

THE
PASSION
OF CHRIST
AND THE
PURPOSE
OF LIFE

A POWERFUL MESSAGE OF HOPE FOR
THOSE WHO PLACE THEIR FAITH IN CHRIST

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CONTENTS

Introduction 7

PART I: CRUCIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT CHRIST'S PASSION

1. Why Did Jesus Have to Die?.....11
2. Who Crucified Jesus?25
3. What Is the Gospel?39
4. How Wide Is God's Mercy?53

PART II: THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS IN CHRIST'S PASSION

5. A Prophecy of His Passion.....69
6. God's Crucified Lamb.....81
7. The Wisdom of the Cross.....95
8. The Silence of the Lamb 109

PART III: CHRIST'S PURPOSE FOR US IN HIS PASSION

9. Say Good-Bye to Boasting 123
10. It's Time for Some Liberated Living 133

INTRODUCTION

When actor Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* finally debuted in theaters across America in February 2004, it arrived amid more media hype, audience anticipation, and bitter controversy than probably any film in the previous half century.

You may recall that the publicity, and the public debate, about this film started many months before it was released. Critics scorned, denounced, and dismissed the work as a piece of narrow-minded, religious propaganda. Many Christians waited with great excitement as they learned of Gibson's plan to use only the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion for the film's story line and dialogue.

In the middle of all this, I rejoiced to know that *The Passion of the Christ* caused millions of people to think about and talk about the cross of Jesus Christ and why He died. Some of the biggest names in the entertainment and religious worlds appeared on prime-time television programs to discuss questions such as: Why did Jesus die? Who really crucified Jesus? What was the real purpose for which He died?

I believe Mel Gibson has done the church a service by shining the light on Jesus' crucifixion and helping people understand it in a way they never had before. The questions his film raised in the popular mind are the most important questions any person could ever ask—not just in our day, but in any day. This book is dedicated to helping answer questions like these, and to lifting the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ off the pages of Scripture and into your heart. My prayer throughout these studies was that God would draw me to the foot of the cross, and now that is my prayer for you, dear reader.

Part I:
Crucial Questions
about
Christ's Passion



WHY DID JESUS HAVE TO DIE?

One of the saddest and most perplexing stories to come out of World War II was the case of Private Eddie Slovik, the only American soldier executed for desertion during that long war.

Private Slovik had come from a very troubled and difficult background and seemed to be just getting his life together when he received his army draft notice. He completed his training and was shipped off to Europe. But his first experience of combat so terrified him that he laid down his weapon and refused to return to his unit. Although he knew that the sentence for desertion in time of war was death by firing squad, Private Slovik did not believe he would really be executed.

But as the case moved through the military justice system, it became more and more obvious not only that Private Slovik had deserted, but that the law was clear on his punishment. Even though no one involved with the case was eager to carry out his duty, Eddie Slovik was eventually executed for desertion. The details of the case were kept under such wraps that Private Slovik's widow did not learn until some years later that her husband had actually died at the hands of a U.S. military firing squad rather than in combat.

For many people, the Eddie Slovik case raised the difficult question, did this young man really have to die? That question cannot be answered with finality or to everyone's satisfaction. But in the case of another young Man in the prime of His life, we can say on the authority of God's Word that Jesus Christ had to die. This does not mean that Jesus had no choice about the matter. It was His mighty love that made any other choice unthinkable. In this opening chapter I want to address the all-important issue of *why* Jesus had to die.

Some of those who debated *The Passion of the Christ* argued vociferously that Jesus was nothing more than a religious martyr who died for what He believed. Others said He died as an example to show us how to die with grace and dignity. Still other people believe that Jesus' death was simply a first-century miscarriage of justice in which an innocent man died tragically at the hands of His enemies.

Seven hundred years before Jesus walked the shores of Galilee, the prophet Isaiah dipped his pen in golden glory and wrote some amazing words that still affect us in the twenty-first century:

Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows:
yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions,
He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to His own way; and the LORD hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

Now let's look at 1 Peter 3:18 and read the words of the apostle that shed the light of heaven on Isaiah's prophecy: "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." This wonderful verse is packed with gospel dynamite, which I want to unpack one stick of truth at a time. Here in one brief statement is God's answer as to why Jesus died.

