

# youthESource Viewing Guide

## *The Passion of the Christ*

This viewing guide for *The Passion of the Christ* was compiled in 2004 by the youthESource editorial team from the notes of Dr. James Bachman, professor of theology at Concordia University, Irvine; Jacob Youmans, DCE; and from an interview conducted with Rev. Tom Lapacka. All three men were given the opportunity to see the film at an exclusive pre-viewing session which included an interview of *The Passion's* director, Mel Gibson.

Further resources can be found at *The Passion* websites, [www.thepassionofchrist.com](http://www.thepassionofchrist.com) and [www.passionmaterials.com](http://www.passionmaterials.com). GROUP Publishing, Youth Specialties and Interlinc have also provided resources for pre-view study, discussion and follow-up (including outreach and evangelism programs, challenges for youth to bring unchurched friends to the film, etc.)

*Note: part of the mission of the LCMS Youth Ministry Office is networking resources for our partners in ministry. These resources are recommended with the confidence that LCMS church workers are trained to discern what is useful and proper for Lutheran churches and schools and our recommendation does not equate an endorsement of the institutions creating these resources.*

### **A Viewing Guide**

from youthESource

On February 25, 2004, Icon films released its much-anticipated *The Passion of the Christ* in theaters throughout the country. Much was shared, revealed and predicted about the release of what some defined as potentially the most "graphic and moving presentation of Jesus' death and resurrection" in cinema history. Many in the Christian church believe that this film was a cultural phenomenon unlike any experienced in modern culture, and have termed it the most powerful media tool ever created for expressing the message of the Gospel. youthESource has provided this viewing guide to help youth leaders prepare youth and parents to see this moving film. The content of this viewing guide was written and processed by members of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. Here, you can find both practical and theoretical advice to help you prepare your youth to see *The Passion of the Christ*, including Scripturally-based discussion starters for use before and after seeing the film, recommendations on preparing youth emotionally for the film, a character list and scene descriptions, discussion of the film's artistic elements, advice on including parents and more!

### ***The Passion of the Christ***

#### Introduction

*The Passion of the Christ* accurately portrays the events of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. The movie is R-rated because of the graphic violence involved in Christ's beating and His crucifixion. The movie provides an opportunity to reflect on the horror and the wonder of Christ's sacrifice on our behalf.

#### Reminders For Us in the Church

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is a horrific depiction of the ferocious violence of which humans are capable. Reminders of the human capacity for ferocious inhumanity are valuable, because humans often forget how near the edge of cruelty we live. Compared to Scripture, the movie dwells disproportionately on the violence and the inhumane behavior of men who become accustomed to gross abuse of fellow humans and on the horrors of mob psychology.

But the Gospels proclaim that the crucifixion story is not a simple example of the oft-repeated story of man's inhumanity to man. Instead this is the central act in God's remedy for all human evil and sin. "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith" (Romans 3:22-25 NRSV).

Therefore, we must resist the temptation to identify with the "good people" in the movie (Mary, the beloved disciple, Simon of Cyrene), and we dare not divide humanity into evil people and good people. Christ died also for Mary, Simon, you and me.

Just as we are to identify ourselves as sinners, we are invited also to identify ourselves with Christ's own death. St. Paul teaches us that the sinful self in each of us is to die with Christ: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4 NRSV).

In the Small Catechism Luther vividly applies this teaching. He asks: What does Baptism mean for daily living? Answer: It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned through daily sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

### Preparing to See the Film

Pray: Spend time in prayer as you consider leading youth to experience this film. Pray that the images depicted, the words spoken and the message shared would be used by the Spirit to guide youth to consider the meaning of the Cross and the necessary humiliation and death of Jesus as a sacrifice for their sins. Pray that you will be equipped with the words to share, and the heart to care for the different reactions your youth may have as a result of viewing this film. Pray that you are approaching the film, and the use of this film, in the proper way, not seeking to sensationalize or simply dramatize the story of the Passion, but as a tool to guide youth to consider their faith by the power of the Spirit at work in them.

### Practical Preparation

Rating: *The Passion of the Christ* is rated "R". The movie closely follows the Scriptural account of the final hours of the life of Jesus Christ, and is visually graphic (particularly the scenes of the scourging of Christ and the actual act of the crucifixion) and may be too intense for young audiences. A suggested parent permission form is included below. We encourage youth leaders to make use of such a form in preparing to lead groups to the film, regardless of age. (Mel Gibson and others have suggested that the age of 12 is really as "young" as viewers should be.)

