead people don't choose life apart from a miracle from God.

As I think about his death, there are two things I know for sure.

First, God is just.

He will not force Himself on someone who refuses Him. He will honor our choices, even if those choices lead to eternal separation from Him. When Jesus was face to face with people who stubbornly said "NO!" to Him, He spoke the blunt truth to them: "Since you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life (Jn. 5 :40), you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24). Apart from God Himself, there is no life, there is no truth, there is no light (see John 1). So if people persist in their rebellion against Him, there is no way for them to have life, truth, light. . . or peace. A terrible, terrible predicament for a person that was counting on annihilation and finds himself an eternal soul instead, separated forever from the source of all that makes eternity good, which is God Himself.

Second, God is good. Which also entails Him being full of grace and mercy. Which is why He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). And which also explains why He proclaims, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11).

Even up to the last moment.

If anyone, Christopher Hitchens included, turns to Jesus in faith, even the tiniest amount of faith, like that of a mustard seed, He will save them.

Dr. Russell Moore—teaching pastor, seminary professor, blogger and exceptionally kind man who knows the love of his Father—wrote about Hitchens' death last week in a post called "Christopher Hitchens Might Be in Heaven." He pointed out that no one can know that Hitchens woke up in hell; God's lovingkindness, expressed through the power of the Gospel, extended salvation up to the man's last breath.

He writes:

> *"But I'm not sure Christopher Hitchens is in hell right now. It's not because I believe there's a 'second chance' after death for salvation (I don't). It's not because I don't believe in hell or in God's judgment (I do). It's because of a sermon I heard years ago that haunts me to this day, reminding me of the sometimes surprising persistence of the gospel.*
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> *"Fifteen or so years ago, I heard an old Welsh pastor preach on Jesus' encounter with the thieves on the cross. The preacher paused to speculate about whether the penitent thief might have had any God-fearing friends or family members. If so, he said, they probably would never have known about the terrorist's final act, his appeal to Jesus, 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom' (Lk. 23:42). They never would have heard Jesus pronounce, 'Today you will be with me in*

> *Paradise' (Lk. 23:43).*
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> *"These believing family members and friends would have assumed, all their lives, that this robber was in hell, especially dying as he did under the visible judgment of God (Deut. 21:22-23). They would have been shocked to meet this man in the kingdom of God. 'We thought you were in hell,' they might have said, as they danced around him in the heavenly places."*

I know that God is just. I know that God is good. I don't know where Christopher Hitchens is right now; none of us do, including his unbelieving brethren insisting he doesn't exist at all, anywhere, in any plane. But as Russell Moore concludes,

> *"Hell is real and judgment is certain. The gospel comes with a warning that it will one day be too late. But, as long as there is breath, it is not yet too late. Perhaps Christopher Hitchens, like so many before him, persisted in his rebellion to the horror of the very end. But maybe not. Maybe he stopped his polemics and cried out, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'*
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> *"I don't know. But I do know that the gospel offers forgiveness and mercy right to the edge of death's door. And I know that the kingdom of God is made up of ex-thieves, and ex-murderers, and ex-atheists like us."*

Like me. God is good. And He IS great.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/on_the_death_of_a_god-hater