

PASSION REVIEWS



Compassion for *The Passion of the Christ*

By David A. Pendleton

Controversial, provocative, gut-wrenching, violent, emotionally charged, awe inspiring, and life transforming—all of these words are accurate, but none seem to do Mel Gibson's film *The Passion* justice. This is not just another movie with a historical theme. It is probably the most important film ever produced about the life of Jesus Christ.

There have been many movies made about Jesus, dating back to the very first films in black and white. Some years ago there was the *Last Temptation of Christ*. I remember writing a movie review on it for the student paper at La Sierra University. What struck me the most was how that movie depended upon its wild departures from Scripture in order to present a provocative story line. Hollywood welcomed it precisely because it was not a movie that sought to take seriously the biblical materials.

Recently there was an excellent video, often referred to simply as the *Jesus Film*, made for mass distribution. That presentation was very safe, very middle-of-the-road. It was consciously made to be as literal and noncontroversial as possible. It sought to present concisely the whole life of Jesus Christ in a balanced way.

The Passion of the Christ is very different. Produced and directed by box office megastar Gibson, this film is not only the labor of an expert filmmaker but also a gift from the heart of a believer. It is a product of the soul as much as of the mind.

The movie takes us every heartrending step of the way from Gethsemane to Golgotha. On this tearful journey we witness a hearing before the Sanhedrin, the ferocious flogging at the hands of the Romans, the presentation of Christ to the puppet government of King Herod, the return of Christ to Pilate's court, and the eventual politically expedient condemnation.

Thereafter, the remaining journey, this time with the cross, is seen much through the eyes of Christ's mother Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the disciple John.

Flashbacks Flesh Out Life of Christ

Gibson is able to fill out the life of Christ through periodic flashbacks—to the rescue of Mary Magdalene from an almost certain stoning, the Last Supper, the Sermon on the Mount, various conversations with his disciples, and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Perhaps the most powerful flashback is to Christ's mother, Mary.

After Pilate condemns Christ to crucifixion, Mary tries to get close to her son one last time, but the crowd prevents her from doing so. Then John the disciple leads her through alleys winding in and around the Via Dolorosa, the path along which Christ bore the cross to Calvary outside the city gates. At one point their paths intersect. Mary the mother of Christ is panting hard and overcome by grief. She leans against a wall and pauses to catch her breath.

At that point Mary recollects Christ as a child. She recalls him running and playing and at one point falling and hurting his knee. She drops her cooking and runs to comfort her little son. "Mother is here," she says in the flashback, gathering the boy in her loving arms.

Then she is back in the present. At the intersection where she has paused she sees her son stumble and collapse under the burden of the rugged cross. With the same motherly passion she runs again to comfort her son. "Mother is here," you can almost hear her say. Yet the juxtaposition of the two scenes is so emotionally charged that your eyes well up with tears and you can hear nothing but the beating of your own heart.

Cannot Be Dispassionate with *The Passion*

Christ reaches Calvary, prays forgiveness for those who have crucified him, and utters “it is accomplished” as he takes his final breath. A near-final scene is silent with Mary holding her now-still son in her arms as the film fades to black. As one would rightfully anticipate, the movie ends on a positive note: a momentary, muted shot of the tomb’s stone rolling away, the emptied death shroud, and the resurrected Christ.

To pretend to be objective would be dishonest. One cannot review this film as though it is any other film. The movies *Titanic* and *Gods and Generals* were also historically true. Those films were about real people who actually died. Yet it is impossible to critique this film in the same way. One cannot be wholly dispassionate, neutral, detached, or impartial watching and thinking about this film—at least if one is a Christian.

As believers, we see our Lord Jesus Christ so cruelly treated and killed. And our hearts respond. I wanted to reach out and help him, rescue him, “save” him. Yet one realizes that Christ willingly gave his life. His crucifixion was not something others did to him. It was something he permitted, something he allowed, something he willed.

