

Screen Savior

Don't expect a romanticized view of Jesus in Mel Gibson's new film *The Passion of the Christ*. The movie is violent, but it's an accurate portrayal of the crucifixion.

With all the hype and controversy surrounding *The Passion of the Christ*, it's difficult to enter the theater with an open mind. But please try if you can. The film isn't perfect, but it offers plenty of truth to take home.

Let's start with a disclaimer: If you're looking for the laughing, carefree Christ of CBS' Jesus miniseries from 2000, you won't find Him here. Director Mel Gibson launches his story in the Garden of Gethsemane with a tortured Jesus crying out for God's intervention.

The film doesn't lighten up from there, except for one brief, playful flashback scene. Gibson gives us a more traditional, solemn portrayal of Christ, as seen in older movies, albeit with a much more believable rendering of Jesus' pain.

The story of how this film made it to the screen is almost as interesting as the film itself. About 13 years ago, Gibson, who was raised Catholic and now celebrates the ultra-traditional Tridentine Latin Mass, reached a difficult point in his life. He says meditating on Christ's sufferings got him through it.

"Life is hard, and we all get wounded by it—I was no exception," he says. "I went to the wounds of Christ in order to cure my wounds. And when I did that, through reading and studying and meditating and praying ... I began to understand it as I never had before, even though I had heard the story so

many times.”

Conceiving the idea for the movie, Gibson adds, was like giving birth. “The story, the way I envisioned the suffering of Christ, got inside me and started to grow, and it reached a point where I just had to tell it, to get it out,” he says.

Telling this story has been an expensive gamble for Gibson, whose religious views have made him unpopular among some people in Hollywood. *Passion* almost didn’t make it to screens after critics charged in 2003 that the film would stir up anti-Semitism. But early nods of approval from religious leaders, including Billy Graham and Pope John Paul II (who watched an advance copy in December in his private residence in the Vatican) have calmed most critics’ fears.

The film stays true to the biblical account, taking some liberty only with the inclusion of a mesmeric Satan character (Rosalinda Celentano) who continually shows up to torment Jesus and Judas and to approve of the frenzied crowd calling for Jesus’ crucifixion.

Other engaging performances cement the appeal of this film. Maia Morgenstern’s Mary is both ethereal and human, maintaining her despairing composure until Jesus stumbles en route to Gethsemane with the cross in tow. When she attempts to rush to Him, we are taken by flashback to a time when Jesus fell down as a small boy.

Pilate, played by Ivano Marescotti, elicits sympathy as he weighs the reality of Jesus’ innocence with that of the insurrection sure to break out if the crowd’s calls for crucifixion are not assuaged. And a surprisingly moving

portrayal of Simon of Cyrene by Jarreth Merz nearly steals the show toward the end of the film. The transformation Simon undergoes in minutes—from unwilling and apathetic to becoming Christ’s ardent defender—is a testimony to the powerful effect Jesus’ presence had on those who knew Him.

But it is Jim Caviezel’s Jesus that provides the anchor for Passion. Also a Catholic, Caviezel delivers his Aramaic dialogue with such intensity and endures his suffering so visibly that he remains far more real and accessible than the more stoic Jesus of past crucifixion films.

The film’s grace goes beyond the smart casting, however. Braveheart-quality cinematography, a tasteful amount of special effects (for example, we see Peter slicing off the centurion’s ear) and a haunting score work together to carry audiences to Bible times. (The film was shot in Rome, on a set created to look like ancient Jerusalem.)

But be warned: The R-rated film is extremely violent. None of the violence is gratuitous, however, and it is necessary in order to maintain the realism for which Gibson was aiming.

“I tried to make it as realistic as possible,” Gibson says of his work. “I wanted the audience to feel like they were really there, witnessing the events as they had actually happened. But at the same time, it’s hugely personal. I saw other film versions, and I couldn’t understand them; I couldn’t believe them. Once I started meditating on the Passion, really going deep into it in my own mind and heart, then I began to understand it, to believe. That’s the version I put on film.”

Some viewers may not appreciate the fact that the entire film is in Aramaic and Latin, but the subtitles aren't distracting. As for the realistic violence, anyone too squeamish to stomach the seemingly endless scourging scene may very well value personal comfort above a deep understanding of the grave reality of Jesus' crucifixion experience.

Some Christians who saw the film before its February 25 release complained that *Passion* doesn't emphasize enough the triumph of Christ's resurrection. Jesus does in fact rise from the dead in this movie, but don't go hoping to see any happy Easter-morning reunions. In this film, our last vision of Peter is of him ashamed and broken, and our final image of Mary Magdalene is of her tear-stained and facedown in the dirt.

The film presents the gospel story from a Good Friday perspective, not from an Easter Sunday viewpoint. The emphasis here is on the Savior's pain, not His ultimate victory.

"The movie isn't about the Resurrection; it's about the Passion, the suffering of the Christ," Gibson says in defense of the film's dark mood. "You need to see the Resurrection, because that shows that Christ was who He claimed to be. It also demonstrates that love is stronger than death, which is why Jesus was able to endure so much suffering without giving in to despair or revenge. But it's the Passion, the suffering that really matters. My wounds were healed by His wounds; I had to tell the story of those wounds."

In light of this purpose, criticisms that the film is anti-Semitic are ignorant at best. "This is not a Christian versus Jewish thing," Gibson told syndicated columnist David Limbaugh. "'[Jesus] came into the world, and it knew Him not.'

Looking at Christ's crucifixion, I look first at my own culpability in that."

That may be the reason Gibson chose to make a stealth cameo appearance in the movie. His hand is shown nailing a spike into Jesus' palm.

And that is the overwhelming message that audiences will walk away with: We are all guilty. It's painful to watch it on-screen, but Gibson brings it out with grace and compassion.

"This is a movie about love, faith and forgiveness," the actor-turned-director said on FOX News Channel's The O'Reilly Factor. "He [Jesus] died for all mankind. He suffered for all of us. It's time to get back to that basic message."

Because of Hollywood's initial negative reaction to the film, *Passion* is likely to trigger more controversy once it hits theaters. Some people will see it out of curiosity—especially when they hear that Caviezel and an assistant director were both struck by lightning during filming. (Both were unhurt.)

Gibson, who attended Mass every morning during the film's production, has said in interviews that people were converted and healed on the set, including a girl who was reportedly cured of epilepsy. He hopes the film will have the same astounding impact on audiences worldwide.

Erika Larson is assistant editor of *Relevant* magazine. She saw an advance screening of *The Passion of the Christ* in October. The film opens in theaters nationwide on February 25.