

"The Passion of the Christ"

Re-examining the Cross

I. Introduction

- A. (Galatians 6:14) "But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ... " (NKJV)
- B. The Cross - a universal symbol of the Christian Religion. A metaphor for an execution of a Galilean Jew 2000 years ago.
- C. Why is the cross the center of Christianity? Why did Mel Gibson make this movie about 12 hours in the life of one regarded by millions as God living as a man.
- D. Is this 12 hours in the life of Jesus of Nazareth the whole story? No. In fact viewing this movie without knowing its context would be confusing to most, raising more questions than it answers.
- E. Purpose: To discuss the cross of Christ, to look at its depiction in the movie "The Passion of the Christ" and to put the story of the cross in its true historical and spiritual setting. Lesson: The Passion of the Christ: Re-examining the Cross. (lesson on website)
- F. I am not here as an apologist for Mel Gibson's film. There are, in fact, things in it with which I would disagree as not representing the gospel story accurately. But I am grateful the movie has introduced the story of Jesus into the public discourse in a way which I have not seen in my lifetime. You may be here because of this movie. For that I am thankful. Hopefully, together we can learn about what is the most significant event for your life and mine.

II. The source of the story of the Cross.

- A. If you have seen the movie and are familiar the New Testament gospels, then you recognize Gibson's attempt to make the gospel's historical accounts the basis of the movie. Are the gospels reliable sources for what happened in Jerusalem 2000 years ago?
 1. Many do not believe so. The media has quoted heavily from critics who cast doubt on the gospels, claiming they were written years after the actual events and have been modified and changed over the centuries.
 - i. As one well known liberal theologian put it; "they were not writing history, they were writing gospel." In other words, they revised and updated the story of Jesus to fit their needs at different times. They weren't interested in historical accuracy, they were interested in providing motivation for a religious movement being challenged by Roman rule and authorities.
 - ii. See also article in St. Pete Times "is the Gospel anti-Semitic?" (Section P, pg. 1; by Roy Peter Clark). He reshapes the gospels story into one which says nothing critical of Jews at all leaving out all references to his arguments with the Jewish leaders of his day. He then says in reference to such negative references to Jewish leaders of Jesus day, "To what extent these things happened, we can never know, because the Christian Scriptures are a complex mixture of history, parable, myth and moral reasoning. They are meant to teach, and they do so from the vantage point of believers who were not eyewitnesses, and for whom the separation of the 'Jesus movement' from Judaism was a fait accompli."

- iii. This is the position of the those who do not accept the historical record of Jesus' life in the Bible. We need to address this matter to determine if what this movie is about, in truth what the whole story of Jesus is about, is history or myth. If it is myth, then it makes no difference what anyone believes about it. If it is historical fact, then it should matter to every person on the face of the earth.

III. Are the Gospels History or Myth?

- A. There are some non-biblical references to Jesus. (Roman historians Suetonius, Pliny; Roman/Jewish historian Josephus). Actually few question Jesus actually lived.
- B. The textual claims of the authors of the gospels (Matt., Mark, Luke & John) clearly indicate they believed they were recording factual history.
 1. Luke 1:1-4; John 19:35; 20:8,30-31; 21:24-25.
 2. These are not the statements of those wishing to write embellished tales of a legendary figure. This isn't the language of one writing about Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox; or of Aesop's fables, spinning morality tales. It is the language of those who say they were eyewitnesses of the events of which they write. To suggest the writers were lying about being eyewitnesses makes no sense. They believed they were writing history.
 - i. Else they purposely practiced lies and deception to their own hurt, and in direct violations of their own teachings!
- C. Do we have accurate copies of what they wrote?
 1. Some claim the gospels were not written down for 30 to 60 years after Jesus lived. No real evidence that is true. Go back a few decades from now and they were saying the gospels were not written until about 200 years after Jesus. Archaeological evidence keeps forcing the critics to revise dates back closer to Jesus. There is no physical evidence that proves no gospel was written down for 30 to 60 years after Jesus. We just haven't found remnants of one of the 4 gospels that dates that far back - yet.
 2. Even if they were not written down for several years, it was the eyewitnesses' accounts that are being recorded even if they are recounting them several years after their occurrence (not doubt for the 10,1000th time!). Can you accurately relate events from 20-30 years ago - especially life changing events in your life. Can you accurately relate the birth of your child? Or the death of your father or mother, etc.? How silly to suggest they couldn't accurately relate the story of Jesus that they had seen and heard with their own eyes and ears. They were adamant in claiming 1st hand knowledge of these events. See 1 John 1:1-4.
- D. But what about from the 1st century until now? Almost 2000 years have passed. How can we be sure the gospel accounts haven't been corrupted in that time span? There are several good ways to determine that. We have a very limited time in this lesson so let me just touch on a couple of things that may help you see we do have accurate copies of the gospels.
- E. **Bibliographical test** - Since we don't have the original autograph writings, do we know we have good copies of the original documents? This important fact can be determined most accurately if there are a number of different copies to compare.
 1. F. E. Peters points out that on the basis of manuscript tradition alone the works that make up the Christian's new testament made up the most frequently copied and widely circulated books of antiquity. (The Harvest of Hellenism, F. W. Peters, pg. 50.

