

Acts 8:26-40

Viewing the “Passion of the Christ” with Philip

(We can learn a lot about evangelism by observing the early church.)

Introduction: The Ethiopian eunuch was a worshiper of God (unlike Simon in vs.1-25).

“²⁶ But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, "Arise and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert {road}.) ²⁷ And he arose and went; and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship.

- a. God wants to minister to the eunuch and directs Philip to step out not knowing what God has in mind for him. Sometimes we should be prepared to obey and expect God to use us in ways we could not imagine.
- b. The Ethiopian is an important person with considerable responsibility. Tradition tells us that he returned to Ethiopia as a successful missionary of the Gospel.
- c. We can't but compare the three evangelistic stories that Luke lumps together in ch.8.

<i>Simon</i>	<i>The eunuch</i>
A magician	A God fearer
Interested in signs	Interested in Scripture
Believed Philip	Believed Christ
Tried to buy the Spirit	Became a missionary to Ethiopia?
Ended in sorrow	Ended in joy

1. Like Philip we must be sensitive to the Spirit's leading.

²⁸ And he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."

- a. We do not know how the Spirit spoke to Philip but Luke wants us to know that God is orchestrating events in our lives.
- b. There is no assurance that everything is directed in this way but it is clear that some things are so directed.
- c. Have you ever sensed the Spirit's leading in a specific way like this? What was it like? How did you know that it was the Spirit?

2. Like Philip we must be sensitive to felt needs.

³⁰ And when Philip had run up, he heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides

me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: "*He was led as a sheep to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He does not open His mouth* 33 *In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who shall relate His generation? For His life is removed from the earth.*" 34 And the eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please {tell me}, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?" 35 And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. 36 And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"

- a. "Unless someone guides me" This is the role of the evangelist – to clarify the message.
- b. The passage from Isaiah 53 speaks of a suffering servant. Israel did not have a clear doctrine of a suffering Messiah.
- c. The question of this suffering servant of God opened a wonderful opportunity for the Gospel story. The Mel Gibson movie "*The Passion of the Christ*" may offer a similar opportunity for many people.

I Peter 2

"22 He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. 23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

Matthew 12

"18 Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. 19 He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. 20 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. 21 In his name the nations will put their hope."

- d. The lesson we can learn from Philip – Don't answer questions people aren't asking. Start with felt needs and move from there to other more important questions.
- e. Jesus seemed to follow this same pattern and Peter instructed the early church to do so as well.

I Peter 3:15

"but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;"

3. Like Philip we must be sensitive to the level of commitment needed.

37 [And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] 38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch; and he baptized him.

- a. Philip was not going to baptize anyone who asked for it. He wanted to be sure the eunuch had more than a superficial faith.

- b. Notice that the issue is “faith” not “obedience to the Law”. We can make the mistake of front-loading the Gospel (Get your life in order before you believe.) or settling for a superficial confession of faith.
- c. In this case the only thing that the eunuch confesses is that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God. That was enough.

4. Like Philip we should not need special instruction to preach the Gospel.

39 And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azotus; and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities, until he came to Caesarea.”

- a. Philip’s pattern was to preach as he “passed through”. This was apparently a way of life for him.
- b. He did not need a special revelation to spread the good news.

Questions that can be asked in following up a viewing of

“The Passion of the Christ”

1. What was clear and what was confusing to you?
2. What did you think Gibson was trying to say when he said the movie is about God’s love not man’s hate?
3. Did you understand Satan’s statement, “no man can bear this.”
4. What was the meaning of Jesus’ sense of abandonment by God?

“No man can bear this”

