



The Truth About Golgotha

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Well, another Good Friday, 2025, which marks, by the way, this year the 20th anniversary of our church here at Compass Bible Church—20 years. That may seem like a long time, but I want us to start by thinking about a church that's a lot older. If you can squint and see in that little square, you can see a little church there, maybe, and it goes all the way back to this man, Constantine the Great. And that, of course, is a very pivotal figure in the Roman Empire, who, when he converted to Christianity in 313, he legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire and gave a lot of freedoms to the church.

His mother, Helena, was converted as well, and she, with the means of her son, was able to travel to what is called often the Holy Land to see where all the things in the Bible took place. She was very interested in making sure she could secure the place that certain things in the Bible took place, particularly in the life of Jesus. And so this particular church goes all the way back to her finding what she believed to be, as all the locals told her, the place where some very important things took place in the life of Christ.

Here's the context for that little church. It's tucked there across this eastern view into the old city of Jerusalem, what's called the Christian Quarter. And the problem was, when she got there in the fourth century and started looking for these places, and all the people that were around said, "Well, here is the place where something very important happened in the life of Christ." The problem was there was a temple that was built on it from the predecessor, a few regimes back, if you will. Hadrian had built, and it was a place that he had put a temple to Venus. And one of the reasons the locals told her was because he wanted to overcast and basically usurp any claims to this being an important site for Christians, and he wanted it to be a place to worship the Roman gods. And it became that. Even as Josephus says, other historians say, this was a place that was put there for a particular reason.

Now, the place that Helena had located, according to all that she was told, seemed to match a lot of what was done just about 100 years from Christ's life, was that this was the spot that was believed to be the place where Jesus was buried and rose from the dead. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is what it's called now, and that, of course, is a word we don't encounter every day, but if you were reading Shakespearean translations of the Bible back in the 17th century, you'd encounter this particular word here in Matthew chapter 27. But if you read a modern translation—any translation today—they're going to take that word *sepulcher* and they're going to say, "Well, this is the word for tomb." This is Joseph's tomb. As John 19 says, it was in a garden, and there was a tomb there that hadn't been used, and they put Jesus in that tomb, and it talks about the stone being rolled here in this particular passage.

So this was the church of the holy tomb. It wasn't called that at the time. It was originally called the church of the resurrection, had a few other names, of course, was destroyed and rebuilt many times. But on that very spot, as all the archaeologists will say, was the place that they believed—at least the earliest recorded confirmation from the Christians all the way back to the second century—say this is the place where Jesus was raised from the dead.

Now this is an up-close look at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, or the Church of the Holy Tomb, and it's got two very important blue domes there. And if you were to take a cross-section of this church and



look at it, you'd see the biggest dome, the rotunda there, has got a building within a building. And this is the place that houses what is said to be the place where Jesus was buried and rose from the dead.

Now, this isn't what you imagined in your mind when you think about Christ rising from the dead, but in this huge rotunda, there is a shrine that has been built over this particular spot. And most archaeologists will say this is most likely the place where Jesus was buried.

What's interesting is, in this church, if you go about a hundred feet to the east, you'll find a place that's called the Rock of Golgotha. Now, it's Good Friday. We'll talk about the resurrection this weekend, but tonight we want to talk about the death of Christ. And Golgotha was the name of the place where Christ was crucified, according to the gospel writers.

Now, it's interesting that it's so close—a lot of reasons for that, the archaeologists will say and the historians will say. But this particular place here, which even most archaeologists will say was really in the apse of the church toward the center of the building. But nevertheless, if you take a tour into this place and you get ushered into it, you will learn about this place called Golgotha, and it will look a little different than what you have imagined.

If you think about where Christ died, you don't picture this, but this is what they will tour you into. If you've been to Israel with us and Jerusalem with us—we've taken many tours there at Compass—this is what we see, and most people come out of there very disappointed because nothing what they imagine. But you'll see some plexiglass that's overlaid on top of some limestone stones, and you'll hear the stories, or you'll get a pamphlet, get a reading from our tour guide that we'll talk about why this is believed to be the place where Jesus was crucified.

So whatever you imagined or saw in your Sunday school curricula, or whatever you saw in the paintings of the medieval church or whatever you saw in the Renaissance paintings, whatever you imagined in your mind, it certainly doesn't look like the shrine that you'll encounter if you're taking a tour of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. And that's just what we're used to. You don't picture that.

And so we think about the Lord dying on this Good Friday. We have to come up with some other depiction.