2. There are now more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Add over 10,000 Latin Vulgates and at least 9,300 other early versions (MSS) and we have more than 24,000 manuscript copies of portions of the NT in existence today. No other document of antiquity even begins to approach such numbers of attestation. In comparison The Iliad by Homer is second with only 643 manuscripts that still survive. The first complete preserved text of Homer dates from the 13th century. (Our Bible. How We Got It, Charles Leach, pg. 145).
 3. John Warwick Montgomery says that "to be skeptical of the resultant text of the NT books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity. For no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the NT." (History and Christianity, by J. W. Montgomery, pg. 29).
 4. Our earliest complete manuscripts of the NT come 250-300 years after the original documents. "This may sound a considerable interval but it is nothing to that which parts most of the great classical authors from their earliest manuscripts. We believe in all essentials and accurate text of the 7 extant plays of Sophocles: yet the earliest substantial manuscript upon which it is based was written more than 1400 years after the poets death. (Handbook to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament, Frederick G. Kenyon, pg. 4)
 5. Review chart on pg. 42 of Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Vol. 1, revised edition, 1979.
 6. Further comparison to the Iliad. They continue by saying that, "the Iliad has about 15,600 lines. Only 40 lines (or 400 words) of the NT are in doubt whereas 764 lines of the Iliad are questioned. This 5% textual corruption compares with 1/2 of 1% of similar emendations in the NT." (A General Introduction to the Bible, Norman L. Geisler, pg. 367.)
 7. Not one of the variations Schaff says altered, "an article of faith or precept of duty which is not abundantly sustained by other undoubted passages, or by the whole tenor of scripture teaching." (Companion to the Greek Testament and the English Version, Philip Schaff, pg. 177.)
 8. That textual variations do not endanger doctrine is emphatically stated by Sir Frederick Kenyon (one of the great authorities in the field of NT textual criticism): "One word of warning already referred to must be emphasized in conclusion. No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading..." "It cannot be too strongly asserted that in substance the text of the Bible is certain: especially is this the case with the NT. (Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts, by Frederick G. Kenyon, pg. 23).
- F. External evidence for the reliability of the scriptures.
1. Suppose there were other people who lived about the same time who referred to these gospels. Would what they say be important? How would it help?
 - i. They might say, "Those gospels are so inaccurate. I've talked to other people who were there and they say they are not accurate."
 - ii. They might also say, "I talked to people who were there and they say those writings are extremely accurate. I use them all the time because the eyewitnesses told me they were accurate."
 2. Extra-Biblical Authors - those who lived and wrote near to the time of the eyewitnesses of the NT. **Some were even personally acquainted with them.**

3. They are called by historians the Apostolic Fathers and we have extensive writings from these men. (I have a 5 volume set of their writings with commentary in my library.
 - i. **Irenaeus of Lyons** (AD 180), who was a student of Polycarp of Smyrna; martyred in AD 156, had been a Christian for 86 years, and was a disciple of John the apostle. He wrote: "So firm is the ground upon which these Gospels rest, that the very heretics themselves bear witness to them, and, starting from these [documents], each one of them (the heretics - SP) endeavours to establish his own particular doctrine." (Against Heresies III). The four gospels had become so axiomatic in the Christian world that Irenaeus can refer to it (fourfold Gospel) as an established and recognized fact as obvious as the four cardinal points of the compass.
- G. The evidence for the accuracy of the gospel accounts we have today is really very very strong to the unbiased student. We just don't have time in this lesson to go into in detail. If you are interested in further study on this topic I will be glad to recommend to you material that may be helpful. (Also our spring meeting, April 4-7, with Marty Pickup).
- H. But understand the Bible teaches another factor is involved - The guidance of the Spirit of God - The Holy Spirit (See 1 Corinthians 2; 2nd Peter 1:19-21).

