

Jesus in the Center

by David Guzik

David Guzik's sermon emphasizes the significance of Jesus being crucified in the center, highlighting His connection with common and sinful men and the message of salvation.

Duration: 33:38

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, Matthew 21:12-13, Matthew 23:39, Luke 23:42-43, John 19:16-18

Topics: "Faith In Jesus", "Salvation Through Christ"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of faith in Jesus and trusting in Him for salvation. He highlights the brief yet brilliant faith of the thief on the cross who asked Jesus to remember him. The speaker also discusses Jesus' role as the mediator between the saved and the perishing, reaching out to both and offering salvation. The sermon concludes by mentioning Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, where he fulfilled his destiny and settled his fate by being crucified for the sins of the world.

Transcript

We're going to be examining this morning the Gospel of John, chapter 19, verses 16, 17, and 18. Let's take a look here. John 19, verse 16.

So he delivered him to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led him away. And he, bearing his cross, went out to a place called the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha, where they crucified him and two others with him.

One on either side and Jesus in the center. I feel sort of humbled before our text this morning. It's presenting something before us that's so big, so majestic, so unfathomable that nobody can really fully explain it.

Or figure it out. So we'll do the best we can with it this morning and kind of get a running start. What we read of in John, chapter 19, verses 16 through 18 had a much earlier beginning, of course.

It began before the worlds were created. It was in the heart of God. To send the Son of God to be the Lamb of God and to take away the sins of the world.

But even in Jesus' own ministry, it's been building towards this climax, especially in the final week of Jesus' ministry. Today's the day that we celebrate as Palm Sunday. And on that day, the Sunday before Jesus was crucified, he was welcomed in to Jerusalem as a conquering hero.

He knew that he had to go to Jerusalem and fulfill his destiny and settle his fate as it were there. And so he set his face, as the Bible says, like flint towards Jerusalem. Nothing would deter him.

No temptation from Satan, no weakness of the flesh, no bad advice from one of his disciples, no opposition from the religious leaders. Nothing would deter Jesus from going to Jerusalem and fulfilling what's going to be fulfilled in these verses. And as he entered into Jerusalem on that day, he was welcomed.

A conquering hero. A political Messiah. It was like a political campaign rally.

Jesus for King. Jesus for Messiah. Welcomed in by excited throngs, crying out, Hosanna! Save now! But the salvation they had in mind wasn't a spiritual salvation from their sins.

It was a political salvation. It was a national salvation. And that's what they wanted.

That's what they were crying out for. And Jesus walked in in the midst of all that acclaim, but he never let it go to his head. Matter of fact, a few hours after he rode into Jerusalem in such triumph and in such glory, he stood above the city on a hill overlooking it and he cried out, Jerusalem, Jerusalem.

That which stones the prophets and rejects those who are sent to them. How many times that I've longed to gather you under my wings. As a hen gathers and protects the chicks, but you would not have it.

And then he said, you will not see me again until you say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. So through that week, Jesus had confrontation after confrontation with the religious leaders, with the people at the temple. He went back to the temple and saw the money changers and the merchants there, not just selling things in the house of God, but making it like a bazaar, like a swap meet.

Ripping people off, extorting money from them in the name of God. Jesus would have none of anyone. He turned over the tables of the temple and he drove out the money changers.

The people loved it. They knew they were being ripped off. Yeah, yeah, Jesus.

But Jesus didn't take it. They already knew that the same crowds that were loving him and praising him on that day would be calling for him to be crucified just a few days later. Jesus had confrontation after confrontation with the religious leaders, with the scribes and the Pharisees who opposed him.

And he answered all of their questions expertly, brilliantly. In the few final days, he set himself aside to have some precious time with his disciples. That evening of the Last Supper, he poured his heart into them in a way that he had never done before.

If you read those chapters of John, John chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16, it's the most glorious discourse that Jesus had with his disciples. But at that time of the Last Supper, he also saw one of them go away. Judas left the Last Supper to go and speak to the political and religious authorities, to gather a band of soldiers and to lead those soldiers back to the Garden of Gethsemane where Judas knew Jesus would be.

And so Jesus could be identified among his disciples. Judas told the soldiers, I'll identify him. I'll go up to him and the one that I greet with a kiss, that's the one.

And so he went and Judas came and he gave Jesus this embrace of friendship, this embrace of love. I love you, brother. And he kissed Jesus, giving that warm, affectionate greeting.