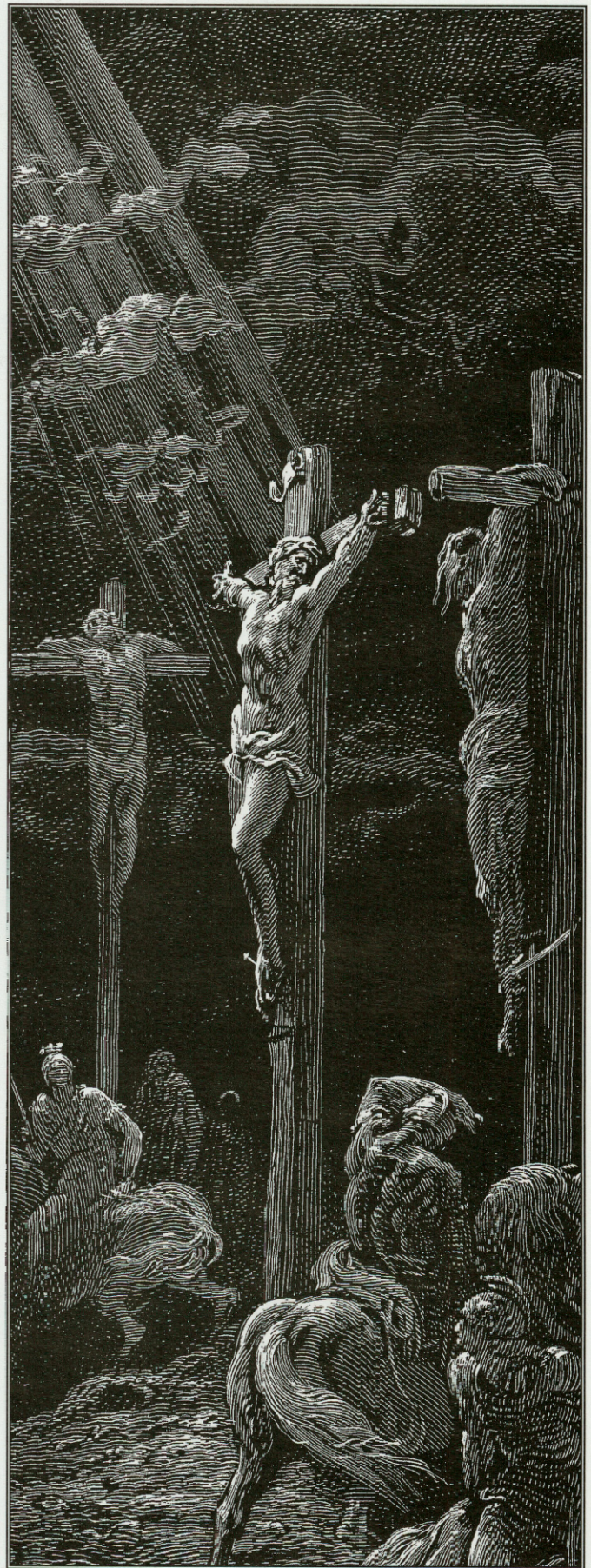
He could have snapped his fingers and a legion of angels would have come to his rescue. Yet he did not. He did not in order to save the world.

Poignancy in the Eyes of Loved Ones

In various scenes Gibson affords viewers brief respites from the horror rained down upon Jesus through a close-up shot of Mary or Mary Magdalene or the disciple John. Through their tearful eyes one experiences the poignancy of the moment.

In one scene, where a Roman soldier gruesomely flogs Christ, the cameras cut away to Mary. There she is witnessing unspeakable cruelty inflicted on her son. She asks herself in Aramaic: “How, when, where will you allow yourself to be delivered from this?”

Seeing this on the big screen brought me to the point of sobbing. How sorry I was for all the complaints I have made. I have grumbled about stressful days at the office. I have sent petitions to God asking for this and for that, whining about minor things, grip-



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ing for things that have happened to me. Like Bruce in the movie *Bruce Almighty*, I have uttered irreverent prayers asking God to use his power to make my life simpler, easier, and more convenient.

