

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	99		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 6:12; Isaiah 6:1-13		
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The Fifth Petition (Part V)

Lords Day 51

Question 126. Which is the fifth petition?

Answer: "And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"; that is, be pleased for the sake of Christ's blood, not to impute to us poor sinners, our transgressions, nor that depravity, which always cleaves to us; (a) even as we feel this evidence of thy grace in us, that it is our firm resolution from the heart to forgive our neighbour. (b)

(a) Ps.51:1 <<To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.>> Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Ps.51:2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Ps.51:3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Ps.51:4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. Ps.51:5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. Ps.51:6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. Ps.51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Ps.143:2 And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified. 1 John 2:1 My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: 1 John 2:2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. Rom.8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. (b) Matt.6:14 For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: Matt.6:15 But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

It has been over 40 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.

“It is in Isaiah,” writes David Wells, “in particular, that this truth about God’s elevation over what is created and his separation from all that is fallen in creation becomes so focused. Indeed, the title, ‘the Holy One of Israel’ is used twenty-nine times in the book (e.g., Isa. 1:4; 5:19; 10:20; 43:3), suggesting the centrality to the prophet of this truth of God’s character. There is little doubt that this designation was rooted in the vision of God that marked Isaiah’s calling into prophetic ministry.

“Isaiah was not unique in being granted a vision of God. Before Jeremiah began his ministry, he saw a vision of God (Jer. 1:4-10). So, too, did Ezekiel. His vision, with its remarkable symbolism, ended with his statement, ‘such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD’ (Ezek. 1:28). Daniel’s vision of God came later on, when he had already begun his ministry. He was enabled to see into heaven’s throne room, filled with angels (Dan. 7:9-14), from whence God’s decrees come forth by which civilizations rise and fall.

“Each of these prophets records how a vision of God began or sustained their ministries. Each vision accented something in God’s character and, given the days in which these prophets lived, was especially important for them to understand. Jeremiah prophesied during the last five kings of Judah, until Jerusalem fell. To him was given a direct assurance of God’s providence in life, an assurance he surely needed during this stormy time. Ezekiel spoke to desolate captives in a foreign land. To him was given a vision of God’s omnipotence that not all of the failures of God’s people could negate. This is what made Ezekiel so unsparing in what he said and so courageous in saying it. Daniel, one of Nebuchadnezzar’s captives taken off to Babylon (Dan. 1:1-6), was assured of God’s sovereign purposes at work in the nations and so was able to look beyond his people’s disheartening circumstances and speak with hope.

“But to Isaiah was given something else. It was a vision in which God’s holiness was manifest.”⁶

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.”⁷

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.”⁸

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.⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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 bringing 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 us to Himself by gradual advances.”¹¹

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.¹² 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 it 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 D.F. Wells, *God in the Whirlwind* (Crossway, 2014), p. 104.

⁷ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament VII* (rpt. Hendrickson, 1996), p.127.

⁸ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit II* (Pickering & Inglis, 1934), p. 304.

⁹ "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.

¹⁰ As cited in E.J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah I* (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 251.

¹¹ *Calvin's Commentaries VII* (rpt. Baker, 1993), p. 210.

¹² *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield XI* (rpt. Baker, 1976), p. 283.