

Understanding the Passion: Is the extent of Jesus' physical suffering theologically significant?

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The Passion of Jesus, more than other parts of the gospel story, cries out for a theological commentary. While the uninitiated can easily appreciate scenes of Jesus' ministry, in which he appears as a compassionate healer and teacher, they will be less clear about what to make of a gruesome execution. The crucifixion made no sense to Jesus' own followers, who had to start rereading their scriptures in an effort to discover why the mighty prophet of God, the one God raised from the dead, died an ignominious death.

As an evangelistic tool, then, Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* presents some challenges. Offering only fleeting references to Jesus' life and ministry, the movie focuses on a bloody day of torture and therefore on that most mysterious of theological topics—atonement.

The earliest creeds of the church never dogmatized about atonement. The Nicene Creed says that Jesus' death was "for us and for our salvation" but does not explain how the death accomplished the salvation. The various theories that have been offered—it was a sacrifice for sin, an appeasement of God's wrath, a victory over the evil powers, the ultimate example of self-giving love, an exposure of the scapegoat mechanism—are all suggestive and helpful, but none unravels the mystery precisely or completely.

Gibson's own emphasis is clearly on Jesus as substitute victim: he bears the punishment we deserve. The film's only theological account of the brutality is an opening citation from Isaiah: "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities . . . and by his stripes we are healed." The camera proceeds to focus on those stripes. When it strays from Jesus' wounds it is often to pan the crowd and Mary's face in order to confirm the horror of what is happening to Jesus.

Gibson's attention to the physical suffering is so relentless that one is forced to ask: Is the extent of Jesus' physical suffering theologically significant? Would the Passion have a different meaning if Jesus had, say, been quickly beheaded? Would the sacrifice be any less if it involved less blood?

Gibson does hint (mainly in the scene in Gethsemane, the only one with some psychological depth) that Jesus' ordeal was spiritual as well as physical—that he felt abandoned not only by his people and his followers but by God himself. But this theme is not developed. In some respects, this form of suffering—that the Son of God encountered the silence of God—is more disturbing than the physical wounds, and more meaningful.

Whatever its flaws and accomplishments, the film's visual display captures only a few strands of the Passion narrative. It serves mainly to return viewers to the Gospels and to our meditations on them. It offers Christians the challenge and opportunity to talk to their neighbors, and among themselves, about what Christ's death does and doesn't mean to them.