Reflections on The Passion of the Christ

“Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* is destined to become a classic in the “Jesus film” tradition” according to the Jewish film critic Marty Sigel. If we take our cue from the box office response during the opening week of its release, we have reason to believe that he may be right. This box office interest was in spite of the film’s cool reception by the academy, the media, and the politically correct. The film’s controversy predated its release by several months for a number of reasons. First, Mel Gibson, an accomplished artist and devout Roman Catholic, financed it privately after major Hollywood studios turned down the project. Secondly, critics sounded the charge of anti-Semitism even before they saw the film. This charge was based on two observations. One, the passion of Christ had long been used by the Roman Catholic Church as an opportunity to finger the Jews as uniquely responsible for Christ’s death and thus deserving of special disrespect and blame. The fear that the subject of this film would revive this anti-Semitic impulse moved some Jews and Christians to anxiety about its release. Two, Gibson and his father were known to be members of a conservative branch of Roman Catholicism that repudiated the reforms of Vatican II. Among the many changes brought about through Vatican II was a formal apology to the Jewish people for the anti-Semitism of the Roman Church in the past. What were Gibson’s “real” motives? Those who interviewed Gibson

about his film had a good reason to probe his motives. But as most interviews revealed, Gibson's passion was not for anti-Semitism but for the good news of reconciliation through the cross. Was Gibson insensitive to the way in which this film's subject matter could be exploited at the expense of the Jewish community? Gibson was willing to run that risk while addressing the much more important question of the dilemma of humanities "soul sorrow" and Gibson's own experience of peace through Christ.

The "Word of the Cross" has always been a controversial subject.

What should be said about this film? Three words outline my own perception – *Controversial*, *Centrality*, and *Calling*. First, we should not be surprised at the controversy surrounding this film in that it reflects the controversy that was present in the early church at the preaching of the Cross. Paul writes in I Corinthians, "*but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*" (1:23-24).

Three different responses are noted in Paul's text. To the Jews it was a "*stumbling block*". The message of the crucifixion was seen as threatening and disruptive to the peace of Israel. The response is not unlike the charge of **anti-Semitism** leveled against this film. At a time when we are working hard to prevent a religious war between Christianity and Islam, why are we risking the present peace between Christians and Jews? Do we need this now? "I don't think so!" is the passionate response of some critics.

If the film offends the Jewish community because of its subject matter, it offends nearly everyone with its **violence**, which is at times, nauseating. Scourgings and crucifixions are reported in the various Roman histories to have looked much as Gibson showed them. Often, it was reported, during the scourging of a criminal, the muscles of his back would be torn away until his spine was visible, and occasionally internal organs could be seen. Nailed to the cross, the victim slowly suffocated as the weight of his body collapsed his lungs. The Romans secured their empire by killing thousands in this way. Tens of thousands. Still, can any film accurately show the audience that level of violence? If this film were to really be true to history it may not have been violent enough.

A second response labels the film as "*foolishness*". Like the Gentiles of Paul's day, some modern critics point to what are perceived to be historical inaccuracies or distortions that mar the credibility of the whole incident. Mel Gibson's story line is taken from the Biblical Gospels without apology. The film contains a number of artistic details that are not a part of the text but do not distort or depart from the main line of the Gospel record. Many critics are not impressed with the historical credibility of the Gospels not to mention the insertion of later traditions by Gibson.

Three points have received special attention. One, the portrayal of **Pilate** and two, the complexity of Jewish thought at the time of Christ's death. It is claimed by many modern scholars, that Pilate was a ruthless, and heartless leader who had no trouble killing Hebrew prophets that were a problem to his province. This is based largely on material from the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus. The Gospels and Gibson portray Pilate as a very conflicted man, torn between a sense of justice for Jesus and a sense of expediency for his political position. Why must we see an insurmountable conflict here? Cannot Pilate, like most of us, be a complex person capable of differing responses in differing circumstances? And why is this such a "deal breaker" for the historicity of the film. Is the historicity of the crucifixion discredited because there are differing views of Pilate's character? And why must we view Josephus as more inerrant than Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

The second issue has to do with the complexity of **Jewish thought** at the time of Jesus. Recent scholarship has suggested that the feelings within the ancient Palestinian community were not as monolithic as the Gospels suggest. But I would point out that a normal reading of the Gospels and certainly an honest viewing of the film make it clear that not all Jews were excited about Jesus' crucifixion. Have we not forgotten that the disciples were all Jewish? The movie puts a lot of the attention on the High Priest as the instigator of the mob's demand for the crucifixion of Jesus. Gibson's film shows some Jewish observers, with expressions of sympathy. What is the problem?

