

Why Did Jesus Suffer?

You've seen Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*. And you were interested enough in its subject matter to want to discuss it with friends. Do you have questions about the truthfulness of the film? Are you wondering why Jesus chose to die on a cross? Would you like to examine for yourself the texts upon which Gibson based his film? Welcome to this discussion group! We hope to look at those questions and more together.

- ✝ What are your reactions to Mel Gibson's portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death in *The Passion of the Christ*? How did the film affect you?

- ✝ Why do you think Gibson chose to be so graphic in depicting the brutality of Jesus' suffering and death?

- ✝ Which character(s) in the film did you most identify with? Why?

Seven centuries before the birth of Christ, a prophet from the kingdom of Judah, which is located in modern-day Israel, foretold Jesus' suffering in the Old Testament book that bears his name – Isaiah. Though Isaiah never actually mentions Jesus' name, the parallels between Isaiah 53 and the Gospel accounts are striking.

Isaiah 53

¹ Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? ² For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Who was Isaiah?

Isaiah, whose name means "Yahweh (God) is salvation," lived in Jerusalem in the eighth century BC. He may have been of royal blood or noble descent, and he prophesied during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The story of how God called him to be a prophet is recorded in Isaiah 6. Isaiah was married, and his wife was called a prophetess; they had at least two sons.

³ He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb

that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgressions of my people. ⁹ They made his grave with the wicked, and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him with pain. When you make his life an

offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the LORD shall prosper. ¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

‡ What similarities do you see between Isaiah’s description of Christ’s suffering, made over 700 years before his death, and Mel Gibson’s portrayal, which is based on eyewitness accounts from the Gospels?

‡ Do you find it hard to believe that Isaiah could have predicted how Jesus would die? Why or why not? What do you think would have made it possible for him to know what would happen in the future?

Did anyone else predict Jesus’ death?

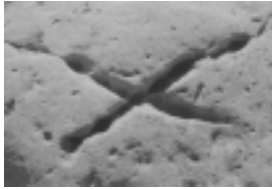
The Old Testament has many examples of Messianic promises that foreshadow the life and death of the Messiah or Christ. (Both words mean “anointed one,” someone specially designated by God to accomplish God’s purposes.) Isaiah 53 is one of the best known. If you would like to read another, you might want to start with Psalm 22, written by King David, in which you will hear the echo of Jesus’ cry from the cross.

‡ According to this account from Isaiah, why did Jesus die? How does this compare to what you saw in *The Passion of the Christ*?

What is sin. . . really?

Isaiah 53:6 has a good definition of *sin*. We sin when we “turn to our own way,” rather than accepting God’s way for us. While sin negatively affects our relationships with other people, it is primarily directed against God. Sin separates us from God and keeps us from enjoying the relationship we were created to have with God. Synonyms for sin in Isaiah 53 are *iniquity* and *transgression*.

‡ What do you think of the reasons that are given for Jesus’ death? Do they make sense to you? Do you think that Jesus, as the “Suffering Servant” described in Isaiah 53, needed to bear our infirmities and carry our sins? Why or why not?



Scene 1: The Betrayal

The pain of betrayal cuts deeply. In *The Passion of the Christ*, we see how Jesus is betrayed by two of his closest companions, Judas and Peter. He had personally selected these men to follow him and learn from him.

‡ When you watched *The Passion of the Christ*, what were you thinking and feeling as you observed Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial?

Luke 22 is one of the Gospel accounts that records these events. Here are two excerpts from that chapter.

³⁹ He [Jesus] came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed.

⁴² "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." ⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.

⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.

⁴⁵ When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; ⁴⁸ but Jesus said to him, "Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?"

⁵² Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? ⁵³ When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay

hands on me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness!"

⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance.

⁵⁵ When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶ Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, "This man also was

The Mount of Olives: A small range of four summits that overlooks Jerusalem and the Temple, thickly wooded with olive trees during Jesus' lifetime.

Jesus' disciples: Broadly, all those who follow Jesus' teachings; specifically, the twelve men, including Peter and Judas, whom Jesus chose to follow him and spread his teachings.