Chaperones: Invite an adequate number of adults to watch the film with the group. Seat adults among the youth and make them available for youth before, during and after the film. Due to the intensity and extreme emotional response youth will likely experience during the film, be aware that youth may need to leave the room during the film. Adults should be on-hand to accompany these youth.

Plan for a debriefing time after the film: You know your youth better than anyone. Carefully consider the best time to hold a debriefing. You may hold it immediately; you may wait a day or two. Taking time to view the film BEFORE attending with your youth may help you make the best decision about scheduling a debriefing.

### Self Preparation: Lead Effectively

Sneak-Preview: Plan to watch the film with the other adult chaperones before showing it to your youth. Taking time to process and respond to the film personally and privately may better equip you to focus on the needs and responses of your youth when they first see this film.

Prayer and study: Take time for personal preparation. Leading youth to experience this film will be vastly different than accompanying a group to view the *Matrix Reloaded* or through a discussion on the theology of *The Lord of the Rings*. Taking time for reflection and study before leading your youth becomes important as you guide youth through the film and the reactions likely to result.

### Student Preparation: View Effectively

Context and Background: Prepare youth pre-event for the film. The events of the film focus on the final hours of the life of Christ. Recognizing the primary characters and developing an understanding of the

approach Gibson employed in developing the film may be helpful for youth. Considering leading youth to discuss these three key questions pre-event:

1. Why did Jesus have to die?
2. Who's who in the Passion account?
3. Why is "feeling sad" for Jesus not enough?

Helping youth to focus not on how "badly" they feel for Jesus throughout the film, but rather on His sacrifice for them as it is graphically depicted will provide an appropriate context for youth viewing the film, lifting the emotions of the film away from their personal fixation and onto their understanding of the theology of the Cross, the humiliation of Christ and His sacrifice for us as His children.

See the enclosed Discussion Activities for more on equipping youth Scripturally to see this film.

Behavior: Spend time discussing appropriate behavior with your youth. Viewing this film will be different from other movie-watching experiences. Encourage youth to maintain appropriate behavior during the film. When youth are uncertain how to react, oftentimes they will laugh or feel the need to make a joke or alleviate tensions. Help youth realize that while these responses are understandable, they are not acceptable for the situation.

Emotions Are Okay: Each youth and each adult will experience the film differently, and there is no right way to respond to what they see. There is, however, a right way to respond to the emotions displayed by the other people in the youth group.

Assure youth that they can feel free to express emotions during the film and help them understand that the movie may cause an intense emotional response. Remind them that the adult leaders are available during and after the film for conversation and prayer. At the end of the film, allow youth to take their time to process it. If some in your group respond immaturely or without understanding, assign adults to usher these youth to the hallway. Again, be aware of others in the room.

Furthermore, assure your youth that while others around them may experience the movie in an intense emotional manner, it is okay if they do not. While they do need to respect the emotional needs of others, they do not need to emulate them in order to fully experience, appreciate, or understand the message the movie conveys.

## **Viewing The Passion**

### Parents

Bring them along: It is important to involve parents in this experience. We suggest that permission forms be sent home for youth of all ages, to help inform parents of the nature of the film. Parents can be a source for conversation and reflection as youth consider their response to the events depicted.

### Presentation

Meet: Establish a meeting time and place that will allow time to prepare the group one last time before watching the film. Remind your group of the following:

1. Behavior: "Normal" movie behavior is not appropriate
2. Emotions: Remind them that they may experience intense emotion (be careful not to say "you will" or youth who do not have a strong response will not carry "guilt.") and remind them that they may exit to the hallway, if they need.
3. Debriefing: Remind youth that there will be a debriefing time after the film.

View: Be prepared, and prepare your chaperones and parents, to help youth deal with their emotions during and after the film. Consider equipping all of your leaders with tissues, and seating them near aisles where they are free to follow a youth who needs to leave the theater.

□ Leave: Take time after watching the film. It often takes viewers some time to leave after viewing an emotional film. Have leaders available to escort youth who need to leave, or who may be reacting inappropriately, out of the room.

### Process

□ Talk Back: Consider how to debrief the film. You may meet as a large group; you may choose to have chaperones and other leaders work with small groups. You may hold your "talk back" immediately; you may wait a few days. Consider location: a home, the youth room, a coffee house. Select a place that is comfortable for the youth, and allows for focused and quiet reflection and discussion. We have listed 15 questions to consider in this discussion guide.

□ Follow-Up: The film may cause reactions that last some time. Leaders across denominations share that this film will "forever change" how Christians view the cross. Consider using materials in this guide as a means of allowing youth to continue giving voice to their thoughts as they ponder this film and its meaning for their lives.