Make no mistake about it. Even though the cross was far more than just a human tragedy, it *was* tragic. In fact, the greatest tragedy and the greatest injustice the world has ever known took place on

a barren hill just outside the city of Jerusalem, where the Son of God hung in bloody agony upon a cross with darkness veiling His glowing face. There was an earthquake: the ground trembled, and the rocks split open as Satan and the dark forces of hell battered against the very gates of glory.

But to find out why Jesus died, we have to look beyond the evils perpetrated on Jesus by sinful men and hateful demons. For the greater truth is that it pleased God the Father to send His sinless, precious, only Son to the cross. We are going to see that Calvary was not only the earth's greatest tragedy—it was also God's greatest triumph. God had a purpose for His Son's death, a purpose so deep and so great that your destiny and mine are wrapped up in it. Consider at least four reasons Peter gave in 1 Peter 3:18 in answer to the question, why did Jesus have to die?

The Substitutionary Purpose of the Cross

The first thing you need to understand about Jesus' death is that He died *in our place*, as our substitute. The Bible says Jesus died as “the just for the unjust.”

Jesus was the just one, completely innocent of any sin. But He went to the cross and died for us who had already been tried and convicted of sin in heaven's courtroom. Jesus Christ did not die as a helpless victim. He said, “No man taketh it [my life] from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:18). On the cross, Jesus took the death stroke for sin that we deserved.

God Cannot Simply Overlook Our Sin

Here is the heart of the matter of why Jesus had to die. When the Bible says that God is just, it means that He is perfectly, totally, and completely righteous, holy, and separated from sin. And being just, God cannot overlook sin. The Bible says that God “will not at all acquit the wicked” (Nahum 1:3).

If you were to go through all of the dictionaries in the world to find one word that would describe God, what do you think that word would be? Most people would say it is the word *love*, because

the Bible says in 1 John 4:8, “God is love.” But if you had to find one word that more than any other captured the essence of God’s nature, it would be the word *holy*. “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts,” the seraphim cry ceaselessly in heaven (Isaiah 6:3).

God’s holiness means that He is the complete antithesis of sin. God’s holiness burns against sin. His holiness regards sin as a clenched fist in His face. Sin is a repudiation of all that God is.

We Are Full of Sin

But if you were to search all the dictionaries and lexicons for a word that best describes mankind, it would be the word *sinful*. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). There is a chasm as wide as eternity between a holy, sinless God and sinful man. The glory of God is His holiness. The shame of mankind is our sin.

That’s why the world doesn’t like to talk about sin. The world says man may be weak, but he’s not wicked. He may be flawed, but he’s not depraved. Pick up the newspaper tomorrow, and you will read about murder, rape, corporate scandals, child abuse, and a myriad of other terrible things. But I doubt that you will find the word *sin* used even one time.

Merely ignoring our sin doesn’t get rid of it, however. So we have a problem, which is that God is holy and just and must judge sin, and yet we are filled with sin. Now God has a problem too, if I can say that respectfully. The problem is that this holy God who must punish sin also loves us sinners and is “not willing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9). So how can He punish sin and love the sinner at the same time?

Someone might say, “Well, can’t God just overlook sin? He can do anything He wants to do, and since He loves sinners and wants them to be saved, why doesn’t He just say, ‘I forgive you,’ without requiring that sin be punished?”

The reason is that simply overlooking sin would not make God loving, but only unjust and unfair. I doubt if any victim of a heinous crime would be satisfied to have the judge say to the criminal, “I’m basically a loving person. So I am going to overlook what you did and let you go.” They say in a court of law that when a guilty man

is acquitted, the judge is condemned. A judge who acquits the guilty cannot justify his actions by claiming that it was an act of love.

Of course, comparisons between human justice and God's righteous judgment eventually break down, because His justice is flawless. Not so in our world. A missionary who ministers in a large men's prison in an African country was told recently by the prison administrator that at least 70 percent of the men in that prison are actually innocent of the crimes for which they were convicted.

This official explained that the real criminals got away, while these men just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The police needed someone to arrest; so the accused were taken. And since they do not have the money to pay off the officials, they are suffering while the guilty go unpunished.

