

IN RESPONSE - GOD'S INITIATIVE

by Dennis Prutow

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We begin four lessons to familiarize ourselves more fully with the gospel. We will look at three texts from the Bible. My motive is twofold. I want to encourage you who know Christ to use the texts we explore to speak to others. I want to encourage you who need to know Christ to trust Him. The first text is the often quoted John 3:16.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Jesus is speaking. He is laying the need to be born again and trust the savior before Nicodemus and before us. See John 3:1-15. Verse 16 displays God's initiative in sending the Son. Everything starts with God. He is the Creator (Genesis 1:1). He is the re-Creator (Ephesians 2:10). God is the subject. Fallen human beings are the objects of salvation.

God *loved* the world. What is love? Love involves affection and action. Although we may see hate as the opposite of love, in this case, lust is the opposite. Love involves giving with others in view. Love desires the satisfaction and pleasure of others. Lust is self serving. Love seeks self-satisfaction. In marriage, love looks to the other. Love acts to satisfy the needs of the spouse. Love therefore produces unity. Lust, on the other hand, is self serving and self seeking. Lust within marriage produces division. Each member of the marriage is out for themselves. The text speaks of God's love.

God loved the *world*. What is the world? Most people within and without evangelical Christian circles view the world as every human being. The world does not refer to every human being on the face of the earth. The term world is a loaded theological term. For example, compare what John says about the world in 1 John 2:15-17.

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and

also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

Pride and lust characterize the world. People full of lust and pride are self-centered. They *oppose* God. Love for God is not present. On the contrary, hatred for God is present.

Is this too much to say? No. When Jesus appeared on the scene, the establishment opposed Him. The religious leaders looked upon him as a rebel and blasphemer. They hated Him because masses of people followed Him. When they got their hands on Him, they killed Him. Using trumped up charges and false witnesses, they took him to court and screamed for the death penalty. Nothing less would satisfy them.

The world is therefore territory hostile to God. It is a spiritual realm called the domain of darkness (Colossians 1:27). The ruler of this hostile spiritual realm is the devil. Paul does not hesitate to call him "the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Here is the amazing truth of the Bible. God loved that which utterly hates and despises Him.

Love commits God to action. We see this in the next words of John 3:16. "For God so loved the world, *that He gave His only begotten Son*" (italics added).

These words remind me of God's command to Abraham in Genesis 22:2.

Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.

Do you have a son? Is he your only son. Do you love this son. I know more than one set of parents who have one son. They waited long for this son. He is considered a gift from God. Such families have an inkling of the love of Abraham for Isaac. Hear these words, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love...and offer him there as a burnt offering...." Understanding these words helps us understand the love of God. God gave His Son, his only Son, whom He loved.

This giving of the Son involved the birth of Christ. It involved Christ growing up as a little boy and a young man. It

involved Christ learning to read, learning to read the Bible. It involved Christ learning a trade. It involved Christ growing to maturity and launching out in a ministry of preaching and teaching. It involved Christ becoming a hated enemy of the Jewish establishment and being put to death on a cross.

The giving of the Son involved all of these things so that Christ might become a suitable sacrifice for sinners. Hebrews 2:17 tells us,

He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

It was absolutely necessary for Christ to enter the world and die on the cross the way He did. Salvation from sin was not possible in any other way. Had God not given His Son, there would be no salvation.

We now see the purpose of God in giving His Son, *that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life*. The purpose of God in giving Christ involves those who believe in Him. All people do not believe in Christ. Those who do not believe in Christ perish. They must suffer the punishment due to them for their own sins. They perish in hell forever. God's purpose in Christ does not include them. This is a hard saying. Yet it is true.

To know for sure the purpose of God to save includes you, you must trust Christ. You must believe in this Jesus whom God gave. You must trust in His sacrifice on the cross as the only adequate payment for your sins. You must rely upon him alone for life, eternal life, in heaven. You must rely upon the love of God given in Christ.

Do you trust this Jesus whom God sent to save sinners? Do you? Failure to do so means you perish. You will either spend eternity in hell or you will bask in the Sonshine of God's grace.

