

Solid Ground



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The Christ of "The Passion": What the Movie Couldn't Show

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"The Passion of the Christ" is an historically precise, visually stunning, and viscerally moving portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus. Yet the most important detail of Jesus' final hours is not in the film.

What viewers do not see cannot be filmed. While three hours of darkness cloak the cross a transaction takes place that has been planned since the dawn of time.

This transaction entails a crucial fact obscured by the controversy surrounding the film: Jesus was not a victim. No one took His life from Him. Not Jews. Not Romans. He gave it willingly and purposefully. It was His choice, what He wanted. In fact, it was the reason He was born. From the beginning, as predicted in the ancient scrolls, a divine plan had been unfolding.

Though conceived by a miracle, Jesus has humble beginnings. He is born, as the prophet foretold, in Bethlehem, in a manger, among lowly people of modest circumstance. Yet there is a persistent testimony in those early days that He is no ordinary child. The statements of the angel Gabriel, Jesus' mother Mary, Zacharias the priest, the heavenly host at His birth, Simeon and Anna in the temple, and the magi all center around one message: Jesus is the very Son of God, the promised Messiah of Israel, and the Savior of the world.

After John the Baptist begins preaching in the wilderness, Jesus quietly initiates His ministry, yet His time of obscurity is short. Jesus' popularity accelerates and begins to eclipse that of John, who dutifully steps aside, giving Jesus the spotlight.

Soon it is impossible not to take sides. Unconventional from the outset, Jesus challenges both the practices and the prejudices of a religious establishment He openly confronts. This endears Him to the common people who flock to Him in great numbers. He speaks with authority and vigor, investing old truths with fresh, new insight. He works miracles, healing, casting out demons, even raising the dead.

Jesus quickly becomes a phenomenon, inciting curiosity and interest wherever He goes. His following grows rapidly, but knowing these loyalties run shallow He does not entrust Himself to anyone. It will not be long before the masses become disenchanted. Jesus does not yield to the agenda of any group. Instead, He speaks the truth and lets the chips fall where they may.

The party soon ends. Jesus does not just criticize the leaders; He condemns the people as a whole as wicked and sinful. After miraculously feeding thousands, He laments openly to the masses that they come to Him merely to have their stomachs filled. They do not hunger for the

Bread that brings eternal life, Jesus Himself. His listeners respond with shock, disappointment, and derision. It becomes clear that following Jesus brings hardship and difficulty, not glory, power, and prosperity. The people turn away from Jesus en masse and most of His disciples depart. Though the twelve remain, one, Jesus notes, "is a devil," portentous of a time of growing opposition that now awaits Him.

As the group of Jesus' followers dwindles, He withdraws, spending more time in obscure areas and gentile regions while He invests Himself in training the twelve. Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, is a testimony to the Apostles' deepening commitment to this enigmatic man. Jesus gives them a glimpse of His glory at the Transfiguration and talks plainly of His imminent death, though they do not understand.

Jesus' conflict with the people, especially the religious leadership, intensifies. He attacks their doctrine, conduct, dress, anything indicative of shallow religious piety that hides the spiritual poverty within each of us. He leaves nothing untouched, rebuking religious self-righteousness more than anything else. He has patience with repentant sinners and those with weak faith, but He has none for religious hypocrisy. Spiritual pride hardens the heart, preventing a humble admission of guilt. It is the most pernicious obstacle to restoring an authentic relationship with the Father. Jesus' unrelenting assault calcifies His opposition who now actively plot His death.

The circumstances ripen for disaster as Jesus' hour of decision rapidly approaches. Calvary looms before Him; Jerusalem is now Jesus' only objective. He knows what awaits Him. The raising of Lazarus hardens the resolve of His enemies. The Triumphal Entry creates a surge of attention, but the celebration rings hollow. In a matter of days the same people will demand His death, trading "Hosanna" for "Crucify Him." In spite of the imminent danger to His life, Jesus stands boldly against religious hypocrisy and its root cause, unbelief.

Passion week is not only the end of Jesus' journey, it is the final resolution of thousands of years of prophecy, promise, and expectation. The die is cast; the final act of the drama is about to be played out. Jesus' life will soon be in the hands of those who hate Him, but it is the Father, not Jesus' enemies, who is in control.

In a matter of hours the Messiah will be dead, but those hours tick by slowly. Some of the time Jesus spends with the ones He loves the most, those to whom He has given every waking moment for the last three years. He gathers them close to prepare them for the dark days ahead. The rest of His time is spent in agony, humiliation, and suffering.

Crucifixion is a cruel form of execution, generally reserved for slaves and rebels. Death is agonizing and slow, the result of shock, exposure and, eventually, asphyxiation. Hanging from a cross constricts the diaphragm, inhibiting breathing. The only way to get air is to release pressure on the arms by pushing up against the nails that pierce the feet, requiring continual effort that could go on for days. Exhaustion eventually overtakes the victim and he suffocates.