The third issue has to do with the film's **historicity**. For the most part it follows the Biblical account but through the lenses of Roman Catholic tradition. There's one scene where Jesus is dropped off a bridge in chains. That doesn't come from the Bible either; it comes from a 19th Century German mystic named Catherine Emmerich. In another scene, a woman gives Jesus a drink of water as he's dragging the cross to Calvary. It comes from much later Christian tradition. In another scene, the Jewish high priests are present at the crucifixion, taunting Jesus on the cross. That's Hollywood, not history. While these details are additions to the Biblical story, they do not fall outside the theme and context of the Biblical events. But the most incongruous scene is when Jesus confronts the devil in the Garden of Gethsemane. A tiny worm crawls out of the devil's mouth and up its nose. Then it re-emerges from under the devil's skirt as a snake and hisses at Jesus, whereupon he promptly stomps on its head with a big 'squish!' This is powerful symbolism but no basis in the Biblical account.

The third response to the movie is distinct in that it focuses attention on the meaning of the cross. There were a large number of evangelical Christians who rallied support for the movie before its premiere. They contacted believers encouraging them to buy large lots of tickets and bring non-Christian friends to show support for the movie. Even though most of these believers had yet to see the movie, Christians knew the theme and the punch line. They firmly believed that this movie would draw attention to what is **"the wisdom and power of God."** As Gibson intended, the film is not about man's hate but rather about God's love. It is the dramatic punctuation of God's mercy on sinners. As John the Baptist put it when he baptized Jesus, *"Behold the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world."* And as Jesus reminded his followers, *"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many."* This film is not so much about what man did to Jesus but about what Jesus did for humanity. One of Gibson's many flash backs in the movie reveals Jesus words, *"No man takes my life but I lay it down of my own will."* This alone should have dismissed any notion of anti-Semitism.

The first point I want to make is simply stated – We should expect the controversy around this movie to fall out pretty much the way it has. Some say it's foolish, some find it a stumbling block, and others see it as the power and wisdom of God.

The "Word of the Cross" has always been a central feature of the Gospel.

Here is the genius in Gibson's movie. He strikes at the most important questions of the human soul – what is wrong with me and how can I be fixed? Few people are willing to deny the fact that something is dreadfully wrong with us. As with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we have an intimate knowledge of, not only "the good" but also "the evil." We have been feeding on that tree with Adam and Eve for a long time and for many of us the fruit has grown putrid to our taste. We are not only sick and tired of what is happening to us and to those around us but we are also sickened by the realization that we are a part of the problem. We may try to define the human dilemma in many ways – economic depravation, poor self-image, lack of education, political marginalization, etc. But in spite of our skill in manipulating our external

and internal environments we still experience a “soul sorrow.” We feel the pain of alienation from our environment, one another, ourselves, and even God. When the Gospel is proclaimed as good news, it is not the ethical renewal, economic and political justice, education, or emotional healing that is in view. The Gospel is a radically different approach to the human dilemma. The good news is in some way nailed with Jesus to the cross. We have every right and need to probe the depths of the meaning and wonder of the cross but we can have no doubt about its central significance in addressing the “soul sorrow” of mankind.

Gibson puts the spotlight on “the central point” of the Gospel story – the passion. *“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,”* (I Cor.15:3). Paul and the other Apostles understood the “Word of the Cross” to be the foundation of the good news of the Gospel. It is interesting to note that the letters of the Apostles to the early church say little if anything about Jesus’ miracles, ethical teaching, or social reforms. They develop a theology that is tied to and focused upon the cross and resurrection. As the late Fulton J. Sheen put it, “Of all the great religious leaders in history, Jesus was unique in that he alone came to die.” It was not his moral teaching, his miraculous healings, or his wise insight that left his mark on history. It was his atoning death and resurrection that changed the story of mankind forever. As one commentator put it, “The four Gospels are passion narratives with long prologues.” This is a point that is in danger of being lost by many in our culture. The scandal of the Gospel is not the powerful life and ethical teaching of Jesus so much as his claim to Divine Sonship and his atoning sacrifice and resurrection. Jesus’ popularity remains high in almost every circle, even among many Jewish theologians. But the Jesus that everyone wants as a poster boy for his or her cause is not the Jesus that Gibson portrays in this movie. To be sure, Gibson’s Jesus is R rated. He is going to offend many and it should. But for those who get and embrace its implications, the film is, as James Caviezel (the actor who portrayed Jesus in the film) said, “all about love.”