Son of Man: A title frequently used for Jesus that originates in the Old Testament book of Daniel and refers to one who comes and rules forever over all the earth.

Temple: The central place of worship for first-century Jews, located in Jerusalem; the dwelling-place of God.

Chief priests: Members of high-priestly families who served in the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews that had extensive authority over their internal affairs, even under Roman rule.

High priest: The president of the Sanhedrin, at this time, Caiaphas.

Galilean: One from the region of Galilee in northern Israel (the backwater of Israel and home of Jesus and his disciples).

with him.”⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.”⁵⁸ A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not!”⁵⁹ Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, “Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.”⁶⁰ But Peter said, “Man, I do not

know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed.⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.”⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

- ✠ Jesus had predicted his own death (Luke 9:21-22) and even that Judas would betray him (John 13:21-26) and Peter deny him (Luke 22:31-34). But foreknowledge does not seem to make this moment on the Mount of Olives any easier to bear. Why do you think that Jesus is struggling so intensely in this scene?

- ✠ Jesus comes to the resolution that he will do his Father’s will and go to the cross. Why do you think that he makes this decision?

- ✠ Judas’ betrayal of Jesus has become known as the ultimate betrayal. In Dante’s *Inferno* (written in the early 14th century), Judas is found at the very pit of hell, where he is gnawed upon by Satan as his punishment for all eternity. What about Judas’ actions makes them so horrifying?

- ✠ What might have caused Judas to betray Jesus for the price of thirty pieces of silver (the amount that he was paid to lead the authorities to Jesus)?

- ✠ Jesus is arrested and taken away to the house of the Jewish high priest. Peter follows at a distance. Why do you think he does this?

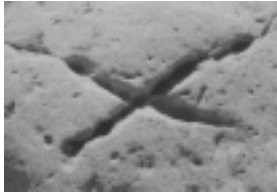
- ✠ Peter’s concern for Jesus and his concern for himself are at odds within him. He had claimed that he would follow Jesus to the death (Luke 22:33), but now that the “time of trial” has come, Peter is afraid. Three times, he denies that he knows Jesus. The cock crows, and the Lord turns and looks at Peter. What do you think passed between them in that look?

‡ As you consider these three men – Jesus, Judas, and Peter – for whom do you have the most sympathy? Why? With whom do you most identify? Why?

‡ Can anything heal the hurt that Judas and Peter have inflicted upon Jesus – and upon themselves – by their betrayals?

How do Peter and Judas' stories end? Is there any reconciliation between them and Jesus? If you'd like to read more, the end of Judas' story is told in Matthew 27:3-10, and Peter's next major encounter with Jesus, after his resurrection, is recorded in John 21.

‡ What would you have done under the pressure of these circumstances if you had been one of Jesus' followers?



Scene 2: The Trial

After Judas' betrayal, Jesus was led away to be tried by the Jewish authorities – the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council – who determined that he was guilty of blasphemy. A more serious charge could not have been leveled against him. One who blasphemes insults the character of God. In the eyes of the Jewish rulers, Jesus was guilty of this charge because he claimed to be the Son of God, a title that equated him with God.

Each gospel account highlights different aspects of Jesus' trial. In this discussion, we will read part of the John's record, which focuses on Jesus' trial before Pilate, the Roman governor. The Jewish authorities had determined that Jesus should be punished by death (according to Jewish tradition, a legitimate punishment for those guilty of blasphemy), but only Pilate, the region's chief representative from Rome, could authorize an execution.

‡ How did you respond to the trial and scourging of Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*? Do you think that Mel Gibson went too far in his depiction of the physical abuses inflicted on Jesus? Why might he have chosen to do that?

We enter the trial in John 19:1-16. Pilate has already questioned Jesus about his claims to kingship, and Jesus has replied that his kingdom is not "of this world."

