

# OpenTheo

## February 28th: Lamentations 4 & Romans 12

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The horrific demise of the city. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Lamentations chapter 4. Lamentations chapter 5. Lamentations chapter 6. Lamentations chapter 7. Lamentations chapter 8. Lamentations chapter 9. Lamentations chapter 10. Lamentations chapter 4 is the fourth poem describing Jerusalem's distress. Chapter 3 moved us towards a point where Jerusalem could properly address the Lord in its grief.

And this movement continues in chapter 4. Like chapters 1 and 2, it begins with the word how, with a derge-like statement about the condition of the people. Chapters 1 and 2 are poems with 66 lines, divided into 22 verses, each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3's acrostic pattern is even more pronounced still.

Each successive set of three lines all begin with a particular letter of the alphabet, in alphabetical sequence. Like these other chapters, chapter 4 also has an acrostic pattern. But here there are only two lines per verse, making 44 lines instead of 66.

And only the first line of each verse follows the acrostic pattern. Within this chapter there are four principal speeches. Verses 1 to 10, 11 to 16, 17 to 20, and 21 to 22.

Once again there are different speakers, but it's not always clear who is the person speaking. Is the first person singular within the third person narration in verses 1 to 16, indicative of an individual member of the community speaking? Or is Jerusalem herself speaking? Is the voice in verses 11 to 16 the voice of someone in the community, or of a more detached narrator? Some clues to answering these questions can be discovered in comparable passages elsewhere in the book. The chapter begins by speaking of the way that the glory of Jerusalem had become dimmed.

Once pure gold, that gold has become tarnished. While gold would not be tarnished, this gold has decreased in its splendour. In addition, the holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street.

What the holy stones are is not immediately obvious. Some have suggested a reference to the precious stones that are part of the garments of the high priest, and other precious stones associated with the temple. Perhaps a more natural interpretation would be as a reference to the stones of the temple itself.

A further possibility that this is a reference to the people of Jerusalem is raised in part by the verse that follows. The precious sons of Zion might be related to the precious stones of Zion. They are now regarded as of little value, as earthen pots.

Here we might recall Jeremiah's symbolic action in Jeremiah chapter 19 verses 1 to 11. Thus says the Lord, go by a potter's earthenware flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests, and go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom at the entry of the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you. You shall say, Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah, and inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such disaster upon this place, that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah have known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of innocents, and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind. Therefore, behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when this place shall no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter.

And in this place I will make void the plans of Judah and Jerusalem, and will cause their people to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hand of those who seek their life. I will give their dead bodies for food to the birds of the air, and to the beasts of the earth. And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at.

Everyone who passes by it will be horrified, and will hiss because of all its wounds. And I will make them eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, and everyone shall eat the flesh of his neighbor in the siege and in the distress, with which their enemies and those who seek their life afflict them. Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and shall say to them, Thus says the Lord of hosts, so will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended.

In the distress of the siege which led to extreme famine, the people became desperate and cruel as a result, no longer even showing maternal tenderness. Mothers were not feeding their young, even abandoning them. Other women, as we see later in the chapter, would even eat their children.

The example of the ostriches' lack of maternal care is also found in Job chapter 39, verses 13-16. The wings of the ostrich wave proudly, but are they the pinions and plumage of love? For she leaves her eggs to the earth, and lets them be warmed on the ground, forgetting that her foot may crush them, and that the wild beast may trample them. She deals cruelly with her young, as if they were not hers.

Once again, dying infants and starving children are presented as a particularly powerful image of the desperation of the city of Jerusalem and its people. In Lamentations chapter 2, verses 11-12, My eyes are spent with weeping, my stomach churns, my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, Where is bread and wine? as they faint like a wounded man in the streets of the city, as their life is poured out on their mother's bosom.

The languishing of those who were rich and powerful within the city is a further example of how far it has fallen. Those who had once dined on the best food are begging in the streets. Those once dwelling in great palaces and dressed in the finest clothes are now in the ash heap.

Verse 6 contrasts either the punishment of Jerusalem with that of Sodom, or its iniquity. Most likely, its punishment. Sodom's judgment came suddenly.

Jerusalem's was painfully drawn out, far preferable to be taken quickly than to suffer such a long and devastating judgment as that experienced by Jerusalem in the siege and the famine and the pestilence. Verses 7-10 continue this description of the terrible condition that certain members of the city have fallen into. The group described in verse 10 has been variously understood as young men, as Nazarites or as princes.

