

March 21, 2004

Lent 4

"The Passion of the Christ-True or False?" (Four Part Series)

"Jesus Is God-True or False" - Matthew 26:59-68

The Mel Gibson film, "The Passion of the Christ" is turning out to be a blockbuster movie that has generated a lot of money and more than its share of controversy lately. Take for example this front cover of *US News and World Report*." It shows a picture of the head of Jesus by a famous artist Rembrandt. The title reads, "The Real Jesus" and underneath are the words, "Searching for the truth between Mel Gibson and the Gospels." The article inside reflects the views of so-called religious scholars who believe that the New Testament account of Jesus suffering and death is a mixture of historical truth and religious truth. They believe that somewhere between historical reality and religious myths you can find the real Jesus.

These scholars are upset with Mel Gibson for taking the gospel accounts of the last twelve hours of Jesus life and presenting them on the screen as historical fact. Gibson told Diane Sawyer on ABC, "You know, critics who have a problem with me don't really have a problem with me and this film. They have a problem with the four Gospels."

For the next four Sundays we are planning a series of sermons with title, "The Passion of the Christ-True or False?" We want to ask probing questions about the person of Christ, the only way to salvation, the death on the cross and the resurrection from the dead. Today we want to direct you to the facts in the Bible about person of Jesus Christ with this question, "Jesus Christ Is True God-True or False?" Let's turn to:

MATTHEW 26: 59-68.

The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. ⁶⁰ But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward ⁶¹ and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" ⁶² Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" ⁶³ But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." ⁶⁴ "Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶⁵ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. ⁶⁶ What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. ⁶⁷ Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him ⁶⁸ and said, "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

1) Listen to the false charges against Jesus

When we read this portion of Scripture and hear these false charges brought against Jesus, we are reminded of the false charges that are being brought against him today.

The Jewish leaders did not like the fact that Jesus kept dropping these bombshells in their midst and telling them that he was the Son of God from all eternity, that he was equal with the Father, and that he existed even before Abraham. He once told a group of leaders in the temple, "Before Abraham was I am." With the words "I am" Jesus was claiming he was eternal and even claiming he was Jehovah God. He told people, "I am the good Shepherd" using terms that were used for Jehovah God in the great 23rd Psalm. Do you realize how much controversy and debate you can stir up today if you make claims that Jesus Christ was not only a person in history, but Lord and God from all eternity?

The chief priests and the religious leaders of the Jewish people gathered in the middle of the night to bring false charges against Jesus to put him to death. Never mind it is the middle of the night, this was serious business that had been talked about for months. Jesus had to be put to death for making claims that he was God. They did not care whether Jesus was given a name that meant deliverer. Thousands of boys were named Yishua or Joshua just as thousands are named Joshua today. They did not mind that he was a great rabbi or teacher. What really rankled them and stirred up hatred was Jesus' claim to be Lord and God.

These religious leaders looked for false evidence they could pin on Jesus but none of the witnesses would agree. Finally two people seemed to share the same story about Jesus destroying the temple and raise it again in three days. This was something only God could do, and with that claim Jesus was claiming he was God. Did Jesus say this? Yes, he did, but he was referring to dying and raising his own body back to life again in three days, an even more powerful testimony that he was truly the Son of God from all eternity and equal with his Father. One reason to believe Jesus is Lord and God is to carefully examine his claims that he made that he would die and rise again. Then examine how he kept those promises that he had made.

How did Jesus respond to these false charges? The high priest Caiphas asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What testimony is that these men are bringing against you?" Then it says, "Jesus remained silent." It was not necessary to speak. The evidence was all there, plain as day. His claims to be the Son of God, and to be equal to his Father, were well known to everyone.

In his book *Born Again* Charles Colson tells how he began examining the claims that Jesus made for himself on the basis of the evidence in the New Testament gospel accounts. He wrote on one side of a legal pad all the claims that Jesus made for himself as the Son of Man, and then on the other side he wrote down the claims Jesus made that he was Lord and God. He came to the conclusion that Jesus was Lord and God from all eternity, and he was born again. Even the biggest critics can be led to confess their faith in Jesus by reading what he says about himself on the pages of the Bible. Jesus said, "My words are spirit and they are life."