If God allowed sin to go unpunished, He would violate His nature and topple from His throne of holiness. He would break His law that says, "The wages of sin is death," and "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Romans 6:23; Ezekiel 18:4). God cannot violate His holiness and overlook sin.

The Cross Is God's Eternal Provision for Our Sin

But because God is a God of infinite love, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit drew up a plan in the councils of eternity past that called for God the Son to take our sin upon Himself and go to the cross. The cross was not an accident or an afterthought but was in the heart and mind of God from all eternity. The Bible calls Jesus "the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

Before God framed this universe, before He flung out the sun, moon, and stars, scooped out the oceans, and heaped up the mountains, before you and I were ever born, God saw the cross. His eternal decree is that "without shedding of blood is no remission" for sin (Hebrews 9:22). That is why Jesus Christ was born in the shadow of the cross.

The cross is pictured, prophesied, and portrayed from the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation. In a sense the river of blood that flowed from Jesus' side on the cross began figuratively flowing in the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve sinned and

tried to hide their shame with fig leaves, God clothed them with garments made of animal skins (Genesis 3:21). You cannot make an animal-skin garment without killing the animal. God was teaching us that the guilt of sin must be dealt with by the shedding of blood.

Then in Genesis 4:1-5 we read that Adam's two sons, Cain and Abel, brought their offerings to the LORD. Abel was a shepherd who brought God a blood sacrifice by killing a lamb from his flock. But Cain was a farmer who tried to offer God fruits and vegetables from the ground that God had cursed because of sin. God accepted Abel's offering but rejected Cain's. Why? Because without the shedding of blood, there is no remission for sin.

Then God destroyed the world with a flood and saved Noah and seven others with him. When they came out of the ark, the first thing Noah did was to offer a blood sacrifice upon an altar (Genesis 8:20). Why? Because without the shedding of blood, there is no remission for sin.

That river of blood next surfaced in the life of Abraham, the first Hebrew, as God called him out of paganism to Canaan (Genesis 12:1-3). God promised Abraham a son even though he was too old to have children and Sarah's womb was dead. But God gave Abraham a miracle son, Isaac.

But when Isaac was a young, strapping boy, God said to Abraham, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest...and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of" (Genesis 22:2). Abraham must have been in agony, but he knew that if God wanted him to sacrifice Isaac, He could raise him from the dead.

So Abraham went to Mount Moriah, the place that would later be known as Mount Calvary, prepared an altar, and laid Isaac on it. But as Abraham took the knife to slay his son, God stayed his hand. Abraham looked up and saw a ram—crowned with thorns, if you will—caught in a thicket. God provided a substitute for Isaac, because blood had to be shed for the remission of sin.

And then this red river of blood flowed into Egypt, where the people of Abraham were formed into a nation in the midst of their slavery. When God got ready to deliver Israel from Egypt, the first thing He did was to command the people to sacrifice a lamb and put

its blood on the doorposts of their homes so that when God's death angel came, he would "pass over" the Israelites. God told Moses, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Exodus 12:1-13).

The Jews were also instructed to eat their lambs in a meal that came to be known as the Passover feast. An innocent lamb was killed as a substitute for the people in each Jewish home, and its blood was posted. If the Israelites had put diamonds or rubies on their doorposts, that would have done no good. Had they put up poetry and sentiment rather than sacrifice, that would have done no good. Neither would it have done any good to take a spotless lamb and tie it alive to their doorposts. God was cleansing His people, but that required blood.

This red river of blood continued to flow throughout the Bible until one day it reached its climax in the Lord Jesus Christ. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus one day and cried, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

The Shadow of the Cross Fell upon Jesus

Hebrews 10:1 tells us that all of those Old Testament sacrifices were only a "shadow" of the reality to come. A shadow is only an outline that has no detail or color. It's not the shadow that really matters, but the reality it represents. The Old Testament's sacrifices were just getting people ready for Jesus to come. God was teaching us that the wages of sin is death, and that nothing but shed blood can atone for sin. Sin always brings death in God's holy court of justice.