IV. The story contained in the movie - "The Passion of the Christ" - is it accurate?

- A. If we compare the movie to the gospel accounts what do we find? What happens anytime Hollywood makes a movie about an historical event? "Artistic license" is taken. If you are going to make a 2 hour movie about what is contained in about 2 pages of the Bible, you are going to "embellish" the historical account. The story is going to be "dramatized" with imagined conversations and occurrences that are "conjectured."
 1. The presence of Satan tempting Jesus is represented in an actual physical being seen on screen who is tempting Jesus not to go through with this death. No doubt Satan did tempt Jesus but *Hollywood's version* is but conjecture and not based on scripture. It does draw on scriptural ideas but puts them into the context of the events of the movie, when actually those statements used occurred elsewhere in Jesus' life.
 2. While on the way to Golgotha, the place of the crucifixion, in the movie Jesus says to His mother Mary, "Behold I make all things new." It is a quotation from the last book of the Bible, Revelation 21:5, a statement by God about what God has accomplished in His work of Redemption for the world. The statement is not in the gospel accounts of the crucifixion but it is a scriptural statement. Hollywood does that kind of thing a lot in Bible movies and Gibson did it in this movie, too.
- B. But Gibson did use some non-biblical sources for some scenes in the movie. They come from his acceptance of myths and traditions taught by the Roman Catholic church of which he claims to be a devout member. These sources are accepted by many Catholics as historical but by hardly anyone else. For example:
 1. On the way to the Cross. A woman who has now come to be called Veronica wipes Jesus face with a cloth and the bloody imprint of his face is left on the cloth. This is one of several catholic legends that surround this woman. Supposedly this cloth was seen and passed around for many years after the death of Christ and actually possessed healing powers, even Emperor Tiberius being healed by touching it. The Catholic Encyclopedia says of her: "*These pious traditions cannot be documented, but there is no reason why the belief that such an act of compassion did occur*"

should not find expression in the veneration paid to one called Veronica, even though the name has found no place in the Hieronymian Martyrology or the oldest historical Martyrologies." (www.newadvent.org/cathen/15362a.htm) In other words there is no real evidence that these things are true, but since we celebrate them already we will keep doing so.

- i. This event of Veronica is actually one of what Catholicism calls "the stations of the cross" - a meditation and prayer which they are taught that takes the worshipper through the events from Jesus' condemnation by Pilate to His entombment after His death. There are 14 such "stations" in this meditation.
 - ii. Another scene in the movie shows the 13th "station of the cross" - Jesus' dead body taken down from the cross and draped across the body of his mother Mary. This station of the cross is rooted in Catholic tradition but actually contradicts with scripture since John had taken Mary from the crucifixion scene to his home before Jesus died (John 19:25-27) and then he returns to Golgotha just in time to see Jesus speak His last words at His death.
 - a. Actually the role of Mary in the film is greatly exaggerated over what is actually in the gospel and New Testament accounts and that would have to be directly attributed to Gibson's Catholicism and Catholicism's veneration of Mary far above anything taught in the Bible. She is only mentioned by name in Scripture 5 times and is very much in the background. She is not pictured as sinless, as having escaped death, as interceding for others in prayer or any of the other things the Catholic church teaches about her. All are clear later additions to the account of Mary's life by the Roman Catholic church that are not found anywhere in the Bible.
2. Another source Gibson used were the writing of two French Catholic nuns:
- i. Mary of Agreda (1602-1665)
 - ii. Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824)
 - iii. Both claimed to have detailed visions of what happened during the passion of Christ
 - iv. Such details in the movie as extra long nails whose points came through to the back of the cross are details Gibson lifted from the writings of these nuns. Some even suggest his portrayal of the Jewish leaders and of Pilate are influenced by Emmerich's portrayal of these people. That is certainly possible since Gibson readily admitted to studying the writings of these two nuns. Many of the charges of anti-semitism in this movie are attributed to Emmerich's portrayal of the Jewish leaders as particularly hateful and the Romans are being more benevolent in their treatment of Jesus during the trials. I must mention that the visions of these two nuns are not accepted as factual even by all Catholics. But Gibson did use them.
3. Thus it is clear that Gibson's old line Catholic beliefs and background influenced some scenes in the movie. And that needs to be taken into account when you watch it. And what that says is, if you want to know exactly what happened you will have to read the gospel accounts without addition or subtraction. They are the substantiated accounts of eyewitnesses to these events who were guided by the Holy Spirit. All other accounts and details are embellishment.
- C. Is this film anti-semitic (i.e., anti-Jewish)?

