

Comments about the Interpretation of Romans 12:20

"Burning Coals" on Your Enemy's Head

Introduction:

This article begins with some background information and the comments I originally made in an article about "Revenge." It concludes with an e-mail question I received and my response.

The basic focus of this article is this: There are some things in the Bible that are difficult to understand, but what we *need* to understand is clearly stated... and that is where we need to focus our greatest attention.

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."
- Romans 12:20

Background:

Romans 12:20 is one of those somewhat ambiguous passages that is difficult to understand - not because we don't like what it says, but because there are *genuine* questions about the nature of the activity which is mentioned. In such a case, it is *never* good to claim that there is only one possible interpretation. Instead, we ought to be gracious in the way we respond to people who have different interpretations.

Note that - even though the *interpretation* is uncertain, the intended *application* is very clear. Read the entire passage:

Romans 12:19-21

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.
On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

My Original Comments (from a study on the topic of "Revenge").

Here are some possible interpretations of the what the "coals of fire" signify:

1) In many cultures at that time, fire was considered very important. Hot embers could be carried from place to place in containers. In some instances, an insulated container may have been carried on the individual's head. (Then he would not be in danger of burns from the rising heat.) According to this view, the emphasis would be on the good we are to do, especially when the other person is in need.

2) This statement could also be reminiscent of an Egyptian ritual signifying "repentance." According to this view, the good that we do would (hopefully) bring shame and repentance to the person. The focus would be on the "mental pain" the person had, rather than on the physical pain that would be experienced, if the live coals were to actually touch his head.

This second view is probably the more predominant view among commentators - whether or not they make reference to the Egyptian ritual itself. But either way, the context shows us that our goal is to do good to the evildoer - in the hope that he will repent. We want him to become our friend, rather than our enemy. (The verse is definitely not an encouragement for us to hope that he will have a "hotter fire in hell" - that is, that more coals will be "heaped upon his head"!)

E-mail Question I Received:

"I have looked everywhere for the historical reference of the Egyptians carrying coal on their heads to one another's homes. You are the only one that I found that mentioned this tradition and I was wondering where your information came from so that I might study it further.

"My friend is absolutely convinced this is the only way to interpret this passage, based on something [a certain preacher] said. Yet I have even gone to [that preacher's] web site ... and he does not mention it."

My Response:

Technically, it doesn't matter, because the passage itself tells us how to respond. We might not completely understand how the phrase "coals of fire" applies, but there is no question about how Paul tells us to act - in kindness!

As far as this specific interpretation is concerned, I am not aware of any authority who claims that it is the *only* way to interpret the verse. Not too many commentators mention it, but those who do tend to call it an "alternative" or a "possibility."

Here are two of the reference books that mention this view (others probably exist): "The New International Version Study Bible" (older edition - I haven't checked the newer one) and "The Bible Knowledge Commentary - Old Testament." Both mention it in their comments about Proverbs 25:22 (the verse quoted in Romans 12:20), and describe it as *one possibility among several*.

Most reference books don't say much about this issue. "The NIV Theological Dictionary of N.T. Words" merely states that there are different opinions as to what it means. Other resources often don't say much about the historical background, but focus on the meaning - the fact that we are to express kindness and love to our enemies.

A few commentaries make vague comments about "burning coals" being symbolic of divine judgment. One expressed two ideas: 1) our acts of kindness will either "burn his conscience" (my paraphrase of the commentator's words) until he repents... or if he refuses to repent, 2) it will increase God's judgment against him.

I hope this helps! Whatever view you reach, don't get too "closed-minded" about it, since we really don't know for sure. Just make sure you do what the apostle describes as the application of the principle. Show love and kindness to your enemies!