

Elvis

God at the Movies 2023, Pt. 4

[**Elvis Bumper 3:04**]

Welcome back to God at the Movies 2023.

I want to explain why I am not with you today...

So I had to put this together on the rush and it won't me nearly as prepared or polished as you are used to. I won't get to go into the history or the theology nearly as deeply as usual and we can't really have as many graphics. But I know you understand and I'm grateful for such a compassionate congregation. Thanks for your prayers.

Make sure you hug your kids. Don't wait. Life is incredibly precious. It has moments of great joy and moments of incredible difficulty. In many way that is a picture of the life of Elvis Aaron Presley.

Born in poverty in **Tupelo, Mississippi in 1935**, Elvis and his parents moved to Memphis when he was 13. His life was marked by three common themes of the American South: **Poverty, Religion and Race**.

His mother was a committed believer and joined the growing Memphis First Assembly of God Church which initially met in a tent before moving to a store

front and finally a building of their own. Elvis attended Sunday school and was considered a courteous, quiet boy. The church was known for it's music.

As was the black church across the street that Elvis would sometimes visit while sneaking away from his own church. The music and preaching at **Rev. W. Herbert Brewster's East Trigg Avenue Baptist Church** was nothing like Elvis and his friends had ever experienced.

The movie exaggerated the experience a bit – after all **Baz Luhrmann**, the director is know for his stylized approach. But in Jim Crow Memphis, a white boy's attendance at a black church might have been considered inappropriate or worse. So he and his friends always snuck back to First Assembly before services ended there.

There was a lot of quartet music in town. Perhaps more than anything else, Elvis's first and most enduring influence was white southern gospel music. The same music my mother loves and tried – unsuccessfully – to get me to love as well. But that makes sense because Elvis had not yet invented rock and roll, so he didn't have as much competition as I did!

First AG Memphis was the frequent home of two of the pioneering gospel acts, The Blackwood Brothers and the Stamps Quartet. Elvis was enamored with them. Once a month they would have an all night “Singing” - my parents would drag me to these in Ft. Worth for years. But Elvis was there every month. The arena was just a few blocks from the housing project where he lived.

I want to play you a clip – not from the sensationalized movie, which I really did like – but from a documentary that was made about the significant role that Christian music played in Elvis’ life. If you want to watch it, it’s available for free on **YouTube, called “He Touched Me”**. This is the founder of the Stamps Quartet, a man who would play a prominent ongoing role in Elvis’ life. In fact, spoiler alert, JD planned Elvis’ funeral. [**Singing :33**]

Elvis dreamed of being a member of a gospel quartet, but things didn’t quite work out. When he was 18 years old, he wandered into a recording studio to make a record as a birthday present for his mother. The owner of the studio, **Sam Phillips**, had been recording local black blues artists on his **Sun Records** label, but made little profit. He frequently said, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.” And then he heard Elvis.

He invited the teenager back for a recording session. It wasn’t going particularly well until Elvis picked up a guitar and started playing a blues number he’s heard at a local club by Arthur Craddup called *“That’s All Right”*. Elvis started jumping around and the whole room came alive. Phillips had the sound he was looking for and Elvis had his first hit.

Elvis later said his famous “wobble” came not from teenage debauchery, but from the singing groups he watched in church. In 1956 after he had become famous, he told an AP reporter: “We used to go to these religious singin’s all the time. There were these singers, perfectly fine singers, but nobody responded to ‘em. Then there were these other singers – the leader was a preacher – and they cut up all over the place, jumpin’ on the piano, movin’ every which way. The audience liked ‘em. I guess I learned from them singers.”

Ironically, the church would later attack him for those very moves. He was very disturbed by the “Elvis the Pelvis” moniker. He said he would never do anything that his mother would disapprove of. Elvis was a man of contradictions.

In the church. Make no mistake, he was no hero to the AG. My goodness, to 1950's Pentecostals you were suspect if you went bowling! My mother once got called out by a young preacher who saw her wearing lipstick at work – I don't think she's ever forgiven him.

