

To Heap Burning Coals On A Head

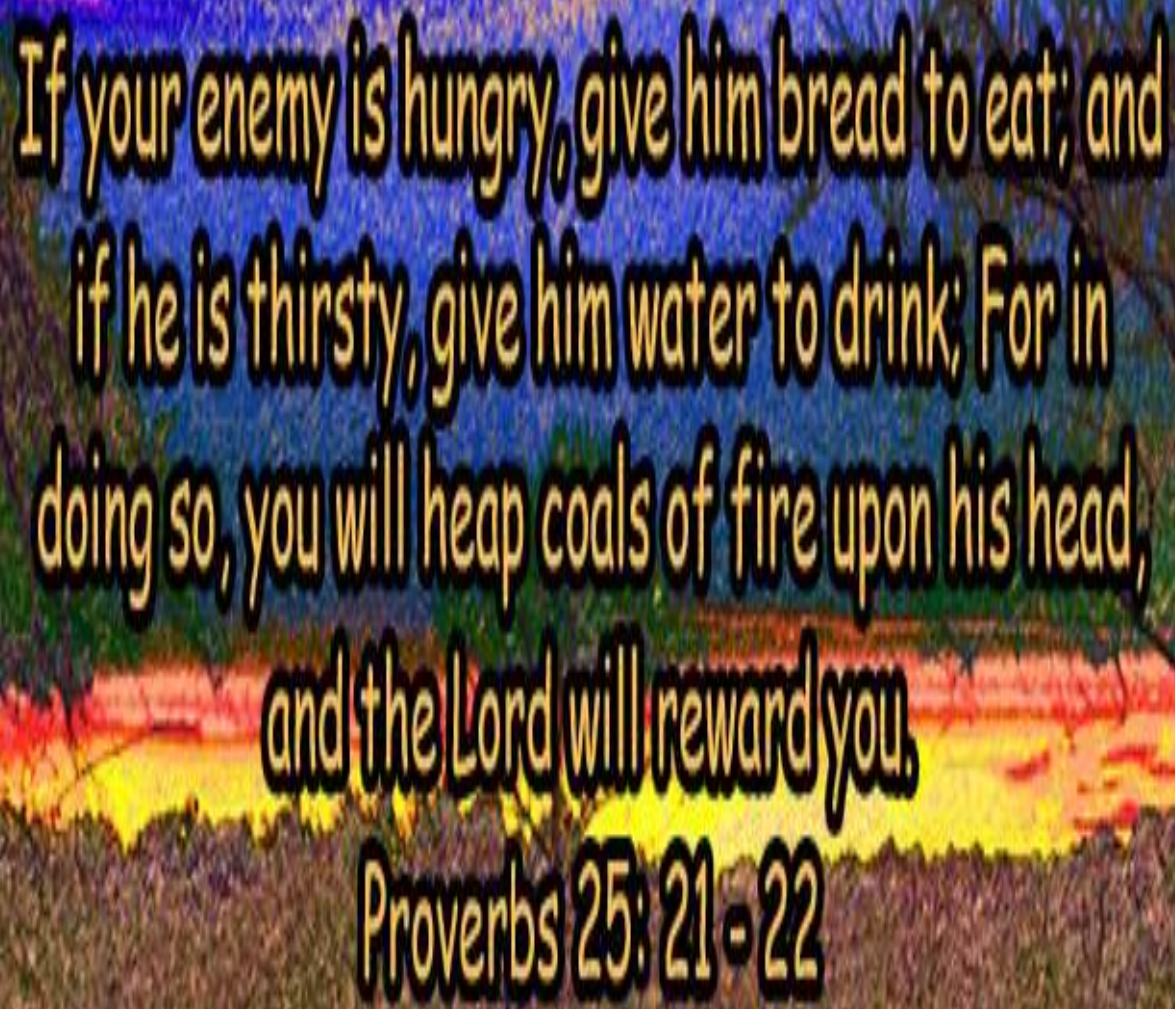
by **David Lee Burris**

What does it mean to
“heap burning coals”
on our enemy’s head?



Bible Love
Notes

Romans
12:20



If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; For in
doing so, you will heap coals of fire upon his head,
and the Lord will reward you.
Proverbs 25: 21 - 22

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Keil and Delitzsch Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament

21 If thine enemy hunger, feed him with bread;

And if he thirst, give him water to drink.

