

**The Rock, the Road, and the Rabbi**  
Session 6: Jerusalem (Crucifixion and Resurrection)

Recommended Reading: Chapter 22

**Opening Discussion**

- Please share something you learned about scripture, or yourself, over the past week.
- What images, feelings, or thoughts come to mind when you think of the Golgotha?

**Old Jerusalem Map**

- A quick review of key locations that are part of tonight's story.

**Watch Video**

- What caught your attention most as you viewed the video?
- When discussing the garden tomb, the Rabbi says that the tomb is not what matters, but that it is empty. What about the empty tomb offers us hope today?

**Read Mark 15:6-24 as a group**

- Just outside of Antonia Fortress and the Roman praetorium, which stood adjacent to the Temple, were the holding pens for animals awaiting temple sacrifice. After his trial, Jesus is led from the fortress out a western gate, behind the temple courts, to Golgotha where he will be crucified. What significance might we place on the location of Golgotha in relation to the fortress, the Temple, and the Mount of Olives.
- What do you think Mark wants us to remember about Jesus when we read this part of the last hours of Jesus' life?

**Read Mark 15:25-39 as a group**

- In chapter 22 of Kathy Lee's book, David Epstein rightly points out that in Luke 23:42-24:2, Jesus not once, but repeatedly asks God to forgive those who did this too him. Mark does not tell us this, instead he focuses on the taunting by those Jesus was sent to save, the astounding revelation of the centurion (a Gentile), and the sudden tearing of the Temple curtain. What might this tell us about the part his crucifixion played in the story of salvation?

**Closing Discussion**

- Most scholars agree that the traditional locations of Jesus' trail, sojourn, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection cannot be verified. What we do know is that these events did happen and they happened in the vicinity of the Temple, the house of God. How does knowing, or not knowing, where these things happened, impact our faith in what these events make possible?

**Wrap up**

- What is one thing you are thankful for that you have received from this study of the places where Jesus lived and ministered?
- If you are going on next year's pilgrimage, what is one thing you are anxious to see for yourself? If you are unable to go, what is the one thing you wish you might see or learn more about?

## Mark 15:6-24

Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them, anyone for whom they asked. <sup>7</sup> Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection. <sup>8</sup> So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. <sup>9</sup> Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” <sup>10</sup> For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over. <sup>11</sup> But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. <sup>12</sup> Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do<sup>[a]</sup> with the man you call<sup>[b]</sup> the King of the Jews?” <sup>13</sup> They shouted back, “Crucify him!” <sup>14</sup> Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” <sup>15</sup> So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

### The Soldiers Mock Jesus

<sup>16</sup> Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace (that is, the governor’s headquarters<sup>[c]</sup>); and they called together the whole cohort. <sup>17</sup> And they clothed him in a purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him. <sup>18</sup> And they began saluting him, “Hail, King of the Jews!” <sup>19</sup> They struck his head with a reed, spat upon him, and knelt down in homage to him. <sup>20</sup> After mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

### The Crucifixion of Jesus

<sup>21</sup> They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. <sup>22</sup> Then they brought Jesus<sup>[d]</sup> to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). <sup>23</sup> And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it. <sup>24</sup> And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take.

## Mark 15:25-39

It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. <sup>26</sup> The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” <sup>27</sup> And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>29</sup> Those who passed by derided<sup>[b]</sup> him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, <sup>30</sup> save yourself, and come down from the cross!” <sup>31</sup> In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. <sup>32</sup> Let the Messiah,<sup>[c]</sup> the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

### The Death of Jesus

<sup>33</sup> When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land<sup>[d]</sup> until three in the afternoon. <sup>34</sup> At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>35</sup> When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “Listen, he is calling for Elijah.” <sup>36</sup> And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” <sup>37</sup> Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. <sup>38</sup> And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. <sup>39</sup> Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he<sup>[f]</sup> breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

# Golgotha

Various locations around Jerusalem have been suggested as the site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial. But in recent times, only two have been deemed worthy of serious consideration. The traditional site lies within the area now occupied by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (at right), in the Christian Quarter of the Old City (see map below). The huge church embraces within its walls a hill called Latin Calvary, and nearby, the traditional tomb of Christ.

The other contending location is a rocky hill—commonly called Gordon's Calvary—just north of Jerusalem's Old City (see map). It was named in honor of a British military leader, General Charles Gordon, who promoted the site in the 19th century. Near Gordon's Calvary is a quiet garden, with a rock-hewn tomb popularly called the Garden Tomb, held by some to have been the sepulcher of Jesus.