And no doubt, Elvis lived a troubling lifestyle for many holiness types. At a young age he was caught up in the music and film industry and surrounded by a lot of dubious influences. **Colonel Parker.** There was definitely some sex and drugs mixed in with that rock and roll. Fame devoured him in many ways. His church, was Sunday morning television and his worship was late night gospel songs around the piano in his Casino penthouse. Think what might have happened. But what if somebody had the foresight to disciple that young man who's talent would touch the world.

There were also a lot of racial critics... stole music...but by all accounts, Elvis genuinely loved the music of Beale Street and black Memphis. He just took his two great influences and put them together. He would also take songs from white gospel singers – “How Great Thou Are” - and make them bigger than they could ever make them on their own. Was he stealing?

Elvis is often criticized for what he didn't do – all of us could be critiqued for that at some level. But he did a lot. **The Sweet Inspirations.** I want to play you another clip from the documentary that shows him integrating a convert here in Texas of all places...[**Alamodome 1:08**]

Elvis felt the tension between his white Christian faith and black blues culture. He had everybody's records.

I'll tell you someone who understood the tension.
James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*...

The great son of America... Two ways of coping with racial violence in the first half of 20th century American South...

“How did southern rural blacks survive the terrors of this era? Self-defense and protest were out of the question, but there were other forms of resistance. **For most blacks, it was the blues and religion that offered the cheap weapons of resistance.** At the juke joints on Friday and Saturday nights and in churches on Sunday mornings and evening weeknights blacks affirmed their humanity and fought back against dehumanization. Both black religion and the blues offered sources of hope That there was more to life than what one encountered daily in the white man's world.” (Cone, C<, p.12)

Our movie brilliantly depicts the influence of this tension in Elvis' music. There's a great scene where he's getting ready to go on stage early in his career, and as the band warms up backstage, you see cut scenes to his past and the musical influences that have shaped his life. [**Tension :53**]

The club on Saturday night. How can a man feel like a man? A bottle of booze and the love of a woman. The blues was liberating. But it was limited. It wasn't a lasting answer.

The church on Sunday morning.

“If the blues offered an affirmation of humanity, **religion offered a way for black people to find hope...On Sunday morning at church, black Christians, spoke back in song, sermon, and prayer against the ‘faceless, merciless, apocalyptic, vengefulness of the vast white mob’, to show that trouble and sorrow would not determine our final meaning. African-Americans embraced the story of Jesus, the crucified Christ, whose death they claimed paradoxically gave them life, just as God resurrected him in the life of the earliest Christian community.”**

“While the lynching tree symbolized white power and ‘black death’, the cross symbolize divine power and ‘black life’ - God overcoming the power of sin and death...In the mystery of God's revelation, black

Christians believed that just knowing that Jesus went through an experience of suffering in a manner similar to theirs, gave them faith that God was with them, even in suffering on lynching trees, just as God was present with Jesus in suffering on the cross.” (Cone, 18, 21)

But the artists put it together before anyone else.

Cone writes extensively about why both white preachers – even progressive ones – and even black preachers, were slow to see the link between the cross and the lynching tree. White's were blinded by their culture. Blacks were too ashamed to look at it clearly.

It was the artists who saw it first: “Many black poets, novelists, painters, dramatists, and other artists saw clearly what white theologians and clergy ignored, and what black religious scholars administers merely alluded to: that in the United States, the clearest image of the crucified Christ was the figure of an innocent black victim, dangling from a lynching tree.” (Cone, 93).

Read the **poems of Countee Cullen**, the **short stores if Langston Hughes**, listen to **the ballads of Billie Holliday**. The artists generally put things together before the rest of us. They are the mystics. They step outside the establishment and show us a different view. They see the truth before the rest of us and we both love them and hate them for it. [**TV 1:30**]

We try to control artists. We tell LeBron “Just shut up and dribble.” Saw a clip just this week of Taylor Swift standing up to her manager dad about wanting to express some political views during Tennessee State elections a couple of years ago. “We don’t make statements we sell records.”

