

## **The Passion of Christ: Its True Significance**

If you saw *The Passion of the Christ*, no doubt you were emotionally affected. Only the most callous person could view a depiction of a man being beaten, flogged, and crucified and not be moved. Maybe once the film was over, you found yourself unable to leave your seat. Stunned and speechless, you attempted to process all you had seen. Maybe the gruesome images drove you to tears. Maybe your mind was filled with the question, "Was that really how it was?" Maybe you had an emotional experience after seeing *The Passion of the Christ*. Maybe you feel you had a spiritual experience as well. Your awareness of God is now greater than before. You believe your Christian faith has begun, been restored, or been strengthened by seeing *The Passion of the Christ*.

When it comes to spiritual experiences, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between that which is true and that which is false. In Matthew 7:22-23, Jesus speaks of some who thought they had a spiritual experience and thus knew Him. He states, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." The only way to really know whether or not you are right with God is to make sure your experience is founded upon biblical truth.

It might surprise you to know that the gospel writers could have portrayed the death of Jesus in very graphic terms and did not.

Matthew 27:26, "Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered *him* to be crucified."

Matthew 27:35, "And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots."

Mark 15:15, "And *so* Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged *him*, to be crucified."

Luke 23:33, "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left."

John 19:16, "Then delivered he him therefore unto them to be crucified. And they took Jesus, and led *him* away."

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John could have used the tool of human language to paint a picture of the last hours of Jesus' life in all of its anguish and blood, but based upon the plan of God they did not. Jesus' crucifixion is spoken of, mentioned, and alluded to throughout the Bible, but it is never recounted in all its details. There is a reason for that. The physical agony Jesus suffered on the cross was only one part of God's message of forgiveness, and a lone gaze upon the crucifixion without the other facets of that message is of no saving or forgiving value to the human race. *The Passion of the Christ* focuses on a portion of Jesus' life that is easily portrayed on film, but there is much more to the sacrifice of Jesus than His brutal death. For a person to secure God's eternal forgiveness through Jesus, he must understand more than how Jesus died. He must understand the true significance of Jesus' death.

### **Jesus' Death Is Significant Because of the Father's Plan.**

The death of Jesus was no accident. God the Father planned it, and God the Son willingly accepted it. Speaking of Jesus' crucifixion, Acts 2:23 reads, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." The sins of mankind made Jesus' death necessary, but God the Father planned His death and brought it pass.

As you consider all that Jesus did for sinners, remember that the Father planned it all. Behind the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is an infinitely wise master plan.

### **Jesus' Death Is Significant Because of Who We Are.**

The Bible consistently makes a great distinction between God and man.

God is man's Creator and sustainer; man is God's servant created for God's glory. Psalm 24:1 reads, "The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein."

God is holy, without fault or sin; man is sinful and rebellious from the day of his birth. Speaking to God, Revelation 15:4 states, "for *thou* only art holy:." Speaking of mankind, Ecclesiastes 9:3 says, "The heart of the sons of men is full of evil." Romans 3:9-18 provides a complete description of mankind and the depths of his rebellion against God. It reads, "Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is

none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat *is* an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps *is* under their lips: Whose mouth *is* full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet *are* swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery *are* in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes.

God is loving, gracious, and just; man, as we have just seen, is selfish, sinful, and unjust. Exodus 34.6-7 says of God, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear *the guilty*.

Whether we care to admit it or not, we are created beings who are infinitely in debt to God, but have returned His grace and love with self-seeking rebellion. We do what we want. When it comes to life's daily decisions and actions, we do as we please. This is the heart of man's problem. Because God is holy and just He must punish man's crimes and rebellion. Every violation of God's law will be punished. Jesus died because of who we are—sinners. He died because sinners need forgiveness, and it is only on the basis of His death that sinners can be forgiven.

### **Jesus' Death Is Significant Because of Who Jesus Is.**

Thousands of men were scourged and crucified during the New Testament period. The physical suffering depicted in *The Passion of the Christ* was not uncommon. It was the lot for many criminals against the Roman Empire. What was significant about the scourging and death of Jesus was not the methods of torture or the physical anguish experienced, but the person who experienced the suffering. Many ordinary men hung bloody and bare upon Roman crosses.

But Jesus was no ordinary man.

