

The Preaching of the Gospel: Free Offer or Serious Command

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We concluded our last article on the well-meaning offer of salvation by calling attention to several passages of Scripture frequently quoted by the exponents of this offer to support their contention that Scripture teaches this offer of grace and salvation which the Lord extends to all who hear the preaching of the gospel. We merely quoted these passages, intending to treat them later, although we did call attention, in some detail, to the incident of the malefactor's petition that Christ remember him upon entering His kingdom. Is it not very strange, if the Scriptures teach that God loves all men and would save everybody, head for head, that Jesus never addressed one word to both murderers prior to the malefactor's plea of mercy? Wouldn't one expect this moment upon the cross to be a very opportune moment for the Rabbi of Nazareth to extend the offer of salvation to them? Such, however, does not occur here as the Savior pours out His life's blood to save all those who had been given Him by the Father from before the foundations of the world. And now, in this article, we propose to call the attention of our readers to a refutation of these passages.

First of all, we call attention to the quotation from our Canons, Art.8 of Heads III and IV, which we quoted in our preceding article. Prof. H.C. Hoeksema, referring to this article in his book, *The Voice of Our Fathers*, page 483, gives a more accurate translation of this article, and we quote: "As many, however, as are called by the Gospel, are seriously called. For God has seriously and most truly shown in His Word, what is pleasing to Him, namely, that the called should come unto Him. He even promises seriously to all those coming to Him, and believing, rest of soul and eternal life." We need not treat this article in the Canons in detail. Notice that the word "seriously" appears three times in the article.

They who hear the gospel, we read here, are called by that gospel. They are not invited. This calling is a demand. The sinner must come. He does not, cannot choose whether he will come or not. Hence, God calls, demands this seriously. The Lord means what He says. What is pleasing to Him is that the called come unto Him. If they refuse to come, He is terribly displeased with them, will visit them with His just judgment and condemnation. Hence, what we have in this article is not a well-meaning offer of salvation, but God's general command to the sinner that he repent and the particular promise to him who repents of everlasting life.

The second passage to which we would direct attention is Isaiah 45:22, and we again quote: "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God and there is none else." How can this passage possibly teach a free offer of grace? An offer is not even mentioned in the text. The words, "Come unto Me," constitute a demand. In verse 20 we read of graven images and of praying to a god that cannot save. In other words, to come unto God, as expressed in this text, surely implies that we come unto God and not to dumb idols who cannot save. Again, to come unto God is a divine command. If, by the grace of God, we come to God He will save us, and that the prophet speaks of salvation is obvious from verses 24-25. If, on the other hand, we refuse to come unto God and bow down instead to idols we, according to verse 24, shall be ashamed. Again, there is no well-meaning offer of grace in this passage, but simply a divine command and calling, and the promise of salvation and everlasting life and rest to those who, by the grace of God, heed this command. Besides, the expression "ends of the earth" certainly does not refer to all men head-for-head. This expression was fulfilled in the New Dispensation. Then the gospel was preached and is being preached to "all men," all classes of men as from among the Gentiles. That the expression "ends of the earth" does not refer to everybody head-for-head is evident from the fact that even after Pentecost the gospel was never proclaimed to all men head-for-head. But the expression does refer to men outside of and beyond the pale of the Old Testament Jewry, completely in harmony with the third Pentecostal sign, the speaking in various tongues and languages.

Moreover, the conception of a well-meaning offer of salvation denies the living God. Notice, please, what we read at the conclusion of this text in Isaiah 45: "For I am God, and there is none else." Try to harmonize this expression, if you will, with a general offer of grace! God is God, the living, almighty, sovereign God, besides Whom there is none else. The living God offers salvation to me? The living, sovereign God does not Himself save men, cannot save the sinner unless and until that sinner consents to be saved? The living God must wait until the sinner acts? The general offer is a denial of the living, alone sovereign God!

A third passage to which we now call attention is Ezekiel 33:11: "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked: but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" We can understand why the advocates of a free offer of grace would turn to this passage. The text has been quoted as a standard passage in support of God's general love to every sinner. Do we not read that the Lord has no desire in the death of the sinner? We do not read here of the elect sinner. So, every sinner is meant. Besides, the second statement in the text must be understood in the light of the first. We read that God has desire herein that the wicked turn from his evil ways and live. So, it is the Lord's desire that every sinner turn from his wicked way and live. And, thirdly, notice the concluding part of the text. Here the Lord pleads with the house of Israel. Of course, they say, the entire house of Israel is meant here. And they also call attention to the fact that the expression "turn ye" is repeated, and this for the sake of emphasis; and that we also read: for why will ye die? Hence, the Lord desires of all the wicked that they repent and live.

