

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Lord's Prayer: The Fifth Petition (Part V)

It has been just over 35 years since Elvis Presley passed away. "The King of Rock and Roll" died at the relatively young age of 42 from a massive heart attack. It is estimated that during his lifetime, his records sold over a billion copies. It has been reported that well over a half-million people a year make the pilgrimage to Graceland, Elvis Presley's home in Memphis, TN. Graceland serves not only as a museum for Presley's awards, accomplishments, and memorabilia, but, in the eyes of many of his fans, it is also a sacred shrine.¹ What is Elvis Presley's legacy? To many fans it is simply his music and magnetic personality. But there was another side- a dark side- to the man. He grew up in an Assembly of God church in Tupelo, Mississippi and recorded a number of albums devoted to Gospel hymns.² But Elvis drifted from his early association with Christianity and turned his attention to such things as star gazing, astrology, and other distinctively occult interests, including Eastern mysticism. He got heavily involved in drugs, including marijuana and LSD, and towards the end of his life, took lots of amphetamines and prescription painkillers on a daily basis³. I remember an interview he once gave not long before his untimely death, in which, when asked what he wanted to achieve in the years to come, he responded in a way that took the interviewer off-guard by saying, "I would like to find some personal peace. Life is so hectic, you know?" He had fame and fortune, but no peace. Some people mistakenly think that when they die, then they can rest in peace. Not so. The reality of our personal sin and guilt will go with us *beyond* the grave. How can we deal with the reality of sin and guilt? Many try to make amends by deluding themselves into thinking that their so-called "good works" or character will more than overturn the scales of justice.⁴ The truth of the matter is very much the opposite. Thomas Adam perceptively wrote, "When we have done all we ever shall do, the very best state we ever shall arrive at will be so far from meriting a reward, that it will need a pardon."⁵ Forgiveness from God is our greatest need. The Lord's Prayer underscores this, and the Old Testament prophet provides us with a vivid illustration of our human predicament and God's provision.

I. ISAIAH'S GREAT NEED

The distraught prophet has caught a glimpse of the awesome holiness of God and finds himself completely shattered by the vision. "He must die, because the holiness of God is to the sinner a consuming fire (ch.33: 14); and the infinite distance between the creature and the Creator is sufficient of itself to produce a prostrating effect, which even the seraphim could not resist without veiling their faces. Isaiah therefore regarded himself as lost."⁶

- A. A Merciful God. The central themes of God's holiness and glory are very prominent, but also embedded in this passage is the message of God's mercy. The noted British preacher G. Campbell-Morgan has eloquently captured this. "Do you hear the thunder of the seraphim as they sing? Can you hear anything else? I do not think I can. God can! What did He hear? The cry of a guilty man! Oh, soul of mine, take heart. One guilty man cries out in the consciousness of his sin, and the faint cry of that human soul, conscious of pollution, rises in the ear of God above the thunder of the seraphim. And a seraph must leave the place of worship to work when a human soul is in need."⁷
- B. Atonement. People erroneously think that forgiveness with God is automatic, or simply granted when asked for. The language of the Bible tells us otherwise. Sin or iniquity must be taken *away* or removed before a holy God can forgive. In other words, atonement must be made, and atonement speaks of sacrifice.⁸ Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22).
- C. Symbols and Signs. The altar and the stone underscore the significance of sacrifice. The fire likewise points in this direction. "The fire symbolized forgiveness and cleansing. The actual

cleansing was accomplished by an offering upon the altar. The touching of the lips does not signify prophetic inspiration, nor may we assume that the seraph of himself could take the initiative toward the forgiveness of sin.”⁹ Calvin has astutely commented on the sacramental nature of his passage.” Here the angel administered the cleansing, but was not the author of it; so that we must not ascribe to another what belongs to God alone. This is expressly stated by the angel himself, who claims nothing as his own, but brining forward the sacred pledge which he had received from God, laid it as a sacrament on the *lips* of the Prophet; not that he could be cleansed without a coal, but because the visible sign was useful for the confirmation and proof of the fact. And such is the use of sacraments, to strengthen us in proportion to our ignorance; for we are not angels that can behold the mysteries of God without any assistance, and therefore He raises is to Himself by gradual advances.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: B.B. Warfield observed that the views men take of the atonement are largely determined by their fundamental feelings of the need- by what men most long to be saved from. And from the beginning three well-marked types of thought on this subject have been traceable, corresponding to three fundamental needs of human nature as it unfolds itself in this world of limitations. Men are oppressed by the ignorance, or by the misery, or by the sin in which they feel themselves sunk; and, looking to Christ to deliver them from the evil under which they particularly labor, they are apt to conceive His work as consisting predominantly in revelation of divine knowledge, or in inauguration of a reign of happiness, or in deliverance from the curse of sin.¹¹ As fallen human beings, we stand guilty before a holy God. Our sin has left us not only guilty, but polluted, so that when we become sensible to our condition, we cry the kind of language expressed in the liturgy of the French Protestant Church: “O Lord God! Eternal Almighty Father! We confess before thy Divine Majesty that we are miserable sinners, born in corruption and iniquity, prone to evil, and of ourselves incapable of any good. We acknowledge that we transgress in various ways thy holy commandments, so that we draw down on ourselves through thy righteous judgment, condemnation and death.” This sense of shame and self-judgment is combined with confidence in the mercy of God displayed exclusively in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and this brings peace (Romans 5:1,2).

ENDNOTES

¹ Gleaned from the Elvis Presley website, <http://www.elvis-presley.com>.

² Elvis began singing in church. The Assemblies of God and other Holiness churches encourage lively singing in their services. Elvis said that as a boy, he was impressed with preachers whose pulpit antics included, “cutting up all over the place, jumpin’ on the piano, movin’ ever which a way.” As cited in *The History Teacher: The Society of History Educators* (vol.29, NO.2), February 1996, p.185.

³ J Esposito and E. Oumana, *Good Rockin’ Tonight* (Simon & Schuster, 1994), p.123.

⁴ “Thousands, and ten thousands carve out and dispose of the mercy of God at their own pleasure, write their own pardons, in what terms they think fit, and if they had God’s seal to confirm and ratify them, it were all well; but alas! It is but a night-vision, a dream of their own brain.” *The Works of John Flavel III* (rpt. The banner of Truth Trust, 1968), p. 201.

⁵ T. Adams, *Private Thoughts on Religion* (Presbyterian Board of Education, 1784), p.218

⁶ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament VII* (rpt. Hendrickson, 1996), p.127.

⁷ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit II* (Pickering & Inglis, 1934), p. 304.

⁸ “The word KAPAR, standing at the heart of the Hebrew sacrificial system, reveals that the worshipper felt the need of escaping the divine displeasure of sin. In this respect, it appears to have had a basic propitiatory connotation... it must be carefully noted, however, that the biblical view of propitiation is not characterized by the crude features, which attach to most heathen conceptions. Rather it should be viewed as the gracious provision made by God Himself, whereby the effects of His righteous anger against sin may be averted, and the sinner may receive the blessings of His paternal love without infringement on His holiness and moral government.” R. Nicole, “C.H. Dodd and Propitiation” in *The Westminster Theological Journal* (Vol. XVII, NO. 2, May 1955), p. 152.

⁹ As cited in E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah I* (Eerdmans, 1981), p.251.

¹⁰ *Calvin’s Commentaries VII* (rpt. Baker, 1993), p. 210.

¹¹ *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield XI* (rpt. Baker, 1976), p.283