

Charles Manson Dead at 83

The Wired Word for the Week of December 3, 2017

In the News

Last Sunday, Charles Manson, the notorious leader of the cult-like group called the Manson family, died at 83, in California, where he was serving life in prison for nine murders in 1969.

Manson and his "family" -- a loose, shifting band of a dozen or so, mostly young women who had left middle-class homes -- came to public attention after his followers committed seven brutal slayings, collectively known as the Tate-LaBianca murders on two consecutive nights in August 1969. Manson himself separately killed two others the previous month, but was convicted of all nine because his followers were acting under his orders in murdering the seven.

The Tate-LaBianca murders was shorthand for the group's killing of actress Sharon Tate, who was eight and a half months pregnant, along with four other people in her home in the Benedict Canyon area of Los Angeles on August 9, 1969. One of the Manson women wrote "pig" in blood on the front door of the home before leaving.

Manson's targeting of the occupants of that house sprang from his desire to have a career in music -- he wrote songs and played a guitar. He hung out with Beach Boys drummer Dennis Wilson and the band's record producer, Terry Melcher, who refused to give him a record deal.

Angry at this rejection, Manson ordered several of his drug-addled, brainwashed followers to kill everyone inside Melcher's former residence, which was then owned by Tate's husband, film director Roman Polanski, who was not home the night of the slayings. Even though Manson knew that Melcher no longer lived there, Manson chose that location because, for him, it represented the music industry that had snubbed him.

The night after the Tate killings, Manson and six of his followers selected, apparently at random, another house in Los Angeles and killed the two occupants, a grocer named Leno LaBianca and his wife Rosemary. The phrases "Death to Pigs" and "Helter Skelter" misspelled, were scrawled in blood at that scene.

Helter Skelter was the name Manson, who admired Hitler, had given to an apocalyptic race war that he hoped the killings would incite, and for which black people would be blamed.

In the subsequent trial, Manson and three of his family members were found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. But in 1972, after capital punishment was made illegal in California, their sentences were reduced to life in prison.

The murders, with their linkages to sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll and Satanism, and the trial were widely covered, which allowed many to view Manson as a cultural icon of the 1960s.

The New York Times obituary for Manson observed "Since then, the Manson family has occupied a dark, persistent place in American culture -- and American commerce. It has inspired, among other things, pop songs, an opera, films, a host of internet fan sites, T-shirts, children's wear and half the stage name of the rock musician Marilyn Manson. It has also been the subject of many nonfiction books"

Manson achieved a pinnacle of popular fame, appearing on the cover of the *Rolling Stone* in 1970.

Elsewhere, writer Paul Berman commented, "The really frightening thing about Charles Manson was not so much his own murderousness (except from the standpoint of the people being murdered, of course), nor his hold over his insane Family, the cult murderers, but his acceptability and even his appeal to other people, the sane and high-minded and groovy bystanders."

Over the course of his imprisonment, Manson was denied parole a dozen times, and no one who carried out the murders has been released. One of the women convicted died in prison of natural causes.

Incarcerating Manson cost taxpayers an estimated \$3.5 million.

Throughout it all, Manson maintained that he felt no remorse about the murders.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Charles Manson Dies at 83; Wild-Eyed Leader of a Murderous Crew. *The New York Times*](#)
[Charles Manson Can Go to Hell. *Religion News Service*](#)
[The Virtue of Hate. *First Things*](#)

Applying the News Story

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, who pens a column for *Religion News Service*, wrote this week that when he heard that Charles Manson had died, his immediate response was "Good." He then posed the rhetorical question, "Was that a 'nice' thing to say about the dead?"

Salkin went on to answer, "In fact, it wasn't. And, for good reason. Judaism does not always require that we be nice. It does require that we be good, and that we strive for justice, and that we make clear ethical claims. In a world in which we frequently eschew such terms as 'evil,' the life of Charles Manson bore grisly witness to the fact that, yes, there really is evil in the world."

Salkin then quoted Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, from his essay, "The Virtue of Hate" (see links list above): "While Moses commanded us 'not to hate our brother in our hearts,' a man's immoral actions can serve to sever the bonds of brotherhood between himself and humanity. Regarding a *rasha*, a Hebrew term for the hopelessly wicked, the Talmud [the primary source of Jewish religious law] clearly states: One is obligated to hate him."

Thus Salkin concluded, "So, yes -- it is quite acceptable to (even quietly) cheer Manson's death." (A TWW team member noted that one of the psalmists would agree, citing Psalm 139:19 -- "O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me ...")

