

Q&A: Osama, a “biblical understanding”

Dave0 asks:



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There is a very real difficulty in bringing Osama to a court and having a trial. However, the current approach is anything but edifying. Can you tease out a biblical understanding/response.

Thanks for the question. It came in just as a facebook/twitter conversation led me to this quote by Martin Luther King:

“Are we seeking power for power’s sake? Or are we seeking to make the world and our nation better places to live. If we seek the latter, violence can never provide the answer. The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night

already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.

I think I’ve said it before somewhere that the response of the US to 9/11 was typical and therefore far from ideal. *Pax Americana* is not a wholesome aspiration. I see very little distinction from militant Islam in it – “Yes, we are a religion of peace, when we’re in control.”

But, you asked for a biblical teasing out, so here goes: Like all good theological questions there are two somewhat contrasting parts to the balanced truth.

The first is this: Violence is not the path of the gospel. This is Martin Luther King’s position of course. Apparently even Bonhoeffer, who contributed to a (justifiable, it would seem) assassination attempt on Hitler, considered that act to be a taking of guilt upon himself. Jesus of course, eschewed violence at the time of his arrest –

Matthew 26: 51 And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” 55 At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. 56 But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left him and fled. ESV

And then, of course, there is the familiar command for us to love our enemies – particularly in the light of the Kingdom of God in which, Christ asserts, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

Matthew 5:43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. ESV

The second is this: Justice is good, and that involves punishment. Would it be right to ignore Osama bin Laden and not call him to account? I think Romans 13 portrays the governing authorities as God’s agents for this purpose

Romans 13: 4b But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. ESV

I think the framework perhaps is to consider Romans 13 punishment is an act of judgement. And to the extent that the human authority acts justly, it is an act of judgement that prefigures the judgement of all things at the end. If you like – a judging ahead of time to prevent harm, pain and further sin. Such an act is not done lightly for the judge presumes to represent and point to God, our judge.

The balance then is this:

Both things point to grace. The non-violence of the gospel

is the nature of the eternal kingdom that we are passing into, by grace. Romans 13 points to the judgement that we are passing from/through, by grace.

In application, therefore: The use of violence against Osama is not necessarily wrong – a violent, evil man needed to be stopped. But it is a *dreadful* thing (as Bonhoeffer knew) and should be measured, and done with trembling and even regret – regret that it had to come to this, regret that this is a necessary act in a sinful world while we yet precede the day when all things are made right. In the light of an eternal gospel of peace and non-violence (lions laying down with the lamb) we need grace in all things, including this, to cover the guilt and brokenness of us all.

Therefore, the jubilation in the streets *must* be considered as “idiotic” (your words). It is simply presumptuous – are they all without sin that they should rejoice at the stones being cast? Triumph, gloating and celebration has no place here.

Some have compared the scenes with that of the end of World War 2. I reject the comparison. The jubilation at the end of World War 2 is not so much that Hitler was dead, but that the war was over. It was relief, a lifting of a burden, not the celebration of a “justice done.” As if war could bring justice! I’m reminded of the scene in a later episode of *Band of Brothers* where an American soldier screams at captured Germans about the pointlessness of it all.

My response to all this is not “God bless America”, but “Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus”