

Almighty, creator of heaven and earth

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Date: 12 January 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Might makes right. As a descriptive term, that's almost always true in human society, isn't it?

After all, history is written by the victors. We can each of us have our ideas of what is true and good, but it is only with the strength to overcome obstacles and enemies that those ideas of truth and goodness can be put into effect.

Only when it's backed up by some kind of power do my ideas become what society must adopt as right. But most times when we use that phrase, might makes right, most times that's a protest, isn't it?

It's a rejection of tyranny. We don't like the idea that might makes right. We rebel against that sense that just because somebody is stronger that they have the ability to decide what is and is not acceptable.

We're suspicious of power, aren't we? We know that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. So when the Apostles' Creed speaks of a God who is almighty, perhaps we're not predisposed to consider that to be a good thing.

[1 : 1 6] We'll dig into that in a moment. Before we go any further, let me just remind you of the Creed as a whole. I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell. On the third day, he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen. So this is our third session looking at this Creed, and if you're here for the first one, you might remember our intention as we work our way through this is to find clarity, as this sets before us who God truly is, and our intention is to find unity, as we're reminded of our common ground with other Christians across the globe and down through the ages.

So we've considered already what we mean when we say, I believe, and we've looked at who is God the Father, and now this morning, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

[2 : 4 0] These two things fit together closely enough that we can very reasonably treat them in one sermon, but you can broadly consider this under those two headings. One, God is Almighty.

Two, He is the Creator of heaven and earth. So then as we consider what we mean by describing God as Almighty in this creed that we affirm, I want to start actually with several negatives.

Start with what we are not saying, and the first of those returns us to that question of whether it is good that God is Almighty. What we are not saying is that God is a brutal dictator.

When we talk about power in most contexts, we tend to think often about the abuse of that power. We tend to focus on the times when power is misused. That's saying power corrupts.

It presumes that those with the power to do as they please will almost inevitably use it to please themselves, to make their own lives easy and comfortable, to help those who will give them something in return.

[3 : 45] And if absolute power corrupts absolutely, well, what is more absolute than God's omnipotence? Omnipotence, of course, it is one of those big theological words that actually has a very simple meaning.

Omni, all, potent, that's power, ability, strength. In other words, omnipotence and almighty. The synonyms. I guess theologians talk about omnipotence because it sounds slightly more absolute and maybe because it makes them sound cleverer to use the Latin words.

But the language of the creed here, almighty, means that same thing and has the advantage of being biblical language that talks about God almighty, as too is the very closely related idea that God is sovereign.

And to my mind, when I think about these things, introducing that term, the idea of sovereignty, it shifts the focus ever so slightly, slightly away from absolute power.

Maybe that's because for me in my head, God's sovereignty is very closely linked to the doctrine of God's providence. And of course, providence focuses not only on God's power, his ability, but on his promise.

[4 : 57] The fact that he has committed himself to ordering all things for the good of his people. Now, the idea of a God who is omnipotent, a God who is almighty, that is an idea that is profoundly troubling if that God cannot be trusted.

If he is not on our side, if he is not benevolent, then we should be worried. A brutal dictator is horrifying. But if alongside knowing God's power, we know also that God is good, if we remember that God is love, as 1 John teaches us, if we remember that preceding word of this creed, God is Father, if we remember these things, then his almighty power is not a worry, but a wonderful reassurance.

A somewhat mediocre manager might perhaps be able to achieve acceptable performance from their team by enforcing obedience to their way of doing things.

And if that manager has a reasonable system, well, you can run a business on my way or the highway. But a great manager recognises that his job is to equip his employees to achieve their best.

He still has the power and the authority, but he doesn't feel the need to shout and to dominate and to throw his weight around. We're all too familiar, aren't we, from films and TV and probably too many of us familiar from personal experience.

[6 : 25] Familiar with the family where one individual, usually the dad, let's be honest, where he dominates everything by controlling what others do and say. But where appropriate power and authority crosses a line, you're into the territory of abuse, aren't you?

Ben Myers says, true power is not the ability to control. Controlling behaviour is a sign of weakness and insecurity. True power is the ability to love and enable without reserve.

God's power, like the power of a good parent or teacher, is the capacity to nourish others and to help their freedom to grow. So God is not that kind of controlling, even abusive father, is he?

God is rather the best father imaginable. God is the definition of what a father should be. God's sovereign power is a delight, not a threat.

As Psalm 96, that we sang earlier, celebrates, along with plenty of other psalms as well. If you read sometime from Psalm 93 through to Psalm 103, you'll find over and over again in those psalms, you'll find this theme picked up, that God's power is something to celebrate and rejoice in.

[7 : 44] Armchair theologians like to consider God's sovereignty as a kind of theoretical, thorny, philosophical question, a chance for a debate. But according to the Bible, God's power, God's sovereignty is a reason to worship.

We rejoice in God Almighty. So when we say Almighty, don't think coercive power. He is not a brutal dictator. Second idea to reject.

When we say God is Almighty, that does not mean there is no such thing as human free will. It does not mean that we are not responsible for our choices. God can rightly punish sin because you and I are moral agents who make decisions.

We're not robots, pre-programmed automata. Now, this is one of those points of theology where we can't always pin things down in a 100% precisely satisfactory way, or at least not precisely satisfactory to my engineering mindset that wants everything evenly spaced and at right angles, please.

It's not quite that clear. But there are certain things which the Bible does clearly assert in this area and which we must therefore accept.

[9 : 02] There are kind of boundary markers that we dare not go beyond. Firstly, God is absolutely sovereign. He has predestined all things, Ephesians 1.11.

And secondly, on the other side of the spectrum, we are guilty in our sin and God is just. Psalm 51 verse 4, you, God, are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

So we are culpable for our sin. We are guilty as moral agents and God is sovereign. So the philosophers and the theologians debate back and forth and there are murky edges and we will not fully understand the interplay here this side of eternity.

It's a secret known only to God how it is that he sustains and overrules our free will without overriding our free will.

But that is exactly what he does. Similar, I suppose, to how he achieves his purposes within the confines of that which is normal, scientifically explicable reality day to day.

[10 : 14] 99% of the time, things happen through the functioning of a normal, natural process, not by God's miraculous intervention. Similarly, God is able to work out his will through the functioning of our own psychological makeup, our own wills.

So we reject coercive power, we reject the overriding of our free will. Thirdly, when we say almighty, that does not mean that he can do literally anything.

Now maybe that is a surprising statement because after all the word almighty is right there in the start of almighty and for that matter is the omni in omnipotence. So why do I say he cannot do literally anything?

Well, because that's not the point we're making when we say almighty. God cannot do something that is self-contradictory or nonsensical.

He cannot square a circle. He cannot create a rock so heavy he can't lift it. Stop with the silly little logic puzzles. That's not what we're saying. Now that is relatively insignificant.

[11 : 25] What's more important is another class of things which God cannot do. This is much more important to understand. A pastor called Nick Tucker who was one of my college lecturers he did a series of talks at the Word Alive conference a few years back now.

A series of talks entitled 12 Things God Can't Do and Why They Should Help You Sleep at Night. Friends, it is good that there are some things God can't do.

God cannot be tempted. God cannot be surprised. There are things God can't do. Jim Packer is excellent on this.

God cannot act out of character. He says God has a perfect moral character and it's not in him to deny that character. He cannot be capricious, unloving, random, unjust, or inconsistent.

Just as he cannot pardon sin without atonement because that would not be right, so he cannot fail to be faithful and just in forgiving sins that are confessed in faith and in keeping all the other promises that he has made.

[12 : 35] For failure to keep those promises would not be right either. Moral instability, vacillation, and unreliability are marks of weakness, not strength.

But God's omnipotence is supreme strength, making it impossible that he should lapse into imperfections of this sort. not. It is not possible for God to act out of line with his character.

It is not possible for God to fail to keep his promises. There are things that God cannot do. Hebrews 6 tells us that when God made his promise to Abraham, he swore by himself because there was no one greater for him to swear by.

There's nothing more certain than that God will keep his promises. 2 Peter 3 we're assured the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness.

Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. So we are not saying that God exerts an unpleasant coercive sort of power.

[13 : 48] We are not saying that our free will is irrelevant. We are not saying that God Almighty can do the illogical or act outside of his revealed character. So what are we saying?

It's really very simple. It was there in verse 6 of our first reading. Psalm 135 verse 6 The Lord does whatever pleases him in the heavens and on the earth in the seas and all their depths.

God may not be able to create a square circle but he can do absolutely everything he wants to do. He does whatever pleases him.

And of course unlike the billionaire playboy of whom one says somewhat derisively he does whatever he wants, unlike that what God wants is perfect. What God desires is wholly just and entirely in keeping with his loving character and nothing can stand in his way.

Remember back in November we looked at Psalm 2 and we saw how important it is that God has the power to enforce his decrees, that nothing can stand in his way.

[15 : 05] It would be little good to us having a God who was father if he were not also almighty, if he were not greater than all other gods, Psalm 135 verse 5, if he were not able to make the clouds rise verse 7, if he could not strike down the firstborn of Egypt verse 8, in order to redeem his people, if he could not do these things, what would be the point?

Paul speaks in Romans 4 verse 20 to 1, he speaks approvingly of Abraham, that Abraham was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

That faith that God could do what he said and would do what he said, that is the faith that is credited to Abraham as righteousness. That's an element of the faith that you and I ought to have.

God is not limited by any external power. God gets all the glory. Nothing can stand in his way. So what should be the result of understanding God's almighty power?

Well, two things. Firstly, it gives you and I absolute confidence. Romans 8, I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[16 : 40] Nothing can separate us because God is almighty. Secondly, and even more importantly, Psalm 135 begins and ends with the same call.

Praise the Lord. Recognizing God's mighty power, recognizing that nothing can hinder him, this should drive us to praise him. Friends, I believe in God, the Father almighty, and I hope you do too.

So what then of God, the creator of heaven and earth? Is this creation just an example of God's almighty power, or is there more going on here?

Well, it seems to me that in such a brief statement as the Apostles' Creed is, it seems wise to assume that every word carries deliberate meaning. This is not mere repetition.

So what are we saying here? Well, of course, creation is a massive subject, isn't it? There's lots that could be said, but here's what I want to focus on this morning. When we assert that God is creator of heaven and earth, we assert that there is a fundamental divide within the category of things that exist.

[17 : 59] The phrase heaven and earth, this is what's called a merism. That means it's a conventional phrase that lists some of the parts of a thing to denote the whole. This is like if you say somebody searched high and low.

You don't mean they looked in two places, do you? You mean they looked everywhere. Well, so too, heaven and earth denotes everything. That's the language of Genesis 1.

God created all that exists. God is not merely the most talented craftsman. He's more than that. Because no craftsman can work without raw materials.

The artist might be able to fashion such a product that you wonder how it ever came to be. But he still uses something to make it from. God created everything that exists.

He didn't take existing materials and fashion them into a clever arrangement. Amazing as that would be. No, God went one step further. We had one bit of Latin already with omnipotent.

[19 : 00] Here's another. Creatio ex nihilo. Creation from nothing. There was nothing, nothing at all and God spoke and there was something.

The almighty God freely chose what to make. He created exactly what he pleased. He created everything that exists.

Except that's not quite right. God did not create everything because God did not create himself. Maybe studying biology at school, maybe you'll remember learning about taxonomy, kind of dividing life up into different categories with the kingdom and the phylum and the genus and so on.

And those groups have fewer things in them as they get more specific. At each level there's certain options. Is this in the animal kingdom or the fungi kingdom and so on? Is it a mammal or an amphibian?

And once you've gone down a particular branch you've narrowed your options. You can't skip back across into another. And if I'm remembering rightly this system kind of categorizes all living things.

[20 : 14] And I suppose if you were so inclined you could create a similar structure to categorize non-living things. But this assertion in the creed says there's a question before you get to is it a mammal or a fish?

In fact there's an even more fundamental question than is it a living thing or not. The first question is created or not. Everything fits over on that left hand side.

All of the plants, all of the animals, you, me, the angels, the planets, the galaxies, the entire universe, all of it created. And therefore all of it fundamentally distinct from that one thing on the other side.

The one creator not created. God who created the heavens and the earth in all their vast array. Psalm 104 makes this point by expanding out that merism of heavens and earth, expanding it out and giving a host more examples.

He stretches out the heavens like a tent. I've only read the first 16 verses but the psalm continues in the same vein. So too Isaiah 45 from verse 9.

[21 : 25] So too plenty of other psalms, plenty of other passages in Scripture. Colossians chapter 1 sets it out with the repeated word all, all, all, all. God created everything.

Everything that was made was made by God and without him nothing was made that has been made. There's a fundamental distinction at the heart of existence, a distinction between created and creator and it is a vital distinction.

Numerous things flow from that fundamental dichotomy. Here are just a few. Number one, this distinction stops us misunderstanding God.

Humanity was created in the image of God, not vice versa. As we'll be considering more tonight, we constantly try to recreate God, to create him in a manner that we can understand, that we can more readily relate to.

Voltaire claimed, man made God in his own image. That's the assertion of plenty of people around us, isn't it? God is a product of our collective imagination. But this distinction says, God is not just us, but a bit better.

[22 : 41] He's not just humanity writ large. He does not depend upon us for his existence. We depend upon him. Not only for creation in the sense of first bringing things into existence, but also creation in the sense that he actively sustains all things.

Creation has no independent existence. Only God does. Creation, without his upholding, would cease to be. Secondly, this distinction stops us misunderstanding our world.

This distinction guards us against thinking that this world is fundamentally evil, or even that it is merely neutral. There was a particular heresy kind of in the air around the time that the creed was coalescing into this concrete form.

Heresy called Gnosticism. And it took various forms, but a key feature was to imagine that there is a divide between, on the one side, the bad, the evil creator, and on the other side, the good redeemer.

And a divide between the wicked world of the flesh from the good human spirit. Matter is bad, is evil, is something to escape from. Now maybe you can see how a distorted reading of certain Bible passages can lead you down that sort of line, but it is a major distortion.

[24 : 06] And against that understanding that was in the air at the time, and that actually is more common today than we perhaps realize, against that understanding we assert that the one true and living God is the God who created all things.

The creation was not achieved by some different alternative inferior deity. We assert that God created all things in keeping with his character.

We assert that he created this world fundamentally good. It's repeated over and over again in the Genesis narrative, isn't it? He saw that it was good.

And we're called, in 1 Timothy chapter 4, we're called to mirror that assessment from God. We're called to receive all things with thanksgiving. And that attitude is inherent to the rejoicing in creation that runs through so many of the Psalms.

Thirdly, this distinction between creator and creation stops us misunderstanding our world in the opposite direction too. This distinction also guards us against acting like creation is itself, well, if not quite divine, then nearly so.

[25 : 23] Some of the more extreme modern environmentalist movements tend in this direction that sees humanity as evil and nature as pure and lovely if only we would get out of the way.

I'm not sure what happened to nature read in tooth and claw. But this distinction between the creator and creation, if we assert that God is the creator and that all things exist subordinates to him, then that means he gets to decide how things are.

And he bestows upon humanity the privilege of being made in his image. He gives us the responsibility to steward what he has made. That's stewardship, that's your mandate for environmental responsibility.

by the way, without having to act like the ethical value of an animal is akin to that of a human being. There is a fundamental distinction.

And fourthly, this distinction guards us against misunderstanding ourselves. It stops us getting too big for our boots. If we are not our makers, but rather we receive our existence from the hands of a creator, then that limits our role.

[26 : 42] If we are not our own makers, then neither are we our own masters. Packer says, God made me for himself to serve him here.

God's claim upon us is the first fact of life that we must face. And we need a healthy sense of our creaturehood to keep us facing it. God's love.

So then, what is the result of understanding all of this? Well, in addition to those safeguards, the avoidance of those misunderstandings, the result of considering God as creator of the heavens and the earth should be the same as that of considering God as almighty.

Psalms 135 rejoices in God's ability to do as he pleases and starts and ends with the call, praise the Lord. Psalm 104 describes God's abundant creation and it also begins and ends with that same phrase, praise the Lord.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you that you have revealed yourself to us in order that we might understand you rightly.

[27 : 58] Thank you that we cannot fully comprehend everything about you, that yet we can understand you truly. Help us to listen to what you have said.

Help us to consider you as you have shown yourself to be. Lord, thank you that you are the almighty one, that nothing can hinder you from doing as you please.

Thank you that your love is not limited by the actions of others, but rather you can always achieve that which you desire.

And thank you, Lord. Thank you for this world that you have made, for this universe that you spoke into being. Lord, guard us against those misunderstandings.

Help us to see that divide between you as the creator and everything else that is. May we see ourselves in the light of who you are and so understand who we are.

[29 : 05] Thank you, Lord. Amen.