

In God the Father

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[0 : 00] So this morning we are continuing our series looking at the Apostles' Creed. So as we do that, let me remind you of how it goes.

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. When we began this series a few weeks ago, we considered a couple of different intentions as we study the Creed together. Firstly, that it should give us clarity by showing us who God truly is and reminding us of what we have already believed and perhaps offering points of gentle correction.

[1 : 20] And secondly, that this creed affirmed by Christians down through the ages reminds us that we are part of something bigger than our fellowship here today. I've been thinking this week that part of saying that this gives us clarity ought also to include that we find comfort in these words.

There is reassurance to us in having these precious truths clearly fixed in our minds as we eliminate ambiguity, as we remind ourselves of who God is.

The God who we encounter is a loving God who offers us comfort. There's perhaps particular comfort in those last few phrases, in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

There's comfort there in terms of our present and in terms of our final standing before God. There's comfort in being reminded that our hope is in the forgiveness of sins, not in somehow living a sinless life.

There's comfort in knowing that this life is not the end, but rather our hope lies in an eternity in the presence of God. And that comfort here at the end of the creed arises from the God who we encounter in the first stages of it.

[2 : 35] There's comfort in being reminded of who Jesus is and of what he did. And there is also, in the section that we're considering this morning, comfort in knowing God as Father.

We focused last time on I believe, and so this time we move to the next few words to God, the Father. And as we consider these things, we're going to think a little bit about who God is in general, and then focus on two aspects of what it means to see God as Father.

That is, we'll focus on the relationship between the Father and the Son within the Trinity, and then aspects of what it means for God to be Father to us as his people. So when we assert, I believe in God, what is it that we mean by that?

I guess that it's most fundamental. This is a rejection of atheism, a declaration that the universe does have a cause, that there does exist some kind of a being more powerful than humanity, and so on.

I came across one philosopher's definition of God as follows. God is an eternal mind or intelligence, sufficient in himself to all felicity, the best of beings, and the cause of good in nature.

[3 : 51] That's true. But is that really enough? Are we just, when we say, I believe in God, are we just agreeing with religious people, as opposed to atheists?

Are we just agreeing that there is someone out there? Do we agree with the Jews and the Hindus and the Muslims? Well, no. We have to go much further than that definition, don't we?

To say, I believe in God, is to say more than, I think there is something out there. Because it is a particular God in whom we believe.

We do not profess faith in an abstract deity, but in the God of the Bible, the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And sometimes people want to suggest that the divide is fundamentally between those who say, in some sense, I believe in God, and those who do not.

But the Bible shows us that isn't the right line to draw. The right line isn't between religious people and atheists, but rather it is between those who believe in the one true God and those who do not.

[4 : 55] The first commandment is not, thou shalt believe in the divine. No, it is, you shall have no other gods before me. And the next continues likewise.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So the call of God's word, the call that is echoed here in the start of the creed, the call is for belief in the one true and living God as contrasted against the pagan gods.

The pagan gods who are many, but the God of Israel is one. The pagan gods who fly into a rage, the true God who is unchangeable and totally reliable.

The pagan gods who can be inflamed with lust, but the true God who seeks the good of humanity without self-interest. The pagan gods who arbitrarily turn against human beings, but the true God who consistently seeks our good.

[6 : 13] All of these contrasts are made clear throughout the Bible. God is not like the other so-called gods. No, God has revealed his true nature.

Friends, if you haven't been at our evening services the last couple of months, you've missed out on this. We've been looking at the book of Exodus and asking ourselves, who is this God? In Exodus chapter three, God reveals his personal name to Moses.

Yahweh, I am who I am. I will be what I will be. Nothing can stand in God's way. He is God Almighty. Nothing can hinder him from being what he is and doing as he wishes.

We'll think more on that in the next part of this series in the Creed as we consider God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. And then in Exodus chapter 20, God comes and lays down his law. But he does that not as a dictator, but against the background of who he is. The background of being the God who brought his people out of the land of Egypt.

[7 : 19] And we haven't got there yet, but in Exodus 34, God will proclaim his name to Moses. He will declare his character. He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. Friends, it is this God who is revealed through the pages of Scripture.

And it is this God in whom we assert our belief in the Creed. And particularly this morning, we focus on him as he reveals himself as Father.