Now, before we ever get to the depiction of what you should think of in your mind or how we should perceive this, we've got to deal with the word Golgotha. It's a strange word, and I'm sure if you've been around the block in the Christian life a few times, you know the word Golgotha, but you should know that, as John 19 points out, this is just a transliteration of an Aramaic word. He says that—John writes to the broadest audience, certainly in the West—and he says this is the word that is an Aramaic word, and then in the rest of this verse in Matthew 15:22, it's spelled out in the language of the Greek New Testament and any other translation.

So this particular word, whenever you say the word or hear the word Golgotha, you're saying an Aramaic word.



If you go into another translation—say the translation of the church for a thousand years, which is Jerome’s translation from the Hebrew and Greek, Old Testament and New Testament, into Latin—you will encounter this particular verse, and it becomes telling, because what we learn from the Latin translation is many of our words in English come from the Latin, and this is a very familiar word when you pull out your what’s called the Vulgate, the Vulgata, which just means the common language, because when the church moved out west in Rome and the Roman Empire, so much of the writings of the early church and the theologians came to us in Latin. And so, of course, this Bible was used for about a thousand years as the primary source of quotations about Christianity.

When you open up the pages here in Mark chapter 15, and you say, “Okay, how does this read there?” We can read it just as plainly as we read it in our English Bibles because it’s just transliterated from Aramaic: Golgotha. What’s interesting is the rest of the verse, which I haven’t put on the screen in English, it is spelled out here in Latin, and it tells us about that place, and the word used there is this word: Calvary.

The word Golgotha in Aramaic is the same meaning as you have in the Latin word Calvary.

Now, I know you’re familiar with the word Calvary because it’s incessantly used, and certainly in hymnology you have it in a lot of titles of some very famous hymns, and you can read poems or see cards, all kinds of things that use the word Calvary. Now, we’re used to that, and we see that, and that’s telling, because whatever Golgotha means, that’s what the word Calvary means. But we go back even previous to the Vulgate, and you start reading the Greek New Testament—that’s also telling because we get a lot of words not only from Latin and English, we get them from the Greek into English. And so we get another layer of insight.

Now, you’ve forgotten some of the Greek letters from your sorority and fraternity days, but if you were good at it, you’d say, “Okay, well, there’s the word Golgotha.” Golgotha here on the page is going to be for the original readers of the Greek New Testament translated into Greek. And so the rest of verse 22 in Mark 15 is going to say, “Here’s what it means.”

And here’s what we find in the Greek New Testament. We find the word—at least the dictionary form of the word—is the word cranium. And the word cranium is what we find in the New Testament. So the word Golgotha in Aramaic is the same word as Calvary in Latin. It’s the same word as cranium in Greek.

And we know those words as well as we talk about craniums. Well, we don’t need all that language study, I suppose, to know what this means because we read our English Bibles and the rest of the verse simply says that the idea of Golgotha in Aramaic simply means place of a skull.

So the word skull obviously makes sense when we think about Greek because we know the word cranium. And we’ve heard the word Calvary. Most of us don’t think about what it means, but that’s what it means. That’s all that it means. Greek, Latin, English, Aramaic: when we talk about Golgotha or Calvary, we mean cranium or skull. That’s what it means, which kind of ruins a lot of these old songs for us.



At the skull, lead me to the skull. Burdens are lifted at the skull. Let me live at the skull. The skull covers it all. But if you want to know what you're singing, you ought to at least know that's what the word Calvary means.

Now you think, okay, a lot of emphasis here in hymnology, a lot of emphasis, frankly, in the Bible about the word skull, or cranium, or Calvary, or Golgotha. And so when we're thinking about the death of Christ, we should be thinking that the place is called the skull. And that should be important to us.

Now, let's go back to the place on the map because that is what it meant. There was a place called the skull. And if you look at a map where the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built, as Helena found out in her research and the money of the Roman Empire built, and churches have been built and destroyed, and earthquakes destroyed, and empires destroyed, and the Islamic overtake of Jerusalem is destroyed, and the Turks destroyed—so this church has been repeatedly rebuilt on this very site.

And you put this in the larger context of where this is in relation to the Temple Mount, it's fairly close. And the whole map, if you want to think about it in terms of our view from the initial picture, you're looking over the corner of the Temple Mount, which is now occupied by the third most holy site in all of Islam, the Dome of the Rock Shrine, and also the mosque on the corner of the Temple Mount now. You're looking over that in our picture, and you're seeing in the background there the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Church of the Holy Tomb.

