

## EZEKIEL 33:11

### ON THE DEATH OF USAMA BIN LADEN

“As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die?”<sup>1</sup>

Following a busy day last Sunday, I relaxed with Lynda by watching television in the evening. I was struggling mightily to remain awake as we watched a cooking show. Suddenly, I was startled by a buzzing in my pocket announcing receipt of a text message. The message, from my daughter, read simply, “Are u watching news? Bin Laden is dead.”

The news was electrifying. I read it to Lynda, and we switched to Fox News. Geraldo was visibly flabbergasted—he was blathering in an attempt to fill time, waiting for the President to formally announce the action. In short order we learned that a black ops team had killed Usama bin Laden and taken the body with them. Elite forces composed of men from the United States Naval Special Warfare Development Group (commonly known as DEVGRU) and the United States Army Night Stalkers had flown into Abbottabad, located sixty kilometers north of Islamabad. There, the team had disembarked from the helicopters, entered the various buildings on the compound where they engaged in a firefight before entering the main building. Within forty minutes, the warriors had killed two couriers, a son of the murderer, a woman who was caught in the crossfire and the depraved Islamist sociopath who was shot twice in the head. The man who engineered the murder of multiple innocent men, women and children in the name of his religion was himself killed. He died as the coward he was, cowering like a cornered rat.

I was galvanised by the recitation of events as they unfolded. Soon, broadcasts showed a jubilant crowd gathered in front of the White House, raucous crowds gathered in Times Square and scenes of jubilation at the United States Air Force Academy, at West Point and at Annapolis. Candidly, I experienced a variety of emotions as I pondered what I should feel at the death of a man that had come to represent evil. I certainly experienced exhilaration—the Islamist fiend responsible for unleashing a cowardly attack on an unsuspecting and peaceful people had received justice. I certainly felt a sense of deep pride in the reports affirming the professionalism of the American special ops teams. There was a sense of relief that an ogre, a psychopath who used religion to justify his hatred, was removed from the earth. However, a nagging question arose in my mind: what response does the Lord expect of His people at the death of the wicked.

I went to bed pondering my response to the news of the death of this evil man. It wasn't until the next day that matters began to resolve themselves, especially after reading a blog by Denny Burk.<sup>2</sup> Professor Burk rightly cautioned believers to weigh carefully their reaction to the death of a wicked man in light of God's character as revealed through the Word. That is my intent in the message this day. I caution the people of God not to assume a position that leaves us guilty either of arrogance or of presumption. Rather, let us acknowledge that God is righteous, and that at best, our responses are not often godly. I caution that we must accept humbly that God does rule in the affairs of men—and He does call the wicked to account.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Denny Burk, “FIRST-PERSON: How should Christians react to bin Laden's death?”, Baptist Press, May 2, 2011, <http://www.bpnews.net/BPFirstPerson.asp?ID=35196>, accessed 2 May 2011

**GOD IS RIGHTEOUS** — For the sake of intellectual and theological clarity, one truth must be emphasised—God is righteous. By definition, God is holy; He is just. Should the Lord God prove unrighteous or unjust in even a single instance, He could not be God. More frequently than one might imagine, sinners accuse God of injustice.

Foolish people sometimes bandy about the charge that the death of the innocent proves that God is unjust; God is commonly imagined to be the author of death. Such a view ignores the fact that our own sinful condition results in death. The Apostle acknowledges this when he states, “As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” [1 CORINTHIANS 15:22]. The innocent die, not because of rebellion, but as result of participation as part of this fallen race. Know that God has made provision for those that are innocent, promising life in the Son of God.

Jesus addressed the issue of death for the innocent when He spoke on one occasion. “There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?’” [LUKE 13:1-4]?

The child of God knows that the Father is holy; He is righteous and just. Jeremiah began a complaint before the LORD on one occasion with affirmation of His righteousness, “Righteous are You, O LORD” [JEREMIAH 12:1]. His words serve as affirmation of the Psalmist’s observation, “The LORD is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His words” [PSALM 145:17]; and they anticipate the testimony before the True and Living God that will be heard in eternity, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just as Your judgements” [REVELATION 16:7]!

