

In the I AM

By [Kristin M. Swenson](#)

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When I read Romans 12:9-21, I think: this is the best of it, this is what marks and makes a good Christian. Love truly and even more generously than the next guy. Seek out goodness and turn your back on evil, be untiring in service to God, be hopeful and steadfast in the face of disappointment, be compassionate and humble. Universal and timeless, these instructions are the real deal. I even think: this is what people are talking about when they say that the New Testament is about love and forgiveness (by contrast with the Old's tally-keeping and vengeance). That is until I get to verse 19, where Paul says we are to extend this generosity to people who would do us harm. "Leave room for the wrath of God." By doing good to those who would hurt you, Paul says, you "heap burning coals on their heads." Hmmm.

The notion that the God of the Old Testament is a God of Wrath and the God of the New is Love is a tired cliché, misplaced and misleading (not to mention theologically problematic for Christians whose faith dictates that both tell of the One God). The Old Testament contains mercy abounding, forgiveness all out of proportion and love without limits. The New Testament tells of justice that requires accountability, hope that evil won't go unpunished and stern admonition to take the harder road. Both testaments counsel balance born of wisdom. They advise an honest, earnest quest to do what is right in the eyes of God tempered by the humility of knowing that we're not going to get it perfect. Both know how crucial accountability is to true justice and that we all need mercy like water in the desert.

I hear in those hard, final words of Paul's, echoes of the psalmists' prayers that God do something! about the people who prosper undeservedly, who cheat, hurt and terrorize. The psalmists don't say that they took matters into their own hands and made their victimizers into victims. While they wish that God would wreak a little vengeance, they don't presume to be the executors of such justice.

We can hope for justice because God Is. We can extend gracious hospitality to the stranger, compassion to the suffering and friendship no matter what because the God who declared, "I Am" partners with ordinary human beings to do extraordinary things. Moses was full of doubt, but God said I Am. The grammar of this God is action in the present tense, be-ing, then and evermore. Humans have the privilege and responsibility to act and be in concert with God.

Jesus, the incarnation of "I Am," told his disciples that he would have to suffer and die. And they would too. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." I don't think that he was talking only about physical martyrdom, but rather about acting and be-ing, day in and day out, in the One who Is. This, Jesus says, is life, and the whole world's profit doesn't hold a candle to it.