## Golgotha outside city walls

In recent decades, archaeological excavations have revealed more facts about the Jerusalem of Jesus' day—including the route of the city walls at that time. As we have seen, the Bible requires that Golgotha lie outside those walls.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is inside the walls of today's Jerusalem. Does that disqualify it as the authentic site? No. The walls that now surround the Old City are not the walls of Jesus' day. They were built in the 16th century. Excavations and literary evidence show that when Jesus was crucified, the line of the city wall ran south of the site on which the Church of the Holy Sepulchre now stands (see map).

Ancient tradition is another important consideration when evaluating alleged holy sites. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre has a longstanding tradition in its favor that can be traced back to the time of Constantine, the first Roman emperor to profess Christianity. According to tradition, Queen Helena, Constantine's mother, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in a.d. 326. The Christians living in Jerusalem at that time pointed out the location of Calvary and Jesus' tomb to Helena and her traveling companion, the historian Eusebius.

It was an unexpected place—they claimed that the holy site lay underneath Jerusalem's Temple of Venus (or Aphrodite), which had been built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian a century after Jesus' crucifixion, when pagan temples were built in the city after the Jewish revolt of a.d. 135.

Helena ordered the pagan temple demolished and removed to uncover Jesus' tomb and Calvary. The excavations revealed several ancient tombs. Evidence pointed to one in particular as the tomb of Christ. The workmen also uncovered a rocky outcrop that was identified as the hill of Calvary. A church was built adjacent to the site in a.d. 335—the forerunner of today's Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Can we trust a tradition as late as the fourth century? Though Hadrian banned all Jews from Jerusalem in a.d. 135, Christians not of Jewish ancestry could and did live in Jerusalem from Hadrian's time on. Eusebius even preserves a list of the Gentile bishops of Jerusalem. A tradition could therefore have easily been passed down through generations of Christians to Constantine's time.

Consider, too, that Jerusalem's Christians were *so certain* the tomb lay under the Venus temple that they persuaded Helena to pay for the demolition of the temple. Had they not been certain that a tomb and rocky hill lay beneath it, they would have been less likely to suggest the costly work. Their conviction must have been tied to a long and consistent tradition.

## **The place of the skull**

What of the notion that Golgotha was named because it in some way resembled a skull? The rough shape of a human skull—with eye sockets, nose and mouth—is visible in the cliff face of Gordon’s Calvary (see photo above). Scripture, however, requires no such features.

The notion that Golgotha, “The Place of the Skull” ([Matthew 27:33](#)), was named because of the appearance of the hill is a modern idea. From early Christian times, virtually all commentators held that Golgotha was so named simply because it was a place of execution, where the skulls and bones of criminals lay scattered.

Further, Gordon’s Calvary was probably part of a ridge—not a separate hill—in Jesus’ time. The features of the hill that make it look like a skull were not present in the first century. Archaeologists believe it to be a quarry or mine developed only in the past two or three centuries. In other words, its skull-like appearance is the result of modern quarrying operations.

The fact that Gordon’s Calvary was suggested only recently is, in itself, clear testimony that the hill did not resemble a skull until relatively recent times. Otherwise, it would have been suggested as an alternative candidate for Golgotha in earlier centuries. Yet no ancient or medieval tradition connects the crucifixion with the place.

## **Garden Tomb is too old**

Jesus’ tomb was a “new tomb” ([Matthew 27:60](#)). Any tomb not identifiable as a first-century tomb is out of the running. Archaeological work has shown that the ancient rock-cut tombs within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are indeed *first-century* tombs, as required by Scripture.

The Garden Tomb, by contrast, was originally hewn out centuries earlier—in the Iron Age, in the eighth or seventh century B.C., during the time of the later kings of Judah. This determination is based on the plan and characteristics of its rooms, the type of chisels used in cutting out the tomb, the artifacts excavated inside, and other factors. Thus, it does not qualify as a “new tomb” of the first century.

## **Is it important to know?**

The verdict of archaeology seems to be clear: Gordon’s Calvary and the Garden Tomb have little evidence in their favor. What of the site now occupied by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre? It seems to have the weightier claim as the actual location of Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. We cannot know with 100 percent certainty, and it is not important that we know. Salvation does not hinge on a particular location, but on the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

*Readers who would like to know more about the archaeological investigations into the Garden Tomb and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre may consult the March/April 1986 and May/June 1986 issues of Biblical Archaeology Review.*

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