Now we can begin to see why Peter said that Jesus died in our place, "the just for the unjust" (1 Peter 3:18). The Lord Jesus hung His head on the cross and died on the same limestone ridge where so long before Abraham had found God's substitute sacrifice in a thicket, and where the priests were the very day of Jesus' death putting to death innocent lambs on the Passover. This is the substitutionary purpose of the cross.

The Suffering Passion of the Cross

Notice also that 1 Peter 3:18 says Jesus "suffered" on the cross. Here is the second reason Jesus had to die. Sin brings suffering

as surely as night follows day, and God's holiness demands that someone must suffer for sin. But because of His magnificent grace, it pleased God to let the suffering we deserved fall upon His Son. The agony Jesus endured in Gethsemane, in His beatings, and on the cross is what is meant by the passion of the Christ. Think of all the suffering Jesus Christ endured to be our Substitute.

Christ Suffered Emotional Agony in Gethsemane

The cross was still hours away when Jesus arrived at Gethsemane with His disciples. Luke records, "And when He was at the place He said unto them, 'Pray that ye enter not into temptation.' And He was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed" (Luke 22:40-41).

The word *Gethsemane* means "olive press," the place where olives were crushed under intense pressure to extract their oil. This name speaks symbolically of the extreme emotional pressure Jesus was feeling as He left the Upper Room and walked across Jerusalem. He and the disciples went down into the Kidron Valley to reach the Mount of Olives.

Bible scholars tell us that the brook at Kidron was most likely flowing red with blood when Jesus crossed it because the blood of literally thousands of Passover sacrifices in Jerusalem was drained there. When Jesus crossed that crimson stream, doubtless it spoke to Him of His own blood that was going to be poured out very soon.

Jesus went to this olive grove and prayed, "Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me" (v. 42). Jesus' "cup" was a metaphor for the sufferings He had to drink to the very last drop as our Substitute.

What was in that cup that made the Lord Jesus shrink back in dread? The *pollution* of sin was in that cup: "For He [God] hath made Him [Jesus] to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Even though Jesus was the sinless, spotless, stainless Lamb of God, all of the sin of the world was distilled in that cup of suffering that He had to drink for us.

Do you realize what that meant? It meant that blasphemy against God settled in that cup. Rape and adultery and sexual perversion settled in that cup, along with the bitterness of child

abuse and wife beating. Hitler's gas ovens were in that cup. The murder of innocent children by abortion was in that cup. Satanic worship was in that cup. Pride, lust, envy, self-righteousness, and every other vile sin you can name were in that cup. And Jesus had to drink all of it.

Not only the pollution of sin, but also the *punishment* of sin was in the cup Jesus drank. The Bible says in Isaiah 53:10, "It pleased the LORD to bruise Him." Some translations (for example, the *English Standard Version*) render this, "to crush Him." Paul said that God the Father "spared not His own Son" (Romans 8:32). This means God held back nothing when He laid the suffering for our sins upon Christ. Jesus took the full force of the Father's fiery wrath against sin.

No one has ever suffered like Jesus. You may have heard a theologian say that Jesus took the hell we deserve. That is not an overstatement, for in His passion Jesus suffered the eternity in hell that our sins deserve.

But how could Jesus suffer an eternity of hell in a matter of hours? Because He, being infinite, suffered in a finite period of time what we, being finite, would suffer in an infinite period of time. The sins of the world were distilled upon Jesus, and eternity was compressed upon Him.

People who are undergoing intense suffering often say that every second seems like a minute, every minute like an hour, and every hour like a day. Well, every minute of Jesus' suffering was like an eternity. But even this does not do justice to the depth of our Savior's emotional and spiritual suffering.

No wonder He lay prostrate on the ground in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39), with red blood and black dirt on His face, pleading, "Father, if there be some other way, please let this cup pass from Me." But the silence from heaven said there was no other way. And the dear Savior said, "Thy will be done."

I want to show you one more thing about Jesus' emotional suffering. In Luke 22:44 we read, "Being in an agony he prayed more earnestly." The word *agony* speaks of a contest. In the Greek language, the *agon* was a wrestling match. Jesus was wrestling, not with God the Father or with Satan, but with His own humanity.