Then, referring to the title of his column for this week, "Charles Manson Can Go to Hell" (see links list above), Salkin affirmed that Jews do believe in hell. He acknowledged that some of his readers might be skeptical about that topic, however, and said, "But if there is a world after this one, I refuse to believe that Charles Manson will be hanging out in the same neighborhood of eternity as, say, Mother Teresa. The world isn't fair. But, God's justice stretches far, far beyond what our mortal eyes can see."

We have taken the time to summarize Salkin's thoughts on Manson's death not to promote them, but because they stand in stark contrast to something Jesus said which seems to apply to Manson and others like him: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ..." (Matthew 5:43-44).

In the contrast of Salkin's pronouncement of "Good" at the news of Manson's death with Jesus' "love your enemies" statement we find the topic for this installment of *The Wired Word*. Where do people such as Manson

fit into the Christian gospel message of salvation, and what are the implications of that for us who are followers of Jesus?

The Big Questions

1. What was your first reaction when you learned that Charles Manson had died? Upon reflection, how do you feel about your reaction? Why? Would you feel differently if Manson had shown remorse, or had converted to Christianity? Do we reveal our faith in how we individually feel about the death of Manson, or in how we act regarding it? Are feelings themselves neutral, while only actions can be right or wrong?
2. Do you ever wish that Jesus had not said, "Love your enemies"? Why? When has that command from Jesus caused you to treat someone better than you would have preferred, given your dislike of that person?
3. While Jesus said to love our enemies, do particularly monstrous enemies such as Manson belong to a "special case" where the usual Christian responses don't apply? Explain. Can "love" -- for enemies and for all -- be compatible with just punishment for wrongdoing? If "love" is for all, not just enemies, is letting a murderer free loving to former and future victims?
4. If places in heaven were reserved only for those who deserve to be there, how many do you think would be there? On what do you base your answer?
5. Is there only one possible response to Manson's death that is actually "Christian"? Can there truly be various responses that are all in keeping with the spirit of Christ? Explain your answer.

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Matthew 5:43-45

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (For context, read 5:43-48.)

Here's Jesus' statement from the Sermon on the Mount. Note that he says loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us makes us children of the Father in heaven -- that is, such loving and praying is *godly*.

In the "Applying the News Story" section above Rabbi Salkin quoted Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, from his essay, "The Virtue of Hate." Here are Soloveichik's comments on these words of Jesus quoted above:

"There is, in fact, no minimizing the difference between Judaism and Christianity on whether hate can be virtuous. Indeed, Christianity's founder acknowledged his break with Jewish tradition on this matter from the very outset: [He then quotes Matthew 5:43-45, as above]. God, Jesus argues, loves the wicked, and so must we. In disagreeing, Judaism does not deny the importance of imitating God; Jews hate the wicked because they believe that God despises the wicked as well."

Christian commentator William Barclay says of this teaching from Jesus:

"We must note that this commandment is possible only for a Christian. Only the grace of Jesus Christ can enable a [person] to have this unconquerable benevolence and the invincible good will in his [or her] personal relationships with other people. It is only when Christ lives in our hearts that bitterness will die and this love spring to life. ... We need Christ to enable us to obey Christ's command."

Questions: How central is this teaching from Jesus to the Christian faith? Is this command meant to apply only to personal relationships and not to the civil justice system?

What should be the content of our prayers for those who persecute us? Is there a time when we should no longer pray for evildoers? What is the purpose of such prayers? Is it to change them, or to change or guard our own hearts?

When has someone forgiven you for acting like an enemy toward him or her? Is it true that "We need Christ to enable us to obey Christ's command"? Why or why not?

Proverbs 24:17-18

Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble, or else the LORD will see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from them.

(For context, read 24:17-20.)

It's not hard to understand the instruction to not rejoice when enemies fall, but we may find it hard not to actually rejoice.

The second part of the proverb is puzzling. Is the Proverbs writer saying that God will be so displeased at our pleasure over the fall of an enemy that he will cancel whatever divine punishment is in store for them?

The issue, however, is leaving things to God's justice, for which one may legitimately hope, as opposed to self-righteous superiority. And the implication is that God's people should not celebrate the calamity of others because that is what the wicked do. In other words, we should not sink to the level of those we consider to be wrong.

Questions: What do you think of Rabbi Salkin's "Good" response to the news of Manson's death? Why?

Luke 13:28-29 (The Message)

That's when you'll find yourselves out in the cold, strangers to grace. You'll watch Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets march into God's kingdom. You'll watch outsiders stream in from east, west, north, and south and sit down at the table of God's kingdom. And all the time you'll be outside looking in -- and wondering what happened. (For context, read 13:22-30)

Here, the New Testament pictures God excluding the unrepentant from his kingdom. From this we can infer that "love your enemies" may not be as simplistic as it is often taken to be. God's love for us, while we were yet his enemies (as Paul writes in Romans 5:10), led him to send his Son to die for us on the cross. Even with this amazing love, some reject that love and suffer eternal separation from him.

Questions: Discuss God's love for us, even though we don't deserve it. Discuss how salvation through Christ -- and the exclusion of those who reject grace -- fits into his attributes of love, mercy and justice.

Exodus 15:1

... I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. (For context, read 14:26--15:21.)

This is the opening line of a song of celebration Moses and the people of Israel sang following the drowning of the Egyptian army when the Red Sea closed in on them. In the Old Testament, the song goes unchallenged by God, but in the collection of ancient rabbinic writings called the Talmud, a rabbi has God rebuke the Israelites, saying, "My children are drowning in the sea, yet you now decided to sing about it?"

Questions: What does God's comment as recorded in the Talmud suggest about God's attitude toward sinners? What does it suggest about God's attitude toward those who have sinned monstrously?

Ezekiel 33:11

... *As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live ...* (For context, read 33:10-16.)

The Bible tells of specific cases where God approved conquest and ordered the death of wicked persons. But this needs to be viewed against the backdrop of God's root character, which, as the verse above affirms, is not bloodthirsty. What God wants is for all to live. He does not override our free will, however. Those who choose wickedness are not protected from the consequences.

Question: What should we do with our feelings of pleasure or relief -- if we have them -- at Manson's death?

For Further Discussion

1. Comment on this: Following the end of apartheid in South Africa, the newly empowered South African blacks as a group forgave their white tormentors. Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains that they followed "the Jewish rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" If we look only to retributive justice, argues Tutu, "then we could just as well close up shop. Forgiveness is not some nebulous thing. It is practical politics. Without forgiveness, there is no future."
2. What do you make of the fact that Manson has become a cultural icon and inspired internet fan sites?
3. React to this: Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, writing about a Jewish response to the death of Osama bin Laden, said, "A member of the Taliban who cuts off a woman's nose and ears or an Al Qaeda terrorist who flies a plane into a building has cast off the image of God from their countenance and is no longer our human brother. They deserve not amnesty but abhorrence, not clemency but contempt. And since humans cannot bestow life, neither can they act in the place of God and forgive those who take life."
4. Respond to this, titled, "Surprise in Heaven." (The author is unknown.)

I dreamt death came the other night
And Heaven's gate swung wide.
An angel with a halo bright
Ushered me inside.
And there! To my astonishment
Stood folks I'd judged and labeled
As "quite unfit," "of little worth,"
And "spiritually disabled."
Indignant words rose to my lips
But never were set free,
For every face showed stunned surprise --
Not one expected me!

5. Discuss this: In *The Lord of the Rings*, the chapter "The Shadow of the Past," Frodo is distressed to learn that Gollum was not put to death, since he certainly deserved it many times over. Gandalf replies "Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends."

As it turns out it is Gollum, as evil as ever, who redeems the quest when Frodo at the end fails the test.

Responding to the News

The death of a major evildoer like Manson is not an everyday occurrence, but the news about it gives us a chance to think about our response to those in our lives whom we consider troublemakers or personal enemies, and consider how Jesus would respond to them.

Prayer

Help us, O Lord, to respond to the death of this evildoer in light of the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Other News This Week

Rerouted Train in India Causes Passengers Alarm

In the News

Late last month, about 1,500 farmers from the western state of Maharashtra, India, who had attended "Kisan Mukti Sansad" (farmers' liberation parliament) in Delhi, to advocate for debt relief and better prices for their produce, boarded a charter train for the trip home on Tuesday evening, November 21. They woke the next morning, bewildered when they realized the train had traveled 99 miles in a direction not on their agreed-upon itinerary.

The farmers expected to travel back to Maharashtra through Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat states, but in the morning discovered that the train was in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, which was not on their original route.

Alarmed, the farmers stopped the train and demanded an explanation at Banmore Station in Madhya Pradesh, according to Sagar Shambhushete, one of the farmers on the train.

The station master claimed to have no information about the routing change, while a passenger indicated that the driver blamed the diversion of the train on a signaling error.