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IN RESPONSE - THE CALL OF CHRIST

by Dennis Prutow

Last time we looked at John 3:16 and God's initiative in giving Christ on behalf of sinners. The second text to which we turn is Matthew 11:28-30, the call of Christ. Those of you who love Christ can use this text to speak to others. Those of you who may be without Christ ought to heed His call.

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

Is Jesus Christ offering Himself in these words? Strictly speaking, Christ is not *offering* Himself. The word translated "come to Me" is an imperative. The words are an exhortation. The question then follows, How do you follow the exhortation? What does it mean to come to Christ?

Coming to Christ involves two things, repentance and faith. You must repent of sin. Sin is violation of the Law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments. "Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Truth is at a premium today, especially in political advertising. Partial birth abortion is infanticide. Schools encourage fornication when they distribute condoms and teach students how to use them. When you violate these and the other commandments of God, you incur guilt. You deserve punishment.

Repentance involves a *change of mind* regarding sin, violation of God's Law. You have a *sense* of guilt. There is *conviction* you are guilty before God. You know God's justice requires punishment. Sorrow and fear arises in your heart.

As a result, you turn to Christ. You *turn away* from know evil behavior and you *turn to* Christ. You trust the sacrifice of Christ as the only adequate payment due to you for your sins. Coming to Christ involves repentance and faith.

To whom does Christ *direct* His exhortation, "Come to Me"? The frequent answer is that this call is meant for and directed to all people everywhere. Is this the case? Look again at our text. "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-

laden." Jesus speaks specifically to the weary and heavy-laden. Who are these weary and heavy-laden? These are men and women who are burdened with sin. These are people laden with sin. Not only so, these are people who know they are laden with sin. They *feel* the burden.

A good picture of these people is the man under conviction in *Pilgrim's Progress* who has a large pack on his back. He wants more than all else to divest himself of this pack, this burden of sin.

Christ calls men and women who are under conviction of sin to come to Him in repentance and faith. *Others may hear the call but Christ directs His words to the weary and heavy-laden.*

Think of it this way. The moderator of a large meeting announces, "There is a white Pontiac Bonneville in the parking lot with its light on, license number XYZ-123." Everyone in the auditorium hears this announcement. To whom is the announcement directed? It is *for* the owner of the car. In the same way, the exhortation of Christ is directed to people under conviction of sin although others may hear it.

Christ makes a promise to those who come to Him in repentance and faith. "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest... rest for your souls." The promise of Christ has to do with the burdens of the soul. Your soul is your inner life. Sin adheres to your soul, contaminates your soul, burdens your soul. The result is turmoil, anxiety, guilt, fear and depression. You need *rest* for your soul.

In the beginning, sin added misery to life. God told Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:17). Later, when Noah was born, his parents believed he was the promised Savior. Noah's father said, "This one will give us *rest* from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed" (Genesis 5:29, italics added). You need rest from the curse of God because of sin. Your sin makes you worthy of death. "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Surely an understanding of sin and its penalty is a burden on the soul. Forgive-

ness and cleansing is the only answer. Such forgiveness brings rest. It comes only through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ. You must come to Christ.

Notice the immediate context of Jesus' exhortation in Matthew 11: 25-27. Jesus prays to His Father.

I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for thus it was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

Jesus gives praise because God hides the things of salvation from some people. Jesus gives praise to God because He sovereignly chooses to reveals the things of salvation to other people. Is this not divine predestination and election at work? God says, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exodus 33:19, Romans 9:15).

Jesus also says, quite plainly, no one knows the Father except those to whom the Son wills, determines, to reveal the Father. This too is divine and sovereign predestination and election at work. We bow in awe before the sovereign God. We adore His majesty.

Immediately upon giving praise to God for His elective work, Jesus Christ turns to the weary and heavy-laden and urges, "Come to Me." Christ's firm belief in absolute predestination does not inhibit His gospel call to sinners in any way. In fact, faith in divine election is the foundation for this gospel call. So it should be with you and me.

Are you burdened with guilt because of sin? Turn from your sin. Repent. Trust the sacrifice of Christ as the only adequate payment for your sins. Jesus exhorts, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." Heed this call of the Savior.