If they are Nazarites, the point is presumably that the most religiously devoted of the city are suffering so terribly. If its the case for the princes, its the juxtaposition between their earlier riches and their current lack. And if it is the young men, it is the demise of the handsome and hearty youths that is particularly in view.

Starving due to the famine, their skin has changed colour, its become shrunken and dry, and they are now tragically unrecognisable to people who once knew them. It might seem that they would have been far better off to have died suddenly by the sword than to suffer in such a grim fashion. Yet far more horrifying still are the lengths to which certain mothers have gone in eating their own children.

This is one of the curses of the covenant in Leviticus chapter 26 and also in Deuteronomy chapter 28. In 2 Kings chapter 6, in the siege of Samaria, we see a historical example of this taking place. Verses 11-16 seem to introduce a different voice.

Verses 1-10 is the voice of someone within the community. In these verses, the voice seems to be of someone slightly more detached. Verse 11 describes the cause of the city's downfall.

The Lord gave full vent to his wrath, he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations. This is language that is found elsewhere in the book. Given its successful defence against Sennacherib in 701 BC, and also the way that it had rebelled against the Babylonians without yet having been destroyed, the surrounding nations might have believed that Jerusalem stood strong, that it would not be easily overcome.

The cause of the destruction of Jerusalem here is particularly identified as the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests. It was on account of the sins of the religious leaders that the city was destroyed. The prophets had engaged in false prophecy, the priests had compromised the worship of the temple.

However, here it is their shedding of the blood of the righteous that is particularly singled out. One might think back to Jeremiah chapter 26, where Jeremiah is almost put to death, and in that chapter the prophet Uriah suffers just such a fate. Verse 14 describes a group that are wandering blind through the streets defiled by blood.

Is this a reference to the righteous? It is more likely still a reference to the prophets and the priests. Defiled by the blood of their victims, they become bearers of uncleanness, that have to be thrust out of society like leprous persons. While they seek sanctuary in other countries, they don't want them there either.

The Lord has scattered them because he has disregarded them, just as they disregarded him in the messengers that he sent to them. In its latter days, the kingdom of Judah had looked to Egypt for help, and yet, although there was a false dawn where it seemed that the Egyptians were going to come to their aid and the Babylonians left off the siege for a short period, there was no such help forthcoming. The Babylonians tightened the noose and when they tried to escape, they were pursued and hunted down effectively.

When the Davidic king Zedekiah, in whom they had placed their trust, tried to escape, he

was successfully pursued. Members of his household were killed in front of his eyes, his eyes were removed and he was taken to Babylon. The king here is described as the breath of our nostrils, the one who gave the people life.

Without him, they are dead as a nation. He is also described as their shade, the one who protects them as they live among the nations. Now they are scattered among the nations.

The imagery of the king as the one shading his people is found in Isaiah chapter 32 verses 1-2 as well. Behold, a king will reign in righteousness and princes will rule in justice. Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.

Without the shadow of their king over them, they are subject to the harsh and unrelenting heat of Babylon beating down upon them. The chapter ends, however, with a turn in Jerusalem's condition. Edom, the descendants of the brother of Israel Esau, had taken advantage of Jerusalem at its lowest point, gloating over Judah as it was judged by the Lord.

But its time would come too. The cup of the Lord's wrath would pass to it. The judgment about to come upon Edom is described in Obadiah verses 10-16.

Do not boast in the day of distress. Do not enter the gate of my people in the day of their calamity. Do not gloat over his disaster in the day of his calamity.

Do not loot his wealth in the day of his calamity. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut off his fugitives. Do not hand over his survivors in the day of distress.

For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you. Your deeds shall return on your own head.

For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, so all the nations shall drink continually. They shall drink and swallow, and shall be as though they had never been. The final verse gives a note of relief.

The punishment for Daughter Zion's sins is accomplished. Edom's is still to come. The Book of Joel ends on a similar note.

In chapter 3 verses 19-21, Egypt shall become a desolation, and Edom a desolate wilderness, for the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land. But Judah shall be inhabited forever, and Jerusalem to all generations. I will avenge their blood, blood I have not avenged, for the Lord dwells in Zion.

A question to consider, why is the judgment of Edom a sign of hope and restoration for

Jerusalem? Romans chapter 12 But to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.