And Jesus looked at Judas and said, Judas, do you betray me with a kiss? And he did. And Jesus was taken away by the soldiers and put on trial from political authority to religious authority, back to political authority, back to another political authority, each time being interrogated and mocked and beaten along the way, afflicted with everything that a person could be afflicted with and humiliated with, until finally Pilate, trying to persuade the mobs to let Jesus go, the mob would have none of it. Pilate gave the mob over to Israel.

After all, he was a political authority and he couldn't have a riot on his hands. So he gave them over to be crucified and that's where he picked it up in verse 16. So he delivered him to them to be crucified.

So they took Jesus and led him away. Now, when they led him away from the place where he was on trial before Pilate, to the place where he would be crucified, you might think they'd take the most direct route, but they didn't. You see, when they crucified somebody, the Romans didn't see it as just a way to execute somebody, just a way to end the life of a criminal.

The Romans looked at crucifixion as an event, as a message. And so obviously, the first thing he did, he did a little bit of advertising. And so the procession from the place of trial to the place of crucifixion was a winding, meandering route that would go all over the place while the Roman centurion rode on horseback in front of the procession, calling out the crime of the accused, or the condemned, should I say.

Everybody would know, this guy's going to die a torturous, humiliating death because he messed around with Rome. Get the message. So they would finally lead them through until they came to the place of crucifixion.

And all the while, Jesus was carrying the cross. Now, please, friends, I should correct any misunderstanding you might have in your mind. It's very picturesque for us to think of Jesus carrying the entire cross, you know, the horizontal beam and the vertical beam.

It's just picturesque. It's the only way we can imagine it. But that's not how it happened.

You see, when they carried the cross in the ancient world, all they carried was the horizontal beam. The vertical beam stayed in place at the place of crucifixion. And so what they would do is they would go and they would simply, you know, leave the vertical beam there.

Jesus carried the horizontal beam, staggering under the load, even having to have another man carry it for him until he finally came to the place of crucifixion, where they nailed him to the cross, as it says there in verse 18, verse 17. And he, bearing his cross, went out to a place called the place of the skull, which is in Hebrew Golgotha. Now, again, I know how we have this picture in our mind.

We see a picturesque hill with the sun setting behind it. And on top of that hill, there's three crosses. There's a tall one in the middle, surrounded by two other tall ones, but yet they're shorter than the one in the middle.

I don't think so. First of all, it's very unlikely that Jesus was crucified on top of a hill, but at the base of a hill. They crucified people along major roads, major highways.

It was like a billboard saying, don't mess around with Rome. This is what will happen to you. There's Jesus along the roadside at the base of a hill.

And the other misconception that we often have is that the crosses were somehow high. That's what we think of when you see a crucifix today. The picture is a painting.

You know, the picture is that, you know, it's somehow noble. The cross is almost reached to the sky. They're high, they're elevated.

Friends, in that day, crosses were pretty much, well, the crucified person was pretty much at eye level. Eye level. I know in one passage of the scriptures, it says that they gave Jesus some refreshment on a sponge that was on a stick that they gave him.

I don't think that is because Jesus was so far elevated. I would think because nobody wanted to get near a person who was crucified. It was just, if I might, I don't know a better term.

It was just so icky. It was so gross. The whole spectacle of crucifixion, he didn't want to get near it.

And that was the purpose for the sponge on a stick. But a person who's being crucified, their feet might only be a foot off the ground. What did it matter? Why lift them up so high? It's a waste of wood.

Jesus was at eye level with the people who were surrounding him. And he was at the same level as the thieves behind him. I know it's picturesque to think of his cross elevated among the three.

That's not how it was. And if you look at verse 18, it says, We do know with certainty that Jesus was crucified among other people. Now, we're not just talking about the passer by.

We're not just talking about the religious authorities who came to mock him. And we're not just talking about the few devoted disciples among the women that he had who were there at his time of crucifixion. What we're talking about is that Jesus was there among others in his crucifixion in the center between two other criminals, one on the right hand, one on the left.

I have to say that I've been struck by those five words at the end of verse 18. And Jesus in the center. Obviously, John meant it was that he was in between two criminals.

There was a cross on the right hand, a cross on the left. But I think the Holy Spirit let that phrase stick out in Jesus in the center, because in fact, at his crucifixion, Jesus is in the center of so many things. First of all, he was centered among common men.

Think of a great man on his deathbed, some great political or social leader, someone who's been famous and influential, a man of power and prestige. There he is on his deathbed. And who's visiting him on his deathbed? Common folks? No.

The famous, the high, the influential. They want to come. That's who that man wants to be surrounded with in his death.

Not Jesus. Even in his death, he's surrounded by common people. Where's Pilate? Is he out at the crucifixion scene? Not on your life? Oh, sure.

There's some religious leaders there. But are they there to kind of be a part of the scene in any good sense? No. They're there to add to Jesus's agony.