Okay, when you think about that in terms of the city now, if you visit Israel with us and visit Jerusalem with us when the war dies down, we'll go back, Lord willing, you're going to say, "Well, wait a minute, I took the rampart walk or I walked on the top of the walls and I don't get it," because I've learned in my Bible from passages like Hebrews chapter 13 that he was crucified outside of the city gates. And if he suffered outside of the city gates, I clearly don't see this building outside of the gates.

Well, if anybody says, "Well, this couldn't be the place because of that," you need to remember that these walls—about 900 years old now—are the Turkish walls. Sultan Suleiman was the height of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks, they built these walls. And most of what we have even today as you walk the ramparts of that old city structure, the old walls, it's the same thing that was built 900 years ago. Well, that is true now from the 1100s, but it's certainly not what was there in the first century.

In the first century, most would agree—and even a gate has been found here called the Garden Gate, which they think is what it was, which matches perfectly with the scene from John 19—that perhaps this was at that time, in the time of Christ, outside the city gates, the garden gate. And this was a place where never had been laid a body. And this garden had a tomb in it that Joseph owned, very rich man who had his property just outside the city. He was part of the Sanhedrin and the top ruling class of the Jews. And it makes sense.

And, of course, the earliest purported place where Christ had died and rose again—this matches just fine.

Well, there is another site, and if you go to Jerusalem with us today, all the tours will take you to another place, which is outside the Turkish walls, which was outside the northern walls even at the time



of Christ. And this certainly is helpful in having us think through all the things that took place with the death of Christ.

One of the things we learn in John, as well as Matthew, is that this was by a place of people traveling. Passers-by were watching as families were walking by, shielding their children's eyes, or guys were just heading home from work—they would see this crucifixion here. And many of them jeered at him as you would see the Romans crucifying people. And you think this is the lowest of the low. And so this was certainly a well-traveled spot.

Now, it could have been that through the garden, there was a well-traveled spot. But some people that argue for this other place where Jesus died, they would say, "Well, this matches better." What is now called a Sultan Suleiman Highway, it goes there, and it would have been the same place that people would walk on the northern side of the old city walls in the first century. And so they'll say, "Well, this is the place."

Now, if you look closely at this place, if you're sitting in the first few rows, you might be able to read what that says: The Sultan Suleiman Central Station. What in the world does that mean, Central Station? Well, this is what it is. It's a bus station—a bus depot. And there are many, and the British church maintains this spot (not at the bus station), but just above and to the left of this picture, they have a place that they run and they tell you all about why they think this is the place that Jesus died.

Most archaeologists, even from the beginning of this being popularized back in the late 1800s, they don't agree with that. But nevertheless, it is interesting to hear the discussion about this.

And the reason this has become a popular place for tourists to say this might be the place that Jesus was crucified is because of this limestone wall. Even in the research and the archaeology that was done at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, there is a limestone quarry and even the topography underneath the church itself that has been excavated all the way through the modern times. There's continuing to be work there. It probably had features that look a lot like this.

Now, this particular cliff here above the Sultan Suleiman bus station is much higher, but nevertheless, one of the reasons that this was thought to be the place where Jesus died, and was popularized, by this man named Major Gordon—Major General Charles Gordon, to be specific. And he was dispatched by the British government to take care of what was going on in Egypt, but he spent time in the Holy Land. And he came to this place, and as he continued to study this, and it had already been recognized by others, he looked at it from this angle and he said, "I see that this could be a place that people would say this is the place of the skull. By George," (I'm putting these words in his mouth) "if there ever was a place of the skull, this is it. This looks like a place of the skull."

Now, ever since, by the way, if you go to Israel or go to Jerusalem, it's called Gordon's Calvary, named after Major Gordon, because he believed this was the place that Jesus died. Now, most scholars don't believe this is the place, but there are features to this that many people think perhaps was even replicated at what is now buried under the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. And that is the limestone features.



Now, one of the problems people have with this is they look at this and say, “Well, it may look like that now.” Plenty of pocks and plenty of caves in the side, but every 150 years or so—and even we see in photography now—it changes. The erosion on this, it erodes easily with the rain and all the rest. So who knows what it looked like 500 years ago, let alone 2,000 years ago.

And so people say, “Well, it may look like a skull now, but maybe it wasn’t.” That’s the kind of thing that would ebb and flow through time. And who knows, there may have been a sense of it looking like a skull.