John 19:1-16

¹ Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. ² And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. ³ They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face. ⁴ Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." ⁵ So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" ⁶ When the chief priests and the police saw him, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him; I find no case against him." ⁷ The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

⁸ Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. ⁹ He entered his

John: The author of the Gospel of John and one of Jesus' twelve disciples. He is often referred to as the beloved disciple and appears with Mary, Jesus' mother, in Gibson's crucifixion scene.

Pilate: The Roman governor during the life of Jesus who exercised control over the province of Judaea, employing an army of 4 to 5 cohorts (2,500 to 5,000 men).

Gabbatha: Literally Aramaic for the "height"; the area in front of Pilate's palace.

Passover: A Jewish holiday that celebrates the historic event of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12). An animal, often a lamb, was sacrificed in memory of the first Passover, when God required that each Jewish household in Egypt sacrifice a lamb and sprinkle its blood on the doorposts. The blood served as a sign that the home and family were not to be subjected to the final of twelve plagues meant to convince the Egyptian Pharaoh to release the Jews from bondage. The marked homes were "passed over" by the plague; in unmarked homes, every firstborn child and animal died. According to Christian understanding, the deliverance of the Jewish people from bondage prefigures the deliverance of all people from sin by the blood of Jesus, who is called the Lamb of God.

headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" ¹¹ Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." ¹² From then on Pilate tried to release him, but the Jews cried out, "If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against the emperor."

¹³ When Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus outside and sat on the judge's bench at a place called The Stone Pavement, or in Hebrew Gabbatha. ¹⁴ Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" ¹⁵ They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." ¹⁶ Then he handed him over to them to be crucified.

- ‡ The Jewish rulers make two arguments against Jesus. The first is based on their religious laws: He claims to be the Son of God and, therefore, is a blasphemer. The second accuses Jesus of insurrection: He claims to be king and, thus, opposes the emperor. Put yourself in Pilate's place for a moment. As Rome's appointed governor whose job is to keep the peace, what reasons might he have to take the charges so seriously?

- ‡ Pilate decides that Jesus is not guilty, so why do you think that he has him flogged? Why does he authorize Jesus' crucifixion?

- ‡ Gibson's film depicts Pilate as a conflicted leader. What is your response to him? Do you sympathize with his dilemma? What do you think of the choices that he eventually makes?

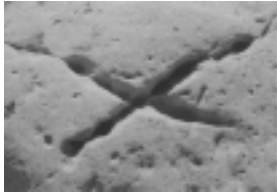
- ‡ Look at Pilate's interaction with Jesus in verses 8-10. Why do you think that Jesus is silent when Pilate initially questions him?

- ‡ When Jesus does respond, what does he have to say about where power and authority ultimately come from? What do you think of this? Do you believe Jesus' implication that God is ultimately in control of these unfolding events? Why or why not?

‡ If God is in control, does that change the way you view the story? How?

‡ The phrase “the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” has sometimes been used in the cause of anti-Semitism. Do you think that this is a misinterpretation or misuse of Jesus’ words? How do you understand this statement?

‡ During Good Friday services in some church traditions, the congregation re-enacts the trial of Jesus. They identify with the crowd and cry out, “Crucify him! Crucify!” Do you see yourself in the crowd? Why or why not?



Scene 3: The Cross

We come to the crucifixion of Jesus – the turning point in history for all Christians.

✝ When you saw Mel Gibson’s depiction of the crucifixion in *The Passion of the Christ*, what moments were the most powerful, significant, or striking? Why?

All four Gospels record the death of Christ; we will read from the Gospel of Luke.

Luke 23: 26, 32-46

²⁶ As they led him [Jesus] away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.

³² Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. ³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ And the people stood by watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, the chosen one!” ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, saying, “This is the King of the Jews.”

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴² Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you have come into your

kingdom.” ⁴³ He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last.

Cyrene: A port city in North Africa with a large Jewish minority; Simon of Cyrene was likely visiting Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

Two criminals: Some translations of the Bible call these men thieves, but, more likely, they were being punished for insurrection against the Roman government.

Crucifixion: A form of punishment practiced extensively by the Romans. Only slaves and the lowest types of criminals were crucified; Roman citizens were crucified very rarely.