□ Maintain Contact and Pray: Continue praying for and with your youth regarding what they saw in the film. Some will be moved to inspiration; others will be confused; others will wonder why everyone is making such a big deal of the film. Regardless of the response, your enduring interest in each youth through prayer and consistent contact will help guide them to a Scriptural, faith-based understanding of the events they witness in *The Passion of the Christ*.

### A Special Note on Anti-Semitism and Blame in *The Passion of the Christ*

*The Passion of the Christ* has come against much attack based on its supposed anti-Semitic content. This was not Gibson's intent, and he could not rewrite history to place Christ's death in the hands of some other ethnic group. However, it is vitally important that we personally understand and teach our youth to understand that it wasn't the Jews of 33 A.D. who put Jesus on the cross, nor was it the Romans; it was we who nailed His hands to the cross, our sin and the sins of the whole world that killed Him. No one people can be blamed, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) Encourage your youth to refrain from blaming anyone but themselves for the brutalities inflicted upon our Lord. Furthermore, encourage them in an understanding that had Jesus wanted to, He could have ended His own suffering by engulfing His persecutors in all the wrath of heaven (See Matthew 26:52-54). Instead, in obedience to the will of the Father, He chose to accept all that wrath upon Himself. Christ was at no point a helpless victim. He was God, allowing Himself to be broken by evil (inherent in people and perpetrated by Satan) so that evil would no longer have dominion over His beloved children.

This is the fundamental truth of the Law. When your youth understand this, then the message of Christ's glorious resurrection and His ultimate victory over death for their very sakes will hold a more precious significance. Arm yourself with the Gospel message of love when discussing the reality of Christ's suffering with your youth. Don't leave them alone in the guilt of the Law, but allow Scripture and the Holy Spirit to guide them through the Law into the joyful truth of the Gospel.

### Youth Materials

The following materials are for use with your youth as you educate and prepare them to view *The Passion of the Christ*.

#### Contemporaries of Christ

The following list of people/groups play a significant role in *The Passion of the Christ*. Youth will benefit from developing an understanding of these people prior to viewing the film.

Go over the list as a group, in small groups or with partners. Consider discussing the following points about each:

Name

Personal/Political Characteristics

Relationship/Attitude to Christ

### Group One: Jewish Leaders

*Caiaphas*: Matthew 26:2-65; Luke 3:2; John 18:13-14, 24-28; John 11:49-51; Acts 4:1-22

*Herod*: Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9; Luke 13:31-33; Luke 23:7-12; Acts 12:1-4

*Sanhedrin*: Matthew 5:21-22; Matthew 26:2-65; Acts 4:13-22; Acts 5:22-31; Acts 6:12-15; 7:1, 51-60

*Temple Guard*: Luke 22:4-6; Luke 22:47-54; John 7:32, 45-47; Acts 4:1-3, Acts 5:22-25

### Group Two: Roman Authority

*Claudia Procles, Pilate's Wife*: Matthew 27:19

*Pilate*: Matthew 27:2, 11-26; Mark 15:43-45; Luke 3:1; Luke 13:1; John 19:1-16

*Praetorian Guard*: Matthew 8:5-13; Matthew 27:62-66; Matthew 28:11-15; Mark 15:16-20; John 19:31-34

### Group Three: Those Surrounding Christ

*Barabbas*: Matthew 27:16-26; Mark: 15:7-15; Luke 23:18-25; Acts 2:14

*Jesus' Mother, Mary*: Luke 2:5-7, 16-19; John 2:1-10; John 19:25-27

*John*: John 12:23-25; John 18:15-16; John 19:25-27; John 20:2-8

*Judas*: Matthew 10:2-4; Matthew 27:3-10; Luke 22:1-6, 47-49;

*Mary Magdalene*: Matthew 28:1; Luke 8:1-3; John 19:25; John 20:14-18

*Peter*: Matthew 14:28-31; Matthew 16:16-23; Luke 5:1-7; John 18:10-27; Acts 2:14-40

*Simon of Cyrene*: Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26; Acts 11:20

*The Two Thieves*: Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27; Luke 23:32-33,39-43; John 19:17-18

### Discussion Activities

Consider using these discussion starters with your youth BEFORE attending the film.

#### Discussion Activity #1: Encountering the Gospels

Objective: that youth become more familiar with the Gospel narratives of Christ's passion and encounter God's word of forgiveness and love to them.