Jesus is God in human flesh. He is the second person of the godhead. In Titus 2.13 Jesus is called "the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ." 1 John 5.20 states that Jesus "is the true God, and eternal life."

Jesus is the beloved of the Father. John 3.16 speaks of Jesus as God's one and only Son. Jesus is the Father's unique, one of a kind Son. In Matthew 3.17 God the Father speaks from heaven and says of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Jesus is sinless. No doubt some men were crucified under Roman law who were not guilty of the crimes for which they were punished. But none of those men were truly guiltless. All of those men were guilty criminals before God. All of them were sinners. But Jesus was guiltless before both man and God. According to 1 Peter 2.22 Jesus "did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth." According to 1 John 3.5 in Jesus "is no sin."

Jesus is also the co-creator, and Lord and Master of all things. Speaking of Jesus, John 1.3 reads, "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made." In John 20.28 Thomas looked into Jesus' eyes and proclaimed "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus' death upon Golgotha's cross was different from every other such death because Jesus was different from every other man. Yes, He was a man. But He was the sinless God/man. He did not deserve to die a criminal's death. Jesus died, not for His own sins, but for the sins of others.

### **Jesus' Death Is Significant Because of Jesus' Life.**

Jesus' death is an indispensable facet of God's message of forgiveness, but Jesus' sinless life is essential as well. In fact, apart from Jesus' sinless life, His death would have been powerless to meet man's need. His death would have had no value for the human race if He had not lived a sinless life first. In order for a sinful man to be acceptable to the holy God, he must be perfect and without sin.

As we have seen, every human being is a sinner and therefore is unacceptable to God. No sinner can enter heaven because God cannot look upon sin. Habakkuk 1.13 addresses God saying, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity." Only that which is righteous and holy can dwell in God's permanent presence. How, then, can a sinful human ever hope to enter God's eternal heaven? He cannot, unless he somehow becomes holy and righteous in God's sight.

That is where Jesus' sinless life comes in. Jesus lived a holy and sinless life so that God could clothe sinners in that holiness and make them acceptable before Him. In 2 Corinthians 5.21 Paul states that God made Jesus "to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." This verse teaches that when Jesus

was crucified, God the Father viewed Him as a sinner (Jesus became sin for us), so that those who have trusted in Him could be viewed by the Father as righteous. In other words, the sinless one was punished as a sinner so that sinners could be blessed as sinless ones.

So often we focus exclusively on Jesus' death, failing to realize that His sinless life made His death valuable. Jesus' crucifixion would have been pointless and void without Jesus' sinless life. If Jesus had suffered the agonies of the cross without first living a perfect life, His death would have been like that of any other man. It would have been painful, brutal, and heart wrenching. It would also have been insufficient to meet the spiritual needs of the human race.

### **Jesus' Death Is Significant Because of the Unseen Torture He Experienced.**

When we couple 2 Corinthians 5:21 with Matthew 27:45-46, we begin to understand the most agonizing aspect of Jesus' suffering on the cross.

2 Corinthians 5:21, For he [God] hath made him [Jesus] *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Matthew 27:45-46 Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

What is depicted in *The Passion of the Christ* is Jesus' physical sufferings. Those sufferings were enormous, but as we know, they were not unusual. Thousands of men suffered similarly. The greatest suffering Jesus experienced went unseen by the human eyes of those surrounding the cross. While the suffering that men observed was enormous, the suffering that men could not see was infinite. Jesus endured unlimited and immeasurable agony which no human could detect and which no human could survive.

On Golgotha's cross, the Father placed the sins of the human race upon Jesus and judged Him as if He were a sinner. The Father poured upon Him both man's sin and the punishment for that sin. That is what Paul means when he writes that God, hath made him [Jesus] *to be* sin for us. It was at that point that darkness fell upon the earth for three hours, and Jesus cried out, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? For the infinitely holy Jesus, the greatest agony was in becoming sin for sinners and in being forsaken by His beloved Father.

Jesus' physical suffering was only the tip of the iceberg. The agony of becoming sin was both infinitely excruciating and indiscernible to the human eye. No eye could see it. No mind can fathom it. No drama can reproduce it. No film can capture it.