So let’s take away the buses and the parking lot and the fences and the floodlights, and let’s just say, “Okay, well, let’s just think about whether this was at the scene of the church of the holy tomb, 500 feet away from the tomb itself, or whether this was in a place like this.” There’s certainly limestone in the backdrop. And nevertheless, we know this about what the Bible says: if you’re thinking about the place that Jesus died, you better be thinking about the skull.

Because I’ve already quoted to you Mark chapter 15, but you can also read this in Luke, you can read it in Matthew, and you can read John’s wording in John 19. All the gospel writers talk about this.

Now, if you’ve studied the gospels long enough—and you don’t have to study it for too long—to know that they’re each emphasizing different things and different aspects of Jesus’s life. And though many of them cover the same events, they’re covering it in a different way. And in that, I think we need to realize that it’s odd when all of them mention the same thing. And it just certainly creates this quadraphonic emphasis on the fact that this must be important.

And four times in four different biographies of the first century life of Christ, we have this emphasis on Jesus died at a place called the skull, without any interpretation of why that matters. We get the interpretation of the word Golgotha, but there’s nothing left to us other than to think about what could the implications be, because the connection is clearly there, and it’s one that we ought to think about.

So as we think through all of this, we should think: if we think about the death of Christ and the crucifixion between two robbers (which isn’t shown in this silhouette), but at least we should recognize, if you’re going to go there, you would be thinking at least saying in your own words, “This is the place of the skull.” Now, it’s more than just seeing it. It’s about you recognizing the importance of it. But for the sake of our discussion tonight, let’s just try to imagine that it was in the forefront of our mind because I think God’s word is trying to get us to think maybe it ought to be more in the forefront of our mind.

We’ve used the word Calvary. We haven’t thought about skull. We haven’t really thought even about the word Golgotha meaning skull. So tonight, let’s focus for just a little bit on the fact that if you’re going to think about the death of Christ on Good Friday, 2,000 years later, it’d be good for us to think about Jesus dying at a place called the skull.

The question, of course, even though it’s emphasized four times over, the question is why? Why is this the case? And all we can do is speculate. So I spent some time speculating on what does the Bible say



that would mean some kind of importance to the idea of this being named Golgotha, Calvary, the skull, cranium, if you want to speak in the Greek language.

Well, I think there are a few.

One is the most obvious, and no one can argue with me on this. It certainly, it represents a place. And if you were asking a 13-year-old boy in Jerusalem, “Hey, I need to go to the place of the skull,” it was so frequently used in the Gospels here, we recognize that most people would know exactly where it is. It could be found on a map, and the map would say, you know—at least in the verbal map, if not on a physical map—“Here’s where the place of the skull is.” And the Bible says that’s where Jesus died.

I think Carson puts it well when we think about the reality of it being a particular place in time. He writes this: the naming of Golgotha roots the crucifixion in history. The gospel is not mere symbolism or abstraction, right? It is real blood on real dirt.

And I think in our day, that’s probably more important than it’s ever been in Christianity, except maybe in the period of the Gnostics. We have a new Gnosticism going on in our day, but it’s good for us to stop and say our religion, our trust in Jesus Christ, is about a real person in time and space living a life in real time in the first century on the other side of the planet in the Middle East, and he dies at a place that can be located on the coordinates on a map. It’s real. It happened in history. And we’re trusting the events that unfolded and what God did in those events in real history.

We’re not arguing, as people like to think, in discussing religion—we’re not arguing things that are just mere abstractions or allegories or principles or theories or ways to live or philosophies of life. Oh, it may trickle down into how to live your life, but we’re really talking about our trust in a person who put on flesh, dwelt among us, and died in a real place in space and time on a map. And that’s very important for us to stop and say the historicity of this all is important.

So without argument and without much elucidation on it, let’s at least just say, let’s all start with that. Certainly, having a place that’s described four times over in the Bible clearly reminds me this is a historic event. It happens in real history.

Number two, which is probably the first thing that popped into your mind, if I ask why is the place that Jesus died called the skull, well, it certainly reminds us of our problem. It goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. In Genesis chapter 3, God said, “Hey, Adam and Eve, you can eat of any of these trees you want, except for that one. That particular tree you can’t eat from—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—because the day you eat of it, you will surely die.”

And instantly we have, in a place full of life, created by the living God, a couple of people that are going to reach out, transgress God’s rules, and be subject now to death.