God is righteous, and we are unrighteous. We know that “The wages of sin is death” [ROMANS 6:23]. Thus, we are compelled to agree with the divine assessment of our condition:

“None is righteous, no, not one;  
no one understands;  
no one seeks for God.  
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;  
no one does good,  
not even one.’  
‘Their throat is an open grave;  
they use their tongues to deceive.’  
‘The venom of asps is under their lips.’  
‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’  
‘Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
in their paths are ruin and misery,  
and the way of peace they have not known.’  
‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’”

[ROMANS 3:10-18]

Few of us have difficulty agreeing that Usama bin Laden and the minions of al Qaeda followers fit the dark description just read. When we review the horrible details of the offensive against all who disagreed with the wicked man—both Jews and Christians, and even other Muslims who did not fit his definition meriting life—we are convinced that he deserved his rough justice.

As is often true of the wicked, Usama bin Laden advocated and approved death for innocent people. Then, having bloodied his hands, he engaged in evils that are more heinous still. Al Qaeda pioneered the use of mentally challenged young women wearing suicide vests in crowded places to murder scores of innocent people—usually other Muslims. Unfortunately, these evil men could only pull off such depraved attacks twice due to insufficient numbers of mentally challenged women. They then hit upon the even more monstrous crime of raping young women repeatedly. Shattered by the experience, these young women were delivered to a woman known as Umm al-Mumineen—“Mother of Believers.” Samira Ahmed Jasmin would convince them that they could redeem their honour and regain respectability through wearing a suicide vest and killing infidels. She confessed to participating in convincing over eighty young women, twenty-eight of whom actually committed suicide while attempting to kill others.<sup>3</sup>

As abhorrent, barbaric, contemptible and despicable as such acts are in the estimate of civilised people, I caution that each of us must confess that when measured by the perfect standard of Christ the Lord, we fall short of the divine standard. We are compelled to confess, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [ROMANS 3:23]. In agreement with God’s assessment of our condition, we are compelled to admit that we, also, are sinful people.

This raises a question of grave significance: does God rejoice at the death of the wicked? How does God react at the death of evil people? If we are able to answer this question, it will give us insight into our own character and actions, providing guidance for our own reactions to the death of the wicked.

**GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS PRECLUDES JOY IN THE DEATH OF THE WICKED** — We are told on several occasions that God laughs at evil men. After describing evil men who howl like dogs and prowl about the city, bellowing and seeking to destroy the wicked, David says that the LORD laughs at them. He continues by stating that God holds “all the nations in derision” [PSALM 59:8]. Clearly, the laughter of ridicule is in view.<sup>4</sup> This same view of God mocking the wicked is presented in PSALM 37:12, 13 and PSALM 2:1-4.

The concept is fully expanded in the Proverbs where we read Solomon’s words:

“Because I have called and you refused to listen,  
have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded,  
because you have ignored all my counsel  
and would have none of my reproof,  
I also will laugh at your calamity;  
I will mock when terror strikes you,  
when terror strikes you like a storm  
and your calamity comes like a whirlwind,  
when distress and anguish come upon you.  
Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer;  
they will seek me diligently but will not find me.”

[PROVERBS 1:24-28]

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Newton Dunn, “Al-Qaeda in gay rape horror,” 04 Feb 2009, The Sun, <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/article2203190.ece>, accessed 6 May 2011; BBC News, “Iraq’s ‘female bomber recruiter,’” 4 February 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7869570.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7869570.stm), accessed 6 May 2011

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., the use of the verb in JOB 39:22; 41:29; PSALM 52:6

Honesty compels me to make one observation as a caution against sinning against the Lord God. The Living God does mock sinners; but nowhere are we given permission to mock wicked men at their death. Reminding the unrepentant of their arrogance when their sin has at last been brought to justice is qualitatively different from taking pleasure in the demise of the wicked. Thus, God declares, “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live” [EZEKIEL 18:23]? In our rejoicing at the death of the wicked, we often forget the heart of the Lord our God. We are informed, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” [2 PETER 3:9].