If prophecy, in proportion to our faith, if service, in our serving, the one who teaches in his teaching, the one who exhorts in his exhortation, the one who contributes in generosity, the one who leads with zeal, the one who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness. Let love be genuine, abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honour.

Do not be slothful and zeal, be fervent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope.

Be patient in tribulation. Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another.

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he is thirsty, give him something to drink, for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. In Romans chapter 12, Paul's grand vision of the gospel assumes clearer practical shape, one grounded in the life of the church as the renewed people of God.

Here we find the answer to the crisis of humanity disclosed in chapter 1, with the formation of a new humanity, ordered not towards idolatry, but true worship. As false worship led to the breaking down of humanity in chapter 1, the restoration of humanity begins with true worship in this chapter. This chapter also looks back to chapter 8, with the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law in those who live according to the spirit, and the formation of a new people in the fullness of time, people conformed to the image of Christ.

It also looks back to the portrayal of God's sheer grace in the formation of his people in chapters 9-11, where the mercy of God was foregrounded. Paul's ethical instruction is firmly rooted in his theological vision. There are many who believe that we can abstract the ethical dimensions from the Christian message, so as either to have a sort of Christian morality apart from Christian faith, or increasingly to have Christian faith

purged of certain unwelcome ethical elements.

Paul does not allow for either of these divides. The therefore in verse 1 connects this with what has preceded it. The grounds to which Paul appeals are the mercies of God, which have been the subject of much of the preceding chapters, for instance chapter 11 verses 30-32.

For just as you were at one time disobedient to God, but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient, in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. While Paul uses a different term in these references, the fundamental reality of mercy is the same.

The call to the heroes of the epistles to present their bodies as a living sacrifice frames Christian obedience in terms of the offerings of temple worship. Such worship is fulfilled in the worship of the church, a worship confirmed in transformed lives. Sacrifice was always symbolic.

It represented the offering of the person, their entire self and all of their actions, under the symbol of an animal ascending to God in smoke. The sacrifice required confirmation in the living of lives that were oriented to God in the same way as the sacrifice symbolized. The sacrifice here is a living one.

Unlike the animals which were killed before they were sacrificed, the true human sacrifice is of a living body, a body devoted to God's service. On several occasions the New Testament speaks of sacrifice continuing in the life of the church. However, what was once the offering of animals in a physical temple is now the offering of human bodies, their actions and their gifts in the spirit.

1 Peter 2-4-5 As you come to him a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Philippians 4-18 I have received full payment and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

Here we have a gift of money or resources presented as a sacrifice. Philippians 2-17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. The faith of the Philippian Christians is here a sacrifice, and Paul's potential martyrdom presented as a drink offering placed upon that.

2 Timothy 4-6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. Hebrews 13-15-16 Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not

neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

The bodies that are offered are plural, but the sacrifice is singular. It is most likely that the term sacrifice is being used to refer to the mode of sacrifice that is being offered. However, there might possibly be a reference to the corporate character of the offering of our bodies.

Although each Christian's body is a temple, we are also a temple together. We individually have bodies, but we are also the body of Christ together. We offer our bodies individually, but all in fellowship with others as well.

As we saw back in chapter 6, we must present our members to God as instruments of righteousness for his obedient service. This is a sort of sacrifice. We might also think of the priests here, as they were offered to the Lord as servants in ways analogous to the offering of animal sacrifices.

It is bodies that we are offering. We might perhaps recall Paul's discussion of baptism in chapter 6. In baptism, our bodies are formally presented to God, washed as sacrifices, marked out as his possession and as his dwelling place by his spirit. God claims our physicality for his service, not just incorporeal souls or minds.

Our bodies are holy and acceptable to God as sacrifices. Here again we get a sense of why treating the body with honour is of such importance for Paul. This also contrasts with the dishonouring of the body in sexual immorality that Paul described back in chapter 1. This is spiritual or reasonable worship, worship that is appropriate to what God has accomplished for us in Christ.

Christians must be separate from the world, not conform to it. It is incredibly difficult not to assume the patterns of the world around us. This is one of several reasons why the church as a new community is so important.

We are creatures given to imitation, and without positive examples to imitate around us, we will easily assume the patterns of surrounding society. Paul instructs the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ. We need communities of mutual imitation in holiness and faithfulness.

Instead of being conformed to the world, we must be subject to an ongoing process of transformation. Paul doesn't seem to allow for any neutral position here. You are either being conformed or you are being transformed.