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IN RESPONSE - SEEK THE LORD, PART 1

by Dennis Prutow

We began with John 3:16 and a very basic look at the gospel. John 3:16 shows God's initiative in giving His Son on behalf of sinners. Then we looked at Matthew 11:28-30. Jesus exhorts individuals convicted of sin, having a sense of guilt, to come to Him. Our third lesson takes us to Isaiah 55:6-8.

Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord.

What does it mean to seek the Lord? I mentioned *Pilgrim's Progress* in the last lesson. John Bunyan relates the purpose of his book in verse.

This book it chalketh out before thine eyes//The man that *seeks* the everlasting Prize;//It shews you whence he comes, whither he goes,//What he leaves undone; also what he does://It also shows you how he runs, and runs//Till he unto the Gate of Glory comes (italics added).¹

The pilgrim in the tale relates, "I seek an *Inheritance incorruptible, undefiled and that fadeth not away*" (italics original).² This pilgrim is a person under conviction of sin. He is weary and heavy-laden. "That is that which I *seek* for, even to be rid of this heavy burden; but get it off myself I cannot" (italics added).³

The pilgrim cannot save himself. God takes initiative in giving His Son. God reveals the things of salvation to some and hides the things of salvation from others. Christ reveals Himself to whom He will. There is therefore a need to seek the grace of God. Calvin reminds you of this. "Therefore we ought always to direct our minds to the blood of Christ, if we are seeking grace in Him."⁴

The immediate response comes from Romans 3:11, "There is none who understands, There is none who seeks for God." Paul quotes Psalm 14: 2

The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

The supposition here is no unbeliever *ever* seeks after God. There is another position. Without doubt, people *never* seek after God *without God initiating that seeking*. God, however, may and often does initiate such seeking.

A good example is Adam and Eve. God says of our first parents,

Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.

Commenting on Genesis 3:22, Matthew Henry indicates these words were uttered tongue in cheek. He speaks of

[h]ow they were justly disgraced and shamed before God and the holy angels, by the ironical upbraiding of them with the issue of their enterprise: "*Behold, the man has become as one of us, to know good and evil! A goodly god he makes! Does he not? See what he has got, what preferences, what advantages, by eating forbidden fruit!*"⁵

Henry goes on to give his view regarding God's purposes in Genesis 3:22.

This was said to awaken and humble them, and to bring them to a sense of their sin and folly, and to repentance for it, that, seeing themselves thus wretchedly deceived by following the devil's counsel, they might henceforth pursue the happiness God should offer in the way he should prescribe. God thus *fills their faces with shame, that they may seek his name*, Ps. 83:16. He puts them to this confusion, in order to their conversion.⁶

God's Word and Providence fill unbelievers with guilt, shame, and humiliation to cause them to *seek* His face. In this context, Matthew Henry refers to Psalm 83. David prays for God's Providence to humble his pagan adversaries. The purpose is not humiliation and shame as ends in themselves. There is a definite aim to the works of God's Providence.

O my God, make them like the whirling dust, like chaff before the wind. Like fire that burns the forest and like a flame that sets the mountains on fire, so pursue them with Your tempest and terrify them with Your storm. Fill their faces with dishonor, *That they may seek Your name, O Lord* (, verses 6-8, italics added).

The objective of the works of Providence sought by David was that pagan men and women would experience guilt and fear and therefore seek the face of God.

Those under deep conviction of sin sense their need, hear the exhortation to seek the Lord and act upon it. John Bunyan's pilgrim expresses this. "I have felt the Powers and Terrors of what is yet unseen..."⁷ Isaiah directs his exhortation to seek the Lord to rebel Israel suffering under the heavy hand of God's judgment. Guilt, shame and fear coupled with a view of possible rest motivates men and women to seek the Lord. In response to a reference to Romans 3:11, I say, you will never seek God without God first taking action upon you.

