

Heaping Coals of Fire

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Q: This has bothered me for years and years.

Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).

Now maybe because I believed in a literal hell, I was confused by the fact that a believer should be motivated to be kind to an enemy because that is equal to “*heaping coals*” onto their head. Before, I used to think that it meant we would be rewarded for being good to those that do evil to us, and those “*evildoers*” were more so doomed to spend eternity in hell. These verses never sat right with me. What does this term “*heaping coals of fire*” mean in your opinion?

A: It is so amazing how our negative view of God flavors our reading of the Scriptures. It leads us to assume that the phrase “*heap coals of fire on his head*” is to be viewed in a negative light. We have been lead to do so by religious teaching. Rome used such passages as this to carry out their Inquisitions and burnings at the stake.

Many Protestant commentators have promoted their own negative view as well:

Coals of fire are doubtless emblematical of pain ... Burning coals heaped on a man’s head would be expressive of intense agony. So the apostle says that the effect of doing good to an enemy would be to produce pain. – Albert Barnes (1798-1870), *Barnes’ Notes on the Bible*

By coals of fire heaped upon the head, others understand a sin-punishing fire. Thou shalt heap coals of fire, that is, the fire of divine vengeance, upon his head, by making his malice and hatred against thee more inexcusable. – William Burkitt (1650-1703), *Burkitt’s Expository Notes*

Bring down the greater vengeance from God upon him. – Matthew Poole (1624-1679), *Poole’s Commentary on the Holy Bible*

You say that this passage has bothered you for “years and years,” and rightfully so, as this passage is a perfect example of how the Father alerts us to the error in our thinking. So, what is wrong with this picture?

We really need to ask ourselves, what does this passage mean in light of all that we know about the Father – of His ultimate victory in bringing all things into harmony with Himself, and using us as His vessels of mercy?

May I ask a simple question here? What would be the natural purpose of “*coals of fire*”? For instance, if I was to have “*coals of fire*” in my own home, would I do so for a *negative* purpose, or for a *positive* one? Would my purpose be for punishment? For shame? For destruction? To produce guilt? To produce pain? No, of course not. A wise man would use “*coals of fire*” in his home for none of these reasons. He would use it to warm his home. Why should we think any different about its use here? Is not our life of goodness and kindness designed by the Father to “warm up” those with whom we share His life? He uses us as instruments of kindness to warm the coldness, and melt the hardness of their hearts.

The Methodist commentator Adam Clarke (1760-1832), wrote fittingly regarding this passage:

Thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head – not to consume, but to melt him into kindness; a metaphor taken from smelting metallic ores.

Here is what another has written regarding the true nature of this passage:

An enemy in distress, instead of calling for hate and vengeance, is a special opportunity for the display of God’s grace. The “morsel,” a special portion of food with which a host favored an honored guest, was a token of esteem and consideration. Mercy might provide an enemy with food, but grace accompanies the gift with every mark of love and honor. This is the way in which God vanquished our enmity, hence we should do likewise. – A.E. Knoch (1874-1965), *Concordant Commentary* (1968)

Speaking to the broader theme of the passage, others have written:

Does this rob God of anything? Not even of revenge, for if bread to the hungry be the divine method of heaping coals of fire, so does God Himself revenge Himself upon His enemies by *loving* them! – Alan Burns (?-1929), *Is It of God?*

He tells us to pour coals of fire on our enemies’ heads. Those coals of fire are love! (Romans 12:20) – Gary Amirault, *Tentmakers*

A Figure of Speech

Now what about the actual phrase “*heap coals of fire on his head.*” What does this actually mean? We are told that this is a Jewish figure of speech that has, for the most part, been lost to the western mind:

Paul says that if we give food and drink to our enemies, we shall be heaping “*coals of fire on their heads.*” To us this doesn’t sound like forgiveness, but like taking vengeance. In the Bible lands almost everything is carried on the head – water jars, baskets of fruit, vegetables, fish or any other article. Those carrying the burden rarely touch it with the hands, and they walk through crowded streets and lanes with perfect ease. In many homes the only fire they have is kept in a *brazier* which they use for simple cooking as well as for warmth. They plan to always keep it burning. If it should go out, some member of the family will take the brazier to a neighbor’s house to borrow fire. Then she will lift the brazier to her head and start for home. If her neighbor is a generous woman, she will heap the brazier full of coals. To feed an enemy and give him drink was like heaping the empty brazier with live coals – which meant food, warmth and almost life itself to the person or home needing it, and was the symbol of finest generosity. – B.M. Bowen, *Strange Scriptures that Perplex the Western Mind*

We, Westerners, usually picture vengeance when we think of pouring hot coals on someone’s heads. The Semites pictured something completely different ... We, Westerners, must break some of our traditions, if we are to ever come to a deep understanding of the God of the Bible. It is full of beautiful pictures like this one. – Gary Amirault, *Tentmakers*

The phrase “*heap coals of fire on his head*” is a part of the quote from Proverbs 25:21-22. Farrar Fenton’s (1903) translation of the passage in Proverbs takes the phrase “*heap coals of fire on his head*” in its literal meaning, thus explaining the Jewish figure of speech, rather than translating it:

And a fire besides for his needs.

Although popular translations of this entire passage may often lead readers to a “punishment” view toward mankind,¹ we have actually been instructed *not* to recompense “*evil for evil*” (Romans 12:17), but to “**overcome evil with good**” (Romans 12:21). This is the divine plan of the ages – “**overcome evil with good**” – for “*love never fails!*” (I Corinthians 13:8).

Jesus instructed His disciples to love their enemies and be a blessing to them:

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you (Matthew 5:44).

On what basis did He do so? Because this is the very nature of the Father!

1. Compare carefully the above listed text of Romans 12:17-21 from the King James Version, with the translation in the Bible Student’s Version:

“Return to no one evil for evil. Display nobility before all men. If possible, as much as lies in you, cultivate peace with all mankind. Dearly beloved, don’t retaliate, but recede from the place of anger: for it is written, ‘Vindication belongs to Me; I will make it up to you,’ says the Lord. Therefore if your enemy hungers, feed him; if he thirsts, give him drink: for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head. Don’t be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good” (Romans 12:17-21). – BSV

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

“God is love” (I John 4:8, 16), and His love has been “shed abroad in our hearts” (Romans 5:5), that we may “walk in love” (Ephesians 5:2), so that as the Father’s “vessels of mercy” (Romans 9:23) we would be a “blessing” to those around us:

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you ... (Matthew 5:44).

Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not (Romans 12:14).

Being reviled, we bless (I Corinthians 4:12).

See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men (I Thessalonians 5:15).

Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing (I Peter 3:9).

This is our *“high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14)!*

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