"Our lives were at risk. The train was on a wrong route, an accident could have happened," said Shambhushete. "We agreed to get back on the train after the railway authorities promised us that we were safe," he said.

In a similar incident in 2011, about 1,000 passengers travelling north from Tirupati to Varanasi, one of India's holy cities, ended up in Kazipet, Andhra Pradesh, 600 miles from their correct destination instead. Upon discovering the mistake, railroad officials returned the train to the exchange station where the mistake had occurred, and rerouted the train to its original destination. Passengers expressed relief that the train did not collide with any other trains while travelling for so long in the wrong direction.

On July 31, 2017, a train carrying 130 passengers from Stockholm, Sweden, to the southern coastal city of Norrköping somehow turned west, ending up in Gnesta instead, 28 miles away.

It's not clear whether the mistake was due to a technical issue related to the traffic management's data system or to human error. Upon arrival in Gnesta, travelers returned to their starting point to board a new train to Norrköping. In that instance, the passengers were delayed about three hours.

In 2014, a subway operator in Boston drove an express 'A'-train the wrong way for several minutes before halting. A radio dispatcher tried unsuccessfully to alert the driver about the error, but she said she never heard

the broadcasts. It was only when she saw the headlights of a southbound express idling on the track in front of her at the next station that she realized something was amiss and stopped the train.

Experts say the fact that the incident happened on a straight track with good visibility when the A-train was traveling only 10 mph or less likely prevented a serious accident. Authorities investigated signal problems, employee failure to follow railroad protocol, and inadequate radio technology as possible contributors to the incident.

In 2015, a train operator in Australia drove a nearly empty passenger train in the wrong direction for 761 miles, stopping only when contacted by a network control officer. At the time, a freight train was about two and a half miles away on a collision course with the train travelling in the wrong direction. Fortunately, no one was injured and no damage resulted from the incident. Investigators determined that fatigue, distraction, stress, overwork and other factors led to the error. Sydney Trains indicated the company was adopting new safety procedures to prevent similar problems in the future.

With regard to the rerouted train in India last month, DG PR Railway Board spokesperson Anil Kumar Saxena denied media reports that the railroad had made a signaling error or misdirected a train. Saxena insisted that the railway chose the best route available at the time, which was the central route rather than the western track used on the first leg of the trip.

"The passengers might have felt confused because of the different route used in their return journey ... [but] had no reason to worry," according to the railway's official statement. "There was no negligence ... no diversion ... no case of wrong signal ... and the passengers were at no point of time stranded. It was held up for some time at Banmore Railway Station near Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh because of some path congestion problem. Once the path became available, the train moved ahead smoothly towards its destination."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[India Train Travels 160 km in 'Wrong Direction.' BBC](#)

[Special Railways Train Travels 160 km in Wrong Direction, Leaves 1,500 Farmers Stranded in Madhya Pradesh. *The Financial Express*](#)

[Swedish Train Takes Wrong Track and Ends Up in the Wrong Town, Yet No One Seems to Know Why. *The Local Europe AB*](#)

[Wrong Running Direction Involving Passenger Train 165-S, Mt Druitt, NSW on 12 March 2015. *Australian Safety Transport Bureau*](#)

['A' Train Heads Uptown on a Downtown Track -- But Good Visibility Prevents Tragedy. *New York Daily News*](#)

The Big Questions

1. What external factors beyond your control might take you in a different direction from the one you planned for yourself?
2. What factors under your control might lead you to change course?
3. What possible risks might be associated with an unexpected change of your direction in life?
4. When does taking a different track become a wrong course in life? What is the difference?
5. When have you experienced God's leading you in a particular direction? How did you respond to the Spirit's call?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 1:28-31, 34

And [the angel Gabriel] came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." ... Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (For context, read 1:26-45.)

Watch the song "[I'll Go Tell Elizabeth](#)" by Ken Medema ([read lyrics here](#)) about Mary's visit to her cousin as both awaited the births of their sons.

Questions: When, if ever, have the plans you made blown down like birds' nests in the wind and the rain? To whom can you go who will understand what you are going through? What have you learned from experiencing an unexpected interruption of your plans, and how can such an experience prepare you to be a blessing to others?

Isaiah 42:16

*I will lead the blind
by a road they do not know,
by paths they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do,
and I will not forsake them. (For context, read 42:1-9, 16.)*

Here God promises to lead his people out of exile where they had languished for 70 years. Isaiah portrays the people of God as "blind" and ignorant of the road and paths they would need to travel to return home. They would face many challenges, but God assures them of his guidance and presence.