I am so sorry. I thank the Lord for giving me true perspective again on life—on what really matters. I left the movie theater asking: How can we complain about anything after what he did for us? How can we feel

since seen the movie a second time, yet the prophetic words continue to haunt me: "... and by His wounds, we are healed!"

I practice a profession where words are the tools of my trade. I write; I speak; I preach; and I debate. I am a former trial attorney and presently work as a legislator and pastor. But I was left utterly wordless and silent both times I saw the film. I was impacted beyond

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anxious, worried, overwhelmed by anything on this earth after the penalty meant for us, which Christ willingly took upon himself?

How often does a movie leave you asking those sorts of questions?

I have friends who say they already know the story and do not need exposure to the violence. I have friends who have as a rule avoided all movies, given what Hollywood customarily serves up for public consumption. I have friends not of a religious persuasion, and they may be avoiding it because it might be "manipulative."

I have Adventist friends who believe that moving pictures are wrong to watch, unless rented as videos. I have Adventist friends worried about seeing a movie produced by a Catholic, lest the subtle theological differences influence their thinking. I have Adventist friends who received an e-mail from Professor Samuel Bacchiocchi, and based upon that single e-mail refuse to see the film.

But I was so thankful to have seen this film. When I got home after seeing it the first time, I found myself so overwhelmed that I could not sleep. I was speechless for hours. I actually picked up an old worn copy of a biography of the life of Jesus Christ recommended by the librarian of the Library of Congress. It is entitled *Desire of Ages* by Ellen White. I read two chapters: "Gethsemane" and "Calvary."

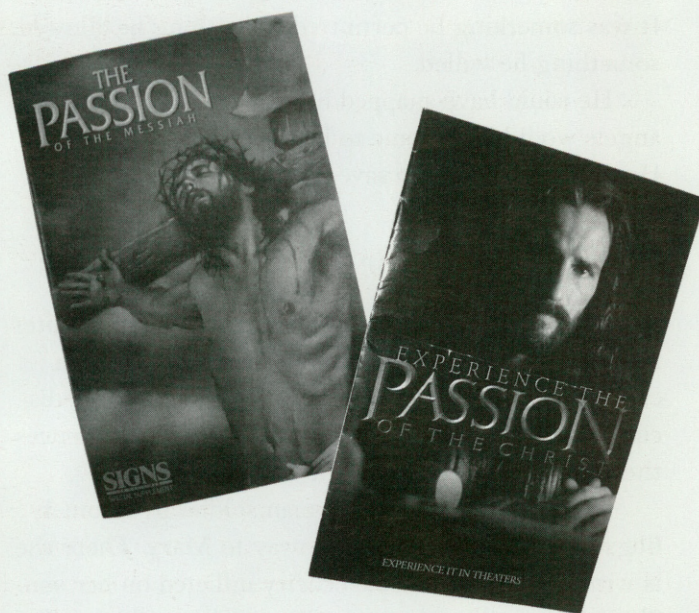
There I found words articulating what I had just experienced in Gibson's movie! It was incredible—as though Gibson's screenwriters had read those very chapters in preparation for making the film. Perhaps not. But clearly both White and Gibson were inspired by the same Gospel account.

The next morning I turned to Isaiah 53. I have

the point where I could articulate what my mind and heart were trying to process.

I have to recommend *The Passion of the Christ*. This will probably be the most controversial film of the year. No movie review can do it justice. You have to experience it for yourself. You may love it—or you may hate it. But I promise that you will not be indifferent to this movie.

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Interest in *The Passion of the Christ* created opportunities for literature distribution. Many Baptist churches used the Brian Mavis brochure titled *Experience the Passion of the Christ* to hand out to movie goers. Pacific Press went into a second printing of its booklet *The Passion of the Messiah*, taken from the Ellen G. White book *Desire of Ages*.