The “popular icon Jesus” is an ethical reformer, a champion of the underclass, a teacher of mercy and love who would never offend anyone. He is the champion of tolerance, pluralism, and non-judgmental liberalism. In many Jewish circles, he is viewed with admiration as a teacher of needed ethical reform. It must be acknowledged that such a Jesus is not the Jesus that is presented to us in the Gospels but rather a deconstructed and domesticated figure shaped by the ideology of those who would exploit his name in marketing their agendas. After all, who would not want Jesus, the Michael Jordan of humanities story, to be the poster boy for his or her cause. We feel free to just pick and choose which parts of Jesus’ ministry and teaching we find attractive and use it to justify our bias. In spite of the critique’s claims, Gibson’s film will have none of that. He focuses our attention on the main thing. This movie is R rated not only for violence but also for political insensitivity. The Passion of the Christ is a movie that could be threatening to more than the Jewish community. It forces all of us to ask some hard questions about life, death, and reconciliation.

The “Word of the Cross” has always been a call to repentance and faith.

Peter’s sermon in Acts 3:18-19 provides helpful commentary. *“But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord;”* What kind of spiritual response should we expect as a result of viewing this film? Any expected response is very subtle in the film. Those who are not familiar with the New Testament should view the film with a friend who is. Many of the sidebars and flash backs are powerful if understood but confusing for those who do not have a ready recall of the Gospel narratives. In this respect, the film is a wonderful

catalyst in that it should and does raise many questions begging answers that do not come from within the film itself. There are lines in the film that do not come from the Biblical text but that convey powerfully the heart of the message. In the opening scene, Satan is tempting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, reminding him “no man can bear this load.” What Gibson obviously has in mind is the load of sin, shame, and guilt imputed to him from a fallen world. Although this line does not appear in any of the Gospels it nonetheless accurately reflect the point of the cross.

For many viewers the film will raise the question of who Jesus really was. A straight forward reading of the New Testament suggests that he was “the Son of God who, by his sacrifice, took away the sins of the world.” This information is not as clear in the film as some would like or expect. For example, we could have expected a flashback to Jesus’ baptism where we would hear the words of John the Baptist, “*Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.*” It would have been helpful to hear Jesus tell his disciples, “*the Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many.*” These lines would have clarified a lot of what we were observing. But this orthodox view has also been controversial. Many scholars who place little trust in the Biblical accounts, place Jesus in the context of mythology and others speak of Jesus in light of Hellenistic tradition. Further along those lines, cynics view Jesus as nothing more than a wise sage. Still others see Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet.

In films of the ‘50s, Jesus was a bloodless figure who looked like he stepped right out of a holy card. Movies like ‘Ben-Hur’ and ‘The Robe’ didn’t even show his face at all, as if he was too ethereal to put in human form. Then, in the ‘60s and ‘70s, we got films like ‘The Passion According To St. Matthew’ and ‘Jesus Christ Superstar,’ which portray Jesus the revolutionary, Jesus the good guy, who doesn’t perform any miracles. He’s like a cartoon character. Gibson’s film forces us to contemplate the enormity of Christ’s sacrifice for us.

Anyone who views this film and does not understand the Biblical story of Jesus is sure to ask a number of other important questions. Why is his death such a big deal? What is the significance of the sidebars or flashbacks that Gibson inserts to break up the torturous beatings? How can this be described as a film about God’s love? These questions offer wonderful opportunities for fruitful discussion of the Gospel message.

The movie should remind sleeping Christians that the Jesus that is worshiped is indeed acquainted with suffering. Physical torture is a big part of this film but in many ways the greater pain is captured in the opening scene where Satan’s words subtly remind us “no man can bear this” (this being the debt incurred because of sins). He was so right. No man could and no man has to because someone greater than man has done so.

This film is not without its flaws - Gibson’s liberal use of extra Biblical material and his lack of a clearer explanation of Jesus’ spiritual suffering (making atonement for sin). Non-the-less, this film is sure to raise the kinds of questions that will provide wonderful opportunities to tell the rest of the Gospel story.

Isaiah 53

“1 Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

3 He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

11 After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.