

The Passion of the Christ

1 Peter 3:15; Genesis 1-3

Introduction

I suppose you would have to have been off the planet or on an extended hike into the wilderness somewhere without any electronic gadgets for the last several months to have missed hearing at least something about Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. People from all walks of life are talking about it - many who have seen it, many who have not, neither condition of which seems to make a lot of difference when it comes to having a strong opinion about it. The movie itself graphically portrays the last 12 hours of Jesus' life up to the point of His death on the cross. Actually, it includes more than that, as it ends with an unmistakable scene of His bodily resurrection. Jesus gets up alive and walks out of the tomb.

Whether you choose to see this movie or not (and I see plenty of room for personal convictions among Christians on the issue) it cannot be denied that it has people talking about some things they don't normally discuss in public – in particular, the meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Peter exhorts us in his first letter to: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

1 Peter 3:15

This is a time when Christians may get the opportunity to explain what we believe and why we believe it to those who know little or nothing about our faith. In our increasingly secularized nation, I cannot remember the last time something has caused so much discussion among Americans about Jesus and what He did on the cross. And if the past is any indicator, in my opinion, we may not see such an opportunity again anytime in the near or distant future. It seems to me that there are some obvious questions that a person unfamiliar with the story of the gospel might ask after seeing this movie or hearing about it.

Why did Jesus have to die?

What are the reasons for such suffering?

Why crucifixion? Why not an easier means of death?

If God needed to save mankind, and He is all powerful as the Bible claims,

why did He offer the life of His own Son?

We Christians need to be able to answer questions like this from the Bible.

Was it necessary that Jesus suffer and die for the sins of the world? You might recall Jesus' prayer in the garden: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt." **Matthew 26:39-40** In essence, Jesus says in His humanity, "If there is any other way to do this without this intense suffering, please let it be done." We understand the silence of God the Father to mean that there was no other way. But why?

Though the suffering and death of Jesus isn't actually recorded until we get to

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it is referred to many times in the Bible before the four gospels were written – and long before it actually happened. The history recorded in the Bible is indeed, His Story. In fact, some of the background reasons for the death of Christ are seen even in the earliest chapters of the Bible – particularly in the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. That is what I want to focus on in this message.

The first chapter of Genesis tells the story of creation – God, in His infinite power and wisdom, speaking the physical universe and all it contains into existence in just six days. The second chapter loops back to describe in more detail the creation of man on the sixth day. If we are to understand the reasons for the suffering of Jesus, there is something we need to understand about the unique creation of man in these chapters. We read in Genesis 1:26: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness....'"

While the explanation for God using the plural in this verse, that is, "Let Us make man in Our image according to Our likeness" isn't suggested until later in the Bible, Christians understand that God the Father was speaking to the other two persons in the Godhead – God the Son (**Colossians 1:16** makes it clear that Jesus, though not yet "born of woman" (Galatians 4:4) was nonetheless, active in the Creation. "For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created by Him and for Him.") and God the Holy Spirit. (The presence of the Spirit of God is seen clearly in the mention of Him in Genesis 1:2.) These three, sometimes referred to by Christians as "The Trinity," or "The Godhead," have no beginning or end in time. They are eternal.

(Hebrews 9:14; Isaiah 9:4.) The Bible's statement that man is made in God's image may suggest several things. It is possible that the three-part Godhead may in some way be reflected in man's three-part nature, though I caution going beyond what is written on this speculation. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, "...may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice the three parts of man. Then notice the similarity between that and what we read in Genesis 2:7, "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground [our "body"] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [our "spirit"] and man became a living being [our "soul" or physical life]"

While we have physical bodies and physical life in common with the many other living things on earth that God created, man alone has a spirit from God that will survive beyond physical death.

Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 12:7 that at the time of our physical death, "... the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it."

Evidence of the life of the spirit of man going on after death is mentioned many times in the Bible. As we shall see, it is the redemption of man's ongoing spirit that was at stake at the death of Jesus. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Another thing to notice from the second chapter of Genesis is found in verses 15-17: "Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.'"

Several concepts appear here in Genesis for the first time. We see here:

The first mention of freedom ("From any tree of the garden you may eat freely....") Adam and Eve enjoyed a freedom that has never been experienced by mankind since the Garden of Eden. We as a people and as individuals appreciate the freedom we have. The first mention of the potential for choice as seen in the presence of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Had that tree not been in the Garden, there would have been no way for man to choose to live with

God. Again, we appreciate the freedom of choice, don't we? Would you want to live with your mate for life simply because you were given no choice in the matter? The first mention of the concept of law ("...from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...") Law is important. Much like a guardrail on the highway, it helps keep us on the road we desire to be on. Without laws, our world would be in Chaos. The first mention of morality, that is, right and wrong: ("the tree of the knowledge of good and evil") Many people today have ceased to believe in the concept of good and evil, believing instead that everything is relative and that there are no absolutes. We've realized some of the results of life lived without a concept of right and wrong, which, incidentally, we call "morals." The first mention of the concept of sin, though the word isn't used here.