1. I can understand a Jews concern because of the history of hatred toward Jews by many peoples. But I don't think the movie is anti-semitic. Gibson says he is not anti-semitic and believes antisemitism is a sin.
 2. What is seen in the movie? It is clear that the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem during Jesus day are portrayed in the gospels as less than heroic. They act in hypocritical and underhanded ways to eliminate Jesus for their own ends. But that doesn't condemn all Jews for all time, just as the actions of Mussolini during World War II does not condemn all Italians, Stalin's actions do not condemn all Russians, and the actions of the Leader of the Ku Klux Klan does not condemn all Southerners.
 3. But there is no escaping facts. The Jewish leaders were involved in bringing Jesus to the cross. That is historical fact. But anyone who wants to blame all Jews for the death of Jesus is a hatemonger of the worst sort. Don't forget. Jesus was a Jew and He said he died for His own people as well as all people.
- D. Overall the film is a fairly accurate representation of what is described in the four gospels. And it is presented powerfully and without apology as Gibson hoped to impress upon the audience the enormity of the suffering Jesus endured at the end of His life.

V. But why is such a death by Jesus necessary?

- A. This question may come from anyone who sees the movie and does not understand the whole context of Jesus life and death. To understand what is being presented in this movie we must see what the Bible says about Jesus and what led up to His death and resurrection.
- B. Jesus is the central character of all of scripture, even in the OT before He comes to earth. His mission and His coming are spoken of repeatedly in prophecy. Yet it is in the gospels, that record His earthly life and teaching, that we see most fully who He claimed to be and we find the explanation of His mission. In our limited time tonight lets look briefly at what the gospel accounts say of Jesus.

VI. The basic claims of Jesus.

- A. **He claimed to be Deity and on equality with God the Father.** (Jno. 5:17-18)
 1. He claimed that to see Him was to see the Father (Jno. 14:7-10; 1:18).
 2. He confessed Himself to be the Christ, "The Son of the Blessed" (Mk. 14:61-64).
 3. If He wasn't the Christ, he was a pretender, a fraud.
- B. **He accepted worship as deity.**
 1. He taught that only God should be worshipped (Matt. 4:10; Jno. 4:23).
 2. But he accepted worship from a leper (Mt. 8:2), Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue (Mt. 9:18), and the blind man He enabled to see (Jn. 9:35-38).
 3. After his resurrection he accepted worship from the disciples (Mt. 28:9), from Thomas (Jn. 20:26-29)
 4. If He was not deity, this was blasphemy.
- C. **He claimed sinlessness** (Jn. 8:46), yet he condemned self-righteousness (Lk. 18:9-14).
 1. IF He wasn't deity, then He was a hypocrite.
 2. He allowed the apostles to believe He was the Christ (Matt. 16:16-18).
 3. If he was not he was the world's greatest deceiver.

- D. **He claimed the shedding of his blood would save men from their sins** (Mt. 26:28; 20:28). He died for this belief and cause. That means he believed it himself. That makes him either Lord and God or a nut case - a lunatic.

VII. The context of the coming of Jesus.

- A. Why was it necessary? Sin.
- B. Genesis 3 records sin entering the world. Sin - transgression of God's law. But even in the introduction of sin into the world, hope is given prophetically in Gen. 3:15 (referenced in the movie in the Garden of Gethsemane).
1. Sin results in our spiritual death - Gen. 3; Ezekiel 18:4,20. We face an eternity in Hell with the devil and his angels (Rev. 20:10-15; 21:8).
 2. It is our own sin that separates from God (Isa. 59:1,2).
- C. The part of the Bible called the Old Testament records God's intervention into this world to bring about His purpose, the saving of mankind and the glorification of His own name. Throughout Old Testament history, we learn of God, His nature and His awesome power. It also, through prophecy, tells of the coming of one who will make salvation possible by taking upon Himself the consequences of our sins.
1. Isaiah 53 - Prophetically speaks of the coming Savior and describes the purpose of His work. (The movie opened with verse 5 on the screen.)
 2. The coming Saviour was going to be one who would die in mankind's place. He would be a sinless sacrifice acceptable to God as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. By dying for us, we can escape eternal condemnation in Hell through the death of Jesus Christ.
- D. Jesus is then, the World's Savior (Luke 1:31; Cf. Matt. 1:20,21; and John's proclamation in John 1:29). Angels declared Him Savior at His birth (Luke 2:11). And Jesus declared himself the fulfillment of prophecy of the coming Messiah/Savior (Luke 4:16-21).
- E. Jesus had to die to save us. He took our place by taking the punishment that was due us upon Himself.
1. He made purification for our sins - Hebrews 1:3.
 2. God had foreshadowed this sacrifice for generations in the animal sacrifices offered throughout the Old Testament. God had required them since sin began but Jesus was going to make them unnecessary as he became the final atoning sacrifice for sin - Hebrews 10:1-10 (Read).
 3. God had prophesied such a sacrifice -
 - i. **Isaiah 53:1-6** (a prophecy of Christ). - ¹ Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ² For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, And as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, *There is no beauty that we should desire Him.* ³ He is despised and rejected by men, A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, *our* faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (NKJV)
 4. If Jesus had not died and been raised from the dead, we would all be lost eternally. He was the only possible sacrifice that could be accepted by God the Father.

