**THE HARDEST COMMAND IN THE BIBLE**

**Part 3**

**Heap Coals Of Fire On His Head**

Politics is a bloodsport. Most U. S. Presidents have had to endure a relentless firestorm of hatred from the opposition party. His enemies would be legion from the other side of the aisle. But few, if any, have ever had to withstand such venom from his own party as did Abraham Lincoln. He was called everything under the sun even by jealous Republicans. These career politicians resented this upstart country bumpkin from the western prairie of Illinois winning the Oval Office, while these sophisticated blue-bloods from the east were overlooked. They hated him with a purple passion.

I have read Donald Phillips book *Lincoln On Leadership*. Let me tell you something I learned that applies to my study of Romans 12:20-21.

There was a high-powered Washington D.C. lawyer and future Attorney General named Edwin Stanton who looked down his nose at this backwoods hick lawyer from Springfield. After meeting Lincoln he began to call him names, including “a giraffe” (making fun of his long lean body and homely face). In 1855 Stanton was hired to be the lead attorney in the famous McCormick Reaper case in Chicago. He needed an Illinois lawyer on his team, so hired Lincoln. But he did so only to use him, then lose him. He never used any of Lincoln’s well-studied work. Lincoln got the hint he was despised and so retired from the case.

Five years later Abraham Lincoln was the nation’s new President! And war was imminent. Stanton still thought Lincoln an ignorant fool and said as much. But Lincoln had to put together a cabinet that would be able to successfully prosecute a bloody war and preserve the Union. He needed the best on his team. The War Department was in a horrible mess. It was totally disorganized. In the first year of the War there were 31 battles fought between April and December. The North only won 14. The Union needed organization and leadership at the War Department. The best man for the job was none other than Edwin Stanton. Lincoln would rather lose his pride than lose the war. He appointed Stanton as Secretary of War. Lincoln’s friends went ballistic.

Old Abe was criticized heavily for bringing his enemies into his cabinet. He was asked, “Why do you try to make friends of them, when you should be trying to destroy them?” His reply? “Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?” I love that answer. His leadership was on full display in his first inaugural address when he was trying to hold the nation together. He famously appealed to the southern states this way:

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Lincoln believed that all men were made in God’s image, which is what he meant by “the better angels of our nature.” We all have the spark of divinity, of eternity, within us (“*He has put eternity in their hearts*” – Eccl. 3:11). Even our worst enemies have souls that will stand before God. We must never forget that.

Lincoln and Stanton became inseparable during the next four years. They came to trust each other implicitly. They won the war and preserved the union together. On April 9th it was Stanton that met Lincoln with a loving bear hug and was the first to tell him the good news of Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. They were now best friends forever (BFF)! Five days later the president was assassinated. It was Stanton who then uttered, “Now he belongs to the ages.” He had destroyed his enemy by making him his friend.

*20 Therefore, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing* ***you will heap coals of fire on his head****.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (Rom. 12:20-21)

What an interesting phrase, “*you will heap coals of fire on his head*.” Sounds brutal. I’ve been burned by hot coals and it smarts. To think of pouring red-hot charcoal on the head of my enemy is not my idea of winning his friendship. So what does this mean?

The full context of Romans 12:9-21 can suggest one of two possible meanings. Paul is quoting from the imprecatory (“*an appeal for divine justice*”) Psalm 140. Here is what David thought when his enemies, like Saul, were pursuing to kill him:

*7 O GOD the Lord, the strength of my salvation, You have covered my head in the day of battle.
8 Do not grant, O LORD, the desires of the wicked; Do not further his wicked scheme, Lest they be exalted. Selah 9 “As for the head of those who surround me, Let the evil of their lips cover them; 10 Let burning coals fall upon them; Let them be cast into the fire, Into deep pits, that they rise not up again.”*

Like a helmet God covered David’s head in battle to protect him, but asked God to let evil cover the heads of his enemy, even to let burning coals fall on their bare heads and cast them into deep pits of fire. Whoa! That’s serious retribution. David was turning to God to exact vengeance on his enemies. Let God be Judge and Executioner. That’s one way to look at it.

A second way is to study David’s own method with Saul in I Samuel 24. Read this moving story yourself. David could have killed Saul himself… twice! In this account David is urged by his troops to kill Saul while he was in the very cave where David was, “*attending to his needs*.” Instead of taking revenge he instead merely cuts off a corner of the king’s robe to later use as evidence that he could have killed him. But he yells to Saul these immortal words:

*12 Let the LORD judge between you and me, and let the LORD avenge me on you. But my hand shall not be against you. 13 As the proverb of the ancients says, Wickedness proceeds from the wicked.’ But my hand shall not be against you… 15 Therefore let the LORD be judge, and judge between you and me, and see and plead my case, and deliver me out of your hand.”*

Saul was shaken to his soul. He wept in shame. He repented openly of his treating David as a fugitive, vowing to give up the chase. Perhaps this is the meaning of “*heap coals of fire on his head*.”

Whether the phrase conveys the idea of leaving divine retribution in the hands of God (see vs. 19), or bringing your enemy to a state of humility and repentance (see vss. 9,12,14,17,18,21), either way fits the context of Romans 12. And either way is what God has asked of us as we deal with the evil of this world. “*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do*.” Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends? Saul became Paul, just as Stanton became Lincoln’s BFF.

Until next time… “The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched … by the better angels of our nature.” Overcome evil with good.

I love you.

Rick