If God in His providence has brought you to the place of seeing your guilt before Him you may fear the consequences of your sin. You may also know the requirements to repent of this sin and trust Christ. You realize depravity is real. As you examine your own heart you do not think faith truly resides within you. You do not want to be a hypocrite and simply *say* you trust Christ for salvation without that faith being present. You should hear the words of Isaiah and seek the Lord while He may be found. Next we finally see what seeking the Lord involves.

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¹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. xi.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 11, pp. 127-128.

⁵ *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 35

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Bunyan, p. 6.

IN RESPONSE - SEEK THE LORD, PART 2

by Dennis Prutow

It is strange we must offer an apologetic for the concept of seeking the Lord. It is necessary. We now move on, more specifically, to what it means to seek the Lord. Look again at Isaiah 55:6-8.

Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," declares the Lord.

Seeking the Lord involves nothing more or less than utilizing what we call *the means of grace*. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the question, *What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?* The answer to this question is quite helpful.

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation (Question & Answer 88).

To seek the Lord, you must avail yourself of *the means of grace*. *These are the outward and ordinary means*. You must read the Bible. You cannot seek the Lord without reading *The Book* in and through which God speaks.

Individuals will argue that unbelievers have no interest in reading the Bible. If God is at work as outlined in the previous lesson, God is moving hearts and hands and eyes to read the Bible.

Westminster Shorter Catechism again helps us (Answer 89).

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

Reading the Bible is indispensable to seeking the Lord.

To seek the Lord, you must pray. Prayer is a means of grace. As a high school boy, at a Christmas dinner, my parents asked me to pray. I asked God to

show us the true meaning of the holiday. Years later, after graduating from college, in the land of Korea, God answered that prayer in bringing me to Christ.

In the context of reading the Bible and praying, seeking God also involves talking with Christian people. You need to talk to people who know the Bible and know Christ. You need to seek answers to basic questions you have. My wife recalls a fellow teacher, filled with questions about the Bible, who frequently came to her home to talk. The questions about God and Christ and the Bible inevitably came. Answers were given. This was part of the process through which God brought this lady to Christ.

Using the means of grace also involves public worship. To seek the Lord you must attend worship in a church where you hear the Bible faithfully taught. Again, Answer 89 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us,

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners....

The church is the temple of God in this present world. It is the special dwelling place of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes the church as "the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (25:2). Salvation *ordinarily* takes place within the pale of the visible church where people attend the means of grace. They hear the Bible read and proclaimed.

Isaiah 55:6 says, "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near." It is within the worshipping community where God may especially be found. It is within the worshipping community where God is especially near.

Are you more likely to be converted to faith in Christ if you regularly attend a Bible believing and preaching church or if you regularly attends professional football games? We all know the answer to this question.

Isaiah 55:6-7 describes another aspect of seeking the Lord.

Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to

our God, for He will abundantly pardon.

Seeking the Lord involves separating yourself from known sin. "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts."

You need to separate yourself from adulterous relationships. Adultery and fornication lead you away from God. You need to separate yourself from pornography. Use your hands to read the Bible instead. You need to separate yourself from drunkenness. Use your feet to take you to church rather than the local bar. You need to separate yourself from the forms of music which urge hatred, rebellion, drugs and illicit sex. Use your ears to listen to the preaching of God's word via tape, radio or television. *Avail yourself of the means of grace*.

In the process of seeking the Lord, reading the Bible and listening to the preaching of the Bible, you realize the import of Isaiah 55:8. God says, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways." You find your thoughts are wicked and evil. The thoughts of God are holy and righteous. You see the *way* you live is evil. In contrast, God's *ways* are holy and righteous.

You must return to the Lord. Turning from evil should not be mere reformation. There must be repentance. That is, you must see your evil and wicked ways as displeasing to God. You must turn to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the One who died to pay the penalty for sin. You must trust in this sacrifice as the only adequate payment for sin.

You may begin to seek God out of fear. But you soon sense deep sorrow and grief for your sins. You see more plainly the only hope you have is Jesus Christ. If you continue to justify yourself, your thoughts and ways, you are doomed. The answer is to cast yourself on the mercy of God. The answer is to cry out, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13). The promise of God is clear to those who seek and find. "He will have compassion on him... He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7).

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