The Word of God is replete with warnings against walking in the way that brings death. God warns, “The way of the wicked will perish” [PSALM 1:6]. Again, God warns, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” [PROVERBS 14:12]. He also warns, “The way of the wicked is like deep darkness” [PROVERBS 4:19]; and “The way of the wicked leads them astray” [PROVERBS 12:26]. We are cautioned, “The way of the treacherous is their ruin” [PROVERBS 13:15]. Again, God is unequivocal in warning that “The way of the guilty is crooked” [PROVERBS 21:8]. Indeed, “Thorns and snares are in the way of the crooked” [PROVERBS 22:5]. I summarise these repeated cautionary statements by citing Solomon once again:

“The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,  
but he loves him who pursues righteousness.”

[PROVERBS 15:9]

Undoubtedly, bin Laden and the wicked people who approve of his acts will be held accountable before God; but my greater concern is that I recognise that I am capable of just as much evil as is bin Laden, especially if I do not guard my heart. Because God is holy and righteous, we must be careful not to presume against His grace. We must not only guard our own hearts, but we are responsible to warn the wicked against presuming against His grace.

There is an awful day when all the unsaved must stand before a great, white throne. Seated on that throne is the Risen Son of God. What terror the lost shall experience in that day! John describes the sobering scene thusly, “I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” [REVELATION 20:11-15]. Does this scene move you to compassion?

No conscientious believer can rejoice in the sentence of eternal death that shall be pronounced for the unsaved. What is especially dreadful is the knowledge that people are judged by what they have done. Lost is lost! In judgement, there will be no discrimination—those who have committed great sins against humanity and those who committed what we imagine to be little sins all have ultimately sinned against Holy God. Therefore, all sin is infinitely offensive. Nevertheless, since it is true of those professing the Faith that “the sins of some men are conspicuous, going before them to judgement” [1 TIMOTHY 5:24], it should be obvious that the sins of the wicked are often equally apparent because they are egregious and notorious.

We are confident that God has not turned his eye from observing the wicked. He has appointed governments to hold man accountable. The Apostle has informed us, “[Government] is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” [ROMANS 13:4]. Thus, the Government of the United States through its special ops teams acted righteously in extracting vengeance on a brutal and depraved man who lived in hostility toward all mankind. Surely, the United States acted justly in exacting justice of this man who had raised his hand against all mankind. Though Anglican archbishops and liberal politicians inveigh against the imposition of this rough justice, the Government of the United States was on sound biblical grounds when they acted to take the life of Usama bin Laden.

You may recall that God said of Ishmael, progenitor of the Arabs:

“He shall be a wild donkey of a man,  
his hand against everyone  
and everyone’s hand against him.”

[GENESIS 16:12]

Usama bin Laden exemplified the prophecy in exaggerated fashion. He lived outside the realm of civilised society, opposed to all that is good and noble, distorting technical achievements to advance his own evil purposes and to oppose all who disagreed with him. Unquestionably, the man was depraved, wicked and evil, calling down on himself the wrath of God.

How terrifying his final moments much have been. It was surely disquieting when he heard the crash of the first helicopter that failed to clear the outer wall; then he would have recognised the distinct sound of rotors as the next helicopter settled onto the grounds. Likely, the warriors made little noise as they leaped from the transport and took up preassigned positions.

In the squalid house where he had lived for at least the previous five years, he would have heard the first shots. At the sound, he must have hastily thrown aside bedclothes, wondering where he could hide. Confusion would have clouded his mind and caused hesitation, for though he had waged war, he was untrained in warfare and unaware of appropriate response to attack. Perhaps he heard the shouts of his couriers when they realised that they were about to die, and then the cries of alarm from his son as each one in turn was gunned down.