Sin is the breaking of God's law.(**1 John 3:4**) The first mention of death. ("...the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.") Since we know that Adam and Eve did not die physically on the day they ate from the tree (Adam lived many of his 930 years (**Genesis 5:5**) after he broke God's law) the word "death" here refers to what the New Testament calls the "second death"(**Revelation 2:11; 20:6; 20:14; 21:8**) which is a separation of the eternal spirit of man from God.

Freedom, choice, law, morality, sin, and death are all issues that are as relevant to us living today as they were back then. Don't ever let anyone get away with convincing you that the Bible is irrelevant to people living today!

In the early verses of Genesis three, a being called "the serpent" appears.

Later in the Bible we learn that this was Satan,(**Revelation 12:9; 20:2**) a powerful spiritual being bent on the destruction of man.(**Satan is called "Abaddon" and "Apollyon" in Revelation 9:11. Both words mean "one who destroys."**) Satan comes to Eve in the apparently familiar form of a snake (remember that there was no death in the garden before man sinned, so the danger of death by snakebite as we know it was unknown to the first couple.) Eve saw no cause for alarm in a talking snake.

In Genesis 3:1-3 Satan says, "Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.'"

Up to this point, Eve does exactly what she should do. She repeats what God said, relying on His word to get her through. She is fully aware of God's only restriction on their freedom. But Satan makes a move that is counter to anything she has ever experienced before. In verses 4 and 5 he says: "You surely shall not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Here we have the very first lie recorded in man's history. Notice that the lie, "You surely shall not die!" is followed by a misleading half-truth. In this case it is a truth that is applied in a different way than it was originally intended. Eve took Satan's words as a promise that the tree had some special power to make her and her husband wise like God.

Reading on in verse 6 and 7:

"When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings." Much fun is made in our carnal generation about Adam and Eve's "fig leaves" which they used to cover up. ("Ha! Fig leaves! Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous? What a fairy tale!")

Beside the fact that they probably had nothing else with which to cover themselves, and they had never seen or heard of clothing, there is an important issue here. They're trying to cover up. They're trying to hide. Why? Perhaps it is because now that they have sinned, they begin to consider some new issues. For instance, if they cannot be trusted to obey God, perhaps they also cannot trust one another. So they cover up the parts of their bodies that are different. The innocence and the joy of their intimacy are now shattered. They've "wised up" all right. They now know what its like to do evil. But instead of giving them something desirable as they were led to believe, they're left with shame and guilt and fear of what might happen next.

Verse 8:

"And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself.' Shame, guilt, fear, cover-up - just as I suggested.

Verse 11:

"And He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' And the man said, 'The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.' Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this you have done?' And the woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'"

Ah, now it's every man (or woman) for himself! "The woman made me do it!" says the man. "The snake made me do it!" says the woman. No one wanted to take responsibility. But God sorted out the lines of responsibility anyway.

In the next verses:

The serpent was cursed to go on his belly and eat dust in verses 14 and 15.

Pain in childbirth was given to the woman; along with subservience to her husband in verse 16. The ground was cursed for Adam, so that it would resist his efforts to work it and provide for his own in verse 17 and 18.

And then the first mention of physical death is in verse 19:

"By the sweat of your face You shall eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."

But God didn't kill them physically that day, did He? As already noted, Adam

and Eve lived physically for hundreds of years after the day they sinned. So is this a Bible contradiction?

Not at all. The issue here is spiritual death, that is, the separation of their ongoing spirit from their creator. This separation came upon them that very day.

Verse 22: "Then the Lord God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever' - therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken.

So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every direction, to guard the way to the tree of life."

This is a very sad story! From this day onward, mankind would live in a condition of separation from his Creator. Yes, God made a way for them to worship, if they chose to do so, but it was always from a distance and nothing like the close fellowship with God enjoyed in the Garden.

But in telling you these things, I left one thing out – something very important – a way out of this awful condition of man's separation from God and the first hint at what would ultimately culminate in the suffering of Jesus Christ. It's in verse 15 in the midst of God's words to the serpent. It is a faint promise of hope that has everything to do with our questions about the nature and necessity of the death of Jesus. God says:

"And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel."

On this single verse, the entire remainder of the Holy Scripture hangs.

Everything in the Bible from this point onward moves toward the fulfillment of this verse. We need to look at it more closely. God says to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman." The issue that started in the garden between the serpent and the woman wasn't over. It was going to continue and intensify. "Enmity" is hostility. It is hatred, antagonism, and bad feelings. The struggle between Satan and the woman would go on. They would have to deal with him outside the garden as well.

Genesis 3:20 says that Eve was "The mother of all the living." As such, this hostility between the woman and the devil would not stop when Eve was dead. It would continue with her offspring and the devil's offspring: "Between your seed and herseed." To my knowledge, Satan has no physical offspring, but he certainly has had, in every age of man, those who honor him as their father by the way they live. Long after this, Jesus would call the corrupt Jewish leaders of His day a "brood of vipers."