So the Fatherhood of God. And it's wise to remember that as we consider this, that statement is made as part of the larger whole. I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

And one aspect then of fatherhood that must be in view here is God as creator. That we depend upon him for our initial creation and we depend upon him for our ongoing existence moment by moment.

[8 : 41] And the Bible talks about these things in terms of fatherhood. Malachi chapter 2 and verse 10. Do we not all have one father? Did not one God create us? And Paul talks in the same kind of terms that the Areopagus in Acts chapter 17.

So creation is part of fatherhood. But that doesn't mean that God is father to all in an identical fashion. Both in Malachi and in Acts, these declarations of God, creator and father.

These declarations are made in context that also speak about the reality of judgment. And so elsewhere in the Bible, we find a discussion of the fuller experience of the fatherhood of God that is accessible to believers.

And we'll be focusing more on that today and then coming back to creation next time we come to consider the creed. So the fatherhood experience of believers.

This experience is presented to us as being parallel to and being based upon the father-son relationship that exists between the first and second persons of the Trinity.

[9 : 50] When we confess that we believe in the God of the Scriptures, we declare that we believe in a triune God, one God in three persons. And so we'll consider now one particular aspect of that, a few minutes, considering what it means for God to be father in the Trinity.

Now this is fundamental to the character of God, that within the eternal Trinity, there is a family relationship of father and son. And of course, to tease out the intricacies of that relationship would be a vast subject.

But we can find several points about this relationship in John chapter 5. John 5 from verse 19. It is on the screen, but if you've got a Bible to hand, it might be worth flicking forward a few pages from where you were in John 1 to John 5 because we're going to refer to a few points from these verses as we go along.

John 5 from verse 19. Jesus gave them this answer. Very truly I tell you, the son can do nothing by himself.

He can do only what he sees his father doing because whatever the father does, the son also does. For the father loves the son and shows him all he does.

[11 : 04] Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these so that you will be amazed. For just as the father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.

Moreover, the father judges no one but has entrusted all judgment to the son that all may honor the son just as they honor the father. Whoever does not honor the son does not honor the father who sent him.

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear will live.

For as the father has life in himself, so he has granted the son also to have life in himself and he has given him authority to judge because he is the son of man. Do not be amazed at this for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out.

Those who have done what is good will rise to live and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing. I judge only as I hear and my judgment is just for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.

[12 : 27] So what does this father-son relationship involve? Well we see there in verse 20 the father loves the son. We see this relationship of love played out and attested to in numerous places through the gospels as the father declares his love for all to hear at Jesus' baptism and on the mount of transfiguration.

This is how fathers are supposed to be to their sons, is it not? And this is not a one-sided love.

Jesus declares his own love for his father in John chapter 14.

Now the idea that a father-son relationship implies reciprocal love, that is hopefully unsurprising to us. Whilst sadly in this broken world there are fathers who do not love their children as they should and for that matter there are children who reject their parents.

Whilst this is a sad reality and perhaps for some of us one all too close to home. Nevertheless we know that this is how things should be, don't we? We rebel instinctively at the wrongness of a father who does not love his child and in this way human relationships mirror those of God himself.

Second we see here in John chapter 5 that the son's actions mirror those of his father. In John 8, 29 he always does that which pleases his father.

[13 : 49] And here in verse 19 and verse 30 we see that he does not act on his own initiative but he depends upon his father's leading. And the same is true at the end of his earthly life in the garden of Gethsemane.

Yet not as I will but as you will he cried. Now that willing obedience of father to son that does not imply for a moment that he is squashed down or unimportant.

John 17, 24 the son is given glory by the father because he loved him before the foundation of the world. And here in John chapter 5 we see Jesus being given significant tasks by his father.

He will show great works verse 20. The son gives life verse 21. He has authority to judge verse 27. These tasks are given to him according to verse 23 in order that he might be honored by all. The intricacies of this father-son relationship are profound and we cannot fully encompass and understand it. But in God's goodness he has chosen to reveal himself to us as father. [14:58] that conveys to us something of his fundamental nature. And because of the closeness of the father-son relationship because Jesus incarnate truly made known his father in heaven then as the closing verses of our reading earlier said because of the closeness of that relationship we can truly know God even though we have not seen him.