### **Jesus' Death Is Significant Because True Forgiveness Involves Substitution.**

God is holy and just, and therefore must punish sin. In order to remain just and yet forgive sinners, He must pour out His punishment of sin on someone besides the sinner. Because He is just, God cannot simply forget a person's sin. In the Old Testament, innocent and spotless animals died in the place of sinners. Leviticus 4:28-29 states that when a person sinned he was to bring a spotless female goat as his sin offering. He was then to lay his hand upon the head of the sin offering, and slay the sin offering in the place of the burnt offering. When the sinner placed his hands upon the spotless animal, he symbolized God's gracious act of transferring his sin and guilt to that animal.

Jesus lived and died as God's final spotless lamb. As such, Jesus died in the place of sinners. John the Baptist highlighted this very point in John 1:29 when he drew attention to Jesus and said, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. Isaiah 53:5 puts it this way, He [Jesus] *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him. When Jesus suffered physically and spiritually on the cross, He did so as man's substitute. He suffered in the place of sinners.

For sinners to be forgiven, a substitute must take their deserved punishment. To focus on the bloody death of Jesus alone without understanding its substitutionary nature is to completely miss the real point of the crucifixion. If Jesus did not go to the cross as the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world, then His suffering was in vain. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was more than a bloody and gruesome death; it was a substitutionary death. He took the punishment of sinners.

### **Jesus' Death Is Significant Because God Accepted It.**

How do we know that Jesus' death was anything special? How do we know that Jesus wasn't just like all the others who were scourged and crucified? How do we know that His death was different than all the others and that it was truly the death of God in human flesh and the Savior of mankind? We know this because the Father validated Jesus' claims and death by resurrecting Him from the dead.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15.15, We have testified of God that he raised up Christ. Paul comments on the purpose of the resurrection in Romans 1.4 where he writes that Jesus is declared *to be* the Son of God with power ... by the resurrection from the dead. Paul also adds that if Jesus had been crucified but not resurrected, the Christian faith is futile and empty, and Christians are still in their sins (1 Corinthians 15.17).

The only reason we know Jesus' person and death were different from all the others is because of His victory over the grave. Jesus' claims are implausible, even absurd, without the resurrection to prove their validity. The crucifixion narrative, no matter how well depicted, is just the death of a criminal apart from the truth of the resurrection.

### **Jesus' Death Can Be Significant For You.**

*The Passion of the Christ* places before the viewer a bold and stunning look at the type of physical death that Jesus endured for mankind. As essential as Jesus' death was, however, you must understand why Jesus died and how His death was unique for it to have any forgiving value for you.

The death of Jesus in and of itself is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus Christ is this: by the plan of God the Father, Jesus' holy God in human flesh and Lord of all came to earth, lived a perfect life, took upon Himself man's sin and punishment, and died as a substitute for sinners who deserve God's eternal punishment. This same Jesus was raised from the dead, demonstrating the Father's acceptance of His substitutionary death for mankind. That is the gospel. That is God's message of forgiveness.

The question remains, how can you access God's forgiveness? How can you secure a personal and forgiven relationship with God through Jesus? Is it through religious activity such as baptism or communion? Is it the result of human religious works?

According to the Bible, it is through repentant faith in Jesus Christ and His gospel that forgiveness is secured. According to the Bible, you must repent of your life of sin and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ. You must turn from your sinful direction and trust in Jesus as your Lord and as the one who took upon Himself your sin and punishment. According to Paul, you must turn in repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20.21). You must repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance (Acts 26.20).

In 1 Thessalonians 1.9 Paul speaks of spiritual conversion as turning to God from idols to serve the living and true God. Idols are anything that a person lives for and serves. True spiritual conversion involves turning from the priorities and value system of the old life and serving and following true and living God.

What will happen to you if you decide not to repent, believe, and follow Jesus Christ? The Bible is very clear about that as well. According to John 3.36, He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him. 2 Thessalonians 1.8-9 states, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

Our culture is inundated with systems of belief and religious groups. People look to and trust in many things. But only one message is from God. Only one message will bring eternal forgiveness to sinners—the gospel of Jesus Christ. In John 14.6 Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. Bow before God. Confess your sin to Him. Turn from your life of rebellion. Cast your faith on Jesus as the one who took your punishment. Offer yourself to Him as His servant. If you do so with your whole heart, eternal forgiveness is yours.