Footsteps running up the stairs and the first errant shot as he briefly looked out the bedroom door would only have heightened his alarm and dread. The crash at his door would have alerted him to the imminent presence of the fearsome warriors. Shouts in American English added to the chaos and bewilderment as rough men burst into the room. The last act of the cornered murderer was to shove his wife toward those warriors before he cowed in terror in the presence of the heroes. The last thing bin Laden likely saw was the gun pointed at his head. This man noted for his hatred of all mankind—who personally bore responsibility for ruthlessly taking the lives of so many others, had at last come to a bad end.

As I reviewed the videos and pictures released of his final days, one phrase kept passing through my mind—the banality of evil. He could not enjoy his life. His world had contracted until it was defined by two rooms, cluttered and strewn with garbage; he lived in squalor like a rat. The words of the Master still hold true when He warned against lifting our hands in violence against another. Jesus warned, “All who take hold of the sword will die by the sword” [MATTHEW 26:52 NET BIBLE]. Indeed, “The way of the treacherous is their ruin” [PROVERBS 13:15b]. Certainly, these words hold true for those who murder the innocent and who mislead others in pursuit of their nefarious ends.

Nevertheless, and for all that, I must iterate the words of the text. God says, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” Similarly, if we will reveal the heart of our Father, we can take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. When I think of bin Laden now suffering the fires of eternal torment away from the goodness and mercy of the True and Living God, I cannot rejoice. No more can I rejoice in the knowledge that some whom I know, even some whom I love, must one day stand before the great white throne and hear those awful words pronounced by the Master, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness” [MATTHEW 7:23]. The knowledge that even now that evil man is suffering in the torments of Hades brings me no pleasure; nor should any follower of the Prince of Peace experience pleasure at the death of the wicked. Indeed, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” [HEBREWS 10:31].

There *is* joy when the wicked perish, but godly joy is expressed at the evidence of God’s mercy shown to His people, and not joy because a sinner has at last received condemnation, however justly condemnation is deserved. The Wise Man observed concerning human nature:

“When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices,  
and when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness.”

[PROVERBS 11:10]

Believers can rejoice in the knowledge that God has not forgotten mercy, and that wicked men are held accountable. Believers can rejoice when government fulfils its divinely appointed responsibility to protect against evil and to bring the guilty to justice. Though mortals are imperfect, nevertheless they are appointed by God to bear the sword and to bring justice.

There is a day, and it may be sooner than we imagine, when we will rejoice because God at last brings justice. The scene revealing the rejoicing of the saints when all wickedness is at last put down is described by John in the closing chapters of the Apocalypse. Listen to the Word of God. “I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out,

‘Hallelujah!  
Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,  
for his judgments are true and just;  
for he has judged the great prostitute  
who corrupted the earth with her immorality,  
and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.’

“Once more they cried out,

‘Hallelujah!  
The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.’

[REVELATION 19:1-3]

The child of God can now rejoice in the knowledge that God reigns in Heaven and that He shall bring to account every wicked person. With the Psalmist, we who know the Lord God can exult in His righteous judgements. For though God seems to delay His judgement, we may be confident that He shall judge the wicked and receive the righteous. Though we may grow impatient, God will act perfectly. Among the black churches where I once laboured, I often heard, “My God works in slow motion”; but my God does work! Hear the promise of God!

“You are not a God who delights in wickedness;  
evil may not dwell with you.  
The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;  
you hate all evildoers.  
You destroy those who speak lies;  
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.”

[PSALM 5:4-6]

“The wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.”

[PSALM 1:5-6]

**GOD’S CALL TO REPENTANCE** — During a Roman Triumph procession, it has been suggested that the emperor was accompanied in his chariot by a slave holding a golden wreath above his head while repeatedly reminding him of his mortality. As the chariot moved along the thoroughfare among the cheering throngs of adulating fans, the slave was assigned to whisper “Sic Transit Gloria”—“Fame is fleeting.” Perhaps each of us should take that knowledge to heart. We will do well to remember the transience of all that passes for glory today.