Now, the interesting thing about biological death, which reminds us of a cranium, right—skulls usually make us think about dying and death—you think to yourself, well, it was, if you know your Bible, at least 950 years after their transgression that they physically died and their bodies turned into skeletons, right? That’s 950 years later. So what’s this about “the day you eat of it, you’ll surely die”?



Well, clearly it did mean that they would physically die if they transgress the law of God, because the wages of sin is death. But we learn immediately in the garden that they're hiding themselves from God because they're ashamed of the sin and the rebellion that they've just done in a very simple act of disobeying God. They realized that they were sinners. It broke their fellowship with God.

Just like their spirit is going to break loose from their bodies and their bodies are going to die, their connection with God, their relationship, had just died with God. And God had to do things to show that he was willing to restore that relationship. But it couldn't be restored until this event at Golgotha, at the place of the skull.

And we are reminded that the problem that we have as human beings, as is said so well here by Origen, is really about the death of Christ dying for us. And the reality of what he dies for is the problem that started in Genesis 3.

Now, this little quote that I'm about to read will take you to one of the earliest reminders of the people trying to research the place of where Jesus died that people had said. Now, this is Origen. He's in the second and third century after Christ. He's now talking about a tradition he had heard of. And many people had said the legend of it all, even though this is way long time ago, before the flood of Noah, that this was the place that was actually the place where Adam had died and Adam was buried.

Note this quote. Origen says, middle of the third century: "I have received a tradition to the effect that the body of Adam, the first man, was buried upon the spot where Christ was crucified. So that as in Adam all die, both Adam and Christ should die in the same spot at the very place that is called the skull." And he goes on to talk about, well, Christ died on a place where Adam's skull was ultimately buried.

Now, that was the legend, or as Origen puts it, the tradition. But you can look through the early church fathers, and he's not the only one in the second, third, and fourth centuries that talked about knowing that people had said in the area it's called the place of the skull because Adam was buried there.

Now, there's no way to verify that, and who knows, but that's what people were saying. And even if it was the legend that was believed that here is the place that we commemorate the death of Adam—that is where Christ died—it reminds us that the problem of sin is death. You know that verse from childhood: the wages of sin is death.

And the wages of Adam and Eve's sin was not only their death, but according to Romans chapter 5, they brought death into all of humanity. And people have been dying ever since.

And what we need to remember is not just the physical death we should worry about in this life, it's the thing the Bible calls the second death. And that's the real problem. In this world, we can all live enjoying a lot of God's gifts and blessings, but one day the Bible says, if you don't get made right with God through the death of Christ, your death is going to be met with something called the second death, where God takes all of his blessings away. You'll have to live in a place that is away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power.



And that problem is the real problem that none of us want to face. And the skull certainly reminds us that the wages of sin is death. And it should remind us of that. That's the problem.

And we should say, what was our problem? Our problem is death. Our problem is fatal. Our problem is one that should make us think, not only am I going to die, but as Hamlet mused, I'm worried about what comes after this life. I'm going to meet my Maker as a sinner, and it's going to be even worse because he's going to cast us out of his presence.

And when we're away from his presence, we're also away from the glory of his power. That is, all of his gifts, all of his blessing, all the sustaining work of the God who made us and sustains us.

The place is historic. No one would argue with that.

The problem, I think, is clearly depicted—that we are people that are subject to death because of our sin.

But what it cost him there is, I think, what most people, they'd say, wow, that is the biggest travesty of all, that the righteous would die for the unrighteous.

To continue to quote Romans chapter 5, the amazing thing, the extent of God's love: this is love, that Christ would die for us even though we are sinners. To have him die for the enemies—because we continue in our sin as we meet the gospel—we recognize this is an amazing thing that the righteous one would die for the unrighteous.

This picture might help us get the idea of how horrific this all is. Back in the book of Numbers, you might remember as Moses leads the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, God's going to lead them into the promised land and they start complaining. But it's more than complaining. It's really blaspheming God's whole plan. And they start rebelling against God and they start rebelling against Moses.

And God says, "I'm done with all this. And I'm done with these people complaining." And he takes these complainers and he sends snakes into their camp and they start to get bit. And then a weird thing takes place, and I've depicted that here on Good Fridays in years past. Moses is instructed by God to get a pole and to put a snake on it, bronze it, and hold it up before the people. And if they want to be healed from the venom of the snake bites that they're being bitten by—they swell up and sweat and they have fever—he says, "You look at the snake on the pole."

Now, I'm not making this comparison. Jesus made this comparison. He says, just as Moses lifted up that serpent in the wilderness, he said, so I'm going to be lifted up, right? And people are going to see me and I'm going to draw people to myself.