The transformation involves the renewal of the mind. We might here recall Paul's statements concerning the mind in chapter 8 verses 5-7. Sin develops from a fundamental disposition of the heart and mind.

It is a matter of our loves, our desires, imaginations and longings. Paul described this



back in chapter 1 as minds were darkened in ignorance and people were given over to folly, with dishonouring passions and debased minds devoted to all sorts of evil. Deliverance from the dominion of the flesh in our lives requires a renewal of the mind, a change in the fundamental orientation of our spirits within the world.

Instead of darkened minds, our minds will be equipped to discern the will of God and that which is good, acceptable and perfect, enabling us to pursue ways of life in which, rather than debasing ourselves, we rise to our full stature. Paul charges the hearers of the epistle not to have too high an opinion of themselves. This ties in with Paul's highly developed critique of boasting.

Boasting must be grounded in God's grace, not in that which belongs to us in ourselves. Greater humility is connected with a greater aptitude for handling great gifts. As Jesus teaches in Matthew 23 verses 11-12, The greatest among you shall be your servant.

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. We must think about ourselves soberly, not as those who are puffed up, but as those who appreciate that we are the recipients of great gifts, completely apart from what we deserve. According to Paul, the measure for thinking about ourselves must be the measure of faith that God has assigned to us.

There are two possible ways of reading this at least. The first, which I prefer, would be a reference to each person having a different measure committed to them. The thought then would be similar to 2 Corinthians 10 verse 13, but we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you.

John Barclay notes the fact that the word used for faith here could be used in the sense of trusteeship in other writings contemporary with Paul, which I think is the most natural way of understanding this. It's that which is committed to your charge. A second possibility is that the faith in question is the common gift of faith received by all in Christ.

The commonality of the one faith that we have would prevent us from exalting ourselves over others. The content of the faith would also humble us in our recognition that we have nothing that we did not receive. We have a similar choice to make between two possible senses of the term faith in verse 6. Paul proceeds to describe the church as a body with many members, its diversity in service of its growth in unity, its unity not of flattening out of its members, but a common good represented by each member in some regard to the whole.

Paul expresses this reality in much more detail in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. The church has been given the one gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. However, each of us exercises our individual gifts of the Spirit to each other, and should recognize in each other a refraction of the one gift that is common to us all, but so often received through each

other.

Paul's vision isn't one of a flat equality of individuals, but of a dynamic mutual involvement of persons who are what they are in fellowship with and in service of each other. This all occurs in Christ, the Messiah, who is the source and the site of our unity. Likewise, as members in a body, rather than members in a club, the distinctiveness, the dignity and the indispensability of each member is emphasized.

Our unity is of the single body in Christ. However, individually, we are also members of each other. Paul's point isn't merely that we are all individually in a vertical relationship to our common head, Christ.

We also have horizontal relationships with each other. We are members not just of Christ, but also of each other in Christ. We have responsibilities to each other, not least that of honoring each other as brothers and sisters.

Paul lists a number of different gifts that can be exercised within the body of Christ. Prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leading and acts of mercy. This list is not comprehensive, and it also differs from the list that we find elsewhere, in places such as 1 Corinthians chapter 12 or Ephesians 4. The list here, for instance, is of more ordinary gifts in contrast to the sign gifts that are more prominent in 1 Corinthians.

If you have gifts, God desires that you use them for the benefit of others and for his glory. As you do so, you yourself can grow. God has given to us in order that we might share in his giving process.

We are rich as we give our gifts to others, not in order to build ourselves up, but to serve others. The exercise of various gifts is also connected with appropriate corresponding virtues. Contributing should be done with generosity, leading with zeal, and acts of mercy with cheerfulness.

It doesn't just matter that we exercise our gifts, how we do so matters too. As we read in 2 Corinthians 9, verse 7, for instance, As in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul presents love ahead of everything else. Love is of paramount importance.

Christian love must be genuine, not just feigned. Such love is not merely a matter of feelings, although feelings should be involved. On the other side, Paul expects his readers to develop a godly hatred and loathing for that which is evil.

Genuine love and an abhorrence for evil will together equip us to cleave to what is good. At the heart of the fulfilment of the law is the writing of the law on the heart, so that we might perform it from the heart. The law was always to be fulfilled in love, and the centrality of love in Pauline ethics is no accident at all.