Divide the youth into four groups and assign Matthew 26:36-27:66 to one group, Mark 14:32-15:47 to another, Luke 22:39-23:56 to the third, and John 18-19 to the fourth. Have each group read its assigned Scripture looking for scenes in the narrative that the group would most wish to see depicted in the movie. Encourage each group member to choose a scene from the narrative and then discuss how he or she would expect the scenes to be presented in the movie. After each group has had time to work at these tasks, bring the groups back together and let them discuss their choices and expectations and why they chose the scenes they did.

Leaders should take the opportunity in the midst of the discussion to remind the youth that Christ underwent the suffering depicted in the Gospel because of our sin and to bring about our forgiveness and salvation. Mark 10:45 would be a helpful reference point: Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Whether the youth do or do not choose features of the narratives that point to the violence of the whipping/scourging and the crucifixion, the leader can take this opportunity to discuss this part of Christ's suffering with the youth and help prepare them for the vividness of the film's depiction of the violence. See activity number two below for further suggestions as to how to address these matters.

If a record is kept of the groups' choices and expectations, then, after seeing the film, the youth could be led in a discussion of how Gibson actually handled the scenes they chose.

#### Discussion Activity #2: An Analysis of Original Sin

Objective: That Christian youth avoid dividing the world into "sinners" and "good people," and instead hear God's word from Romans 3: "There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (3:22-24).

Assuming the young people have become acquainted with many of the characters involved in Jesus' suffering and death, ask them which character other than Jesus they would wish to play if they were actors who wanted a significant role in the film. Discuss their reasons for their choices. Discuss also which roles they would rather not have. You might point out that Gibson tells us that, while he plays no role in the film, his is the hand that you see driving the nail into Jesus' left hand. (You also see Gibson's

feet in the flashback scene concerning Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. In that scene only Jesus' feet are seen, and Gibson put himself in that scene.)

Turn then to a related question: Which actual person in the narrative would you have wanted to be? This question is not about acting a role but about being a person. As you discuss their reasons you will want to explore how we will tend to divide the people in the narratives up into the really bad people, maybe Judas, or the soldiers, or the mob crying "crucify Him," and the "better" people, maybe one of the women, or Simon of Cyrene, or the beloved disciple who stood with Mary at the cross.

In light of Romans 3:22-24 we need to help the young people go deeper in their understanding of what happened in Christ's suffering and death. As Luther says, Christ died not only for the worst parts of humans. He died because, even when humans are doing very good things, we are often in a bad relationship with God. Our sin is that we do not fear, love and trust God as we ought, and all our actions are tainted by our unbelief and failure to trust God. This will help us understand why all the disciples forsook Jesus; see Matthew 26:31-35, and how Peter came to deny Him; see Matthew 26:69-75. This will also help us see why the first disciples were doubtful even after Jesus was raised and why so many people today, both Christians and non Christians, hesitate to trust that Christ rose from the dead and that He is freely giving us His eternal life. (See discussion starter #5 below.)

*The Passion of the Christ* is not a simple example of the oft-repeated story of man's inhumanity to man. Instead this is a depiction of the central act in God's remedy for all human evil and sin. Therefore, we must resist the temptation to identify with the "good people" in the movie, and we dare not divide humanity into evil people and good people. Christ died also for Mary, Simon of Cyrene (Mark 15:21), you and me. (Simon of Cyrene plays a significant role in the film.)

Just as we are to identify ourselves as sinners, so we are invited also to identify ourselves with Christ's own death. St. Paul teaches us that the sinful self in each of us is to die with Christ: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4).

In the Small Catechism, Luther vividly applies this teaching. He asks: What does Baptism mean for daily living? Answer: It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned through daily sorrow for sin and repentance, and that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

After seeing the film, the youth could be led again into a discussion of our temptation to divide humanity into the really bad and the better people, so that they can be pointed again to the significance of Christ's death for all people.

### Discussion Activity #3: The Seven Words of Christ

Objective: That youth learn Jesus' words from the cross in their Gospel contexts and that they encounter Christ's love for them.

Encourage the youth to search for Christ's last words in Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23 and John 19. They could do this all together or be divided into a group for each Gospel. The youth may be surprised to find that each Gospel has its own unique emphasis.

Matthew and Mark have only one word: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34). This is the most difficult word. Jesus' "cry of dereliction" is the most somber witness of the effect of His taking our sin upon Himself. The sinless Son of God finds Himself forsaken in the midst of the burden of our sins. Leaders should also point out, however, that this word is the first word of Psalm 22, and Psalm 22 could be examined at this point. Youth will note that while the psalm speaks in a way very relevant to Jesus' terrible suffering, verses 22-31 witness powerfully to how God "has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help" (verse 24). Many scholars believe that Matthew and Mark are showing us that Jesus prayed this psalm as He was dying on the cross.

