

March 28, 2004

Lent 5

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

"Jesus Is the Only Way Back to God-True or False"

The opening scenes of the movie "The Passion of the Christ" show Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Satan lurks in the background portrayed as this ominous, androgynous person that bespeaks of evil at its worst. Jesus fervently prays to his heavenly Father for strength. A snake emanates from Satan and slithers along the ground. Then, boom, a sandaled foot suddenly stomps on the head of the snake. Those who know the Scriptures immediately recognize that this was a powerful portrayal of Jesus crushing the head of the devil, predicted in the words of Genesis 3:15 when the Lord spoke to Satan and told him there was someone coming from the woman who would crush his head.

But let me ask you an important question this morning. Can the head of Satan be crushed by other religions, or is Jesus the only one who can crush the devil's head and give you peace with God? What about all the people of the world who do not believe in Christ as their Savior, will they perish forever? Was Jesus being exclusive when he said, "I am the way, the truth and the life no one comes to the Father except through me?" Can we believe these words of the Bible to be literally true, or do we have to put a modern spin on them that says Jesus was probably using a figure of speech called hyperbole or exaggeration when he said he was the only way?

I believe that I am safe in saying that if you witness to your Christian faith, and share the words of John 3:16 with someone that "God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten Son," you may be asked the question, "Do you believe people will perish forever without faith in Christ? What about all those people who never had a chance to believe in him?"

It is my prayer that our walk today to the Garden of Gethsemane, and the time we spend together listening to Jesus pray, will help us answer the question of the ages: "Is it true or false that Jesus Christ is the only way back to God?" Let's read these words together:

MATTHEW 26:36-44.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." ³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." ³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." ⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. ⁴¹ "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." ⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." ⁴³ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

1) The prayer

We can see evidence that Jesus is the only way back to God by the urgent prayer Jesus spoke to his heavenly Father. Jesus told his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." It also says that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and "began to be sorrowful and troubled." The book of Luke says that Jesus prayed so fervently that the sweat fell to the ground as great drops of blood. Mel Gibson's movie had Jesus praying in Aramaic using words of Psalm 22, the psalm about Jesus suffering and death such as "Be not far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help."

If other religions of the world could rescue people why would Jesus pray to his heavenly Father the way he did? Why was he deeply sorrowed and troubled? Here is Jesus, Lord and God from all eternity, setting aside his power as God and praying to his heavenly Father, crying out in anguish, seeking his help in this important task of rescuing people from eternal death and punishment. He prays to his Father because is the only hope of salvation just as he told the disciples shortly before, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to Father except through me."

When Lutheran missionaries went to Greenland, the Eskimos of Greenland wanted nothing to do with the missionaries and their message. For years they struggled to get through to them. Then one day, a missionary by the name of Beck was reading to some Eskimos this account of Jesus praying in the Garden. A leader of the people was so moved by this example of Jesus praying that he said, "Tell us again, tell us again how Jesus was praying." It was the breakthrough needed to reach these people with the gospel.

In my second year of the pastoral ministry, I had an experience with an elderly gentleman that shook my faith in the belief that Jesus is the only way back to God. A very nice man visited our worship service, and I called on him later that week. He showed me his beautiful garden on a spring day such as this. Then he said, "Do you really believe that Jesus is the only way for people to be saved?" Then he proceeded to express deep conviction that this could not be true. I was shaken by that man's argument and convictions. That night, I had a class with people interested in joining the church, and we were studying Jesus' suffering and death, and part of that lesson involved Jesus praying in the Garden. That night it became so clear, so clear that there was no other way back to God, because of Jesus fervently praying to his Father. This historical event has helped me again and again. People can try to put their spin on words that Jesus said, and even twist his words about being the only way back to God and give them different meanings. It is more difficult to question events, historical events, such as the resurrection or this event of Jesus praying in the Garden. These events are the very foundation of Christian faith. Let's say with the Eskimo, tell us again, tell us again how Jesus prayed.

2) The cup

There is more in this prayer Jesus prayed in the Garden that helps us with this question of the ages, "Is Jesus the only way back to God?" Look now at the cup of suffering that Jesus was prepared to drink for us. We are told that Jesus prayed with his face to the ground, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will but as you will."

Jesus prayed that the cup might be taken from him. He was chosen by his Father to drink the bitter cup of sin and suffering in our place. Usually we associate good things with a cup: a cup of water, or cup of juice, a cup of coffee in the morning, a cup of wine in Holy Communion that gives us the blood of Christ for our forgiveness. In contrast prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, and John in the Revelation speak of a cup of God's wrath. In Mark 10 Jesus asked his disciples if they could drink the cup that he was about to drink. They said they could, but they had no idea of what Jesus was referring to, and what was in the cup.

To understand this cup suffering and pain we need to look in Romans 1 where it says, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." God must by his very nature as a righteous and holy God, punish all sin, even the smallest things that we think in our minds, or fail to do properly. Jesus was prepared to take upon himself the sin of the world as we are told in Isaiah 53, "The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all." He was prepared to become sin for us, and then be punished in our place.

We cannot fathom what it must have been like to assume the sin of the world. Some of you sitting here, no I should say all of us sitting here today, know what is like to suffer guilt and shame for sins that we commit in our lives. If somehow the shameful things we have done in a lifetime, those known and those that are unknown, were suddenly pressed together, distilled, zipped together, and place upon you, you could not handle the pain. Have you ever seen someone so filled with mental pain and anguish they have curled up in fetal position in a corner of a room? Jesus assumed in himself the shame and sin of the world. He was also willing to be punished for that sin. I was talking to some of my relatives this past week about the Mel Gibson film. They said it was too much to see the whipping and beating that Jesus endured. I heard that my cousin's son started coming back to worship, because he was so deeply moved by what they saw. As horrific as the scenes were, they do not accurately depict the reality.

No film can ever show the internal anguish Jesus endured as he was forsaken by his own heavenly Father for our sin.

All other religions of the world have in their teaching that you can do something to make up for the cup of sin that you have accumulated in your life on this earth. Produce a cup of goodness for the cup of sin you accumulate and everything will be fine in the end. The Muslim faith says that by submitting to Allah and following the five pillars of Islam you can atone for past sin and make yourself worthy. The average Joe on the street freely admits that he has done shameful things in the past. He hopes that shameful things can be outweighed by following whatever religion you choose, even if it is the little voice within you.

In the story of the blind men and the elephant, everyone felt a different part of the elephant, yet it was the same elephant. That picture is used to illustrate that all religions are basically the same, because they teach the same thing about God. Try your hardest, follow whatever path seems best to you, and you will come out OK in the end. In a real sense all religions are the same, because they all teach that you can remove the suffering in the cup on your own. Only in the Christian faith do you have God sending his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin. Only in the Christian faith do you have Jesus willing to

drink the cup of suffering in your behalf for you.

3) The decision

Jesus was willing to drink the cup down to its last bitter drops. We know this is true from the way he closed his prayer, "My Father if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." "May your will be done." We know what the final decision was. "My Son there is no other way." If there was another way, Jesus would have left the Garden, and the angels who were with him would have protected him from those coming to arrest him. If it was not necessary for Jesus to drink that cup, then the Father should have told his Son, "My Son you do not have to drink the cup. There are other religions that people can use to make themselves worthy. There are lots of paths to follow."

If other paths are possible, what kind of monster do we have for a God that would send his Son to this world, if it were really not necessary to drink that cup? The decision was made to send the seed of the woman to crush the devil's head. Jesus honored that decision by praying in the Garden and by this prayer he shows us clearly there is no other way. Amen.