For Jesus, though, the pain of the cross pales in the face of a greater anguish. There is a deeper torment that cannot be seen, one no camera can capture and no words can express, more excruciating than nails pinning Jesus' body to the timbers, more dreadful than lashes ripping flesh from His frame. It is a dark, terrible, incalculable agony, an infinite misery, as God the Father unleashes his fury upon His sinless Son as if guilty of an immeasurable evil.

Why punish the innocent One? Nailed to the top of the cross is an official notice, a certificate of debt to Caesar, a public display of Jesus' crime: "The King of the Jews." The cross is payment for this crime. When punishment is complete, Caesar's court will cancel the debt with a single Greek word stamped upon the parchment's face: tetelestai. Finished. Paid in full.

Being king of the Jews is not the crime Jesus pays for, however. Hidden to all but the Father is another certificate nailed to that cross. In the darkness that shrouds Calvary from the sixth to the ninth hour, a divine transaction is taking place; Jesus makes a trade with the Father. The crimes of all of humanity, every murder, every theft, every lustful glance; every hidden act of vice, every modest moment of pride, and every monstrous deed of evil; every crime of every man who ever lived, these Jesus takes upon Himself as if guilty of all.

At the last, it is not the cross that takes Jesus' life. He does not die of exposure, or loss of blood, or asphyxiation. When the full payment is made, when the last of the debt melts away and the justice of God is fully satisfied, Jesus simply dismisses His spirit with a single Greek word that falls from His lips: "Tetelestai." It is finished. The divine transaction is complete.

You see, there are actually three passions in "The Passion of the Christ." The passionate intensity of God's anger at us for our sins collides with the passionate intensity of God's love for us, causing the passionate intensity of the agony of the cross to be shouldered by God Himself in human form.

The story is told of a king who, having discovered a theft in the royal treasury, decrees that the criminal be publicly flogged for this affront to the crown. When soldiers haul the thief before the king as he sits in his judgment seat, there in chains stands the frail form of the king's own mother.

Without flinching, he orders the old woman to be bound to the whipping post in front of him. When she is secured, he stands up, lays down his imperial scepter, sets aside his jeweled crown, removes his royal robes, and enfolds the tiny old woman with his own body. Baring his back to the whip, he orders that the punishment commence. Every blow meant for the criminal lands with full force upon the bare back of the king until the last lash falls.

In like manner, in those dark hours the Father wrapped us in His Son who shields us, taking the justice we deserve. This is not an accident. It was planned. The prophet Isaiah described it 700 years earlier:

Surely our griefs He Himself bore....He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

No other man did this. No other man could. Jesus alone, the perfect Son of God, He paid the debt so that whoever trusts in Him will not perish under God's punishment, but have life with Him fully and forever. Jesus is the Savior of the world. Without Him the world could not be saved from its overwhelming debt.

Permit me to share a final story. Harry Ironside used to tell about a young Russian soldier who, because his father was a friend of Czar Nicholas I, had been made paymaster in one of the barracks.

The young man meant well, but his character was not up to his responsibility. He took to gambling and eventually gambled away a great deal of the government's money. In due course the young man received notice that a representative of the czar was coming to check accounts, and he knew he was in trouble.

That evening he got out the books and totaled up the funds he owed. Then he went to the safe and got out his own pitifully small amount of money. As he sat and looked at the two he was overwhelmed at the astronomical debt versus his meager funds. He was ruined.

The young soldier determined to take his life. He pulled out his revolver, placed it on the table before him, and wrote a summation of his misdeeds. At the bottom of the ledger where he had totaled up his illegal borrowings, he wrote: "A great debt! Who can pay?" He decided that at the stroke of midnight he would die.

As the evening wore on the soldier grew drowsy and eventually fell asleep. That night Czar Nicholas, as was sometimes his custom, made the rounds of the barracks. Seeing a light, he stopped, looked in, and saw the young man asleep. He recognized him immediately and, looking over his shoulder, saw the ledger and realized all that had taken place.

He was about to awaken him and put him under arrest when his eye fastened on the young man's message: A great debt! Who can pay? Suddenly, with a surge of magnanimity, he reached over, wrote one word at the bottom of the ledger, and slipped out.

When the young man awoke, he glanced at the clock and saw that it was long after midnight. He reached for his revolver to end his life. But his eye fell upon the ledger and he saw something he had not seen before. There beneath his writing, "A great debt! Who can pay?" was written a single word: "Nicholas."

He was dumbfounded. It was the Czar's signature. He said to himself, "The czar must have come by when I was asleep. He has seen the book. He knows all. Still he is willing to forgive."

The young soldier then trusted the word of the czar. The next morning a messenger came from the palace with exactly the amount needed to meet the deficit. Only the czar could pay, and the czar did pay.

We compare God's righteousness to our own tawdry performance and we ask: "A great debt to God! Who can pay?" But then the Lord Jesus Christ steps forward and signs His name to our ledger: "Jesus Christ."

Only Jesus can pay, and He does. He has completed the transaction. He has canceled the debt. It is finished. It only remains for us to trust in His promise.

That is something "The Passion of the Christ" does not reveal. It is something no movie could ever show.

Under His Mercy,

Gregory Koukl
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