THE PASSION OF CHRIST--WARNING

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This article was written before the release of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Christ* in response to all the promotion of this film.

At first, it was a trickle and now almost a flood of emails with testimonials about watching the film. I began to feel uneasy a few weeks ago when every one of them used so nearly the same words in describing the experience of seeing the film; churched or unchurched people. It has rendered them speechless, in tears and in shock for varying amounts of time. The brutality of the crucifixion experience is uppermost in the comments that then go on to say you will be compelled to do something after seeing this. Mr. Gibson has been interviewed saying he intended to produce something that will push people over the edge, declaring that this is simply the Gospel story; twelve hours told honestly. Now I have learned that churches are buying out theaters, encouraging their members to attend and bring an unchurched friend to the movie and a sermon series afterwards. Thus, the movie has apparently been accepted as an evangelizing tool by churches of all denominations.

I would like to add a word of caution to the discussion. It appears some people may be experiencing a challenge to their faith such that it is almost a badge of honor to be willing to experience this film and there is something wrong with your witness if you choose not to do so. Please know this is NOT the case. There are those of us who question the wisdom of this approach.

As a clinical social worker, I would say the responses described sound distinctly like response to trauma. Yes, it is possible to be traumatized by the re-enactment of an event. When the body's mechanisms for absorbing information are overloaded a person is often incapacitated and emotional. This is a normal response to a fearful situation and one that we normally recognize as in need of support. That is why there are teams of people trained to respond to debrief people following a traumatic event. Yes, people are more emotionally vulnerable at such a time. Yes, they may respond in different ways than usual but the basis for that different response is not a reasoned one but purely emotional, usually based in fear, and in this case, guilt and self-condemnation.

Mr. Gibson has chosen to present the story of Jesus' death, concentrating on the brutality, ending in darkness. AW. Tozer said, "The bird of truth has two wings." Jesus told us to spread the Good News that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Repent! He told His disciples that He must be handed over to die but quickly also told them He would be with them again in three days and gave them instructions to meet Him then. For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross. The FULL message --both wings--is one of victory! It is NOT--"Oh poor Jesus, look how He suffered". It IS --HalleluYah! Jesus came on purpose to destroy all the works of the evil one, to overcome sin, death and the devil---and He DID IT! In Him, WE have victory, too!

Go! Make disciples of all nations, ... teaching them as I have taught you and lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Matthew 28: 19-20 He did NOT say --

Go! Awaken revulsion and sympathy about what was done to Me so that people will believe in Me. The Scriptures give us enough information to understand that it was brutal. We cannot deny that but the emphasis is on redemption, on victory, on LIFE!! Have we become a nation so desensitized to violence through "reality TV" and slasher type films that we now believe we must apply the same level of violence in order to bring people to "faith"? And what kind of "faith" would it be, rooted in such an approach? Fear bonds are very different from bonds of love.

When people respond while in the grip of fear, they may be convinced of things to which they would not otherwise be susceptible. This vicarious, bloody experience is the type of thing that abusers often use to keep those they hurt immobilized and vulnerable to them. Yes, our Father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, could certainly have used such tactics in Scripture to evangelize but rather He limited the graphic content; perhaps in order to focus on the Good News of Jesus Resurrection as the First Fruits of all to come to faith and salvation in Him? Paul was beaten and left for dead many times but again, the message of hope and LIFE transcends the brutality.

I have lived long enough to know that things are not always what they appear to be on the surface. Certainly, no one who knows me would ever accuse me of sidestepping difficult things; rather some think I am far too direct and blunt. I do not advocate ignoring the reality of the suffering Jesus experienced for ME and for all sinners. But I wonder what agenda is behind presenting such an image to so many who may well be totally unprepared for the assault on their senses. The statistics on those who have experienced sexual abuse are very high and in the public eye especially now. Physical and emotional abuse histories are also far too common. These people will be even more affected than someone without such a history. What is the point of creating SUCH intense emotional vulnerability? WHAT is one "compelled" to do on seeing this film? There are some answers to this question but they involve many in-depth studies, too much to go into in a brief letter. I encourage you to delve deeply to question and learn. These days are spiritually intense as we approach the end of the age.

Please prayerfully consider whether or not you will subject yourself and your family to this experience. Do you already love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength? Are you uncertain if your faith is strong or lukewarm? Is the person you invite able to cope with such a brutal display? Do you, or they, have a history of abuse? What would seeing such brutality add? Will this message, ending in darkness, be encouraging or devastating? Is this loving your neighbor as you love yourself? What will you do for yourself or others if you are emotionally undone?

May the Spirit of the Living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through His Son, Jesus of Nazareth, give us increased discernment and wisdom in this matter.

As for me, I will stand in the knowledge that HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!!