Messiah: Jewish term for the Christ, God’s anointed one. The Jews of Jesus’ time looked for a Messiah who would come and set them free from Roman oppression and re-establish the throne of David. Instead, Jesus came to provide a way for all people to be set free from the bondage of sin.

Temple curtain: In the Jewish temple, a curtain separated the “Holy of Holies,” the place where God dwelt, from the rest of the temple. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies only once a year to make atonement for the people’s sins. The rending of the temple curtain in verse 45 is symbolic as well as a literal event. Because of Jesus’ death, anyone can now enter into God’s presence and receive forgiveness.

- ‡ Not much is written in the gospels about Simon of Cyrene. In *The Passion of the Christ*, how did Mel Gibson portray the scene described in verse 23? Do his additions seem faithful to the story? Why do you think that Luke included this detail about Simon carrying Jesus' cross?

- ‡ From the cross, Jesus cries, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." What kind of person could say this in the middle of such torture? What does this statement show us about how Jesus saw his executioners and those who conspired against him?

- ‡ The soldiers and leaders, even one of the criminals crucified with Jesus, mock him and challenge him to save himself – if he's really able to. What do you think causes them to scorn someone who is already suffering so greatly?

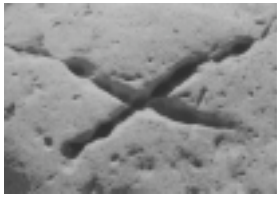
- ‡ The second criminal has a different response to Jesus. He believes that Jesus is innocent and asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. Why do you think it's possible for the people in this scene to have such opposite reactions?

- ‡ What is the right reaction to Jesus – mockery or belief? If you think that neither reaction is correct, what would be the right response?

- ‡ Jesus promises that the criminal who trusts in him will be with him in paradise. What would give Jesus the authority to make this promise – and to fulfill it?

‡ If you haven't already, read the note about the tearing of the temple curtain. Christians believe that Jesus' death has atoned for our sins and opened the way into God's presence. Do you want to come before God? Do you believe that Jesus' death is the only way that God could make it possible for us to be with him – the only way to remove the barrier of our sin? Why or why not?

Would you like to read an explanation of how Jesus' death makes it possible for us to be with God? Many people have found that something called the "Bridge Diagram" helps them understand the core ideas of the Gospel. The Navigators have published "The Bridge to Life" on their web site: <http://home.navigators.org/us/>. It's listed under "Ministry Tools." Another helpful explanation – "Two Ways to Live" – can be found at <http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/2wtl/index.html>.



Scene 4: The Resurrection

While most of *The Passion of the Christ* is given to the last twelve hours before Jesus' crucifixion, Mel Gibson ends with a brief resurrection scene.

✚ What did you think of how Gibson chooses to end the film? Was it what you expected? Why or why not?

Jesus had predicted his resurrection from the dead (Luke 9:22), but it still comes as a surprise to his followers as we will see in these excerpts from John 20.

John 20

¹ Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went to the tomb. . . ⁶ Simon Peter came. . . and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ And after he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. . .

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them

Mary Magdalene: "Magdalene" probably refers to the town of Magdala. Mary Magdalene had been freed from demon-possession by Jesus (Luke 8:2) and was one of his followers.

The other disciple: John, the author of the Gospel of John.

Thomas: One of Jesus' twelve disciples. It is uncertain whose twin he was.