It's a weird comparison, but it's a comparison that should make us think. The idea of death is that the innocent one is dying. The whole point of the sacrificial system is bringing the blemishless lamb, the one without defect, and having that lamb substitute for us who are feeling guilty and sinful.



And here's John the Baptist meeting Jesus on the baptismal shores of the Sea of Galilee—or I'm sorry, the Jordan River—and he says, "Here's the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Here is the one who's done nothing wrong. There's no deceit in his mouth. He's never lied to his mom. He never did anything wrong. And he is being killed on a cross.

Now, when you look at Jesus dying on the cross, having been beaten by the Romans, having a crown of thorns around his head, having his back lacerated, hanging there naked on a cross by a highway, a footpath where people are walking and jeering at him, you think to yourself, who is this that he should die this way?

As a matter of fact, if you as a sinner look upon Christ on a cross, if you understand your problem of sin, you might look at that and say, "Well, that's what I deserve. I deserve that."

Now, picture you being bitten by a snake. The last thing you want to look at raised up on a pole is a picture of a snake. But that's precisely what God does as Moses is lifting up the problem and saying, "Look at the problem. Look at this thing causing you such pain. Look at the wages of your rebellion and your complaining. The wages of sin is death. Look at it."

So now it's not just that we are dying, and we look at the cross and say it's called the place of the skull because we have a problem of death. But now the perfect one, the author of life, is now dying, which is an oxymoronic thing to even think of. How can the one who gives life, who is life himself, who has life in himself (is the Gospel of John)—how can he die? How can God die?

And here is the one who, in the fullness of deity, dwells in bodily form—and he's dying on a cross? We're looking at the cross and saying, here is the problem of sin.

So many people through church history have made much of this. Here's Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth century. He says, "Now Golgotha is interpreted the place of the skull." And look at this poetic, sermonic gold here. He says, "Who were they then who prophetically named this spot Golgotha, in which Christ, the true head, had endured the cross?"

The apostles call him the image of the invisible God. And a little after that, the head of the body, the church. And after that, the head of every man is Christ. He's quoting Colossians, and he's quoting Ephesians, and he's quoting 1 Corinthians 11. And he is head over all things, over all principalities and powers.

The head suffered at the place of the skull.

The ultimate head who has all glory and should be glorified is now—wrapped around his forehead—is a crown of thorns as blood is streaming down his face after being beaten and swollen by Roman fists. And here is the perfect one being treated as a criminal, being treated as one who deserves the wrath of God.



And then he breaks out with this: “Oh, wondrous prophetic appellation,” appellation being the name. Man, how bizarre that this place where Christ would die, the head of all things, is dying at a place called the skull. His head that should be glorified and honored is indignant. It’s ignoble. It’s despised. It’s one, as it says in the Old Testament prophets, from whom men hide their faces, beaten and marred more than any man, to quote Isaiah.

This is a horrific scene of the perfect one, the head of all things, dying at the place of a skull. It’s an unimaginable price. It’s a price that makes no sense. No greater love is anyone that he would lay down his life for his friends. For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son.

To see Christ die, who deserves only life and honor and glory, right, is the most unimaginable price to be paid to save sinners like us.

Well, the real aspect of what we come to celebrate—and why we can put the adjective *good* in front of Friday where Christ was crucified, a horrific death at a place called the skull—is because there’s a benefit to us.

And that benefit to us might take our minds back to Genesis chapter 22 when God had told Abraham to do something that seems just unthinkable. I mean, God had always said there’s no place for human sacrifice, right? There’s no time that you should take your kids in Canaan and follow their examples and toss your kid into the fire for the god Moloch. That makes no sense. It does nothing, right? God doesn’t want your human sacrifice.

And yet here he is in Genesis 22 saying, “Hey, Abraham, take your son, your only son, the son of the promise, by the way—son of the covenant. Take your son whom you love and go to the place that I will show you.” And if you study biblical geography, he’s taking them to a place that’s very near, if not exactly where Christ is going to be crucified centuries later—4,000 years ago, right, 2,000 years before Christ.

And he says, “Take your son there and build an altar and sacrifice him on that altar.” And you know that story, which doesn’t make much sense unless you start thinking about the fact that the thing that saves us is a human sacrifice of the perfect one, the Son of God. And here is a picture of it.

And Abraham was just so filled with faith, Romans 4 says, that he trusts him and he does what he says. From the beginning, he’s going to obey God. And Hebrews 11 says he so trusted God, even though he was the child of the promise and this command made no sense, he thought, “Well, maybe God will raise him from the dead.”