Why does this matter to you and me today? Well it matters because it matters a great deal who we believe God to be.

And that matters not only because if we worship something that is not who God is then that is idolatry but it matters also because if we misunderstand God then there is a very real chance that we will not wish to believe in him.

That we will not consider him worthy of worship. In 2007 Christopher Hitchens one of the leading lights of militant new atheism he said this in an interview I think it would be rather awful if it were true.

If there was a permanent total round the clock divine supervision and invigilation of everything you did you would never have a waking or sleeping moment where you weren't being watched and controlled and supervised by some celestial entity from the very moment of your conception to the moment of your death it would be like living in North Korea.

[16:27] See because Christopher Hitchens conceives of God as the ruler as a sort of Stalin in the sky he rails against such a concept who would want that kind of God to exist?

He's right to be repelled by that kind of conception. But friends the God of the Bible is not that God. The God of the Bible is not fundamentally ruler so much as he is fundamentally father.

God is the most kind and loving of fathers. That's what we confess in the Apostles' Creed. And so the idea of having a reality where you never have a waking or sleeping moment where you are not being watched instead of being a terrifying thought suddenly that is a very comforting thought. that your father who loves you knows every detail of what you are going through. We do not consider life in this world to be like living in North Korea but rather living in the home of the most loving father imaginable.

And so that brings us to our third point. God is father not only to his eternal son but he is father to you and to me as well. Flip back to John chapter 1 and verse 12.

[17:50] Yet to all who did receive him to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will but born of God.

Friends, does this not blow you away? you and I receiving and believing in his name have not just the opportunity not just a one in a thousand chance not just permission to come and beg you and I have the right to become children of God.

When we confess God as father in the creed it's not just a recognition of who God is within himself. It's not just a description in the abstract of intratrinitarian relationships.

That is theologically important but that is not all. It's not an abstract declaration. It is rather a personal appropriation. It is something that we believe because it matters to us.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray our father in heaven. I love this phrase from Ben Myers' book on the creed. Jesus' relationship to God is unique but also inclusive.

[19:10] His followers stand on the inside of Jesus' unique relationship to God. Friends, as believers in Christ in union with our Savior we are adopted sons and daughters of the living God.

And so we come and we speak to God and he listens to us. He listens to us not just as a king hears petitions from his subjects. He listens to us as a father listens to his children.

Jesus is God's son by his very nature. We become his children by his gracious choice. We are adopted into his family. Adopted not on sufferance, not begrudgingly, not just allowed into the front porch but welcomed right into the heart of the family.

And so Jesus after his resurrection told Mary, go to my brothers and tell them, I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.

Jesus' disciples belong to the family. You and I belong to the family. If he is your God then he is also your father.

[20 : 29] If Jesus is your savior he is also your brother. God is your father. And all manner of things flow out of this family relationship that we now enjoy. Matthew chapter 7, which of you, if your son asks for bread will give him a stone?

Or if he asks for a fish will give him a snake? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?

If God is your father, he will give you good things. And if God is your father, you do not need to worry. A few verses earlier, Matthew 6, 25. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear.

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow, or reap, or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them.

Are you not much more valuable than they? If God is your father, you do not need to worry about tomorrow, because he will give you what you need.

[21 : 39] Friends, ask yourselves, what lengths would a father not go to to keep his daughter safe from harm? That is how your heavenly father sees you.

What lengths will he will not go to? What father is not devastated to see his son in tears? Your father promises, that the day is coming, when he will wipe away every tear, and there will be no more pain.

Friends, this is what we declare, when we say, I believe in God, the father. It is not an abstract theological idea. It is the defining relationship, of our lives.

So let's pray to our father. Our father in heaven, thank you that you have revealed yourself to us.

Thank you that in declaring yourself to be our father, you have shown us something of how you regard us. Thank you that as your adopted sons and daughters, we have that right to be counted as yours.

[22 : 59] We have that opportunity to be confident in your provision for us day by day, that you will provide for our daily needs, that you will preserve us, that you will bring us safely to that day, when those tears will be wiped away.

Lord, even as we grieve in this life, Lord, thank you that you are with us in the midst of it, that you do not abandon us, that you will never abandon us, but that you bring us safely through.

Lord Jesus, thank you. Amen.