Echos what Col. Parker said to Elvis in the 60’s. By the way, the real scandal of the Ed Sullivan show was not the wiggling. That brought in ratings. Elvis promised his mother he would sing her favorite gospel song, “Peace in the Valley” on the program and they didn’t want him to sing Christian material. He did anyway.

Elvis stood up for the gospel in a variety of ways. No, he wasn’t a preacher, but he sang. Norte Dame concert. Girls on the front row with banner, “Elvis is the King” he stopped and said, “No, Jesus Christ is the king.” He could be bold for his faith.

As a pastor I want to have the courage of an artists. Same tension...money or truth?

I’m not saying Elvis was a saint. He had a lot of problems. But he took comfort in songs about the goodness of God.

He reminds me of another flawed musician that I know. **Think about the similarities with David.**

David is the Elvis of the Bible. Both started as boy musicians. David took the world by storm from his first hit - Goliath? Had a love hate relationship with his manipulative boss - Saul. Crowds went crazy for him. Eventually became The King. Everything he touched turned to gold. Both built a dazzling city – Jerusalem and Vegas. But then David got lazy, maybe the success went to his head.

2 Samuel 11:1 records that “*In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.*” Hmm, why hadn’t David gone out to lead the troops himself. Is this the “Fat David” period?

V.2-3, “*One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her.*” David was in his penthouse apartment in a Vegas casino. David had sex scandals. David was a terrible father. His life was extremely problematic

But even his downfall couldn't keep his name from becoming even greater after his death.

It's really easy for us to be judgmental about what we would or wouldn't do if we had the level of exposure that people like Elvis or other celebrities. But none of us could handle that kind of pressure without a direct miracle from God. I've seen men's lives ruined by a promotion at work and a new condo at Corpus Christi!

Woman at the well. Her community had a lot of dirt on her. Plenty of slander. And it's not like Jesus didn't know about it. But what did he do? He invited her to worship with him. And that's one thing Elvis clung to his whole life. The songs of faith gave him peace that nothing else - including the drugs - could. I want to play you a clip from the documentary in which JD Sumner daughter talks about the influence that her father and other gospel musicians had on Elvis. [**JD Daughter 1:12**]

There is plenty I can admire and criticize about Elvis. And David. But I have empathy for both as fellows pilgrims in this hard, hard world. Maybe they weren't always faithful. Who of us are always faithful. But their God is always a faithful and that's what I cling to.

Bottom line, Elvis is not supposed to be our hero. Neither is David. They all exist...we all exist to point to the one true hero, Jesus Christ. We are all flawed in

various ways, our hope is to be found "in Christ", to be clothed in *His* righteousness.

Following his death in 1977, well known Assemblies of God evangelist, **Jimmy Swaggart** wrote a sanctimonious article about how Elvis had been a tool of Lucifer to deceive a generation through his devil rock and roll. He said the thought of Elvis burning in hell "unnerved" him. Well, I hope so. By the way, that letter reads a bit differently after Swaggart's public humiliation from a sex scandal involving prostitutes a decade later. Maybe glass houses and all that.

Listen, I'm not discounting sin. Elvis's, David's, Jimmy's or mine. I can't say who is in hell when they die - that would be blasphemy - but I can tell **some people are living in hell on this earth.** We can learn from Elvis' contradictions. A life of integrity really is a life worth living. Spiritual growth is import - for our life - peace, joy - and for our witness to others.

We should live lives of repentance. Some people like to point out that both David and Jimmy repented. But none of us know the state of Elvis heart. The people that knew him say he understood his brokenness and longed to be loved by God. Longed to have the religious faith that his mother did.

Well, I want to close by reading you the song that David wrote about his repentance. It became the Psalm that Jimmy quoted about his. I remember reading it in the pages of *Time* magazine in 1988. And when I read it I am reminded that repentance is not nearly as much about us “getting it right” as it is about God’s righteousness.

Psalms 51:1-12

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge

5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. 6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.”

That’s a prayer that any of us can pray. In the end, none of us live a life worthy of God. Elvis’ friend Billy Graham would be the first to admit that about himself. But Elvis put his faith – however imperfect – in the man who lived his life perfectly for us.

And I hope you will too.

Let’s pray...