22 For thereby thou heapest burning coals on his head,

And Jahve will recompense it to thee.

The translation of this proverb by the lxx is without fault; Paul cites therefrom [Romans 12:20](#). The participial construction of 22a, the lxx, rightly estimating it, thus renders: for, doing this, thou shalt heap coals on his head. The expression, "thou shalt heap" ($\sigma\omega\rho\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\sigma\epsilon\iota\varsigma$), is also appropriate; for $\eta\eta\eta$ certainly means first only to fetch or bring fire (vid., [Proverbs 6:27](#)); but here, by virtue of the constructio praegnans with על , to fetch, and hence to heap up - to pile upon. Burning pain, as commonly observed, is the figure of burning shame, on account of undeserved kindness shown by an enemy (Fleischer). But how burning coals heaped on the head can denote burning shame, is not to be perceived, for the latter is a burning on the cheeks; wherefore Hitzig and Rosenmller explain: thou wilt thus bring on him the greatest pain, and appease thy vengeance, while at the same time Jahve will reward thy generosity. **Now we say, indeed, that he who rewards evil with good takes the noblest revenge**; but if this doing of good proceed from a revengeful aim, and is intended sensibly to humble an adversary, then it loses all its moral worth, and is changed into selfish, malicious wickedness. Must the proverb then be understood in this ignoble sense? The Scriptures elsewhere say that guilt and punishment are laid on the head of any one when he is made to experience and to bear them. Chrysostom and others therefore explain after [Psalm 140:10](#) and similar passages, but thereby the proverb is morally falsified, and [Proverbs 25:22](#) accords with [Proverbs 25:21](#), which counsels not to the avenging of oneself, but to the requital of evil with good.

The burning of coals laid on the head must be a painful but wholesome consequence; it is a figure of self-accusing repentance (Augustine, Zckler), for the producing of which the showing of good to an enemy is a noble motive. That God rewards such magnanimity may not be the special motive; but this view might contribute to it, for otherwise such promises of God as [Isaiah 58:8-12](#) were without moral right. The proverb also requires one to show himself gentle and liberal toward a needy enemy, and present a twofold reason for this: first, that thereby his injustice is brought home to his conscience; and, secondly, that thus God is well-pleased in such practical love toward an enemy, and will reward it; - by such conduct, apart from the performance of a law grounded in our moral nature, one advances the happiness of his neighbor and his own.

Barnes' Notes on the Bible

Therefore, if thine enemy hunger ... - This verse is taken almost literally from [Proverbs 25:21-22](#). Hunger and thirst here are put for want in general. If thine enemy is needy in any way, do him good, and supply his needs. This is, in spirit, the same as the command of the Lord Jesus [Matthew 5:44](#), "Do good to them that hate you," etc.

In so doing - It does not mean that we are to do this "for the sake" of heaping coals of fire on him, but that this will be the result.

Thou shalt heap ... - Coals of fire are doubtless emblematical of "pain." But the idea here is not that in so doing we shall call down divine vengeance on the man; but the apostle is speaking of the natural effect or result of showing him kindness. **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. But the pain will result from shame, remorse of conscience, a conviction of the evil of his conduct, and an apprehension of divine displeasure that may lead to repentance. To do this, is not only perfectly right, but it is desirable. If a man can be brought to reflection and true repentance, it should be done.** In regard to this passage we may remark,

(1) That the way to promote "peace" is to do good even to enemies.

(2) the way to bring a man to repentance is to do him good. On this principle God is acting continually. He does good to all, even to the rebellious; and he designs that his goodness should lead people to repentance; [Romans 2:4](#). People will resist wrath, anger, and power; but "goodness" they cannot resist; it finds its way to the heart; and the conscience does its work, and the sinner is overwhelmed at the remembrance of his crimes.

(3) if people would act on the principles of the gospel, the world would soon be at peace. No man would suffer himself many times to be overwhelmed in this way with coals of fire. It is not human nature, bad as it is; and if Christians would meet all unkindness with kindness, all malice with benevolence, and all wrong with right, peace would soon pervade the community, and even opposition to the gospel might soon die away.

Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible

Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him,.... These words are taken from [Proverbs 25:21](#), and to be understood, as a Jewish (o) writer observes, according to "their literal sense"; though some of the Rabbins explain them in an allegorical way, of the corruption of nature. The Alexandrian copy and some others, and the Vulgate Latin version, reads "but if"; so far should the saints be from meditating revenge upon their enemies, that they should do good unto them, as Christ directs, [Matthew 5:44](#), by feeding them when hungry, and giving drink unto them when thirsty:

if he thirst give him drink; which includes all offices of humanity and beneficence to be performed unto them: the reason, or argument inducing hereunto is,

for in so doing, thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head; not to do him hurt, not to aggravate his condemnation, as if this would be a means of bringing down the wrath of God the more fiercely on him, which is a sense given by some; as if this would be an inducement to the saints to do such acts of kindness; which is just the reverse of the spirit and temper of mind the apostle is here cultivating; but rather the sense is, that by so doing, his conscience would be stung with a sense of former injuries done to his benefactor, and he be filled with shame on account of them, and be brought to repentance for them, and to love the person he before hated, and be careful of doing him any wrong for the future; all which may be considered as a prevailing motive to God's people to act the generous part they are here moved to: in the passage referred to, [Proverbs 25:21](#), "bread" and "water" are mentioned as to be given, which include all the necessaries of life: and it is added for encouragement, "and the Lord shall reward thee". The sense given of this passage by some of the Jewish commentators on it agrees with what has been observed in some measure; says one (p) of them,

"when he remembers the food and drink thou hast given him, thou shall burn him, as if thou putttest coals upon his head to burn him, , and "he will take care of doing thee any ill";"

that is, for the time to come: and another of them observes (q) that

"this matter will be hard unto him, as if thou heapest coals on his head to burn him, "because of the greatness of his shame", on account of the good that he shall receive from thee, for the evil which he hath rendered to thee."

This advice of showing kindness to enemies, and against private revenge, is very contrary to the dictates of human nature, as corrupted by sin. The former of these Julian the emperor represents (r) as a "paradox", though he owns it to be lawful, and a good action, to give clothes and food to enemies in war; and the latter, to revenge an injury, he says (s), is a law common to all men, Greeks and Barbarians; but the Gospel and the grace of God teach us another lesson.

HEAP BURNING COALS ON ENEMY HEADS

Our culture's preference for information in 140 characters or fewer is no modern invention. Ancient peoples shared our taste for brevity, as evidenced in the proverbs—short, pithy truisms about life. But brevity has its downsides. Sometimes we need more detail or context to understand a proverb's true message.

Proverbs 25:22 is a good example: “For you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.” Is this proverb Solomon's idea of “an eye for an eye”? I've heard more than one sermon that took that angle. Examining the wider context of this passage, however, shows that this is an unfortunate misinterpretation.

A REBUTTAL TO RETALIATION

To better understand Proverbs 25:22, we need to read it in the context of the preceding verse:

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you. (Proverbs 25:21–22)

Proverbs 25:21 gives no hint that revenge is an option for the wise person—one who fears the Lord (Prov 1:7; 9:10). Rather, this verse is a rebuttal to retaliation. Instead of suggesting that we seek vengeance, it encourages us to show kindness to our enemy: If he is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him water. This aligns with the wider biblical teachings on the treatment of enemies. For example, consider Proverbs 24:17–18:

Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.

The Old Testament law likewise discourages us from seizing opportunities to harm our enemies: “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him” (Exodus 23:4). Both verses promote kindness toward enemies and hint that attitudes seeking harm for them are displeasing to God. This is a far cry from an eye-for-an-eye mentality.

BURNING SHAME

Another difficulty in understanding Proverbs 25:22 is the idea of heaping burning coals on someone’s head. This is a foreign concept to modern readers. Cultural context can help here. Some interpreters see the burning coals as a metaphorical reference to an Egyptian custom whereby a person who had been shamed would bear a pan of smoldering coals on top of his head as an outward display of shame and regret. Others see the language—which involves burning—as an expression of the inward burning of shame. Proverbs uses the metaphor of burning fire elsewhere to describe the anguish of shame, as in the warnings about infidelity in Proverbs 6:27–28:

**Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned?
Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?**

While we can’t be completely sure which image or metaphor is in play, both capture the intent of Proverbs 25:22 well: By treating our enemies with kindness, we will put them to shame. Loving our enemies will make them ashamed of themselves and hopefully move them toward repentance (compare Matthew 5:43–44). In this way, mercy is the best revenge.¹

¹ Heiser, M. S. (2017). *The Bible Unfiltered: Approaching Scripture on Its Own Terms* (pp. 129–131). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Proverbs 25: 21-22 & Romans 12:20 @ Burning Coals?