When the sight-impaired have a trusted guide upon whom to rely, that guide serves as the eyes of the blind. The person who trusts in the God who is faithful "walks by faith and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Questions: When have you wished for clearer vision to see the pathway forward in your life? When you can not see clearly a path forward, what do you need in order to safely take the next step?

Psalms 23:1-4

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff --
they comfort me. (For context, read 23:1-6.)*

According to Phillip Keller, author of the book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, the primitive shepherd was never without a rod and a staff. The rod was used for protection, care, and discipline of the sheep, while the staff or hook was used to rescue wayward sheep in trouble and to guide them in the path the shepherd wanted them to go.

Here Keller describes how a herder uses his rod or club as a defensive weapon:

Once in Kenya photographing elephants, I was being accompanied by a young Masai herder who carried a club in his hand. We came to the crest of a hill from which we could see a herd of elephants in the thick bush below us. To drive them out into the open we decided to dislodge a boulder and roll it down the slope. As we heaved and pushed against the great rock, a cobra, coiled beneath it, suddenly came into view ready to strike. In a split second the alert shepherd boy lashed out with his club killing the snake on the spot. The weapon had never left his hand, even while we worked on the rock.

Here Keller describes how the shepherd uses his staff:

Again and again I have seen a shepherd use his staff to guide his sheep gently into a new path or through some gate or along dangerous, difficult routes. He does not use it actually to beat the beast. Rather, the tip of the long slender stick is laid gently against the animal's side and the pressure applied guides the sheep in the way the owner wants it to go. Thus the sheep is reassured of its proper path.

Hymnwriter Joseph Gilmore explained the origin of his hymn "He Leadeth Me," which was inspired by Psalm 23. You can [read about that here](#).

Questions: Why would David say that the Lord's rod and staff gave him comfort? When have you felt the Lord's staff prodding you in the direction he wanted you to go? How was God's staff manifested to you?

Genesis 12:1, 4

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ... " So Abram went, as the LORD had told him ... (For context, read 12:1-9.)

Hebrews 11:8

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. (For context, read 11:8-16.)

God called Abraham to embark on a journey of faith, a journey that involved sacrifice, courage, trust and the willingness to accept God's leadership. Without knowing *where* his destination would be, or *what* route would get him there, *how long* the journey would take, or *when* he would arrive, he still began the journey, one step at a time, because he knew *who* had called him to take the trip.

Questions: What did Abraham know, and what did he not know, when he set out on this journey? What assurance did God give him that he would reach his destination? What do you think went into Abraham's decision to obey the Lord, even though the information he received from God was limited? What runs through your mind when you sense God calling you to a new "place" or decision or action? What factors do you consider?

Acts 9:19-22

For several days [Saul] was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." All who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah. (For context, read 9:1-22.)

Saul was headed to Damascus, intent on arresting followers of "the Way" of Jesus, when Jesus met him on the road, dramatically changing his beliefs and the direction of his life. For the first three days after the encounter, Saul was unable to see, and went without food and water (vs. 9).

Then God sent Ananias, one of the very disciples in Damascus that Saul had planned to take into custody, to restore Saul's sight. Ananias was understandably cautious about meeting with a man's-with Saul's reputation. Both men had to change their views in order to move forward on the path God had laid out for them.

Questions: When, if ever, have your beliefs been so challenged that you were compelled to change your opinions and the trajectory of your life? What, specifically, stopped you in your tracks?

For Further Discussion

1. Reflect on this, from biblical commentator Alexander MacLaren, "Life is like the course of the Congo, which makes so mighty a bend northward that, till it had been followed from source to mouth, no one could have supposed that it was to enter the ocean far away to the west. Not only God's mercies, but our paths, are 'new every morning.'"
2. What do you do when you head in one direction but end up in a completely different place than you expected? Many passengers on board the misdirected trains in the article felt anger, anxiety, confusion or fear. How might you react emotionally to unanticipated events that alter your plans?
3. Where is God when life takes a turn we did not expect?
4. In what way can scripture, prayer and/or your faith community serve as a spiritual GPS?

Responding to the News

This might be a time to consider how ready you are to take a journey of faith with God, wherever he may lead you.

Listen to the song by Phil Keaggy "[Things I Will Do,](#)" and pause to praise God for his promise to guide us through life.

Prayer

Good Shepherd, lead us in the paths of righteousness for the honor of your name. Protect us from danger with your rod and guide us with your staff, until we arrive in our heavenly home to live with you forever. Amen.