(Matthew 23:23) This was not an arbitrary choice of words. He would say to them, as recorded in John 8:44, "You are of your father, the devil." A long, long hereditary feud then, is prophesied here between the children of the devil and the children of the woman. If you have read the scripture you have read God's chronicle of that struggle. But there is something else here.

Notice in the verse that there is a sudden change. At first it seems God is speaking of the descendants (plural) of Satan and the woman: "Your seed... her seed." Then abruptly He is talking about an individual: "He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." The "He" here is suddenly singular. The seed of the woman, referring to the offspring of Eve has suddenly become a person – a man (He) born of a woman.

This man born of a woman would one day bruise or crush the serpent's head. For a snake a head injury is ultimately fatal. In the process, the serpent would bruise or crush His heel. For a man a heel injury is serious and very painful, but it is not fatal.

Thousands of years after this was spoken, the struggle of the ages, that is, the struggle between the spiritual descendants of the devil and the spiritual descendants of the woman would come to one great head, beginning in and around the ancient city of Jerusalem and ending on a barren hill called Golgotha, "the place of the skull." The focus would be upon two beings locked in mortal spiritual combat. The "serpent of old," also called Satan, and a single Man, the God-man, born in a special way of a woman, would engage in the most spiritually significant event in all of man's history.

Galatians 4:4 says, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman... in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."

It is nothing strange to the Bible that Jesus was born of a virgin. In this way and in over 300 other ways, Jesus fulfilled Biblical predictions written hundreds of years before His birth, including this prediction of Genesis 3:15.

What Mel Gibson has focused on in his Passion movie, is the final twelve hours of this cosmic struggle. It is culmination battle in the war of the ages. Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, locked in mortal spiritual combat with the deceiver of the whole world. If He wins, he wins back the lives of all those who will accept Him. If He loses, the whole world is lost forever and condemned by God's perfect justice along with the devil.

Though Jesus had all the frailties of a human being while he walked the earth, (**Galatians 2:7**) in sending Him, God sent His very best to deal with the devil on the same playing field as every other man. The angels of heaven did not help Him in that final struggle. Nor did the God the Father Himself help any more than He helps every other man who turns to Him. And while God sent His very best, Satan sent His absolute worst. He pulled out all the stops. All hell broke loose against Jesus, the Son of God – literally!

Demonic activity, that is, the disruption of the entire unseen spirit world, was at an all-time high – something not seen before that time and not seen since.

Satan threw all that he had against Jesus!

"Why crucifixion?" you ask? Because it was the worst that hell could throw at our Lord. The utter brutality (depicted so graphically in Gibson's movie), the intense cruelty hinted at in Scripture, is Satan at his worst, inflicting every angle, employing every strategy, enlisting the worst torture he could conceive, unleashing every pain imaginable upon God's Christ to get him to give in and deny His mission or to sin just one time and nullify His sacrifice.

"Why death?" you ask. Because death was the only way the penalty for sin could be paid. Remember, God had said, "the day that you eat from it you shall surely die." The penalty for breaking God's law has been the same all through man's history. Even for our day, the New Testament says, "The wages of sin is death." (**Romans 6:23**) And remember, this is not just physical death. It is spiritual death – eternal separation of man's ongoing spirit from God.

"Why Jesus?" you ask. Why not use someone else? Because Jesus was the only One who ever came to the end of his life having never mortgaged His own eternal spirit to sin. Thus His life alone could satisfy the requirement of God's law for a substitute. He was the perfect, unblemished sacrifice for sin.

"Why such a sacrifice?" you ask. Because God could not set aside His law to pardon man. If He did so, it would become meaningless. Justice would be a travesty. Yet He wanted to offer us mercy. So He sent His only begotten, fully innocent Son to die the death of a criminal and endure the worst horrors mankind and the devil who controlled them could pile upon Him. In essence, Jesus, who is called "Immanuel" – "God with us" - was God Himself paying the price for our sin. The opposing concepts of justice and mercy - self-canceling in every other way - are both satisfied in the death of Jesus Christ. God offers mercy while at the same time satisfying the Law's requirement of death. The Apostle Paul put it very well in Romans 5:6-8:

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

Can we callously turn our back on God's love? If so, then we deserve our fate of eternal separation from God. If not, then we need to come to God through Christ right away. Will you consider that today?

To receive Him and the benefits of His death and begin the new life as a Christian, you must believe His message.(**John 3:16; Acts 16:31**) You must be willing to confess your faith before others. It is no silent faith.(**Matthew 16:16; Romans 10:9-10**) You must turn away from your sins in repentance(**Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19**) and you must be baptized to have you sins forgiven.(**Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Mark 16:15-16; 1 Peter 3:21**) If and when any of you are ready to do these things, please let us help you. You won't regret your decision.