Of Luke's three words (23:34, 43, & 46), the first ("Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing") is a focused expression of Christ's forgiving love. The second ("Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise") is a specific word concerning the hope offered to all sinners by Christ our king. The third ("Father, into your hands I commit my spirit") shows Jesus' own trust in His Father as He commends His life into the Father's hands. (Note that Christ's third recorded word in Luke may be a quotation of Psalm 31:5. The importance of the psalms as prayers for God's people could be discussed in this connection.) This third word from Luke, along with the word from Mark and Matthew, provides an opportunity for discussing with youth the struggles of faith that come with times of suffering and despair. The book of Hebrews reminds us that because Jesus Himself underwent such a testing by suffering, "he is able to help those who are being tested" (2:14-18). And we have His example of prayer and His faithful commitment into God's hands.

Of John's three words (19:26-27, 28, & 30), the first ("Woman, behold your son! Behold, your mother!") shows Jesus' continuing care for His mother. The second ("I am thirsty") reminds us of His remarkable words to the woman at the well in John 4:7-15. The third ("It is finished!") makes plain that Christ's sacrifice on our behalf was fully completed at His death.

Youth could discuss how they would try to show the meaning of these words in doing a film like Gibson's. Which word would they choose as most fully showing the depths of Christ's love for us? A case could be made for any one of the seven words!

If a record is kept of the discussion of Jesus' words from the cross, then, after seeing the film, the youth could be led in a discussion of how Gibson actually handled the scenes in which the words are spoken. In particular, youth could try to determine whether or not Gibson helps the viewers connect the word from Matthew and Mark to Psalm 22.

#### Discussion Activity #4: Jesus as the Great I AM, His use of the Name in the Garden of Gethsemane

Objective: That youth be strengthened in their faith in Jesus, the Son of God, who is God from God and Light from Light.

Invite the young people to dramatize John 18:1-11. Have them focus on how best to depict verse 6, "When Jesus said, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground."

One of the most intriguing features of the Gospel narratives about Jesus concerns His use of the simple "I am he." In Greek, this is "ego eimi," an emphatic way to say this phrase. Jesus uses this phrase in two ways: In John's Gospel we read that Jesus says "I am the bread of life" (6:35); "I am the Light of the World" (8:12, 9:5); "I am the gate" (10:7, 9); "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14); "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "I am the way, the truth and the life" (14:6); "I am the true vine" (15:1, 5).

These are wonderful sayings about who Jesus is as our Lord, God and Savior. But Jesus used an even more majestic way to say who He was. Read John 8:48-59. In verse 58 he declares, "Before Abraham was, I am." The Jews understand that in these words Jesus is plainly claiming to be God, and so they try to stone Him (Leviticus 24:16 says it is appropriate to stone someone who blasphemously claims to be God). But Jesus is God, and the words are not blasphemy but the truth. Jesus' use of "I am" connects Him with God's special name as revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:13-15. Some will also hear an echo of God's self-description in a passage like Isaiah 43:25: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more."

When Jesus emphatically said, "I am he," those who came to arrest Him understood that they were in the presence of someone extraordinary; someone so extraordinary they could not stand in His presence. After seeing the film, you could discuss whether Gibson's portrayal of this scene helps people see its full meaning.

#### Discussion Activity #5: Encountering the Resurrection

Objective: That youth celebrate Christ's resurrection victory and be prepared to speak of the resurrection with one another and with the unchurched.

Spend time in large or small groups reading the Gospel accounts of the resurrection: Mark 16, Matthew 28, Luke 24, and John 20-21. Mel Gibson has designed the movie to focus on Christ's suffering and death, but as a Christian he also wanted to witness to the resurrection. Ask the youth this question: If you were Mel Gibson and you wanted to use only one minute of time in the film to make a witness to Christ's resurrection, what would you put in that minute?

It is worth reflecting on the role of women among the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Scholars often remark that in a day when women's public witness was not valued, Jesus was willing to have them play major roles. See, for example, Luke 8:1-3, John 4, and Luke 10:38-42. The disciples were not immediately ready to trust the women's reports, but they discovered the women were right. See, for example, Luke 24:22-25. Gibson's film gives an important place to women's roles also when Jesus was suffering and dying. You may further point out that as a traditional Roman Catholic, Gibson may assign significance to Jesus' mother Mary that goes beyond what we see in God's Word.