Religious leaders, political leaders, his own disciples, they all forsake him. Where was Jesus? In the midst of common men. That's how much Jesus loves everybody.

That's how much Jesus... Well, if Jesus were here with us today, not spiritually, as he is here, and I don't mean spiritually in a fairy tale kind of way. Jesus is here. He said, wherever two or more are gathered in my name, there I will be in the midst.

But if Jesus were here physically, as he was when he walked this earth, you'd notice nothing particularly remarkable about him. You wouldn't say, wow, what's that guy with the big shining halo behind his head? He didn't have one of those, my friends. He wouldn't even have that look that we think Christians oftentimes are supposed to have.

You know, you meet someone, you know, I bet they're a Christian. Just look at them. Wow, just they got that look.

And you don't know, they might have just had a hot fudge sundae or something. And that may be why they have that pleasant look on their face. You don't know.

If Jesus were here as he walked this earth, there'd be nothing particularly remarkable about his appearance. He was a common man. And even in his death, he chose to remain among common men.

But he wasn't just centered among common men. Jesus was centered among sinful men. You could pick common folks to be around you in your death, but wouldn't you pick some good folks? I mean, the salt of the earth kind of people.

But look at who's on the right hand of Jesus and on his left. Not just common people, but particularly sinful people. Now, on the one hand, we see this and we're not surprised at all, because Jesus was the friend of sinners all throughout his ministry.

He associated with the sinners, not with the righteously religious. Now, in his death, the righteously religious mock him. The righteously religious come close to the cross and spit in his face.

Even his own disciples have escaped. Where's Peter? Where's James? Where's Andrew? Where are they? Right there. We're behind you, Jesus.

Hang in there. God will do something great. We're so sorry this has happened to you.

We don't understand it, but we'll trust God. We'll pray for you, Jesus. Where are they? They're hiding.

They're afraid. They're thinking, oh, this is bad that it happened to Jesus, but it might be me next. And so they're hiding.

And so who did Jesus choose to have company with on his death? Two notorious criminals. You might say, wait a minute. He didn't choose to have company with them.

Oh, yes, he did. Because we take it as established truth that Jesus was not the victim of these circumstances. That he is the omnipotent Lord, had the power to change anything at this scene at his own will.

That Jesus could have very well chosen to be crucified alone there, to be the only one crucified on that day. What? Do you think it would have been hard for Jesus to pray a prayer when he knew, Father, let me be the only one crucified on that day? Do you think that the Father in heaven would not have answered that prayer? Jesus chose to be in the company of sinful men. And I can just see the religious leaders, the political leaders.

They're around there. They're looking at Jesus and they're saying, oh, this is great. We love this.

This makes his suffering worse. He's in the company of sinful men. Think of the humiliation.

Yeah, that's the word that will go around Jerusalem tomorrow. Did you hear about the three criminals who were crucified? And now Jesus would just be lumped in with them. Look, he's surrounded by these filthy, terrible people.

They had thought that it would add to his agony. But you know what Jesus said? He looked at his right hand. He looked at his left.

He goes, it feels like home to me. I'm in the company of sinners. If you feel like you're a sinner, you're not far from Jesus.

He was centered among common men. He was centered among sinful men. We also know that he was centered among believing and rejecting.

You know the story from the Gospel of Luke, don't you? The two thieves on either side of Jesus, they started out each reviling Jesus, mocking him, adding to his insult and his agony. Then one of them stopped and one of them said, what are we doing? And he even criticized the other thief on the other side, yelling over the top of Jesus. Now, I'm not trying to imply that these fellows were far apart.

Their hands may have been almost touching. But he calls out with whatever weak, gasping breath he has because he's in the midst of the agonies of crucifixion. And he says, why are we saying this about this man? We deserve this, but he's done nothing wrong.

And then he turned to Jesus and he said to Jesus again in the halting, agonized speaking of a man who's being crucified. He said, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. That's a word of faith, isn't it? Isn't that a glorious word of faith? Oh, Lord, remember me when you come in your kingdom.

So on one side of Jesus is faith. On the other side of Jesus is unbelief. It's mocking, it's reviling, it's rejecting.

But I want you to see where is Jesus in the midst of this? He's in the center. He's right in between the two. We almost thought that Jesus would rather be as far away from the unbeliever as he could be.

Oh, you're bad. I don't want to be around you. I'm just going to be with my friend, the believer, not Jesus.

He's the friend of sinners. And if you see, he reaches out one hand to the believer. And as it were, he wraps his arm of love around that believer and holds him and cherishes him.