And he goes and he does this. But as he’s lifting up that knife to kill his own son—he was probably 12, 13 years old—the angel stops him and says, “Look, look at the ram caught in the bush.” And he says, “Go over there, take that ram and sacrifice that on the altar.”

Now, that’s an amazing thing because here is this boy who is about to be killed, who gets to return and walk shoulder to shoulder back to his tent with Abraham, and the ram gets to die in the place of the son.



That substitution is the price: life for Isaac for the death of an animal, which goes all the way into the Levitical sacrificial system. “Put your hand on the head of the lamb,” Leviticus chapter 1, verse 4, “and that lamb will be accepted for you.” And you get to go home feeling forgiven. The lamb becomes food for the Levites. It dies, you live.

That’s the substitution that was depicted 2,000 years before Christ, 4,000 years ago from our perspective, where here you had someone who gets to gain their life because someone—in this case, something, an animal—died in the place of Isaac.

F.F. Bruce puts it well: Christ was led to be crucified to the place of a skull. The death he died was a bloody one. And we may see him, the slaughtered lamb at Golgotha, bearing the sin of the world. The sin that we deserved, right? The punishment for—he has taken that sin upon himself.

To put it in the words of 2 Corinthians 5, God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. So he takes the place of the sinner and we get to go free.

As Matthew Henry so well put it, by his sufferings in death, Christ destroyed him that had the power of death—that is, the devil. And it was the bruising of Christ’s heel. It sure was that he was crucified and slain. But in the very act of that, he gave a fatal blow to Satan’s kingdom, a wound to the head of this serpent that cannot be healed.

Back to Genesis chapter 3: the crushing of the head of the enemy who held the power of death, who was the tempter that led people into sin that caused their death penalty. And all of a sudden now, Christ comes and says, “Your prize is you don’t have to die. You don’t have to incur this death.”

Therefore, this whole problem of you looking at the cross and remembering death—at least your death has been taken care of in that exchange. And why? Because it was the righteous for the unrighteous. It was the sinner getting his sin forgiven by the perfect one.

J.C. Ryle, two generations ago, said it’s no small thing that the name of the place where Jesus died should be repeatedly recorded. And it was in all four Gospels. Calvary, the place of the skull, becomes the mount of victory. There, death was swallowed up in death. There, Satan was openly defeated. Puritans love that phrase: the death of death. The death of death in the death of Christ.

And here, because Christ suffers and dies, we all of a sudden now can look to our own death, as it says in Hebrews, and no longer be enslaved to fear. We should be able to say, you know what, we are forgiven, and because of our forgiveness, we don’t fear what Hamlet feared, and looking at the other side of the threshold of this life, thinking, what is God going to do to me, a sinner?

Because we know our sin is completely absolved. It is all completely forgiven, and we are fully accepted. This is more than just getting out of jail and going about our business. This is us returning—it’s called reconciliation—to our Maker and being brought in, as Luke 15 depicts in that great parable, having the father say to us, now you’re my child. You were lost, now you’re found. Put a ring on him,



put a robe on him, right? Put sandals on his feet. Let's kill the fattened calf. Let's celebrate. Let's have a party because now the family has been rejoined.

This is a picture of us being fully accepted because we're fully forgiven. We're fully exonerated. All of the sin that I've committed, all the sin that you've committed, as we trust in Christ and we cry out, "Have mercy on me, a sinner," here God is saying, now you're part of the family. You will never bear the sin. There's no condemnation for you now in Christ because what happened on the cross.

To live is Christ. To die, right, is gain. And all of a sudden, now I can look forward to the fact that when I'm done with this life, not only will I not have the second death, but I'll step into something that is qualitatively and quantitatively eternal: eternal life.

This is a great, great line. D.A. Carson, again: the name Golgotha served not only to identify a location, but also to underline the grim reality of what took place. Yet, in this place of the skull, the Son of God turned the valley of death into the gateway of life.

And that's a good way to put it. What was the prize? That I can look at my death and see life on the other side. A life not just of consciousness away from the presence of God, but into the kingdom where he says, "Enter into the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

This is an amazing thing. You may not think about the cross of Christ in relation to a skull, but you ought to.