You might also discuss with the young people how scholars tend to agree that Mark's Gospel originally ended at verse 8 of chapter 16. Our best manuscripts do not have endings that go beyond verse 8. But that raises a question. Why would Mark end with, "They were afraid, you see." Most translations don't have "you see," but in Greek the sentence ends with the word "gar" which would roughly translate into "you see" in this context. Greek sentences hardly ever end with "gar," but here we seem to have a whole Gospel ending in this puzzling way. Discussion of the interesting questions about the ending of Mark's Gospel may help the young people explore the many different ways we can make a witness to the resurrection. In a similar way you might also discuss Matthew's report that the disciples "worshiped him; but some doubted" (28:17). Luke's narrative of Jesus' appearance to the disciples on the way to Emmaus (24:13-35) can also lead to some good discussion: why was it difficult for them to recognize Jesus? Why does Luke say that they recognized Jesus when He blessed and broke the bread; does this connect with our own times of Jesus giving us His body and blood in Holy Communion? John's account of "doubting Thomas" (20:24-29) explores similar questions.

#### Artistic Elements in the Film

The following is a list of the different artistic elements employed by Gibson in *The Passion of the Christ*. Though these artistic elements do not compromise the Scriptural nature of the film, they do include characterizations and events that go beyond the Scriptural records of what actually happened. The following list is not exhaustive, but it could prove useful to you as you lead your youth in a follow-up discussion of the film.

#### Artistic Element #1: Use of the Ancient Languages

*The Passion of the Christ* is filmed entirely in the Biblical languages of Aramaic and Latin. English subtitles are used to help viewers who may not be familiar with the story follow the action. People have provided mixed responses to Gibson's choice to use the original languages instead of filming the entire movie in English.

Possible questions: Do the original languages add to the overall authenticity and intensity of the film or do they take away from the viewers' ability to fully experience the film? What would you have done if you had directed this movie?

#### Artistic Element #2: Flashbacks

Gibson implements several different flashbacks as the movie unfolds, providing viewers with a visual and emotional break from the harsh action in the film. These flashbacks include scenes of Jesus in His family's carpentry shop, Jesus teaching the people and a scene dealing with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-12, but Gospel manuscripts disagree about this narrative. Gibson portrays the woman caught in adultery to be Mary Magdalene, though Scripture does not support this. Some background concerning speculations about Mary Magdalene would be helpful in discussing Gibson's portrayal of this woman [Luke 8:2, Mark 15:40]).



Possible questions: What purpose do the flashbacks serve in the movie? Why do you think Gibson placed each flashback where he did? What do the flashbacks teach moviegoers about Jesus' ministry and life? Do you think they were accurate? Why or why not?

### Artistic Element #3: Characterizations and Interpolated Events

Gibson employs some poetic license in his characterizations of certain key players in *The Passion*. He also interpolates some events into the action of the film. Some of the non-Scriptural artistic elements in this vein that you will see include:

□ *Characterizations of Mary, Mother of Jesus*: Gibson is a Roman Catholic, which means that he believes certain things to be true of Jesus' mother that are not supported directly by the Holy Scriptures. One of these beliefs is that Mary was present with Christ through every step of His ministry, including His death. In keeping with this belief, Mary plays a significant role in *The Passion of the Christ*, and is present through much of Christ's suffering.

Possible questions: Why do you feel Gibson placed Mary in so many scenes in this movie? How did her presence enhance your understanding of the action in the film? How did it possibly take something away?

What do you think of Mary's relationship with Jesus? What do you think of His treatment of her? What does this mean for you?

□ *Characterizations of Mary Magdalene*: Scripture tells us that Mary Magdalene, a devoted follower of Christ, was one of several women whom Christ had cured of disease or possession. We know that Mary Magdalene had been possessed by seven demons before she met the Lord, (Luke 8:2) and that she and other women who loved Christ traveled with Him and the disciples to attend to their needs. We also know that she was present at the Lord's crucifixion. This is all Scripture tells us of her connection with Jesus. However, popular Catholic tradition holds that Mary Magdalene was the woman caught in adultery and the woman who poured expensive perfume on Christ's feet, anointing Him for his death (Matthew 26: 6-13 and Mark 14:1-9). Gibson's depiction of Mary Magdalene follows this popular view of her.

Possible questions: How does Gibson depict Mary Magdalene in the film? Why do you think he does this? How does this depiction enhance your understanding of Christ's relationships with His children? How does this depiction, and the actual Scriptural account, enhance your understanding of Christ's view of women?

□ *Characterizations of Simon of Cyrene*: Simon of Cyrene was the foreigner who was made to carry Christ's cross to Golgotha. (Mark 15:21) Gibson chooses to give focus to this humble character as he fulfills his task. Simon originally wants nothing to do with the bloodied, disfigured Jesus, but as he walks with the cross to Golgotha, he comes to admire and defend Him.