But with the other hand, it's still reaching out to the unbeliever and saying, I love you. Come unto me. Come unto me.

I will stand between us. I will stand between the believer and the unbeliever. I will say, come, believe in me.

Come unto me. All ye who labor and are heavy laden, I'll give you rest. He's centered there between believing and rejecting.

Jesus was centered among common men. He was centered among sinful men. He was centered between believing and rejecting.

But he was also centered between saved and perishing. Remember the response that Jesus gave to the thief who said, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus said, today, you'll be with me in paradise.

Oh, that's a glorious word of salvation. Isn't it remarkable? That man was saved. And we might say, well, wait a minute.

It's how could he be saved? That's not fair. He lived his whole life as a bad criminal. And there he is getting what he deserved.

He deserved to die. He deserved to be executed. He admitted it himself.

And what now? In his dying breath, he says, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And he gets to be saved. He gets to go to heaven with Jesus.

Yes, that's exactly what we're saying, because it's exactly what Jesus said. Well, that's not fair. You know, I've served in the Lord my whole life.

I guess when we get to heaven, we're going to see that thief on the cross and say, well, you know, we'll see him way at the back in heaven, right? He'll get the back row seat. Whoever's furthest back, it'll be that thief on the cross, right? Not on your life. You want to find that thief on the cross when you're around the throne of God? Look up front.

You know why? Listen, I will agree that he had a brief time as a Christian, a brief time as a believer. But though it was brief, it shined with the brilliance that I think eclipses anything I've ever done in my life. Look, it's one thing for you and I. Well, we believe in Jesus.

We trust in Jesus. One of us have trusted Jesus from a cross, from being crucified. That's faith.

That's glorifying God. So his faith was brief, but it was brilliant. Lord, remember me when you come and you came.

Jesus said, you've got it today. You'll be with me in paradise. And so Jesus, when he comes, when he ascends to his father, who's with him right there? I brought someone with me, Dad.

Here he is. And Jesus is there in the center between saved and perishing. Again, please remember, we might think, well, he just wants to hang out with the saved man.

No, he said, I'm going to stand in the center. I'm going to embrace this believer. I'm going to make sure he comes home to glory.

But I'm going to reach out to the one who's perishing. I say, come, come. It's not too late.

While you still have breath, you can come. But Jesus is there. He's the watershed.

If you're on one side of Jesus, you'll perish. But if you're on the other side, you'll live for eternity. He's the watershed.

He's the dividing line. How glorious it was that one of them was saved. Again, I think of the religious leaders.

You know, they were kind of ecstatic that Jesus is hanging on the cross surrounded by two criminals. They go, good, this adds to his agony. It adds to his humiliation.

It adds to the debasing spectacle of the cross. This is good, they're thinking. They intended to increase the shame of the cross.

Do you understand? They only increased its glory. I don't even know if I can say this. But let me venture forth to say that if Jesus had a happy moment on the cross, if a smile ever crossed his face while he hung on the cross, it was when that thief said, Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And when Jesus could say back to that man, today you'll be with me in paradise. He could say, thank you, Father. Even here, you're saving sinners.

Even here, you're encouraging me. It cheered Jesus on the cross to welcome this man into salvation. It showed him and it confirmed in his heart that the glorious, redeeming power that was being worked right then.

And so what his enemies had intended to increase the shame of the cross, God used it to increase the glory of the cross. That Jesus could come to heaven's doors with a saved sinner tagging along with him. He was centered among common men, centered among sinful men, centered between believing and rejecting, centered between saved and perishing.

He was also centered between God and man. Paul said it, didn't he? There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. That's it.

He's in the center right there between God and man. And even though Jesus was in the center among two thieves, he was also in the center between God and man. And as he there was in the center between God and man, he made himself the center of God's righteous wrath upon sinners.

If there's any message we need to take away from the cross, it's that we deserve to be where Jesus was. And there's Jesus made the righteous target of the wrath of God. He put himself in a place as if he deserved it.

But he didn't. But he put himself in that place. It was a righteous, loving, godly thing to do.

The punishment you and I deserve for our sins. Jesus said, I will take it. At some point in a mystical transaction, there you can see the wrath of God.

I know this sounds almost silly to put it this way, but think of it like a bullet or a ray gun that God holds in his hand and he shoots it and out shoots a beam of his wrath and it's pointed right at you and it's his wrath. And you righteously deserve it. And I righteously deserve it.

And that beam will come and it will destroy us. And there it is. The beam's on its way.

It's coming. And Jesus says, I'll stand in the center. I'm going to stand in the center between God and man and I'll take it.

And he stands in the center and the beam hits him. But that beam, which would destroy us, didn't destroy Jesus. He bore it.