Those were dreadful scenes recorded by the cameras on September 11, 2001. Planes were transformed into missiles, condemning all who were confined within the fuselages to a terrible death. The images of terrified men and women leaping to their death from the twin towers so that they might escape the flames are seared into the consciousness of Americans and all decent people. The images of Arabs laughing and dancing, of Palestinians celebrating and exchanging sweets while women ululated is likewise now a part of the national consciousness.

Religious mobs in European cities rejoiced in the evil engineered by Usama bin Laden. The wicked thought that he had struck a great blow to the glory of a bloodthirsty, craven demigod. The names of bin Laden and his wicked henchmen were known throughout Muslim communities as Imams praised them in mosques. What happened to these craven curs in the decade since they launched ruthless attacks against innocent and unsuspecting people?

- Mohammed Atef was killed in November of 2001
- Abu Zubaydah was captured March 28, 2002
- Abd al-Rahman al-Nashiri was captured in November of 2002
- Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was captured March 1, 2003
- Ibn al-Shavkh al-Libi was captured in the fall of 2001. He has since died in a Libyan prison in March of 2009
- Usama bin Laden was killed on May 1, 2011
- Ayman al Zawahiri is in hiding
- Sayf al-Adl is in hiding
- Saeed al-Masri is in hiding
- Abu Hafs al Mauritani is in hiding

Surely, the Word of the Lord stands true:

“As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away;  
as wax melts before fire,  
so the wicked shall perish before God!”

[PSALM 68:2]

Nevertheless, I am duty-bound to remind you that the Living God stands firm in declaring, “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” There is always this call to life appended to the divine warning: “Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die?”

I am speaking to people today who are tempted to rejoice in the death of the wicked. Examine your motives; ensure that they are just and righteous. Focus on God’s mercies revealed through government doing what it was assigned to do. Focus on the grace of God as demonstrated because He has held a wicked man to account. Take warning if you are a wicked person, for as God called bin Laden to account for his wickedness, so you may be assured that each of us who depends upon our own righteousness shall give an accounting to God for what we have done with His grace.

Each Christian must know that God expects His people to be wise stewards of His grace. We are warned, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:10]. The believer must surely know that “We will all stand before the Judgement Seat of God” [ROMANS 14:10] and that “Each of us will give an account of himself to God” [ROMANS 14:12].

In a similar vein, each individual who is outside the grace of God, each one who has failed to receive the mercies that are even now extended, must realise the peril in which she now stands. God informs us, “Whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” [JOHN 3:18]. In mercy He has warned, “Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” [JOHN 3:36].

Those are awful words recorded in the Letter to Hebrew Christians. “If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’” [HEBREWS 10:26-30]. The words are recorded to warn against presuming against the grace of God. The writer then cautions, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” [HEBREWS 10:31]. It is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God.

In the sight of God, there exists no difference between a nice person who has rejected divine grace and one we call a monster—each alike stands condemned because he has failed to receive the grace of God in Christ the Lord. But, it need not be so with you. God has provided a means by which each person can be forgiven all sin. Christ the Son of God gave His life as a sacrifice because of your sin. His sacrifice was made effective through His conquest of death, for He was raised from the dead. Now, we are confident that “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be set free. With the heart one believes, resulting in a right standing with the Father, and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in freedom” [ROMANS 10:9, 10 AUTHOR’S TRANSLATION].



The simplicity and universality of God's provision is revealed in one glorious statement. God has promised, "Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved" [**ROMANS 10:13**]. The option for each person is either to spend eternity separated from the love of God together with the wicked of this world, or to enjoy the mercies of God forever. I pray that you will choose wisely, turning from pursuing your own desires and receiving the grace of God in Christ the Lord. My prayer for each one is that you know the reality of the Psalmist's words:

"The fear of the LORD is clean,  
enduring forever;  
the rules of the LORD are true,  
and righteous altogether."

[**PSALM 19:9**]

Amen.