

Question: How should we react to the killing of Osama bin Laden?

Osama bin Laden was responsible not only for engineering the death of thousands in the 9/11 attacks but also for the brutal killing of many others, including Muslims who did not share his radical views. Phrases like “may he burn in hell” and “I hope he died a slow and painful death” have echoed across the world. Thousands have gathered in the streets to celebrate his death with joyful shouts and dancing. But as much as we may be tempted by a vengeful spirit, Christians should ask, “What would Jesus do?”

We should not be surprised when those who have suffered because of wicked and violent men cry out for them to be brought to justice. In their sufferings, the writers of the Psalms called for the LORD to “Declare them guilty,” “Break the teeth in their mouths” and “May they be blotted out from the book of life” (Psalm 5:10; 58:6; 69:28). These cursings sound inconsistent with other teachings of the Bible and especially with the words of Jesus in the New Testament. However, we need to understand that these are not the words of God to men, but they are words of deeply hurting souls crying out to God for justice. This does not mean that God endorses this attitude; but the presence of these curses in scripture does demonstrate that God hears our honest cries, understands our deep hurts and will help us deal with such feelings.

Therefore, when the justice of God is brought about, it is only natural that righteous people would rejoice. The Proverbs declare: “When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers” (Proverbs 21:15; cf. 11:10). After the Egyptian army was drowned in the Red Sea, Moses and his sister, Miriam, led the people to rejoice with singing and dancing (Exodus 15). At no time has God expressed disapproval when his people rejoice in his justice and vindication. In fact, God has authorized civil government to bring justice by punishing the wicked. Romans 13:4 says of our rulers: “he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” Justice is so important to God that even if an evildoer should escape justice in this life he will eventually stand before God's eternal throne of justice (Ecclesiastes 3:17; Acts 17:31).

However, we need to separate rejoicing in justice from any kind of gloating over the death of anyone, even one as evil as Osama bin Laden. God told his prophet Ezekiel: “As surely as I live . . . I take no pleasure

in the death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 33:11). Although God knew he must destroy the corrupt and violent people of the ancient world with a flood, we are told that “The LORD was grieved . . . and his heart was filled with pain” (Genesis 6:6). Therefore we are charged: “Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice” (Proverbs 24:17).

The Lord not only explained that he takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but he added that he would “rather that they turn from their ways and live” (Ezekiel 33:11). In the New Testament, we are told that the Lord is “patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). God loves us and sent his Son to die for all of us sinners, including Osama bin Laden (Romans 5:8). Sadly, bin Laden made some bad choices in his life and failed to listen to God’s plea to “Turn! Turn from your evil ways!” (Eze. 33:11).

It is one thing to rejoice that justice is done, but it is another to celebrate the eternal loss of any soul. Yes, I believe Jesus would join a celebration of God’s justice and vindication; but he would never rejoice in the eternal loss of any person. May each of us examine our hearts, our motives and our own lives before we react to the death of any human being for whatever reason. If not for God’s offer of grace, justice would demand that all of us be eternally banished in our sins (Romans 3:21 & 6:23).

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