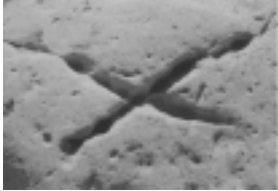
when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

- ‡ In the darkness before dawn, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb and finds it empty. She reports this news to Peter and the "other disciple" (John). What do you think was running through their minds when they saw the empty tomb and evidence that Jesus' burial clothes had been removed?
- ‡ In the evening, the disciples, except for Thomas, are gathered behind locked doors – afraid that a fate like Jesus' might yet await them. What do you think it was like to be in that house? What might they have talked about?
- ‡ The disciples had followed Jesus for three years, devoting themselves to him and to his teaching. Why then do you think that they doubt his promise that he would rise again?
- ‡ When the risen Jesus appears, he enters a room burdened with doubt and fear, filling it with his peace and joy. If you had been there, how would you have responded to the appearance of Jesus? What difference might it have made to you that he had a physical body?
- ‡ Not all the disciples saw Jesus that first evening. For some unknown reason, Thomas was missing. What do you think of his response to his friends' good news about Jesus? In what ways do you identify with his response?
- ‡ A week later, Jesus appears again, and this time Thomas is there. Jesus responds directly to Thomas' request to touch his scars. Thomas' answer to Jesus is simple: "My lord and my God." Do you think Thomas' response is appropriate? Why or why not?

‡ A barrier stands in the way of Thomas' belief. Jesus removes it by showing himself to Thomas. Are there barriers between you and your belief in Jesus as your risen Lord and God? What are they? Do you believe that Jesus can overcome those barriers? Why or why not?

‡ Do you agree with Jesus' statement that those who believe in him without seeing him are blessed? Why or why not?



“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

The Passion of the Christ uses flashbacks at several points to show us something of Jesus’ life.

‡ What effect do these flashbacks have in the film? Which one(s) stood out to you? Why?

In our final discussion, we will “flashback” to a crucial conversation between Jesus and his disciples. Here, for the first time, he tells them about the suffering that awaits him.

Luke 9:18-25

¹⁸ Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?”

¹⁹ They answered, “John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” ²⁰ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.”

²¹ He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, ²² saying, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

²³ Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁴ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?”

John the Baptist: A Jewish preacher (and Jesus’ cousin) who prepared the way for Jesus’ ministry by calling people to repent of their sins.

Elijah: A great prophet of Israel who lived in the ninth century BC. His prophetic ministry is recorded in the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Kings.

Ancient prophets: Ancient Israel had many prophets, sent by God with a message for the people.

Messiah: Jewish term for the Christ, God’s anointed one. The Jews of Jesus’ time looked for a Messiah who would come and set them free from Roman oppression and re-establish the throne of David. Instead, Jesus came to provide a way for all people to be set free from the bondage of sin.

Son of Man: A title frequently used for Jesus that originates in the Old Testament book of Daniel and refers to one who comes and rules

‡ Jesus, when he is alone with his twelve disciples, asks them: “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They respond with various answers. What is the people’s general impression of Jesus? (See the notes if you’re unfamiliar with the people named here.)

‡ Jesus then asks a more personal form of the question: “But who do *you* say that I am?” What does Peter’s answer reveal about how he views Jesus?

- ‡ How is Peter's answer different from the crowds'?

- ‡ Why do you think that Jesus orders them not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah? (This question is a challenging one, so don't feel like you need to come up with the definitive answer. Some people think that Jesus may have said this because he knew that many had misconceptions about what it meant to be the Messiah. See the note above.)

- ‡ After Peter's proclamation, Jesus predicts his suffering, death, and resurrection. This hardly would have matched the Jews' vision of a triumphant Messiah throwing off their Roman oppressors. What do you suppose the disciples thought about Jesus' prophecy regarding his own death?

- ‡ Jesus also has something to tell his disciples about being his followers. What do you think it means to take up a cross and follow him? Obviously, not all of Jesus' followers throughout history have died by crucifixion as he did, so how might this instruction be understood figuratively?

- ‡ What do you think Jesus means when he says that those who try to save their life will lose it (and visa versa)? Does this make sense to you? Why or why not? How is Jesus' own life an example of this principle?

- ‡ If you had been present for this conversation, would you have continued to follow Jesus after you learned more about what's involved? Why or why not?

- ‡ Christians believe that the questions raised here by Jesus are still relevant today. All who encounter him must answer them for themselves. You have now read and discussed several passages that reveal Jesus' character and purposes in the world. How will you respond to his questions: "Who do you say that I am?" and "Are you willing to follow me even though it may be costly?"