He could pay it fully. It's not like Superman standing in the way. If it was Superman, it would bounce off his chest unaffected.

It didn't bounce off the chest of Jesus. He bore it within himself and he bore the wrath of God and perfectly satisfied it. But he could only do it by standing in the center between God and man.

So I think it's so meaningful. It says in verse 18, and Jesus in the center. There is one mediator between God and man.

And maybe you think, well, I'll take the wrath of God myself. I'll take the punishment I deserve. Matter of fact, when I stand before God, I'll have a thing or two to tell him.

Oh, please, please. You honestly, I mean, and I say this in all sincerity, you really don't know what you're talking about. You don't.

And you need to come to a biblical reality on these things instead of just making it up as you go along. Because you won't have anything to say before God when you stand before him. The thing to say is to say it now.

Lord, I accept what Jesus did in my place. I accept that he stood in my place as a guilty sinner. And as he stood in the center, Lord, I received that on my behalf.

Centered among common men, centered among sinful men, centered between believing and rejecting, centered between saved and perishing, centered between God and man, and centered in all God's work in all history. Here we are 2,000 years later, and we're looking back to something that happened right then. We're centered on it.

We're centered on it. That's it. That's what matters to us.

What God did at a certain time and place 2,000 years ago. And even before that time, before the cross, all of history anticipated the cross. Every sacrifice that was ever made in the temple looked forward to the cross.

The prayers that were prayed, the confidence in the coming Messiah, it all focused on the cross. I don't know if the people who passed the world beyond could see what was happening on the earth, but if they could, David and Abraham and Solomon and Adam and anybody else in God's place of paradise in the world to come, they were on the front row of their seat watching what was happening when Jesus was crucified because they knew that all of history up to that point had anticipated that for all of time and all of eternity. History is centered on this one great event to the point that when we get to heaven and Jesus comes and holds you in those beautiful arms of love that he has.

And when he reaches out a hand towards your face to wipe away the tear that's on your eye, you're going to look at that hand and see that there's a nail scar in it. That the wound that he bore is still there. All of history is centered in what Jesus did on the cross.

He'll never be forgotten. Centered among common men, centered among sinful men. Centered between believing and rejecting, centered between saved and perishing, centered between God and man, centered in all God's work through history.

But here's the final question. Is he centered in your life? That's a very pointed question I ask too. Not is he in your life, but is he centered in your life? Is he the center? No, the center speak of what's at the core of what's at the essence.

It's the bullseye. It's the target. It's what's most important.

It's what's central. Is Jesus the center? Is he the center of this church? Or is he just here, but not the center? Something else is here. You might satisfy yourself saying, well, he's in my life.

Is he the center? Look at verse 18. Jesus in the center. That's where he wants to be in your life.

Not on the periphery. Not your helper. Not the guy you turn to and everything else falls to pieces.

Is he the center? Not just on one morning a week. Not just a selected time here or there. Is he the center? Can you say what Paul said in Galatians chapter 2, verse 20? I've been crucified with Christ.

It's no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh. I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

That's Jesus in the center. That's where he wants to be in your life right now. Now, first of all, this is a bold call to anybody who doesn't have Jesus in their life at all.

When you give your life to Jesus Christ, that's where he wants to be is in the center. That's where he'll demand to be in the center. Jesus in the center.

That's where he belongs. Don't ask Jesus in your life as just a helper. It's just some fire insurance for eternity.

It's just someone, you know, help you out through a tough time here and there. He wants to be the center. He demands to be the center.

Friends, if he is in your life right now, if you are a believer, what a glorious wake-up call from the Lord this morning. God's saying to you right now, is my Son in the center of your life? Is another relationship in the center? Is a thing in the center? Is a goal or an aspiration in the center? Jesus would look at you with eyes of love yet firmness and he'd say, you need to move away from the center. Let me be there.

Let me be the center of your life. Jesus is the answer to everything. He's God's great resolution to every problem.

And Jesus asks you this morning, will you yield to me and make me the center? For the Lord to do that work in our lives, I think we should pray. And ask him to do that kind of deep work. So let's pray together.

Father, we come before you now in Jesus' name. And I pray for myself and for every person here. And I pray that each and every one of us would know what it is to have Jesus be the center of our life.

Not just to have him in us or with us. In an outside sense or in a peripheral sense. Lord, when we see how we were in the center of the heart of Jesus through his crucifixion, through his agony of the cross.

If we were in the center of his heart, then we want him to be the center of our lives. So we yield before you, Jesus. We ask that you do this work.

Thank you, Lord. We pray this in Jesus' name.

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