The image of pouring burning coals on another's head — even though we realize that it is a figure of speech—conjures up negative connotations. It sounds like vengeance or retribution. Surely that is not the result to be achieved by acts of kindness. Could Paul be saying that doing good to one's enemies is an indirect way of punishing them?

These negative assessments disappear rather quickly when we see this passage in its larger context (both in Rom 12 and in Prov 25:21–22, from where it is cited) and properly grasp the meaning of this figure of speech in its ancient Near Eastern setting.

The entire context argues against the possibility of interpreting this figure in a negative sense. As a whole, Romans 12 begins the final section of the epistle in which Paul, on the basis of his theology of justification and the empowering of Christian life by the Spirit, works out some of the practical implications of this theology for everyday Christian existence. He begins by speaking of the transformation of life in such a way that God's good will is accomplished in and through Christians (Romans 12:1–2). He continues by showing that as Christians we do not stand alone in this task, but are one body, gifted by God's grace to empower each other in mutual loving service (Romans 12:3–13). Then he focuses on Christians' existence in the larger world, a world which, for the early believers, was often hostile toward the followers of Christ (Romans 12:14–21).

In such a world, it would have been very natural and easy to build resentment, to lash out, to resort to even violent means in order to protect oneself against hostility & persecution. But Paul knew, on the basis of Jesus' "suffering servant" messiahship, that the way of bitterness, resentment and violence was not to be the way of Jesus' followers in this world. God's love, demonstrated in Jesus' death on the cross and poured into believers' hearts (Romans 5:5), was stronger than hate. He had experienced its grasp on his life while he was a persecutor of Christians (see Phil 3:4–12).

The proper response to those who persecute is to bless, not curse, them (Romans 12:14). The evil done to you should not be repaid by evil (Romans 12:17). In situations of conflict, Christians ought to be about the search for peace (Rom 12:18). Where the world's values would call for retribution and vengeance when evil is done to us, we are, on the contrary, to respond in love and kindness, going as far as giving food and drink to enemies who are hungry and thirsty (Romans 12:19–20). Why? Because God is the one who judges and holds evildoers responsible in the final judgment (Rom 12:19).

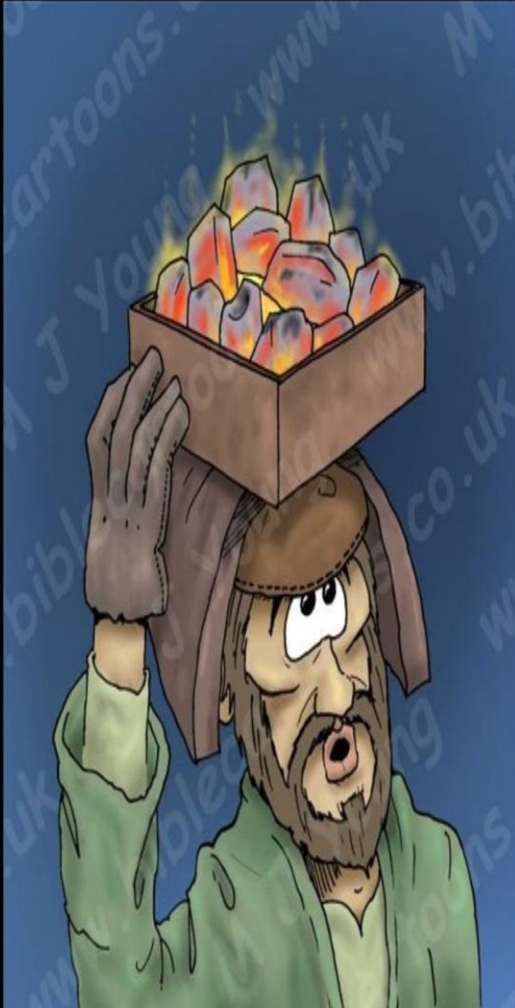
When we respond to evil in the radically unexpected form of goodness, we are in effect pouring “burning coals” on the head of the perpetrator of evil (Romans 12:20). Paul drives home this radical Christian response to evil, urging that we refuse to “overcome by evil,” but instead “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). Romans 12:21, in confirmation of the entire context of the passage, demonstrates the figure of “pouring burning coals” is to be understood as an act of goodness, as something which “overcomes evil with good.” This meaning of the figure is confirmed even by the context in Proverbs 25:21–22, which closes with the words “and the Lord will reward you.” And in the Old Testament, God’s rewards are always seen as response to human acts of kindness.