As a matter of fact, look at these works of art. I think you should look back at these art pieces that you've looked at so many times, and maybe think to yourself, I haven't seen it, but it's been there in so many famous paintings. You see the cross, there's a skull. Think that through. I mean, as odd as it is to think about a skull in relation to the cross, I could go on all night with these pictures, by the way. It's always there. I mean, not in every painting, but so many from so many genres and so many periods. Whenever there was a picture here of the cross, thoughtful painters and leaders who were commissioning these paintings said, "Oh, don't forget the skull," because when it comes to Christ's death, it's the place of the skull.

That certainly reminds us of a legitimate place, but it also reminds us, right, of our problem. It also reminds us of the price of Christ to die in our place, but most importantly, it's a Good Friday because it reminds us that death has been conquered, that my death is no longer something to fear, that Christ has completed for us, right, our complete forgiveness. And he says on Good Friday, "It is finished."

Yeshua's going to come down and they are going to bring the elements of the Lord's Supper. And you may not think of it often, but if you think now of the cross of Christ, I want you to remember the skull. So many people wanted to remind you that if you're going to think of the cross, you better think of Calvary. You better think of Golgotha. You better think of the cranium.

And if you're a Christian, I want you to take these elements if you know your trust is in Christ, and I want these elements to remind you of the place of the skull and that it paid for you the eternal punishment that is completely gone because of your trust in Christ.



I have an old hymnal that records in my library 200-year-old songs. And one of the first hymns that ever popped off the page when I opened up this old dusty book that's falling apart was this old hymn, "Go to Golgotha."

And as you, in your own heart, think about what happened on the cross, and you spend a little time right now confessing any unconfessed sin, I'd love for you just to put your eyes up on the screen and use these words to guide your thinking as you contemplate these elements in your hand. And then in about three minutes, I'll come back up and we'll take these elements at the same time.

If you're not a Christian, just let those elements pass. Matter of fact, it'd be better if you put your trust in Christ now and call out to the Lord and say, "I'm a sinner, have mercy on me." It's called repentance and faith. It's a penitent faith saying, "God, save me." And God says it's totally doable because it was all paid in full at the place of the skull.

Use these words to worship. Spend some time in your own heart, searching your heart, and then let's take these elements together in a few minutes.

I certainly hope you'll never read the word Calvary or Golgotha without thinking about what it really means, and then kind of imagining with me and other theologians and pastors of church history thinking, why—making some connections. And certainly it reminds us, ultimately, I hope, of the prize that we don't fear the things that Christ took care of for us.

We should not be anxious people. We should not be worried. We should not be afraid of this threshold that enslaves so many people. For us to live is Christ, to die is gain—be much better to enter into eternal life.

But we stay on and we remain on in the flesh, as the Apostle Paul says, for the good work of telling other people about this. And we don't abandon all the implications of the skull in the centerpiece of our theology, which is what's called a penal substitutionary atonement.

Penal, that is, it's legal. It's forensic. It's a declaration, an imputation from God. It's a substitute. Christ dies for us, and we get his righteousness imputed to us. And it's an atonement. It deals with our sin. This substitutionary atonement, this legal substitutionary atonement, is so important. And so many 21st century pastors and theologians are done with it. They don't buy it.

Well, I hope you proudly stand firm on what Scripture has taught us, even down to the implications of where Jesus died, stating that we know and believe that Jesus died in our place and took the penalty for us. And because of that, and him saying "It is finished," and the thing that we'll celebrate tomorrow and Sunday, the resurrection of Christ, we can have assurance that our salvation is secure.

So I hope you think about the place where Jesus died and it becomes a bit more rich because you've spent time together as a church tonight.



And if your trust is in Christ and you have these elements before you, I invite you to eat this bread and drink this cup in remembrance of him.

Pray with me.

God, please just drive this, as Ecclesiastes says, as well-driven nails into our minds to remind us of the profound work that took place 2,000 years ago in time and space at a real place called the Skull, Golgotha, where your Son died for our sin problem and brought us the result of exoneration, forgiveness, acceptance—what you call repeatedly life.

The author of life could not be snuffed out at the cross, but instead, what you did there for us has provided for us assurance and hope and anchor for our soul. Gives us confidence and courage to face whatever comes. Give us that in large measure in this season, in this time, in this place—the 21st century in the Western world. Give us courage to stand up against the chaos and folly of this culture.

God, we pray for the church to be strengthened, for it to grow, multiply our tribe here and all the other churches all throughout this county and around this country that are preaching the word of God and relying on the work of the cross. God, we pray for success in our mission to make disciples.

Thanks for our time together tonight. Thank you so much for this profound truth. In Jesus' name, amen.