This interpretation of the text is impossible. First of all, what a caricature we have here of the living God! God simply pleads with the sinner? Can He not do anything about it? Besides, upon what basis does He plead with the sinner? Does He simply extend an offer of salvation to all sinners? What about the payment of their sins? Or, does the Lord extend this offer to them without the satisfying of His justice and righteousness? Secondly, the context of this passage is obviously particular. Notice what we read in verse 10 - "O son of man, speak unto the house of Israel; Thus ye speak, saying, if our transgressions and our sin be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?" The Lord, in verse 11, is therefore obviously addressing those who are concerned because of their sin. Thirdly, the text does not mention an offer of salvation. The text begins with a divine oath. This is no offer. Then, the Lord simply states a fact that He has no desire in the death of the sinner but that he turn from his evil way and live. This is surely no offer. And this turning from sin and evil is exclusively the work of God, is it not? And that this turning from sin unto God is surely the work of God from the beginning even until the end surely establishes the truth that He performs this work in whom He wills, never determined by the will of any sinner. Fourthly, the Lord neither asks the house of Israel to repent, nor offers them salvation, but He simply commands them to do so. And a divine command is surely never to be confused with or identified as an offer. And finally, is it so that the Lord has no desire in the death of any sinner, also of the sinner who does not repent? The Lord has no desire in the death, the eternal death of the impenitent sinner, the sinner who refuses to repent? Please read in this connection Psalm 2:4-5 and Psalm 58:6-11. And these passages can be easily multiplied in the Psalms and in the book of Proverbs, and throughout the Word of God. Would any Arminian have the brazen boldness to read the text in this way: The Lord God has no desire in the death of the wicked, whether he repent or not? Do not the Scriptures emphasize throughout that the Lord is unchangeably holy and just and righteous, that He will reward the righteous for Jesus' sake but also that He will visit upon the wicked His righteous wrath and judgments?

One cannot, therefore, appeal to Ezekiel 33:11 in support of a general, well-meaning offer of salvation. What does this passage teach? We must be brief. Indeed, the Lord has no delight in the death of a sinner. We must interpret this "death of a sinner" as the way of death. Do we not read in this text that herein is the Lord's delight, that the sinner turn from his evil ways and live? Hence, this "death of a sinner" is the way of death. And the way of death of the sinner is the way of sin. In this the Lord hath no delight. The meaning is that the Lord has no ethical delight in this way of sin. He looks down upon it with holy displeasure. Let not any sinner think or imagine that he can sin with impunity, can sin and "get away" with it, can sin and continue to be the object of His favor and grace and love while continuing in sin and evil. We must reject the theory that the Lord loves all men, is favorably inclined to them, also and even while they continue in evil, which is characteristic of all men without saving and regenerating grace.

Rather, this is the Lord's delight, His ethical and spiritual delight, that the sinner turn from his evil way and live. And, mind you, the sinner does not live because he turns from his evil way. There is nothing meritorious in a sinner's repentance. He must repent. This is God's demand. And when a sinner repents he does nothing more than he is supposed to do. He is only performing his duty. That he lives when turning from his evil way is only because he lives in the way of his turning, is only because he repents in the shadow of the cross of Calvary.

And now we have that wonderful conclusion in this passage: "As I live, saith the Lord God, why will ye die, O house of Israel." He who speaks here is the Lord God, Jehovah God, Israel's faithful covenant God. This faithful covenant God now addresses the house of Israel, the Church, the elect Church of the living God. Indeed, the text proclaims comfort only to the sinner who repents. The reprobate wicked never repents. Of course not! Do not the Scriptures declare, as in Romans 9, that "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated, that the purpose of God,

according to election might stand"? Consequently, the Lord never promises peace and rest to the reprobate wicked. Him the Lord does not mean and this is because God has determined that such will never turn. On the other hand, the Lord speaks comfortably to His own elect people. They are the wicked who turn from their evil ways and live. And if then the people of God, the wicked who repent and turn from their evil way, do not understand how they in the way of repentance can receive everlasting life (our repentance, after all, neither pays for sin nor gives us the right to eternal life), then God swears an oath, by Himself, that He has no desire in the death of the sinner but in his life. Indeed, turn ye, O house of Israel; why should ye die? Am I not the Lord Jehovah? Am I not your Redeemer, about to blot out all your sins in My own blood, the blood of my only begotten Son? O house of Israel, elect church of the living God, why should ye die for whom I will presently give My blood and for whom I have now given My blood unto a perfect propitiation for all your sins?

What a wonderful passage this is! How the Arminian destroys the Word of God, robs it of all its comfort! Are you sorry for your sins? Do you pine away in your hopelessness? Indeed, look unto Me, the Lord God, your covenant God, in the shadow of the cross, and be saved and have everlasting life.