Possible questions: Gibson gives focus to this otherwise humble player in the crucifixion story. Why do you think Gibson made this choice? What do you think Simon's transformation in his attitude about Christ communicates to moviegoers? What does his role in the crucifixion mean for you?

□ *Events Surrounding the Suicide of Judas Iscariot*: Judas is the well know disciple turned traitor in the crucifixion story. Gibson inserts a short vignette into *The Passion* that fills in the space between Judas' return of his 30 pieces of silver and his suicide. The vignette is a non-Scriptural look at the psychological trauma Judas perhaps experienced as a result of his betrayal, and includes manifestations of his distress in the form of children who hurl rocks and torment him. This torment drives Judas to hang himself in a later scene.

Possible questions: Do you think Gibson was right in his depiction of Judas in the movie? Why or why not? How are Judas' actions similar to Peter's when Peter disowns Christ (Luke 22:54-62)? Why do you think Judas' fate was different from Peter's, whom Christ later reinstates as a disciple (John 21:15-25) and who goes on to be a major player in the foundation of the Christian church? What choices did Judas make that led him to his torment, even after he returned the 30 pieces of silver? Is Judas a victim, or did he have the same option of forgiveness that Peter did?

□ *Characterizations of Satan*: It is a given that Satan played a significant role in the crucifixion of Christ, even though his role is never explicitly mentioned in Scripture. Satan enflames and uses to his advantage the sins inherent in all people, and it goes without saying that he enjoyed watching his archenemy suffer as horribly as He did on the cross. Gibson chooses to depict Satan as a character in *The Passion*, showing him as an unsexed, eerily perfect figure (who looks startlingly like Mary, Mother of Jesus) that only Christ can see. Satan constantly tempts Christ as the film plays out.

Possible questions: Why do you think Gibson depicted Satan in the film? Why do you think he chose to make Satan look the way he did? What do you think of the ways Satan tempted Christ? What do you think of Christ's response to Satan? What does this mean for you?

### Talk Back Triggers

Mel Gibson has been quoted as saying that he made *The Passion of the Christ* to raise questions, not to answer them. Your youth will very likely have several questions after seeing this film. To encourage them to start talking about their questions, consider using the following as a starting point to dialogue with youth following their viewing of *The Passion of the Christ*.

1. Why do you think the authorities wanted Jesus eliminated?
2. This film has been charged as being Anti-Semitic (against the Jewish people). Why do you feel this charge was made? Is this a fair charge? How do you see yourself in the depiction of the Jewish people in this film?
3. Mel Gibson appears in one scene of this film; his hands drive the nails into the palms of Christ. What does Gibson's choice suggest to each of us as we view this film?
4. The Romans depicted seem to really enjoy the torment they inflicted upon Jesus. How did this make you feel? Why do you think Gibson portrayed them this way? Do you think this is accurate? What does the Romans' sadistic enjoyment of Christ's torment say to you about human nature? About yourself?
5. Other than Jesus, for which person do you feel the most compassion? Judas? Peter? Pilate? Mary? Why?
6. Was Pilate in a no-win situation? What would have been the result of his letting Jesus go?
7. React to Jesus in His dialogue with Pilate as opposed to His dialogue with Herod. What possible reasons might Jesus have had for speaking to Pilate and not to Herod?
8. The film is brutal and violent. React to what you saw, and explain how it has impacted your view of the story of the crucifixion.
9. What was the significance of the earthquake and the tearing of the curtain in the Temple, Holy of Holies?
10. Why was the Resurrection absolutely vital to the viewer's experience with this film?
11. What range of emotions did this film pull from you? How did the reaction of others around you impact your experience with the film?
12. Share the most powerful part of this film for you.
13. Explain the idea that someone does not "watch" this film, but "experiences" this film. What does this mean for you as someone who has been a part of this film and as a Christian?
14. God made emotions, and they are powerful things. Are decisions based on emotions always good? What role does our emotional reaction to this film play in our faith in Jesus Christ?
15. What would you say to a non-Christian friend who sees this film? How could you use the scenes in the film to help your friend understand why Christ did what he did? How could you help your friend realize that the film is based on an actual historical event, not just a sensational piece of fiction? How does this film make it clear that Jesus is unlike any other "god"? How can you compassionately communicate this difference to a non-Christian friend?

### Personal Journal

Ask youth to journal in order to chronicle their reactions to *The Passion of the Christ*. You can give them a sheet of paper with the following questions on it.