Paul presents a series of affections, practices and virtues to which Christians must

devote themselves, all of which serve to build us up together. We must have a love for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, concern not merely for ourselves, but also for the well-being of each other. We should go out of our way to show honour to each other, honouring each other as recipients of God's honour.

We must cultivate zeal and fervency in ourselves, regarding ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our lives must be marked by rejoicing, patience in hardship, constancy in prayer, and hospitality and generosity to our brothers and sisters. Moving his attention beyond the life of the Church and Christians' treatment of each other within it, Paul speaks of how they should relate to persecutors.

Persecution is to be expected, and can't easily be avoided by the faithful. However, how we respond to it is crucial. Like Christ, we should seek God's forgiveness for our enemies, rather than cursing them.

We should not respond in kind to their cruelty and hatred. In 1 Corinthians 12, verses 24-26, Paul describes the fellow feeling that should characterize the Church. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honoured, all rejoice together. It might be in verses 15-16 that Paul is charging the hearers of his epistle to pursue such fellow feeling with each other in the body of Christ.

However, N.T. Wright raises another possibility. Perhaps Paul is not referring to fellow members of the Church, but to outsiders. Considering the placing of these verses at a point flanked by verses speaking of relations to those who mistreat us as Christians, this possibility shouldn't be dismissed.

If this were the case, Paul's teaching would be that Christians should seek appropriate common feeling with their non-Christian neighbours. When they are suffering, Christians should get alongside them and weep with them. When they are celebrating, Christians should celebrate with them.

Christians should pursue harmony, peace and mutual honour over conflict and polarisation. Christians should not be puffed up on account of their faith, but should particularly associate with those of little honour or status, regarding themselves as lowly servants of Christ. Christians should not give in to a false sense of superiority.

We must act honourably before our neighbours, having unimpeachable character and being concerned not to bring the Gospel into disrepute. This will likely, as we see in 1 Corinthians, require sacrifice of certain of our liberties for the sake of the Gospel. As Paul adapted himself to those to whom he was ministering, so as to cause no needless offence to them, so Christians should be diligent in seeking to live peaceably with those

around them, having good reputations and being respectable, and adopting the customs that are appropriate for the time and place.

A powerful description of what this looks like is given by the Epistle to Diognetus, writing of the character of the early church in the 2nd century. For the Christians are distinguished from other men, neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity.

The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men, nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines, but inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners.

Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all others, they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed.

They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.

They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death and restored to life.

They are poor, yet make many rich. They are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all. They are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified.

They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified. They are reviled and blessed. They are insulted, and repay the insult with honour.

They do good, yet are punished as evildoers. When punished they rejoice as if quickened into life. They are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks.

Yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. Just as God showed the most incredible grace to us, while we were still his enemies, so we too must reject the path of vengeance and retaliation. Rather than zealously pursuing justice in our causes, or taking matters into our own hands, we should place vengeance in the hands of God and his appointed ministers, of whom we will read in the following chapter.

The Lord is just, and he will act for his people. Confidence in the Lord of justice allows us

to surrender our frantic quest for justice on our own terms, and to give up our grudges. As an alternative form of practice, we should respond to cruelty with kindness.

When we see an enemy in need, we must act with the compassion that we should exercise with a friend. This will have the effect of heaping burning coals on our enemy's heads. Most take Paul to be referring to the shame caused by receiving kind treatment for cruel, something that might lead to change.

Another, less popular possibility is that the burning coals are a symbol of divine judgement. This needs to be handled with care. The story of David and Saul might be helpful in this regard though.

David treated Saul with kindness, and did not take vengeance into his own hands, even when he could. Rather, he left vengeance to God's providence. David's kindness did lead Saul to shame in his cruelty, but it also set Saul up for divine judgement.

We might consider the example provided by God himself in chapter 2 verses 4-5 of this book. Like God did to us, we should show kindness to our enemies in the hope that they will repent. However, if they do not, their cruel response to our kindness will lead to their greater condemnation.

The final statement of the chapter sums up the concluding section. We don't fight evil with evil. Evil is something that we can overcome, not merely retaliate against, when we act with goodness.

However, if we reject the way of peace and grace, we will ourselves have been overcome by evil. The only true way to arrest the spread and resist the power of evil is to commit ourselves to the way of kindness to enemies, exemplified by God himself. A question to consider.

How does Paul's gospel about the revelation of God's justice in Christ inform and empower the ethic of grace to enemies that he describes here?