This analysis of the context shows that the image of burning coals must have a *positive meaning*. It does not tell us precisely what that meaning is, what “pouring burning coals” on an enemy’s head is to accomplish. To that question we now turn. Romans 12:2 implies the “burning coals” image refers to an “overcoming” of evil. How is the evil of the enemy to be overcome? Help in answering this question comes from both biblical (internal) & nonbiblical (external) sources. In the narrative of the prophet Isaiah’s call (Isaiah 6), the recognition of his sinfulness receives a divine response of purging/purification. A burning coal is taken from the altar and applied to his mouth, with the assurance that “your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven” (Isaiah 6:7). This connection between burning coals and repentance and cleansing is also present (though not as directly) in Malachi’s picture of God as one who is “like a refiner’s fire” (Malachi 3:2). As fire refines silver & gold to purify it, so God will “purify the sons of Levi till they present right offerings to the LORD” (Malachi 3:3). The point of this passage is that Israel’s sin and disobedience shall be separated out through the refining process of God’s judgment. A possible cultural background, outside the Bible, for connection between burning coals/fire & purging of sin/evil is to be seen in the ancient Egyptian custom in which a penitent demonstrated his repentance because of a wrong committed by carrying a dish of burning coals on his head. Some commentators see this as the immediate background of the proverb which Paul cites (Proverbs 25:21–22).

In light of the above discussion, the purpose of “pouring burning coals” seems to be that, when good is returned for evil, then evil may be overcome; the antagonist may be transformed by a renewal of mind, a change of orientation from darkness to light.²

² Kaiser, W. C., Jr., Davids, P. H., Bruce, F. F., & Brauch, M. T. (1996). [*Hard sayings of the Bible*](#) (pp. 572–574). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

Heaping Burning Coals?



“Heaping ‘coals of fire on their heads’ sounds like taking vengeance to us. In the Bible lands, almost everything is carried on the head. 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.”

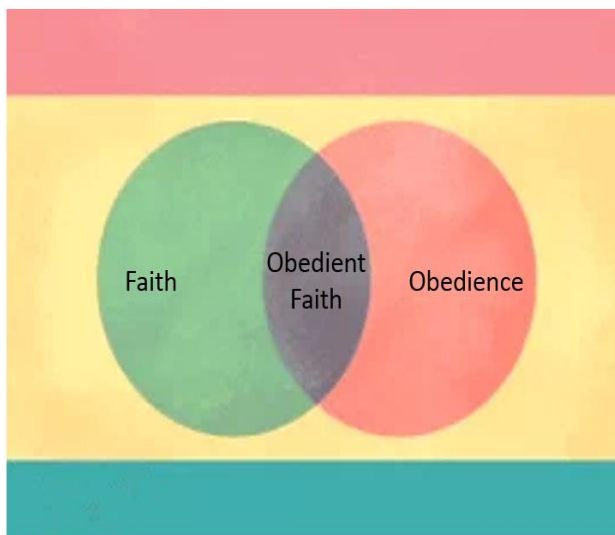
Barbara Bowen

Strange Scriptures that Perplex the Western Mind

AT THE NEXUS OF GRACE & GLORY

Five Steps For Saving:

- **HEARING:**
- **Romans 10: 17; Matthew 7: 24 - 27**
- **BELIEVING:**
- **Hebrews 11: 6; Mark 16: 15, 16**
- **REPENTING:**
- **Acts 2: 38; 17: 30; Luke 13: 3**
- **CONFESSING:**
- **Matthew 10: 32, 33; Acts 8: 36, 37**
- **BAPTISM:**
- **Romans 6: 3 – 5; Acts 8: 36 – 38**



O That Will Be Glory

2. *Wh* **O that will be glory for me,** *e grace,*

I an **Glory for me, glory for me;** *ce,*

When by His **glory for me, glory for me,** *ce,*

That will be **glory, be glory for me.** *me.*