- F. Why so brutal a death? It impressed upon us all the horror of sin and the price that had to be paid. Those images of the suffering Saviour are powerful because we know He suffered for us willingly. (John 10:17,18; Cf. Matt. 26:53 & 12 legions of angels at His disposal. Also Heb. 10:5-7.)
1. Yet understand the humiliation and suffering of Christ did not begin with 12 hours before his death. His entire earthly life would be a humiliating experience for God. (See Philippians 2:5-8.) What he endured for 33 years is unbelievable when viewed from the perspective of God.
- G. Thus the crucifixion becomes the central event in the story of mankind's redemption for it is in that singular, awesome and horrible event that the sins of world were placed upon one person - God himself dying as a man for our sins. And, just as importantly, the gospels record His resurrection from the dead the following Sunday, the act that gives us all hope of life after the grave. The crucifixion and resurrection go hand in hand.
- H. This, then, is the Bible account of God at work bringing about our redemption. It is not a fairy tale. It is an actual historical account of real events confirmed by the hand of God himself by the signs that followed, the miraculous events that surround the story of Jesus and of His prophets. These confirm the accuracy of what they taught and give us assurance of the truth of the Bible.
- I. The movie, the Passion of Christ, with all its shortcomings, has brought the greatest event in history back into the public discourse and I am glad for the doors it is opening to discuss this event with those who may not have understood it before or not been touched by its awesome power and love.
1. It is, after all, a story of love - God's unending love for us all - John 3:16.
 2. And it is God's desire that everyone personally benefit from the loving sacrifice of Jesus. But whether we benefit from it is up to us personally.

VIII. How do I benefit personally from the saving grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ?

- A. The scriptures teach us that there must be a response on our part to this loving sacrifice of Jesus. And our response will lead to our salvation from sin, our escape of Hell and our eternal home with the Father after this life. What does he ask of us?
- B. Believe on Him - 1 Timothy 4:10 - ¹⁰For to this *end* we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is *the* Savior of all men, especially of those who believe. (NKJV)
- C. What does such faith produce?
1. A recognition of our lost condition -
 - i. **Genesis 2:17** - (God's original prohibition & consequence to Adam) - ¹⁷"but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (NKJV)
 - ii. **Ezekiel 18:4** - ⁴"Behold, all souls are Mine; The soul of the father As well as the soul of the son is Mine; The soul who sins shall die. (NKJV)
 - iii. **John 8:24** - ²⁴"Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins." (NKJV)
 2. A desire to change - Repentance.

- i. Jesus wanted His disciples to preach repentance - Luke 24:46-47
- 3. A willingness to confess Jesus as your Lord - Rom. 10:9-10.
- 4. A desire to obey His Will -
 - i. **Hebrews 5:8-9** ⁸ though He was a Son, *yet* He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. ⁹ And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, (NKJV)
- 5. A desire to be in a right relationship with Christ by removal of our sins. When does this happen?
 - i. **At baptism** -
 - a. **Mark 16:15-16** ¹⁵ And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. ¹⁶ "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. (NKJV)
 - b. **Acts 2:38** ³⁸ Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (NKJV)
 - ii. Our relationship with God is changed at that point
 - a. **Romans 6:1-4** - ¹ What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? ² Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? ³ Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (NKJV)
 - iii. We then live a changed life in which we have changed our relationship with God.
- D. What must we do to be saved? Just what Jesus taught - Believe in Him, Repent of our sins and be baptized for the removal of our sins.

IX. Conclusion

- A. It may be that this lesson, or this movie has made you think about your condition before God as never before. Maybe you are just coming to an understanding of what Jesus is all about.
- B. If you would like to talk further or study more about this, see me tonight. I will be glad to help you in coming to further understanding of Jesus the Savior. Others here will be glad to do the same. But please don't walk away tonight without getting your questions answered.
- C. Come to Jesus. Maybe you are ready to respond now. Contact us.

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