General reactions: Jot ideas, compose a poem or simply journal about your "gut" reactions to the film: Consider this statement, "Feeling sad for Jesus doesn't make you a Christian" How might you help a non-

Christian person move beyond just feeling sympathy for the death of "this man" to focusing on His Sacrifice for them? What words would you use?

Can an emotional event change a person's life? How has this film impacted your life?

What do these words mean for you as a Child of God, "no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his Life for his friend..." Jesus calls you friend. How does this reality shape your life and your plans?

## **Review of The Passion of the Christ**

By Jacob Youmans, DCE

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

*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. Isaiah 53:5*

These words from the prophet Isaiah are presented at the beginning of Mel Gibson's 12-year odyssey known as *The Passion of the Christ*. I've heard this verse a thousand times in my life, but the words never truly sunk in until I spent two hours viewing the images associated with the passage. This is without a doubt a movie that every Christian over the age of 14 must see. It's a film we all need to take our unchurched friends to see. In a way that has never been done before, we see what Jesus endured out of His passionate love for the human race. *The Passion of the Christ* is more than a typical low-budget movie depicting a Jesus with blonde hair and blue eyes; this is as historically accurate as any movie I've ever seen on the death and resurrection of Christ.

*The Passion* begins in the Garden of Gethsemane following the Last Supper and works through the trials, torture, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It's fast-paced, with subtle flashbacks to different, "happier" moments in the Lord's life, giving the audience time to catch its breath before each scene of Roman brutality. Like any movie, there is some artistic license taken, but the script as a whole is exceptionally loyal to the Gospel accounts. The film was made all the more powerful and authentic through the use of the languages used in Christ's day, Aramaic and Latin. Though English subtitles are used, I found myself not reading them very often, finding it sufficient to follow the movement of the story without them.

One of the questions I always had about the crucifixion, even as a child in Sunday school, was, "Why did Jesus die so much more quickly than the two thieves on either side of Him?" The answer is presented soundly in this movie as we see a Jesus who is beaten far worse than we ever imagined. We see a Jesus who knows His mission must be completed, but who at the same time is undergoing unimaginable suffering. One of the miracles of the crucifixion is that Christ survived long enough to make it to the cross; a lesser man without the passion for saving all the peoples of the world would not have survived the pre-cross punishment given to Him.

Incidentally, the movie presents Evil in a unique manner. The film shows that Jesus was tempted up until the very end, and the source of His temptation takes many different forms, such as a Satan figure, a child and groups of children and a bird. Even in the final hours of Jesus' life, He faces a constant bombardment of evil. We visually see how Jesus was tempted in every way just as we are tempted.

Our unchurched friends need to see this presentation! There are a number of ways to help them do so; our church is going to rent a theater and encourage our members to come with their unchurched friends. Outreach magazine is calling *The Passion*, "Perhaps the best outreach opportunity in 2000 years." There are a number of Internet resources available to help you if your church decides to promote this movie. The official movie site is [www.thepassionofchrist.com](http://www.thepassionofchrist.com). Church resources are available at [www.thepassionoutreach.com](http://www.thepassionoutreach.com), and there are even free resources available at [www.passionmaterials.com](http://www.passionmaterials.com). For advance tickets and group sales, check out the website [www.thepassionticket.com](http://www.thepassionticket.com). *The Passion of the Christ* will be rated R for its graphic violence, so this is not a movie to show in Sunday school with little children. It is, however, one that will cause you to think and ask questions you may have never thought of before. And after all, good art does not answer questions--it raises questions. It's up to us to be the hands and feet of Jesus to point people where they can find the answer.

## **Permission Form for Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ***

Dear Parents:

This permission form allows your son/daughter to view Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, which is rated R. The movie graphically depicts the final twelve hours of the life of Jesus. The R-rating is because of the graphic nature of the scourging of Christ and the crucifixion. We, the church and youth ministry, believe this film will encourage and challenge our young people in their faith, the way in which they share their faith with others, and the manner in which they understand the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Adults will be available before, during and following the film to help the youth process what they experience in this film. I invite you to call for more details, further conversation or clarification about our intent to view this film as a youth group. Thank you for your support of your son/daughter in this experience. We invite all parents to attend the film with the youth group.

Our youth group will watch *The Passion of The Christ* at \_\_\_\_\_ church on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ PM.

I give permission for my son/daughter: \_\_\_\_\_ (name) to attend the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, with the youth group of \_\_\_\_\_ Lutheran Church. I understand the movie's R-rating and that at least one adult, over the age of 21, will be viewing this movie with the youth.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent's Signature