Permit me to share an example to help us understand what happens when you boldly confess the name of Jesus with the understanding that he is Lord and God. When I was a kid, I can remember my dad saying that he was thinking of making some holes in the marsh along the river for nesting and migrating geese and ducks. Rather than spending lots of money to have the holes dug, his plan was to take 2 bags of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, soak them in diesel fuel, and then detonate them with a stick of dynamite. Other

farmers were successfully blasting huge holes 20 feet across and ten feet deep without spending more than a few dollars. Do you realize what a huge explosion can be produced from one stick of dynamite and one bag of fertilizer? Do you realize the explosion of controversy that you will produce if you mention the name of Jesus in such a way that you proclaim him as Lord and God, and only way back to God?

Listen to these words that appeared in a church newspaper about the name of Jesus. "Jesus. It's a little name. A small word. Say this little name in public, however, in a way other than an obscenity, and stand back and watch the fireworks. This little name is like a tiny detonator that triggers a nuclear warhead. You can say "God," and you won't get a squeak. You can say "Our Father/Mother in Heaven," and few will flinch. You can say "Great Spirit," and people will nod in approval. You can say "Allah" and you will be deemed tolerant. But say "Jesus" and just wait for the sonic boom. Articles will appear in the paper. Reprimands will be posted from the home office. Suits will be threatened by the civil liberties block.

Mel Gibson sure has taken the heat for producing a film that portrays the last hours of Jesus life from the Bible as historical facts. That's the way it will be for us if we step up and boldly confess Jesus' name.

2) Listen to the true claims from Jesus

We have heard the false charges against Jesus now let's listen to the true claims that come from Jesus. The high priest takes matters into his hands and says to Jesus. "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." There is no way that Jesus can remain silent. He is placed under oath, and now he must do what we do in a court of law, "Swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God." There are times that you will be asked to witness to your faith and you cannot keep silent. Jesus said, "If you confess me before men I will confess you before my Father which is in heaven."

Listen to the words of Jesus as he speaks under oath: "'Yes, it is as you say,' Jesus replied, 'But, I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of glory.'" This is not just a claim to be a great angel who comes with the heavenly Father on clouds of glory. This is a claim to be the One who sits at the right hand of the Mighty One, a position reserved only for the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God.

If you were producing a movie on the last twelve hours of Jesus life how would you portray Jesus saying these words to the high priest and to the others in the Sanhedrin? Would you portray anger on Jesus' face and a terminator voice, "Someday I am coming back and I will nail you?" No, I believe we would produce a film that shows Jesus speaking these words with love and kindness in his voice and tears in his eyes. The same kind of compassion he had when he said, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would have gathered you together as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings but you would not." That's the love that we see on the face of Jesus, and a love we want on our faces and in our voices when we tell people who Jesus is.

The reaction to Jesus' words was a violent reaction. "The high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has spoken blasphemy! Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?'" The response is immediate. "He is worthy of death." They showed their hatred for the fact Jesus claimed he was Lord and God by spitting in his face, striking him with their fists, slapping him and saying "Prophecy to us, Christ. Who hit you?"

If you were in a large mosque and loudly proclaimed, "Jesus is God" you might find yourself beaten to within one inch of your life, or torn apart limb by limb. Mel Gibson took the heat for using the medium of film to proclaim Jesus as Lord and God, and even end his film with a brief but powerful proclamation of the resurrection. Confess your faith boldly as Jesus did and get ready for some violent reaction from those who hate the name of Jesus. Those who refuse to confess Jesus are faced with four options:

- 1) He is a lunatic for making foolish claims he is God.
- 2) He is liar for telling the world he is God
- 3) He is a legend, set down in layers by early Christians
- 4) He is Lord and God as Christians around the world teach

Jesus prediction to rise from the dead came true, and his prediction to come in glory will come true. Are you ready to meet him when he comes in the clouds? Are you ready to stand before your God and be on trial for your life that you lived? The way I have lived my life this past week, and you have lived yours, we have fallen short of God's glory, and we have not hope of having peace with God and escaping the judgment to come. In Jesus, you not only have someone who is God from all eternity, but the perfect sacrifice to pay for our sin. When he cried from the cross, "It is finished!" he completed the payment for all sin and because he is Lord and God that payment counts for us right now. Is Jesus Christ true God? To that we say a loud. Amen.